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Children's Rights and Early Childhood Policy: Impacts and Influences

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Abstract:

A combination of research and policy initiatives in early childhood has resulted in a growing interest in young children's rights. It is a complex discourse characterised by ambiguous understandings of what children's rights are. This article discusses some of the main early childhood policies and documents from the mid-1980s until the release of the Strategic Plan *(Ministry of Education, 2002), with a focus on children's rights – a focus that has been, at times, subsumed by other contextual influences, including political and economic agendas. While research findings and policy initiatives now appear to be more aligned, children as citizens with rights are still vulnerable.*

The 2004 Budget announcement was a cause for celebration for the early childhood education and care sector in New Zealand. Significant new funding to support the implementation of the *Strategic Plan* included 20 hours of free early childhood education for three and four year-olds in community-based services, as well as new requirements for qualified teachers.[1] After decades of reform and retrenchment, Cinderella may well be back at the ball (Dalli, 1990). As the Minister 's Fact Sheet states:

> Quality early childhood education has a dramatic impact on a child. Research shows that intensive and regular participation in quality early childhood education delivers long-term educational benefits for children. In total Budget 2004 will see an additional $365 million spent on early childhood education over the next four years. (Mallard, 2004, p. 1)

In this article I explore some of the key early childhood education policies, regulation documents and reports since the late 1980s and analyse them with a focus on children's rights. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) (Office of the Commissioner for Children [OCC], n. d.) establishes rights, or entitlements, for children that are universally applicable. Many government departments and non-governmental organisations use UNCROC as a guide to children's rights. It is the foundation for the work of the OCC in New Zealand. UNCROC is based on the principle of acting in the best interests of the child, but there "are a number of complex assumptions about the relationship between culture and human rights, and about the universality of the child's 'best interests' – what constitutes 'best' and who decides?" (John, 1996, p. 7). There are political, and indeed moral considerations regarding not just the rights of children, but also the status of children, particularly in relation to parental authority and state responsibility. While UNCROC does not specifically discuss children's right to an early childhood education, it certainly provides international leverage that supports both access to, and participation in, early education.

The discourse of children's rights in early childhood has gained prominence in the last decade (Dalli & Te One, 2003; Mitchell, 2003; Smith, 2003). Current policy initiatives such as the *Agenda for Children*, (Ministry of Social Development, 2002), and *Pathways to the Future*, (Ministry of Education, 2002) [*the Strategic Plan*], openly advocate a children's rights approach. In addition, the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum document, *Te Whāriki*, begins with an aspiration for children to have citizenship rights (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9). It supports the view of children as active participants, able to make decisions that concern them.

At a national level, many early childhood policy initiatives have concentrated on children's rights ***to*** early childhood education. Access and participation are key planks in policy documents that use research to show the social capital benefits gained from early childhood education of good quality. Researchers and child advocates have used Article 29, which says children have the right to achieve their educational potential, to argue for free, universal provision of early childhood education services (Noonan, 2001; Mitchell, 2003; Smith, Taylor & Gollop, 2000).

However research has also begun to examine *process* quality indicators (which include relationships and interactions between staff

and families), alongside *structural* quality indicators (i.e., adult:child ratios, group size, and staff training). This has broadened its focus, beyond the externals of mere attendance at an early childhood centre, towards an assessment of the quality of the experience for children while they are in the centre. There is a need to explore in more depth the rights of the child ***in*** early childhood education. The rhetoric of rights connects to principles of *Te Whāriki*, especially the principle of empowerment, which is used extensively by teachers in planning and assessing young children's learning. This is a central concept in UNCROC, especially Article 12, which articulates children's rights to participate in decisions that affect them. Previous experiences have indicated that teachers' talk and teachers' actions are not the same thing (Nuttall, 2004). It is not enough to say what the child's rights are – the experience itself matters. The child has agency here – the early childhood system is not just working one way to influence the child. Children's own actions influence their early childhood education.

Also influencing our understanding of children's rights are theoretical concepts from the sociology of childhood. Where UNCROC takes a universal approach, childhood sociologists argue that there are many childhoods (Jenks, 1996; Prout & James, 1990). It is not a universal phenomenon. It is constructed differently in different times and places (Taylor, Smith, & Nairn, 2001). These include philosophical, political, historical, cultural and theoretical considerations. Social chit chat about children's rights prompts a range of comments reflective of the diverse opinions within our society. As Prout (2003) notes: "For children's voices to be really heard, even when the institutional arrangements create a notional space for it, requires change in the way that children are seen" (p. 22). To make it even more complicated, there is no national agreement on where childhood ends, or in some instances, begins. It is an arbitrarily wavering and incoherent line (Franklin, 1986; Tapp & Hanaghan, 2000). In fact "the term child has a connection less with chronology than with power. The question 'what is a child?' is answered by those in authority – those who have power in society" (Franklin, 1986, p. 8). So, exactly what role children have in society, their status, let alone their rights, is ambiguous (Smith, Gollop, Marshall, & Nairn, 2000).

Critical analysis of the policies is difficult because it challenges "the dominant, discursive regimes" (Dalhberg, 2000, p. 14) in which needs and rights remain intertwined, both in theory and in practice. To work through these discourses, to examine how "they exercise power over

our thinking and our acting as well as how we govern ourselves through these discourses" (p. 14), requires open and honest discussion and debate. It is not easy. However, critical discourse can reveal not just the strengths but also the weaknesses, and it is in this context that the policies and reports will be analysed here. The movement to include children's voices is widely supported, but the extent to which it happens is less evident. This is compounded by "one central belief: that the key thing about children is that they develop" (Mayall, 2003, p. 6). In the public mind, the child is very often seen in terms of the future. This perspective is discussed in the next section.

Children: the promise of the future

Children and future are often linked and that is one of the reasons why rights for children are problematic. Freeman notes:

> Childhood has come to be seen as a stage rather than a social practice, with children spoken of as in the process of 'becoming', and therefore in terms of inadequacy, inexperience and immaturity. They are to be 'measured' against an unexplained, unproblematic rational adult world which is (of course) both complete and desirable, and, in contrast to childhood, is also static. (1998. p. 434)

Views of children as adults in waiting – vulnerable and dependent, naïve, innocent – serve to disempower and marginalize them as a silenced, disenfranchised class. Ambiguous attitudes to children and to childhood counter attempts to understand what rights for children mean beyond the rhetoric that traps them as less than equal in status to the rest of us. It is this concept of a child as "becoming" that feeds an enduring obsession with the child in the future, something common to all the policies reviewed. It is also this concept that can cloud understandings about children's rights because it presents them as "not there yet".

As politically active

Every policy document examined in the preparation of this article began with a vision of the child in the future, regardless of the political context in which that document was developed. For example, the *New Zealand Early Childhood Code of Ethics* begins with the following:

> Ako paitia a tatou tamariki
> Ma ratou hoki e whakamana
> Nga wawata mo te tino rangatiratanga

> Educate our children well, for through them, our vision of self-determination will be realised.
>
> (Early Childhood Code of Ethics National Working Group, 1995, p. 3)

The *Code of Ethics* is a document that implicitly assumes that children have rights. However, current political, economic and socio-cultural agendas are also apparent in this statement. Tino rangatiratanga – which translates as "self-determination", is a commonly understood catch cry for ratification of the Treaty of Waitangi, and is associated with Maori demands for justice over land grievances. Thus, right in the opening to the *Code of Ethics* we have an example of how children are perceived of as contributing in the future. But no matter how well intentioned, our vision might not be their vision. Debates like this are semantic, and when critiqued in this way, the intentions of the critique can become blurred. Of course the *Code of Ethics* has the best interests of the child at heart, but exactly how those rights were perceived is not so evident.

In the future as social glue

Policies often present views of children in the future as arguments to provide for them in the present:

> The care and education received by and given to a young child is crucial to her or his development. Crucial not just to the individual, but to the society in which they will grow up and become adults." (David Lange, Prime Minister and Minister of Education, in the foreword to the Meade Report, 1988, p. iii)

This aspiration suggests that the child who is the beneficiary of a high quality early childhood education will grow to become a good member of society in the future: "good quality early childhood education and care sets the right foundation for children's future and personal educational development .... Any principal or junior class teacher will comment on the difference early care and education experience makes to children's ability to learn" (Meade, 1988, p. 13). Investment in early childhood education is regarded as a vehicle for success both in educational terms and in social terms. However, the focus of the policy has often been to establish the efficacy of the service, and because of this, children's rights per se are seen in relation to that service.

Although the social benefits associated with early childhood education are generally well understood and recognised, more often than not they are perceived as future benefits. For example, in the

foreword to *Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki*, Trevor Mallard, Minister of Education, wrote:

> If we are to build a strong future for this country, I believe we must firmly establish early childhood education as the cornerstone of our education system. Our social, educational and economic health can only benefit from efforts and resources focused on young New Zealanders. (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 1)

New Zealand's present day social statistics are disturbing. We have the highest teen pregnancy rate in the Western world, and one of the highest youth suicide rates. One in three New Zealand children lives in impoverished circumstances for at least part of their early childhood (Easton, 2004). There is still legal protection under Section 59 of the Crimes Act for the use of "reasonable force" to discipline children, but the number of actual child abuse cases has tripled in recent years, and there has been an increase in the number of cases of a child being killed by a family member, or someone with caregiver responsibility for that child (UNCROC, 2003; National Radio, 2004). The *Strategic Plan* very much focuses on structural concerns and may be described as a framework for policy analysts and policy advisers. Its strengths lie in the fact that it was developed in close collaboration with the sector and that it was research-based. Under the goal "promote collaborative relationships", the importance of the wider social environment is stressed. The *Strategic Plan* promotes a holistic approach to coordinated and integrated services for families and, by association, for children. It is directed at the Ministries of Health, Education and Social Development. However, like most early childhood policies and documents, the *Strategic Plan* avoids specific details about child poverty and the impact of violence on children, two factors that most seriously breach children's rights as citizens, with at the very least, an entitlement to childhood.

In the future as crucial to the economy

There are many reasons why investing in early childhood is important. This has been particularly true for the cost-benefit economic arguments used by researchers and activists alike to lobby politicians to invest in early childhood education. A need to fulfill the economic prerequisites of the global economy of the 21st century produced the argument for quality early childhood education for children at risk of failure, "an important consideration at a time when unskilled employment is disappearing" (Meade, 1988, p. 14). This line of argument persists. The

"promise of the future" theme is evident in the government document *Before Five*: "Improvements in this sector are an investment in the future.... Our children are our future. They need a good start in life" (Lange, 1988, p. iii).

There are two things to note here. First, the early childhood sector is the focus for improvements, and by association, children's circumstances will improve too. But secondly, there are some important questions underlying this type of statement, because of the implications for children's economic identity as taxpayers in the future, contributing to the present "adult" generation's superannuation. A decade after *Before Five*, the Chief Executive of the Ministry of Education wrote: "Early childhood education provides a sound foundation in the early years for children's future learning and achievement" (Ministry of Education, 1998, p. 2).

Children as citizens

To further reinforce the fact that futures are hard to escape, the latest policy document is titled *Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002). It is often referred to as the *Strategic Plan*, a term that projects into the future as well. This states: "The Government's vision is for all New Zealand children to have the opportunity to participate in quality early childhood education, *no matter their circumstances*" [emphasis added] (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 1).

It is an admirable vision, reminiscent of the famous Beeby quote (May, 2004, p. 16), for all children to participate in education, no matter their circumstances. It encompasses many of the old ideas (participation, access and quality), and appears to emphasize equity – a concept that receded during the retrenchment policies of the 1990s. May describes the rights movement for children in a reconceptualised statement based on Beeby's scribbled note. She writes:

> The government's objective, should broadly speaking be, that every child: whatever their family circumstances, whether their parents are solo, separated or married, at work or at home, whether they be rich or poor, whether they live in town or country, are Maori or Pakeha, should have a right as a citizen to a free early childhood education that meets their family needs, recognizes their cultural heritage and provides a rich learning environment in a community of learners that empowers both adults and children to learn and grow as equal participants in a democratic society. (May, 2004, p. 16)

This position of children as citizens entitled to an education is concerned with more than simply *access*, (in terms of attendance), and *quality* (in terms of standard measures), but also includes *appropriateness*. For Maori as tangata whenua, and for Pasifika people, access to an early childhood education that ensures cultural transmission is clearly rights-based. Therefore it remains an issue in terms of provision and access.

The 2004 Budget introduced a range of strategies to address equity issues for families and children and placed the government in a central role. The Working for Families initiative has been criticized as pre-election bribery by the Opposition parties, but as Easton (2004) comments, the questions of rights for children, particularly children living in poverty, are issues of social justice in which governments play a pivotal role.

So, "the child as a citizen", with rights to participate in decisions that affect them, (see UNCROC Article 12), may not be as secure a concept as the vision expressed in the printed word suggests. Like other early childhood initiatives, the *Strategic Plan* has been influenced by research that suggests participation in early childhood education of good quality has positive social outcomes for children. While the New Zealand early childhood participation rates are high, there is still a strong emphasis from the Ministry on increasing participation by improving access to services. These are structural measures of quality.

The process quality indicators, those difficult-to-measure aspects of "being" in context, are less well attended to. As it stands, the document is a guide for the policy makers, inclined to the public "mind view" of the child as developing (Mayall, 2003), rather than the child as citizen in a community of learners (Rogoff, 1994). Experienced educators are well aware that the leap from policy rhetoric to action is not straightforward, particularly during election years.

There is a rich irony in many policy documents – the rhetorical claims about the importance of children can be found in the opening comments of the policy, but very often, a visible acknowledgement of children's rights is hard to discern beyond that initial point. This is in part because academic and research interests have shifted in focus from *needs* to *rights*, something not always picked up on in the transition from research to policy. *Education to be More*, the report of the Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group (generally known as the Meade report, after its chair, Anne Meade), is founded on "a respect for the basic rights of children" (Meade, 1988, p. 7), which implies that children actively construct their understanding of childhood. As already

noted, David Lange, as Minister of Education, comments in *Before Five* that young children "need a good start in life" (1988, p. iii). These comments both reflect a view of the child as "an object of social concern" (Freeman, 1988, p. 436).

Contexts for Policy

Numerous policy initiatives have concerned themselves with the structural provision of early childhood education. These policies can be categorised as promoting rights ***to*** an early childhood education. Alongside these, policies have emerged promoting children's rights ***in*** early childhood centres. This section describes the background context to policy development in the late 1980s.

Recurring themes: Access, participation and quality

Widespread uncertainty characterised the upheaval of the economic reform era in the late 1980s. The early childhood sector, diverse and divided over that time, was preoccupied with the impact of the reforms on administration and curriculum. The not-for-profit sector focus was on preservation of the existing conditions for teachers and children in early childhood centres. Private sector interests lobbied for lesser regulatory requirements, particularly for licensing purposes (Te One, 1996). Huge amounts of energy went into complying with agency demands that detracted from a "big picture" view of early childhood education. Universal and free education was the dream. Accessible, affordable quality early childhood education was the aim. Given the economic climate of the free market, even to try to achieve this aim became a nightmare.

A preoccupation of policy in the mid-1980s was the level of participation in high quality early childhood education, and the benefits of this experience not just for children, but also for society, in the present and in the future. The debates shifted the discussions from "what is good for children", where the adults decide what is in the child's best interests, to what makes a "good" child, where both the adult and the child contribute to this notion (Te One, 2003). Shifting the locus of power more towards the child reflects wider socio-political and socio-cultural circumstances, as well as current theories about child development and learning. These theories acknowledge children as actively influencing their early childhood experiences, and as participating in a community of learners (Rogoff, 1994).

There are complications when the focus is on provision and access, especially when coupled with a drive for consumer choice that reduces services and children to commodities and clients. In the reform era, communities, not the government, were expected to be responsive, and to compete for funding in the market for new educational endeavours. Little regard was paid to the capacity or the capability of communities to provide choices, let alone access them. Within communities there is a risk attached if the ventures into early childhood service provisions don't work. The social glue deemed essential to active democratic participation can come unstuck with repercussions that, in small communities, go beyond the walls of an early childhood centre. In this way, consumer choice poses genuine threats to participation in communities bound by locality. It may be that the choice is there, but the capacity to access it is restricted. Conversely, there may be the capacity to access choices, but no choices exist. So, there can be provision, but entitlement is limited; and there can be entitlement, but provision is limited. However, notions of education as a commodity, and indeed children as commodities, are contrary to concepts of children's rights.

Education to be More *and* Before Five

Education to be More (The Meade Report) followed the compulsory education sector reforms of the time, and was the basis of *Before Five* (Lange, 1988), the government's policy statement on the administration of early childhood education.

The Meade Report worked within pre-determined terms of reference as set by the government's programme of social policy reform:

- Implementing the Treaty of Waitangi
- Improving the social and economic status of women
- Enhancing the family unit in society
- Providing a legislative environment which safeguards basic human rights and freedoms, and works towards the removal of discrimination
- Recognizing the needs, contributions and traditions of Pacific Island peoples and other minority cultures residing in New Zealand (Meade, 1988, p. 5).

The working group made their own contribution to the social policy agenda by adding to the list strong support for early childhood services

that were flexible, diverse, responsive, accessible, affordable, accountable, and involving the community.

Early childhood care and education "develops the potential and quality of life of young children in the present and for the future" (p. 6). Early childhood services were seen as complementary – they support parents and families and the benefits afforded to children, broadly conceived of as rights, accrue to society in the future. Children's rights are used as leverage for adequate funding of early education and for the continuation of a healthy society, "which includes all community members, whether or not they have children" (p. 20).

The report promoted the rights of children and families, and argued, "these services are so important to social well-being and cultural continuity that adequate public funding for them is essential" (p. 14). Any model of early childhood care and education had to encompass "features which are in the interests of the child; features which are in the interests of the caregivers, particularly women; and features which are in the interests of cultural survival and transmission to succeeding generations – achieving the correct balance is crucial" (p. 7). The Meade Report centralized, conceptually at least, children as active and children as citizens with rights, although positioning children alongside families also minimizes their status as citizens with entitlements (Easton, 1980; Mayall 2003; Smith et al., 2000; OCC, n.d.)

For example, Qvortrup's analysis of aggregated statistical data in Europe illustrated how "children are an invisible group par excellence in our society" (Qvortrup, 1997, p. 88). UNCROC claims that New Zealand's children continue to suffer because there is no consistent statistical data gathered on children as a population group. If children are counted in statistical data, the assumption is that children can influence policy decisions that affect their social condition – childhood. However, the idealised myths about children and childhood continue to de-politicise children, based on the "mistaken belief that the problems relating to them are non-controversial and lie outside the political agenda" (John, 1996, p. 9).

The official *Before Five* policy statement which followed the Meade Report aimed to establish a new administrative framework for early childhood, and to promote the sector as equal in status to the compulsory and tertiary sectors. Although not without its critics, it was hailed as "a foot in the door" for early childhood (Meade, 1990). However, it failed to work as intended because it was never funded adequately (Mitchell, 1999). This was in part due to a change of

government in 1990, which held to the economic reform agenda of the previous administration. Regulatory changes were made to hard-won positions supporting quality early childhood services, such as the requirement for teachers to be trained to Diploma level. The state had reduced some conditions for work, and changed entitlements to negotiate. The private sector interests in teacher training, particularly, proliferated. Confusion within the sector was compounded by a series of interim policy decisions with no long-term initiative from government. The idea of a child as a citizen with an entitlement to a good early childhood education moved into the background.

Desirable Objectives and Practices 1990 and Charters

With the administrative reforms came a large number of compliances contained in the *Early Childhood Education Charter Guidelines: Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices* (DOPs) (Ministry of Education, 1990). This dominated the "busy work" of teachers as they genuinely and conscientiously developed policies, charters and assessments to match the new expectations. Charters and DOPs became "new instruments of power" (Dahlberg, 2000, p. 7) that resulted in resentment within the sector, as the accountability agent, the Education Review Office (ERO), seemed less concerned with children and more with policies and measurable outcomes. This reflected the managerial, technicist stance of the newly elected National Government (Codd, 1997; Willis, 1996).

As regulations promoting quality were reversed and conditions for teachers deteriorated, so did conditions for children. Group sizes increased, the requirements for trained teachers were lowered, qualifications diversified uncontrollably, and a complex incentive for "quality funding" added to supply and demand problems, especially in childcare services (Te One, 1996).

The revised DOPs and Quality in Action

Important theoretical underpinnings support the perception of children as active participants in their own education. The current interest in socio-cultural theories provided the impetus for reconsideration of the scripts or roles for players in the early childhood centres. This interest was mandated in the revised DOPs (which required educators to demonstrate understanding of current theory – DOP 2), and were included in *Te Mahi Whai Hua*, or *Quality in Action*, produced as a resource for educators (Ministry of Education, 1998). *Quality in Action* explicates a range of theories by providing scenarios, signposts,

reflective questions and recommended readings. It indirectly refers to Article 12 of UNCROC by suggesting that "supportive and responsible educators guide children to make choices within a strategic planned environment, acknowledging that children are active participants in their own learning" (p. 21). The effect of this document was to move teachers beyond their traditional roles as experts, towards one of "scaffolding" children into a more co-constructive approach to learning, in which both teachers and children learn, but about different aspects of the same task (Jordan, 2004).

Participation in a community of learners and/or learning (Jordan, 2004), and even inquiry, requires consideration of the different roles and responsibilities of those involved. This could encourage reflective thinking, and develop the idea of social cohesion referred to in both the Meade Report and in the *Strategic Plan*. To regard children as co-contributors to the "process" quality of the environment represents a dramatic shift in perception. They are no longer passive recipients but active social participants – citizens in the centre, with democratic rights. As Jordan puts it, "the major issue here is one of the use of power. If children are to be empowered as equal contributors to learning situations, they need to be in an environment in which they can learn that they have the power to make decisions about the direction of their learning" (2004, p. 42).

During the ten years between the mid-1980s and the mid-to-late-1990s, the sector struggled to come to terms with its reduced status. It was suffering from reform overload, but it was in this era that several "subversive" initiatives emerged and proved to be enduringly positive (Dalli, 2002). This marked the beginning of significant movement towards thinking beyond children's rights ***to*** an early childhood education, to engaging with theoretical ideas supportive of children's rights ***in*** early childhood education.

Future directions

Increased participation, access and improved quality, all recommendations of the Meade Report, were not forthcoming in the early 1990s. As the grip of monetarism tightened, and frustrated by the lack of progress, in 1996 a broadly representative group known as the Early Childhood Education Project (ECEP) was sponsored by the New Zealand Educational Institute Te Riu Roa (the union for early childhood teachers) to produce a report entitled *Future Directions*. This developed a strategy to counter the regressive policy decisions in early childhood,

and raised a strong protest against "the carrying out of 'top down' reviews with very little appropriate consultation with those in the field" (New Zealand Educational Institute, 1996, p. 1). McDonald commented that this report was "the first time that such a wide range of services [had] come together to reflect upon their common concerns, to acknowledge their diversity, and to decide upon their common needs for the future" (1996, p. 1). The report revitalized a disenchanted education sector by providing political leverage which later brought about a widely agreed strategic vision for early childhood education.

Te Whāriki: An entitlement to childhood

During this time, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), Aotearoa New Zealand's national early childhood curriculum, and one of the most influential early childhood documents in New Zealand, was produced. *Te Whāriki* largely managed to escape the dominant economic and accountability discourse of the time (Te One, 2003). *Te Whāriki* contains an often-quoted aspiration for children:

> To grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9)

It is a strong aspiration for children as citizens in the here and now. But underlying the statement is an ambiguous relationship between the present and the future. Are contributions valued for what they are in the context of the early childhood centre, or valued as potentially economic contributions in the future, or valued because of anticipated participation in a democracy? The latter implies that the curriculum educates for citizenship, and certainly goals and outcomes in the strands can be directly linked to this. But the former can be linked to national educational strategies as determined by the government of the time.

The nuances are interesting. There are social and cultural conditions of being: being an individual child in the centre; being a part of a group of peers; and being part of the centre and its projected image to the community in which it is located or which it serves, and being a participant in New Zealand's democratic process. But through a children's rights lens, the landscape placed experiences for the child in the centre, thus shifting the rights focus beyond enrolment statistics, or structural concerns with access and participation.

There is no question that there is widespread agreement with *Te Whāriki*, which is based on principles of empowerment, of family and

community, of relationships and of holistic development. But enactment, with a specific focus on children's rights, is less clear.

Back to the Future: Research and Policy Connect

In 1999 a new Labour government was elected, with the development of the long-term strategic plan for early childhood as one of its promises. May comments:

> Initially the expectations for the Strategic Plan were for reform rather than revolution, but the balance soon tipped. The final consultation document restated much of the vision of the earlier Meade Report, but gave new emphasis to the Articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. (May, 2002, p. 29)

Led by Anne Meade, the Working Group for the Strategic Plan stated: "Our long term vision is for whanau and families to have a universal entitlement to a reasonable amount of free, high quality early childhood education" (Strategic Plan Working Group, 2001, p. 5). Further support for free, universal entitlement to early childhood education came from the Human Rights Commissioner, who wrote:

> In the New Zealand context, the results of the Competent Children longitudinal study and other research confirms the very significant impact of quality early childhood education on a child's achievement at primary school. On that basis early childhood education can be viewed as an implicit element of the right to free primary education provided for in the international Conventions that New Zealand has ratified. (Noonan, 2001, p. 65)

It was argued that access to free early childhood education, as a statutory right for children, would remove significant cost and access barriers (Mitchell, 2002, p. 135). As with all early childhood initiatives, the *Strategic Plan* provoked criticism during its development and on its release in 2002 (Dalli & Te One, 2003; Mitchell, 2002). The questions concerning participation, access and quality (not to mention who pays), remained, but the Government had written itself a larger role as a quasi-owner/provider in community-based centres, with its policy to encourage participation by building new services and, with Ministry of Education facilitators, to diversify existing services in response to community needs. The private sector providers have criticized overt state support for not-for-profit services, arguing that they are disadvantaged. These same providers have also objected to regulatory requirements for a fully registered teaching service (Dalli & Te One, 2003).

Despite this, the *Strategic Plan* has several distinguishing characteristics. First, the conceptual framework includes three goals (participation, quality, collaboration) that coexist as "pathways", with varying degrees of interdependence. This is a potentially powerful strategy because the collaborative work envisaged would require key government ministries and agencies to meet together and discuss policies relevant to early childhood education. The last two UNCROC reports have commented on a lack of coordinated policy to support children's rights. Inclusive policy discussions have the potential to increase awareness, certainly about early childhood education and care, but also about very young children and their rights.

Second, and further to this collaborative approach, the theoretical framework of the Agenda for Children (Ministry of Social Development, 2002) adopts the ecological model of the whole child as an active participant in and across multiple sites. This is the same model used in *Te Whāriki* and is a theoretical perspective familiar to most early childhood practitioners. The advantages in the cross-disciplinary approach proposed by the *Strategic Plan* might to some extent protect it should there be a change in government – the respective work programmes and performance outputs required by the government ministries and agencies might establish a mutually supportive environment to promote children's rights. There are of course, disadvantages to this collaborative approach as well, and the lack of detail about when and how particular strategies are to be implemented and evaluated is a criticism levelled at the *Strategic Plan* (Mitchell, 2002, p. 132).

Third, collaborative approaches also have the potential to realise another thread drawn through from the Meade Report to the *Strategic Plan* – that the early childhood sector has equal status with the other education sectors. This certainly promotes rights for young children, although what that means exactly still needs to be revealed.

Finally, collaborative relationships, or pathways, go beyond the walls of an early childhood centre and into communities, a function certainly supported by reconceptualist ideas about children and early childhood services, not as separate and separated from the social and political world, but as citizens – participants in society "beyond [the] statistical measures" that record enrollment (May, 2004).

The research connection

Part of the negotiations for the development of the curriculum included the future development of an assessment framework. The work of Margaret Carr linked dispositions to the strands of Te Whāriki and these dispositions later formed the basis of *Learning Stories*, a narrative, formative assessment tool. Alongside the Learning Story framework, further research was undertaken to develop a Teaching Story framework designed to shift the focus of evaluation of early childhood programmes towards a more rights-based approach using five "child's voice" questions (Carr, May & Podmore, 1998).

The learning story format and the teaching story research supported children's rights by regarding them as stakeholders in their own learning. Whether or not this shifted the actual power dynamics beyond what happened in the centre is hard to know. But "the idea of focusing on the 'child's voice' in defining and evaluating quality is consistent with current understanding of early childhood centre quality" (May & Podmore, 1998, p. 24). It is also consistent with UNCROC, in particular Article 12.1 in which the child as an equal stakeholder has the right to participate and be consulted.

The early childhood assessment exemplar project

One recent example of research with a focus on children's rights is the early childhood assessment exemplar project (Ministry of Education, 2005). This project documented examples of assessment that are inclusive and formative. The child's voice is a feature of the type of narrative assessment sought by the research. This is set alongside teachers' and parents' perspectives. In the ideal situation, all three stakeholders contribute equally, or at least, equitably, to the assessment equation. Children's rights are to the fore in exemplars: an acknowledgment that children's voices are important influences on curriculum decisions and directions.

Blue Skies Thinking? Why Not?

On May 27, 2004, Dr Michael Cullen delivered the Labour-led coalition government's budget. This budget has allocated an additional $365 million for early childhood education, to be spent over the next four years.

> From 1 July 2007, three and four year-old children who attend teacher-led community-based early childhood education services will be entitled to 20 hours free education each week. (Mallard, 2004, p. 1)

The Minister of Education, Trevor Mallard, who had at one point criticized the *Strategic Plan* of "blue skies thinking for recommending free early childhood services" (2001, cited in May, 2002, p. 10), has turned the rhetoric into action with a promise of money – a victory for New Zealand's youngest citizens. A combination of regulatory requirements for qualified teachers, pay parity for kindergarten teachers, and in-depth professional development programmes to support "the effective implementation of the early childhood education Assessment for Learning exemplars" are all presented as part of a wider package for early childhood education alongside another initiative – the Working for Families package (New Zealand Government, 2004).

On the morning after its release, commentators noted that the Budget was the first in nearly three decades to "deliver a social dividend to working families" (Cullen, 2004, p. 9). This was welcome news – the Budget responded to the growing disparities between the wealthy and the middle-to-low income, impoverished sectors in New Zealand with a range of incentives, "to help parents who want to move into work or training get the childcare they need" (New Zealand Government, 2004).

While the news for early childhood can be regarded with "cautious optimism"[2] because the "how" of this has yet to be revealed, the Minister of Education is clearly committed to new funding that delivers affordable, accessible and quality early childhood education. "Budget 2004 continues this Government's commitment to value and invest in future generations ... and supports a commitment to a fair, safe society" (Cullen, 2004, p. 9). Themes of the future remain, and while "rights to" early childhood education continue to underpin the "constructive dreaming"[3] of policy analysts, the inclusion of funding for professional development is an indication that "rights in" early childhood feature too.

As yet, the risks to this fiscal agenda are not clear, but the sector has been buffeted and bruised by changes in administration in the past. Although the rhetoric of promoting quality early childhood as beneficial for children will be hard to sideline now, the routes, or pathways, to realizing this will certainly differ should there be a change of government. The issues of power and control remain – wider societal goals, be they cultural, educational, economic or political, determine the allocation of resources. Children's rights therefore remain vulnerable, because as we have seen, when the energy of the sector is directed to protecting existing conditions, rights for children retreat into the background.

Notes

1. This will not be implemented until 2007.
2. Podmore, V. (2004), personal communication.
3. Boyd, R. (2004), personal communication.

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