

Early Education



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- Politics of funding for Playcentre
- Walking the talk: Leadership in ECE
- Te Whariki and inclusive practice
- Soft skills of collaborative reading
- Joining a Kahui Ako
- Quality in ECE in China



Contents

Early Education Volume 65 Spring / Summer 2019

Editorial

The beginning of a new era
Claire McLachlan

I

Designing a funding system for Playcentre

Lessons from History
Suzanne Manning

5

Walking the Talk

Leadership in New Zealand early childhood settings
Raewyn Higginson

11

An examination of the updated Te Whāriki in relation to inclusive practice

Thecla Kudakwashe Moffat

17

Soft skills surfacing in collaborative reading practices at home and early childhood centre

Marjolein Whyte

23

Building Bridges 29

Developing an ECE presence in Kāhui Ako
Christine Bailey

29

An introduction to early childhood education in China

A consideration of quality
Dan Wan

32

Book Reviews:

Weaving Te Whāriki

Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum document in theory and practice (3rd ed.)

Reviewed by Vijaya Tatineni

41

For women and children

A tribute to Geraldine McDonald

Reviewed by Claire McLachlan

43

Contributors

45

,



Volume 65 Spring / Summer 2019

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

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- Think pieces with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Commentaries on management matters with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

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Designing a funding system for Playcentre

Lessons from History

Suzanne Manning

The strategic plan for early learning in 2019 calls for co-design of a funding model with the Playcentre Federation. This paper reviews the impacts of past funding policies on Playcentres and concludes that any new funding model should be based around Playcentre practices by talking with those who understand Playcentre operations. A new model must guarantee small and rural centres a minimum income so they remain sustainable; and funding the support provided by the Federation must be included. The paper concludes by imagining services which accommodate both parents-as-educators and teachers, removing the necessity for separate funding models.

The early learning strategic plan 2019

The first early childhood education (ECE) strategic plan for Aotearoa New Zealand was from 2002–2012 (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2002). A change in government leadership from 2008 meant that this plan was not renewed. However, in 2019 the government developed a new plan, which was published in December 2019 as *He taonga te tamaiti/Every child a taonga: Early learning action plan 2019–2029* (MoE, 2019). The action plan had five objectives, each containing some actions. The focus here is Objective 5: “Early learning services are part of a planned and coherent education ecosystem that is supported, accountable and sustainable” (p. 32) and specifically Action 5.7:

Co-design an appropriate funding model with the Playcentre Aotearoa New Zealand.

Playcentre is a uniquely New Zealand model of early learning service that views parents as the first and best educators of their children. Playcentres tend to have lower staffing costs than teacher-led services because parents or whānau are usually the educators. To continue to support playcentres as a valued form of provision, the Ministry is co-designing a funding model with Playcentre Aotearoa New Zealand and considering qualification requirements to align with the organisation’s preferred operating model. (MoE, 2019, p. 36).

Funding for Playcentres has been a difficult policy issue since the *Before Five* reforms of 1989 (Department of Education (DoE), 1988), which attempted to apply a unified system of funding across the whole early learning sector. This funding was based almost solely on participation numbers and proved problematic for the many small and rurally isolated Playcentres because they operated with minimal child numbers, sometimes as low as 10 children in one session per week. Later, in the new century, the question arose of how to design funding policies that supported professionalisation of the ECE sector as a whole and yet still accommodated the parent cooperative philosophies of Playcentres and Ngā Kōhanga Reo. The new action plan appears to address these issues through shifting emphasis

from participation numbers to supporting quality, yet the question of how to design effective funding policies for Playcentres remains.

In order to support the discussion around the co-design of an appropriate funding model for Playcentres, this paper presents some lessons from the impact of previous funding policy decisions. Key lessons include the importance of co-design, enabling sustainability of small centres, and recognising the significance of the collective organisation. The final section speculates on the possibility of radical re-organisation of parent cooperatives, based on a different funding system.

The importance of co-designing policy

One lesson learned from previous policy initiatives is that the voices of those who experience the lived effects of the policies should have meaningful input. In the past, policymakers have misunderstood Playcentre philosophy and practice, and therefore have been surprised at the reactions to or unintended consequences of new policies. People within the Playcentre organisation could have predicted many results. Three policy examples illustrate such concerns, including quality funding, equity funding, and the 20 Hours Free ECE (20 Hours) policy. On the other hand, those with experience in Playcentre do not always have the policy experience necessary to propose workable policy solutions, as shown in the development of the earlier strategic plan *Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (MoE, 2002). Collaborative co-design of policy, which harnesses the strengths of both parties, can be of mutual benefit.

Quality funding

Quality funding was introduced by the government in 1996. The working group for this project designed additional criteria using Playcentre-specific qualifications, so that Playcentres could be eligible for this higher funding rate. However, by 1999 the take-up rate by the early learning sector was 45%, while for Playcentres only 3.2%. May (2009) explained that the low take-up rate of the sector was because the financial rewards were too low to offset the extra costs. Yet there was an additional explanation for the low Playcentre uptake, which would not have been as obvious to policy makers and commenters. This barrier was the assumption that staffing in a centre remained static throughout the week, and therefore only one funding rate could be claimed in any one week. Such an assumption did not hold true for Playcentres.

As Playcentres used forms of group supervision, a different supervision team, with different qualifications levels could run each session in a week. Some Playcentres also operated a 'dual roll' system, where two group of families would attend different sessions (New Zealand Playcentre Federation (NZPF), 1994–1998). With two groups operating in one centre it was quite possible that one group could qualify for quality funding and the other one would not, making the whole centre ineligible for quality funding. As the NZPF pointed out in a letter to the MoE in January 1996, "recognition of specific higher funding criteria for Playcentre is made meaningless by the adoption of processes which preclude Playcentre's participation in the new policy" (NZPF, 1994–1998). This policy was an example where the good intentions to accommodate Playcentre processes were not realised.

Government equity funding

When equity funding was implemented in 2002, it was calculated using a number of factors that had been shown to contribute to increased costs for services, including an 'isolation factor'. High numbers of rural Playcentres were eligible for this isolation component of the equity funding. It was a relatively small funding boost, with most eligible Playcentres receiving between \$1000 and \$2000 per year, the smallest amounts of any of the equity-funded services (Mitchell, Royal Tangaere, Mara, & Wylie, 2006a). An evaluation of the use of equity funding found that most services used the money for quality improvements rather than targeting increased participation through enrolling new families (Mitchell et al., 2006a). For Playcentres there was a participation effect, which surprised researchers:

Unexpectedly, the use of Equity Funding to enhance quality was sometimes associated with gains in the regularity and duration of attendance and parent/whānau involvement. These gains occurred when parent and whānau-led services, particularly playcentres, employed staff to reduce volunteer workloads, when services included parents in activities that interested them, such as excursions and wānanga, when additional staff were employed to work with families, and when improvements were made to resources and the service environment. The Equity Funding use made the service more attractive to parents/whānau or led to better

communication. (Mitchell et al., 2006a, p. 4)

This is an example of funding policy that was beneficial in unexpected ways for policy makers. The main objective of the policy was to increase participation in ECE, especially for families not already participating. However, spending the extra funding on quality initiatives within Playcentres had the effect of increasing the “regularity and duration” of participation of families already involved. From an internal Playcentre point of view, this is not a surprising effect. Playcentre members had been discussing the increasing administration workloads required by the *Before Five* policies (DoE, 1988), and the negative effects of that this had had on membership numbers and satisfaction, for about a decade by the time equity funding was implemented. Smaller Playcentres, with fewer families, were less able to spread the workload and therefore were more negatively affected than larger, urban centres. Equity funding would have been welcomed as a way to address those workload issues for the benefit of all involved in the Playcentres.

20 Hours Free ECE

Ngā Huarahi Arataki (MoE, 2002) led to a new funding system where the government would cover the costs of twenty hours at a teacher-led early learning service for any child. This 20 Hours policy was designed to compensate teacher-led services for the costs of the new quality requirements, especially teacher registration, and at the same time make using these services more affordable for families. The government was seeking to meet objectives of increased quality and increased participation in early learning. Yet Playcentres were excluded from this funding on the premise was that there were no increased costs resulting from *Ngā Huarahi Arataki*, and fees were already very low, so increased funding would have no impact on meeting government objectives. Playcentres would not receive less funding under the new scheme, so maintaining the funding status quo was considered fair and equitable.

Playcentre parents, however, saw the exclusion as undervaluing the contribution that they made. The costs to parents were their time rather than their money. The MoE acknowledged this in their internal policy memos and subsequent public communications agreed (May, 2003–2004), and therefore offered free access to early learning at a teacher-led service through the 20 Hours policy, available in addition to Playcentre attendance. From a government perspective, this would increase the total number of hours these families participated in

early learning, allow the parents to have time away from their children, and not penalise them for choosing to be involved in Playcentre. This argument has internal logic, but was not effective in placating Playcentre parents, as the policy makers overlooked or did not understand the philosophical approach and decision-making that motivated Playcentre parents in their choice of service.

Playcentre parents generally did not wish to increase their total hours of attendance, and valued the time spent with their children at Playcentre. What they saw as a burden was the administrative workload that had come with increasing professionalisation of the early childhood sector since *Before Five*. Market research commissioned by the NZPF (Murrow, 2002) found that spending time with their children was the primary reason parents identified for choosing Playcentre as an option:

We're in Playcentre because we want to spend time with our children not dealing with the piles of paper generated by the Ministry and by ourselves," lamented one centre. Employing paid administrators to deal with paperwork was a solution suggested by many who felt that any conflict between paid and voluntary positions that could arise would quickly disappear as the advantages of a lighter workload became obvious. (Sparkes, 2001, p. 10)

Although Playcentres used volunteer labour, centres were happy to pay for administration support. As other services were getting a funding increase through the 20 Hours policy, Playcentre parents did not think it was fair and equitable that there would be no extra funding to enable a lighter administrative workload. Lobbying from the Playcentre Federation gained a concession in 2006, when the government announced a funding rate increase for Playcentres for administration support (NZPF, 1994–1998).

Ngā Huarahi Arataki/Pathways to the Future

Although Playcentre members may have the experience to predict the impacts of funding policies, it is still easier to say why a policy will not work well rather than generate new policy strategies. When *Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (MoE, 2002) was developed, the Playcentre representatives voiced their concerns that the draft plan focused on professional early childhood teachers and that parents-as-educators in Playcentres were not being included. They

articulated the Playcentre philosophy of valuing parents as educators of their children but were unable to suggest regulations or strategies to support this (Meade, 2001) and therefore few strategies for Playcentres came out of the plan. This example highlights the necessity of co-design, combining the expertise of sensitive policymakers with the knowledge of organizational members. There is a clear need for reciprocal and responsive discussions between the two groups, so that the best workable solution can be negotiated, drawing on the expertise of both.

Sustaining small centres

Any funding system designed for Playcentres must cater for services with small enrolment numbers. Many Playcentres are located in small or rurally isolated communities and are thus an important provider of early learning services in these areas (Mitchell, Royal Tangaere, Mara, & Wylie, 2006b). The funding system introduced by the *Before Five* reforms was based almost solely on attendance numbers, which disadvantaged small centres. Small Playcentres only survived in the 1990s because of the Playcentre Federation internal redistribution scheme, described more fully below. In contrast, sector-wide funding initiatives such as government equity funding and the small centre top-up guaranteed a minimum income and thus enabled these small Playcentres to manage financially. These sector-wide initiatives were helpful for all centres, not just Playcentres, and were an important component of ensuring rural families had access to ECE.

Before Five

The *Before Five* funding system was based on a universal subsidy (bulk funding) for any type of early learning service that met the licensing criteria and was calculated in hours of attendance per child (DoE, 1988). The subsidy covered both fixed and variable costs, and applied the same formula for every centre. Yet for Playcentre, this was problematic because many centres had additional costs because of their rural location, or low child attendance but the same fixed costs as a larger centre. A Playcentre federation officer implied this in 1991:

The funding provided on a child/session basis from government does not address many of the unique difficulties that playcentre associations face. The funding assumes that, other

than child number, all our centres are equal—equal facilities, equal travelling costs, equal location costs, equal woman power. But we know this is not true. (Playcentre Journal Editor, 1991a, p. 10)

The Playcentre federation treasurer, in an internal memo responding to the draft funding proposals in 1989, calculated that “a centre needs nearly 20 children/session to really do well” (NZPF, 1989–1990). This was never going to be possible for many Playcentres that operated in rural areas with small numbers of children (less than 20, sometimes less than 10) and sessions only once or twice a week (Powell, Cullen, Adams, Duncan, & Marshall, 2005). Additional weightings to the basic subsidy formula due to factors such as rural location had been suggested (Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group, 1988), yet the bulk funding rates announced in September 1989 included only a weighting for children under two years old (DoE, 1989).

The *Before Five* funding system started at the beginning of 1990, and by 1991 Playcentre associations were reporting difficulties in maintaining viable centres and that many rural centres were closing. In order to support the smaller centres, a national equity-sharing scheme was introduced. The fund aimed “to share funds between associations so that all are able to meet funding shortfalls in centres as well as pay for their own support services for centres” (Playcentre Journal Editor, 1991b, p. 10). This equity fund quickly became an embedded part of Playcentre culture, where it was accepted that centres receiving higher amounts of funding paid higher levies, and smaller centres received extra funding. Playcentres in 2008 were paying an average of 30% of their funding in levies (Woodhams & Woodhams, 2008). This internal equity system was the main reason that a high number of rural Playcentres were able to stay open, particularly in the first decade after *Before Five*.

Funding that worked for small centres

Policy initiatives that effectively addressed the issue that small centres faced, were those that included an extra payment based on location or size of the centre, in addition to funding based on attendance. An example was the top-up payment for small centres announced in the 2004 Government Budget, for all ECE services including Playcentres, which guaranteed an annual minimum level of funding (NZPF, 2000–2005). This met both the Playcentres’

need for sustainable funding, and the MoE's objective of ensuring families in rural areas were still able to access early childhood education. This small centre top-up was not large in monetary terms but was significant in the budgets of the tiny Playcentres, especially when combined with government equity funding and the Playcentre internal equity sharing. These additional sources of funds meant that these Playcentres could be kept open.

Playcentre as a Collective

Neoliberalism was an underlying philosophy of the *Before Five* reforms of the late 1980s and was the reason for removing 'the middle layer' of administration. The new structure was a direct funding relationship between the MoE and individual service providers. Before the changes, the NZPF received some money direct from the government, to fund the support that they gave to individual Playcentres. In the new system, the bulk funding given to each centre was supposed to be enough to enable the centre to 'buy in' support from wherever they chose. The collective organisations, such as the Playcentre Federation and the Kindergarten associations, were bypassed, and there was discussion as to whether these collective organisations would, and could, continue to exist. The practical response was that Playcentres decided to retain the structure of the federation and funded this support through levies; the regional associations became agents who mediated the bulk funding process with the MoE (Manning, 2019b). The equity-sharing scheme described previously was another way that Playcentres resisted the neoliberal move to treat each individual centre as an autonomous entity.

Two research studies have highlighted the value of the collective organisation in terms of supporting the management and curriculum delivery in Playcentres. *Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (MoE, 2002) set up a research project to investigate quality in parent and whānau-led services (Mitchell et al., 2006b). This research showed the positive impact that Playcentre structure had on supporting quality in individual Playcentres and recommended "making a greater contribution towards the costs of playcentre education courses and professional advice" (Mitchell, et al., 2006b, p. ix). A later study commissioned by the Playcentre Federation also emphasised the necessity of this support structure for good outcomes in Playcentres and that the costs of this support was not taken into account in funding rate calculations (Woodhams & Woodhams, 2008). Such findings affirm that a future funding system for Playcentres

must consider not only the costs of the individual parent cooperative centres, but also the costs of the organisational structure that supports and trains parents to manage their centres and educate their children.

Funding parents-as-educators

The proposal in the draft strategic plan in 2019 is a welcome acknowledgement that better policy can be achieved when the specialist policy makers enter into a co-design process with those who will be affected by the policy, and who therefore have lived experience that can inform the policy design. A review of early learning sector policy and its impact on Playcentre provides examples of where policy makers have not understood the full context of Playcentre operations, and therefore the policy has not been effective (for example the 1996 quality funding); or the reactions to policy have not been predicted (such as with the equity funding or the 20 Hours policy). History also shows that small centres require a guaranteed minimum funding amount in order to survive, and this issue disproportionately affects Playcentres as a service as a high proportion are small and rurally located. Yet these Playcentres are essential for maintaining access to early learning services for many communities, and therefore is significant equity issue. Finally, Playcentres should not be considered as isolated units, but funding needs to include sustaining the Federation structure. This support is vital for Playcentres to be able to operate as parent cooperatives.

As the co-design process for funding commences, it might also be worth considering the fundamental differences between teacher-led services and parent cooperatives. In 2019, the Playcentre Federation has been restructured to form the new organisation Playcentre Aotearoa, where the many associations have been replaced by four regional hubs which provide administration, training and support for the Playcentres in their region. These hubs are staffed with paid employees, and many of the centres have paid staff. Playcentre Education now deliver the New Zealand early childhood education qualifications rather than Playcentre-specific qualifications.

What remains constant, however, is that parents still have roles as educators at the centres. They work alongside others with varying amounts of training and experience, and learn about the education of young children. Not every parent is interested in this learning, and not every parent can afford this time; yet for some, it is a life changing experience, and one that helps them form

relationships with both children and adults in their community. In the future, is it Playcentres that should be protected as a separate early learning service type, or is it support for parents-as-educators that should be protected? Imagine, instead, a generic early learning service where registered teachers form the core of the teaching team, and parents-as-educators make up the rest of the team (see Manning, 2019a, for a fuller discussion). Any future funding system would need to allow for this teaching team composition without penalty to the centre; and enabling the parents to be paid when they are part of the teaching team would allow more than just wealthy families to take part in this learning opportunity. In the words of Anne Meade, this would remove the necessity for an either/or choice for families (i.e., teacher-led or parent cooperative) and allow for a both/and scenario. I think this is a proposal worth discussing.

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