

Early Education



Volume 66 *Spring / Summer 2020*

- Teacher Led Innovation Round 3
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- Children, families in prison and ECE practice
- Reflexes and support early learning



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Contributions of articles and photos are welcome from the early childhood community.

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Challenging the old normal

Privatisation in Aotearoa's early childhood care and education sector

Caitlin Neuwelt Kearns and Jenny Ritchie

Abstract

There is unequivocal evidence of the importance of quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) in providing foundational learning experiences and whānau support. Yet, in Aotearoa New Zealand, unlike the compulsory schooling sector, ECCE is provided under a market-based model, with services having become increasingly delivered by the private sector. This paper discusses recent trends in ECCE provision, highlighting three key concerns. First, current policy settings are encouraging homogenisation of service provision by favouring teacher-led, centre-based ECCE, threatening the viability of models such as Kōhanga Reo, Pacific Language Nests and Playcentre. Second, increasing privatisation over the last two decades is undermining our ability to ensure early learners are receiving a high-quality education, since for-profit services tend to provide poorer quality services. Third, the expansion of for-profit provision is exacerbating inequities in access to high-quality ECCE in Aotearoa. We conclude by arguing for stricter regulation—such as a requirement that all teaching staff are registered, qualified teachers—and the bolstering of diverse, community-based models of ECCE by implementing higher funding bands for not-for-profit services.

High-quality ECCE services provide foundational learning experiences for children, along with emotional and parenting support for whānau (Ritchie & Johnson, 2011). Reciprocal relationships with ECCE teachers can enhance parents/caregivers' confidence, provide relief from isolation, and allow them to engage in paid employment (Duncan et al., 2005). The gains from attending high-quality ECCE services are particularly significant among children from low-income households, who may otherwise be disadvantaged in their development of cognitive and language skills (Burchinal et al., 2010; Leseman, 2002; Ritchie et al., 2014).

However, attendance at an ECCE service is not universally beneficial. It is imperative that the sector consistently provides high-quality culturally

sustaining services, particularly as children are spending increasingly more time in care (Ministry of Education, 2019a). A lack of cultural responsiveness in teaching practices may limit gains for children who are not members of the dominant cultural group (Chan & Ritchie, 2019). Poor-quality ECCE may have a detrimental impact on a child's wellbeing, and in some cases may be worse than attending no early learning service at all (Ritchie et al., 2014). Reports of bad treatment from other children and teachers, including physical and verbal abuse, have made headlines in recent years and illustrate a sector under significant stress (see for e.g., RNZ, 2019; Walters, 2020a).

Despite unequivocal evidence of the importance of quality ECCE, in Aotearoa the sector is increasingly understood as providing private investment opportunities rather than as a public good. While ECCE was once regarded as a community responsibility, neoliberal reform in the late 20th century transferred this responsibility to the market (Duhn, 2010; Press et al., 2018). The trend towards private provision in the sector is concerning given the relationship between for-profit services and poor-quality provision; research across international contexts such as the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States has demonstrated, on average, lower quality provision across a range of indicators in for-profit—and particularly, corporate—early learning settings (Penn, 2011; Rush, 2006; Sosinsky et al., 2007). In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, a national survey conducted in 2003/2004 highlighted significant challenges associated with private services, including poorer employment conditions and higher staff turnover (May & Mitchell, 2009; Mitchell & Brooking, 2007). While no equivalent national survey has been conducted in Aotearoa since, reports of compliance issues and complaints of mistreatment of staff in corporate centres suggest that the challenges identified among private ECCE providers in 2003/2004 prevail today (Walters, 2020b; Walters 2020c).

Increasing privatisation has meant that many centres prioritise profit margins over the needs of

children and families (May, 2014). While private providers are not universally profit-driven—in some cases, a small-scale private centre may generate a modest income for its owner who may be working as a teacher and centre manager (Duhn, 2010)—of concern are the large corporately-owned and—managed centres, who are leveraging early learning as a profit-generating opportunity.

This article discusses the current trajectory of ECCE in Aotearoa, highlighting the urgent need for reform. Specifically, we discuss issues of diversity, quality, and equity as they relate to current trends within the sector. The normalisation of market-based provision in the 1990s as ‘the’ way to provide early learning services to children has constrained our capacity to envisage alternatives (Press et al., 2018). And yet, evidence points to a sector in urgent need of reform; for instance, Ministry of Education data has revealed that the number of complaints about ECCE services increased 69 percent between 2013 and 2019, with a corresponding increase in the proportion of complaints upheld (Ministry of Education, 2020a; NZEI Te Riu Roa, 2020b).

We therefore strongly urge the government to use the current pandemic as a circuit breaker to reassess and redress these challenges. In particular, stricter regulation of determinants of quality such as the proportion of registered, qualified teachers in teacher-led services, must be implemented. Further, we argue that the government should provide extra funding to community-based, not-for profit providers, in order to bolster them through the pandemic, with a view to ensuring all children have access to high-quality culturally resonant ECCE.

Recent trends in ECCE

In New Zealand, ECCE provision operates under a market-based approach. While the Ministry of Education provides support and guidance to the sector, it does not fund the sector in the same manner as it does schools (May, 2014; Mitchell & Davison, 2010). Instead, providers operate independently, either as private businesses or community-based organisations. While community-based providers such as kindergarten associations, charities,¹ or churches cannot distribute financial gains to their members, private services—owned by private or publicly-listed companies, private trusts or

individuals—are able to make a profit (Duhn, 2010; Mitchell, 2019).

The sector has transformed over the last three decades, with a significant thrust towards this privately-owned model of ECCE provision. Privatisation within the sector has not been inevitable, but rather the consequence of a series of policy decisions that have been conducive to the expansion of for-profit providers (May, 2008; Mitchell & Davison, 2010). In 1990, the introduction of a market-based approach to funding in the sector meant that any service that met licensing requirements—whether for-profit or community-owned—could be eligible for ECCE bulk funding (Mitchell, 2010; Press et al., 2018). Prior to this, government funding for childcare centres, introduced in 1973, was targeted to not-for-profit centres (Press et al., 2018); however, the ability to access significant, sustained government funding has made the sector desirable for private investors (Duhn, 2010; May, 2014).

This funding has only increased over time with the introduction of the ‘20-hours’ policy in 2007. This policy provides participating ECCE centres with a higher subsidy rate for 20 hours per week per child (May, 2008). The intention of the policy was to improve participation rates by reducing the financial burden of accessing ECCE by providing 20-hours fees-free for parents. Under the initial proposed policy, only community-owned centres were to be eligible for 20-hours funding; however, following pressure from the private sector, this subsidy was extended to include for-profit providers (Dalli, 2010; Press et al., 2018).

This increase in government funding corresponds with the burgeoning of for-profit centres. While in 2002, private providers accounted for 23 percent of all licensed ECCE services, by 2019, this figure was 41 percent (Education Counts, 2019b). This privatisation has suited successive governments, led by both National and Labour, who have been largely equivocal about the role of the state in providing opportunities for early learning (Mitchell, 2010). A neoliberal framing of parents-as-consumers of self-governing services absolved the government of responsibility in providing ECCE services to enable parents to engage in paid work.

Private providers are largely able to raise funds quickly to establish new centres, and are often

¹ Major early learning chain Best Start Educare is an exception. While technically a charity, the chain is privately owned by the Wright Family Foundation with \$20 million in tax-free income paid to its founders each year. That this

arrangement is permissible under current tax and charity laws has been a source of significant controversy, with the chain running 260 childcare centres for 15,000 children nationally (see Nippert, 2020).

experienced in property development. By contrast, community providers have had to navigate a complex and over-subscribed grants scheme, at the end of which funding is not guaranteed (May & Mitchell, 2009; Mitchell & Davison, 2010). In some cases, corporate chains have also acquired community-owned centres as part of their strategic plan, often with detrimental impacts on the quality of service provided (Duhn, 2010; May, 2008). It is in this context that enrolments in community-owned services—including kindergartens, Playcentres, Pacific Language Nests and Kōhanga Reo—have gradually declined (Education Counts, 2019b).

Homogenisation

Education and care services have proliferated over the last three decades. Between 2000 and 2019, there was a 90 percent increase in enrolments in education and care services, and a 92 percent increase in enrolments in home-based ECCE (Education Counts, 2019b). During this same time period, enrolments decreased at Kōhanga Reo by 24 percent, kindergartens by 38 percent, and Playcentres by 40 percent. Proportionate to the sector as a whole, education and care services accounted for 58 percent of licensed services in 2019 (Education Counts, 2019b).

The expansion of education and care services, centre-based and home-based, has come at the expense of other models such as Kōhanga Reo and Playcentre. Debates over the devaluing of parent/whānau-led services emerged following the introduction of the 20-hours policy in 2007, since this subsidy was initially only available to teacher-led services (Dalli, 2010; Mitchell & Davison, 2010). While the subsidy was later extended to include parent/whānau-led models such as Playcentre and Kōhanga Reo in 2010, these tensions prevail today, as teacher-led services continue to be better-funded, and regulations are designed such that parent/whānau-led services often struggle to meet administrative requirements (Fleet, 2020).

Parent/whānau-led settings such as Playcentre, Kōhanga Reo and Pacific Island Language Nests are invaluable as they provide support for the wider family by involving parents and whānau in their children's education (Fleet, 2020). Yet despite providing significantly different services and learning environments, parent/whānau-led providers must meet many of the same regulatory requirements as teacher-led services. The administrative burden of meeting these requirements, meanwhile receiving a fraction of the funding that teacher-led services

receive, has undermined the viability of these models, overlooking their invaluable contributions to the early learning landscape (Dalli, 2010).

For instance, this one-size-fits-all approach to ECCE policy has threatened Kōhanga Reo. Kōhanga Reo provide young children with an immersive early learning environment in which to learn via te reo and tikanga Māori (May, 2014). The programme emerged in the 1980s as a response to the declining number of te reo speakers, and provides an important means of language transmission not only for tamariki, but for whānau who often learn alongside their tamariki (Tearney, 2016). Evidence has demonstrated improved educational outcomes for mokopuna emerging from Kōhanga Reo versus auraki (mainstream) ECCE services (New Zealand Waitangi Tribunal, 2013).

However, despite its importance for both the education of tamariki Māori and the broader project of te reo revitalisation—a responsibility of the Crown under Article Two of Te Tiriti—the design of ECCE policy has been at odds with the objectives of Kōhanga Reo. Whānau-led Kōhanga Reo services are poorly funded compared to auraki teacher-led services. These providers are classed as 'parent/whānau-led' despite the kōhanga movement having its own (unrecognised by government) training system that provides a qualification after three years of part-time study while working in a kōhanga (Collins, 2019). In 2013, the Waitangi Tribunal found that the Crown had breached the Treaty by assimilating the Kōhanga Reo movement into its ECCE system, overlooking the specific needs of these services.

This privileging of mainstream, teacher-led services—a Western ECCE framework—has undermined the ability of Kōhanga Reo to flourish. Enrolments in Kōhanga Reo have steadily declined over the last two decades (Education Counts, 2019a). The Tribunal's report warned that the Crown "must act to avoid the looming disaster in the ability of kōhanga reo to function" (New Zealand Waitangi Tribunal, 2013, p. 332). Budget 2020 provided a well-overdue funding injection, including increasing child funding rates and lifting staff wages (Hurihanganui, 2020); however, even with this much-needed boost, Kōhanga Reo will still struggle to achieve equity with other ECCE centres. As the Tribunal (2013) highlighted, services need a more appropriate regulatory framework, and a supportive funding regime that recognises its unique contributions. The Ministry must therefore tailor its regulation and funding mechanisms to ensure diversity in ECCE provision, rather than merely bolstering auraki teacher-led models.

Quality

Successive governments have prioritised increasing child participation in ECCE. Indeed, New Zealand is lauded for ranking higher than most other OECD countries for participation rates (Stats NZ, 2016); however, critics dispute whether participation is a useful metric for evaluating the efficacy of our ECCE sector (May, 2014; Te One, 2012). Increased participation is not necessarily a measure of progress when children are engaging with poor-quality services, and participation in ECCE may be detrimental for children where these services are poor-quality (Ritchie et al., 2014).

Advocates of market-based provision of ECCE argue that competition between providers will result in high-quality services, because if they do not, people will choose a different provider (Duhn, 2010; Mitchell, 2019). However, for many reasons this ideal market scenario does not play out in the ECCE sector. Parents may find it difficult to assess centre quality as they are not the 'consumer', the child is; nor may they have the background knowledge to ascertain what high-quality provision actually looks like (Fenech et al., 2011). Further, in some areas parents may have few choices of providers. Lower socioeconomic areas are overrepresented in the number of ECCE services that have received Education Review Office reports indicating poor-quality provision (Ritchie et al., 2014). Families in these areas may be choosing between sending their child to a low quality ECCE centre, or no ECCE at all.

The trend towards for-profit provision within the sector is concerning, as on average, not-for-profit services offer higher quality services than for-profit services, findings which are consistent across various indicators of quality and multiple international contexts (Mitchell & Brooking, 2007; Mitchell & Davison, 2010; Penn, 2011; Rush, 2006; Sosinsky et al., 2007). One key indicator of quality is working conditions for teachers. For-profit ECCE services tend to have poorer working conditions, and as a result, are more likely to struggle with teacher retention (Mitchell, 2002). A 2007 survey highlighted significant problems associated with many for-profit services, including higher incidence of excessive workloads and consequent teacher stress (Mitchell & Brooking, 2007). For-profit centres tend to pay their staff lower wages, contributing to higher staff turnover in these services, which is disruptive for children and the relationships among teaching staff who remain at the centre (Education Counts, 2014).

Further, for-profit services are generally slower to achieve qualified teacher targets (May, 2014; Mitchell & Brooking, 2007). Qualified teachers are able to draw on their understandings of pedagogy to create constructive learning environments involving sustained collaboration and engagement (May, 2014; Meade et al., 2012). Qualified ECCE teachers are more likely to be culturally-responsive in their teaching (Ritchie et al., 2014), so with fewer qualified staff on average, for-profit providers may be less likely to prioritise culturally-appropriate services for Māori and Pasifika families (May & Mitchell, 2008). The availability of culturally-appropriate services is an important factor that shapes parental decisions about whether to enrol their child in an ECCE centre at all (Meissell et al., 2018). For-profit provision may not meet the needs of children who are not part of the dominant cultural group, and as a result, families may choose not to engage with these services, of particular concern in areas where there are fewer choices of providers.

Increasing for-profit provision has occurred alongside the erosion of requirements for teacher qualifications. The 2002 Strategic Plan set a target to have a fully qualified workforce in teacher-led ECCE by 2012; however, the election of the 2008 National government saw a reduction in requirements for teacher qualifications from the then 80 percent to 50 percent of staff in teacher-led services, where it remains today (Clarke & Antonela, 2019). While the 2017–2020 Labour-led coalition Government reinstated the higher funding band for teacher-led centres that employ a 100 percent qualified workforce (Ministry of Education, 2020b), the minimum requirement for a degree-level qualification remains at 50 percent of staff in teacher-led centres, despite pre-election policy promises for a return to 80 percent (Early Childhood Council, 2017). Further, recent changes to allow primary trained teachers to be the designated 'person responsible' means that there can now be periods of time where there are no qualified ECCE teachers onsite (Ministry of Education, 2020e). Weakened regulatory requirements for teacher qualifications, combined with increasing for-profit provision, have therefore created a 'perfect storm' within the sector, to which an urgent response is needed.

Equity

Many critics have argued that privatisation of the ECCE sector is compounding inequities of access (Duhn, 2010; May, 2008; Press et al., 2018). There are funding mechanisms that seek to improve equity

in access to ECCE such as Equity Funding, which was established in 2002 as a financial incentive for providers to establish themselves in under-served areas (Ministry of Education, 2020c). However, despite these mechanisms, private providers are still more likely to establish themselves in areas already well-served (May & Mitchell, 2009), and services in low socioeconomic areas are more likely to underperform (Ritchie et al., 2014).

Unlike in other jurisdictions where ECCE needs have long been forecasted in order to ensure the needs of communities are met, in Aotearoa, the Government had no direct role in the planning of ECCE services until the 2020 Education and Training Act. This Act “introduces additional requirements to be considered for new early learning service applications [including] the children’s needs, the community’s need, the applicant’s character and licensing history, [and] the organisation’s financial position” (Ministry of Education, 2020d). Given its recent introduction, it is yet to be seen how well this will work in preventing the oversupply of poor-quality providers.

Yet despite this legislative change, the Ministry still does not play an active role in planning ECCE provision. The need for coordinated oversight has been recently acknowledged by the Ministry; Objective 5 of the 2019 Early Learning Action Plan highlighted some of the challenges associated with lack of engagement in network planning (Ministry of Education, 2019b). It laid out a staged approach to developing the Ministry’s capacity for more active management of the network, including ensuring that under-served communities have access to quality ECCE services. For instance, the Plan stated that setting up state-owned services would be considered in communities where there is insufficient supply (Ministry of Education, 2019b). **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Advancing this objective is crucial, particularly in light of Covid-19. In lower-income areas, services tend to be smaller, community-based providers that have been chronically underfunded (NZEI, 2020a). In the period 2000–2019, over 60 percent of centre-based closures were community-based providers, such as Pacific Islands language nests. This is particularly concerning since these are services who are best positioned to offer culturally—and linguistically-relevant provision (Education Counts, 2019b). Without significant government support, these centres are those most likely to collapse in the face of Covid-19 (NZEI, 2020a). This means that Māori, Pasifika, migrant and other communities living in low-income areas—who have the most to gain from quality ECCE (Ritchie et al., 2014)—will

be the hardest hit by pandemic-related impacts on the sector.

Further, despite significant government investment, cost remains a barrier for many whānau in accessing ECCE, exacerbating social inequities. A 2019 evaluation reported that despite government subsidies, cost is the biggest obstacle to accessing ECCE faced by parents of 3- and 4-year olds (Mitchell, 2019). The 20-hours policy has significantly reduced the cost of ECCE (Mitchell et al., 2011); however, ‘optional fees’ and donations have undermined the preliminary principle of ‘free’ early learning for families (Mitchell, 2019). **Error! Bookmark not defined.** While fees are monitored by the Ministry of Education, and can only cover ‘extras’ such as increased staff ratios or outings, these fees can still impede access to ECCE. Beyond extra fees, some providers also require families to enrol their children full-time, or for more hours than 20, charging high fees for the additional hours (Mitchell, 2019). **Error! Bookmark not defined.** For parents looking to go back to work before their child turns three—when the 20 Hours subsidy begins—the cost of ECCE may negate any earnings, thus disincentivising workforce participation (Parker, 2020). These are challenges exacerbated under a for-profit model of service provision.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, we have witnessed a shift away from community-based provision of early learning to an increasingly privatised for-profit model of provision in Aotearoa. This article has highlighted many challenges associated with a market-based and increasingly profit-oriented sector. Community-based providers have struggled to keep pace with rising participation rates within the sector, exacerbated by a policy environment that has favoured private rather than public provision. Current funding mechanisms and regulations have entrenched the mainstream teacher-led model, threatening to undermine diversity within the sector.

The profit incentive inherent in the corporate model means that the financial gain of investors, rather than the rights and needs of children, are prioritised. Despite significant government investment in the sector, many whānau still lack physical or financial access to high-quality, culturally-resonant ECCE, highlighting the inequities that a market-based approach perpetuates. Poor-quality services are more likely to be located in lower socioeconomic areas, which is troubling when we consider that gains from access to quality ECCE

are greatest among children from low-income households.

Fixing the ECCE sector is a crucial piece of the broader puzzle of addressing child poverty in Aotearoa, and the Covid-19 pandemic has given us pause to reflect on the current state of the sector. As public debate emerges over investment in physical infrastructure in the wake of Covid-19, we must also be considering the importance of social infrastructure such as early learning services and the role that the sector plays in shaping the wellbeing of our youngest citizens (Dalli et al., 2020; NZEI, 2020a). Stricter regulation, such as teacher qualification requirements, must be implemented with urgency to ensure that for-profit services are consistently providing quality ECCE. Further, the government should provide extra funding to community-based providers in recognition of the importance of diverse ECCE provision, and the better quality service that they provide in many instances. Rather than propping up the existing system—whereby ECCE is increasingly treated as an instrument for corporate profits—the pandemic and its associated economic fallout has presented an opportunity to reimagine ECCE beyond this dominant neoliberal narrative.

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