

Today's challenges in providing a great early education for kids

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At first glance, our early childhood education system looks to be in a shambolic state and appears to be going downhill fast.

Families were promised 20 hours free ECE for their three and four-year-olds, but today nearly all ECE services say the funding is not enough to be able to offer high quality education and care and are charging parents extra to cover the shortfall.

An increase in license size has seen the maximum class size go from 25 to 75 for babies and from 50 to 150 children under-5, and planned adult-child ratio improvements for under-2s in centres were dropped from the 2009 National government agenda. The target for 100% qualified teachers has also been dropped and plans to have 80% of teachers qualified were delayed from 2010 to this year.

Regulations introduced in 2008 which required services to be re-licensed every six years, were dropped in 2009 in favour of keeping the status quo of perpetual (lifetime) licenses.

As if things were not bad enough, services already hit by a drop in funding for registered teachers and professional development were given another blow by this year's Budget announcement that base funding would no longer increase in line with inflation, essentially freezing their funding.

The Government is now planning to move away from the general approach to funding ECE and towards a targeted approach focusing on groups with traditionally low

participation rates including Maori and Pasifika families and low-income communities. The Ministry of Education is setting up a new advisory group of sector representatives to act as a sounding board for its ideas on restructuring the funding system.

Meanwhile, the Education Review Office said in its 2012 national evaluation report

that ECE services are failing to demonstrate effective and culturally responsive relationships with Māori families. And also according to the report, good parent-teacher relationships were found to be lacking in around one quarter of the services it reviewed.

Parents today are much more likely to recognise the educational value of childcare

services and more parents are aware of the importance of being engaged in their children's learning, so it is important that ECE services get the basics right. Yet, a 2011 national evaluation report on literacy showed many early childhood services do not give literacy an important place in their philosophy statements and in many services there was 'evidence of ad hoc purchases





of books, art and writing materials, and computer software with no specific learning purpose in mind.'

While this paints a troubled picture of the early childhood education sector, one in a constant state of flux with frequent policy and funding changes making high quality ECE difficult to achieve, scratching the surface reveals another story.

There are many fabulous examples of high quality work within our early childhood services

At ground level there is plenty of ingenuity, courage and a desire to provide the best for children no matter how difficult the circumstances.

There are many fabulous examples of high quality work within our early childhood services. Consider the kindergarten association that has branched out into home-based ECE to support whanau learning and provide care that meets family needs, or the Pasifika ECE centre that is not only helping children, but also helping their parents learn to read and write and supporting them into employment.

These are examples of teachers and ECE services working hard in their communities, to make a difference not only to the lives

of the children in their care, but also to their families.

The challenge for early childhood services is to continue striving to provide these high quality services amid a future dogged by potential funding cuts and a struggle to find suitable teachers.

The lower level of qualifications needed to work within the early childhood sector compared to the teaching sector, which is seeing moves to raise qualification requirements to post-graduate level, will likely see less value put on training and high quality than now and this will make it harder for early childhood services to recruit highly qualified staff.

Combined with potential funding cuts and the requirement for less than 100% qualified teachers, ECE services may be forced to or choose to take on more part-time or casual workers rather than full-time qualified teachers - and some are already doing so. This makes it harder to create a culture where the emphasis is on high quality and care based on consistency in staffing and relationships along with well thought out educational programmes.

The growing aged-care sector may also put pressure on ECE recruitment as many of its typical workers - predominantly women with skills in caring - may find employment in the aged care sector instead.

Adapting to the challenge of

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responding to different cultures is also increasingly important for early childhood services. The need to recognise and meet the needs of children from different cultures is likely to increase again as the Government pushes ahead with its plans to raise participation from certain ethnic groups. Services must also learn to cope with children and families in which more than one ethnic group is represented with mixed ethnicity becoming more common in New Zealand.

Early childhood services need to make sure children are offered a rich diversity of experiences

However, amid all the challenges, the most important role for the early childhood education sector remains to be there for children. As more families have two working parents and working hours get longer, children are spending more hours in the day and more weeks of the year in early childhood education, sometimes from a very young age. This makes it all the more important that early childhood services provide environments that do not just tick all the boxes in meeting regulations but are actually good for children to be in.

The challenge for early childhood services is to make sure that children grow up to be happy and healthy people who can adapt easily to change and make their way in a globalised society. Early childhood services must also connect with their families to ensure children are getting the best out of their home-life, especially if family time is limited due to the pressures of work.

Early childhood services need to make sure children are offered

a rich diversity of experiences in those early years, which lay the foundation for learning and success later on. These experiences should not only focus on the academic things such as reading and writing, but also the wider experiences that childhood should bring such as climbing a tree, watching raindrops slide down a window, riding a train and meeting many different people, all of which help children understand the world around them.

Many of our early childhood services are already doing these things, and doing them well. What they need now is the support to be able to continue and build on their good work.

There are signs that things may be changing in the ECE sector. Two advisory groups set up by Education Minister Hekia Parata, have made a number of recommendations about the quality of care sector-wide, and the care of under-2s specifically. These recommendations include improving adult-child ratios for under-2s, regulating group sizes, increasing the number of qualified teachers and better supporting professional development, and changing the licensing process to a three yearly renewal cycle.

These are not new issues, they have previously been raised by people working in the sector. Ms Parata has asked the Ministry of Education to advise which of the recommendations can be implemented in the short-term and which need further work, but it remains to be seen if any of the suggestions will be acted upon. In the meantime, early childhood services must continue to strive at ground level to give our children the support they need.