

**Ministry of Education Presentation for NACEW Childcare Survey Seminar
Wednesday 8 December**

ISSUES FOR CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION

I have been asked to consider childcare issues from the perspective of children, including issues raised by the Childcare Survey.

I'm going to focus on how to achieve good educational outcomes for young children and the role early childhood education can play in this – and what issues the Childcare Survey raises for us in this respect. The issues for school aged children are not addressed in this paper.

Policymakers and the Government may have an interest in reducing barriers to workforce participation by focusing on childcare issues. But it is important that the educational component of childcare arrangements is not neglected. Care must address the child's educational needs, because regardless of whether the child is having positive or negative experiences, the child is being educated. We must ensure that no harm is done. In turn that requires a reasonable quality of care and education.

Young children are learning all the time. Early childhood "education" is not restricted to what occurs in early childhood services – or interactions between early childhood professionals and children. Parents and families obviously have an important role in the educational, social and cultural development of their children. Sometimes this point can get forgotten in the debate on early childhood education.

Increasing numbers of children are attending early childhood services. Ministry of Education statistics show that participation in early childhood education has increased from 42% of 0-4 year olds in 1990 to 55% in 1998. There has also been considerable growth in the supply of early childhood services. The number of childcare centres (what we call education and care services) almost doubled from 1990 to 1998. As at June 1998, there were 1,376 such centres, catering for over 65,000 children. There has also been significant growth in home-based services. There are now 150 home-based care networks, compared with 40 in 1990. Enrolments in home-based care networks have increased correspondingly, from 1,600 to 8,300. And indeed it is in home-based services that we have seen the most growth in the last couple of years.

Changes in the economy and society are leading to growing numbers of women moving into employment while their children are young. This is giving rise to a growing demand for full day early childhood services, and for services for infants and toddlers.

Early childhood services contribute to a number of Government objectives. Benefits to the child from early childhood education include:

- education benefits;

- socialisation benefits; and
- language and cultural benefits.

Research suggests that the first 3 years of a child's life are a time of great development and learning. They are critical years.

Early childhood education also provides benefits to parents. Early childhood education services provide opportunities for parents: to participate in the labour force, to undertake recreational and social activities, and to engage in the training which some ECE services provide for parents.

VALUE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

At the Ministry of Education, early childhood education is viewed as something that has inherent value in itself due to the benefits which children can gain as a result of participating in quality early childhood services.

There is evidence that good quality early childhood education can enhance educational and social outcomes for children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, *Competent Children at 8* shows that children's experiences at early childhood education continue to make a difference – three years after they began school. As this research project continues it will add further valuable information in terms of the role of early childhood services in achieving good educational outcomes for children.

Recent New Zealand and international research findings, including several longitudinal studies on the long terms effects of early childhood education, indicate that early childhood attendance can narrow the gaps in achievement that separate children from different socio-economic backgrounds. Good quality early childhood education plays an important role in setting-up the foundations for higher order cognitive development.

However, there are some caveats around the role early childhood services can play in enhancing good outcomes for children. Early childhood education is only positive for children if the service is delivered at a certain level of quality. Early childhood services which are poor quality can harm children.

A number of steps have been already been taken to promote good quality services, including the revision of the Regulations, the revised Desirable Objectives and Practices, the introduction of the early childhood curriculum *Te Whaariki*, in-service professional development for early childhood educators, funding incentives linked to staff qualifications and staff:child ratios (Rate 2 funding), an increase in the minimum qualification requirements for people responsible for licensed services and home based care services, and the development of the Quality Journey, a resource kit which supports services to develop high quality early childhood education.

In considering what further steps should be taken to raise quality, we must consider both how to encourage good quality services to raise their performance to a

consistently high standard, and to support services which are currently achieving only acceptable standards to lift their game.

We regulate the formal side of the early childhood sector to ensure acceptable levels of quality. The regulations are designed to ensure the wellbeing of children – to ensure that while children are in services they are cared for and kept safe, and also have stimulating learning experiences. Children must be cared for, nurtured and exposed to experiences which are of benefit to them. Early childhood services must primarily be focused around the needs of the child.

USE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The Childcare Survey paints a picture of how families use early childhood education. The Survey shows that:

- 60% of preschool children had ECE and care arrangements;
- of those children, most (87%) were attending formal early childhood services;
- European children were more likely than Maori and Pacific children to have ECE and care arrangements;
- the proportion of children with ECE and care arrangements was higher for children from higher income families;
- ECE and care arrangements were more common for those with employed parents;
- most children have 1 care arrangement. However, 20% of children had more than 1 care arrangement;
- the majority of parents (62%) paid less than \$10 per week;
- almost half of preschool children with an ECE and care arrangement used 10 hours or fewer of ECE per week. Children using ECE and care arrangements for more than 20 hours per week were most likely to be informal care (84%). Those children going to childcare centres most commonly went for 20 hours per week or fewer (75%);
- there is no significant difference in participation between children living in rural areas (52%) and children living in urban areas (51%). Anecdotal evidence suggests that in these areas choice is sometimes restricted, or there are no services at all. The main factor is the viability of services for small, often widely dispersed populations. Further work is proposed to investigate this apparent discrepancy.

ISSUES FOR CHILDREN RAISED FROM THE CHILDCARE SURVEY

So what then are the issues identified from the Childcare Survey as being particularly critical for children, especially in terms of achieving good educational outcomes for children?

The Childcare Survey both raises some new issues for us as a Ministry, and confirms others for us.

- *Participation*

One key issue for us, highlighted again by the Childcare Survey, is that there is a significant group of children who for a variety of reasons are not accessing early childhood education services. Because of the benefits associated with early childhood education we would like all children to have the opportunity to access early childhood education services. But let's be clear – we have very high participation rates when looked at globally.

The profile of participation in NZ indicates that children from low socio-economic groups, children who the research evidence indicates would benefit most from early childhood education, are accessing it least. This is a key issue for us.

The Survey illustrated the under-representation of Maori and Pacific children in early childhood education. The Survey showed that while 66% of European children participated, only 53% of Maori and 48% of Pacific children did. Representation of these groups is of particular concern.

The Childcare Survey also highlighted some issues in terms of the usage of early childhood education services by beneficiaries. For pre-school children with parent(s) receiving the Unemployment Benefit, the use of ECE and care arrangements was lower (39%) compared to the average of 60%. 55% of children with a parent receiving the DPB were using ECE and care arrangements. These figures highlight the need for different strategies to reach different groups of parents and that different things are barriers for different families.

- *Barriers to ECE*

The main reasons identified by the Survey why ECE and care were not accessed by those who wanted to participate in work and training were cost, lack of informal care by someone known and trusted, lack of suitable or flexible hours of ECE and care, and lack of local services. Cost was identified as the biggest barrier.

While the Childcare Survey is a step along the way towards addressing the issue of barriers to early childhood education, there is a need for more detailed knowledge of the barriers preventing access for different families. The Childcare Survey shows that cost is a barrier for some families. However, barriers to access can arise for both financial and non-financial reasons. Some services may not meet parents needs and preferences, for example in respect of their language, culture and philosophy and their hours of opening. Some services may not be located conveniently, especially for parents who do not have access to their own transport. Fees charged could be unaffordable to low-income parents. Parents may not know that early childhood services are available, they may lack confidence or they might not appreciate the value of early childhood education.

The priority for policy is to better understand the relative importance of the different barriers to access faced by under-represented groups.

- *Informal care*

Another issue raised by the survey is that of the use of informal care. The Survey has provided valuable new data on the group of parents using informal care for their children, primarily so that they can access the labour market. The Survey results suggest that many families using informal care would prefer to use formal care.

- *Demand for change*

The Survey sought to measure the demand for ECE in order to provide a better understanding of families' needs, so that an assessment could be made as to whether current provisions are adequate.

A sizeable group of parents were demanding more hours of care, care at different hours, and different types of services. This demand for change was stronger for families with pre-school children than families with school aged children, also for higher proportions of Maori children, children from sole parent families, and children using more than one care arrangement.

Conclusion

From the perspective of children:

- Quality is important.
- There remain issues in early childhood participation, particularly for groups: Maori, Pacific children, and children in low income families.

In general, we can be proud of diversity and quality of provision of the section, while accepting that more needs to be done.