

The Competent Children Research: A Flagship for Public Policy and Spending in Early Childhood Education and Care?

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Executive Summary

This paper grew from our initial interest in reading the evidence that supported what the Minister and Ministry of Education were saying about the *Competent Children* research. To date the research has received much political and professional acclaim in New Zealand for its demonstration of the positive effects of early childhood education on children's competencies and educational achievement.

We discovered however, that what was being said about the research did not seem to match well with the written reports. This paper is concerned not so much with the quality of the research because every piece of research has strengths and limitations, but with the political importance it has attained in the absence of much critical review, discussion and understanding of the full research reports.

The assessment reported here suggests that the findings have been over-generalised beyond that warranted by the data. The use of the research to legitimate public policy and spending should be questioned.

Given the political significance *Competent Children* has attained there would appear to be a strong case for comprehensive critical analysis of this research by policy-makers, Ministry of Education officials, and early childhood researchers and professional leaders.

Background to the Study

The New Zealand Council for Educational Research “flagship research project *Competent Children*” is a longitudinal study of the “roles of home and education in the development of children’s competencies and whether these roles change overtime as the children have other experiences” (NZCER, 2004, p. 1). The project commenced in 1992, the latest report published in 2004 is of the children at Age-12 and the project has funding to follow the children until Age-16.

The project is classified as early childhood research by the Ministry of Education as it “aimed to provide New Zealand policymakers and the early childhood education sector with a longitudinal study which could show the concurrent, short-term, and long-term impact of early childhood education experience”¹.

In recent years the Minister of Education has promoted the research as being of unquestionable and unrivalled value. He has described it as:

- “A flagship study of early childhood education in New Zealand” (9/8/04 media statement).
- “Nationally and internationally” recognised research (9/8/04 media statement).
- “The landmark *Competent Children* study” (26/10/01 speech to the NZCER conference).

Competent Children has confirmed that current government policy and spending in early childhood education is “the way to go” according to the Minister of Education (26/10/01 media statement). As recently as April 2005 the Minister restated that the reason why “the government is determined” that all children should experience “intensive and regular quality early childhood education” is because research has shown this has “long-term educational benefits”.

A Ministry of Education (2001) paper to the OECD states that “the *Competent Children* Study has been and is a significant resource ... the study is the only one of its kind in the New Zealand context and has, over an extended period, influenced policy and practice” (pp. 10 -11).

A measure of the importance with which the Ministry of Education and successive governments have placed on this study is the funding. The NZCER have received approx 2.7 million dollars (excluding GST) in government funding from the Ministry of Education for the research, including \$28,000 from the Ministry of Social Development. In addition NZCER and Victoria University of Wellington have contributed to the funding of the project, although no amount has been stated (Meade & Cubey, 1995; Wylie 2001).

Research Conflicts with Government Message

Government Budget 2004 announcements for spending on early childhood education were justified on the basis that:

Research tells us that intensive, regular and quality early childhood education is critical to ensuring children do well later in life.

A similarly worded statement has appeared in many of the Minister of Education’s press releases announcing changes for early childhood education. For example on 1 April 2005 the Minister stated again that:

Research shows intensive and regular quality early childhood education has long term educational benefits, and the government is determined to ensure these benefits are available to young New Zealanders.

The *Competent Children* research findings are taken in policy to indicate that participation in early childhood education benefits all children if it is quality early childhood education, and that increasing the quantum number of hours children are in early childhood education is advantageous for them along with getting children into regular involvement in early childhood education from a younger age. In some policy advice documents *Competent Children* has been cited as providing justification for policy directions. For example the Strategic Plan Working Group

report (Meade, 2001) to the Minister of Education named only the *Competent Children* research in its introduction as providing evidence of the importance of early childhood education for children's outcomes and the importance of government's role in ensuring quality.

A recent literature review for the Ministry of Women's Affairs (Brewerton, 2004) notes that "if there are any negative effects of maternal employment and/or early childhood education in the first year for New Zealand children, they are probably offset by later high quality early childhood education experiences" (p. 43). The findings of the *Competent Children* research should not be used to support early childhood education for all infants. And as noted in Brewerton (2004) the international research paints quite a different picture to the *Competent Children* research on the importance of participation in early childhood education for children's development, especially for infants and also for children who are not at risk of poor educational outcomes due to poverty.

Of the effects of early childhood education on children Smith et al (2000) in their Ministry of Education commissioned strategic literature review note the following:

The early childhood program experience appears to be a stronger force in lives of low-income children than middle-class children.

Early childhood program attendance can narrow the gaps in achievement that separate children from different SES backgrounds, but not entirely remove the gaps.

The positive impact of high quality care is strongest for children who would otherwise experience an unstimulating and unresponsive environment at home. (p.4)

An ERIC Digest review of the literature (Paten & Ricks, 2000) notes that correlation studies of the extent to which high quality features 'predict' better outcomes have mostly been unable to find anything more than modest correlations between some quality factors and some child outcomes. Experimental studies which seek to identify features of quality that 'cause' better outcomes have generally failed to find anything other than modest causal relationships between quality and outcomes, with the exception of high-risk children living in poverty for whom being placed in high-quality care has substantial and long-lasting positive effects. Findings from the NICHD (1988) research indicate that while the quality of early childhood services had a consistent positive correlation with children's cognitive and language development, the correlation was higher for a combination of family factors. A combination of family factors was also found to be more closely correlated with developmental outcomes like behaviour and self-control than was early childhood service quality.

Problem of the Competent Children Research Being Cited and Used in the Absence of Critical Review and Understanding

The findings of the *Competent Children* research have been widely reported in the media, for example see a front page article in the New Zealand Herald by Stuart Dye (26/6/04). In the absence of much critical analysis of this research reporters have not had reason to question whether claims about the findings are being over-generalised.

The research has been referred to in the promotion of early childhood sector interests. For example the New Zealand Childcare Association states on its website that:

NZ research shows that quality early childhood education produces competent learners ages 6, 8 AND 10 ... However, we can't assume that communities appreciate the importance of our children's earliest educational experiences. For this reason, each year we nominate the third week in November to promote ourselves – and your centre!²

While citing the research may serve professional interests it is not clear if this also serves the best interests of children, families and communities, or indeed provides an accurate representation of the actual findings.

The research has been cited within recommendations for practice, for example the Ministry of Education's new resource on assessment exemplars of best practices draws on the research's concept of competence. Yet the concept of competency introduced to the language of early childhood education in New Zealand by the research needs to be debated, along with whether the only or chief purpose of early childhood education is to prepare children for later educational achievement. Competence is argued by the researchers to not be the opposite of incompetence, notwithstanding this competence is still presented in the research as a taxonomy of skills needing judgements about what defines a skill and the extent to which a child is competent or incompetent (Wylie et al., 1996).

Given that the *Competent Children* research is already having implications for teaching practice and has been taken up by at least some sector groups, the need for critical and comprehensive analysis of the research seems urgent.

It should be noted that no single research study can provide the full answer on how early childhood education impacts on children, and especially on how it impacts differently for different children. How the home environment is put into the analysis can make a big difference to the findings, as does whether sufficient controls for non-random effects are included. This is because for a child participation in an early childhood service is but one of many experiences in the context of the child's life. It is also because parents' motivations, values and reasons for using an early childhood service differ. With any statistical study of the effects of early childhood education it is possible to come up with an answer that pleases by doing such things as: cutting the sample in particular ways, focussing on particular mechanisms for effects and not others, using certain measures and not others, and putting in the right controls and leaving out other controls that might show up negative effects.

Rationale for this Paper

This paper grew from our initial interest in reading the evidence that supported what the Minister and Ministry of Education were saying about the *Competent Children* research. We were puzzled, upon starting to read the many reports and documents relating to the research, to find that many of the claims made about the research were not supported by the evidence and did not appear to have taken account of the various limitations of the research. And so we decided to draft this paper to share with other early childhood researchers our discovery that what was being said about the research does not seem to always match the written reports.

In academia there has been little published critique of the research, the main exception being a paper by Roy Nash (2001). Nash's main criticisms focused on technical matters such as the analytical techniques used, sample constraints, unsound findings with respect to 'school mix' and a need to improve analysis of progress at school. He also indicated a need for closer examination of theoretical issues such as the promotion of the discourse of competency. Massey University Professor in Early Years Education Joy Cullen has argued that members of the early childhood research community should be more critical consumers of research (Cullen, 2003). As an example to support this argument she referred to the *Competent Children* research which has received positive acclaim for its demonstration of the significance of quality early childhood education for subsequent achievement at school and noted that the full reports of the project contained qualifications to this conclusion.

To guide and frame our review of the *Competent Children* research we looked at early childhood education policy and media statements put out by the Minister of Education's office concerning or mentioning it. We found eight claims about the research that did not appear to be supported sufficiently by the research findings and/or because of limitations with an aspect of the research such as sampling or methodology. The claims are listed below along with notes to explain what our initial review of the research revealed.

1st Claim: It is a study of some 500 children (e.g. Minister of Education, 9/8/04 media statement)

Points to Note

- The study started with 307 nearly five-year-old children. Full data on children's competencies was obtained for only 306 children in early childhood education. At age-12, 268 of the original 307 children remained in the study. Therefore to describe *Competent Children* as a study of 500 children is misleading.
- When the children were Age-8 the researchers increased the sample size by including 242 more children (as the researchers wanted to allow for attrition and obtain a larger sample for analysis of some family characteristics). The additional children were drawn from a parallel NZCER telephone survey of 767 parents of children who were about to or who had recently started school. The survey study was originally intended only as a form of validation for the full study (Lythe, 1997).
- This claim masks a problem of bringing together two different sample groups with data obtained from different sources using different methodological approaches in a longitudinal study.
 - Sampling techniques differed. The main study of 307 children used a sample stratified to get equal numbers of children in the sample early childhood services, whereas in the survey study population based sampling was used.
 - What counted as children's current early childhood service may have differed. The main study sampled services when children were in the final few months before starting school. Whereas in the survey study some of the children were already at school when the survey was conducted.
 - Data collection techniques differed. In the main study field-workers rated the quality of early childhood services children attended, they assessed children's competencies and asked teachers for ratings of children's competencies, they also interviewed parents for information relating to home background and history of use of early childhood education and perceptions of quality. In the survey study parents only were interviewed by telephone and asked to rate children's competencies. Fieldworkers did not rate the quality of the services these children attended or had attended and early childhood service teachers were not asked to provide ratings of children's competencies.
 - Parents of the children in the survey were asked about the 'be-ing' competencies whereas the teachers only were asked for their ratings of children on these competencies in the main study.
- Researcher Cathy Wylie stated that "with hindsight, it would have been more useful to increase the number of children in the full study from the start" (Wylie, 2001, p.5).
 - 307 (or 306) children could be considered a reasonable sample size, as long as the sample was representative (which it was not – see the points noted for Claim 2 below).
 - A larger sample size would improve reliability and give greater confidence in the project report findings and conclusions. The numbers were so small in some of the analyses that results were of questionable significance.

2nd Claim: The researchers drew on a random selection of centres in the Wellington region (e.g. Minister of Education, 9/8/04 media statement)

Points to Note

- Concern for costs meant that the researchers excluded any services in the outer Wellington region. So most of the services in the sample were urban ones.
- The researchers were interested only in services that had at least 3 children over 4½ years of age and not in services with fewer children aged near five-years of age.
- The researchers did not select their sample from the full range of services in the Wellington region.
 - The services sampled included one home-based group which was family day-care operated by the Barnardos organisation and four types of centres. Sampling did not cover Nga Kohanga Reo.
 - The Ministry of Education asked the researchers to include all licensed Pacific Island early childhood centres in the Wellington region (note that only 3 A'oga Amata were sampled in the end. A Cook Islands early childhood centre approached did not participate).
 - The researchers experienced difficulty in getting family day-care children and decided to extend their sample to include all children aged between 4½ and 5 years in Barnardo's family day-care programmes.
- The participation rate was low. Of the 151 services approached from a list of services drawn up by the Ministry of Education's data management section as meeting criteria for selection, 76 or approximately half of these services participated.
- Sampling was not random and the sample can not be viewed as representative of Wellington services or of early childhood services in New Zealand.

3rd Claim: The research is nationally and internationally recognised (e.g. Minister of Education, 9/8/04 media statement)

Points to Note

- The research appears to have been questioned very little, if at all, by New Zealand academics and researchers, practitioners, NZEI, and Ministry of Education officials. The lack of questioning may indicate support based on a critical appreciation and knowledge of the research or it may not. As there has been so little published critical comment on the research it can not be safely claimed that the quality of research is nationally recognised, just that it is nationally well-known because of its promotion by the Minister, the Ministry of Education and the NZCER.
- A look at international publications using the Google scholar search engine revealed the majority of publications mentioning the *Competent Children* research were from New Zealand (notably NZCER and Ministry of Education publications).
- In 2001 Massey University's Roy Nash wrote in a critique of the *Competent Children* research that "it would be particularly useful ... for researchers engaged in the study of matters of public interest with public funds to take seriously the suggestion that their data should be made available for secondary analysis ... one might hope that requests for re-analysis ... would be considered favourably and even welcomed" (p. 119). Only from August 2004 has the NZCER permitted researchers to apply for access to the data. The process of application is outlined on the NZCER website but does not appear to have been advertised by the NZCER within the early childhood or wider research community.

- While research commissioned by the Ministry of Education is usually subject to independent review by experts in New Zealand or overseas³ no statement can be found concerning whether external independent reviews of the *Competent Children* research reports were commissioned by the Ministry.

4th Claim: It provides proof of the educational benefits of early childhood education (e.g. Minister of Education, quoted in the NZ Herald 26/6/04)

Points to Note

- As the researchers have themselves noted any significant associations between explanatory and outcomes variables do not indicate causality because: “ ‘proof’ of relations between individual factors remains elusive given existing statistical techniques, and the sheer quantum of different aspects of individuals’ daily and cumulative existence” (Wylie et al, 2004, p. 315).
- At times the *Competent Children* researchers seem to try too hard to emphasise and to demonstrate the importance of certain variables, such as staff training while other variables get less attention.
- The *Competent Children* at Age-5 research reports that “low family income is the main factor associated with lower competency scores”. In the *Competent Children* at Age-6 report family income continued to feature as having the most impact on outcomes and the researchers emphasised the complex effects of a wide range of home and school factors on children’s competences. Given the reported salience of family income then it is puzzling how the researchers can conclude from the data that “good-quality early childhood education experience clearly benefits all children”. This conclusion about benefits for all children is also puzzling for the following reasons:
 - The research design did not include sufficient controls (for children’s home and family factors and other simultaneous and prior early childhood education experiences). Also problems with sampling mean the study lacks the statistical power that would be expected of any research making such a conclusion about the effects of an intervention (ECE) on a population (children).
 - As many as 70% of the children had attended other early childhood services and the research did not examine the quality of these other services.
 - The research was designed to provide only a snapshot look at the ‘quality’ of an early childhood service children were in at the end of their time in early childhood education and how the children performed in relation to a selection of competencies. It does not provide a comprehensive picture of the quality of all the services children had experienced and how participation in early childhood education influenced children’s development and outcomes during their early childhood years.
 - Around half of the services in the study were rated as below acceptable standard for quality. Any government policy for raising children’s participation in early childhood education should be a worry given that so many services were of below acceptable standard. Further, no evidence is presented to confirm that time in formal regulated early childhood education is better than the time children spend with their parents and better for children than other choices parents may make for their child’s care and education.
 - Not all of the children were under five-years-of-age and still attending an early childhood service at the point of time when data were first collected. While the services were sampled in the months prior to children starting school by the time children were interviewed and tested by fieldworkers 20% were aged 5-years or

older. When children's early childhood teachers were interviewed 16% of children were aged 5-years and 4% over 5-years-of-age.

- Correlations appear to have been selectively highlighted in an effort to promote the educational benefits of regulated early childhood education, especially for children's achievement in mathematics and literacy. A closer look at the findings in the latest Age-12 report on children's literacy competencies shows that only 4 out of the 21 early childhood service 'quality' scale rating items were statistically associated with the PAT Reading Comprehension. The quality rating scale items were not statistically associated with other literacy related measures of writing, reading age, or the Burt Word reading test. Three out of the 21 'quality' scale items were statistically associated with children's mathematics scores at age-12, however the researchers also note that it was likely that the socio-economic mix of the children in any one service mattered more than the quality of the service. Furthermore, middle-class families on the whole tended to use services that rated higher in quality on the quality scale items and they also had children with higher average scores for cognitive competencies.
- A control group, which is usual in research when evidence is sought on the effects of an intervention such as participation in early childhood education, was not able to be built into the study. However, more sophisticated statistical analyses such as multiple regression, could tease out the relative strength of predictor variables much more effectively than the procedures reported in the *Competent Children* reports.
- Greater care needed to be taken in the research when selecting and putting in home environment factors into the analysis. Greater care also needed to be taken in controlling for non-random effects for parent selection of early childhood service and other possible non-random effects. Without such care the possibility of positive effects increases, but as non-random effects are controlled for, more negative effects usually emerge and confidence in the reliability of the research findings is therefore strengthened.
- Analyses of the joint influences of home and early childhood education service would have helped to strengthen any claims about the effects of early childhood education. Although questions about these were included in the parent interviews no observations were carried out in the home context and no data on children's competencies in the home context was included.
- There are many questions surrounding the relativity and the reliability of the data. For example teacher reports of children's 'be-ing' competencies were relied upon but there are three major problems with this:
 - Children's performances can be affected by and may be particular to the context and situation in which they are in. The competencies and the competency levels children displayed at their early childhood service and school will not necessarily be the same as those they displayed at home, with their family and in other settings and contexts.
 - Children's teachers changed at each stage of the research and given the timing of the study in some cases the teacher-child relationship may be comparatively recent.
 - Teacher reports can not be assumed to be neutral or objective. They may be more reflective of the current relationship between the child and the teacher, the teacher's assumptions about the child, the teacher's relationship with the parents and the teacher's own biases regarding a child's ethnicity, gender, class, family structure, physical appearance and special needs.

5th Claim: It is a flagship study of early childhood education in New Zealand (e.g. Minister of Education, 9/8/04 media statement)

Points to Note

- The sample did not include Nga Kohanga Reo and only 3 Pacific Islands language centres participated. No claims can therefore be made about quality and the effects of participation in early childhood education on children in Maori and Pacific centres.
- The main contribution of the study appears to be that it was a longitudinal one, following a group of children from around 5-years-of-age and documenting a selection of competencies/outcomes and experiences over-time. The research does not appear to have added to what we already knew about the effects of early childhood education, and how the quality of the home and early childhood service environments jointly and separately impact on children's outcomes. The study focused on a narrow set of outcomes defined as competencies, and did not cover other important outcomes such as effects on children's health, attachment and social relationships, metacognitive thinking, artistic and musical development and so on.
- The early childhood services measured for quality may not have been those that most influenced children's outcomes. As many as 70% percent of the children had attended or were attending another service, and others spent even greater amounts at home with their families than in a regulated early childhood service. Commonly the number of hours spent in a service for a Playcentre child before starting school was 8.9 hours a week, for a Kindergarten child 14.7 hours and for Childcare 31.9 hours a week at the time of the study.
- The research did not examine the whole of, or the range of quality of, children's early childhood education experiences. It would have been a more comprehensive study of early childhood education if children were sampled from the time they first entered early childhood education and followed through to the time they started school.

6th Claim: The study relates to early childhood targeting and is of important strategic value (Minister of Education, 26/10/01 media statement announcing the release of the *Competent Children at 10* report⁴)

Points to Note

- It is not clear what the Minister meant by the study relating to targeting. Given the characteristics of the research sample it is hard to see how the study could be of value for informing the government about appropriate targeting of funding and the provision of services.
- The sample was not representative of the Wellington population or of the New Zealand population in relation to ethnicity, income and other socio-economic differences measured such as computer ownership, and rural-urban differences. There was a high representation of children from high-income homes, who were Pakeha/European, whose mothers had a trade or tertiary qualification and who were in the paid workforce.
- The Age-5 report data suggests that certain types of families were least likely to pick an early childhood service which was of the quality that the researchers valued, namely: the lowest income families, sole-parent families, children whose mothers were employed full-time and families of Asian children (Wylie et al. 1996, p. 117). However this finding reflects differences in viewpoints and does not lend support to or pinpoint needs for targeting.

7th Claim: The study relates to early childhood resourcing and is of important strategic value (e.g. Minister of Education, 26/10/01 media)

Points to Note

- Evidence relating to the cost-effectiveness of the allocation of resources for making the greatest difference to child outcomes is not provided by the research. A question which can not be answered on the basis of the evidence provided by the study is: where should spending go to make the greatest difference for children as a group or for diverse children?
- For example the evidence does not provide empirical support for raising the qualification level of teachers. As stated in the *Competent Children at Age-5 Report* (Wylie, 1996, p. 116) “Considerable confounding obviously occurs between ECS types, the children to staff ratio, and the highest training of any staff member when the data are included in the same modelling process”. The researchers had to “push our exploration of the effects of ECE training on ECS quality to the limits of our sample by focusing only on playcentres, which had sufficient cell sizes of different children to staff ratios”. The researchers found indicative associations between the length of training and their ratings of playcentre quality on only two subscales. Note that:
 - Comparing a structural/policy variable of quality (i.e. staff training) with the research ratings of observed service quality does not in itself say anything about how the length and type of staff training impacts on outcomes for children.
 - In the case of playcentres staff are usually not employed but are children’s parents and this further confounding factor does not appear to have been included in the analyses.
 - Some findings seem to be at odds with government policy on teacher registration and raising qualification levels. For example, children at Age-12 who had attended a playcentre or family day-care service just prior to starting school were better at mathematics than kindergarten children with trained teachers by about 13% points. Playcentres are parent-led services and family day-care adults tend to have a lower level of qualification or no qualification at all compared with kindergarten and childcare centre staff.

8th Claim: It confirms the Government’s intention to “beef up” children’s participation in quality early childhood education (e.g. Minister of Education, 26/10/01 media statement)

The Minister has signalled intention to “beef up” children’s participation in at least four ways:

1. By increasing the number of Maori and Pacific Nations children enrolled in early childhood services,
2. By working on ways to get children attending early childhood education from a younger age and for more hours,
3. By directing parental choice in service use, and
4. By increasing government influence on quality in services and determining for parents and families what quality in early childhood education is.

Point No. 1 – Maori and Pacific Nations children and services

- Given the study sample of services and a lack of control group of children who did not attend early childhood education nothing can be claimed from the research about the benefits to Maori and Pacific Nations children of participating in early childhood education, especially in Nga Kohanga and any of the various Pacific Islands language early childhood centres.

Point No. 2 – Time spent by children in regulated/formal early childhood education

- In the *Competent Children* research children's early childhood education experiences are subsumed into general categories such as 'age of starting' and 'length of experience'. Within such ranges there can be children who began attending once a week for 2½ hours from birth and attended up to 7½ hours by the time they were old enough to start school (as is a typical pattern in the playcentre service), and children with similar starting dates who spent many more hours overall within an early childhood service or services. The services rated as highest quality in the first report were both sessional services, which does not prove or suggest anything about the value of intensive experience. The evidence provided by *Competent Children* is not strong enough to conclude that earlier participation and an increase in the hours children spend in early childhood education will benefit all children. Smith et al (2000) in the Ministry of Education Strategic Literature Review has noted that

The early childhood research literature is somewhat difficult to generalise from about the extent of care which can influence child outcomes, but a few studies address this issue ... A major issue which has not been satisfactorily resolved, is what is the optimal intensity of participation (in terms of hours and variety of services offered) for children of different ages and from varying types of families, and is there any deleterious effect of participation in several programmes. (pp. 20-23)

Point No. 3 – Directing parental choice

- The *Competent Children* research is explicit about parental choice: "children's access to good-quality ECSs should not be made dependent on parental choice" (Wylie et al, 1996 p.118). However the evidence for this conclusion is weak because as the researchers state "it may be that our measure of parental perceptions is too loose" (p. 117).
- The evidence presented in the *Competent Children* research does not lend sufficient support to government intentions to provide 20 hours a week free childcare in community-owned centres for all 3 to 5 year-olds with registered and qualified teachers. It is not clear from the findings that the provision of 'free' childcare in community-owned centres would necessarily ensure children experienced better quality early childhood education since:
 - Services within any one type differed in their ratings of quality on items in the subscales; thus not all childcare centres for example were uniform in quality.
 - The type of service is not consistently shown in the research over-time to be important enough in relation to effects on children to indicate that there is a role for government to play in influencing parental choices of either the type of service or the ownership basis of the service. For example at Age-8 the type of service predicted only 3% of the variance on children's PAT reading and mathematics scores.

Point No. 4 – Increasing Government influence on service quality

- The *Competent Children* researchers advocate that parents should be provided with a “sounder basis for their choice of early childhood service” and “a better understanding of what constitutes quality in early childhood education” (Wylie et al., 1996, p. 142). The *Competent Children* findings on the importance of some ‘quality’ factors are consistent with other policy research. However a growing body of literature from the early 1990s has been highly critical of the traditional approach to quality, as taken in *Competent Children*. The critical and philosophical literature has pointed to quality as a problem rather than as a given and that the views of different stakeholders should be recognised, respected and supported (see for example Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). Farquhar (2005) has argued that quality is not only about what is important from a policy perspective; it is also essentially about what is important for children, parents and families. She proposes that quality can be developed through partnerships between parents and service providers and staff.

Concluding Comment

This review shows that *Competent Children* has a number of limitations including sampling, methodology and data analysis. Assumptions about what defines quality in early childhood education, its measurement and children’s competencies need to be questioned.

Is it fair to be raising issues here about the *Competent Children* research? However many years a study is carried out and however well-funded it is impossible for any study to provide a full answer or to be completely free of limitations. This review suggests that the *Competent Children* findings have been over-generalised beyond that warranted by the data. Therefore the use of the research to legitimate public policy and spending should be questioned.

Undertaking the review has provided a lesson in why publicly funded and politically important research should not be exempted from close scrutiny and critical review. We were surprised to find that claims made about the research did not stand up well to a reading and examination of the project reports. We hope that this review serves as a warning to other researchers and to all users of research to view the use of research for political purposes without an understanding of the data as a problem. We must become more critical consumers of research.

There is a need for more critical review of the analyses and the statistical aspects of the research. Closer examination of theoretical as well as political issues is needed. We hope other researchers will further examine the research.

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Endnotes

¹ See www.minedu.govt.nz current projects (page last updated on 26/3/04, accessed 7/4/05).

² <http://www.nzca.ac.nz/news/news.htm> Accessed 7/1/05

³ <http://oecd.org/dataoecd/60/41/2664670.pdf> Accessed 20/4/05

⁴ http://www.nzcer.org.nz/default.php?products_id=486 Accessed 17/1/05