
Constructions of Childhood in Early Childhood Education Policy Debate in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT What assumptions about children and childhood are held by government officials and organisation representatives who are influential in policy formation in early childhood education (ECE) in New Zealand? How are assumptions manifested in policy? This article draws on a study carried out from 2001 to 2003, a time of radical ECE policy change in New Zealand. It uses principles derived from social constructionist theory and values expressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to analyse constructions of childhood in ECE policy debate during this time. Three dominant constructions about childhood were identified: a construction of the 'child as dependant within the family'; the 'child as learner within a community of learners'; and the 'child as citizen within a social community'. These constructions were associated with views about the purposes and outcomes of ECE; the roles of children, teachers, families, and government; and favoured policy approaches. It is argued that a construction of child as citizen within a social community is a new paradigm that places children's rights and agency to the forefront, and acknowledges the interdependence of care and education. As a basis for policy, it could cater better for societal change and support ECE services as participatory forums building social networks, support and cohesion.

Introduction: New Zealand's early childhood education policy context

Writing about the public management model in New Zealand, Boston et al (1996) have argued that the large-scale reforms of public management that occurred in New Zealand during the 1980s emphasised improving responsiveness to consumers, and were more equivocal about the role and status of citizens. An emphasis on parents as consumers and equivocation about state responsibility was evident in the approaches of successive governments to early childhood education (ECE). A neo-liberal 'National government' during the 1990s placed policy emphasis on individual parental choice and service responsibility for standards and provision. This government set low regulated standards for staff qualifications, ratios and group size, discriminated against collective bargaining in its industrial relations legislation, and funded ECE to low levels relative to the schools sector (Mitchell, 2005). Nevertheless, a highly significant policy initiative – the development and publication of the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* – occurred in 1996. This initiative framed successive approaches to government-funded professional resources and support in subsequent policy reforms.

The policy context of ECE in New Zealand was transformed during the 2000s, as a Labour-led government, holding office from 1999 to 2008, committed itself to a 10-year strategic plan for ECE, *Pathways to the Future – Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002), to support children's participation in quality ECE. The government set up a working group of 31 people, chaired by Dr Anne Meade, and consulted widely to develop the strategic plan (Working Group for the Development of the Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education, 2001). The strategic plan has three high-level goals that are aspirational for the sector and the government: to improve the quality of ECE services; to increase participation in quality ECE services; and to promote

collaborative relationships between ECE services, parent support and development, schools, health and social services. Four supporting strategies underpin the three goals: to review regulations; review the funding system; undertake ongoing research; and involve the sector in ECE policy development.

The 2002 strategic plan for ECE signalled a transformed role for the state away from minimal state involvement and support (Mitchell, 2005), with individual services alone responsible for their performance, to a system of mutual responsibility between government and services. Distinctly new roles for the government in planning and provision, in supporting teaching and learning, and in creating coordination and coherence between systems were created. Requirements to increase the proportion of qualified registered teachers staffing teacher-led ECE services were set in 2002, aimed at all teachers being qualified by the year 2012. Assessment and other professional resources (Ministry of Education, 2005, 2007, 2009), congruent with the sociocultural framing of New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, were published, and funding was provided for associated professional development. Funding was reviewed over 2003 to 2004, and a new system of funding, based on the main staffing and operational costs of service provision and with significantly enhanced rates, was implemented in April 2005. The new levels were such that funding for ECE services increased from \$409 million in the year ending June 2002 to an estimated NZD771 million in 2007 (May, 2009). On 1 July 2007, a policy that three- and four-year-olds in teacher-led services could access up to 20 hours per week free ECE (if their service opted into the scheme) was implemented. In teacher-led services, 50% of the adults who educate and care for children must be qualified and registered as ECE teachers. The '20 Hours Free ECE' policy did not apply to all children and did not guarantee an entitled place, but it represented a step towards the government viewing ECE as a child's right, a public good and a governmental responsibility.

This was a time of ideological debate over the rights of the child, parental choice and the role of the state. May (2009) has described the political divisions occurring in these years over ECE policy, both between the main political parties and between groups within the sector. During the time leading up to the 2005 general election, the divide was intense. The centre-right National Party sought to cut tax rates, introduce tax rebates on parent fees, and place more individual responsibility for ECE onto families. The centre-left Labour Party sought a stronger role for the state through its '20 Hours Free ECE' policy and through regulating high standards for teacher qualifications.

Within the ECE sector, the Labour-led government's qualifications policy was strongly opposed by the Early Childhood Council, a national organisation representing mainly private education and care (childcare) providers. The Early Childhood Council recommended greater recognition of parent opinions and staff competence as a gauge of quality. The qualifications policy was strongly supported by the New Zealand Educational Institute – Te Riu Roa, the teachers' union; Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa – New Zealand Childcare Association (NZCA), representing community-based and some private education and care providers; and New Zealand Kindergartens Inc, representing many kindergarten associations. Their arguments were related to links between research on quality provision and teacher qualifications.

The early 2000s, when these debates first began to emerge, was the context for the study discussed in this article. The study investigated constructions of childhood that underpinned thinking and discussion of government officials and ECE organisation representatives, and of government department policy briefings on the review of funding in New Zealand during the period 2001 to 2003.

A focus in my study was on exploring what dominant constructions of childhood were held by the participants, and whether and how these were associated with participants' preferences for particular policy mechanisms and roles to be played by the state. How may constructions of childhood shape possibilities for ECE provision? The article offers an analysis of the views and advice of influential policy advisers and early childhood organisation representatives, and of less influential teachers, at a time when early childhood policy was being reformed. It concludes with current policy commentary, following the shifts in ECE policy after the election of a National-led government in New Zealand in November 2008.

Why Examine Constructions of Childhood?

Several writers (for example, Moss & Petrie, 1997; Dahlberg et al, 1999; Mayall, 2003) have discussed the value of examining explicit theories of childhood in order to think critically about the nature, role and purposes of ECE. Constructions of childhood seem to be productive of different views about the shape of ECE provision and of different approaches to policy solutions (Rigby et al, 2007). Constructions of childhood are especially relevant to ECE policy because of the prevalence of thinking about ECE as a service to support parental employment (children do not feature in their own right) and as a service to rescue the disadvantaged (some children are objects of concern, other children are not visible). It is argued that it makes a difference to ECE policy formulation if children are positioned not solely as dependants of their parents, but as participants in society and autonomous beings.

During the 1980s and 1990s, writers from a range of disciplines (for example, Jenks, 1982; Qvortrup, 1994; Mayall, 1996; James et al, 1998; Dahlberg et al, 1999) began to question much twentieth-century research that suggests that childhood is experienced in a similar way by all children. In particular, they questioned the idea that children progress through preordained universal stages of development to maturity, as is conveyed in normalised definitions of developmental psychology. Underlying their ideas is a view that there are many diverse childhoods created through social relationships in different settings. Social constructions of childhood differ not only within societies, but also within particular 'disciplines, professions, agencies, settings and policy areas' (Moss & Petrie, 1997, p. 20).

The theoretical frameworks of social constructionism have highlighted new ways of representing and understanding children and childhood that foreground the diversity of childhoods, which are locally constructed, and children's agency. James et al (1998, p. 6) describe this as a 'new paradigm' of the sociology of childhood, in which children are understood as 'social actors shaping as well as shaped by their circumstances'. Smith summarises the contributions this framework and the framework of children's rights have made:

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. (Smith, 2007, p. 151)

A second approach from the sociology of childhood emphasises childhood as a feature of social structure separate from other social structures such as the family, and examines the position of children as a group within a society (Qvortrup, 1997). Studies of childhood as a social structure aim to provide children and childhood with 'conceptual autonomy' (Qvortrup et al, 1994, p. xi) by making children the unit of observation rather than others on whom they are dependent. Qvortrup (1997) has argued that in order to represent children's interests and needs, it is increasingly necessary to give such visibility to children as separate identities.

Ideas from this literature informed my analysis of thinking and advice about ECE policy for my study. In particular, they informed my view of the value of examining the position of children separately from their families in respect to ECE access and participation; who provides ECE and why; the rationale for government to support ECE; funding mechanisms (who are they intended to sustain?); and the nature of environmental standards set by the government – for example, curriculum, staffing, and space and their capacity to sustain children as participants.

Research Approach

The research reported here is from a broader study (Mitchell, 2007) analysing constructions of childhood within ECE pedagogy and policy, and the implications for pedagogy and policy that could support democratic citizenship. In this article, the focus is on the constructions of childhood that are evident in ECE policy thinking, discussion and advice, and how these constructions are manifested in preferred policy solutions.

The participants in the policy arm of the study were senior officials from government ministries and departments who provide advice or advocacy on ECE policy and human rights

issues, senior ECE organisation representatives, and teachers who work within ECE policy contexts (see Table I).

Participants' affiliation	Role of organisation in New Zealand
Ministry of Education	Responsible for strategic advice on education policy and policy implementation. Administers all ECE funding except for the Childcare Subsidy.
Ministry of Social Development	Responsible for social policy. Administers the Childcare Subsidy for low-income families meeting employment and training criteria.
The Treasury	Responsible for government financing.
Early Childhood Development Office of the Commissioner for Children	Responsible for ECE operational matters. This agency has subsequently amalgamated with the Ministry of Education.
Human Rights Commission	Advocates for the best interests of all children and young people in New Zealand.
Ministry of Women's Affairs	Created to provide better protection of human rights in New Zealand. Works for a fair, safe and just society, where diversity is valued, human rights are respected, and everyone is able to live free from prejudice and unlawful discrimination.
Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa – New Zealand Childcare Association	Provides the New Zealand government with advice to help improve women's lives.
Wellington Region Free Kindergarten Association	A national childcare organisation with a range of functions, providing advocacy, ECE teacher training, and representing teachers and employers in childcare centres.
New Zealand Educational Institute – Te Riu Roa	Represented in the working group to develop the strategic plan for ECE.
Professional development adviser and two teachers	Employing body for kindergarten teachers in Wellington. Represented in the working group to develop the strategic plan for ECE.
	National union representing ECE teachers. Represented in the working group to develop the strategic plan for ECE.
	These participants took part in my investigation of constructions of childhood in pedagogy and work within ECE policy framing.

Table I. Participants' affiliations and the roles of their organisations.

New Zealand's political model is similar to the Westminster model, where public services (mainly policy ministries and departments) employ permanent officials who are charged with providing policy advice 'without fear or favour' (Boston et al, 1996, p. 121). The policy advice can be categorised as strategic advice concerned with a broad and longer-term focus; substantive advice on matters such as the role of the state in funding, providing and regulating in a particular policy domain; and operational advice on the implementation of policy (Boston et al, 1996). The central government agencies (the Ministry of Education, the Treasury, and the Ministry of Social Development) represented in the study had provided strategic advice on the strategic plan for ECE, and were providing substantive policy advice to the government on the review of early childhood funding and the review of regulations at the time of the study. Other government ministries/offices provide advice and advocacy on issues emerging from their own goals.

Constructions of childhood in policy debate were investigated through analysis of the discussions of these participants, who took part in three focus group meetings and individual interviews to talk about conceptions of childhood and key ECE policy issues that were being debated at the time. The participants were not necessarily giving the views of their organisations. Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Welfare and Treasury briefings to the government on the reviews of funding and regulation were a third source of data.

The focus group meetings were purposely set up to generate debate about ECE for the study. My premise was the need for a 'new debate about childhood', to enable early childhood pedagogy and policy to be framed around a concept of the 'child as citizen' and children's rights. The aim of the focus groups was to stimulate thinking and discussion about children and childhood as a basis for the development of ECE policy. I told participants about the aim in my letter of introduction.

As a catalyst for the focus group discussions, I wrote three papers with questions for discussion, which were circulated beforehand. These were:

- 'Conceptions of Children and Childhood'. Here the focus was on themes and constructions of childhood in relation to ECE. Questions for focus group discussion were about constructions of children and childhood in ECE policy.

- ‘ECE for a Democratic Society’ summarised international evidence and analysed New Zealand data about differences in employment of qualified teachers in the education and care sector between for-profit services and community-based services. A summary of this analysis was later published on the New Zealand Council for Educational Research website (Mitchell, 2002). Questions for focus group discussion were about who should provide ECE and whether the government should fund and support commercial for-profit owners.
- ‘Early Childhood Funding, Staffing Regulations and Systemic Support’. This paper summarised international literature on staffing and funding of ECE services, and made a costed proposal for free ECE. Questions for focus group discussion were about the pros and cons of free ECE, and the nature of staffing regulations.

These papers could have influenced participants’ views. The paper on differences between community-owned and privately owned ECE services had an emphasis on evidence against the quality of for-profit provision. I also entered into some of the discussions, especially related to free ECE. This was done because the focus group participants wanted me to clarify my proposed funding formula and to understand the basis for the approach. However, my support for free ECE was clear and my interests and concerns could have dominated and influenced how participants responded. On the other hand, the government officials all held positions of seniority within their organisations. They were very used to entering into policy discussions and analysing arguments for and against policy approaches. They did not reach consensus positions and were willing to argue for views that differed in fundamental ways.

Two focus group meetings were held to discuss each topic, with a choice of time for attendance. Size varied from three people in one, to an average of five to eight people. I asked the focus group members to read and think about the discussion papers before the focus group meeting. After an initial reaction to the papers, I asked participants to respond to the questions asked in each paper. Recordings were made of the discussions and transcripts sent to the focus group participants for any amendments.

The second source of data was semi-structured individual interviews with the focus group participants. These were up to an hour’s duration and asked participants what issues of importance they took from the focus group discussions and their views on these issues. The third source of data was briefings from the Ministry of Education, Treasury, and Ministry of Social Development on the government reviews of funding and regulation. The participants in the focus groups had also contributed to these briefings.

Bacchi (2000) has argued that discourse has its place in policy analysis through its use in identifying the reasons why programmes are hard to change. The ways in which issues and groups of people are represented in policy analysis, and their visibility, are linked to what is considered in policy solutions, and what is left invisible. Analysing these constructions and the values that underpin them enables the constructions to be made transparent and more easily contested. In my study, I analysed how children were constructed in focus group discussions, policy briefings and individual interviews, keeping in mind the research question: ‘What constructions of childhood are evident in ECE policy debate, and what are their effects?’ I compared, contrasted and clustered into groups the main ways in which children were represented.

I then examined the roles of the participants in each grouping, the participants’ preferred policy mechanisms, and views about ECE. The viewpoints were critiqued, and the implications evaluated against principles I had developed for an education for ‘democratic citizenship’. These principles were developed from international rights conventions and research about children’s agency and participation:

1. Integrated action, referring to both ‘structural integration’ of policy and ‘conceptual integration’ within policy and pedagogy. Cohen et al (2004) used these terms to include government departmental responsibility, and principles, values, identity and approaches to practice. A rationale for integrated action is to provide coherence and continuity between different spheres of children’s lives (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, 2006) and for players in education to work together (Durie, 2001).
2. All children without discrimination, an article of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) that is consistent with the emphasis on inclusion within *Te Whāriki*, New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum, and addressing the concept of diversity;

3. Best outcomes, another UNCROC article, which is interpreted in this study to include children's learning dispositions, knowledge and skills, and strengthening families and community.

Constructions of Childhood in Early Childhood Education Policy Debate

Primarily, three dominant constructions of childhood were revealed in the views of the participants: a construction of the 'child as dependant within the family'; the 'child as learner within a community of learners'; and the 'child as citizen within a social community'. These constructions were associated with views about the roles of ECE, outcomes of ECE, and favoured policy approaches. They were linked to the institutional affiliations of the participants: a central government organisation frame (child as dependant), based on market, economic and welfare discourses; a teacher institutional frame (child as learner), based on pedagogical discourses; and a rights-based government agency and childcare organisation frame (child as citizen), based on rights discourses.

Child as Dependant within the Family

The first dominant construction was of the preschool child as a dependant and a private responsibility of parents (except where parents cannot provide). This construction was demonstrated in viewpoints expressed by participants from the Ministry of Education and the Treasury, and briefing papers on the review of ECE funding from these government agencies and the Ministry of Social Development. It was articulated in the Ministry of Education participants' statements about whether a 'child rights paradigm' might be a useful way of thinking about ECE provision and policy:

We in early childhood education are getting into the intersection between parental rights and government responsibilities. And how far government is willing to curtail parental rights appears to depend to some extent on the age of the child. When the child is very young, the state tends to think that the responsibility is with the parent. They will support the parent in that responsibility but they won't take over. (Ministry of Education participant)

Associated with a construction of the 'child as dependant', the main purposes of ECE for government were conveyed as educational achievement, especially in later life and especially for disadvantaged children, and labour market outcomes.

At its extreme, the purpose of ECE was conveyed as contributing to a narrow range of future-focused outcomes. The Treasury briefing papers emphasised school achievement test scores and social development as outcomes of ECE, and suggested these largely accrue to children from low-income and otherwise disadvantaged homes (Treasury, 2003a, b).

Support for families to participate in training and paid employment was conveyed as another desirable outcome of ECE. The Ministry of Social Development's (2003) briefing paper on the review of funding advocated for childcare services that are not education-based as complementary to education services. It emphasised the physical care of the child in relation to childcare, and learning in relation to education:

Early childhood education is limited in the way it can meet families' labour market needs, and has other features that are not always necessary for childcare ... Not all care arrangements have an educational component, and often all that is needed is safe childcare to meet families' labour market needs alongside children's education. (Ministry of Social Development, 2003, p. 7)

In this way, the briefing reasserted the divide between 'care' and 'education' that the 1986 integration of childcare services into New Zealand's Department of Education was intended to dispel. Prior to 1986, childcare services were administered by the Department of Social Welfare, and kindergartens and playcentres [1] by the Department of Education. In this divided system, there was an implicit view that childcare was a welfare service offering care for the needy, while kindergartens and playcentres were education services (May Cook, 1985; Dalli, 1992; May, 1992). Childcare services were brought into a single education administration in recognition that care and education are intertwined.

Conceptually, the location of the child within the private domain was conveyed as limiting the role of the state for ECE funding and provision. At its extreme, the Treasury participant argued that the focus for government action should be 'disadvantaged' children, rather than all children:

From a public policy perspective, the evidence suggests that it may be more appropriate to regard formal ECE provision as a key mechanism for addressing educational disadvantage, rather than as a means of addressing educational outcomes of children in general. (Treasury participant)

An exact match was found between a dominant construction of the child as dependant and opposition to free ECE for all children, and options favouring funding targeted to disadvantaged children:

Entitlement to free [ECE] is more about rights and public good arguments. My thinking about that is probably still around, 'Who is going to benefit here?', and there are also issues in terms of public policy about who should be using this money. Where you argue for 'free' is where the government would say, 'This is so important for children to get an early childhood education that we are going to pay for it all.' Even though there is significant benefit for parents from this, particularly those who are using it to go to work ... part of the benefits the state is interested in, are those where parents are in a disadvantaged situation. Or when most parents can't afford to use this service, then maybe that is when the state should step in. (Ministry of Education participant)

Similarly, the Ministry of Social Development briefing used 'private good' arguments to criticise the proposal for free ECE for all children. It argued that a large proportion of families who could otherwise afford to contribute to the cost of their ECE services would be 'winners' (Ministry of Social Development, 2003, p. 8).

The strongest advocacy for individually targeted funding for low-income and disadvantaged children was made by the Treasury participant and in Treasury briefing papers on the options for free ECE:

Evidence suggests that general programmes appear to offer limited measurable long term gains to children from middle-upper income families with supportive home environments (compared to gains they would have made under informal care arrangements). This would suggest that an option of targeting ECE to those who would gain the most benefits (children from low income or otherwise disadvantaged families) would be more effective in raising educational outcomes than the proposed approach. (Treasury, 2003b, p. 3)

These participants favoured or were non-committal about the market approach to ECE provision that currently exists in New Zealand and which assumes the market will provide appropriate services where they are needed, and allows publicly listed corporate companies to set up ECE services and receive government funding.

In summary, a dominant construction of the 'child as dependant' was associated in my study with an economic discourse concerned with reducing costs to government, a labour market discourse concerned with parental employment, and a discourse of the 'child in need'. The main vision is about providing where families cannot cater for themselves, or about meeting goals for adults. As New Zealand's Royal Commission on Social Policy (1988, p. 128) has stated, in a situation of 'minimal state involvement ... [t]he role of the state is restricted to "picking up the pieces" only where family care has broken down, or when the care provided is beyond the family's means'.

Child as Learner within a Community of Learners

The participants from organisations where a dominant focus of their work was on teaching and learning (the New Zealand Educational Institute – Te Riu Roa, the Early Childhood Development government agency, the Kindergarten Association representative, the professional development adviser, the Ministry of Social Development participant – who was a qualified early childhood teacher – and the teachers) promoted a dominant view of the child as learner within a community of learners. They focused their discussion of policy mainly on pedagogy and conditions for pedagogy to flourish.

These participants emphasised ECE provision offering learning environments that are responsive to children's family backgrounds and cultural heritages. They did not essentialise 'the child', but drew attention to differences among children:

There is still a view of the child as a 'universal child', but not an appreciation of the child as a child, not an appreciation of the diversity of children – for example, special needs, other culture. Policies in place now have the potential to make good provision in these areas. (Ministry of Social Development participant)

Fairness and equity are important, balanced alongside diversity. (New Zealand Educational Institute – Te Riu Roa participant)

These participants said the focus group discussions were a catalyst for them to think more about the meaning of the concept of 'quality', and cultural relativity within the concept of quality. Cultural relativity was not regarded as a reason not to insist on standards; rather it was to acknowledge the value of pedagogies that draw on the cultural capital of children and families, and of regulations that enable culture to be expressed:

[I have thought more about] the insensitivity of some current ways of thinking – the cultural bias of a dominant white regime that sets funding and regulation rules and the subsequent disadvantage to Māori and Pasifika people. The fact that some such groups may find themselves marginalised because they have a different cultural capital and different ways of viewing things is something I continue to reflect on. (Professional development adviser)

There is a whole pile of government officials trying to make things right for the Pasifika services, but I think it is a Pākeha [white European New Zealander] model. The notion of child-initiated play, the whole curriculum issue will be different in a Pasifika centre. I think we have to relook at what a curriculum in a Pasifika centre entails, not an individual child with individual goals. (Early Childhood Development participant)

A key theme within this construction was about how to strengthen ECE centres as communities of learners, focused on the child and incorporating family contributions in the interests of children's learning and well-being:

We have to get away from ... parents' key role in most early childhood services is to fundraise and do working bees and do the garden. That suits us, 'they' don't understand. We have never really given over an understanding to parents of what they truly could do. We've got a 'teacher knows best' attitude to learning. That is why postmodern structuralism is quite interesting. It challenges the teacher to not think in a 'one model fits all' approach. Most of my generation comes from that type of thinking. If parents had that power, that influence, then we would be seeing some innovation. (Early Childhood Development participant)

Some of these participants were interested in work to gain indigenous and community viewpoints in co-constructing the curriculum:

We talked for a number of years about partnerships, almost as rhetoric. I am really interested in what Alan Pence did with the First Nations group [the development of a generative curriculum in partnership between the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria and regional First Nations organisations]. That is really regional and that is probably the only way you are going to get some influence from parents. (Early Childhood Development participant)

In these ideas can be seen an openness to building a democratic teaching and learning community, with genuine opportunities for contributions from all comers, and a particular concern with inclusion of ethnically diverse and indigenous people. As the Early Childhood Development participant noted, rejecting established ways of working with parents involves a relinquishing of teacher power and willingness to share power with others – community members, parents and children.

A key policy issue for these participants was to support a pedagogic focus. One implication was the importance of moving away from a culture that is most concerned with what is reported as measurable outcomes of education to the educative process itself:

Government's attempts to measure quality through outcomes places stress on the early childhood community as it tries to find pedagogically appropriate ways to measure outcomes. The structural aspects which are far easier to determine and measure can, in fact, mask the process aspects of quality which are less apparent to viewers. For example, compare a parent who checks out a centre and goes on visual first impressions, hours, access, availability, and so on, to a more scrutinising approach to measuring process quality – for example, level of teacher–child interaction, cognitively challenging environments. (Professional development adviser)

In policy matters, these participants were especially concerned with policy to support pedagogy, especially through teacher education, professional development to support teachers as critical thinkers, and professional resources:

The teachers are probably the most critical factor and need to be highly qualified critical thinkers and have ongoing group advice and support. Not advice and support that tells them what they are doing. More the critical reflection that challenges things and keeps taking people forward, because I think that is where teachers get their energy from – that debate, thinking, reading, trying things out. (New Zealand Educational Institute – Te Riu Roa participant)

In keeping with their emphases on the inclusion of all children, they favoured universal approaches to funding, and explicitly rejected the market model of provision and the user pays that dominated ECE policy in New Zealand in the 1990s.

Child as Citizen within a Social Community

Smith (2009) has discussed three threads of theory that come together in the idea of children's citizenship. One thread, from the sociology of childhood, rejects the notion of children being passively socialised by adults. A second thread, from children's rights discourses, focuses on children's participation, protection and provision rights, with an emphasis on children's agency and right to participate. The third, from sociocultural theory, 'recognises that agency arises out of social and cultural contexts' (Smith, 2009).

These threads were reflected in the third dominant construction found in my study – of the child as citizen within a social community. The group upholding this construction comprised the participants from rights-based government agencies, the Human Rights Commission, Office of the Commissioner for Children, Ministry of Women's Affairs, and NZCA. These participants positioned the child as a member of a social group and wider community, with the wide-ranging purposes of ECE being to support the child and family to flourish. Broad views about how ECE could contribute to community development as well as the well-being of children were expressed. These participants asserted the importance of care and caring relationships. They paid attention to the experiences of children and to what ECE could be for children, families, and the community.

The NZCA participant thought 'education should be broad in its conception'. She was concerned that 'care, nurturance and love' are often not seen as education and yet 'these have such importance to education'. Her description seemed to be something akin to the Nordic concept of caregiving, which, 'of course, includes physical caretaking, but it also requires mutual regard, warmth, and a genuine sense of shared personal and emotional involvement between the child and the adult' (Einarsdottir, 2006, p. 173). She said that the funding arrangements – the bulk funding formula, which funds 'education' for up to six hours per day, and the Childcare Subsidy, which subsidises childcare for up to 50 hours per week – were partly responsible for emphasising a division between care and education. She thought it important to consider the life circumstances of the families participating in ECE and how ECE services could contribute to supporting families, through, for example, health care, parental education, and childcare for parents in paid employment.

The emphasis on care and education as a holistic concept was associated with an understanding of the reality of childhood within New Zealand society, the shift towards more women with preschool children being employed in the labour force, and the absence of traditional extended family support:

I wonder if ... we have lost sight of the whole issue, which was the need, given changing labour market/family structures, to provide quality services that did provide care – not separate from

education. I was interested in the papers and all the references to early childhood education, which I'm not opposed to, but I think it partly feeds into the view that, therefore, what this is about is making children ready for school, as opposed to creating an environment for our young children to be safe and flourish, which includes providing all-day care, because there aren't extended families or women at home full-time. (Human Rights Commission participant)

These participants valued goals for parent participation, support and learning, as well as goals of ECE supporting workforce participation and training. The shape of ECE provision was seen as a critical policy issue. One interest was in multiservice, integrated ECE provision that offers broad support for families:

I think it is really important not to miss the issue of the reality of actually providing a service that does actually meet children's and families' needs, which is why I always talk about children's and families' needs, which might not necessarily coincide either. (Human Rights Commission participant)

Ideally, I would like to see a well-funded early childhood sector that allowed for a wide range of services to meet the needs of the parent and child communities in New Zealand. (Office of the Commissioner for Children participant)

In these participants' views, government funding, regulation and planned provision need to ensure effective access to good-quality services. Funding that is delivered to parents and provision that is left to the market to determine are unable to deliver this for all children:

I think the reality is that if you view early childhood education and care as a really important service to the children and the family, which actually has lasting impact ... then how does society ensure that every child gets a fair opportunity to have access to an appropriate service? It seems to me that the places that do it best fund services. (Human Rights Commission participant)

It seems to me that if you come from a basic principle that an early childhood experience is important for children, your next question is: 'How can we ensure that all children get it?' ... And the Office [of the Commissioner for Children] has a position that universal provision is the answer ... it's the only way we can see that everybody gets a fair share, so that even if you're a child who is in transition, your parents are on the run from the bailiffs, in any town or place where you arrive you can go to the nearest early childhood centre and have a session ... So that means regardless of circumstances. Availability is the main factor. (Office of the Commissioner for Children participant)

This latter participant described problems with the targeted Childcare Subsidy, including the need for people to be 'bureaucratically literate' and able to apply for the subsidy, the stigma of a targeted subsidy 'in people's own minds if nowhere else', and costly administration that detracts from funding the service itself.

Constructions of Childhood, the Roles and Benefits of Early Childhood Education, and Favoured Policy Mechanisms

There was an exact match between constructions of childhood and views about the roles and benefits of ECE, and favoured policy mechanisms (see Table II). A key conclusion is that beliefs about children and childhood influence how people regard ECE and their formulation of policy designs. As well, organisational cultures seem to exert a pervasive influence on the assumptions and values of the participants.

The construction of the 'child as dependant within the family' is characterised by an absence of view about the child as a person: the focus is on the family who cares for the child. The construction positions children as reliant on the goodwill and choices made by parents in a childcare market of unplanned provision and possibly variable quality. All children do not have visibility within the favoured policy approaches, which are mainly concerned with the 'poor' child (Moss & Petrie, 2002). At its extreme, outcomes of ECE are narrowly conceived in relation to children's academic achievement in the future. The social context for childhood barely features.

Integration as a principle does not feature, and one extreme view asserts unhelpful divisions between ‘care’ and ‘education’.

Constructions of childhood	Roles of ECE	Who benefits from ECE	Policy mechanisms
Child as dependant within the family	Preparation for schooling and educational achievement. Support for parents in paid employment and training.	Especially disadvantaged children.	<i>Funding:</i> large targeted component, others pay. Not supportive of universal free entitlement. <i>Provision:</i> market approach. Community-owned and for-profit funded equally. <i>Policy issues:</i> desired goals and appropriate policy mechanisms to achieve these goals.
Child as learner within a community of learners	Children’s learning.	All children. Parents may benefit, but children are primary goal.	<i>Funding:</i> universal free entitlement to good-quality ECE. <i>Provision:</i> planned provision. Community-owned provision encouraged. <i>Policy issues:</i> supportive conditions for teacher professional development and investigation of pedagogy.
Child as citizen within a social community	Children’s learning and well-being, parent employment, parent education, social and personal support, and connectedness with others.	All children, parents and the community.	<i>Funding:</i> universal free entitlement to good-quality ECE. <i>Provision:</i> planned provision. Community and state-owned provision encouraged. ECE centres fulfilling a range of purposes, offering services to meet aspirations for children, families and community. <i>Policy issues:</i> encouragement of integrated forms of service provision to meet a range of needs.

Table II. Constructions of childhood, the roles and benefits of ECE, and favoured policy mechanisms.

The two constructions ‘child as learner within a community of learners’ and ‘child as citizen within a social community’ convey a view of children as people in their own right, are concerned with all children, not a select group, and convey broader views of possible outcomes of ECE. Each of these constructions is consistent with sociocultural theory in highlighting the social context of the child’s world, the latter at a broader community level. The focus on multiservice forms of provision recognises the ways in which children’s learning, well-being, and identity are embedded within family and community contexts, and integrated actions.

As an adjunct, outcomes of ECE are portrayed more broadly in these viewpoints. In relation to children’s learning, the outcomes include learning dispositions – dispositions that are positive about learning, and able to support further learning (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004; Mitchell et al, 2008). The viewpoints also reveal a broadening of possibilities in relation to outcomes for families and community. The group holding a construction of the ‘child as citizen within a social community’ promoted personal support and community cohesion as valued outcomes of ECE, while the group holding a construction of the ‘child as dependant within the family’ focused on more tangible outcomes linked to paid employment (for which there is a direct return for government through taxation and productivity).

A more complex portrayal of children was found in the third construction – the ‘child as citizen within a social community’ – where both the vulnerability of children and their need for care and protection were asserted alongside their right to be active as participants in the world. This construction comes closest to meeting the three principles I have developed from international rights conventions and research about children’s agency for an education for democratic citizenship: principles of integrated action, all children without discrimination and best outcomes.

Since gathering the data for this study, the changes in New Zealand’s ECE policy landscape have also edged their way towards a citizenry rights framework that upholds these principles. New Zealand’s ECE strategic plan policy emphasis on promoting ‘collaborative relationships’ is in

keeping with the principle of 'integrated action' between all players in children's lives; the landmark free ECE policy, although not comprehensive enough to enable all children to have access (Dalli, 2008), recognises a principle of universality and children's right to education irrespective of their family circumstances; and the professional resources poured into teacher education, assessment and curriculum have been powerful supports for broad outcomes of ECE that include children's learning dispositions and the ability of children, parents, and the community to participate as agents in the ECE setting (Mitchell & Hodgen, 2008).

But in 2009, the ECE policy landscape in New Zealand changed again. The '20 Hours Free ECE' policy was renamed the '20 Hours ECE' policy; the requirement for all regulated staffing in teacher-led ECE services to be registered teachers was reduced to 80%; and the May 2009 government budget cut funding for professional resources and professional development. The May 2010 government budget cut the top two rates of funding for ECE services employing 80 to 100 percent registered teachers. In October 2010, the government established a Taskforce on Early Childhood Education to 'review the efficiency and effectiveness of spending on ECE, and propose new ideas for innovative, cost effective and evidence-based ways to support children's learning in early childhood and the first years of compulsory schooling' (ECE Taskforce, 2010). It is timely to hold onto and advocate for an ideal of citizenry rights in New Zealand's ECE policy.

Conclusion

I began this article with a discussion of the value of examining explicit views of childhood underpinning early childhood policy debate as a means to understand how constructions of childhood shape possibilities for the provision of ECE services. Data from my study involving officials from New Zealand government departments and ECE organisation representatives support previous research and thinking that constructions of childhood are linked to views about the purposes of ECE, and how the government should support ECE provision.

A key point that can be argued is the value of having explicit societal goals about children and childhood as a basis for ECE policy. Childhood is 'produced within a set of relationships', as Prout (2005, p. 76) has noted, and the reality of children's lives within their family and within society is diverse and changing. These relationships and life realities need also to be conceptual frames in policy development and provision. A construction of the 'child as citizen within a social community' is a new paradigm that places children's rights and agency at the forefront, and acknowledges the interdependence of care and education. As a basis for policy, it could cater better for societal change and enhance ECE services as participatory forums building social networks, support, and cohesion.

Note

- [1] Playcentres are underpinned by a philosophy that the family is the most important setting for the care and education of the child. Playcentre parents work together as a collective to undertake all pedagogical roles, including curriculum delivery as well as managing the playcentre. Parents undertake playcentre training through the New Zealand Playcentre Federation to become educators of their children. In order to be licensed and receive government funding, parents collectively need to hold certain levels of qualifications.

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