

Charters: The Great Disappointment in Early Childhood Services

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ABSTRACT: *This paper addresses the usefulness of early childhood centre charters. A study of people's experiences of chartering in nine kindergartens, playcentres and childcare centres was carried out between 1989 and 1990. A follow-up of the same centres was carried out in 1993. From the beginning of 1990 all nine centres had commenced work on areas within the Ministry of Education's charter guidelines, even on areas that proved to be difficult and highly contentious. Teachers and managers were sharing their views and opinions on ways to improve centre quality and they were also making significant effort to consult and involve parents. Charters started to lose credibility early when centres noted that the different education agencies were not always in agreement on what should be in charters. Credibility was further reduced at the end of 1990 when centres learned that the Ministry of Education were yet to approve charters despite centres rushing to complete them by an initial 1 July 1990 deadline. Charter changes came in with a change of government from Labour to National at the end of 1990. These changes nullified the progress centres had started to make in developing policies and practices of higher quality, and consulting with parents. At the end of 1993 all nine centres continued to view the charter primarily as a bureaucratic requirement.*

In 1985 the Labour Government hosted the first ever forum of representatives from early childhood services. The Government appeared to support the existence of diversity in provisions for early childhood education and care but wanted more central control over the quality of service delivery. As Hon. Russell Marshall, then Minister of Education, said to participants at the forum:

Mosaics are comprised of individual pieces - like the early childhood world. As pieces of the mosaic you differ in size, in composition, in colour, in philosophy and in texture, and no one would want to change your individuality ... Yet an assortment of pieces does not make a mosaic. A mosaic must be planned, designed, ordered and made (Marshall, 1985, p. 20)

It seemed that the Labour Government in 1987 had even stronger ambitions to introduce change in the structuring and quality of the early childhood education sector. A review of early childhood policy was commissioned (The Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group, 1988). The Working Group recommended a number of significant changes in the funding, regulation, monitoring and accountability of early childhood services. The Early Childhood Management Handbook (1989) on minimum licensing standards and charters followed the report of the Working Group. The Management Handbook specified areas within which centres had to show improvements over a period of time negotiated with the Ministry of Education. The areas included curriculum, staffing, relationships with parents, families and whanau, the Treaty of Waitangi, provision for special needs children, and physical environment.

Central to the process of reform in the early childhood sector was the concept of the "charter". The Working Group (1988) defined that the charter as a "two-way" contract: "between the service and its community (the parents/whanau); and between the service and the government" (p. 50). The Working Group's report added that the charter represents an expression of partnership between services, community and the Ministry of Education.

The involvement of immediate stakeholders in early childhood education, namely parents, centre managers and teachers, in charters reflected a model of partnership with the State. Policy analysts, however, have argued that reforms within New Zealand's education system have been more about the centralisation of the functions of policy-making and fiscal and managerial control than about working in partnership to solve educational issues (Codd and Gordon, 1991; Dale and Jesson, 1992; Nash, 1989).

According to Meade (1991) the Working Group believed that through developing charters the quality of processes in centres would be enhanced because managers would need to involve parents, teachers and the centre's community in consultation about goals, objectives and practices. Centres would have a charter which

articulated management plans to meet government specified quality requirements in a range of areas as well as documented progress in reaching even higher standards. Centres also needed to look towards better meeting community needs, and a first step towards this was to define their community and to consult with parents and others with a direct interest in their service.

The literature on educational change suggests that the concept of the charter developed along this partnership model is a positive one (Instance and Love, 1991; Spidell-Rusher, McGrevin and Lambiotte, 1992). By introducing the concept of the charter as being founded on collaboration between the State and individual services the Labour Government demonstrated respect for the perspectives and philosophies of the different early childhood services. The literature indicates that when people at the grass-roots-level feel that their views are valued and respected they are more likely to accept and to action the directives they receive from administrators and policy makers (Spidell-Rusher *et al*, 1992).

Clearly then the charter was intended to convey to services a sense of ownership of change. There is evidence in the literature (Weindling, 1989) that to have such a sense of ownership results in stronger and more enduring positive change. It was also intended that the charter would result in teachers engaging in regular self and programme evaluation, and that they would view parents as important partners in providing for children's education. There is substantial evidence in the literature on the importance of self-reflective practice (Duff, Brown and Scoy, 1995) and knowing parents' views and wishes (Rosenthal, 1991) in order to provide a high quality education for children.

The impact of charters on early childhood centres is important to study in order to know whether the concept of the charter has been achieved. There has been very little research in this area. The focus of this paper is on whether the process of charter development engendered a sense of ownership of change and reflected the model of partnership as intended. The main objective of the study was to see what the change management process was like for people in different types of early childhood centres during the first year of charter development and to re-assess the effectiveness of charters after they had been chartered for three years.

METHOD

The main part of the study covered the period of initial charter development in centres between October/November 1989 and December 1990. A follow-up survey was carried out in August 1993. When the research began kindergartens, playcentres and childcare centres, but not Te Kohanga Reo or playgroups, were required by the Ministry of Education to negotiate a charter if they wished to receive funding from the Education Budget.

There were four kindergartens, three childcare centres and two playcentres in the study. All centres were located in the Otago region of New Zealand. The number of each type of centre sampled reflected the relative size of each service nationally, with kindergartens being the largest service. A small sample of centres with diverse characteristics was chosen so that the process of charter development could be studied in depth. The centres differed in type of management, programme, teacher-child ratio, group size and geographical location.

One method of data collection involved observation of discussion and activities at centre consultation meetings, including committee, parent and staff meetings as well as family functions at centres and at parents' homes between November 1989 and June 1990.

In addition three meetings at the University for committee/parent and staff representatives from each of the nine centres were arranged and held at strategic points in the chartering process. The first meeting for centre representatives was held in early March 1990 near the start of the charter writing process for centres, a second meeting was held in June which was close to the Ministry of Education's deadline for charters to be written, and the third in November by which time centres were to be chartered according to the Ministry of Education's time line. The first two meetings of centre representatives provided a forum for people to discuss and share their views and experiences of consultation and charter preparation with each other. The meetings were well supported, probably because representatives realised the benefits of discussing issues, gaining ideas from one other and support in what was a difficult process of charter development.

At the third and final meeting, summaries of the process of charter development in each of the centres and written transcripts of tape recorded discussions from the previous two meetings were provided for representatives to read, correct and add to where necessary. This provided confirmatory evidence of the data collected through observation at meetings at each of the centres and the meetings for centre representatives. Further evidence was collected as a result of centre representatives reflection and discussion of the data records.

A follow-up survey of the same centres in the study sample was conducted in August 1993 (Smith and Farquhar, 1994). A mixture of open-ended and closed questions were asked about modifications to the charter, the importance of the charter, staff and parent input, satisfaction with the process and recommendations. All nine centres responded.

At three centres the respondents to the survey had been employed for less than 18 months, and they were thus not familiar with the initial process of charter writing at their centres. It should be noted that despite being in positions of responsibility at their centres these three respondents stated they were still to fully learn and understand the contents of the centre's charter. Even before presenting the results of the study this information in itself, suggests that charters have come to have low priority in the work of people in charge at centres.

FINDINGS

Partnership

At the beginning of the chartering process centres were enthusiastic and committed to preparing a charter. All felt unsure about how best to proceed with the task and felt daunted by the work that lay ahead. The education agencies had only just been formed at the time that centres were faced with coming to terms with the contents of the Management Handbook. Centres reported that they often received conflicting information and advice from the Ministry of Education and the Early Childhood Development Unit about what they should and should not do in regards to meeting minimum licensing standards, carrying out consultation for their charter, and drafting their charter. One playcentre representative summed up the problem in this way:

We could have done with something in the beginning to help us to be confident, to know that we're doing the right thing and that we, the Ministry, and the ECDU are working together.

Although centres received instructions on charter preparation during October 1989, seven of the nine centres did not start preparing their charter until February 1990. There were a number of reasons for this and probably the strongest was that centres were preoccupied with the proposed new licensing standards and decided to leave charters until the new year. The district branch of the Ministry required that consultation be completed and draft charters received by the end of May 1990 to allow sufficient time for negotiation before the 1 July 1990 deadline for approval. The fear among centres was that if charters were not approved by this deadline government funding of their service would cease. This fear, coupled with the short time frame for preparation and a feeling of insufficient support and inconsistent information from education agencies, caused unnecessary panic and stress. One kindergarten teacher's reflection was:

Looking back on it, it was a relatively simple exercise if it was taken slower and more organised.

In November, centre representatives reported that they had little (or no) enthusiasm left for their charter and they felt upset and angered at the absence of a quick and positive response from the Ministry of Education to their draft charters. As one kindergarten representative said:

I feel it's all been rather an anti-climax. We rushed with our charter and then what happens - the Ministry hasn't even looked at it. They put the pressure on us and it has turned out to be needless.

They had all found a lack of external support and praise for the voluntary work many parents, committee members and staff had undertaken. They felt that they had been unduly pressured to put a lot of time into

consultation and preparing a charter when in the end the task became one of simply re-iterating what the Ministry wanted to see in their charters.

The government's promise of partnership in the process of educational change and improvement had not been fulfilled. At all centres charter negotiation was found to be a one-way rather than a two-way process with centre views and community wishes being regarded by the Ministry of Education as superfluous in the charter. In the words of one kindergarten committee member:

The Ministry gave a new meaning to "negotiate". We have to negotiate. They don't have to.

In 1993 the failed promise of partnership was reflected in the responses of centre supervisors/directors to the survey. For example one supervisor commented that at her playcentre they:

... felt the whole thing was a big farce and were very put off; it has taken a whole new "generation" of parents in the centre to get rid of this feeling.

What the centres, however, were unaware of in 1990 was that the Ministry had their hands tied because they could not approve charters until legislation for licensing standards had been passed as part of the Education Regulations in September 1990. The Ministry revised the charter requirements in the Management Handbook (1989) and the new requirements were published in The Education Gazette (1990) under the title of *Desirable Objectives and Practices* (or DOPs for short). Publication in the Gazette gave charters legal status

In reading the DOPs it is clear that the Ministry did not need to work in partnership with centres, or to be legally bound to do so. The DOPs suggested a change towards more government say and less centre autonomy to define quality. It included the Ministry's Legal Division advice to change wording from "this charter is an agreement between the management of __ centre and the Minister of Education" (Management Handbook, 1989, p. 2) to "the charter is an undertaking to the Minister of Education by the management of the early childhood service concerned" (The Education Gazette supplement, 1990, p. 1). The ability of centres to negotiate how and at what levels charter standards would be met was taken away. The Ministry and the Education Review Office became interested only in checking that charters restated the DOPs statement and that centres were in compliance.

The early souring of relationships between centres and the Ministry of Education due to administrative delays and lack of support does not appear to have improved over time. In 1993 visits by the Education Review Office were the main reason for eight of the nine centres reviewing the charter and continuing to refer to it to check that they were complying with it. When asked what the role of the various education agencies was with respect to charters all respondents made brief comments along the lines of:

ERO is the main reason the charter gets discussed at all

Very little (contact with agencies) except for guidelines.

One ERO review 2 years ago.

The Playcentre Association keeps us up to date on any requirements of the Ministry.

In short, the evidence suggests that a relationship of partnership did not form between early childhood services and the State and its education agencies. Instead a top-down or regulatory approach to charters exists.

Change Management

The process of preparing draft charters in 1990 led to all centres defining their community and seeking ways (which were often innovative) of involving parents and community members in open discussion about the centre's programme and management. Regardless of type of centre, problems were experienced in obtaining parent participation in all centres. Low turnouts were common at charter discussion meetings and centres used incentives such as holding fish 'n chip evenings, barbecues, and even a meeting at a local hotel with a free

supper provided to attract more parent participation. Supervisor/director and manager explanations for difficulties in obtaining parent involvement covered the following issues

We hear the comment of “my children won’t be here when it’s in place (the charter) so why should I be involved”

Parents are busy, they work all day and they’ve got to go home to preschoolers and bath them, put them to bed, do the washing and ironing

People are equating our meetings with the Board of Trustees (schools). They just don’t want to put themselves in the position where they are involved to a large extent

Parents are quite cynical and think this is more government bullshit.

In June 1990 representatives from the centres were asked about the groups they consulted with and how useful this had been. Parents were the main group consulted with at every centre, because as one childcare director said: “they are our immediate community”. Six of the nine centres also involved local Maori and members of the District Kohanga Reo Trust in charter discussions. Five of the centres reported that this had been useful for learning how to develop a more bicultural programme for their children and to work out what their obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi were. Table 1 shows their ratings of the usefulness of consultation with different groups on a four-point scale (“4” most useful, “3” useful, “2” somewhat useful and “1” not useful).

TABLE 1 Ratings of the Perceived Usefulness of Consultation with Various Groups

	Parents	Local Community	Maori People	Local Schools
Playcentre A	3	-	-	-
Playcentre B	3	2	3	
Kindergarten C	3	2	2	-
Kindergarten D	4	2	3	4
Kindergarten E	4	1	3	2
Kindergarten F	4	2	4	3
Childcare G	2		-	-
Childcare H	3	-		-
Childcare I	4	2	3	2

The charter development process resulted in enhanced communication between parents, staff, committee members and managers. Parents had opportunities to ask questions about practices and to make their needs known. Staff who had previously not had much, if any, involvement in decisions about centre operation became more knowledgeable about management matters and more vocal in conveying their points of view and needs to managers/committees. Parents and staff learnt more and understood better their centre’s philosophy and practices. Charter development provided staff with the opportunity to discuss their values and programme philosophy with each other and with parents, for example, playcentre representatives reported that as a result of consultation they realised that parents were not all as well informed about playcentre philosophy as they had previously taken for granted they were.

At one kindergarten the teachers become aware of the views of some parents which they believed to be unfair. They then sought to communicate the correct information, for example, that fathers were indeed welcome after

a father had written that he thought he and other fathers were not allowed to be part of the kindergarten. At one childcare centre some parents asked to know how the money received from government and their fees was spent. The manager agreed to increase the visibility of spending for parents.

Other significant changes as a result of charter development included efforts by teachers at all centres to introduce some Maori language and aspects of culture into their programmes. Centre managers and committee members were challenged to look at how they were meeting their obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi. All three childcare centres were developing plans for ensuring the training of all non-qualified staff and preparing policy to employ only trained staff in the future. The four kindergartens were attempting to improve the quality of adult-child interactions by lobbying for a further trained teacher and being firmer with parents about needing their assistance in the programme. One kindergarten had started to maintain its group size at a level slightly lower than the then maximum of 40 children so that the teachers could spend more time with each child. The Management Handbook (1989) requirement that provision has to be made for special needs children because they are entitled to be taught in the same setting as other children, stimulated much discussion amongst parents, staff, and management on how they could achieve this for any special needs child who enrolled.

However, by 1993 there seemed to be little evidence that charters were continuing to provide grounds for positive changes in centres. Under the Management Handbook (1989) centres were required to work towards better standards than the licensing minimum in areas such as group size, employing trained staff and staff-to-child ratios. Under the DOPs there are no such requirements. Specification of commitment to meeting the Treaty of Waitangi and a detailed plan of progress towards biculturalism is not required now under the DOPs. Centres do not have to accept the enrolment of any child with special needs and they do not need to provide a programme which ensures that special needs children have contact with other children all of the time.

The main changes centres have made to their charters overtime have been at the request of ERO and the Ministry, and these have been to check on the wording of certain statements and to include new policies, such as a policy on child abuse. One of the playcentres in the follow-up survey reported that their Playcentres Association's policies had provided more valuable guidance for improving programme quality than their charter.

At eight of the nine centres in 1993 the charter was only discussed because it is a requirement that it be regularly reviewed and that centres ensure that the stated policies are practised. As one playcentre commented:

The charter is just one more thing which needs to be discussed at meetings and people are in a hurry to get home and unwilling to spend much time on it.

The remaining centre which continues to use its charter as a tool for self-evaluation and programme improvement, was also the centre in 1990 which individualised its charter the most. In 1990 this childcare centre took up the task of charter preparation to not only gain government funding and status as a chartered service but also for promoting staff development. The centre's director stated that the charter in 1993 is still

... referred to, sets guidelines for decision-making and is something we all feel we have "ownership" of. We will aim to update more regularly. It's now on computer which will assist this process.

Charters still provide a basis for centres to consult with parents but this consultation when (and in some centres 'if') carried out takes the form of either discussing sections of the *DOPs* (as written into their charters) at committee and parent council meetings, or displaying charter policies for parents to read. Centres no longer have to find ways of obtaining and encouraging parents' input. Parents' and teachers' views do not need to be addressed in current charters.

The delay in the approval process of draft charters in 1990 meant that there were changes in parents and staff who had not participated in the original consultation process and were unfamiliar with their centre's charter. In 1993 the sense of ownership of the changes made in centres and knowledge of decisions about programme improvement during 1990 was essentially lost because the original draft charters prepared by centres were no longer valued and wanted by the Ministry.

DISCUSSION

This paper has shown that positive changes were happening in centres during the preparation of charters at the end of 1989/early 1990. The evidence suggests, however, that charters have become ineffective as a basis for programme quality improvement through involving parents in decision-making and working in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. A partnership between the State and services has not resulted as intended by The Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group (1988). Charters have not provided a nationally directed incentive for centres to upgrade their quality.

Was it not for the initial delays in administration and the replacement of the Management Handbook with DOPs it is likely that charters would be continuing to provide a challenge to centre staff and parents to do better in their programmes. The process would be enhanced if the emphasis shifted from the Ministry stating what should be in charters to centres taking a participatory approach to developing and revising statements, engaging in self-evaluation, and working towards higher quality from their perspectives and values.

It is a dangerous sign of stagnation in quality improvement in the early education sector that providers can now claim to be providing a quality service simply by being chartered (*i.e.* meeting the *DOPs*). There is no form of “quality” assurance currently in place in the early childhood service that takes account of other stakeholder views such as parents, children and teachers. Charters had potential to be the basis of consensus between services and the State in ways of working towards higher quality. But as the study has shown this did not result.

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