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Impacts of Early Childhood Education
Social Obligations on
Families and Whānau

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of
Master of Education
at
The University of Waikato
by
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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

2014

Abstract

This thesis explores the impacts of ECE social obligations on affected families and whānau. In 2013 ECE social obligations were introduced through the Social Security (Benefit Categories and Work Focus) Amendment Bill. These obligations require beneficiaries to ensure their children are “enrolled in and attending an approved early childhood education programme from the age of three, until they start school” (Work and Income New Zealand, 2013c).

A qualitative approach was utilised to hear the voices of those affected. Data was gathered through interviews with eight beneficiary families and two ECE centre managers who had knowledge of the impacts of obligations. Perceived impacts were analysed using thematic analysis. An examination of the discourses underpinning these obligations as represented in policy documents was undertaken utilising Bacchi’s (2000; 1999) “what’s the problem?” framework.

The introduction of the ECE social obligation policy was found to have placed responsibility on beneficiaries but to have failed to adequately address barriers to ECE participation that families face. The study identified many barriers which impede a family’s ability to participate in ECE. These include transportation, cost, and provision of high quality, suitable ECE for their children available in their local community. Mandatory ECE does not provide the infrastructure needed to enable families to access ECE programmes as it does not address the accessibility, structural, and personal barriers that families face. The thesis argues that the context of incorporating ECE policy in Ministry of Social Development (MSD) legislation and the use of sanctions to ensure compliance is likely to lead to negative outcomes for children’s well-being.

Policy-as-discourse analysis identified that social obligations were conceived in the context of reducing long-term benefit dependency. The three interrelated dominant discourses underpinning this policy, economic rationalisation, the positioning of beneficiaries as job seekers, and the positioning of children as vulnerable, has left the child as citizen invisible. I advocate that redefining the problem through a child as citizen lens could provide a framework for government to support families through barriers and address provision of high quality ECE.

Three key suggestions are made. Firstly, utilisation of a child's rights framework could ensure children's rights are at the forefront of ECE policy. This would enable the primary emphasis to be on the welfare and best interests of all children. Within this framework this study identified the need for ECE matters to be in the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, rather than MSD, in order to ensure consistency and accessibility to quality ECE for all children. Secondly, ECE engagement needs to be promoted through a positive model rather than sanctions. Government financial investment in integrated ECE services within local communities could aid families to overcome participation barriers and provide an ideal model for enabling families to access social services. Thirdly, government policy and funding needs to support provision of high quality ECE services that are responsive to their local communities. Such services are essential to encouraging ECE participation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deep gratification to whānau participants who shared their stories with me. They graciously gave of their time giving an insight into their experiences. I am also grateful to the community agencies that helped connect me with whānau participants and encouraged this research. Thank you to the ECE manager participants who also gave of their time and who work tirelessly to provide high quality accessible ECE programmes.

The guidance and support of my supervisor Associate Professor Linda Mitchell has been hugely appreciated. She never ceased to inspire, encourage and keep me on track. Thank you for all your support and wise guidance.

I would like to thank the University of Waikato Masters Research scholarship whose financial support enabled me to undertake this research. I would also like to acknowledge my cultural advisor Vanessa Paki. Thank you for your encouragement and practical advice.

Finally I would like to thank my friends and family. To my husband, Mike, I am grateful for the endless encouragement and for your support which enabled me to pursue my desire to undertake research. To my children, thank you for your understanding and for allowing me the time to study. To my dear friend Tania, I am so appreciative of the many walks and coffees, thank you for taking such an interest.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures and Tables	vii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
1.1 Overview	1
1.2 Researcher background	1
1.3 Research aims and questions.....	2
1.4 Research design.....	3
1.5 Contribution of thesis	3
1.6 Outline of the thesis	4
Chapter Two: Literature Review	5
2.1 Section 1 Early childhood education social obligation policy	6
2.1.1 Policy	6
2.1.2 Context of social obligations.....	6
2.1.3 Rationale for social obligations.....	8
2.1.4 Welfare initiative rather than educational initiative.....	10
2.1.5 New Zealand in the context of international practice	12
2.1.6 ECE service and whānau partnerships	14
2.1.7 Issues of quality	15
2.2 Section 2 Implications of ECE social obligations.....	17
2.2.1 Financial sanctions	17
2.2.2 Participation barriers	19
2.2.3 Overcoming barriers.....	23
2.3 Summary	24
Chapter Three: Methodology	25
3.1 Introduction	25
3.1.1 Research questions	25
3.2 Theoretical framework	25
3.3 Methods of data collection	27
3.3.1 Semi-structured interviews.....	27
3.3.2 Policy research	28
3.4 Procedure.....	29
3.4.1 Selecting participants	29
3.4.2 Participant involvement	30
3.5 Ethical considerations	31
3.5.1 Confidentiality	31

3.5.2	Informed consent.....	32
3.5.3	Potential harm to participants.....	33
3.6	Validity.....	34
3.7	Limitations	35
3.8	Data analysis	35
3.8.1	Child and human rights framing	35
3.8.2	Thematic analysis.....	36
3.8.3	Policy-as-discourse analysis	36
3.9	Summary	37
	Chapter Four: Policy-as-discourse Analysis.....	38
4.1	Introduction	38
4.2	What is the problem represented to be?	38
4.2.1	Economic discourse	40
4.2.2	Job seeker discourse.....	43
4.2.3	Children as vulnerable discourse	47
4.3	How would responses differ if the <i>problem</i> was thought about or represented differently?.....	52
4.3.1	Child’s rights discourse.....	54
4.4	Summary	57
	Chapter Five: Perceived Impacts	58
5.1	Introduction	58
5.2	Whānau experiences.....	58
5.2.1	Reasons parents enrolled their child/ren in ECE.....	59
5.2.2	Parents’ aspirations for their children	59
5.2.3	Beneficiaries’ knowledge and impact of the ECE social obligation.....	60
5.2.4	Whānau experiences discussion.....	62
5.3	Experiences with WINZ.....	62
5.3.1	Perceptions of treatment.....	62
5.3.2	Work expectations.....	65
5.3.3	Sanctions	68
5.3.4	WINZ discussion.....	70
5.4	Barriers	71
5.4.1	Structural barriers.....	72
5.4.2	Accessibility barriers.....	75
5.4.3	Personal barriers.....	76
5.4.4	Legislation barriers - Frequent absence rule	80
5.4.5	A case study of Hine	80
5.4.6	Barriers discussion	83
5.5	ECE provision	84
5.5.1	Quality (positive experiences).....	84
5.5.2	Poor quality provision	85

5.5.3	A case study of an empowering ECE service: Nikau Childcare....	87
5.5.4	ECE provision discussion	89
5.6	Summary	89
Chapter Six: Conclusion.....		92
6.1	Discourses framing the social obligation policy	93
6.2	Impacts of ECE social obligations on families and whānau	93
6.3	Impacts of an MSD/WINZ framing	94
6.3.1	Barriers	95
6.3.2	Sanctions	95
6.4	Suggestions	96
6.4.1	Child’s rights framework	97
6.4.2	Addressing barriers	97
6.4.3	Provision of empowering ECE	98
6.5	Limitations and further research	100
6.6	Summary	100
References		101
Glossary.....		109
Appendices		110
	Appendix A: Letter/email for personal and community contacts	110
	Appendix B: Information sheet for potential participants.....	112
	Appendix C: Letter/email for potential ECE manager participants	114
	Appendix D: Informed consent form (for family and whānau participants) ..	115
	Appendix E: Informed consent form (ECE manager participants).....	117
	Appendix F: Semi-structured interview questions for families and whānau ..	119
	Appendix G- Background questionnaire for families and whānau	120
	Appendix H: Semi-structured interview questions for ECE managers.....	123
	Appendix I: Official Information Act Request	124

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: A diagrammatic representation of barriers and bridges to ECE participation.....	99
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Table 1: Background information about beneficiary participants.....	30
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Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis analyses views and experiences of parents and early childhood community organisation representatives who have an understanding of the impact of social obligations for beneficiaries. It also examines the dominant discourses that underpin this welfare reform. Specifically, it investigates the experiences and perceived impacts that early childhood education (ECE) social obligations have had on families and whānau.

1.1 Overview

In 2013 attending Early Childhood Education (ECE) became a social obligation for children of beneficiaries in New Zealand. This is specified in Work and Income's fact sheet that states parents or caregivers on a benefit with dependent children are obligated to have them "enrolled in and attending an approved early childhood education programme from the age of three, until they start school" (Work and Income New Zealand, 2013c). In addition, if a parent is on a benefit and then has another child, when their new child turns one year of age, the parent may be obligated to enrol the child in childcare so that the parent can work (Work and Income New Zealand, 2013a). This policy has in effect made ECE compulsory for a defined group of people.

1.2 Researcher background

I have taught in various ECE services over a period of 20 years, working with families from a broad range of backgrounds. In recent years I have been interested in how policy impacts on families accessing quality ECE programmes. I am an advocate for the benefits that quality ECE provides for young children. However, the idea of ECE being a social obligation for a set group of people provoked many questions for me.

I am concerned about the rights of parents to choose whether or not to enrol their child in ECE, the barriers parents and whānau face in accessing appropriate ECE and the impact on relationships of trust that ECE services seek to build with families and whānau. Additionally, I question whether Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) are able to provide appropriate support to help families meet

their ECE requirements. The announcement of this policy created much debate nationwide about the potential consequences that imposing obligatory ECE could have on children, their families and ECE services.

Rather than pre-empting what the impacts have been and whānau feelings and reactions to this welfare reform, I believe it is crucial to hear the stories from some of those who have walked through the consequences of this policy. Therefore it was my intention to hear from those affected.

In conducting this research I acknowledge that I come from the perspective of a New Zealand European, middle class ECE teacher, married with three children. I have never experienced what life is like for families and whānau who receive a benefit. However, through this study I have aimed to capture their voices and experiences and let their stories be heard.

1.3 Research aims and questions

This community of people, beneficiaries, appear to have been marginalised and deprived of rights in the development of this policy. This study has sought to understand this community of people's views and experiences in regard to this mandatory requirement. In enabling individuals from this community to have a voice, this project has gained insight into ways this policy has impacted them and their families.

Further to this is the exploration of the context of this policy and analysis of related policy across the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Development and Work and Income. At the same time that the Welfare Working Group recommended obligatory ECE to “promote the well-being of children in welfare dependent families” (Welfare Working Group, 2011b, p. 58), it also recommended that beneficiary parents “be required to seek part-time paid work of at least 20 hours per week once their youngest child is three years of age” (Welfare Working Group, 2011b, p. 21). This research project has sought to clarify the primary motivation for compulsory ECE, bearing in mind WWG's assertion that it is for children's well-being as well as the notion it was enacted to acquire more parents into the workforce.

The research questions were:

1. What are the perceived impacts and experiences of early childhood education social obligations on families and whānau?
2. What are the discourses underpinning early childhood education social obligations and what are their effects?

1.4 Research design

The purpose of this research was to hear the voices of those affected by the ECE social obligations policy. In order to ensure that these people's experiences were heard, my research design encompassed a qualitative methodology with an interpretive paradigm.

Semi-structured interviews alongside a brief background questionnaire were utilised to gather data. This data was then analysed using thematic analysis. A policy-as-discourse analysis examined discourses and assumptions embedded within this policy. Data was also gathered from an Official Information Act request.

1.5 Contribution of thesis

As a consequence of the newness of this policy, there is presently no research published regarding its implementation and impact on families and whānau. Wynd (2013), in *Benefit Sanctions: Creating an Invisible Underclass of Children?* noted that “further qualitative research is required to establish how families perceive their treatment” (p. 3) and indeed I think the same can be said in regard to the implications of social obligations on families.

This study sought to enable the stories of beneficiaries to be heard and to contribute understanding of how they perceive and experience this policy. It set out to highlight some of the barriers these families face in accessing quality and culturally appropriate ECE for their children and what advice and support was offered to address those barriers. It is anticipated that it will afford insight and awareness to educators working with these families and whānau through promoting understanding and consideration. Furthermore, it is hoped that it will provide information to inform policy.

1.6 Outline of the thesis

Chapter one has provided an overview of this thesis.

Chapter two explores literature related to the context and background of social obligations and mandatory ECE. Literature reviewed considers the context and government rationale behind the policy as well as participation barriers that families face in accessing ECE.

Chapter three outlines the methodology and theoretical underpinnings of this study. It details the qualitative approach that was utilised to gather data via semi-structured interviews. In addition, the chapter describes how government policy documents were analysed through a human rights lens using Bacchi's (1999) "what's the problem?" framework.

Chapter four explores the discourses that have given rise to social obligation policy. Three interrelated discourses, economic, job seeker and vulnerable children discourses, are examined. I contend that a child's rights paradigm has been overlooked. Therefore, I advocate for a child's rights framework that would enable ECE policy to be framed by what is best for the child.

Chapter five presents the perceived impacts of this policy in relation to participants' experiences. Beneficiaries' stories demonstrate how obligatory ECE has failed to provide support to enable them to overcome barriers to ECE participation. The findings highlight that participant families have negative impressions of WINZ and this factor alongside the threat of sanctions fails to provide a supportive environment to aid ECE participation.

The final chapter, Chapter six, brings together the themes from participants' experiences and policy discourses to redefine the problem through a child as citizen lens. I argue that this lens would provide the framework for government to support families through barriers and address provision of high quality, local, accessible and culturally responsive ECE.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review examines early childhood education (ECE) social obligations for children of beneficiaries. Welfare reforms enacted in July 2013 set out requirements for beneficiaries in regard to work availability requirements and their children's education and health care expectations which are outlined in the Social Security (Benefit Categories and Work Focus) Amendment Act 2013 (N.Z).

Owing to the recent nature of obligatory early childhood education, there is a lack of scholarly material and research on the impacts of this policy. Therefore the material used for this review includes New Zealand government documents, media releases, and submissions, as well as relevant books and articles from both New Zealand and overseas. This literature review explores the context in which this policy was birthed, and the reasoning and motivation behind such reform. It examines how this policy, which was introduced as part of welfare reforms as a measure to reduce long term benefit dependency, was based on assumptions rather than specific data about beneficiary families' engagement with ECE.

This review begins with an outline of the policy followed by the background and construction of issues that gave rise to this social obligation. The question of whether a policy related to early childhood education but born out of a welfare initiative is in the best interests of children is explored.

Secondly, the review examines implications of social obligations, specifically the potential impacts of financial sanctions and barriers that affect participation in early childhood education. The prominent government justification of improving children's well-being does not stack up with the punishment of financial sanctions which are likely to hurt children. Social obligations fail to provide the infrastructure needed to enable families to access ECE programmes as they do not address barriers families face, such as cost, accessibility, transportation and provision that meets cultural values and family needs.

2.1 Section 1 Early childhood education social obligation policy

The government decision to make early childhood education a social obligation for children of beneficiaries was announced on 11th September 2012. This obligation came into force in July 2013 with the Social Security (Benefit Categories and Work Focus) Amendment Act 2013.

2.1.1 Policy

Obligatory ECE is outlined in Work and Income's fact sheet which states parents or caregivers on a benefit with dependent children are obligated to have their children "enrolled in and attending an approved early childhood education programme from the age of three, until they start school" (Work and Income New Zealand, 2013c). In addition, if a parent is on a benefit and then has another child, when their new child turns one year of age, the parent "will be expected to continue to take practical steps to get ready for work" (Work and Income New Zealand, 2013a). While the additional child rule could have significant implications, the focus of this literature review is in relation to the obligatory nature of ECE for children aged three years to school age.

The term social obligation has generally been interpreted as compulsory by both media and the public. Media headlines and editorials generated by the policy announcement included Radio New Zealand's (2012) headline *Concern Over Compulsory Pre-School Education for Children of Beneficiaries*, and the New Zealand Herald's (2012, 21 September) debate *Should Pre-School be Compulsory?* The policy has in effect made ECE compulsory for a defined group of people: children of beneficiaries. Notably, ECE is not compulsory for any other children, and compulsory schooling does not start until the age of 6 years. Children of beneficiaries are being defined by their membership to a family that is on a benefit, rather than being defined as people in their own right.

2.1.2 Context of social obligations

The context in which this welfare reform was birthed provides some detail as to the reasons, motivations and play of government departments in the development of this policy.

The idea of social responsibility was mooted in the 1990s with the National Party's discussion document *Towards a Code of Social and Family Responsibility* (New Zealand Department of Social Welfare, 1998). This code introduced the notion of social and family responsibilities for those receiving welfare and came at a time when the then Department of Social Welfare was using the catch phrase, "from welfare to well-being" (Davey, 2000, p. 17), thus inferring "welfare implies dependency and ... something negative. Well-being is a positive state to be aspired to and encompasses self-reliance and independence" (Davey, 2000, p. 17). The code sought to spell out "what society expects of people bringing up children or those receiving income support" (New Zealand Department of Social Welfare, 1998, p. 3).

Some of the responsibilities proposed by the suggested code have evolved into what we now have as social obligations for beneficiaries, including the obligation to enrol young children in a recognised early childhood education programme. Like the current policy, the suggested code was targeted only towards beneficiaries and would not have been applicable to others. Discussion about the code led to debate about possible financial sanctions against those who did not meet their responsibilities. While this code did not directly discuss compulsory early childhood education, it specified the expectation that parents should do "all they can to help their children learn from the time they're born" (New Zealand Department of Social Welfare, 1998, p. 13). However, after widespread outcry and debate, the National government dropped the idea of a formal code (Davey, 2000, p. 133).

The idea of compulsory ECE was further explored in 2001 when it was floated by Trevor Mallard who "suggested four-year-olds may be required to attend 12 hours each week at an early childhood centre" (Catherall, 2001, July 29). However, this proposal for mandatory ECE was different in that it was universal, rather than targeted to a specific group. The concept of compulsory ECE did not progress at that stage; nonetheless, the focus on the benefits of ECE did lead into '20 hours free ECE' (since renamed '20 Hours ECE') being introduced in 2007.

The notion of social responsibilities and obligatory ECE was raised again in 2012, this time proceeding into legislation. While the Code of Social and Family

Responsibility may have appeared to have been shelved in the 1990s, the content of this code is clearly visible in the 2013 Welfare Reform. Issues that were headlined in the code that are now included in the Social Security (Benefit Categories and Work Focus) Amendment Act 2013 (N.Z) include Keeping children healthy, Learning for the under-5's, and Work obligations and income support (New Zealand Department of Social Welfare, 1998). The call for discussion that was so prevalent with the Code of Social and Family Responsibility was notably missing from the 2013 Welfare Reform. Perhaps this is because discussion in the 1990s resulted in the code being shelved. This time around, unlike Mallard's suggestion, the concept of compulsory ECE only applied to a select group of people.

A significant instrument in the decision to introduce social obligations for beneficiaries was based on the National Party's 2011 Confidence and Supply Agreement with the Act Party (ACT Party, 2014; The Treasury, 2012, p. 28). This agreement committed the National Party to introduce requirements for beneficiary parents to enrol their children in an ECE service in exchange for ACT's support of a National-led Government. Prior to this time there had been no such obligation.

2.1.3 Rationale for social obligations

The context and rationale for social obligations is set out in a series of Ministry of Social Development and Welfare Working Group papers. The Welfare Working Group (WWG) was established in 2010 with the task of creating practical solutions to reduce long-term benefit dependency.

The Welfare Working Group report (2011b) placed emphasis on the long-term cost of benefit dependency, the associated poverty and socio-economic ramifications. As such, the group was tasked with finding an economic cost-effective solution.

Long-term benefit receipt is also undesirable because it is associated with low incomes. A short period of lower income does not necessarily result in long-term deprivation. However, persistent periods on a low income significantly increases the risk of deep deprivation, financial stress, low

living standards, and poor health and housing. (Welfare Working Group, 2011b, p. 42)

Recommendations from WWG specified that in their view, “tackling educational under achievement is central to reducing long-term joblessness and welfare receipt” (Welfare Working Group, 2011b, p. 56). Accordingly, WWG view ECE as a cost effective intervention solution to decrease long-term welfare dependence (Welfare Working Group, 2011b).

This early intervention solution appears to have developed into the WWG’s ECE obligatory recommendation which was presented in the Ministry of Social Development’s Welfare Reform Cabinet Paper E (Ministry of Social Development, 2012b). This cabinet paper sought agreement “to use the benefit system to reinforce important social objectives relating to child education and child health, by establishing social obligations for beneficiaries with dependent children” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012b, p. 1).

The benefits of quality ECE are well documented. MSD validates ECE social objectives on the grounds that “domestic and international studies show clear benefits for children (particularly children from low-income families) participating in quality ECE from three years of age” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012b, p. 6). The government Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS) on the welfare reform emphasises the following benefits: a. improved social skills and fewer behavioural problems among children, b. reduced risk of subsequent failure in the schooling system, c. alleviation of stress in family homes, improved parenting and lower levels of child abuse and injury (The Treasury, 2012, p. 27).

However, there appears to be no research-based reasoning for making ECE compulsory for only this group of children. Rather, the evidence suggests the policy was enacted based on assumptions that children of beneficiaries were not engaged in ECE. The RIS on the welfare reform states that “evidence suggests that children of beneficiary parents are likely to have lower ECE participation rates” (The Treasury, 2012, p. 28). On the other hand, the Ministry of Social Development’s (MSD) Welfare Reform Paper E acknowledges that the number of children of beneficiaries who are not enrolled and attending an ECE service is unknown and “may be low” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012b, p. 6).

Data that was included in this cabinet paper to justify the singling out of beneficiary families maintained that Māori, Pasifika and low socio-economic families generally have lower attendance in ECE, and that these families “feature prominently in the benefit system” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012b, p. 6). However, Ritchie and Johnson (2011) have previously argued “there is copious research to indicate that Māori families value early childhood and other education experiences for their children, particularly those in which their children receive culturally relevant experiences, including the opportunity to learn te reo Māori” (p.162). The reasons some children do not attend ECE is often as a consequence of external reasons, such as accessibility and appropriateness of ECE services rather than because of the attitudes and motivation of families. Ritchie and Johnson (2011) suggest the Ministry of Education needs to ensure culturally appropriate and accessible services are made available that meet the values of Māori and Pasifika families.

Indeed, in 2010 the Ministry of Education (MOE) did initiate funding for ECE participation initiatives to increase participation for Māori and Pasifika families. Initiatives have included both support for families as well as equipping ECE services to be culturally responsive, and consequently have resulted in increased participation. The *ECE Participation Programme Evaluation* states, “MOE data shows the enrolments for Māori and Pasifika children and children from low income communities in ECE over the first two years of the programme have increased considerably from the first year” (Mitchell et al., 2014, p. 13).

2.1.4 Welfare initiative rather than educational initiative

The fact that this ECE social obligation is a welfare initiative rather than a Ministry of Education initiative is worthy of scrutiny. 1986 marked a significant shift in ECE in New Zealand with the administration of all ECE services being transferred from the responsibility of the then Department of Social Welfare to the Department of Education. Prior to this childcare was viewed as a welfare service, whereas kindergartens and playcentres were deemed educational services (Mitchell, 2005). This move signalled a more integrated approach to ECE services providing quality care and education (Mitchell, 2005). However, there now

appears to be another shift between ministry responsibilities which is illuminated by the Ministry of Social Development introducing educational obligations.

Moreover, it would appear these government departments are playing different tunes. In June 2012 Christchurch newspaper The Press reported Education Minister Hekia Parata as saying that “government had no plans to make early education compulsory” (Law, 2012, 20 June). Nevertheless, less than three months later Paula Bennett, the Minister of Social Development, announced that social obligations would require children of beneficiaries to attend ECE (Bennett, 2012). Rather than a cohesive and integrated approach between these government departments, they instead appear to be following conflicting programmes.

It would also seem there is a discrepancy between the Education Act and the Social Security Amendment Act. The Education Act 1989 (N.Z.) Part 3:20 requires all children aged between 6 and 16 years to be enrolled at a registered school; however, it does not require children to be enrolled in ECE. The Home Education Foundation, which advocates the rights of parents to educate their children at home, suggest that the Social Security Amendment Act “ignores the Education Act and coerces beneficiary parents to enrol their children” (2012).

The underlying motivation for mandatory ECE can appear blurry. The Child Poverty Action Group released a report, *Left Further Behind: How Policies Fail the Poorest Children in New Zealand*, in which Ritchie and Johnson write:

There has been confusion in recent early childhood education policy as to the value to society of provision. This confusion has centred around the dual aims of meeting the needs of children and families for quality education and care; and providing support to families and the economy by providing adequate early childhood services for young children and thus freeing workers for the workforce. (Ritchie & Johnson, 2011, p. 159)

It is unclear from MSD’s recommendations whether the primary motivation for compulsory ECE is as WWG assert: for children’s well-being, and/or whether these obligations are being enacted to acquire more parents into the workforce. However, considering this social obligation is legislated under a *work focus* bill, it could be rationalised that the main focus is a work application. This could result

in emphasis on workforce participation, at the neglect of ensuring that children are placed in accessible and high quality ECE.

At the same time as requiring ECE social obligations, the WWG proposed that beneficiary parents “be required to seek part-time paid work of at least 20 hours per week once their youngest child is three years of age” (Welfare Working Group, 2011b, p. 21). A later cabinet paper outlined that “a requirement for children aged three and over to participate in ECE will facilitate beneficiary parents’ ability to prepare for and move into work by ensuring quality care arrangements are in place” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012b, p. 6).

However, work obligations for parents of children of this age were not included in the social obligation policy at this stage. Nevertheless, there is the expectation that “those with children under five are expected to prepare for work, and may be asked to do specific work preparation activities” (Work and Income New Zealand, 2013b, p. 2).

2.1.5 New Zealand in the context of international practice

International examples of social obligations which are reinforced by sanctions are evident in Australia, Britain, Germany and the USA. These obligations include work-related requirements, parental responsibilities, such as ensuring children attend school, and health obligations for the children of welfare recipients, such as immunisation, dental and vision care (Davey, 2000, pp. 131–132; Finn & Casebourne, 2012). These overseas welfare requirements are likely to have influenced New Zealand policy. Certainly the government Regulatory Impact Statement makes mention of international findings; however, it does not reference exactly which research they are referring to.

While social and parental obligations (rather than work search or training expectations) are new in the New Zealand context they have been used and evaluated in overseas jurisdictions. For example, social assistance provisions have been shown to be effective in increasing school attendance and retention (though not necessarily achievement) and in increasing immunisation take-up. (The Treasury, 2012, p. 7)

The RIS conveyed international obligations have resulted in increasing compliance, on the other hand, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) suggest research shows mixed results. CPAG analysed an aide memoire gained through an Official Information Act request.

The *aide memoire* discusses the success of parental obligations in the UK and Australia, pointing out that Australia's maternity immunisation allowance and the UK's Sure Start Maternity Grant use an incentive payment as well as sanctions for non-compliance. The *aide memoire* goes on to note that although research on programmes linking obligations to welfare payments is 'limited', the results are mixed. It cites one study but doesn't state the result, and cites another which concluded that requiring a wide range of activities of welfare recipients had no impact on vaccination status or well-child care. (Wynd, 2013, p. 8)

While parental obligations are not new, social obligation related to children's ECE attendance seem to be a world first and appear to emanate without any overseas precedent. The New Zealand Herald reported that "University of Auckland sociologist Maureen Baker and retired Massey University professor Mike O'Brien, who have both written books on international welfare reform, reported that they were not aware of any other country that had tried the idea" (Collins, 13 September 2012).

Undoubtedly, outcomes from both New Zealand and international studies do, however, confirm that high quality ECE can have a lasting impact on the cognitive performance of children from low socio-economic back-grounds (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002, p. 55; ECE Taskforce Secretariat, 2010; Mitchell, Wylie, & Carr, 2008). Many international longitudinal studies (such as the Abecedarian project, Head Start programmes and the Perry Pre-school project) examined the impact high quality early childhood programmes had on young children from low income families who were considered to be at-risk. Evidence gathered from these studies identified many beneficial outcomes (Mitchell et al., 2008; Vandell & Wolfe, 2000).

Nonetheless, when comparing these studies to obligatory ECE in New Zealand, it is important to note that participation in these ECE programmes was not compulsory and the childcare provided was high quality, accessible and culturally responsive. Conversely, obligatory ECE in New Zealand has the potential to impede the partnership between an ECE service and whānau and needs further examination. Likewise, analysis of accessibility to high quality ECE for beneficiary families is needed.

2.1.6 ECE service and whānau partnerships

The parents involved in the Abecedarian project “agreed to take part” (Campbell et al., 2002, p. 45). This mutual agreement between families and the childcare programme is likely to have influenced the trust relationship and outcomes of the project.

As yet there is no research to indicate the New Zealand ECE social obligations impact on relationships between ECE services and families. However, there is a justifiable fear that the compulsory nature of ECE may affect positive relationships and trust between educators and whānau. Such an argument was made by The New Zealand Kindergarten Incorporated in its submission to the Ministry of Social Development (Wells, 2012). This argument is also illustrated in a New Zealand Herald debate on the issue where a member of the public, Jude, wrote, “The minute ECE is made compulsory under threat of losing part of the benefit will put parents’ backs up and cause them to develop a negative attitude towards the ECE centre. This can only be counter-productive” (The New Zealand Herald, 2012, 21 September).

Similarly, some respondents to an ECE sector survey of 2,000 ECE services were concerned about the potential for damage to the integrity of partnerships between quality ECE services and their families and whānau if families are “forced to enrol in their service” (ChildForum, 2013, p. 4). On the basis of the survey results, ChildForum makes an argument that “the impact of a parent and their child being forced to attend an ECE service will be felt by all those involved at the service, the other parents, children and staff” (ChildForum, 2013, p. 6).

There is debate that the nature of mandatory ECE will create barriers for families whereas a more positive approach could be utilised, such as ensuring ECE is accessible and inviting.

2.1.7 Issues of quality

Research shows that quality early childhood education benefits young children (Ministry of Social Development, 2013). Mitchell, Wylie and Carr in their literature review *Outcomes of Early Childhood Education* determine “the existing research base shows positive outcomes (cognitive, learning dispositions and social-emotional) of ECE participation for learners in the short and long term” (Mitchell et al., 2008, p. 7). As such studies have identified that investment in good quality ECE is beneficial to “governments, as well as to children and families” (Mitchell et al., 2008, p. 7).

However, ECE needs to be of good quality in order to be most beneficial to children (Campbell et al., 2002; Mitchell et al., 2008). If an ECE service is not of high quality it can be detrimental, or the benefits not as substantial. Mitchell et al. (2008) conclude that “(g)ains are not realised, or not as great, if the ECE is of poor quality” (p. 7).

Key aspects for the provision of a high quality ECE programme include “qualified staff, low child:adult ratios, small group size, and staff professional development opportunities” (Mitchell et al., 2008, p. 8).

The accessibility to quality ECE for some low-income families in New Zealand is limited. Both Ritchie and Johnson (2011), and Mitchell et al. (2008) argue that the market approach to provision of ECE in New Zealand impacts on quality and disadvantages New Zealand’s poorest children. Mitchell et al. (2008) contend 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” (p. 12). A market approach in the planning and provision of ECE can push profit ahead of quality and tends to produce a “high level of standardisation ... not responsive to or supportive of Aotearoa New Zealand’s national and local context and culture” (Mitchell et al., 2008, p. 18).

Commenting on a Portuguese context, Formosinho and Figueiredo (2014) encourage the development of participatory professional teams as a way to promote equity and social justice. They argue that standardisation devalues the individual. Rather, they advocate for substantial investment in staff to develop and equip them “to work with all type of diversities, including ethnic and socioeconomic diversity” (Formosinho & Figueiredo, 2014, p. 397).

High quality is compromised in some private ECE services whose commercial interests influence their human resource decisions. Mitchell and Davison (2010) cite research from both New Zealand and overseas that identifies there is “a quality differential between private and community-based services demonstrating that community-based services, on average, offer higher quality ECCE than private services” (Mitchell & Davison, 2010, p. 19). Reasons identified for this included factors such as less qualified staff, higher rates of teacher turnover and less staff meetings in private-based services.

The impact of government policy on community-based ECE services during 2008 was examined by the New Zealand *Quality Public Early Childhood Education Project* (QPECE). QPECE proposed the following objectives to ensure high quality ECE is accessible for all families: a move away from a market approach to ECE provision, a “fully qualified and registered teaching workforce”, and free early childhood education (May & Mitchell, 2009, p. 5). At this stage, even though the New Zealand government are pushing a participation agenda, no such strategies have been adopted which would help ensure accessibility to high quality ECE.

Monitoring of quality in New Zealand is largely conducted by the Education Review Office (ERO) who generally undertake audits of centres every three years. ERO reports are available for the public to read. Families and staff are able to report serious incidents or complaints to the Ministry of Education. However, there is debate over the transparency of serious complaints and whether these incidents should also be available to the public (Tait, 2013, 10 October). The New Zealand Herald published complaints received by the Ministry in the last year. Incidents included a child being bitten by her teacher; staff smacking children; a child falling off a slide and not receiving medical treatment; children not being

given their prescribed medicine; a child leaving a centre and being found on the street, yet the centre was unaware the child was missing; and food being withheld from children (Tait, 2013, 10 October).

Obligating children to attend ECE may be damaging to young children if they experience incidents such as these. Beneficiary children are even more at risk of negative ECE experiences with evidence that children from lower socio-economic communities are more likely to access poorer quality childcare. Vandebroek and Lazzari (2014) writing about Europe in *Accessibility of Early Childhood Education and Care: A State of Affairs* identify the need for quality monitoring “to prevent children from disadvantaged backgrounds being more often found in poor quality services” (p. 332).

2.2 Section 2 Implications of ECE social obligations

ECE social obligations do not take into account the adverse effect that sanctions could have on children. Nor do they resolve barriers that impede participation in ECE.

2.2.1 Financial sanctions

A cabinet paper on the social obligation policy expresses MSD’s stance that “the welfare system provides ... an opportunity to reinforce some important social norms, relating to children’s education and health” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012a, p. 5). It can be argued that compliance with deemed social norms (obligations) are able to be enforced on this group of people through financial pressure. The Social Security (Benefit Categories and Work Focus) Amendment Act 2013 (N.Z) states that beneficiary parents who fail to take all reasonable steps to meet ECE social obligation will be given three reminder opportunities before they are subject to financial sanctions resulting in a 50% reduction of their benefit.

Bill English, the then acting prime minister, reiterated that “the relevant department would ensure that every option is given to the parents to enable them to meet their obligation in the first place” (New Zealand Parliament, 2012a). The New Zealand Ministry of Education’s website (2013) indicates that “parents

would not be penalised simply because they could not secure a place for their child (and are on a waiting list) or could not find an affordable option.” Despite the lack of precise data showing how many children of beneficiaries do not currently attend an early childhood programme, the Ministry of Social Development estimated that 2,177 financial sanctions could be initiated against beneficiaries each year because of their failure to meet this social obligation (Ministry of Social Development, 2012b, p. 2).

However, there is no documentation as yet on how those implementing this policy interpret the *all reasonable steps* criteria. Cabinet’s Regulatory Impact Statement acknowledges that while in general the threat of sanctions encourages people to comply, “there is little evidence currently available on sanctions for social obligations that are attached to benefit receipt in the manner proposed” (The Treasury, 2012, p. 35). Information that I received from the Ministry of Social Development under the Official Information Act did, however, state that as at the “end of June 2014, no beneficiaries had been sanctioned” for not meeting their ECE social obligations (D. Power, personal communication, October 3, 2014). While no sanctions have yet been enacted the threat of sanctions still remain.

In regard to the implications of financial sanctions on human rights, Cabinet’s *Welfare Reform Paper A* suggests that financial sanctions are “consistent with New Zealand’s obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as it contains in-built protections for children such as ... 50% income protection when sanctions are applied to a parent” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012a, p. 18).

This justification does not elaborate on any evidence that a parent can provide the necessities for their family if they are only receiving 50% of their benefit or consider that 51% of families with children supported by an income support benefit are already living in hardship (Perry, 2009, p. 51). Certainly, a policy paper on *Lone Parent Sanctions: A Review of International Evidence* reported that British studies indicated sanctions led to financial hardship, with other research also identifying emotional and physical impacts (Finn & Casebourne, 2012).

In New Zealand, Charles Waldegrave who has done extensive research on poverty for the Family Centre Social Policy Research Unit, contends that such sanctions “would be very serious and definitely poverty inducing” (personal communication October 9, 2014). Wynd (2013), in a CPAG report on *Benefit Sanctions: Creating an Invisible Underclass of Children?* contends that this legislation has no “provisions to safeguard the interests of children” (p. 6) and that conditionality attached to core benefits “will always place child welfare outcomes at greater risk” (Wynd, 2013, p. 9).

Chi-Fang, Cancian, Meyer, and Wallace (2006,) in analysing longitudinal data in Wisconsin identify “an important question is whether the sanction caused significant hardship, and whether another mechanism for increasing compliance could have achieved a similar result with less hardship” (p. 49).

Indeed, the Welfare Working Group (2011b) do assert that “(w)elfare reform options must explicitly consider the potential impacts on the well-being of children” (p. 2). Yet it must be questioned how a policy that implies it has children’s best interests at heart and will protect them can justify sanctions that are likely to lead to hardship.

2.2.2 Participation barriers

Research indicates that some families are not able to access appropriate ECE for their children. ECE providers in research on ECE participation by Mitchell et al. (2013) reported “that many families faced multiple barriers” (p. 6). Main barriers that were identified included cost, long waiting lists, lack of transport, lack of provision to meet family’s needs, and other personal barriers (Mitchell et al., 2013, p. 5). Submissions (Ministry of Social Development, 2013) and opinions (The New Zealand Herald, 2012, 21 September) opposing the ECE social obligations policy detail similar barriers for families participating in ECE services, including cost, accessibility, transport, values, preferences and culture.

New Zealand Kindergartens expressed concerns and reservations for similar reasons. They reasoned that “(m)aking ECE compulsory for children age three and over whose parents are receiving a benefit will not address the underlying

barriers which prevent families from choosing to participate in early childhood education” (Wells, 2012).

Indeed, many barriers that families face are outside of their control. Mitchell et al. (2013) observe that “(o)ften the main barriers to participation did not reside within the ‘priority family’, but within the ways in which the early years settings were organised, funded and provided” (p. 5). The power to address barriers therefore resides with government policy and ECE services, rather than with families (Mitchell et al., 2014).

MSD in their reply to the aforementioned submissions on barriers commented that parents who had made a genuine effort would not be penalised.

The requirement that beneficiary parents take “all reasonable steps” to meet their obligation also recognises that there will be a variety of situations where parents are unable to meet their obligations through no fault of their own. These criteria will ensure that parents who have made a genuine effort but are unable to meet their obligation will not be penalised or sanctioned in any way. (Ministry of Social Development, 2013, p. 48)

While MSD have indicated there will be leeway, as yet there is no data or research to indicate how MSD actually do respond when families encounter barriers.

2.2.2.1 Cost

Mitchell et al. (2013) report that the most common inhibitor to participation is cost. As mentioned in section one, the Ministry of Education was already funding initiatives to work alongside families to overcome barriers (such as cost) prior to the Ministry of Social Development introducing ECE obligations. One initiative aimed at increasing participation is *Engaging Priority Families*. Providers in this participation initiative helped some families overcome the barrier of cost through providing broad support to families which included aiding them to get state housing, ensuring they were aware of their entitlements and accessing budgeting advice (Mitchell et al., 2013, p. 64). Initiative providers were also sometimes able to negotiate ECE costs for some families. However, Mitchell et al. note:

This was not always successful. When cost reduction is reliant on advocacy from an organisation or individual and basic cost structures within ECE services are not changed, it is likely that cost will continue to be problematic for successive families. There are likely to be many families still unable to access ECE because of prohibitive costs who are not part of an initiative. (Mitchell et al., 2013, p. 50)

2.2.2.2 Accessibility

While ECE has been made obligatory for some children, there is no guarantee that there are spaces available in ECE services for all children. During the first reading of the Social Security Bill in parliament, New Zealand First member of parliament Barbara Stewart raised this concern over accessibility (New Zealand Parliament, 2012b). Accessibility is also argued by Fletcher and Dwyer in *A Fair Go for all Children. Actions to Address Child Poverty in New Zealand* where they contend that “there is still not enough affordable, high-quality early childhood care and education services to accommodate the needs of children and enable parents to work ... This problem appears to be most acute in low-income communities” (Fletcher & Dwyer, 2008, p. 5).

Respondents in research conducted by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner “supported improving the quality, affordability, and access to early childhood education (ECE). In addition, (these) respondents emphasised the need to increase the number of ECE programmes, especially in low-income communities” (Office of the Children’s Commissioner: Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty, 2012, p. 25).

Some argue that New Zealand’s market-based delivery of ECE plays a role in the lack of accessibility for families. Ritchie and Johnson contend that this market-based provision has contributed to the lack of local ECE services in low-income communities and been detrimental for many children living in poverty. They reason that “the profit-orientation of many early childhood businesses means that these enterprises are viewed as being unlikely to deliver sufficient profit margins in low socio-economic areas” (Ritchie & Johnson, 2011, p. 160).

In order to increase participation, the provision of local, high quality and culturally appropriate ECE services must be addressed. This is especially crucial since many beneficiaries live in low socio-economic areas and these locations are less likely to have accessible ECE.

2.2.2.3 Transport

Lack of transport is another main barrier to participation. In the first reading of this bill in parliament (New Zealand Parliament, 2012b), Te Ururoa Flavell from the Māori Party raised concerns from one of his constituents. His constituent pointed out that the policy “doesn’t take into account circumstances of poverty” and they argued therefore that it has the potential to raise the burden of poverty. A significant concern of this constituent was that many families have no access to transport in order to passage their child/ren to an ECE service.

Similarly, the Ministry of Education’s Participation Programme identified that “(t)ransport is a deciding factor in whether to participate in ECE for some parents” (Mitchell et al., 2013, p. 89). Van transportation provided by some ECE services has enabled some families to access ECE programmes; however, Mitchell et al. (2013) do not consider vans to be a wide-spread solution. Rather, they conclude that “(i)f the ICCP [Intensive Community Participation Programme] groups are able to establish responsive, local ECE services where they are needed, needs for transport would be dissipated” (Mitchell et al., 2013, p. 50).

2.2.2.4 Cultural values and family needs

Inability to access ECE programmes that meet whānau needs and values can create barriers for some families. Findings have shown that the commercialisation of ECE has resulted in uneven distribution of services in some localities as well as an insufficient number of culturally responsive programmes (Mitchell & Davison, 2010; Ritchie & Johnson, 2011).

Eurydice (2009), commenting in a European context, identified the following barriers.

Formal barriers include waiting lists and the requirement for regular attendance and respecting rules in childcare. Informal (‘cultural’) barriers ... include the way in which child care is publicised, the language

spoken in the child care facility and the cultural background of the staff. These barriers often lead families from ethnic minorities and underprivileged families to perceive child care as being ‘something that isn’t for us’. (Eurydice, 2009, p. 163)

In their New Zealand findings, Mitchell et al. (2013) found that *cultural match* was important to families). Their study reveals that families relate to “ECE services that incorporate their own cultural values and languages (where appropriate)” (p. 73). Noticeably, their participant families required the support of participation initiatives to aid them to engage in ECE.

While parental rights may not necessarily be referred to as a barrier, it is still worthy of mention here. Some families make a deliberate conscious choice not to enrol their children in ECE. Rowntree, an advisor to the Home Education Foundation, stated “many families have made a principled decision not to send their children to approved ECE providers” (Rowntree, 2012). However, obligatory ECE has taken away this right for beneficiary families, while still allowing other families’ choice.

2.2.3 Overcoming barriers

High quality, free, local ECE services would overcome many of the barriers experienced by families. Free ECE would overcome the most prevalent obstacle, unaffordability. Indeed, the Quality Public Early Childhood Education (QPECE) project group advocated “every child has a right as a citizen to participate in free early childhood education” (May & Mitchell, 2009, p. 19). Further to this provision of high quality, local services would address additional barriers. A report aimed at addressing child poverty in New Zealand proposed that an increase in “funding for establishment grants and running costs to equalise access to and participation in ECCE services across deciles” (Fletcher & Dwyer, 2008, p. 51).

In addition, some families require support to facilitate them through the enrolment process. Research has shown that the Ministry of Education Participation Programme has been reaching target families: non-participating Māori and Pasifika children and children from low socio-economic communities. These

supportive initiatives help assist families to find an appropriate ECE service that will meet their family's needs around "cost, location and cultural fit" (Mitchell et al., 2013, p. 47). Different participation initiatives within the programme were able to address different types of barriers and needs (Mitchell et al., 2013, p. 90).

2.3 Summary

This chapter has explored literature related to the context of ECE social obligations and potential impacts such as financial sanctions and barriers to participation.

Government papers identify that ECE social obligations have been conceived from welfare reforms with the express purpose of reducing long-term benefit dependency. The fact that ECE is regulated and monitored by the Ministry of Education, but ECE obligations have been legislated by and are enforced by MSD warrants further examination. The rationale for their policies are different and their requirements are sometimes inconsistent. Consequently, there is potential for a lack of cohesion of policy and a lack of information and support for whānau.

A main argument has been that while quality ECE provides beneficial outcomes for children, the enlisting of sanctions to enforce obligations is likely to cause family stress and financial hardship which potentially hurts children. In addition, social obligation legislation does not take into account or provide a means for families to overcome the barriers they face in accessing quality ECE that is culturally responsive.

This review informed my aims for my study. Owing to the newness of ECE social obligations, there is an absence of real stories and experiences of those affected by them. Wynd (2013), in her report on benefit sanctions, surmised that "further qualitative research is required to establish how families perceive their treatment" (p. 3). Accordingly, my study aimed to understand the true impacts of social obligations by listening and seeking to understand those affected. In addition, government documents examined in this literature review prompted further exploration through discourse analysis.

The following chapter discusses the methodology and theoretical underpinnings of this research.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines methodology utilised for this research project. The purpose of this research was to hear the voices of those affected by ECE social obligations as legislated in the Social Security (Benefit Categories and Work Focus) Amendment Act 2013 (N.Z). In order to ensure that these people's experiences were heard, my research design encompassed a qualitative methodology with an interpretive paradigm.

Semi-structured interviews alongside a brief background questionnaire were utilised to gather data. This data was then analysed using thematic analysis. Data was also gathered from government documents and through information acquired through an Official Information Act request. This information was examined through a policy-as-discourse lens.

It is imperative that research is conducted in an ethically appropriate manner in order to protect both its trustworthiness and those involved (Mutch, 2013). Ethical considerations that were taken into account during this project are outlined further in this chapter.

3.1.1 Research questions

The research questions were:

1. What are the perceived impacts and experiences of early childhood education social obligations on families and whānau?
2. What are the discourses underpinning early childhood education social obligations and what are their effects?

3.2 Theoretical framework

My research project design embraced a qualitative approach using an interpretive paradigm. Qualitative research commonly “uses methods that gather descriptive accounts of the unique lived experiences of the participants to enhance understanding of particular phenomena” (Mutch, 2013, p. 24). This methodology

allowed me as a researcher to use semi-structured interviews to examine participants' experiences in-depth (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011).

An interpretive paradigm commonly underlies qualitative research. This paradigm has a philosophical supposition that "knowledge is situated in relations between people" (Thomas, 2009, p. 109). Hennink et al. (2011) outline that an interpretive research paradigm allows the researcher "to identify issues from the perspective of study participants, and understand the meanings and interpretations that they give" (p. 9). While interviewing, the interpretive researcher can "attempt to clarify and interpret the descriptions together with the subject" (Kvale, 1996, p. 127), rather than just gathering a surface description.

An interpretive paradigm enables one to find out about a participant's lived experience, the emphasis being their experience (Hennink et al., 2011). Holliday (2007) suggests that qualitative and interpretive research derives from the belief that "what is important to look for will emerge" (p. 6). Using a qualitative and interpretive approach allowed me to discover my participants' interpretation of reality in relation to the said policy. As Krauss (2005) states "each of us experiences from our own point of view, each of us experiences a different reality" (p. 760).

This approach was well-suited to inform my research questions and enable me to comprehend the point of view and perceptions (Bell, 2010; Krauss, 2005) that my sample population hold of mandatory ECE. Hennink et al. (2011) identify that qualitative research fits with this type of ontological perspective. They ascertain that "where reality is assumed to consist of meanings, perceptions, beliefs and underlying motivations, they can be examined through qualitative research" (p. 11).

Punch (2000) states that the methodology adopted can influence the way questions are posed. The use of carefully thought out questions (largely open-ended) along with prompts was an effective way to gather data to inform my study. The decision for me to use semi-structured interviews was carefully thought through. An unstructured approach would have been too broad and may not have resulted in data that address the impacts of this policy. A more structured

approach would have led to questions based on assumptions and would not have given the richness of data required.

3.3 Methods of data collection

Interviews are commonly used as a data collection method for research. They provide a valuable tool “for studying people’s understanding of the meanings in their lived world” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 116). The use of interviews for qualitative research helps a researcher understand the participants’ views, opinions, perceptions, attitudes and experiences. The most commonly used interview structure in education and social research is the semi-structured interview (Menter, Elliot, Hulme, Lewin, & Lowden, 2012). The flexible nature of this dialogue allows the participant’s own thoughts to be explored and sub-topics to develop. It is the semi-structured interview that this study utilised.

Data was also collected from a series of Ministry of Social Development and Welfare Working Group papers that set out the context and rationale of this policy, as well as through information obtained via an official information act request.

3.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews involve a guide or outline of key questions which a researcher uses to guide the interview’s direction with cues and prompts. They can consist both open and closed questions. Open questions enable the participant to give broad answers using their own thoughts and words without limiting their options. Closed questions capture more limited, but specific answers.

This type of interview allows information to surface that may not be noticeable through observation or survey methods (Bryman, 2008). They can be used for many different types of research questions when there is a need for the flexibility to expand on and explore participants’ ideas more fully (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001). This type of interview is useful to gather opinions from individuals in a community to help inform needs, practice, policy and social justice (Stillman, 2007).

For my research project I developed an outline of open ended questions with prompts. The questions for beneficiary participants (Appendix F) covered five main areas: participants’ family, their contact with WINZ, their involvement or

knowledge of early childhood education programmes, work experiences and their feelings about the policy.

The questions for the head teacher and childcare team leader (Appendix H) covered background questions about their organisation and the families they work with, the impacts (if any) that social obligations have had on their ECE service and on families, and family reactions and experiences they had observed as a result of this policy.

The open-ended questions allowed participants to share their own experiences and allowed me to probe further into the areas they raised, in order to gain more insight into their stories and feelings.

Group one participants also completed a background questionnaire (Appendix G). A “questionnaire is a versatile tool and is used in a number of different kinds of research design” (Thomas, 2009, p. 174). The defining characteristic of a questionnaire is that it is a *written* form of questioning (Thomas, 2009), although it can be read out by the interviewer. The researcher needs to be clear about the information they want to find out and be precise in their wording (Bell, 2010).

The questionnaire I used in my study was an extension of our interview and used closed-ended questions. Participants had the option to read the questionnaire themselves, or have me read it to them. The questionnaire was utilised in order to understand some background about the families who took part in the research project. This background information included their ethnicity, their qualifications, whether they were working and how long they had been receiving a benefit.

3.3.2 Policy research

Related policy and government documents across the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Development, and Work and Income were analysed with the purpose of placing the mandatory policy in context. Understanding the setting in which this policy evolved is important as McHoul and Grace (2000) draw attention to an understanding that “tactics within institutions are often part of a more general political strategy” (p. 70).

Additional data was gathered from an Official Information Act request (Appendix I).

3.4 Procedure

The perceived impacts and experiences of early childhood education social obligations on families and whānau were analysed through data gathered from interviews with parents and ECE managers. Mutch (2013) defines qualitative research as “a research approach that looks in-depth at fewer subjects through rich description of their thoughts, feelings, stories and / or activities” (p. 9). Because of the in-depth nature of my interviews the sample size was quite small.

3.4.1 Selecting participants

I emailed (Appendix A) personal and community contacts who I knew worked with beneficiary families to ask if they were able to invite parent and whānau beneficiaries, who had been directly affected by this policy, to be part of the study. These community connectors included community centres, study and training institutes and ECE services. My connectors were given an information sheet (Appendix B) to give to any interested parent and whānau beneficiaries who fitted the criteria. The information sheet explained the study, what was involved and invited parents and whānau to be part of the study.

Twelve people initially agreed to participate in the study; however, four of these were unable to and did not form part of the final sample. The other eight people were interviewed and made up group one of this study.

As I was reliant on community connectors, most of whom were affiliated to ECE services, it proved difficult to locate participants who, for their own values and reasons, were opposed to enrolling their children. So in this study these particular voices are not heard.

The second group of participants was a kindergarten head teacher and an ECE education and care centre team leader. I emailed (Appendix C) them inviting them to be part of this research project. Their ECE services are located in low income communities known to have beneficiary families enrolled and were likely to be knowledgeable about the impact of the policy. They were chosen on the basis of my knowledge and contacts.

3.4.2 Participant involvement

Interviews were conducted with eight beneficiaries (six mums and two dads), who had children aged three to five years of age. Participants were asked to take part in a semi-structured interview with the researcher to talk about their experiences and views of the ECE social obligations policy. Each person was interviewed individually and was also asked to complete a background questionnaire. Participants were welcome to bring a support person to the interview if they wanted to. These interviews were a maximum of one hour and each participant was given a \$20 Pak'nSave voucher in recognition of the costs of their attendance. Table one sets out the background of group one participants.

Table 1: Background information about beneficiary participants

Parent (n=8)	Ethnicity	Number of pre-schoolers	Type of benefit received (as listed by participant)*	Employment status
Dad	NZ European	1	Job seeker	Full time training
Dad	NZ European	1	Unemployment benefit	Full time training
Mum	Māori/Tongan	2	Emergency maintenance	Full time training
Mum	Māori	2	Single parent	Not in work/training
Mum	NZ Pakeha	1	Sole parent (temporary support)	Full time study
Mum	Māori	2	Was job seeker, now working	Full time work
Mum	Māori/Pakeha	1	Sole parent	Part time work
Mum	Māori/Samoan	1	DPB	Not in work/training

* In 2013 the welfare system changed to new benefit categories. In most cases the 'Unemployment Benefit' became renamed 'Job Seeker Support' and the 'Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB)' was renamed 'Sole Parent Support'. However, some participants listed the old name of their benefit.

The ECE manager participants (group two) also participated in individual semi-structured interviews with the researcher, which were a maximum of one hour. The kindergarten offers sessional, school day and extended hours. The community centre provides a childcare integrated with support for families and the community.

3.5 Ethical considerations

A researcher should be able to demonstrate that their decisions are well thought through from an ethical lens. Ethical guidelines provide a 'framework for navigation' with principles that should be followed. A key principle in research is that the risk of harm must be minimised. Because of the personal nature of interviews, there are many potential ethical issues that can arise which must be considered at the start of and throughout the duration of the research project (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Using peer review and ethics committee approval helps bring other voices to decisions and establishes credibility to the research. This research project was conducted with approval from the University of Waikato Research Ethics Committee and under the supervision of my supervisor, Associate Professor Linda Mitchell.

Key ethical issues to which I paid particular attention were confidentiality, informed consent and minimising potential harm to participants.

3.5.1 Confidentiality

Ethical practice must consider a participant's right to anonymity and privacy (Menter et al., 2012). Participants were assured of the confidentiality of data collected for this research project. As previously discussed, assurance of confidentiality was important to some participants. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants, community services and locations in this thesis in order to protect anonymity.

3.5.2 Informed consent

Ethical research should involve informed consent with participation being voluntary and the participant having the right to withdraw (Menter et al., 2012; Mutch, 2013).

In the design and process of a study, the researcher should ensure informed consent is gained and that confidentiality issues are addressed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In order for my participants to give true informed consent, I ensured that they had all the relevant information of what would be involved and that they were informed of their right to withdraw from the project or to withdraw data.

Group 1: Most of my community connectors arranged a meeting time and place for me to meet with their clients who were interested in participating in the study. At these meetings potential participants were given information about the research and were able to ask any questions that they had. They were informed there was no obligation if they decided that they did not want to be involved. Those that chose to participate in the research were invited to complete an informed consent form (Appendix D). I read through the form with them and discussed any content with them as needed. The form explained the nature of the research, what participating in the study would involve and that they could withdraw at any time. Participants were asked to consent to the use of background information and interview data in the researcher's thesis, academic publications and presentations. One of my community connectors chose to meet with potential participants herself and go through all the above processes with these participants before they were introduced to me. For this group this process was more culturally appropriate. When I met with these participants they were given the opportunity to ask me any further questions prior to the interview.

Group 2: I contacted the ECE services and invited the head teacher/team leader to be part of the research. I gave them information about the study and the opportunity to ask any questions. They were both interested in being part of the study and were invited to complete an informed consent form (Appendix E).

All participant consent forms have been digitised and will be stored on my password protected computer for five years to allow for review if needed. Participants will be given the link to the research commons database so that once the thesis is published they can access the findings.

3.5.3 Potential harm to participants

When designing research the researcher has an obligation to consider possible implications for the participants and to ensure safeguards are put in place (Mutch, 2013). I sought the advice and guidance of my supervisor and Vanessa Paki, who agreed to act as my cultural advisor for this project. Vanessa is a lecturer in Human Development and Counselling at the University of Waikato, and has expertise in Māori education in early childhood, transition issues from Kōhanga Reo to mainstream, intergenerational issues, and assessment and evaluation. I met with both my supervisor and cultural advisor to ensure the interview settings and questions were culturally and socially sensitive and that potential harm was minimised. We anticipated that there was no potential harm to participants in conducting this study.

Seidman (2013) advises that there may be times when an interviewee shares details that they later wish to retract. I ensured participants knew they had the right to decline to participate in any aspect of this research. They were also informed that they had the right to withdraw data up until the time that they had approved their interview transcript. This ensured that if participants felt uncomfortable about something they had said during the interview they were able to withdraw it from the transcript.

Participants have a right to expect they will be portrayed authentically in ways that reflect their vision of themselves (Fontana & Frey, 2003). Through having access to their transcripts for verification, participants were able to ensure they were happy with the data they had shared.

An ethical consideration in working with family and whānau beneficiary participants is recognising they may have experienced stigmatisation and segregation as a result of receiving a benefit. I consulted with both my supervisor and my cultural advisor, who have both done extensive research with a diverse

range of families, before embarking on this research project. For some participants in this study there was a sense of distrust between them and government agencies. These participants needed reassurance that their interviews were confidential and that identifying personal information would not be shared with any agency. I made every effort to ensure my questions were sensitive and that participants felt comfortable participating in the study. Interviews were conducted in a place where participants felt comfortable. All chose to be interviewed at the location of the community organisation they had been contacted through. I hope that participants will benefit from having shared their stories and experiences.

3.6 Validity

Readers of a study need to be assured that the researcher's processes are sound and that the study accurately measured what it defined it would (Mutch, 2013). In this research I have carefully set out and followed processes in order to gain accurate data. Anderson and Arsenault (1998) stipulate how efficient and methodical process skills help substantiate the quality and validity of a research project. The maintenance of meticulous records of all aspects of the interview process aids credibility as it enables peer review (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001). Meticulous records have been kept in regards to informed consent, interview recordings and transcripts, as well as other relevant records, this ensures that this material or evidence is open to scrutiny and verification.

Triangulation can also provide credibility to a study (Mutch, 2013). There is linkage between information gained through the literature review, interview data and analysis, and policy analysis.

Anderson and Arsenault (1998) suggest interview questions should be carefully formulated to reduce ambiguity and to establish credibility. In *The Process and the Pitfalls of Semi-Structured Interviews*, Harvey-Jordan and Long (2001) suggest it is advisable for interview questions and processes to be piloted first. I piloted my questions with a friend who receives a benefit. This process allowed me to identify and amend questions that needed adaption and to practise my interview style, thus lending to more robust data.

3.7 Limitations

This study has given insight into what the impacts of the ECE social obligations have been on a small group of whānau based in one region in New Zealand. The findings from small qualitative projects are not generalisable; rather, they help generate understanding of that particular community, at that particular time and place (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001).

3.8 Data analysis

Data was analysed within a human rights framing. Thematic analysis was used to examine data gathered from interviews and government documents were explored utilising a policy-as-discourse approach.

3.8.1 Child and human rights framing

Analysis has been guided by the tenets of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, New Zealand's Human Rights Act 1993 (N.Z.), and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948. These tenets declare:

- The best interests of children are paramount (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989)
- Everyone has the right to freedom from discrimination (Human Rights Act 1993 (N.Z.))
- Article 25 “Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection” (United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948)
- Article 26 “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children” (United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948).

A child and human rights framing enabled the best interests of the child to be at the forefront during analysis of data gathered in this research.

3.8.2 *Thematic analysis*

I explored the gathered qualitative data using thematic analysis to examine keywords and underlying themes, both implicit and explicit, within the dialogue that was communicated. This helped classify significant themes and develop findings.

Anderson and Arsenault (1998) suggest the qualitative researcher “first, try and understand phenomena through the participants’ eyes, then place that understanding within your theoretical and conceptual framework of the phenomena and reconsider the participants’ perspective with the goal of trying to define, unravel, reveal or explain their world” (p. 125).

Data from my interviews lent itself to an interpretive approach and the use of thematic analysis. Working like this has allowed key messages to emerge and the dialogue to “speak for itself” (Mutch, 2013, p. 122).

3.8.3 *Policy-as-discourse analysis*

Government documents were examined using a policy-as-discourse analysis within a child’s rights framework. I used Bacchi’s *what’s the problem?* approach as an analytical tool for examining how beneficiary parents and families have been represented in this social obligation policy and as a “way to uncover problem representations” (Bacchi, 1999, p. 170).

The steps I followed from Bacchi’s (1999) “what’s the problem?” framework are:

1. What is the problem represented to be either in a specific policy debate or a specific policy proposal?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation?
3. What effects are produced by this representation? How are subjects constituted within it? What is likely to change? What is likely to stay the same? Who is likely to benefit from this representation?
4. What is unproblematic in this representation?
5. How would ‘responses’ differ if the ‘problem’ were thought about or represented differently?

(Bacchi, 1999, pp. 12–13)

3.9 Summary

This chapter has outlined the purpose and methodology of this research which sought to understand the perceived impacts and experiences that ECE social obligations have had on families and whānau. A qualitative methodology with an interpretive paradigm was chosen in order to allow the voices of those affected to be heard.

This chapter has described the measures taken to ensure the research meets ethical standards and that the potential of harm was minimised.

Additionally, a policy-as-discourse approach was outlined. The following chapter, chapter four, examines the discourses underpinning these obligations.

Chapter Four: Policy-as-discourse Analysis

This chapter examines the dominant discourses underpinning the social obligation policy reform. I analysed government documents using a child rights framework and Bacchi's "what's the problem?" process. In recognition that social realities are formed through prevalent views and discourses, this analysis seeks to examine what gave rise to the early childhood education (ECE) social obligation policy. Assumptions and the normalised discourses that have been embedded within this policy are interrogated.

4.1 Introduction

This analysis of discourses has been guided by the tenets of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). These tenets have been outlined in chapter three.

A policy-as-discourse analysis was used as a lens for exploration utilising Carol Bacchi's (1999; 2000) "what's the problem?" steps which are also listed in chapter three. Bacchi (2000) states that such an approach enables "deeper reflection on the contours of a particular policy discussion" (p. 48), which enables examination of 'what is the problem' and how the 'problem' has been framed.

I begin with an exploration of what the problem has been represented to be, how beneficiaries have been defined and positioned in the policy and how children have been positioned as vulnerable. I conclude by advocating a child's rights discourse for policy development and implementation and I argue for accessible high quality ECE for all children.

4.2 What is the problem represented to be?

Research indicates that quality early childhood education benefits young children. However, what are the potential reasons for making ECE compulsory for a targeted group of families? There are many motivations that could be analysed behind a policy such as this. McHoul and Grace (2000) note that solutions offered can be influenced by a larger political strategy.

Was this ECE social obligation policy born out of the belief that more children should attend ECE because it is beneficial for children's well-being, or possibly to prevent perceived future educational failure? Perhaps the policy was enacted to acquire more parents into the workforce, or to help increase enrolments at ECE services that were struggling with low enrolment numbers.

To understand what the problem is represented to be, it is important to locate how this policy was conceived. Bacchi (1999) suggests it is "always useful to consider when and why an issue comes onto the agenda" (p. 135). Government documents indicate the social obligation legislation was birthed out of government policy to reduce long term benefit dependency.

In 2010 a welfare working group (WWG) was established to explore ways to reduce long-term benefit dependency (Welfare Working Group, 2011b). From their report of recommendations, the obligatory ECE policy for children of beneficiaries was born. Of significant note here is that this policy did not come out of an education initiative, but out of a welfare initiative. This would suggest the problem is represented to be long term benefit dependency.

The Ministry of Social Development (MSD) Welfare Reform Paper E does argue that "these obligations are not aimed primarily at achieving employment outcomes"; however, in the same paragraph the report states that "(s)ocial obligations and employment obligations are mutually reinforcing" (Ministry of Social Development, 2012b, p. 5). Further rationale for ECE participation listed in the WWG report states "the Working Group's view is that given the importance of early childhood education to child development, every attempt should be made to ensure that no child, especially those at greatest risk of disadvantage, misses out on its benefits" (Welfare Working Group, 2011b, p. 121). Nevertheless, considering the foundation of the reforms, such justification appears to be secondary and used to boost the primary rationale of legislating obligatory ECE in order to enable parents to prepare for employment. Indeed, even the Ministry of Education's website states in their information on ECE social obligations that "(h)aving children in ECE will help parents get ready for work" (Ministry of Education, 2013).

In analysing this welfare reform that introduced these obligations to reduce long-term benefit dependency, I have identified three interrelated problem representations: an economic discourse aiming to reduce costs to government of the welfare system, job seeker discourse positioning beneficiaries in relation to their employment status, and a children as vulnerable discourse positioning children as in need of protection. The different discourses embedded within the policy justifications are analysed from a rights perspective. A further discourse that is missing from these problem representations is a child's rights discourse; I argue that if a child's rights discourse was represented in the welfare reforms perhaps the solution would have been more embracing rather than the punitive and targeted obligations the policy adopted.

4.2.1 Economic discourse

In examining the history of this policy, there is a prevailing dialogue of economic rationalisation. Ball (1990) explains how “(m)eanings thus arise not from language, but from institutional practices, from power relations, from social position. Words and concepts change their meaning and their effects as they are deployed within different discourses” (p. 18). Social welfare reforms demonstrate such power relations with the Government able to wield control over beneficiaries since beneficiaries are financially dependent; “the welfare system provides us with an opportunity to reinforce some important social norms” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012a, p. 5).

McClure (1998) suggests “in the period after 1984 ... attitudes to the rising cost of the state's activities dominated social policy” (p. 8). This viewpoint is demonstrated in The Welfare Working Group report which sought to highlight the long-term cost of benefit dependency and its associated poverty and socio-economic ramifications. As such, the WWG were tasked with looking for a solution that could be rationalised economically. Their subsequent report stated that “early intervention with family programmes centred on the child's early years have been shown to be the most cost effective means of reducing long-term welfare dependence” (Welfare Working Group, 2011b, p. 122). MSD documents are embedded with economic dialogue that reveal an economic rationale such as “(t)he investment approach aims to reduce long-term benefit dependency”

(Ministry of Social Development, 2012a, p. 9) and “this package will improve social and economic outcomes” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012a, p. 1). Of note here is this government department’s tendency to focus on what can be measured, with emphasis placed on economic and financial goals, ahead of less measurable outcomes, such as well-being.

4.2.1.1 Effects of economic discourse

It would seem an economic discourse has influenced government policy to emphasise childcare as a means to enable parents to re-enter the workforce. The focus on an economic discourse and the promotion of independence implies that beneficiaries are to blame for not being able to independently provide for their families. Consequently, social obligations are advocated as a means to impart social responsibility because beneficiaries would not achieve independence voluntarily. Bacchi (2000) suggests “‘problems’ are ‘created’ or ‘given shape’ in the very policy proposals that are offered as ‘responses’” (p. 48). Indeed, an economic representation has caused this policy to constitute key assumptions and has instigated segregation of beneficiaries.

Social obligation legislation was introduced as part of the confidence and supply commitments that the National Party made with the ACT party in 2011 (Ministry of Social Development, 2012a). ACT has a strong agenda of free market principles and personal responsibility. The ACT Party aims to “promote, develop and pursue policies and proposals which: (e)ncourage individual choice, responsibility and excellence” (ACT Party, 2014). While it purports to promote choice, the Party’s agenda of social responsibility has removed choice for beneficiary families and failed to understand the realities that some of these families face. ACT and National Party’s oratory of individuality and investment is prominent in this legislation.

MSD’s Welfare Reform Paper A contains a strong emphasis on the reform’s *work focus* and is embedded with reference to an *investment approach* (Ministry of Social Development, 2012a). The assumptions in this discourse are that there are enough appropriate jobs, that jobs are available at times and in localities to suit families, and that all parents are in a position to be able to work.

In addition to job presuppositions is the notion that high quality early childhood services are easily accessible to all. Research, however, has shown that fiscal constraints and New Zealand's market approach to provision has undermined equality of access to quality ECE (Mitchell & Davison, 2010; Ritchie and Johnson, 2011). The market focussed provision of ECE in New Zealand and the need for ECE businesses to make a profit for their shareholders is sometimes at odds with the provision of high quality services.

While legislation has been enacted to make ECE a social obligation for children of beneficiaries, it has come at a time when there have been government cut backs on spending on features that have contributed to enhancing quality in the sector, including on qualified teachers and research and professional development initiatives (Te One & Dalli, 2010). Again such discourse points at this policy being enacted to lessen long-term benefit dependency through getting parents into paid work, with no emphasis on quality and accessibility of early childhood care and education.

Mitchell (2005) contends "views about the purpose of early childhood education also shape ways in which societies support early childhood services" (p. 176). An economic rationale has enabled an education policy to come under an MSD framework and administration. However, the monitoring of accessibility and provision of quality ECE for children of beneficiaries is not within an MSD jurisdiction. Where the driving factor behind obligatory ECE is the provision of care for children to enable their parents to work and the legislation is controlled through the Ministry of Social Development, rather than the Ministry of Education, a question is raised of the priorities that will be placed on government expenditure (childcare for working parents or education and care for children) and the support, or lack thereof, for high quality ECE.

4.2.1.2 Left unproblematic in economic discourse

The solutions that are explored in order to solve a problem largely depend on what questions are asked. Postman (1992) advises that "the form of a question may even block us from seeing solutions to problems that become visible through a different question" (p. 126).

It would appear access to quality, culturally responsive childcare is left unproblematic in this economic discourse. Bacchi (2000) proposes that there is a “non-innocence of how ‘problems’ get framed within policy proposals” (p. 50). This in turn affects what possibilities for action are considered. Referring to this as the *politics of funding*, Bacchi suggests that sometimes questions are asked within a framework that allow a low-cost solution to be promoted as the answer, while problems that demand higher cost answers are avoided or remain hidden.

In the policy at hand, the Welfare Working Group asked the question ‘How do we reduce long-term benefit dependency?’ One of the actions the government decided would solve this problem was to obligate parents to enrol their children in ECE. However, in this action the government policy has framed parents as being to blame for not enrolling their children. Silent in this solution is the possibility that ECE facilities should adjust their delivery or that government policy could adjust the provision and funding of services in order to make ECE more accessible. In this policy a child rights framework is inaudible. I believe the question should have been ‘Why are children not participating in ECE?’ But asking such a question would perhaps demand higher cost solutions, such as the need to provide local high quality ECE in communities that do not have local access to a service.

In addition, the economic discourse also fails to consider barriers facing families in securing jobs. In this representation emphasis is placed on the individual needing to meet their responsibilities without examination of the job economy. The influence of economic discourse places emphasis on personal responsibility and is interrelated with the way beneficiaries are positioned.

4.2.2 Job seeker discourse

A second dominant discourse identified within the social obligation policy is the positioning of beneficiaries solely in terms of their employment status. In MSD terms, beneficiaries are labelled ‘job seekers’. I analyse the effect and what has been left unproblematic in this job seeker discourse.

Recent government policy has been formed from a prevailing job seeker discourse with a belief that all individuals have a social responsibility to support themselves.

The Welfare Working Group (WWG) 2011 report (2011a) maintained it is fundamental that welfare reforms “encourage personal responsibility” and “send clear signals about the value of paid work” (p. 10). MSD reinforces individualisation through its statement of intent: “We help New Zealanders to help themselves to be safe, strong and independent” (Ministry of Social Development, 2014).

As such, welfare reforms have sought to “embed a work focus throughout the benefit system” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012a, p. 6) introducing new benefit categories. There are now three main categories, two of which are Jobseeker and Sole Parent Support. Jobseeker support is “for people who can usually work full-time” and Sole Parent Support is “for sole-parents caring for children under the age of 14 who can look or prepare for part-time work” (Work and Income New Zealand, 2013b). The Ministry of Education’s website states that “The early childhood education (ECE) social obligation is part of a set of welfare reforms aimed at supporting people into work” (Ministry of Education, 2013). With the focus on moving beneficiary parents and caregivers into work or training, childcare is a way in which to facilitate beneficiary parents into labour force participation.

Edelman proposes that governments affect behaviour by shaping people’s cognitive perspectives. As such, political activity “helps create their beliefs about what is proper; their perceptions of what is fact; and their expectations of what is to come” (Edelman, 1971, p. 7). In this way New Zealand welfare reforms have sought to shape beneficiary behaviour through expectations and obligations. Welfare Reform Paper E states the MSD aim to “use the benefit system to reinforce important social objectives relating to child education” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012b, p. 1) and to work (Welfare Working Group, 2011b).

Human capital theory underscores the job seeker discourse and promotes that individuals should gain skills for themselves and their children in order to avoid poverty and to gain employment. This theory underpins New Zealand government policy in this area. To this end the New Zealand government is seen to utilise “early childhood education to further the Human Capital of both the parents and their child-as-future citizen” (Stuart, 2013).

WWG's definition of *long-term* is not widely known to the general public and because government link *long-term* with phrases such as *social and intergenerational consequences* and *growing up in benefit dependent households* (Welfare Working Group, 2011b), the public are often given the impression that the majority of beneficiaries have been on the benefit for many years. Yet WWG define *long-term dependency* as "individuals who have been in the welfare system for six or more consecutive months" (Welfare Working Group, 2011b, p. vii). With such a definition it is likely that a large majority of beneficiaries fit into this criterion of long-term dependency.

This positioning portrays beneficiaries as bludgers on society, lazy and bad parents. MSD's Welfare Reform Paper E reinforces this representation of blame and responsibility being placed on beneficiary parents: "The onus is on parents to take up services for their children ... We need to help them to do the right thing for their children" (Ministry of Social Development, 2012b, p. 4). In the first reading of this bill in parliament, Labour MP Grant Robertson accused National of "fear mongering and exclusion". He positioned that it is wrong for "people in privilege [to] blame the most vulnerable for what is wrong in society" (New Zealand Parliament, 2012b).

The following section discusses the effects of a job seeker discourse.

4.2.2.1 Effects of job seeker discourse

A job seeker discourse frames benefit dependency as an individual's problem. The Welfare Working Group Report (Welfare Working Group, 2011b) states "(t)here are few incentives and little support for too many welfare dependent people to move into paid work. The resulting long-term benefit dependence is avoidable" (p. 1).

The view that welfare dependence is avoidable underscores the emphasis on personal responsibility. This representation has in turn led to legislation to control welfare recipients' behaviour through the threat of financial sanctions. Such positioning of beneficiaries infers money/sanctions/punishment are needed to motivate them. Indeed, the *National Evaluation of the ECE Participation Programme* has demonstrated that this is not the case. At an early stage of the

programme “(a)lready over 1,000 children have been enrolled in ECE through the initiatives within the target communities” (Mitchell et al., 2013, p. 4).

In this discourse beneficiary parents are positioned to be *work ready* through the enrolment of their children in ECE. Government appears to wield the power in this social obligation policy with beneficiaries not having a voice or choice. This positioning of beneficiaries suggests that the state knows better than parents. As ECE obligations only apply to children of beneficiaries, beneficiaries have been disempowered, marginalised and further segregated from other families.

The representation of beneficiaries as ‘bludgers’ has provided an underlying theme for welfare reforms. One submitter opposed to the introduction of this policy and the financial strain sanctions may impose on families alludes to this fixation:

All of these options are bad and would open up a Pandora’s Box of problems around childcare, lack of employment options, and child welfare issues. There needs to be greater support for study, training and child care. No policy is going to get rid of people who use the DPB to avoid work, but an obsession with “bludgers” will punish the vast VAST majority who are using it for its legitimate purpose. For that small number that use the DPB to avoid work, the question needs to be asked: why they feel so hopeless about their prospects that they would seek a life on the DPB? This is a murkier and tougher issue which popularity seeking governments avoid (Welfare Working Group, 2011a).

As this submitter stated, this is a complex problem; social obligations, including obligatory ECE, seem to just skim the top of the issue without asking deeper questions and addressing underlying concerns.

4.2.2.2 Left unproblematic in job seeker discourse

It would appear the perspective that *beneficiaries are to blame* influenced the solutions that were explored in this reform. This examination seeks to identify what has been left unproblematised in this representation.

The focus on individuals has shifted emphasis away from the job economy. Seemingly, beneficiaries have been categorised as answerable for their own *failures*. Therefore by ensuring they meet social obligations to do with work and their children they can take responsibility to solve their own *self-created problems*.

This government policy has applied a blanket approach outlining how beneficiaries should act, but little consideration or allowance has been given to individual circumstances. Children's well-being, arrangements for sick children and other personal barriers families face are not addressed. A Child Poverty Action Group report on sanctions suggest the welfare reforms ignore "the fact that raising children is work itself; it overlooks the needs of disabled, sick or traumatised children; and it assumes the state knows better than parents what is best for their children"(Wynd, 2013, p. 2).

Furthermore, this legislation presupposes that there are enough jobs for everyone. Wynd (2013) submits that reforms have failed "to address underlying issues including poverty and the weak labour market" (p. 7). Using childcare as a means to get parents into the workforce again doesn't take into account whether there are jobs available or the conditions of employment available.

4.2.3 Children as vulnerable discourse

The third discourse identified in government dialogue surrounding the social obligation policy contains a discourse of the child as *vulnerable*, *at-risk*, and *under achieving*, and therefore in need of targeting and intervention. *Vulnerable families* are defined as "those most at risk of adverse outcomes (poor health, low educational attainment, unemployment, economic disadvantage, perpetrator/victim of crime)" (Ministry of Social Development, 2012b, p. 1).

The socio-economic status of the child of a beneficiary is portrayed as a strong indicator that they are at-risk and vulnerable. The Ministry of Social Development (2013) state that at risk "children from lower socio-economic groups, particularly benefit-supported homes, have a higher risk of negative social outcomes" (p. 45).

It can be argued that within this deficit discourse, beneficiary families are portrayed as lacking parenting skills and not being socially responsible. Such discourse is not new; in a social policy report on Cycles of Disadvantage in 1994,

Chapple et al. (1994) identified the strong link assumed between welfare dependency and undesirable behaviour, such as perceived poor parenting. In 1998 the proposed Code of Social and Family Responsibility was aimed at enforcing beneficiary parent's conduct in certain areas. Now we have the social obligation policy which outlines mandatory obligations for parents and again focusses solely on the conduct of beneficiaries.

4.2.3.1 Effects of a children as vulnerable discourse

Representing children of beneficiaries as vulnerable has caused government policy to marginalise, stigmatise and remove choice for these families. Beneficiary parents are portrayed as ineffective parents who need to be made to enrol their children. As such, they are deprived of the choice that other parents have over ECE enrolment. In a paper presented at the Children in Crisis Conference, White (2013) states that “the very young child in crisis is frequently positioned as an object of pity” (p. 3) in need of intervention from wider society. Indeed this is visible in the ECE social obligations legislation which seeks to aid the achievement of targeted outcomes for vulnerable children (Ministry of Social Development, 2012a).

The MSD justify social obligations targeted at beneficiary families because of the perceived vulnerability of these families. Their report proposes that “compliance testing for these social obligations will be targeted towards families with vulnerable children” this paper goes on to say that “(w)ork is underway to identify this population” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012b, p. 2). They suggest “potential indicators could include previous involvement with Child, Youth and Family (CYF), frequent changes of address, frequent changes of caregiver for children, multiple children to different fathers and fathers of multiple children” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012b, p. 2). No explanation is referenced in this MSD paper to validate the link made between these perceived indicators and vulnerability.

The WWG *Reducing Long Term Benefit Dependency Recommendations* (2011b) did acknowledge that only a minority of parents had not enrolled their children in ECE, asserting that “(w)hile the vast majority of parents in the system understand their responsibilities to care for their children, we know there are many at-risk

children in households supported by the welfare system” (p. 14). Yet despite the fact that most families had already enrolled their children, the MSD still chose to legislate a blanket rule for all beneficiary parents.

This policy is birthed out of assumptions rather than actual data. As previously stated in chapter two, there is no actual data to say how many of these children are not attending an ECE service, or the reasons why they are not attending. Consequently it is worth reflecting on and dissecting the rationale given and assumptions presented in this social obligation. The MSD state social obligations are necessary to achieve the vision that “every child thrives, belongs and achieves. For this to happen, we need to create the right environment” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012b, p. 3).

The context of this statement is that “every child” thrives. Yet in this discourse of vulnerable children, it must be noted that there are vulnerable children who do not live in beneficiary homes, and as such this policy does not support all vulnerable children, much less “every child”.

Similarly, the Welfare Working Group received many submissions opposed to the ECE social obligation requirement. Submissions from the public argued that not all beneficiaries are *vulnerable*, and that there are *vulnerable* families outside the benefit system for whom this policy will not reach (Ministry of Social Development, 2013). However, MSD policy can only legislate for beneficiaries; the MSD does not have the power to make ECE compulsory for all families (Ministry of Social Development, 2013). If this policy was to target all *vulnerable* families, it would need to be developed under the Ministry of Education.

The other part of the MSD’s statement worth scrutinising is the phrase the “right environment”. Who dictates what the right environment is? Again, the MSD do not have jurisdiction over ECE services, and some services in New Zealand are not high quality. Perhaps accessibility and provision of high quality needs to be ensured before imposing mandatory ECE.

Māori and Pacific families feature heavily in vulnerability discourse. MSD data “identifies a significant and persistent gap for Māori and Pacific families in poor communities, a group which includes some particularly hard-to-reach families”

(Ministry of Social Development, 2013, p.45). The analysis of why Māori and Pacific families are normalised as being at risk, living in poverty, and failing is worth further scrutiny. Yet this policy fails to address such needs or cater for the fact that some families do not have access to culturally responsive services. Rather than the onus being on families and whānau, the problem of support and access to culturally appropriate services perhaps should rest with those who provide and monitor ECE.

The discourse of vulnerability and perceived poor parenting has encouraged the positioning of ECE as a *preventative intervention* (Ministry of Social Development, 2013). Alongside an economic discourse investment in ECE is promoted as a way to cure social ills. In support of this policy, the Early Childhood Council state “From this point of view early childhood education can be viewed as an inoculation for multiple diseases, with these diseases including low achievement at school, criminality, unemployment, and poverty as an adult” (2013).

As previously discussed, views held about the purpose of ECE will influence provision. New Zealand ECE educators have sought to promote pedagogy with the aspiration of supporting children to be lifelong learners (which is reflected in Te Whāriki, the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum). Conversely, government policy preoccupation with intervention has the potential to devalue this aspiration.

Similarly, the preoccupation with both intervention and positioning childhood as a preparatory stage influences policy and provision. In Alcock and Haggerty’s (2013) article *Recent Policy Developments and the “Schoolification” of Early Childhood Care and Education in Aotearoa New Zealand* contend that

The emphasis of policies, such as the social obligation of ECE for children of beneficiaries, can be seen to be based on a deficit model of filling a gap in order for these children who are not meeting expectation to achieve. The discourse of plugging the gaps for children of beneficiaries would appear to emphasise that education in early years can only occur in an ECE service. It also risks placing the pedagogical emphasis on

preparedness for school. The subtle difference in approach and pedagogy in reality can lead to vastly different focuses. Preparing children for school is focussing on teaching what is deemed necessary, and what can be measured, but is different from preparing children for life with a wider view of the dispositions that will lead to lifelong learning. (Alcock and Haggerty, 2013, p. 22)

Ironically, this legislation has the potential to impose further poverty on families it proposes to help as a result of its threat of sanctions. The MSD on the one hand claim the legislation “contains in-built protections for children such as ... 50% income protection when sanctions are applied to a parent” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012a, p. 18), while on the other hand they acknowledge that “it is possible that some people who repeatedly fail to meet their obligations will experience hardships as a result” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012a, p. 3). These hardships will affect children.

4.2.3.2 Left unproblematic in the discourse of vulnerability

Government policy documents have represented the issue of vulnerability as a justification to enforce ECE participation. However, the ECE social obligation policy was specifically designed to address long-term benefit dependency with the underlying factor being to ensure parents are able to engage in training or paid work. Fundamentally, this policy is directly targeted to children whose parents receive a benefit, rather than to vulnerable children.

Indeed, crucial solutions have been missed as a consequence of the focus of this legislation. If this policy was truly about every child thriving it would address access for all children and not solely focus on children of beneficiaries. If obligatory ECE was motivated by ensuring all young children attend an ECE programme it would address barriers that families face. The *ECE Participation Programme Evaluation* found that obstacles participant families faced were often outside of the families’ control, rather they were to do with the way “settings were organised, funded and provided” (Mitchell et al., 2013, p. 5). Therefore instead of placing the sole focus on the parent’s responsibility to enrol their child, there needs to be examination of governmental responsibility.

This policy raises questions around government department responsibilities. Is enforcing education an appropriate purpose of the welfare system? In Wynd's report for the Child Poverty Action Group, she argues that the welfare system should be concerned with income support rather than education and health as they are in regard to this policy and its sanctions (Wynd, 2013). As previously discussed, the MSD has no impetus to provide and monitor quality ECE. Conversely, the Ministry of Education was already funding a programme aimed at promoting ECE participation.

Surface legislation is unlikely to go deep enough to address the issues surrounding poverty. The systems that have created poverty and children being classed as at-risk need to be examined. Additionally, we need to evaluate how we measure achievement and what has been normalised to create underachievement.

Furthermore, the value of ECE for all children under five needs to be explored as a totally separate discourse to the present examination of solutions explored under this crisis framework.

4.3 How would responses differ if the *problem* was thought about or represented differently?

Leading US poverty researcher Rebecca Blank expounds how "different views about the underlying causes of poverty lead to very different policy choices" (Blank, 2003, p. 458). Blank outlines six major theoretical approaches, below I list three of these that are observable in this governmental social obligation policy.

Firstly, if the problem of poverty is represented as being caused by individuals having "inadequate skills", then "training programs and improved educational opportunities" would be offered as an obvious remedy (Blank, 2003, p. 451). Whereas if poverty is denoted as an individual's own fault by reason of a "lack of appropriate learned behaviour" then "the right policy response should be to encourage the individual to behave differently" through measures such as sanctions (Blank, 2003, p. 456). Contrariwise, if poverty is viewed as being "caused by efforts to alleviate poverty", i.e. benefit payments are seen to create welfare dependency, then the policy response derived may be to impose work requirements as a condition of income support (Blank, 2003, p. 457; Office of the

Children's Commissioner: Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty, 2012, p. 14).

Let me examine these approaches in regard to their visibility in New Zealand's social obligation policy. Firstly, the belief that long-term benefit dependency is partly caused by inadequate skills is demonstrated through ECE education obligations being introduced. Secondly, a prominent underlying discourse implies long-term benefit dependency is self-inflicted. This belief has been used to justify the introduction of sanctions. Thirdly, a belief that welfare payments can create welfare dependency has led to work obligations being enacted.

Other causes for long-term benefit dependence in New Zealand appear to have been given no weight and are therefore not addressed in this policy. The legislation does not address or provide any support for the fundamental issues of poverty, the reality of the job market, minimum wage laws, discrimination and barriers families face in attaining employment. Reasons why children are not attending ECE are also not visible in this policy. A focus on the limitations within the job market, rather than blaming the individual, would allow other elucidations to be explored.

Commenting on discourses, Moss and Petrie (2002) write that those "which value independence, paid work, privatised family life, markets and consumerism ... only recognise and value children in relation to the adults they will become and childhood as an opportunity for shaping a desired adulthood" (p. 80). ECE social obligation legislation is an example of this. Instead, I advocate that to formulate policy in regard to participation in early childhood, a child's rights paradigm must form the primary representation.

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.
(Mitchell & Davison, 2010, p. 330)

Responses would differ if the issues of welfare dependency, poverty and ECE participation were addressed from a child's rights paradigm.

4.3.1 Child's rights discourse

This section explores a child's rights discourse, addressing human rights legislation, discrimination and governmental responsibility to ensure policy is in the best interests of the child.

There has been considerable recent literature on discourse that places children's rights at the forefront of policy (Mitchell, 2010; Mitchell & Davison, 2010; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Noonan, 2001; Te One & Dalli, 2010). Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 declares that "(i)n all actions concerning children ... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration" (p. 2). As such a rights perspective enables the focus to be on what is best for young children. In overseas research Vandebroek and Lazzari (2014) sought to determine the causes for unequal accessibility to quality ECE. They identified that "policies based on a (children's) rights perspective are more effective than policies based on a needs (or risk) framework" (Vandebroek & Lazzari, 2014, p. 330).

The present social obligation policy, as a consequence of its targeted nature, imposes requirements on beneficiaries that are not required of other families. Consequently, the policy has caused debate in regard to its discrimination and impingement on rights. New Zealand's Human Rights Act 1993 (N.Z.) upholds that everyone has the right to freedom from discrimination. Prohibited grounds of discrimination include employment status; therefore it can be argued that discrimination on the grounds of being a recipient of a benefit is a breach of this Bill of Rights.

Nevertheless, Melanie Webb, the Acting Chief Legal Counsel at the time the Social Security (Benefit Categories and Work Focus) Amendment Bill was being read, defended the policy, contending that its implementation was for the well-being of children. "We consider that the social obligations imposed by the Bill do

not give rise to disadvantage as they are designed to be beneficial through improving education and health outcomes for dependent children of beneficiaries, thereby reducing likelihood of inter-generational welfare dependence” (Webb, 2012) .

Further rights from The Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 that appear to be overlooked in this policy include the protection of all children as well as rights related to education and parental choice. Article 25 states: “Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection” (United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948). Article 26 in addressing education makes no reference to ECE being compulsory, but does, however, state that “parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children”. A memorandum from the Home Education Foundation (2012) argues that “compelling them to participate in ECE breaches not only this right, but also the right of children to be raised within their parents’ culture, ethnicity, and religion”.

During a period in the late 1990s and early 2000s, New Zealand ECE policy was moving in the direction of supporting children’s rights. In *The Status of Children’s Rights in Early Childhood Education Policy*, Te One and Dalli (2010) consider the progress education policy in New Zealand made towards supporting child provision and participation rights through the introduction of the early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996) in 1996 and the 10 year strategic plan in 2002 (Ministry of Education, 2002). Te One and Dalli (2010) comment that children’s rights are implicitly embedded in the following aspiration from Te Whāriki.

To grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society.

(Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9)

However, as a result of a discourse of economic restraint and budget cuts, the momentum towards rights-based policies and provision of high quality ECE that

were supported in the strategic plan were stalled. An agenda for participation has continued, but without the emphasis on quality.

As discussed previously, the participation policy has placed focus on enrolment as a parental responsibility, yet has failed to address barriers and provision. Commenting on accessibility of ECE in a European context, Vandebroek and Lazzari (2014) highlight the implicit assumption that “inequalities in enrolment were predominantly understood as the result of parental choice” (p. 328). This is illustrated in New Zealand with this legislation requiring parents to enrol their children even though research shows many face barriers. Placing the onus on parents assumes that all families have access to information about ECE services and that quality and appropriate ECE is easily accessible to all.

It can be argued that requiring children to attend ECE without ensuring they have access to high quality, culturally responsive services negates children’s rights. The prerequisite of providing high quality locally available ECE services warrants emphasis. Vandebroek and Lazzari (2014) advocate not just for availability and affordability but also accessibility, suggesting “ECEC access policies should be planned at the local level, starting from the analysis of barriers that prevent disadvantaged children and families from availing of ECEC provision” (p. 331).

In addition to provision the promotion of ECE participation requires enactment within a supportive and enabling framework. A child’s rights position would replace the use of sanctions (that have the potential to violate the needs and rights of children) with enabling practices, such as participation initiatives and ensuring ECE services are responsive to the conditions of children’s lives. As considered earlier the Ministry of Education instigated initiatives, such as the participation project to increase participation. Rather than a punitive obligatory focus, this initiative has successfully worked alongside families and supported children to access culturally responsive ECE services. Mitchell et al. (2013) contend that community connectedness and “working collaboratively with other agencies that are working intensively with families in the home” (p. 6) were key to engaging participation. A rights framework would enable initiatives such as this to support families and address barriers.

The formulation of obligatory policy under the MSD has overlooked the rights of the child. In order to ensure the focus is on what is best for the child, ECE policy needs to be developed within the framework of the Ministry of Education.

4.4 Summary

ECE social obligations are embedded within an economic discourse which theoretically positions beneficiaries as job seekers and their children as vulnerable. These interrelated discourses have caused this legislation to overlook child rights and fundamental issues that affect ECE participation.

The ECE social obligation policy decrees that parents are obliged to enrol their children. However, it fails to address any of the surrounding barriers and issues that these families face. This policy comes under MSD legislation with an emphasis on beneficiary parental responsibilities; however, the MSD do not have the mandate to ensure quality, provision or adequate support of ECE.

The beneficial outcomes of this policy are deemed by treasury government officials to outweigh the compromise of human rights and possible financial disadvantage sanctions might cause. Ironically, in the interest of improving child outcomes, officials deemed financial sanctions to be justifiable.

Instead, a child's rights framework would enable ECE policy to be framed by what is best for the child. It would promote provision of high quality, local, accessible, culturally responsive ECE for all young children. Under this umbrella funding of empowering, supportive community initiatives could promote and encourage participation.

Chapter Five: Perceived Impacts

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research project was to examine the perceived impacts of early childhood education (ECE) social obligations on families and whānau. Thematic analysis of the data is discussed under the following four key areas.

Firstly, whānau experiences related to social obligations are explored. The reasons that parents enrolled their children in ECE, their aspirations for their children and their knowledge of ECE social obligations are considered. Secondly, families' experiences with Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) and how these have impacted on their perceptions of WINZ are examined. Participants share their stories of the impact of treatment from WINZ staff, work expectations and sanctions. Thirdly, this analysis will examine the barriers to ECE participation that participant families encounter, including structural, accessibility, personal and legislation barriers. A case study of mum Hine illustrates her experiences and the obstacles she faced in accessing culturally appropriate ECE for her children. Fourthly, the nature of ECE provision is discussed. Participants' stories illuminate both beneficial and negative ECE outcomes which reflect the quality of the ECE programme. ECE needs to be of high quality to contribute to an empowering and welcoming environment that is beneficial to both children and their whānau. A case study of an empowering programme illustrates such benefits.

5.2 Whānau experiences

The welfare reform has used the benefit system to reinforce what the government sees as important social objectives (Ministry of Social Development, 2012b). The ECE social obligation policy implies that legislation is needed to ensure beneficiary parents enrol their children in ECE. Nonetheless, the beneficiaries whom I interviewed had all chosen to enrol their children in ECE because of their own values, rather than because of the introduction of ECE social obligations.

5.2.1 Reasons parents enrolled their child/ren in ECE

Five of the eight parents listed the main reason that they had enrolled their children in ECE was to enable them as a parent to study or work. This included Kelly who said she had to enrol her twins as her husband had lost his job, and they were both looking for work (Kelly, Parent Interview, August 2014). The primary reason given by two other parents was to ensure their child/ren had a good start. Rebecca was one of these parents; she stated she enrolled her son because “for his best interest, he needed it” (Rebecca, Parent Interview, August 2014). One parent, Hine, enrolled her child because of the social obligation policy.

While the majority of parents interviewed would have enrolled their children in ECE regardless of this policy, this may not be the experience of some other families. Indeed, two ECE manager participants outlined that they had a lot of families come into their ECE service as a result of this legislation. Both Fiona and Debbie believed the legislation had had a huge impact on families enrolling at their service. However, they noticed that some of these families faced barriers in enrolling their children, such as cost, lack of transport, waiting lists, absence of local full immersion services that were responsive to their cultural aspirations, wariness of institutions and insufficient confidence.

5.2.2 Parents’ aspirations for their children

“I do have high hopes of university for her education is definitely important, so I will encourage her, guide her through education” (Emma, Parent Interview, July 2014).

Parents were asked to describe their aspirations for their child’s education and future. Their answers signalled that their child’s formal education was important to them. All parents wanted their children to have a good education and to pursue a career that they would enjoy. David’s comment was common amongst the participants: “obviously I want a good education for them” (David, Parent Interview, June 2014).

Parents’ short term desires for their children included attending an ECE programme that would provide them with a “good start”, social activities and social skills, reading and maths development.

High educational aspirations were expressed by parents in regard to their long term hopes for their children. Typical responses were that they wanted their children to enjoy school and to attend tertiary education or training.

Three parents were anticipating a better future for their children than they had experienced. Arini contrasted her own schooling experiences with what she wanted for her children. “I really want them to stay in school . . . because I regret myself not carrying on with education. It’s very important to have an education” (Arini, Parent Interview, June 2014).

Rebecca referred to her tough upbringing stating,

[My] home life and upbringing wasn’t good for me so education and all that wasn’t really focussed on ... I hope my children get total opposite (Rebecca, Parent Interview, August 2014).

In wanting home life to be different for her children, Rebecca expressed the desire to look after her children as much as she could. As such, she was torn about placing a child in childcare because to her it meant that she was not doing her job as a mum.

5.2.3 Beneficiaries’ knowledge and impact of the ECE social obligation

The government Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS) on welfare reforms states that “evidence suggests that children of beneficiary parents are likely to have lower ECE participation rates” (The Treasury, 2012, p. 28). This was not the case for my sample of parents.

Of the eight beneficiary parent participants, six already had their children enrolled in childcare prior to the introduction of this policy. One parent, Hine, had withdrawn her child from an ECE service (because both she and her child did not feel comfortable there), when she received a letter about the ECE social obligation. Additionally, one other parent, Arini, enrolled her children in ECE this year (2014) after the obligation had been introduced. Arini stated, however, that she enrolled her children out of her own choice; she did not recall receiving a letter informing her that she was obliged to.

Information I obtained through the Official Information Act stated that “(a)ll beneficiaries received a letter prior to the Welfare Reform changes on 15 July 2013. For beneficiaries with children, this letter outlined the social obligations that they are expected to meet, including ensuring their children are ... enrolled in Early Childhood Education” (D. Power, personal communication, October 3, 2014).

Nevertheless, two out of the eight parent participants specified that they were not even aware of the ECE social obligation; they believed they only heard about it through this research project. Three other parents also seemed unsure about whether they had been aware of it.

Of significance is that all these parents chose to enrol their children in an ECE service initially through their own choice. The only parent who was directly impacted by the passing of this legislation in terms of having to enrol her child, was Hine, who felt pressured to find a centre that was available, accessible and appropriate for her son after his first centre had failed to meet her family’s needs. Those who had already enrolled their children, and were unaware of the obligation were not knowingly affected by the introduction of this legislation.

Nevertheless, all these parents are implicitly impacted by this legislation. This policy implies that authorities have little faith in beneficiary parents’ ability to provide good educational experiences and care for their own child/ren. Obligations also potentially undermine parents’ choice to educate their children at home because of their values and beliefs around language, religion, environmental concerns and food. Rebecca and Dean both spoke of the lack of choice they felt:

. . . it feels like you don’t have much control, or you don’t have any, yeah you do, you gotta do what they say or else sort of feeling, you know, so it makes you feel like you’ve got no choice whether you wanted to home school them, teach them yourself you know, teach, even if you wanted them to stay home, teach them there, your language, your religion, your, you know, you won’t have a choice because you have to send them to day care where someone else will teach them what they know (Rebecca, Parent Interview, August 2014).

Dad Dean and his wife are both unemployed. Dean related that as a family they chose for his wife to look for work, and for Dean to be the primary caregiver for their child. However, he felt that WINZ viewed this as unacceptable, and that pressure was put on him, as the man, to be the breadwinner:

I wanted to be a stay at home dad. I feel very strongly about developing his skills for later on in life, but WINZ doesn't want me to do that, because I am a man, and men don't do that. And so I had to go find work ... It's a bit sexist (Dean, Parent Interview, June 2014).

The letter sent to beneficiaries outlining their ECE obligations states that children must be enrolled and attending “from the age of three until they start school” (D. Power, personal communication, October 3, 2014). Emma, although her child was already enrolled, expressed surprise that there was no forewarning about the need to enrol children. She thought a letter prior to children turning three would enable parents to look for a centre before they were obligated. On the other hand, Hine spoke of the stress it placed on the whole family as she felt pressured to rush to find a centre immediately since her child was already three.

5.2.4 Whānau experiences discussion

Whānau participants expressed high educational aspirations for their children and contrary to perception, most had enrolled their children without the need for mandatory legislation. ECE manager participants noted that families who were not enrolled in ECE were likely to face obstacles to engagement. Both parent and ECE manager participants expressed concern that ECE social obligations have removed choice for beneficiary families.

5.3 Experiences with WINZ

Because they're controlling your money, they control your life (Rebecca, Parent Interview, August 2014).

5.3.1 Perceptions of treatment

Treatment and communication from WINZ deeply affects beneficiaries' lives. Participants shared mixed experiences and views of their interactions with WINZ. Seven out of eight expressed negative perceptions of WINZ. One of these parent

participants articulated both positive and negative experiences. On the other hand only one participant, Arini, was very positive about her experiences.

Intimidating, judgemental, bullying with stand-over tactics and unprofessional were the negative attributes ascribed to some WINZ staff by participants. David exclaimed that WINZ staff are not helpful, “you are just another number to them” (David, Parent Interview, June 2014). Participants were asked if all staff treated them the same; their reply was “no”. Participants labelled some staff as helpful, and others they noted were unsupportive. Parent participants Kelly and Jo, and childcare team leader participant Debbie, described how the result of a visit to WINZ can be based entirely on the person you see. As such, participants perceived a lack of consistency and professionalism from staff. Kelly described different treatments from different case workers and her trepidation about being allocated some WINZ staff members:

Kelly: [The case worker said] “Well you’re not getting it [payment for a driver’s licence] and it’s my discretion, so no”. I went back two days later to somebody else who turned around and signed the paper for me to go and get [my driver’s licence] exactly what, you know, like that. So that just depends on who you see.

Researcher: How do you feel when you are waiting and you are looking to see which person you’re going to get today?

Kelly: Yeah that’s what we do, yeah and we’re going “hope we don’t get her, oh please don’t give us her, oh hope she doesn’t give us him either”, that’s how we are when we used to go there, which is why we try and not even go there, yeah. (Kelly, Parent Interview, August 2014).

WINZ staff are alleged to undervalue welfare recipients’ worth by addressing them in a different manner from how they would address others. Debbie observed this when she attended WINZ appointments with people to act as their advocate:

Debbie: And like in all organisations some workers are great and others are just rude and arrogant. I’ve sat beside a woman in there, a couple of times, and they’ll go “oh I hope I don’t get him”, this isn’t a gender thing

by the way, “he is just shocking” and when I’m with them, no problem. So I’m an advocate, it’s not about me. Soon as an advocate [is present, it is] totally different.

Researcher: The WINZ worker treats the client differently?

Debbie: I’ve seen that so many times, it’s not right. That is saying the person has no worth unless someone else goes along that looks like they’re a bit more whatever what I look like (Debbie, Childcare team leader Interview, July 2014).

Parent participants also conveyed that dealing with WINZ causes them to feel nervous and ashamed. “It’s just, it feels really, you’re being really judged” (Emma, Parent Interview, July 2014). Emma described how a WINZ staff member had a negative perception about what she deserved and made her cry when she made a house request. She was moving city so she could undertake study and the rental price of homes in her new location were more costly. However, her WINZ worker did not understand her request as he had not read her papers thoroughly. This is how she explained her experience: “I actually cried because he said to me why do you want a house this expensive and why would we give you this much money, no that’s just ridiculous” (Emma, Parent Interview, July 2014). After the WINZ worker said this, Emma had to justify her case and explain that she was moving location. Her request was then deemed acceptable.

Six parents described how administration errors by WINZ staff had affected them. Errors included families being underpaid, having their benefits cut, and personal data being misplaced. Widowed mum Jo described how when a WINZ staff member could not find the details of one of her children on their records, the staff member acted insensitively in making her get her late partner’s death certificate. If the staff member had searched the correct file they would have seen that WINZ already had the information.

Many families who rely on receiving a benefit struggle to pay their bills. However, if they do not know what to ask WINZ and what they are entitled to, they can often miss out on receiving all their entitlements. Kelly, Debbie and Jo all stated that WINZ did not let beneficiaries know their entitlements.

5.3.2 *Work expectations*

They're not looking personal, you know, individual stories, they're just saying let's get these mothers back to work. (Emma, Parent Interview, July 2014).

ECE social obligations will “help parents get ready for work” (Ministry of Education, 2013). The *New Benefit Categories* fact sheet states that “those with children under five are expected to prepare for work, and may be asked to do specific work preparation activities” (Work and Income New Zealand, 2013b). However, there was general consensus from the participants of this study that they were constantly being pushed to find paid work even while their children were very young and irrespective of the needs of the child.

Jo had stopped working because two of her children had serious illnesses. Her youngest child was born prematurely and is sometimes hospitalised because of bone infections. Another of her children has had leukaemia. Jo felt that WINZ still expected her to work even though her youngest was only six months old at the time:

He was like six months, yeah, and they were wanting me to go back to work and stuff, or look for part time job or course they said. Yeah, I's like ‘Really!’ Yeah, cause I's like, I haven't been on the benefit for years and years. Yeah it was a bit of a shock (Jo, Parent Interview, August 2014).

Similarly, Rebecca had a three year-old child with high needs when she felt pressured to start looking for employment. She tried to work, but found her son did not cope well with the change in his routine. She explained that she needed to conserve her strength to be a mum, rather than using all her energy in paid work:

. . . but then when I had my boy, that's when they started pushing, WINZ started pushing me to, if I could get more hours for him, to start looking at my future . . . but first and foremost because my son has just been diagnosed with autism I have to look after him first (Rebecca, Parent Interview, August 2014).

Kelly perceived that she and her husband were always being pressured. She undertook volunteer work which resulted in her obtaining a cleaning job. However, her husband was still being pressed to get a job. “Even though I ended up with a part time job, WINZ was still harassing Dad to carry on with job seekers and I said ‘Well he can’t look for a job because I’m at work and I don’t get home till 6.30 at night so I need him home’” (Kelly, Parent Interview, August 2014).

Low pay can be a disincentive to taking on paid employment. However, for some families paid employment is not just about the money. Much to their relief, Kelly and her husband have recently come off the benefit. Nowadays though, they perceive that they have less money in their pocket each week than when they were receiving the benefit. They remark that they are better off having less money as they do not want to have to be involved with WINZ. “Yeah, less money, yeah works out less. But I think it’s, in the long run we would rather get away from WINZ cause it’s too much of a headache” (Kelly, Parent Interview, August 2014).

While some parents’ treatment from WINZ did not appear to take into account their individual family’s needs, one parent felt her needs and time commitment to her son were eventually taken into account in regards to work expectations:

Because I had kicked up such a big stink about the enforcement of the kindy, my own case manager felt it fit that I don’t need to look for work because of Daniel’s ongoing CDC [Child Development Centre] visits (Hine, Parent Interview, July 2014).

Parents are being pressured to find a job, but expressed frustration with the assumption that there are jobs available. Rebecca summed up this feeling:

It’s like, go to work, like there’s jobs everywhere when there’s not. It’s like far out, and then when you don’t go to work because you’ve just been trying to find work, they push you, you know put it back on you like you haven’t done nothing, because you’re not working (Rebecca, Parent Interview, August 2014).

Making a social obligation policy does not provide jobs (Emma, Parent Interview, July 2014). This feeling was reiterated by Kelly who highlighted how hard it is to find a job with changes in the job market:

“We’ve got no experience in anything else, we don’t have any certificates”...“there are no jobs out there” (Kelly, Parent Interview, August 2014).

While most parents feel pressured and consider work expectations do not take into account individual circumstances, one parent, Arini, feels empowered, positive and excited about returning to work:

Because I have been wanting to work for a long time, it’s just hard to get out of that motherhood sometimes. Oh not so hard to get out of it, just the choices you make, you know the paths you take too, beginning it [training for work] you don’t know which way to go sometimes, you need someone to steer you in the right direction ... I think people need a lot of comfort to get to where they want to get to ... That’s all I needed was the encouragement and that positive, just that positivity you know, you can do it (Arini, Parent Interview, June 2014).

Of note in this example is the support and encouragement from her family in helping Arini to choose to attend a training for work course. The training course she attended was highly motivational and supportive. These factors appear to have contributed to the empowerment she feels toward job seeking.

Parent participants also identified the added difficulty of finding a job where the pay was reasonable, covered the extra costs such as childcare, and made working “worthwhile”:

“It kinda deceives the point of having him in daycare if we are spending all our wages on more daycare” (David, Parent Interview, June 2014).

Lack of confidence is a further hindrance for some mothers to enter the workforce. They require help and support to assist them to overcome this:

Because I've been mother for how many years now, so I've, I need to learn to get my confidence back, and I have to probably do a motivation course and get all that back, because you tend to lose yourself when you come into motherhood aye, you forget who you are and that's what, you know that's what I think I'm, I think I need so I can't just go straight into work, or go straight to a course and just do this whole big, do a whole new scene, like I've always been like that, when I haven't. You know I've been at home, cooking, cleaning, bottles, nappies, yeah. So I think I'll have to, before I even think of work I have to do a confidence, you know, get that self-confidence back" (Rebecca, Parent Interview, August 2014).

5.3.3 Sanctions

Beneficiaries face possible sanctions (financial penalties) if they failure to comply with social obligations. Most participants in my research had received threats of sanctions, and two had had their benefits cut in error. While these sanctions were related to work expectations and not ECE social obligations, the stories paint a picture of the fear of sanctions and how errors affect a family's ability to provide for their children.

The feeling that WINZ has control over family life through the threat of sanctions is described here by Rebecca:

"Because what would they do, stop your benefit with, you know, things that, the main thing that keeps you surviving, aye and that's what it feels, it feels like you have to cause you have no choice, they've got control over that" (Rebecca, Parent Interview, August 2014).

Three parent participants discussed their experiences with sanctions. Rebecca arranged for family to care for her children so she could undertake seasonal work out of town. She said she informed WINZ of her intentions. However, WINZ threatened to cut her benefit after she did not attend an appointment during this time. She was told by WINZ that even though she was working an hour and a half's drive away she should have still made time to attend an appointment that WINZ scheduled for her in her home city:

They sent me out a letter saying my benefit's going to get reduced fifty percent. And I's like fifty percent woo I'm not going to get my rent done, my food, nothing, anything, so I rushed back and I had to go to, and I have to, I haven't been able to relax since, because getting that letter is like sucks you have to be here for it, you know ... man if they reduce my benefit by fifty percent me and my kids are stuffed (Rebecca, Parent Interview, August 2014).

This experience also impacted on Rebecca emotionally:

When I got back I just felt, stressed, frustrated, pressured all that. At the same time I have to be straight to look after my kids and I'm like strung out (Rebecca, Parent Interview, August 2014).

It seems ironic that Rebecca secured some seasonal work for herself, but because she was obliged to attend WINZ appointments she felt forced to give up the job and return to her home city. The additional stress this placed on her was not beneficial for her or her children's well-being.

Dean and David both relayed how WINZ seemed to have gaps in their data on clients which caused errors and contradictions. Dean explained how he had his benefit cut off in error. He attended a course (that WINZ told him to do) and because he was attending the course he didn't attend an additional appointment WINZ made for him:

“It was quite hard, yeah I had to, cause we couldn't really afford food, I had to send my partner — my wife and my son out of the house to her Dad's place so that they could get fed. Because we didn't have enough money for food” (Dean, Parent Interview, June 2014).

David had a similar experience. He received a letter threatening to cut his benefit because he did not attend a seminar. The reason he had not attended it was because he was attending another course that WINZ had sent him to. David also related how previously he had had his benefit cut when his partner was in hospital, even though he had given WINZ a letter informing them of their family circumstances.

Childcare team leader participant, Debbie, witnessed families struggling to cope after their benefit had been reduced. These reductions were not related specifically to ECE social obligations, but were for other reasons:

A number of them were cut and they had to survive on a half benefit. Well you can hardly survive on a benefit, let alone a half benefit and who misses out? I believe the children miss out (Debbie, Childcare team leader Interview, July 2014).

5.3.4 WINZ discussion

These findings suggest that treatment and communication from WINZ in regard to ECE obligations need to be explored in the context of beneficiaries' previous experience with WINZ staff. As participants' stories have demonstrated, there is often already wariness, nervousness and a lack of confidence that beneficiaries feel towards WINZ staff. This in turn raises questions about how supportive WINZ staff will be in dealing with a family in regard to their ECE social obligations.

ECE social obligations state that a parent must take "all reasonable steps" to enrol a child in ECE. However, it is uncertain whether inconsistent decisions will be made by case workers in regard to what constitutes "all reasonable steps". The experiences of participants in this study illustrate that often WINZ staff do not take individual circumstances into consideration, that some information is not taken into account in decisions, and that sanctions are sometimes actioned in error.

Information gained from my Official Information Act request states that "a beneficiary is considered to be taking all reasonable steps to meet their obligations if they have their child's name on the waiting list" (D. Power, personal communication, October 3, 2014). Yet the letter that beneficiaries receive decrees that parents need to "take reasonable steps" to ensure children are "enrolled and attending" (D. Power, personal communication, October 3, 2014). This letter has no definition of what reasonable steps are and makes no mention that being on a waiting list fulfils such requirements. Therefore, beneficiaries appear to be unaware of this option.

Sanctions and the stress of worrying about sanctions are unhealthy for a family's well-being. Participants' stories illustrate how stress affects the energy a parent has to give their children and therefore can affect their relationship with them. Furthermore, sanctions will affect parents' ability to provide the necessities of life for their families.

5.4 Barriers

This section discusses barriers that participant families encounter and includes a case study highlighting the impact that this policy has had on one family.

Requiring ECE attendance assumes that there are culturally appropriate, accessible services available. However, parents and ECE manager representatives all spoke of barriers that whānau face in regards to enrolling children in early childhood programmes. Obligatory legislation does not afford provision to support families through these barriers. A similar view is portrayed in a letter to the Select Committee by Wells on behalf of the New Zealand Kindergarten Incorporated which states "making ECE compulsory for children age three and over whose parents are receiving a benefit will not address the underlying barriers which prevent families from choosing to participate in early childhood education" (Wells, 2012).

In their New Zealand research on ECE participation, Mitchell et al. (2013) report that ECE providers observe "that many families faced multiple barriers" (p. 6). Main barriers that families face are structural barriers, such as cost, high waiting lists and lack of transport; accessibility barriers, such as lack of provision to meet family's needs in terms of hours, location and cultural values; and personal barriers, such as shyness, confidence and past negative educational experiences (Mitchell et al., 2013). Barriers that my participants identify with correspond with this literature. An additional barrier identified is the disjunction between Ministry of Education policy and Ministry of Social Development policy. Participants observed that WINZ did not have adequate information or advice to help them make informed choices about ECE.

In selecting participants for this study, it was noticeable that some families face other pressing priorities and multiple challenges. Two potential participants had

to withdraw because their children were hospitalised. One mum had started a new job, but as a result of her child's special needs she had to resign and was facing too many stresses in her family's life to proceed with an interview. It is likely that these challenges could also affect the family's ability to participate in ECE.

5.4.1 Structural barriers

5.4.1.1 Cost

Well you know the government want us to put the kids in there and stuff which is fine, but where's the help [with costs]? (David, Parent Interview, June 2014).

If I had the choice and the money, and you know I will take my kids somewhere where they will get the best (Rebecca, Parent Interview, August 2014).

The cost of ECE limits a parent's choice of where their child can attend. David suggested he had to send his children where he could afford to pay the fees, rather than where he wanted to send them. Five parent participants mentioned cost being a difficulty and limiting their choice of ECE centre. Arini had enrolled her daughter at an ECE service previously, but had found it too hard to keep up with the fees. The cost had caused her to discontinue taking her daughter at that time.

ECE manager participants' Fiona and Debbie both mentioned that they tried to keep their fees very low, but acknowledged that when a family is on a tight budget, even small fees can still be a lot for some families. Fiona's centre uses their equity funding to help subsidise fees for some families. She explains:

Because equity's about, for me, is about giving opportunities of equal participation. So it's not about buying lots of glamorous new equipment or anything like that, it's about supporting families to be able to participate (Fiona, Kindergarten head teacher Interview, August 2014).

5.4.1.2 Transport

Cause we don't have any car transport, so we just, cause we'd need to drop him off at kindy every day, we just literally like went up five blocks and just a grid pattern all the way down, back to our house and so then we

walked past one and we're like ok then we go in here and apply and see if there's any spaces available (Dean, Parent Interview, June 2014).

Having to find a service within walking distance can be a problem if there are no suitable services in a family's locality. ECE manager participants Debbie and Fiona both mentioned the lack of transportation that some families face. Debbie's centre provides a van to pick up those children who need transportation to the service:

So the parents all of a sudden were coming out of the woodwork, but then there were issues ... how were they going to get their children there? So even if they enrolled they would only be there a short time and then they wouldn't be there. And so we realised we had to put on transport" (Debbie, Childcare team leader Interview, July 2014).

Debbie was asked whether she found that she could still have good engagement and communication with families if their children were being transported to the centre. She explained there are positives and negatives in providing a van service:

It has a definite downside. It's much better to have that contact into the centre. But what we would do, we would, the van driver started to get to know the parents and the staff person that was going with the van would do some of the communication about the child. Not ideal, but some of those parents they were only doing it because they were scared their benefits were going to be cut and they were just very nervous about the whole engagement. (Debbie, Childcare team leader Interview, July 2014).

Fiona was aware that some families were unable to attend because of the distance, while other families walk a long distance to attend her centre. She noted that flexibility is important. Her kindergarten has changed the structure of their hours so that now families can opt for three longer days rather than five short days. They then do not have to walk every day.

Other ways this kindergarten supports families in this area is through encouraging their community to help each other. This is done both through donations of gumboots and clothing received from the community being passed on to families

to wear when walking in wet weather. Encouraging families to establish relationships with each other also enables them to help each other:

“In building relationships with families we also support them building relationships with each other so we’ve got some families that have got transport saying hey I’ll pick your children up” (Fiona, Kindergarten head teacher Interview, Aug 2014).

Some families face a multitude of barriers. An ECE service may be able to meet a family’s need in one area, but not necessarily another area. Arini attends a training-for-work course and wanted to find a place that could take both her children. She had hoped to access a place that could transport her children as well; however, when she found a place that provided transport, she discovered they had no spaces for her youngest child.

5.4.1.3 *Waiting lists*

I literally applied for, when he was of legal age to actually go into a kindy, I applied for everywhere, that was the only place that had space (Dean, Parent Interview, June 2014).

Two parents identified waiting lists as a barrier to accessing ECE. They were not able to enrol their children in their first choice of service because there were no spaces available. Arini had the added limitation of finding a service that was able to take both her children (one of which was under three), as she wanted to keep them together.

The social obligation policy means that parents feel pressured to have their children start at a service straight away. Debbie observed that “parents that wanted childcare wanted it now; they’re not good to be on a waiting list” (Debbie, Childcare team leader Interview, July 2014). This was something that kindergarten head teacher participant Fiona has also noticed in what she referred to as a demand for here-and-now enrolments. She does not like to turn families away who have been told they have to enrol. So she has had to get quite creative with her roll to legally fit all the children.

As previously discussed, putting a child's name on a waiting list meets the government obligation for parents to take 'all reasonable steps'. However, as a result of WINZ communication and the pressure that families perceive, the policy has been interpreted by families as meaning their child must be enrolled and attending, not just on a waiting list.

5.4.2 Accessibility barriers

Commenting in *Left Further Behind: How Policies Fail the Poorest Children in New Zealand*, Ritchie and Johnson (2011) write "opportunities for pre-school children to attend a local early childhood education centre are not evenly distributed throughout New Zealand" (p. 168).

5.4.2.1 Family values

Some families struggle to access an ECE service that is accommodating and compatible with their own family values and culture and that provides the hours they need. Others hold the view that they should be able to choose whether or not to enrol their child, as they would prefer to look after them at home.

I would rather have them home and teach them my own teachings and I would want them to grow up knowing that I have taught them what they know, not somebody else (Rebecca, Parent Interview, August 2014).

Parent Emma was fortunate to find a centre that was aligned with her values and needs:

I went there, had a look and you just, I just felt the community feel to it so I's like I like this ... There's a wide range of ethnicities and I chose it for reasons because she needs to be around different cultures I think, cause it's important, it's the reality of New Zealand now (Emma, Parent Interview, July 2014).

While for other families the lack of locally available culturally appropriate ECE services creates a barrier to participation. Debbie was aware of parents who had been told their child had to attend an ECE service; these parents specified they wanted their children to attend a total immersion te reo Māori centre as they were

going to attend a total immersion primary school. However, there were no centres in their area to accommodate them.

Hine describes feeling uneasy about food and discipline procedures during her visit to a centre which made it feel culturally unresponsive:

Things just sort of sinking in for you, you kind of look around a bit more, like wow, there's not really that many cultures in this kindy. You know that kind of, their teaching method kind of reduced the number of kids that can go there (Hine, Parent Interview, July 2014).

5.4.2.2 Required hours

Parent participants discussed the need to find an ECE service that provided the hours they required for their children. Arini had found casual work; however, it mostly involved night-time shifts. She said, "Sometimes it's hard to find a sitter, being mainly night-time."

Fiona explained how her kindergarten had changed its hours to meet family needs. The hours were changed partly to meet transport needs as discussed earlier, but also largely in response to the new work obligations for beneficiaries. She described how they extended their hours as "there was issues for them [parents] racing back here to pick up their children" (Fiona, Kindergarten head teacher Interview, august 2014).

5.4.3 Personal barriers

Some parents have a fear or distrust around enrolling their child because of past experience or concern about the unknown. Families, who are already struggling just to survive, may not necessarily have the energy to have ECE on their radar. Personal barriers include lack of confidence, negative perceptions and lack of knowledge of how the system works.

5.4.3.1 Confidence

Parents expressed a lack of confidence and a nervousness about enrolling their children because ECE was unfamiliar territory for them, and because of the protectiveness they felt for their child. Mum Jo was nervous about her son attending childcare because of his health complications. Kelly explained that she

was reluctant to enrol her twins, but through the help and support of her children's ECE service she was able to make the transition:

They supported me the whole way with them and yeah I started doing voluntary work in the kitchen, that way they were just on the other side of me, you know. And then slowly I made my way in the hall, to garage sales helping and you know, I just loved helping out, so I just kept coming back and then I started relieving for the cleaners when they couldn't come in, and the kitchen lady when she couldn't come in ... The cleaning came available they told me to put an application in, so I did, yeah. Which made it easy cause I was still with my boys and they were still getting an education I know I needed them to have and I was back to work (Kelly, Parent Interview, August 2014).

Kindergarten head teacher participant Fiona also reiterated the need to assist families through the process of enrolling their child:

The families that are coming because of the policy, they have different needs and different ways of supporting them and I guess we've, we talk about it a lot. Sort of very shy at the gate, or head down or, just not sure what they're asking for or anything, so. You just have a different approach for each person (Fiona, Kindergarten head teacher Interview, August 2014).

Furthermore, parents may be reluctant to bring their children to an ECE service because of their perceptions of what might be expected of them, and what they need to provide. Fiona is an advocate for creating a partnership with families, empowering parents and creating a sense of belonging. She shared the following example:

One of the mums had learnt to do those rubber band plaits that are all the things lately and her daughter showed me and I said 'wow your mum's so skilled' and her mum said 'oh do you think I've got skills?' Yes the children would love to just watch you so yeah she came in and plaited away. She's like I didn't think I knew anything. Look at what you're doing it is amazing. And then she went on to plait the poi, the leads for the poi

for us, so you know (Fiona, Kindergarten head teacher Interview, August 2014).

To overcome confidence barriers parents need a welcoming and supportive environment. For some this involves having someone support them through the visiting and enrolment stage. Both Fiona and Debbie have adapted the way they greet new families and they now allow a greater amount of time for this process.

5.4.3.2 Perceptions

As stated above, for some families ECE is unknown territory and past experiences and unfamiliarity have resulted in negative perceptions. Debbie noted that some families she had contact with were very distrustful of outside institutions:

Ok they are all expected to be engaged in ECE, but they, you know people are nervous about that. They are nervous of statutory invasion and what I mean by that is that there will be something and CYFs will be involved. Or there'll be something and they feel like they'll lose power; it's like a fear in some of them. And not just because they are guilty of something, but they're on high alert, something can happen, like a child will knock it's head at home and the parent, some parents are paranoid that CYFs are going to be involved, a bit of a misconception out there. So that is a hidden implication in the whole engagement of ECE in poorer communities (Debbie, Childcare team leader Interview, July 2014).

The kindergarten head teacher also recognised the significance of parents' own backgrounds and experiences, noting, "Their experience of school and their non-experience of early childhood" are barriers (Fiona, Kindergarten head teacher Interview, August 2014). She put emphasis on the need for an informal approach to communicating and engaging with families, enabling them to experience the ECE service as different from perhaps their negative perceptions.

Parents who are apprehensive about their children attending ECE need to have a supportive environment to aid them through the transition process. Enforcing participation without support could have a negative impact on a child. Debbie emphasised "the way a parent feels about their child going into ECE has a huge

effect on how the child enters and how they feel” (Debbie, Childcare team leader Interview, July 2014).

5.4.3.3 *Knowing how the system works*

Mitchell et al. (2013) found “not knowing what was available” was frequently listed as an obstacle for families. This was also echoed in my study. Considering this legislation is enforced through WINZ, there was an expectation from parents that WINZ would be able to provide them with information and support their families through the ECE enrolment process. However, this was not Hine’s experience when she asked WINZ for advice. Staff did not have relevant local information for her, and she felt like she was on her own trying to figure out how to find a suitable service for her children.

Some families are disadvantaged simply because they are unfamiliar with how the system works. One parent withdrew her child from a centre as it was too expensive; she stated that she was unaware of any other options. Dad Dean shared his experience of being unaccustomed to enrolment procedures:

I literally applied for, when he was of legal age to actually go into a kindy; I applied for everywhere, that was the only place that had space ... What I didn’t realise until Max was born, is most of them you have to apply before they are born because they are booked out three years in advance ... It’s like I’m thinking about maybe having a child in a year or so I better go apply and get space for my child to go into this one that I actually want them to go into (Dean, Parent Interview, June 2014).

Beneficiary parents are often transient as they may move location to gain work. Six parent participants indicated they were new to the area and therefore did not have local knowledge of ECE programmes available for their whānau.

These difficulties again highlight parents’ need for information and support to overcome barriers to participation. A community-based service that three participants’ children attended provided an example of such support (see case study on page 87).

5.4.4 Legislation barriers - Frequent absence rule

The Ministry of Education (2014) frequent absence rule states “(a) child’s attendance must match their enrolment agreement for at least half (i.e. 50 per cent or more) of each calendar month”. If a child’s absence pattern continues “(f)unding for absences in the fourth month must not be claimed and the enrolment agreement must be changed to match the child's attendance.”

This rule highlights inconsistencies between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Development. Fiona described the tension between promoting participation and then wrangling with the Ministry of Education frequent absence rule which works against participation. She explained how an ECE Participation Project was contracted by the Ministry of Education to identify local families who were not participating in ECE and support them to find and enrol in a programme:

... but then after four months if they haven’t been attending fifty percent on a certain day or something they’re not allowed to come on that day for six weeks. And it’s, it’s a real fuddle ... you’re paying for a participation project to bring children here, they come, but because their attendance is irregular ... they’re not allowed to come on that day for six weeks ... I tracked about five I think, cause I wanted to see what were the reasons, and was it just because they weren’t wanting to come. But they had really valid reasons you know. It could be that one of the other siblings was sick, or one had a sick grandmother with them and they couldn’t leave the house because they were the only ones there. Or there were tangis, you know, they were what I consider valid, but policy doesn’t see valid (Fiona, Kindergarten head teacher Interview, August 2014).

5.4.5 A case study of Hine

Hine’s personal story highlights the barriers she faced in enrolling her children in ECE. It illustrates the impacts that this policy has had on her and her children. Hine’s experiences demonstrate the need for support to enable parents to find a service, and the need for culturally responsive teachers and services.

Hine is a single Mum with three children; Hunter is 15 years, Daniel is four years and her youngest, Liam, is three years old. She recently moved to a new city and enrolled her middle son, Daniel, at an ECE centre, hoping to meet his social needs.

Daniel struggled to settle at this centre and cried a lot. Hine said he sometimes would almost make himself sick so he would not have to go. Hine felt that her son did not fit in and the staff just left him to cry. She described how the staff expected her to drop her son off and leave straight away. She says it was

a kindly that thinks it's good to drop and gap while your kids screaming, you know to run away while your kids screaming and listen on the other side of the fence.

This was something she was clearly not comfortable with. She appeared to feel like an outsider that did not belong and referred to it as a “mean” place. Hine also struggled with the communication at this centre. She explained to the centre manager that she would be late paying her account as WINZ had cut her benefit in error. However, when she went to take Daniel there a few days later the centre handed her a letter which said that because of her unpaid account, Daniel was suspended. The anger and frustration she felt for the centre boiled to the surface and she withdrew him.

She then received a letter from WINZ that informed her Daniel had to be enrolled at an ECE service. At the bottom of the letter it said there was a list of information on centres attached; however, this information was not there.

She went to WINZ and asked where the information was. She voiced her frustration, exclaiming,

Why do we have to be forced to do this? ... You don't care individually about my son, because he is not your son. The thing is, is that, it could be holding my son back from learning, because I'm forced to put him in somewhere, I don't know where to go.

Hine found WINZ unhelpful and relays how they did not have information on ECE services in her neighbourhood:

I's like come on, is there none on my side of the tracks. She goes yes, but I can't find the list for that. I's like well how many other people have enquired about this letter. Oh quite a lot. Well then you would think that you would have everything you need for it. That was the other setback about it, is the information you needed to go along with all these kindys and you know with the form you got sent out and all that, they don't even have any of that stuff available if you needed it.

After the previous ECE experience Hine was quite stressed trying to find a service that Daniel would be happy at. The wording on the WINZ letter led her to believe there was urgency to find a place. This impacted on the whole family. Hunter, aged 15, played up and missed out on school experiences as Hine was too pre-occupied to organise things for him. Hine even took Hunter out of school to get him to help her find childcare for the younger boys.

She did find a place where she felt welcomed. She described how when she visited, the teacher gave her a hug:

We were just 'Hi, how are you?' and she gave me a hug. And I was like wow ... So the feeling I got from there straight away was I really like this place. You know it just made me feel comfortable, made my son feel so comfortable.

Hine had a bit of a cry and told the teacher how she hated having to enrol her son. The teacher was welcoming and told Hine that she was welcome to stay at the centre as long as she liked. Now as Hine talks about the new centre you can sense the ownership and belonging she feels for the place. She describes how it is a good fit for her family

Just the communication from the teachers from the one they're at now, yeah, just to me suited, it was like a big family, not just like I'm here and you're there.

5.4.6 Barriers discussion

You know it's easy to say things, but it's not so easy to do it (Hine, Parent Interview, July 2014).

There are many barriers that impede a family's ability to access high quality suitable ECE for their children. The New Zealand Government funded the ECE Participation Programme in 2011, which has been successful in helping many families access ECE. The various participation initiatives seek to provide support for low-participating families during the process of finding an affordable, accessible, and appropriate quality ECE service for their children. The initiatives also include being responsive to other family needs. As such, these programmes recognise that a family's basic needs must be met before they are in a position to engage with education. An evaluation of the programme found that for one initiative, the Engaging Priority Families (EPF) initiative, "providers often helped families address basic needs for health, housing, and income support before discussing ECE (Mitchell et al., 2014, p. 9)

It is unclear therefore why obligatory legislation was needed. Legislation alone is unlikely to eradicate the barriers to participation, whereas positive support, such as the Ministry of Education's participation project, have "contributed to increases in participation" (Mitchell et al., 2014, p. 19).

Indeed parent participants who were satisfied with the ECE service their child/ren were attending had either had family encouragement or the help from a community agency to support them through the enrolment process. Such assistance appears to have supported them to overcome some of the difficulties they faced in finding appropriate ECE for their children.

The way some ECE services are organised can inhibit participation and accessibility. The challenge is for all ECE services to create an empowering, inclusive, quality programme. As well, the government needs to take responsibility to ensure there is provision of local, accessible, high quality ECE programmes for all. It can be argued that focussing on provision is likely to be more beneficial for children than placing pressure on families to enrol in programmes that may not meet their child's needs.

A re-think of rules and cohesion of policy between the MSD and the Ministry of Education would help ensure legislation does not impede participation.

5.5 ECE provision

It would appear it is not the ECE social obligation policy that is going to ensure children participate in quality ECE but rather where families enrol their children. Both New Zealand and international research demonstrate that ECE needs to be of good quality in order to be most beneficial to children (Campbell et al., 2002; Mitchell et al., 2008). Key structural aspects for the provision of a high quality ECE programme include qualified staff, low child: adult ratios, small group size, and staff professional development opportunities” (Mitchell et al., 2008, p. 8).

While this research project did not assess the quality of the centres that the participants’ children were attending there were noticeable comments between parents who were really happy with their child’s centre, and those that were not.

5.5.1 Quality (positive experiences)

The policy intention is that beneficiaries’ children will attend high quality ECE. A government Regulatory Impact Statement on welfare reforms identifies that “(p)articipation in ECE has been linked to: improved social skills and fewer behavioural problems among children, reduced risk of subsequent failure in the schooling system, alleviation of stress in family homes, improved parenting and lower levels of child abuse and injury” (The Treasury, 2012, pp. 27-28).

These benefits were also identified by family participants. Social skills and strategies for children to express their feelings and frustrations were listed by seven parents. Parents noted that these skills were also beneficial in the home environment:

Communication and behaviour the main two things, yeah he’s improved a lot so it’s, it’s made a big difference for me (Rebecca, Parent Interview, August 2014).

Attending ECE was perceived by parents to help their children to be more prepared for future education compared to their older children who had not attended ECE:

I found with my other boys, I think my ten year-old I had him in kindy and they've just, he just started so well at school, yeah and the other ones I didn't really put them into kindy or anything, and they were really shy when they got to school. They found it hard to, like communicate with the teacher and stuff like that" (Jo, Parent Interview, August 2014).

Two parents shared that their child's attendance at an ECE service had helped identify and source support for their child's special needs.

Additionally, the kindergarten head teacher participant described how ECE can provide a welcoming and empowering environment for parents too:

For some of our beneficiaries too it's empowering them to show they have value. One of the dads came in today and I's talking to him and he says I do nothing but sit and play my guitar at home really, he's a bit down. I said hey look we'd love you to come, if you feel comfortable just come and sit here and play your guitar, cause none of us have that as a strength and we had a reliever last week who played the guitar and the children loved it and you don't have to sing songs or anything, just strumming away. He says oh would you mind? Nooooo. And he, yeah he was really chuffed, you know, to think that yeah he's got value to add here" (Fiona, Kindergarten head teacher Interview, August 2014).

Lastly, the above government Regulatory Impact Statement states that ECE is shown to reduce stress in homes; however, the mandatory nature of ECE in this welfare reform has placed pressure on families which actually increased stress levels for families like Hine. Nonetheless, this statement also linked children's attendance at an ECE service with improved parenting. This was a benefit that Hine identified: "I've picked up on little things that the teachers do for the kids" (Hine, Parent Interview, July 2014). Such benefits, however, are reliant on accessibility to high quality ECE.

5.5.2 Poor quality provision

Findings have shown that some families are not able to access their first choice in service and may only be able to access a service of poor quality. Indeed, three parent participants described examples of poor quality ECE provision.

Kelly observed her son being bullied and was concerned by the lack of supervision or intervention from staff:

“I had one son, our eight year-old now, but when he was here, when we first moved here he was about one and I put him into an [ECE centre] but I didn’t like them cause I would turn up and I see kids slapping him and I was observing from a distance and there’s adults standing right there, and just totally ignoring it, so for two days I walked in to see that and that’s probably another reason why I was a bit iffy about putting the boys in after seeing that, you know. So I wasn’t happy and I pulled my son out the same week” (Kelly, Parent Interview, August 2014).

Parents’ perceptions of what they see as ‘good’ are not always the same. Two parent participants who both had children at the same ECE service illustrated this. One parent was very happy with the centre, another, David, was unhappy with the programme. He felt stuck as they chose their child’s ECE service as a basis of its accessible location; however, he perceived it as crowded, and criticised staff for insufficient supervision and interaction with children. He also had concerns in regard to the resources provided:

I don’t feel for his safety there but sometimes I look around it and think you know they [staff] are too busy talking to each other or doing other things ... I haven’t actually ever seen a book there (David, Parent Interview, June 2014).

Mum Hine and her son struggled to settle at a centre that appeared to be unresponsive to their values and cultural needs. Ritchie and Johnson (2011) suggest the Ministry of Education need to ensure culturally appropriate and accessible services are made available that meet the values of Māori and Pasifika families.

Poor quality practices are not only damaging to children’s well-being, they also create barriers and issues of trust. These types of experiences result in parents being reluctant to enrol their children. Making it an obligation for parents to enrol their child in ECE without being able to assure high quality may be putting them into a damaging environment. Certainly research shows that if an ECE service is

not of high quality it can be detrimental, or the benefits not as substantial (Mitchell et al., 2008).

5.5.3 A case study of an empowering ECE service: Nikau Childcare

The following case study provides an example of how a local empowering ECE service can be beneficial for both children and their whānau. In this service family support workers and support services enable whānau to work through barriers to participation in ECE. Additionally, families have gained a sense of belonging, well-being and worth.

Empowering ECE requires buy in and willingness from both management and staff. Management at this service has sought to ensure the service has human resources as well as accessible policies and procedures to ensure inclusivity. This service has implemented measures to support children to access ECE as well as to assist parents to provide for themselves and their families.

Nikau Childcare is part of a community centre that provides an ECE service with wraparound services such as counselling, budgeting, food bank and courses for parents. It has a kitchen at its hub with a place for people to meet and connect together.

Debbie was the team leader there until December 2013. She explains how they attuned to a new set of parents' needs when the social obligation policy was introduced:

... We had to really look at our engagement, how we engaged with parents, how we facilitated and enabled the children to be at, to transition into our childcare and to stay.

Nikau Childcare seek to meet families' complex needs in a holistic way. They already had resources in place, such as family workers, transport and food provision, prior to social obligations being introduced. However, these services were all extended to meet new whānau needs. With the desire to support families, the centre funds their family workers from any surpluses and through sponsorship.

Being community-based there is a connectedness and trust built up with local families, with many hearing about the centre through word of mouth. Rebecca found the centre to be a welcoming and helpful environment to both herself and her children. She found out about it from a friend:

She says it's you know they will look after you not only with just your children, you know other things, if you're struggling, if you need some sort of help they're there and that's what, that's what made me bring my kids and I haven't left since.

Offering a community hub allows the centre to build relationships with families. Kelly came to the service as she knew the centre's family worker:

I used to come here a lot and she'd talk and she said get the boys in and she put them on the list and said it'd be good for them. She actually encouraged me, yeah. Cause otherwise I think I might just have stayed at home with them, cause as I said I was too clung to them.

Nikau Childcare provides a place of empowerment to families in the community through offering both volunteer and paid work to parents. Kelly undertook volunteer work at the centre when her sons first started; this helped her cope with the transition. She was later employed by the centre to work in the kitchen and as a cleaner. The centre's family worker helped mum Jo find a part-time job in town and more recently Jo was employed by the centre as a van driver.

This community centre is an example of how an ECE service can provide a place where staff, children and their parents can all learn and develop together.

The final word goes to parent Rebecca who states,

I don't know what I'll do if Nikau wasn't here.

5.5.4 ECE provision discussion

The *Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)* undertook a study to identify barriers that hinder Roma and Sinti communities from accessing ECE. Their finding advocated “the need for education systems to be more inclusive and accommodating” (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2010, p. 4). In the New Zealand context, research such as Mitchell et al. (2014) and data from my participants also identify the need for responsive ECE services.

The case study of Nikau Childcare, a local, empowering ECE service, demonstrates the benefits of quality integrated services for both children and their whānau. Research by Clarkin-Phillips and Carr (2014) outline the benefits of an integrated provision approach: “(i)t was this approach that enabled parents and the wider community to avail themselves of services that supported their aspirations and broke down barriers of access” (p. 188).

5.6 Summary

Both New Zealand and international research establish that participation in quality ECE has many beneficial outcomes for young children. Participants in this study also observed positive benefits from their children’s attendance at an ECE service. However, the perceived need to obligate beneficiaries to enrol their children is worthy of debate.

The mandatory nature of welfare reforms has been disempowering for some families. Obligations undermine a parent’s right to choose whether or not their child will attend ECE and when it is the appropriate time to enrol their children. ECE team leader Debbie observed that options, such as choosing to have their children cared for by whānau, have been taken away from these parents. Parents also conveyed that they are limited in the choice of service their child can attend as a result of the lack of spaces available.

Participant data from this project as well as other New Zealand research indicate “every family wants their children to ‘live well’ and to be educated” (Mitchell et

al., 2014, p. 89). While parents want the best for their children, sometimes they face obstacles that inhibit access to ECE.

Barriers that impede participation in ECE include structural, accessibility and personal barriers. Families facing barriers often require support from either family and friends or a community agency to help them engage in ECE. A response to my Official Information Act request states that when a beneficiary parent requires assistance, WINZ “proactively work with them [beneficiaries] and provide information to help them enrol their children in health and education services in their area” (D. Power, personal communication, October 3, 2014). However, this study found that some parents, such as Hine, encountered a lack of local ECE information and help when she went to WINZ for support. A majority of participants shared negative experiences of their encounters with WINZ and spoke of the lack of consistency, support and professionalism from staff.

WINZ do not appear to be equipped to inform and support whānau to locate appropriate ECE. Conversely, the Ministry of Education’s Participation Programme has reported successful results in increasing participation through working alongside families to address obstacles. “Reducing barriers of cost, location and unresponsiveness within services (as the Participation Programme initiatives do) needs to be a common goal across the ECE sector, as these are key enablers for priority families to engage in ECE” (Mitchell et al., 2014, p. 19).

In order to overcome obstacles families face, there needs to be unity between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Development policy and initiatives. As well as addressing the above barriers examination of rules and legislation need to ensure consistency. At present rules such as the frequent absence rule work against participation.

Alongside the impact of barriers to participation data in this study also highlighted the impact of sanctions. The frequency of WINZ clerical errors reported by participants opens up the possibility for beneficiaries to face unwarranted sanctions. Indeed, an international report examining the impact of sanctions on lone parents “found variations in the commitment and capacity of front line staff” (Finn & Casebourne, 2012, p. 4). Additionally, it pointed to “high rates of

administrative error with evidence that sanctions are often also imposed on service users who do not understand programme rules or who have good cause for their failure to comply” (Finn & Casebourne, 2012, p. 3).

While the response to my Official Information Act request identified that as at June 2014 no beneficiaries had been sanctioned as a result of ECE social obligations (D. Power, personal communication, October 3, 2014), this does not remove the stress that families face from the perceived threat of sanctions. While the motivation of obligatory ECE is espoused as being beneficial for children, sanctions have the opposite effect. Wynd (2013) contends that “The sanctions regime puts children’s needs in second place behind the ideologically driven desire to move sole parents (and other beneficiaries and their partners) into paid work” (p. 15).

Lastly, and significantly, access and monitoring of local affordable and appropriate high quality ECE programmes is integral to increasing participation.

Clarkin-Phillips and Carr (2014) outline the benefits of integrated services where opportunities are *available, inviting* and *personalising*; thereby affording opportunities for family engagement. Holistic community services, such as Nikau Childcare in this study, demonstrate the benefits of quality integrated ECE services not only for the child, but also for the wider whānau.

Alongside ensuring adequate provision stands the crucial element of monitoring that ECE provided is of high quality. Participant stories and newspaper articles, such as *‘Horror’ Tales at Preschools* (Tait, 2013, 10 October), indicate that some services in New Zealand do not meet this standard and therefore could be detrimental to young children. In *Accessibility of Early Childhood Education and Care: A State of Affairs*, Vandebroek and Lazzari (2014) identify the need for quality monitoring “to prevent children from disadvantaged backgrounds being more often found in poor quality services” (p. 332).

The introduction of ECE social obligation legislation has put pressure and stress on families but has not facilitated parents to overcome such barriers or addressed the provision and monitoring of accessible high quality ECE.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the impacts of ECE social obligations on affected whānau in conjunction with analysing the discourses underpinning these obligations.

A review of literature identified the background context and formation of the Social Security (Benefit Categories and Work Focus) Amendment Bill. The thesis aimed to gain understanding into the perceived impacts of this policy, and accordingly sought to hear the voices of people affected. Participants' stories gave insight into their perceptions of ECE obligations, their experiences with Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) which administers the policy, and their involvement with ECE services. Further to this a policy-as-discourse analysis examined the dominant discourses embedded in the ECE social obligation policy reform.

In this final chapter I discuss the key findings. I contend that the three interrelated dominant discourses underpinning this policy, economic rationalisation, the positioning of beneficiaries as job seekers, and the positioning of children as vulnerable, have failed to provide for children's rights. The problem with policy framed around these discourses is that the child as a citizen is invisible.

I argue that the enforcement of ECE social obligation policy by the MSD overlooks the impacts that barriers and sanctions have. Obligatory ECE does not offer the support families require to overcome barriers; furthermore, it would create negative impacts for children if financial sanctions were imposed.

I advocate that redefining the problem through a child as citizen lens could provide a framework for government that shifts the focus to the best interests of children. In doing so, new policy implications would be foregrounded, including finding ways to ensure provision of high quality, local, accessible and culturally responsive ECE. New Zealand has many examples of empowering ECE programmes that do not rely on obligatory policies to attract families. I outline the characteristics and benefits of such programmes and highlight policy and practice implications.

6.1 Discourses framing the social obligation policy

Using Bacchi's *what's the problem?* approach, this thesis identified that obligatory ECE participation has been legislated for a select group (beneficiaries) as a solution to reducing long-term benefit dependency. Three interrelated discourses embedded in this policy are economic rationalisation, the positioning of beneficiaries as job seekers and the positioning of children as vulnerable.

Within these discourses responsibility to find work and enrol children in ECE is placed on parents, without consideration of the job market and provision of accessible ECE. Families in this study spoke of the lack of jobs available and of their children's needs (three spoke of their children having illnesses and/or special needs) which prevented them from being able to be available for work. They felt that these factors were not taken into account when they were being pressured to find work. Additionally, while this policy seeks to acquire parents into the workforce and remove them from dependency on the state, it is less detailed on how the ECE needs of children will be addressed.

ECE social obligations appear to have segregated beneficiary children, made assumptions that they would not voluntarily participate in ECE and framed them as vulnerable. It is questionable as to whether this legislation is appropriate. Contrary to assumptions, participants in this study had enrolled their children in ECE prior to legislation and spoke of high educational aspirations for their children. Beneficiary families whose children were not previously enrolled seem likely to need support to overcome barriers and accessible provision, rather than legislation, to enable their children to participate in ECE.

Missing in the discourses underpinning this legislation are principles founded on a child's rights or a child as citizen framework which place children's well-being at the forefront.

6.2 Impacts of ECE social obligations on families and whānau

National and international research (Campbell et al., 2002) establish the benefits of high quality ECE, this is not in dispute. However, this thesis raises questions in regard to requirements for children of beneficiaries to attend ECE being legislated under the MSD. The driving of such policy by the MSD has resulted in legislation

that is targeted at a set group (beneficiaries) with an intention to enforce compliance through financial sanctions, while overlooking fundamental issues that affect ECE participation. In this context the MSD and WINZ (who administer the policy for the MSD) have failed to adequately support whānau and to address the barriers they may face in accessing high quality and culturally responsive ECE.

6.3 Impacts of an MSD/WINZ framing

My argument is that the entrenchment of the legislation within an MSD framework and its narrow focus on welfare dependency is inadequate to address the rights of children for access to good quality education and the barriers and other issues that affect ECE participation.

Data in this study identified that WINZ staff are not adequately resourced to promote and support ECE participation. In response to my Official Information Act Request, the MSD claim that WINZ case workers are encouraged to engage with parents and caregivers to discuss their children's education and provide information about ECE services (D. Power, personal communication, October 3, 2014). While the MSD assert this is the aim, in reality it is not what families have experienced in practice. A beneficiary participant, who sought advice from WINZ staff, was given a list of ECE services located on the other side of the city which were too far away for her to access. Staff did not know what ECE programmes were available or have details about the different types of ECE services. WINZ staff appear to be neither trained nor equipped to help families access ECE.

Additionally, the actions of some WINZ staff appear to compound difficulties. Many families have negative perceptions of WINZ arising from their past experiences with staff. This strain in relationship impacts on the trust beneficiaries feel towards WINZ. Beneficiary participants' stories revealed WINZ administration errors, staff disregarding individual needs and circumstances, and treating beneficiaries with a lack of respect. Based on previous experiences, beneficiaries are concerned that their individual circumstances will not be taken into account and that if they get an unsupportive case manager their needs will not be addressed. This is a problem that others working in social policy have also observed. Charles Waldegrave from the Family Centre, Social Policy Research Unit wrote, "(g)etting fair and reasonable treatment of a high standard across

Work and Income offices throughout the country is not easy” (C. Waldegrave, personal communication, October 9, 2014).

The consequence of these factors combined has resulted in negative views of obligations and has also raised apprehension about the conduciveness of utilising a WINZ environment to encourage participation. From the perspective of what is best for children and their families, it appears problematic for this policy to be administered by WINZ. To ensure coherent and co-ordinated policy, I advocate that all ECE participation initiatives need direction from the Ministry of Education.

6.3.1 Barriers

Obligatory legislation on its own does not support ECE participation. Data from this study and research (Mitchell et al., 2013) identify that many families face obstacles in regard to accessing ECE. These include structural barriers, such as cost, transport and waiting lists; accessibility barriers, which include lack of provision available to meet family needs (hours, location and values); and personal barriers, for instance, lack of confidence and past experiences. Some of these barriers have been further entrenched because of the market driven provision of ECE in New Zealand which has resulted in a lack of local, culturally responsive ECE in some low-socio-economic areas (Ritchie & Johnson, 2011).

Social obligations have failed to address provision of ECE and monitoring to ensure all children can access high quality ECE. Programmes need to be of high quality to be most beneficial, whereas low quality programmes can be detrimental (Mitchell et al., 2008). Participant stories involving experiences in ECE services of bullying, an absence of books and staff talking to each other rather than supervising and engaging with children highlight examples of ECE programmes that appear to have failed to provide high quality ECE. In addition, a newspaper article (Tait, 2013, 10 October) provides further stories of detrimental incidents happening in some New Zealand ECE services.

6.3.2 Sanctions

A significant impact of social obligations is the threat of sanctions. The tying of financial sanctions to social obligations raises the likelihood of severe hardship

for children. Perry (2009) identifies that many families receiving a benefit are already living in poverty.

The punitive nature of sanctions, if enacted, is likely to result in negative outcomes for children through family stress and further poverty. Information I obtained through the Official Information Act from the Ministry of Social Development, states that “as at June 2014, no beneficiaries had been sanctioned for not meeting their social obligations” (D. Power, personal communication, October 3, 2014). However, as long as this legislation remains in force, beneficiaries still live under the stress and threat of sanctions. Beneficiary participants relayed how the threat of sanctions resulted in them feeling controlled by WINZ and caused worry for their families. Participants also spoke of the negative impacts that wrongly enacted sanctions had placed on them, for example, being unable to feed their family.

Additionally, punitive measures can induce negativity. Parents’ negative views are in turn likely to affect their children’s transition, perception of education and well-being. These findings were confirmed by the head teacher and ECE team leader participant who observed that for parents who had encountered previous negative educational experiences, the feeling of being forced to enrol their children in ECE and the threat of sanctions furthered their negative perception of education.

6.4 Suggestions

A key point that can be argued is that it would be more conducive to empower families through a positive approach. The use of incentive initiatives could be explored. Incentives to participate could promote participation without subjecting children to further poverty in the way sanctions do. Positive approaches would also help protect the relationships between ECE services and whānau.

Three key suggestions outlined in this section are a framework to explore child’s rights in regards to the promotion of ECE participation, support that understands and is able to overcome barriers to participation to increase ECE engagement, and the need for provision of empowering ECE that addresses practical issues around access to childcare.

6.4.1 Child's rights framework

A child's rights framework would ensure that children's rights are at the forefront of policy and not overlooked. If primary consideration is given to the welfare and best interests of all children as Wills (2012), the Children's Commissioner, advocated in a submission to the Social Services Committee, then enabling participation for all children would be at the centre, rather than potentially harmful targeted obligations and sanctions.

As well as the negative consequences sanctions garner, the social obligation policy is only able to obligate children of beneficiaries to participate in ECE. It would be far better to aim at encouraging participation for all children (not just children of beneficiaries) through the provision of local, culturally responsive programmes.

Rather than blaming parents for not enrolling their children, a child's rights framework would enable exploration of why some parents do not enrol their children. The market-driven approach to ECE has undermined key rights, such as high quality and provision in low socio-economic communities (Mitchell et al., 2008; Ritchie & Johnson, 2011). Solutions could then examine whether ECE services need to adapt their delivery, and whether government policy should adjust funding and provision of ECE to make it more accessible. The government is starting to do this through some planned new services; however, at this stage this is restricted to just a few communities. A child's rights framing would enable emphasis on provision of quality ECE for all children.

6.4.2 Addressing barriers

Some families and whānau need appropriate support to work through barriers and locate a service that is appropriate for their child and their family. The Ministry of Education Participation Programme initiatives have raised ECE participation and provided families the needed support to engage in ECE (Mitchell et al., 2013). Participation Programme staff provide local informed support and work alongside families, focussing specifically on ECE, a service that WINZ staff are not equipped to cater for.

Integrated childcare offering a range of support services also aid the ability of families to engage in ECE (Clarkin-Phillips & Carr, 2014). Government financial investment in integrated childcares could aid families to overcome participation barriers and provide an ideal model for enabling families to access social services.

6.4.3 Provision of empowering ECE

A challenge for government policy and funding is to support high quality ECE again. The provision of local, high quality, accessible and culturally responsive ECE programmes is essential if government is serious about encouraging participation. The costs of provision and participation initiatives are likely to be offset by the long term benefits of ECE participation.

There are huge potential benefits to be gained from ECE services that provide a hub for their local community and enable families to be involved, empowered as well as supported (Clarkin-Phillips, 2012). Since market driven provision has been shown to be detrimental to high quality and local provision, an argument can be made for a re-focussing on community-based services with emphasis on quality over profit.

Findings from my study illustrated the benefits of integrated ECE. Three families provided stories of how high quality ECE programmes with wraparound services led to positive outcomes for both children and their parents. Their ECE service promoted a sense of belonging for the whole whānau as well as additional support, such as parenting programmes, budgeting, food banks and counselling. The mothers cited how ECE provided a caring, developmentally stimulating environment for their children. They spoke of the positive impacts ECE had on their children's behaviour, social interactions and development. This centre also provided an empowering environment for parents with opportunities for them to be involved, volunteer, share skills, access support and work opportunities.

Empowering ECE services need staff who demonstrate understanding rather than judgement. The ECE managers in this study reviewed their practices, for instance, their enrolment procedures, transport provision and hours, in order to provide a welcoming environment and sought to meet whānau needs. Significantly, in

services where parents expressed a sense of belonging there was a notable emphasis given to building relationships with the community.

Figure one below is a representation of main barriers to ECE participation, who these affect and how they might be overcome.

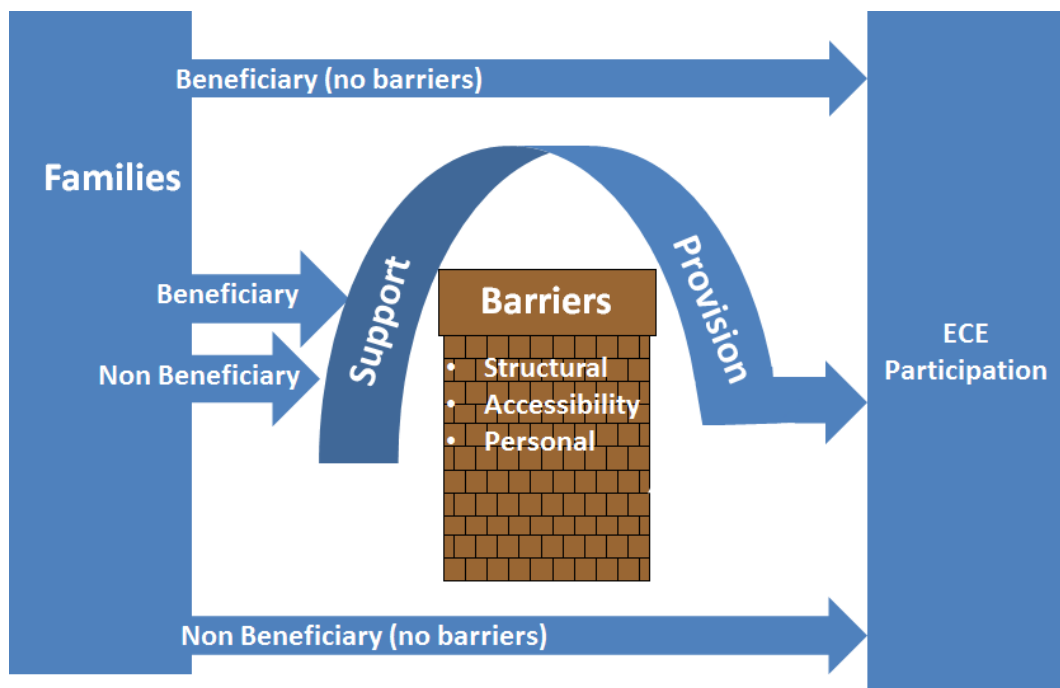


Figure 1: A diagrammatic representation of barriers and bridges to ECE participation

Many families are able to access ECE. However, some families (both beneficiary and non-beneficiary) have barriers to overcome before their children are able to participate in ECE. These families need support and high quality, culturally responsive local provision in order for their children to participate in ECE. Support to overcome barriers may come from within the ECE service, such as Nikau Childcare, or from an outside service, such as the Participation Programme Engaging Priority Families initiative. ECE social obligations do not provide the bridge for families to overcome the barriers that they face.

6.5 Limitations and further research

The results from this study illustrate the perceived impacts of social obligations on the participants. The participants were selected through community contacts, a training for work course and community ECE centres. Beneficiary participants all had children enrolled in ECE; therefore the study did not include whānau who had no connections to a community agency or ECE centre.

Further research with a greater cross section of beneficiary families and a larger sample would give more generalisable data.

6.6 Summary

Obligatory ECE has sought to place responsibility on beneficiaries and has failed to adequately address barriers to ECE participation that families face. The context of incorporating ECE policy in MSD legislation and the use of sanctions to ensure compliance is likely to lead to negative outcomes for children's well-being. Adding to negative outcomes is the requirement to participate in ECE in a market-driven ECE environment. Research has identified that privatising ECE has not been conducive to enabling access to high quality ECE for all.

One way to ensure the best ECE outcomes for both children and their whānau is for the government to take responsibility for investing in both local, high quality ECE and in support services to encourage families to participate. To accomplish this, ECE participation needs to be promoted and provided for through the Ministry of Education, rather than through MSD social obligations.

ECE teachers and services can also support participation and the sense of belonging for families through providing high quality, empowering ECE programmes and wraparound services for families.

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Glossary

ACT: is a far right, conservative political party in New Zealand*

Labour: is a left-leaning social-democratic political party in New Zealand and is one of New Zealand's two main political parties*

National Party: is a centre-right political party in New Zealand and is one of New Zealand's two main political parties*

New Zealand First Party: is a conservative political party in New Zealand

Te Whāriki: the New Zealand early childhood curriculum

United Future Party: is a centrist minor political party in New Zealand

Whānau: extended family, network of kin

*descriptions of New Zealand political parties are from <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page

Appendices

Appendix A: Letter/email for personal and community contacts

Kia ora X

As you may be aware, I am conducting a research project for my Masters in Education thesis at the University of Waikato. My research focusses on *Impacts of Early Childhood Education Social Obligations on Families and Whānau*. This social obligation for beneficiaries was introduced in July 2013. It requires children of beneficiaries to attend an early childhood education programme from the age of three until the child starts school. I would like to study the experiences and views of families and whānau in regard to this policy.

I am writing to ask if you would be willing to invite families and whānau you know, who are affected by this social obligation, to be involved in this research.

I am seeking to interview people who receive a benefit, have child/ren aged three to five years and who have been directly affected by this policy to participate in this research project. The purpose of this research project is to understand some of the impacts of this policy and how it has affected families and whānau.

In order to hear a variety of experiences, I am looking for beneficiaries from different situations. I would like to interview some who have enrolled their children in an ECE programme as a result of this policy, some who have not yet enrolled their children in an ECE programme and some whose children were already enrolled.

Participants will be asked to:

- complete a form giving their consent to be involved
- complete a background questionnaire and participate in an interview with the researcher to talk about their experiences and views of compulsory early childhood education. This interview would be a maximum of one hour. Please note that their anonymity will be guaranteed; their real name will not be published in the study. Participants will be given a transcript of their interview to check and amend if they wish to.

I will offer a \$20 Pak'n Save voucher to participants who attend an interview in recognition of the effort and any costs involved.

If you know any families and whānau who would be willing to participate in this study would you please give them the information sheet attached and invite them to meet with me so I can talk about the project with them and obtain informed consent. If it suits both you and the potential participants I can come to your organisation to meet with them.

The results of this study will be used for a MEd thesis. An electronic copy of this thesis will be made available on the university's digital repository: Research Commons. Results from data analysis may also be used in academic publications and presentations.

If you would like more information please do not hesitate to contact me. If you would like to be involved in this study please contact me by phone or email.

Yours sincerely

Judi Randall

Appendix B: Information sheet for potential participants

Kia ora, Greetings, Talofa, Malo e lelei

My name is Judi Randall and I am conducting a research project for my Masters in Education thesis at the University of Waikato. For my study I would like to interview you about your experiences of compulsory early childhood education.

My research focusses on the impacts of early childhood education social obligations on families and whānau.

Background

In July 2013 a social obligation for beneficiaries was introduced requiring their child to attend an early childhood education programme from the age of three until the child starts school. This meant that early childhood education became compulsory for children of beneficiaries. My project aims to find out about the experiences and views of families and whānau in regard to this policy.

If you receive a benefit, have child/ren aged three to five years and have been directly affected by this policy, I would like to invite you to participate in this research project.

The purpose of this research project is to understand some of the impacts of this policy and how it has affected families and whānau.

What participation would involve

If you agree to participate in this project, you will be asked to:

- complete a form giving your consent to be involved
- complete a background questionnaire and participate in an interview with the researcher to talk about your experiences and views of compulsory early childhood education. This interview would be a maximum of one hour. (Please note that everything you say will be confidential, your real name will not be published in the study.) You will be given a transcript of your interview to check and amend if you wish to.

The results of this study will be used for a MEd thesis with an electronic copy available on the university's digital repository: Research Commons. Results from data analysis may also be used in academic publications and presentations.

I value you sharing your knowledge and experiences and I would like to show my appreciation with a small token of my aroha by giving a \$20 Pak'nSave voucher to participants who take part in an interview.

If you would like more information please do not hesitate to contact me. If you would like to be involved in this study please contact me by phone or email.

Yours sincerely

Judi Randall

Appendix C: Letter/email for potential ECE manager participants

Kia ora

I am conducting a research project for my Masters in Education thesis at the University of Waikato. My research focusses on *Impacts of Early Childhood Education Social Obligations on Families and Whānau*. This social obligation for beneficiaries was introduced in July 2013. It requires children of beneficiaries to attend an early childhood education programme from the age of three until the child starts school. The purpose of my research project is to understand some of the impacts of this policy and how it has affected families and whānau.

As you work with families and whānau who may have been affected by this policy, I am writing to ask if you would be interested in being interviewed as part of my research. I am seeking to interview supervisors/managers associated with ECE services located in low income communities in this city. I would like to hear your experiences and views on the impact this policy has had on beneficiary families and your organisation.

Participants will be asked to:

- Complete a form giving consent to be involved
- Participate in an interview with the researcher to talk about your experiences and views of compulsory early childhood education. This interview would be a maximum of one hour. (Please note that anonymity will be guaranteed, your real name will not be published in the study.) You will be given a transcript of your interview to check and amend if you wish to.

The results of this study will be used for a MEd thesis. An electronic copy of this thesis will be made available on the university's digital repository: Research Commons. Results from data analysis may also be used in academic publications and presentations.

If you would like more information please do not hesitate to contact me. If you would like to be involved in this study please contact me by phone or email.

Appendix D: Informed consent form (for family and whānau participants)

Name of research project: *Impacts of Early Childhood Education Social Obligations on Families and Whānau*

Researcher:

Judi Randall

Student: Faculty of Education

University of Waikato

Participant's Name: _____

I have discussed and understand the following points:

- The purpose of this research project and what will be required of me as a participant
- My participation is voluntary and I can withdraw from this project at any time without having to give a reason, by informing Judi Randall
- I will have the opportunity to review, amend and approve my interview transcript
- I can withdraw any data up until I have approved the interview transcript and that after this time it will not be possible to withdraw data
- My anonymity is guaranteed and my real name or other identifying information will not be used
- My interview recordings and transcripts will remain confidential and access to this data will be restricted to the researcher and her supervisor

- Ethical approval for this research has been received from the University of Waikato Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee
- Data for this study will be used in the researcher's MEd thesis and may also be published in academic publications and presentations
- If I have any concerns regarding this research project I can contact the researcher, Judi Randall, or if I prefer, I can contact the researcher's supervisor :
Associate Professor Linda Mitchell
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered

I agree to be interviewed for this research project.

Signed _____ Date: _____

Appendix E: Informed consent form (ECE manager participants)
Impacts of Early Childhood Education Social Obligations on Families and Whānau

Researcher:

Judi Randall

Student: Faculty of Education

University of Waikato

Participant's Name: _____

I have discussed and understand the following points:

- The purpose of this research project and what will be required of me as a participant
- My participation is voluntary and I can withdraw from this project at any time without having to give a reason, by informing Judi Randall
- I will have the opportunity to review, amend and approve my interview transcript.
- I can withdraw any data up until I have approved the interview transcript and that after this time it will not be possible to withdraw data
- My anonymity is guaranteed and my real name and that of my organisation or other identifying information will not be used
- My interview recordings and transcripts will remain confidential and access to this data will be restricted to the researcher and her supervisor
- Ethical approval for this research has been received from the University of Waikato Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee

- Data for this study will be used in the researcher's MEd thesis and may also be published in academic publications and presentations
- If I have any concerns regarding this research project I can contact the researcher, Judi Randall, or if I prefer I can contact the researcher's supervisor:
Associate Professor Linda Mitchell,

School of Education, University of Waikato
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered

I agree to take part in this research project.

Signed _____ Date: _____

Appendix F: Semi-structured interview questions for families and whānau

Impacts of Early Childhood Education Social Obligations on Families and Whānau

- Background:
 - Tell me about your family, your children...
 - How many children do you have? Ages?
 - What do you hope for yourself, your family, short-term, long-term (education, home language and culture...)
 - Do you want your child/ren to attend an ECE programme? (Why or why not?)
 - Contact with WINZ :
 - How did you hear about the policy? (letter...)
 - What were you told? (Do you have a copy of the letter? What did it say?)
 - How did you respond? What did you think /feel?
 - What have you done since you received the (letter...)? (If had meeting at WINZ) What were you told at WINZ office? (Were WINZ flexible?)
 - Before you received this letter/... had you thought about ECE for your children?
 - If they have visited/enrolled /enquired about ECE programmes:
 - Can you tell me about your experience of visiting/enrolling/enquiring at an ECE service?
 - What do you know about ECE in your community? (prompts.. what type of services available, enrolment, quality, costs, accessibility, waiting lists, others experiences?)
 - Work experiences/opportunities
 - Can you tell me about your experiences of finding work? (prompts... kind of work, quality, hours to suit...)
 - What do you think about this requirement?
 - Is there anything else you would like to say?

Appendix G- Background questionnaire for families and whānau

Impacts of Early Childhood Education Social Obligations on Families and Whānau

Background Information

I would like to ask you some questions about you and your family in order to understand some background about the families who have taken part in this research study.

Confidentiality

The information you give is confidential to the researcher and her supervisor, other people will not know what answers you give. Results from questionnaires will be described in publications from the research project, but your name will not be used.

Completing the questionnaire

You may fill in the answers yourself, or the researcher will go through the questionnaire with you and help you if you like.

1. Your name:	
---------------	--

2. Your ethnicity:	
--------------------	--

3. How many children live at home with you? Please write gender and age for each child. If they are under school age please write whether they attend an ECE service (e.g., childcare centre, kindergarten, play centre, kōhanga reo, playgroup).			
Child	Gender (boy or girl)	Age (years and months)	Attends an ECE programme (yes/no)

4. If your children, who are under school age, attend an ECE programme, please write the name of the programme and how many hours your child is enrolled for each week.		
Child	Name of ECE programme	How many hours enrolled for each week

5. What languages do you speak at home?

6. What is your highest qualification?

7. Are you in paid work? (Tick one only)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	No, I am not in paid work
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes, I am in part-time paid work
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes, I am in full-time paid work

8. Are you undertaking training or study? (Tick one only)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	No, I am not in training or study
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes, I am in part-time training or study
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes, I am in full-time training or study

9. What benefit are you on at present?	How long have you been on it? (write years and/or months)

--	--

10. Were you on a benefit prior to this?	Yes / No
--	----------

11. If yes, what benefit were you on?	How long were you on it? (write years and/or months)

Thank you

Appendix H: Semi-structured interview questions for ECE managers

Impacts of Early Childhood Education Social Obligations on families and whānau

Preamble

In July 2013 a social obligation for beneficiaries was introduced requiring their child to attend an early childhood education programme from the age of three until the child starts school. In essence New Zealand early childhood education became compulsory for children of beneficiaries. I would like to hear your experiences and views on the impact this policy has had on beneficiary families and your organisation.

1. What impact (if any) has this policy had on your organisation/ECE service?
2. Can you tell me about families' experiences you have observed as a result of this policy?
3. What reactions have you seen from families?
4. What do you see as the impacts that this policy has had on families?
5. What are your views of this policy?
6. Anything else you would like to say?

Appendix I: Official Information Act Request

This official information request is in regard to the Social Security (Benefit Categories and Work Focus) Amendment Act 2013, specifically

26 Social obligations of certain beneficiaries with dependent children

60RA (3a) The obligation of enrolling dependent children aged 3–5 in an early childhood education programme

60RAB

60 RB

60RC Sanctions for failures to comply

I would like to request information in regard to the following questions please.

1. What are the recommended processes for WINZ staff to follow to ensure beneficiaries enrol their children in ECE?
2. Who gets a letter from WINZ regarding this ECE social obligation? (Is it all beneficiaries when their child turns three, or just selected beneficiaries?)
3. Can I please have copies of the standard letters sent to beneficiaries in regard to the ECE social obligation?
4. Can I please have copies of the standard letters sent to beneficiaries to inform them of possible sanctions for failure to comply with the ECE social obligation?
5. Are all beneficiary families with children aged 3–5 tested for compliance? If not then how is it decided which families will be tested?
6. What information does WINZ provide beneficiaries about local ECE services?
7. What support is available to help families find suitable ECE for their child?
8. What process are WINZ staff instructed to follow in regards to whether a family has taken “all reasonable steps to ensure that every dependent child aged 3 years or more but less than 5 years ... is enrolled in a recognised early childhood education programme”?
9. How many families have been sanctioned as a result of the ECE social obligation?
10. How long have the aforementioned sanctions lasted for?