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Invited Panel Discussant

My view of early childhood education and care policy comes from a centre perspective. To give you some context for my remarks the centre is community based and has four sections [two under two and two over two] with a mixture of full time and part time children. We have 32 staff, including myself as Director and an Office Administrator.

Policies have a profound effect on centres such as ours. They guide and drive enrolment procedures, internal policies, staffing policies and fee structures.

An example is the under two/over two division. The structure of the centre derives from this division, the funding associated with the policy, and the demand for places from University students and staff. In the best interests of the children as they transition into a larger, busier, more bustling group, we would prefer it to be an under three/over three split to enable them to cope better with the demands of the older age group. However to remain financially viable, it remains as it is. We strive to overcome the issues that result from these policy factors with carefully thought out transition procedures that support children and families throughout this process.

Policy constrains flexibility at times, particularly concerning enrolments. Though we operate with a part time and full time roll it is not always possible to satisfy the wants of families. The need to keep rolls at a certain level –we have minimum hours; maintain staff/child ratios, registered teacher and staff hour count requirements sometimes means that we cannot offer families what they really need. I am not saying that the regulatory requirements are not necessary, but it is sometimes a juggling act with families as the balls.

Every three years we are faced with the worry of what a new Government might mean for early childhood education. Both Sarah Farquhar and Frances Press stressed the need for stability of policies, something I heartily agree with. A stable and consistent environment is something we do our utmost to provide for children and families and it is as vital for centre management and teachers as well.

It is difficult to achieve strategic goals when the playing field changes at what sometimes seems to be a whim of Government. A case in point is the policy changes regarding funding. Not so much a whim as a thunderbolt. It has had a significant effect on the centre's operation and staffing profile and we are working hard to ensure it has a minimum impact on the programme.

Stability and consistency come from sound strategic planning. Every policy that is written in the centre has at its foundation the guiding principles of the centre's Strategic Plan which provides the framework for planning: building on what has gone before. We lament the loss of Ngā Huarahi Arataki: Pathways to the Future. The early childhood sector was building; creating a sense of professionalism and purpose. My question is: How can sound policy be created without it?

From a centre perspective policy should be creating conditions that will enable us to build the capacity of each member of a community. To do that we need policy that allows us to:

- build strong relationships between children, teachers, colleagues and families
- have sustained interactions with children
- have “time” to stop and listen; engage in professional dialogue with colleagues; read; research; to think; to challenge ourselves and each other.
- employ qualified, registered early childhood teachers
- build teacher capacity with ongoing professional development
- develop innovative programmes
- research, recognise and take advantage of opportunities for continuous improvement.