

Qualifications, Gender and Income: Inter-Related Issues in the Early Education Sector

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Abstract:

Teachers in early education remained, in 1994, among the lowest paid and lowest qualified of all education groups. One reason for this is that the area is dominated by women, who tend to price their services lower than men, and who may not have other career options. This article provides an analysis linking the issues of income, qualification and gender. Arguments for improving the status of early education and the standard of programme quality experienced by children through increasing the required qualifications of teachers and encouraging more men into the profession are presented. The higher cost of early education due to higher qualification requirements and the entry of people (including men) who see this as a viable career alternative could be offset by an increase in government subsidies and a rise in demand for higher quality services.

The complaints of many people working in the field of early education and care include low wages, poor conditions of work, stress, and low social regard for the importance of their work. The blame, however, should not be placed solely on macro-level factors such as government regulations about teacher-child ratios, social beliefs about the value of caring work, and low occupational status. The early childhood sector has a responsibility for its own conditions and status. Change can, and should, be effected from within the field as well as from outside it.

There is much that can be done by members of the early childhood sector to change their Cinderella standing in the education system and in society. A key way, I wish to argue, is to examine the characteristics of those who are admitted to the profession and participate in it. Only the very best people, men as well as women, who are well-educated

professionally and academically, should be teaching and caring for young children and families.

My analysis shows that two issues of qualifications and gender are inextricably linked. This connection has been missed by New Zealand writers who have mainly explained the low status of early childhood work in relation to the unpaid work of mothers and the dominance of women in the early education sector (Cook, 1985; Cooper and Tangaere, 1994; Fasting, 1992; May, 1990; Meade, 1990). Serious consideration has not been given to changing the female-dominated nature of the sector, nor to the effects of such a move on the profession and on the quality of children's experiences in programmes. The argument usually presented is for public recognition of the real financial value of women's work in early education. But the demand for services would drop if wages rose significantly without other changes such as recognised improvements in the standard of teachers' qualifications.

The first section of this paper looks at the literature on the importance of education and training for teachers and presents information on current educational and training standards in New Zealand. The second section reviews the literature on why working with children should not exclusively be a women's job and discusses why gender bias should be seen as an issue affecting men, the quality of early childhood teaching and the social and economic status of the profession. Affirmative action employment policies for men or other such measures to increase the number of men or encourage more highly educated people into the profession are not considered in this paper because they are only temporary solutions. The problem is wider in terms of the cost of services and teachers' incomes. The paper concludes with an argument for improving the status of the profession and standards in the workforce by raising qualification requirements which in turn would lead to higher incomes for teachers and encourage more sole household income earners (especially men) into the profession.

Educated Teachers Are Good

A saying is that those who can, do, and those who can't, teach, and those who can't teach teach the teachers. On the contrary, Snook (1992:24) argues that "teaching is a profession which belongs to educated people". Given the cogent research evidence on the educational, economic and social importance of the early years of children's development, we clearly cannot afford to have people working in early education who are not well-educated (Belsky, Steinberg and Walker, 1982; Lazar and Darlington, 1982; Weikart, 1982).

In the quest for quality early education there is a strong rationale for focusing on the nature of early childhood teacher training and the educational background of those who work in early education settings. Research shows that the key determinant of the quality of children's care and education is the competence and quality of the teaching professional (Smith, White, Hubbard, Ford and Lai, 1994; Whitebook, Howes, Phillips, and Pemberton, 1989). Quality, as measured in positive child development outcomes, is not determined by whether a centre provides the latest educational equipment and materials, but how the equipment and materials are used and the social interactions that are involved and managed by the teacher (Lanser and McDonnell, 1991). Research by Tizard and associates (1976) shows that children only benefit from an improved teacher-child ratio if teachers view their role as educational rather than supervisory and if they are involved with the children in their activities. Wilson (1988) suggests that teacher education is vital regardless of how good a person appears to be with young children. He argues that while "born" teachers have charisma, subject knowledge and pedagogical skills can only be developed through course work.

From a child development perspective good teachers are the key to making a learning environment an optimal one for children. For example, Athey (1994:20) explains that:

the level of development of thinking in the children is inferred by teachers from what they see children doing, from their patterns of action and the products and outcomes of that learning. A non-professional can observe what children are doing but be unable to set these observations in the context of learning and behaviour.

A knowledge of child development and educational theory influences the ability of teachers to interact with children, affecting, for example, their level of sensitivity and involvement in children's activities (Howes, 1983; Smith et al., 1994; Whitebook et al., 1989). Berk (1985:124) found that the more educated teachers, who were also more likely to be aware of current educational philosophies, were the ones who "engaged in the most encouragement, teacher direction, and development of verbal skills". According to Feeney and Chun (1985), trained staff tend to have more contacts with children of an encouraging and rewarding nature than untrained staff.

Research has further suggested that in addition to skills-based training a relevant university education is highly desirable. For example, White (1993) examined whether trained teachers who have a degree and those who don't have a degree differ in their interactions with four-year-old children. She found the main differences were between the early

childhood degreed teacher and the teachers who were either non-degreed or held a degree in another area of education. The early childhood degreed teacher worked more appropriately and effectively with the children than the other teachers. Her philosophy was found to be consistently evident in all her interactions with the children.

Snook (1992:13-14) argues that "prospective teachers should be recruited from the most academically able and challenged to perform at the highest level of academic excellence". Research by Meade (1985) has shown how important it is that teachers think about and reflect on their practices. This is an ability that is dependent on having a strong knowledge base and analysis skills. Furthermore, teachers should be "knowledgeable concerning various theories and believe that one or more of them can explain child development and behaviour – but only part of it" (Palmerus, 1992:11).

Concerns about education and standard of training

The quality of training courses for people in early education (for example, access to teaching resources) must be questioned given that there are now a large number of training providers. The quality of applicants for positions in courses must also be questioned given the competition for students that exists amongst training providers. The 1993/4 slump in applications for early childhood teacher training at colleges of education was blamed on "increased competition from private providers and bad publicity for childcare" (*Sunday Times*, 1993:10). The principal of Christchurch College of Education described this as adversely affecting the quality of the student intake. At Wellington College of Education where a rolling system for applications had been adopted, 120 applications for the 80-100 positions available were received under the first round. As at February 1994, 36 different early childhood training courses had been approved by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. The chaotic nature of training options for people in the early education sector is supported by the NZQA in determining what courses are worth what number of points (this will be further explained).

It was government policy that by the year 2000 all early childhood teachers should reach three-year training equivalence (Allan, 1989). A review and rationalisation of qualifications and training for early childhood workers started as part of the national reforms in education. Prior to the Education (Early Childhood Centres) Regulations (1990), kindergartens were bound by the Kindergarten Regulations (1959) to employ only staff who held a kindergarten diploma, unless a small Grade

“O” kindergarten, in which case an untrained assistant helped the teacher. Under the now revoked Childcare Regulations (1960), licensed childcare centres were categorised on the basis of staff qualification: Class “A” centres with at least one person, usually the supervisor, who held a recognised qualification; and Class “B” centres which met all licensing standards but did not have a supervisor with a qualification as listed in the Regulations.

When the NZQA was established in mid-1990 it was agreed that because a large proportion of early childhood teachers had only 40 licensing points (equivalent to a one-year qualification) or 80 points (equivalent to a two-year qualification) their practical experiences would be recognised to assist them in up-grading to 120 points (three-year training equivalence). This “grand-parenting” was to have been phased out by the beginning of 1995.

In the 1991 Government Budget, however, 100 licensing points from 1 January 1995 was set as the requirement for persons responsible in early childhood centres. Meade and Dalli (1991) argue that this was a “neither fish nor fowl” decision as there is no 100 points qualification. “For years, those in early childhood care and education in Aotearoa/New Zealand have aspired to the benchmark of three year training to help realise the goal of a quality service as well as to enhance the professional status of early childhood staff”, but now “incentives for obtaining certificates have diminished”. Current education policy on early childhood teacher training does not support a coherent approach to teaching students a core set of principles, theories and skills over an extended period of time. There are no specified qualifications for early childhood teachers in the Education Regulations 1990. What constitutes a “qualification” is defined by the NZQA, and influenced by the Government.

Furthermore, the supervisor or person who has overall responsibility for children in a centre, and this may involve as few as three children or as many as 50-plus, is not required to hold a minimum of a Diploma of Teaching.

In 1989 a qualifications and training survey showed that 34 percent of people working in a range of different early childhood centres had no formal training (Allan, 1989). The most common qualifications were the Kindergarten Union Diploma, Primary Teachers’ Certificate and Playcentre Association Certificate. However, the researchers noted that a large group of disparate qualifications and experience outweighed in number the formally recognised qualifications.

Current data obtained from the Ministry of Education’s annual survey of staffing shows that the majority of staff in the three largest early childhood services do not have three-year training equivalence or a Diploma (see Table 1). The kindergarten service continues to recruit mainly Diploma qualified staff (97.9 percent). The majority of playcentre staff do not hold even 80 licencing points (93.6 percent). Half the staff working in childcare centres with regular child attendances hold 100 points or more (50.5 percent), but of these only 30.5 percent hold a Diploma of Teaching or equivalence. Across these services, there are more staff who do not have three-year equivalence (56.6 percent) than staff who do (43.3 percent). In other types of early childhood services the training level of staff is even lower.¹

Table 1 Staffing of three early childhood services in full-time equivalents by NZQA points during the week 29 June to 3 July 1993

| | Kindergarten | | Playcentre | | Childcare (regular) | | Total | |
|---------------------|--------------|------|------------|------|---------------------|------|--------|------|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| 120 pts/Dip. Tching | 1566.7 | 97.9 | 29.1 | 3.7 | 1336.5 | 30.5 | 2932.3 | 43.3 |
| 100 points | 2.9 | n/a | n/a | | 876.7 | 20.0 | 879.6 | 13.0 |
| 80 points | 4.2 | n/a | 21.8 | 2.7 | 351.0 | 8.0 | 377.0 | 5.6 |
| Under 80 points | 6.3 | 1.6 | 741.6 | 93.6 | 1811.1 | 41.4 | 2579.0 | 38.0 |

Table 2 presents data recently collected by Dr. Anne Smith on the educational background of staff working at 100 childcare centres in New Zealand. Note that the highest school leaving qualification for 51.5 percent of staff was only School Certificate or a lower level of attainment (Smith, 1995). Of even greater concern is that 23 percent of the supervisors in Smith’s study had not attained a School Certificate level of education and yet these supervisors had responsibility for children as well as for staff and centre management

Research by Cooper (1993) on New Zealand kindergarten and childcare teachers’ views about pre-service teaching courses suggests a perception that training largely involves developing competency or skills rather than gaining a knowledge base and theoretical understandings.

Table 2 Highest educational qualifications of staff and supervisors at 100 childcare centres licenced for under-two year old children

| | Staff % | Supervisors Only % |
|------------------------------|------------|--------------------------|
| Less than School Certificate | 29.5 | 23 |
| School Certificate | 22 | 21 |
| Sixth Form Certificate | 23 | 21 |
| Bursary or HSC | 10 | 4 |
| Some part of a degree | 10 | 20 |
| Bachelor's degree | 2.5 | 3 |
| Some graduate work | 0 | 2 |
| Master's degree | 0.5 | 0 |
| Another advanced degree | 0.5 | 6 |

The study's findings suggest that teacher educators need to examine what messages they are conveying to teachers and student teachers about the importance of being "learned" professionals (Snook, 1992).

A review of the qualifications of early childhood teaching staff in colleges of education and the Waikato School of Early Childhood Studies indicates that professional qualifications, for example a playcentre or a kindergarten diploma, are highly valued for employment whereas comparatively fewer staff hold academic degrees. Table 3 provides a summary of the numbers of staff with degrees as listed in their institution's 1994 student calendar². It appears that a high number of teacher educators at tertiary level do not hold degrees, and of those who do, most have degrees at the bachelor's level.

Men Are Good Too

Male involvement in early childhood work holds benefits for children. A traditional reason for involving more men in early childhood work was to provide male role models for girls who did not have regular access to their father or a male caregiver. It was also to ensure that boys did not become overly "feminised" by female domination of their early years of development (Clyde, 1987). Another more recent reason for male

Table 3 Degree qualifications of college of education/school of early childhood studies staff

| | Doctorate | Master | Bachelor | No degree | Total |
|------------------|-----------|--------|----------|-----------|-------|
| Dunedin | - | 1 | 2 | 4 | 7 |
| Christchurch | - | 3 | 3 | 9 | 15 |
| Wellington | 1 | 2 | 5 | 13 | 21 |
| Palmerston North | - | - | 5 | 3 | 8 |
| Waikato | 1 | 5 | 2 | 5 | 13 |
| Auckland | 1 | 2 | 3 | 12 | 18 |

involvement is the argument that children should have both male and female role models who do not show traditional sex-stereotyped behaviours and attitudes. The androgyny argument is a strong one. For example, male early childhood teachers can show boys and girls that men can be just as caring, loving and understanding as women. Boys and girls who grow up and become parents are likely to share more evenly child-caring tasks if they themselves have experienced care from male role models.

Greater male participation in early childhood work may increase women's opportunities for promotion in the education system (Dunn, Pole and Rouse, 1992). It could also lead to improvements in wages across the early education sector and to a change in societal perception of the value of working with young children. According to Cook (1983), maintaining early education work as the women's domain has been both a hindrance and an advantage to women. It offered employment opportunities and led to a women's theoretical perspective on education, but it also meant that their work was socially and financially devalued. For example, a recent report on teachers across the education sector states that "since women made up 99 percent of the kindergarten workforce in 1990 the disadvantage relative to workers in other areas of education impacts almost entirely on women" (Dunn et al., 1992:34). Consequently kindergarten teacher salaries averaged only 73 percent of the average for teachers in all other sector groups.

From the perspectives of what is best for children's development, the status of early education, and the incomes of people working in the sector, involving men should be seen to be highly desirable. Members of the early childhood profession need to consider carefully whether the

benefits as pointed out by Cook (1983) outweigh the disadvantages of maintaining a female dominated profession. If not, then close examination of the current gender imbalance is needed to identify issues and strategies for bringing about change.

Gender bias exists: Why?

Interestingly the founder of the kindergarten movement, Frederick Froebel, had an all male staff (Clyde, 1987). But for the past 100 or so years early childhood education and care has existed as a women's sphere (Cook, 1983). Testimony to this are recent statistics on the number of male in comparison to female teachers in the three largest early childhood services (see Table 4).

Table 4 Early childhood centre staff full-time equivalents by gender during the week ending 3 July 1993

| | Male | | Female | |
|-----------------------------|------|-----|--------|------|
| | n | % | n | % |
| Kindergartens | 13.1 | 0.8 | 1587.1 | 99.2 |
| Playcentres | 10.5 | 1.3 | 781.9 | 98.7 |
| Childcare centres (regular) | 97.7 | 2.2 | 4277.6 | 97.8 |

The above comparison of the participation rate of men in the different services suggests that they are either more inclined to take up childcare work or that the probability of their being taken on as a recognised member of staff in a playcentre or kindergarten is much lower.

Table 5 below shows that of the men who take up early childhood work the majority have had little or no formal training. Men possibly find access to work in childcare centres easier to obtain because kindergartens mainly recruit Diploma level qualified staff and playcentres are staffed by parents who tend to be mothers and not main household income earners.

An in-depth study of the differences between male and female childcare workers, male childcare workers and male engineers in the United States revealed that male childcare workers were not as interested in money, career, or prestige as men in the more traditional career of engineering (Robinson, 1988). Like their female colleagues, the

Table 5 Total staffing of kindergarten, playcentres and childcare centres (regular) full-time equivalents by gender and training points during the week ending 3 July 1993

| | Male | | Female | |
|-----------------------|------|------|--------|------|
| | n | % | n | % |
| 120 Pts/Dip. Teaching | 24.1 | 19.9 | 2908.3 | 43.8 |
| 100 Points | 11.2 | 9.2 | 86.4 | 13.1 |
| 80 Points | 8.6 | 7.1 | 368.4 | 5.5 |
| Under 80 Points | 77.4 | 63.8 | 2501.6 | 37.6 |

male childcare workers priced their services lower than men involved in a traditional occupation and they were prepared to accept lower earnings. Over a two-year period most of the male childcare workers in the study had left their work (70 percent in comparison to 35 percent of women and 30 percent of the male engineers) due to poor salaries (85 percent were married heads of households with children) and the prejudicial attitudes of parents, the women they worked with, and administrators.

The findings of this study suggest that working in early education seems to be more financially possible for women than for men because males perceive themselves to be the ones most likely to be providing the main household income. The gender distinction between the earning roles of men and women is further reinforced by the tendency for mothers (not fathers) to give up paid employment and stay at home to care for children. Gender-role socialisation from an early age leads to boys seeking careers that show obvious strength and measurable competence, and working with young children is not considered acceptable for men (Seifert, 1988). In contrast, because girls learn from an early age that motherhood is a women's natural destiny and that they are suited to work that involves caring they tend to perceive themselves in careers such as early education (New and David, 1985). Women perceive themselves as likely to spend less time in the paid workforce than men and price their services lower than men's on average, thereby reinforcing the social perception of the lower value of women's work.

Gender bias in early education work is a significant issue particularly for men who do become involved. In the study by Robinson (1988:57):

many said they were treated with mistrust and suspicion by parents and their co-workers. Several men said that their colleagues believed that they, as women, were better equipped by nature to work with young children. Others reported beliefs that because they had never been mothers, their co-workers felt they could not make accurate judgments concerning discipline, the health of the children, and approaches to teaching and supervising children.

According to Seifert (1988:77) men in female-dominated occupations in contrast to women in male-dominated occupations “face more socialisation pressure: more doubts, especially in their own minds, about whether they really “care enough” about young children”. The following quote illustrates well the bias men experience:

Changing nappies is presented to us as such an integral part of motherhood that no researcher would ever ask a woman how often she did it – and had she ever changed a dirty one? For fathers, even those with relatively egalitarian views, it is still seen as an option. Women often find they cannot bear to stand back and let the man “make a mess of it” – “Let me do it!” (New and David, 1985:225).

Gender bias is also an issue for women in the early childhood sector. Clyde (1987) argues that women teachers are excellent in identifying stereotypes and unfair behaviour amongst children in their programmes and yet they are being biased in showing unfair behaviour towards men. Student teachers are reported to believe that men can not have a similar commitment to early childhood teaching to that of women, and that men behave very differently towards children compared with women (Clyde, 1992). Research evidence suggests that contrary to social beliefs, both sexes desire to be effective teachers and behave and interact with children in very similar ways (Clyde, 1987; Seifert, 1988).

The early childhood sector has engaged in little activity to support male early childhood workers over recent years when there has been much negative media publicity about sex abuse at a Christchurch childcare centre and also at a centre in Wellington by male staff. This may be because of the pride of teachers in the early childhood sector (who are predominantly women) in their work being a key source of employment for women (Cook, 1983). A support group for male kindergarten and primary teachers has only recently been agreed to be set up by male members of the New Zealand Educational Institute (*Evening Standard*, 1994). It is difficult to understand why this has not happened earlier given that the Institute has had a women’s network for many years and men supported its formation. The fact that women may also abuse children has been largely ignored within the early childhood sector and by the media.

Linking qualification and gender issues

We have to acknowledge that higher standards in early education through more and better qualified staff, and employing more men in early education are both desirable. The qualification level or educational expectations for those working in the sector should be raised. As long as standards are not increased early childhood teachers will continue to find it difficult to justify their claims for increased wages. The profession will continue to attract and retain women who do not price their services as high as men and who do not have higher income earning alternatives.

Raised qualification requirements would initially lead to there being more qualified people in the sector but fewer available people overall. In the long term it would lead to upward pressure on teacher incomes which would attract men and more career-minded and educated people. Early childhood teaching would come to be viewed as a serious career alternative by men, main household income earners, and people who have a wide choice of possible careers open to them due to their investment in education. This would then increase the social respectability of early childhood teaching and the status of the sector overall.

The downside is that the users (i.e., parents) of early education services would have to pay more. More highly qualified teachers cost more to employ. Also given the current gender bias and the adverse effect of publicity about male teachers and child abuse, wages might have to be higher than in other sectors of education to encourage men into the early childhood field. This once again raises the question of whether it is desirable to have higher qualifications, and as the first part of this article explains the answer is yes. In order to spread the benefits of higher educational ability and the employment of staff who view early education as a viable career as widely as possible, it would be necessary to do one or both of the following:

- increase government subsidies (for example, financial incentives for teachers to upgrade their basic educational and professional training qualifications); and
- raise demand for early childhood services.

Demand for early childhood services could be increased in a number of ways including: advertising the benefits of early education for children, encouraging employers to provide childcare facilities or employee assisted benefits, and promoting awareness campaigns on the need to pay more for higher quality services.

Conclusion

In this article evidence was presented of the low qualification and education level of teachers and the lack of men in the early education sector. It was argued that a high, not low, level of staff education is vital for the quality of early childhood programmes and that it is important for more men to be in the profession.

To gain a higher male participation rate higher wages would be necessary and the supply of women able to work in the sector would have to be reduced or the demand for services increased. This could be achieved through lifting the qualification requirement and also through awareness of the negative impact of gender bias for the profession and for children's educational experience. The higher price of early childhood services due to lifting the overall educational standard of people in the profession and enabling more men to see early education as a viable career alternative would likely lead to a lower demand for services. However, the lower demand for services could be positively offset by, for example, creative advertising to parents of the benefits of increased standards in early education. Parents are least likely to support services that have lower standards if they know what these are and what the long term cost for their children's learning and beliefs about gender roles might be.

Unfortunately in the current environment the average qualification level of people working in early education is likely to deteriorate further due to problems that include:

- a lowering of the minimum qualification (licensing points) requirement;
- a proliferation of training providers;
- efforts by some employer groups and training providers to control or to further lower the qualification requirements;
- the way decisions are made about what courses are recognised for early education staff and what courses are worth what number of licensing/training points; and
- continuing inequities between the wages of early childhood teachers and teachers in other sectors of education.

In an environment where the range of training providers has increased to a competitive level, the incentive to overcome set criteria standards for student selection and to put aside subjective criteria (quality of the person criteria) has strengthened. The goal of three-year full-time

training as the benchmark qualification for people working in early education to realise the goal of a quality service and enhance the status of the profession is moving further away rather than closer (Meade and Dalli, 1991).

Qualitative study of sexism in the views and practices of women (early) childhood teachers is needed in New Zealand to compare with overseas research findings before strategies to counter any sexism can be developed and promoted by early childhood groups. We also need New Zealand data on the experiences of male early childhood teachers, and on differences in the retention rates of male and female employees in the sector. The information and analysis provided in this article should lead to the questioning of policies that support gender inequality in the early childhood sector and the employment of people in a profession which should belong only to educated people (Snook, 1992).

The point made in the opening of this paper was that change should come from within the field as well as from outside it. A difficulty may be that it is in the interests of those currently working in the field for change not to occur for reasons of job security and self-motivation to increase qualifications. This is why other stakeholders in the quality of early education (namely the Government and service users or parents) have a vital role to play in insisting on and supporting change.

Notes

1. The Data Management and Analysis Section of the Ministry of Education also surveyed childcare centres with casual rolls, independent Te Kohanga Reo, independent Pacific Island Language groups and Home-based co-ordinators. The data for these groups are not included here because of their comparatively small numbers of staff.
2. Note that not all staff degrees are necessarily in education (e.g., biology, French, English), some staff completed their degrees as long as 20 and even 30 years ago, some staff with degrees work part-time, and not all staff listed in their institution's 1994 calendar have continued working for their institution (for example, the PhD staff member at Wellington College of Education left at the beginning of 1994 for a university position).

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