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### **Research**

## **Early Childhood Education as Sites for Children's Citizenship: Tensions, challenges and possibilities in New Zealand's policy framing**

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### **Abstract**

This paper draws on recent research to examine the tensions and challenges inherent in the current market approach to provision of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services in Aotearoa New Zealand. We use selected United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) articles to evaluate what the market approach means and explore the implications for children and families. We argue that the market approach has led to duplications and gaps in service provision, and that it has produced inequities in access particularly for low income, ethnically diverse and rural families. We also argue that the market approach has not been able to realise the full potentials for what ECCE provision might look like as services that can offer the best possible support for children's learning and wellbeing, as well as family participation and support, social networks and community cohesion. We argue that we need to establish citizenry rights as a goal for policy development, especially policy about the nature and roles of ECCE provision. Our paper proposes how we might move to a new policy approach

## Introduction

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2001, 2006), those countries that have strong Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) systems have developed policy based predominantly around children as a distinct social group with their own associated rights. This focus on children's rights highlights new ways of representing and understanding children and childhood that foreground children's agency and experiences. Children are social actors, not passive and vulnerable dependants. They are shaped by society, and also shape it through their own experiences and interactions with others. This vision of children as competent and active contributors to society is a founding aspiration for children in Te Whāriki, Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum. Smith (2007) discusses relationships between the theoretical frameworks of the rights of children and the sociology of childhood:

*Both paradigms recognise that children construct their social worlds; that they have agency; that they are participants in social processes; that they are persons not property; that they constitute multiple voices rather than a collective and undifferentiated class; and that childhood should be given as high (if not higher) priority (p. 151).*

Noonan (2001, 2002) and Bennett (2006) independently suggest that the values and articles from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) are directly relevant to policy development for ECCE. We agree that UNCROC offers a useful conceptual tool for thinking about ECCE provision. The

principles and values of UNCROC are used to guide our analysis of ECCE provision in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has identified four principles that must inform the analysis and implementation of all other rights (UNICEF, 2001). These are discussed below in relation to early childhood education.

Article 2 - All rights must apply to all children without discrimination of any kind. The results of Aotearoa New Zealand's *Competent Children, Competent Learners* longitudinal study and a large body of international research (Mitchell, Wylie, & Carr, 2008) confirm that participation in good quality early childhood education benefits children and families at the time of their attendance and has a significant impact on achievement and wellbeing later during schooling. On this basis, access to good quality early childhood education is a right of all children, and children should not be discriminated against in having such opportunities.

Article 3 –The best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. The principle of “best interests” appears in many of the articles. In relation to early childhood education, Article 28 states that Governments shall respect the right of the child to education. Article 29 links the right to education to children's development: [Governments] will direct the education of the child to the fullest development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities; the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; the development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity,

language and values; understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples; and respect for the natural environment (UNCROC Article 29). The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006) emphasised the importance of quality: quality curriculum, pedagogies, staff qualifications and access of staff to professional resources and support.

Article 6 – Children have the right to life and to survival and development to the maximum degree possible. The Committee on the Rights of the Child further elaborated that:

*The right to survival and development can only be implemented in a holistic manner, through the enforcement of all the other provisions of the Convention, including rights to health, adequate nutrition, social security, an adequate standard of living, a healthy and safe environment, education and play . . . as well as through respect for the responsibilities of parents and the provision of assistance and quality services (articles 5 and 8, Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006).*

The Committee was supportive of policies that integrate care and education and of multiservice provision that coordinates services for families.

Article 12 – Children have the right to express their views freely on all matters of concern to them and to have those views taken seriously. The Committee on the Rights of the Child noted that this right reinforces the status of the young child as an active participant. “Respect for the young child’s agency – as a participant in family, community and society – is frequently overlooked or rejected as inappropriate on the grounds of age and

immaturity” (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006, p. 6).

These principles provide a value base against which we examine policy for developing and providing ECCE services as sites for democratic citizenship. In this paper, we focus on ECCE provision, including children’s access to ECCE and the quality and nature of ECCE provision. To what extent and how are Aotearoa New Zealand’s policies on provision of ECCE services guided by the UNCROC principles? We discuss the Aotearoa New Zealand’s policy context, and with reference to research, examine the extent to which the policy frameworks “assert universal entitlements, combat discrimination, while at the same time respect diversity” (Woodhead, 2006, p. 39).

### ***The Aotearoa New Zealand context***

The mid 1980s and 1990s have become known as times of sweeping social, economic and educational reform in Aotearoa New Zealand. Wide-ranging neo-liberal reforms, of which early childhood education was a part, emphasised self-sufficiency and market provision. Neo-liberal reforms positioned children as dependent on their families, and impacted disproportionately and negatively on children’s economic position, health and educational opportunities.

In 1999, a change to a Labour-led government heralded a shift to a more supportive state (Mitchell, 2005) and further reforms in relation to welfare benefits, education, housing and employment relations. A 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education, *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki*, (Ministry of Education, 2002),

was published in 2002. Through strategic plan policies, the government substantially increased funding levels, including some free provision for 3- and 4-year-olds in teacher-led services, basing funding more closely on the costs of service provision, setting high standards for staff qualifications, addressing pay equity for kindergarten teachers with primary and secondary teachers, providing greater pedagogical support for teachers, and taking some new initiatives to encourage participation in ECCE. The strategic plan policies were better able to respond to differential needs and costs of each service type, and to support teaching and learning for all children (Mitchell, 2005).

Essentially, a market approach continues to exist at the current time. This approach to planning and provision of early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand has been described as an “Achilles heel” within a fundamentally sound policy context (Mitchell, 2008). The market approach to planning and provision impacts on opportunities for all children to access good quality ECCE provision that is also supportive of and responsive to their families’ cultural needs and circumstances.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the government is not a direct provider of early childhood education. Like Australia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, United States, and the Netherlands, Aotearoa New Zealand involves private groups in the provision of ECCE services alongside community providers<sup>i</sup>.

Aotearoa New Zealand’s ECCE provision has been called a “paradigm of diversity” (Smith & May, 2006) because of its variety of distinctive ECCE service types.

There are more than seven types of ECCE service provision that have arisen from different social and political imperatives, and which are part of the Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood landscape today.

The earliest services, childcare centres and kindergartens, were first established in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today childcare centres cater for the most children in ECCE, from babies to school starting age (which is usually 5-years of age). Some childcare centres provide all-day ECCE, often while parents work; others are open for part of the day.

Kindergartens were originally sessional early childhood education services for 3 and 4 year-olds. Many are now expanding their hours in response to changing community needs and funding incentives, often to cater for children for a school day (usually 9am to 3pm).

Home-based services offer flexible provision in the caregiver’s or child’s home to suit the needs of families. Children from birth to school-age may attend.

The playcentre movement is a uniquely Aotearoa New Zealand initiative. Playcentre parents work together as a parent collective to undertake all pedagogical roles, including curriculum implementation, and running the playcentre. Parents are trained as educators. Playcentres cater for children from birth to school-age, although most enrolments are of younger children, partly because of a trend for mothers of older preschoolers to enter into paid employment.

The kōhanga reo movement was established in 1982 and has been described as “the most vigorous and innovative educational movement in this country (dare one suggest, in the world)” (Reedy, 2003, p. 65). Kōhanga reo offer total immersion in Māori language, and are run by the extended family. Their philosophy centres around fostering Māori language and cultural identity, and self determination.

Following the example of kōhanga reo, Pasifika people in Aotearoa New Zealand have set up their own Pasifika bilingual and immersion ECCE services.

Playgroups are another service run by parents, often small-scale and operating from community halls. Unlike playcentres, there are no required levels of training, and the main focus is on social support for children and families.

Over time successive Aotearoa New Zealand governments have assumed that the community or private sector will provide ECCE. A fairly “hands-off” approach to service provision has been adopted, except for some targeted support for planning and capital works, and initiatives aimed at increasing participation in areas where many children are not attending ECCE before they go to school. But the government has no direct responsibility for the provision of ECCE.

The main form of support for capital works is through a discretionary grants scheme that offers planning and capital grants for eligible community-based services or groups which meet criteria set by the Ministry of Education annually. The fund is capped, and many services miss out each year or are not eligible. In

2008/2009, 19 capital grants were allocated for building new services, and 12 planning grants for planning of new services in areas where participation was low or there was a shortage of places (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Discretionary grants were offered to community based services because it is assumed that private providers have access to commercial funding arrangements (Lange, 1988). Privately owned ECCE services exist in the education and care (childcare) and homebased sector only. Traditionally, most private centres have owner operators, with some seeking just to make a living for themselves. However, one private corporate company (Kindercare) has operated since 1972. In 2002, three new international companies, Macquarie Bank, Kidicorp and ABC, that had bought ECCE centres in Aotearoa New Zealand, were listed on the share market. Consistent with developments in other countries that share a market approach, corporate ECCE has expanded rapidly in the last decade. By 2008, ABC owned 123 centres (following an aggressive campaign to purchase existing centres), Kidicorp owned 68 centres and Macquarie Bank owned 20 centres in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Currently, the discretionary grants scheme is on hold while the government considers “options for more effective use of the funding to increase participation. . . The Ministry is currently developing advice on future options” (Bree Kurtovich, personal communication, 2009).

The role of government via the Ministry of Education has been to undertake “analysis of the current state of the network of ECCE services. This analysis

[is] to assist in identifying where investment may be needed in new services and where the existing network is sufficient to meet community needs. MOE facilitators [are] working with communities in areas of low participation to find solutions for access to quality and sustainable ECE” (Mitchell & Hodgen, 2008a, p. 132).

From 1 July 2007, the government provided “20 hours ECE” (initially termed “20 hours free ECE”) for 3 and 4 year-olds in teacher-led services where compulsory fees are not able to be charged, although parents can be asked to agree to paying optional charges. ECCE services “opt in” to the scheme. At May 2009, over 80 percent of eligible services had opted in. 20 hours ECE is now being extended to parent/whānau-led services (playcentres and kōhanga reo), and to five year-olds. A main policy aim is to make ECCE affordable, and thereby increase participation.

In terms of the UNCROC principle of “no discrimination” (Article 2), the market approach as applied in Aotearoa New Zealand has impacted negatively and disproportionately on access to ECCE for children from low income communities and children of Māori and Pasifika ethnicities. The latest Ministry of Education figures shows 98.3 percent of European/Pākeha children attended an ECCE service before starting school, compared with 90.4 percent of Māori children and 84.8 percent of Pasifika children (Ministry of Education, 2009). These figures mask much lower attendance figures in particular localities. This was apparent in findings reported in stage one of the locality-based evaluation of Aotearoa New Zealand’s strategic plan for ECCE, which followed 46 services in

eight localities in Aotearoa New Zealand over 2004 and 2006 (Mitchell & Hodgen, 2008a). The two localities where the median family income was the lowest, also had the lowest levels of ECCE participation prior to children starting school – 74 percent and 78 percent respectively in 2006.

The take-up of the 20 hours ECE subsidy is also lower in some communities than others – particularly Mangere, Papatoetoe, Manurewa, Otara, and Tamaki Maungkikie in the Auckland region (Ministry of Education, 2009). Again, these communities are characterised by much lower income levels than is found for Aotearoa New Zealand as a whole. That these children do not have opportunity to benefit from the 20 hours ECE subsidy constitutes another example of discrimination against children from low-income families.

Discrimination also exists in respect to choice of ECCE service. Robertson’s (2007) study of parent decision-making in relation to the use of ECCE found there was limited choice for families in rural communities. There is also a high incidence – around 22 to 25 percent - of families in Aotearoa New Zealand using more than one ECCE service (Department of Labour and National Advisory Council on the Employment of Women, 1999; Mitchell & Brooking, 2007; Mitchell & Hodgen, 2008a, 2008b). In these situations, the child needs to make “flexible adjustments” between one environment and another, and make sense of contexts in which there may be divergent values and perspectives (Dencik, 1989). Dual

enrolment may not be in the best interests of the child if there is little connection and coherence between the ECCE services that the child attends. New Zealand Council for Educational Research's 2007 national survey (Mitchell & Hodgen, 2008b) found the main reasons for the 25 percent of families using more than one service was that they thought a combination of services was beneficial for their child. But 31 percent of families stated that the times or days were not suitable, suggesting ECCE services may be inflexible or not suited to the context of family lives. This is another reason why it is in the best interests of the child to move away from a market approach to planned provision of ECCE services that is responsive to the context of family lives.

The market approach and generous government subsidies have also contributed to a massive expansion in the privately-owned ECCE sector, while growth has been sluggish or declined in the community-based sector. In 1992, 41 percent of education and care services were privately owned. This rose to 51 percent in 2001, 57 percent in 2007, and 60 percent in 2008.

One of the key reasons for these discrepancies in growth rates was articulated by the Quality Public Early Childhood Education project (QPECE). This group was set up to appraise the impact of government policies on community-based organisations and services (May & Mitchell, 2009):  
*...community-based early childhood services and organisations had been ill-*

*placed in the policy environment of the past two decades to respond to the need for the expansion of provision in the sector and the increased participation of children in Aotearoa New Zealand. This was because they were not set up to raise funds in the same way as private companies and are reliant on limited government grants and community funding. The provision of new services had been more possible for private and increasingly corporate providers (p. 2).*

When examined from a child's rights point of view and measured against the UNCROC principles, we should be concerned at the rapid spread of the private sector, more especially, of corporate publicly listed companies. The corporate world constructs early childhood services as places of commercial exchange, where the first duty of directors is to shareholders who expect a financial return on their investment, and where parents are positioned as consumers purchasing a product. The business expertise expected of corporate providers requires financial and managerial expertise but no prior knowledge of professional issues of childcare, as Penn (2009) points out.

With a focus on business and profit corporate childcare is likely to limit the potential for "what an early childhood service might be". The predominant concern of managers is financial, and there is usually a high level of standardisation. The corporate chain, ABC, in Aotearoa New Zealand is an example of this. Australian-developed policies, equipment, staff uniforms, and branding have produced a level of standardisation that is not responsive to or supportive of Aotearoa New Zealand's national and local context and culture. In

Australia, the large market share of ABC childcare provision had the effect of limiting parental choice of service, and putting non-ABC centres at financial risk because of the power of ABC's competitive edge (Press & Woodrow, 2009). Corporate childcare does not operate as a community facility, and there is not the opportunity for parents, teachers and children to take responsibility in deciding the shape and direction of the services. For-profit services "are situated in the economic sphere; they cannot also be forums within civil society" (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, pp. 74–75). The ideas behind the UN committee's support for holistic and multiservice provision that coordinates services for families and is responsive to family and community contexts cannot be realised in an approach that imports practices from an unrelated context, as corporate chains have done in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Studies in Aotearoa New Zealand (Mitchell & Brooking, 2007), the Netherlands (Noially, Visser, & Grout, 2007), and Canada (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2004) found that private childcare is more likely to be located in high income communities. There is also a quality differential between private and community-based services demonstrating that community-based services, on average, offer higher quality ECCE than private services. This is a consistent finding in studies in Canada, the United States, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (May & Mitchell, 2009). In Aotearoa New Zealand, compared with community-based childcare services, private services have

been found to employ less qualified staff (Mitchell, 2002). Two national surveys (Mitchell & Brooking, 2007; Mitchell & Hodgen, 2008b) found that private services held less frequent staff meetings, were more likely to have only the minimum annual leave entitlement, and had higher rates of teacher turnover. Staff were more likely to describe their workload as excessive and were less likely to regard themselves as part of a decision-making team in all areas (policy and pedagogy).

Profits for owners and shareholders compete with spending fully on reinvesting in the service. Private providers, through their national organisation the Early Childhood Council, have been strong advocates against high regulated standards for qualified teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand. In Australia, private for-profit providers have lobbied against paid parental leave, since such leave may reduce the need for their services (Brennan, 2007, unpublished manuscript). In combination, these factors constitute further evidence for why over-reliance on the private sector and markets will result in a narrowing of ECCE options and discrimination against low income communities. The "best interests of the child" are not respected in ECCE provision that is not of the highest standards of quality.

### **An alternative model of provision**

Another model for childcare provision, one that is not premised on the idea that the operation of the market alone will

provide suitable services, exists in many European continental countries. In these instances local or national government play a strong role in planning provision, extending to taking over direct responsibility for service provision (OECD, 2006). For example, it is the responsibility of municipalities (local bodies) to plan and support ECCE services in Scandinavian countries. In Finland, Norway and Sweden children, have an entitlement to a place in an ECCE service, usually after the end of paid parental leave. In France, école maternelles are fully provided and funded by the state.

Such an approach lies at the heart of the QPECE project group's vision and goals for strengthening community-based ECCE in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The vision is that:

- *Every child has a right as a citizen to participate in free early childhood education*
- *Every family that wishes to can access high quality, community-based early childhood education (May & Mitchell, 2009, p. 4).*

The QPECE project group's rationale for free provision of ECCE is its belief that early childhood education should be viewed as "a public good which empowers adults and children to learn and grow together" and a partnership between government, community, whānau (extended family) and ECCE services (May & Mitchell, 2009, p. 4). Its focus on high quality, community-based ECCE recognises the difficulties for community-based groups in expanding service provision in a context where they are reliant on limited government grants or community funding, and are largely inexperienced in property development.

Realising this vision would help Aotearoa New Zealand to remove inequities in access that have discriminated against some children and families, and would be consistent with UNCROC principles that we have highlighted.

The tenets of community-based provision are:

- *The service is seen as a community asset and the children, parents, families and community benefit from it;*
- *Collectivity, partnership, and participation are hallmarks of decision-making and*
- *The full funding from government resources goes into educating the child and supporting their family (May & Mitchell, 2009, p. 4).*

These tenets portray the roles and purposes of ECCE as encompassing children's education and integrated support for families. Strong family engagement with early education, where social/cultural capital and interests from home are included within the education programme, and continuity between early childhood settings and homes can significantly contribute to children's learning (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford, 2004; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2003). Integrated programmes have the potential to offer wider possibilities for learning and for enhancing the agency of children and families than stand alone education services. (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003; Cohen, Moss, Petrie, & Wallace, 2004). Within a New Zealand context, integrated ECCE provision can recognise and include local Māori knowledges via strong reciprocal relationships with whānau/hapu/iwi<sup>ii</sup> (Penetito, 2001).

The QPECE project group's emphasis on democratic processes of decision-making opens up possibilities for ECCE service participants to contribute as agents to social action within the sphere of the ECCE community. Consistent with UNCROC Article 12, concerning children's agency, we argue that participation in decision-making should include children as well as adults. The market approach to provision has overlooked respect for agency of children and their families because it does not offer an established space for their participation in shaping the nature of provision and contributing to it. Within corporate publicly listed ECCE services, opportunities for such space will always be limited because of the primary responsibility of directors of these companies to their shareholders. Community-based services are well positioned to support childhood as a site for citizenship practice because of their existing collective decision-making structures. Both types of service, private and community-based, can adopt a focus on children's rights through policy and pedagogy that positions children and their families with authority and enables them to use their competence and experience to make positive changes to their world.

The QPECE project group's proposals would require a shift from the current market approach to nationally planned provision of early childhood education, and collaborative relationships in planning at local and regional levels. Such a process should include discussion of community values for ECCE and consideration of current local provision. Participants from interested organisations would contribute ideas on how they might connect with early childhood services so

that services become a hub for community development.

Planning provision, rather than funding any service that meets regulatory requirements, as is currently the norm, offers the opportunity to develop new and responsive forms of provision, with a genuine sense of local commitment to the quality of early childhood education services in a community. It is also a more effective use of government funding since planning should avoid oversupply and duplication, and consequent wastage.

The proposals are consistent with the UNCROC articles that we have highlighted. They offer a basis from which to plan and provide ECCE services for young children that are responsive to the wider context of children's lives, that support a stronger sense of community at a local level, and that promote a socially just world.

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<sup>i</sup> Community-based services are those established as Incorporated Societies, Charitable, Statutory, or Community Trusts, or those owned by a community organisation (e.g. City Council). Community-based services are prohibited from making gains that are distributed to their members (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 3).

<sup>ii</sup> "Whānau" is a Māori word meaning extended family or family in a broad sense. Hapu means clan or sub-tribe. Iwi means tribe, people