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The Changing Face of Kindergarten: A National Picture of Two-Year Olds Within Kindergartens[1]

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Abstract:

In a Teaching and Learning Research Initiatives-funded study of the experiences of under-three year olds and their teachers in selected kindergartens in two urban areas of New Zealand, it became clear that the macro policies at the kindergarten association and government levels have resulted in changes in the daily experiences of children and kindergarten teachers. A national survey of kindergarten associations, and focus group discussions conducted as part of the project, illustrated some of the changes brought about by the policy of diversification. This article argues that the changes suggest that the national context of kindergartens is no longer homogenous.

This article draws on a two-year study funded in 2003 as part of the first round of the *Teaching and Learning Research Initiatives*.[2] The study was undertaken in partnership with kindergarten teachers in Dunedin and Wellington, with the intention of exploring the new context of two-year olds enrolled in New Zealand kindergartens and supporting quality experiences for two-year olds.[3]

Historically, kindergartens have provided early childhood environments for over-three year olds, and a body of literature now exists that identifies the pedagogical practices that have characterised this service (Dempster, 1986; Duncan, 2001a; Dunedin Kindergarten Association, 1989; Levitt, 1979; Lockhart, 1975; May, 1997, 2001). That the majority of children attending kindergartens are aged three years and over is thus a matter of record and remains the case in many kindergartens around the country (e.g., in Christchurch and Auckland where demographics support waiting lists and high enrolments).

Since the mid-90s, however, kindergartens in several regions of New Zealand have experienced a fall in enrolments and a fall in the numbers of children on waiting lists, with the result that they have enrolled under-three year olds into their programmes. This has proven to be a challenge for teachers in terms of their teaching practices, programming and curriculum goals. For example, as early as 1994, one South Island kindergarten teacher described the pressure to keep rolls full, and the impact of this on the kindergarten programme, in the following way:

> Oh that pressure [to keep rolls full] is absolutely awful (pause). Absolutely dreadful. I mean every kindergarten teacher that I know will be doing their utmost to get their rolls full (pause). They are really trying. People are not being slack. Like I mean I'm taking children at two [years] eleven [months]. In the afternoon I am offering a care programme (pause). It's absolute survival (pause). I tried to think of innovative ideas. I don't know what to do (pause). We may have permanent playgroup Monday, Tuesday, Thursday.[4] I don't know (pause).The age group is so wide now that I don't want to bring any morning children back in the afternoon because their age group is too wide. It's not family grouping. It's nothing. It's just yuck (pause). (Duncan, 2001b, p. 112)

The pressure to keep rolls up was noted also at the Kindergarten Association level. For example, a 1997 policy document in the Dunedin Kindergarten Association discussed the necessity to enroll under-three year olds (Dunedin Kindergarten Association, 1997). By 2003 the age of children attending Dunedin kindergartens had lowered further, with children starting as young as on their second birthday. Additionally, the number of very young children in the sessions had grown. In 2003, two Dunedin kindergartens had 50 percent of their afternoon-session children aged less than three years; in three kindergartens, over 30 percent were under three; and in one kindergarten 26 percent of the entire enrolment was under three years. Within the Association's 22 kindergartens, half had more than one-third of their afternoon session enrolments filled with under-three year olds.

The changing context for kindergartens raises questions about its impact on the experiences of children and teachers. Factors in the kindergarten teaching environment, such as a physical environment structured primarily for the older-age child, and the large group setting of 30 to 45 children per session, impact on the experiences of all children, but most particularly on the very young child. Earlier research

by one of the investigators in this study (Duncan, 2001a; Duncan, Bowden & Smith, 2005) raised many questions about what good teaching practices and positive learning experiences for children would "look like" in this new environment. Duncan reported that while some teachers had been able to see this change as having many positive features, others had been struggling with the increased physical demands of toileting children who were not yet fully toilet-trained, and with concerns about physical safety.

Searching the literature for guidance on these questions is not a rewarding exercise. New Zealand-based research on two-year olds in early childhood settings is limited and relates almost exclusively to two-year olds in care and education centres (e.g., Dalli, 2000a; 2000b; Foote & Hurst, 2000; Merry, 2004; Podmore & Taouma, 2006). Moreover, two-year olds often appear to fall into a "black hole" between being an infant and toddler (0-2 years) and being a young child or preschooler (3-5 years), thus making information pertaining to just two-year olds, or directed at working with two-year olds, very limited. Within our study, this led us to ask:

- What does becoming a "kindy kid" at two-years old now mean?

Our study was framed with this question as a focus, mindful also that the kindergarten associations were framing similar questions when planning the future of their service (Stoke-Campbell, 2003, personal communication) [General manager of Dunedin Kindergarten Association, 2003].

We structured our project around the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of under-three year olds in the kindergarten setting?
2. What factors within the kindergarten environment support positive experiences for the under-three year olds?
3. What factors impact on teachers for positive environments and practices when working with the under-three year olds in their kindergartens?
4. What macro factors impact on the experiences of the under-three year olds in the kindergarten environment?

As we began the study, additional areas of interest came to our attention as we discussed the project with people in different kindergarten settings around New Zealand. It became increasingly clear that the

national picture of kindergarten services was more complex than had yet been documented.

This complexity was reinforced when in March 2005, at the beginning of the second year of this project, one of the authors, Judith Duncan, presented preliminary findings to a Kindergarten Senior Teacher Hui in Wellington. The comments and concerns raised by Senior Teachers from each of the different associations were remarkably similar to the concerns being raised by the teachers in our project. This prompted us to design a national questionnaire to explore the idea that a shared discourse might be operating within the kindergarten service around the ability of kindergartens to meet quality outcomes for their youngest children.

The national questionnaire canvassed the views of associations about the wider issues associated with having two-year olds in kindergartens. This national survey was an addition to our original project design, which focused on case study kindergartens within the Dunedin and Wellington Kindergarten Associations, and on cluster group discussions with a wider group of kindergarten teachers who had two-year olds in their kindergartens.

In this paper we draw on data from this nation-wide questionnaire and on focus group discussions by the teachers who met in professional development cluster groups, in Dunedin and Wellington, throughout the project.

The National Survey

The nationwide questionnaire was mailed out to the general managers of the 32 kindergarten associations in the last quarter of 2005. The questionnaire consisted of 19 questions about:

- The participation of two-year olds at kindergartens within the association;
- Diversification within the kindergarten association;
- Contextual data about: numbers of children enrolled; changes implemented to facilitate attendance by two-year olds; current issues in relation to the attendance of two-year olds at kindergartens; and wider contextual changes in the programmes.

Twenty-nine of the thirty-two associations replied to the questionnaire (91% return rate).[5]

The Professional Development Cluster Group Meetings

The cluster group meetings were attended by the teachers in the four case study kindergartens in Wellington and Dunedin, and by other teachers within the two associations who had two-year olds in their kindergartens. The purpose of the cluster groups was to build a shared discourse amongst the teachers about, and around, working with two-year olds, and to create a community of learners and a community of practice within kindergartens for two-year olds. The university researchers facilitated these groups and used the sessions to discuss the teachers' current perceptions and to encourage a critical and reflective practice. The teachers were given readings and "homework" assignments to develop their thinking and support the group discussions. In Phase One, two sessions were held in each area, and three were held in Phase Two. In Dunedin sixteen teachers regularly took part in all of the cluster groups (including the teachers from the case study kindergartens). In Wellington the number of teachers who attended varied between six and twelve.

Numerous issues were discussed during the cluster group meetings, and these discussions provided a sense of the lived experiences of the teachers in the changing context of kindergartens. Combined with the survey responses from the kindergarten associations nationwide, these data provide a national picture of the changes that kindergartens have faced during recent years with regard to two-year olds attending sessions. The rest of this article elaborates on this picture.

The Changing Context of Kindergartens

1. Attending kindergarten at two-years old

Kindergartens are licensed for children from the age of two years and older. Interestingly, there are no licensing restrictions on the number of two-year olds[6] in a session, that is, there is no minimum or maximum number of two-year olds who can be present.

The national survey of kindergarten associations presented an interesting picture of enrolment of two-year olds and the associated issues for 2004 and 2005. In 2004, 18 associations identified that they had two-year olds enrolled, and in 2005 this had increased to 21.

The percentage of children who were two-years old ranged among associations from 0.5% to 12% of all children in 2004, and from 0.5% to 11% in 2005. One of the reasons for this slight drop in percentage may be attributable to the stability of the groups of children – the younger

the children start, the longer they stay at the kindergarten, with the result of an older starting age for subsequent intakes of children.[7]

Table 1 shows that nationally, the numbers of two-year olds have risen at the same rate as all children attending kindergartens and have remained at 2% since 2004.

Table 1 Enrolment at Kindergartens in New Zealand

	2004	2005
Number of all children enrolled at kindergarten	33,471	38,331
Number of 2 year olds enrolled at kindergarten	772 (2%)	956 (2%)

While nationally, this growth is a small one, the 2% national increase disguises the fact that the increase is distributed unevenly among individual kindergarten associations, and indeed within individual kindergartens within each association. Table 2 illustrates this uneven distribution of two-year olds among kindergarten associations in 2004. Just as there are geographical differences in two-year old enrolments, so there are differences within each association. For example, as noted earlier, in Dunedin kindergartens the numbers of two-year olds ranged from as low as 2 to as many as 17. In Wellington, the range was from 1 two-year old in a kindergarten to a maximum of 12.

2. The introduction of two-year olds into kindergartens

Two-year olds have been present in kindergarten sessions for many years. However, until recently, they were present only in very small numbers (one or two at any one time) and they usually started attending when they were very close to turning three years of age. Teachers in cluster group meetings related how most kindergarten associations had a "rule of thumb" about how many two-year olds could be included in sessions, and justified this on safety grounds. One teacher in Dunedin commented:

> Going back many, many years ago you were only allowed a certain proportion of children under-three and I think it might have been about five per session. So if you had thirty children you were only allowed three under-three year olds because it wasn't considered safe to have children so young in the session because everything was geared for three- and four-year olds.

Table 2 Kindergarten Association Enrolments for the Year 2004

Number of Kindergartens in Each Association	Total Number of Children Enrolled	Two-Year Olds Enrolled N	%
1	75	2	3
2	181	21	12
3	162	2	1
3	179	5	3
5	365	5	1
13	1020	5	0.5
15	1041	13	1
15	1100	33	3
16	1040	110	11
19	1443	14	1
20	725	25	3
22	1357	31	2
22	1478	133	9
29	2291	19	1
51	3521	197	6
56	4188	65	2
62	4836	56	1
108	8469	36	0.5
TOTAL 462	**33,471**	**772**	**2**

In Wellington, one teacher said: "The unofficial policy was 10%; if you have 40 kids then you shouldn't have more than four under-three's."

The teachers in this study identified a requirement to have full rolls as the key reason behind the introduction of two-year olds in kindergarten. Their views support the argument made by a number of policy commentators that the introduction of bulk funding in 1992 changed the way that kindergartens were funded, leading to new pressures to have not only full rolls, but to keep them full at all times (Davison, 1996, 1997; Duncan, 2001a; Wilson & Houghton, 1995; Wilson, Houghton, & Piper, 1996; Wylie, 1992, 1993).

As the decline in rolls and the traditional "waiting lists" began to create spaces for children in sessions, taking younger and younger children into the session became the obvious way to maintain full rolls and thus ensure viability of the kindergarten and protection of teacher positions. One Dunedin teacher said:

> The reason why we're taking them ... comes down to just keeping our rolls up ... it's that concern of always trying to keep up your numbers and having to bring in a two-year old who's just turned two for the sake of keeping up your roll numbers, rather than it's just the best reason for the child to start.

Similarly, another Wellington teacher said that her kindergarten first started to think about enrolling under-threes "when the roll became a bit low." Another added: "We thought we might be able to take kids that are just about three-years old. I looked at the licence and it said "over-two's", so we could take over-two's. We thought we just did over-three's and four's and not under-three's."

Interestingly, a clear directive to take under-threes into sessions was not issued by associations. However, as early as 1997 the Dunedin Kindergarten Association's policy on its management of kindergarten rolls required that "kindergartens maintain rolls to a minimum of 99%." The policy goes on to state: "For rolls to be maintained it may be necessary to bring in under-3 year olds, incorporate the playgroup into an afternoon session or look at other alternatives" (Dunedin Kindergarten Association, 1997, p. 1).

To keep the rolls full meant, for most kindergartens, taking the next child on the list – the two-year old. Recalling the time when her kindergarten made the decision to enrol under-threes, one Wellington teacher saw the decision as also connected to the policy of diversification. She said: "there wasn't an announcement, it just happened. We were talking about diversification with the Association at the time." Another teacher recalled:

> We got a newsletter about diversification. There weren't low rolls in every kindergarten. Those with low rolls got contacted. They could be proactive themselves to fix the rolls. We had meetings in kindergarten; minuted meetings. The Association visited. They gave us information on different options, hours and how we could change our hours and the funding would still be viable.

In the Wellington Association, a policy on diversification, approved in June 2001, does not mention the enrolment of under-three year olds as an option and defines diversification as:

> [A]ny of the following: change to starting/finishing times, changed session days, change of session structure e.g., family/vertical groupings, change of number of children in sessions, change of teachers.

Similarly, the enrolment and admission policy talks only about the admission of children "according to age" (July, 2002) or "in age order" (February, 2004), and does not specify a starting age. One teacher said: "They said we didn't have to take under-threes ... but when it comes to funding, when a two-year old comes, we take them."

In Dunedin, another teacher said:

> The expectation was there, but nobody told you, you know you had that feeling you had to have, whatever number it was, that wonderful number.... Nobody said I had to take under-threes but you heard that others had two-year olds so, "Oh well. I've got to keep my numbers up." But it was a real pressure wasn't it? It was the pressure of maintaining your rolls. And adjusting, no training, nothing, they just happened to be there.

Therefore, for most of the teachers the two-year olds arrived serendipitously, without advance planning and without additional training or support for the teachers, who in most cases, were unfamiliar with working with these very young children.

Other options for keeping rolls full were also attempted in several Dunedin and Wellington kindergartens, both in an attempt to maintain the viability of the kindergartens but, in some cases, also to avoid taking on large numbers of two-year olds. Some kindergartens changed from offering two sessions daily (morning for the older children, and afternoon for the younger children) to a mixed-age session in the morning (from two- to five-year olds in group sizes of 40-45 children). Alongside this, in 2000, in some kindergartens, the hours for sessions were changed, with a longer session in the morning (4 hours instead of 3.5) and a shorter session in the afternoon (2 hours instead of 2.5). More recently a six-hour extended session has also been provided. In some kindergartens, the financial gains from these changes were initially used to fund additional part-time staffing positions in kindergartens with high needs (including kindergartens with large numbers of two-year olds), but these have not been maintained.

One Dunedin innovation was to re-deploy teachers from the restructured kindergartens with the newly-created single session, to assist in the afternoon sessions of kindergartens with under-threes:

> *Teacher:* Well, it was keeping us in a full-time job. We were working full-time but we had no afternoon session so it was just sort of a normal full-time job.
>
> *Interviewer:* But shared location?

> *Teacher:* Shared location .... I've been put down to a 0.9[8] and supposed to go into another kindergarten, and [other teachers] a 0.8 and a 0.6. So to give us full-time, like we did in the past, we'd go to another kindergarten.

This teacher, however, went on to describe how this situation had not been able to be maintained as the Association had been unable to continue to pay them full wages.

> *Teacher:* And that's because we don't keep full rolls, basically. There isn't the funding coming in to support the teachers who are, in Dunedin, generally at the higher level of the scale.

Likewise, the move to a single session, with extended hours, did not prevent the decline in numbers and the introduction of two-year olds as had been anticipated.

> *Teacher:* I think it's really interesting that the kindergartens, whose rolls have dropped over time, who've gone to the extended session, still have really high numbers of two-year olds, in actual fact, in that new sessional structure that they've got.
>
> *Teacher:* And also like the pressure, I'm not sure what age they're coming into, but with the older twenty children staying for the extended sessions as well too, the age is dropping and they're getting younger and younger and with the younger children moving up into if it's not actually doing what it was intended to [extension work for the older children].

In our national survey we asked associations to choose which factors from a list had contributed to the enrolment of two-year olds in their kindergartens. Falling demographics (86%) and "continuation of the kindergarten" (76%) were the most commonly chosen reasons. (See Figure 1).

Responding to transient communities (43%), competition with other early childhood services (43%), and to secure staffing positions (33%) were also high on the list of reasons.

3. *Awareness of two-year olds as an issue*

We asked the associations to indicate on a scale of 0 to 5 (0 = not at all significant and 5 = very significant) the factors that brought the attendance of two-year olds to their attention. For the majority of associations (66%) their awareness of two-year olds in kindergartens had occurred since 2000, yet 19% indicated that it had been an issue for

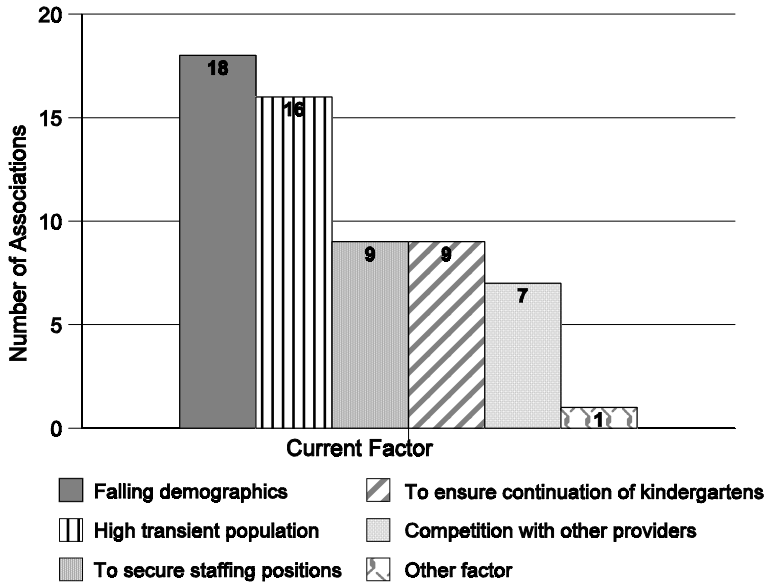

Figure 1 Factors contributing to the enrolment of two-year olds at kindergarten

them since the 1990s. We had identified the 1990s as a time of policy and funding change for the kindergarten service, and had been interested to see if this had impacted on the introduction of larger numbers of two-year olds in the service.

The associations identified that it was teachers (75%), and senior teachers (45%), who alerted them to the issues of two-year olds in their associations. The majority did not rate "numbers of two-year olds", or "external review" as factors in this at all. However, two associations indicated that the "number of two-year olds" was "very significant": one of these associations had 8% of their enrolments aged under-three and the other had 2%. Again, these averages may not capture the number of children in individual kindergartens within the association, where a high percentage in a particular kindergarten would be a significant issue for group size.

The impact of external review was raised in the Dunedin cluster group. An Education Review Office (ERO) inspection in 2002 created much discussion in the association around recommended changes within the kindergarten environments to reflect the increased numbers

of two-year olds. The reviewers informed the kindergartens that they must have "defined areas" for the under-threes. They recommended signs, indicating these areas, and barriers to keep the children "safe". One teacher recounted:

> We were told we had to provide an under-three play area ... you had to have a sign up ... and you had to have it in a way that it was closed off.... It was a wonderful plastic fantastic conversation. We did it and separated it with wood. Of course we were telling the children "they're safe" and that this was for the younger children. And what happened? Of course, all the older children rushed in. And we just knew straight away it wasn't going to work. But it was a requirement so we did it. So we still have the remnants of an under-three designated play area. But it didn't work. So we had all these fancy signs for when they came back. And suddenly then you didn't need a sleeping area because it was only for kindergartens that operated for longer than four hours.

The confusion of this "multi-message" approach about two-year olds in kindergartens appeared to be a common situation within the sector as the numbers of two-year olds increased. It seemed to the teachers that policy and procedures, as well as professional development or programme support, were reactive to the situation rather than proactive, and decisions were made on the spot without wider consultation or understanding of kindergarten philosophies and practices. One Wellington teacher explained:

> We had ERO in and we were talking to them about how busy the afternoon sessions are and how there's so little time to do some things. And ERO didn't really care. They couldn't respond and didn't want to discuss the situation. For example, 80 kids sharing "2 spaces", part-time attendees taking up places. They couldn't see that having young kids in the afternoon was an issue. They don't know the difference between kindergarten and childcare. There's 58 children and only 40 places. Some don't all come for the 3 days. No day is the same. They need to understand the complexities and the situation, especially ERO and the association.

The teachers openly discussed the different recommendations and advice that they received in their kindergartens, from both ERO and their associations. Often, tensions arose between different kindergartens as the apparent "ad hoc decision making" of their association left teachers feeling that decisions were inequitable across kindergartens:

> *Teacher 1:* I was talking to [Senior Teacher] about the sixteen children that are going to school in August and September and that has a huge impact on the roll. That's 50%. And we were talking then about the ages and so I said, "Well, two and-a-half year olds is where I'm going. And she accepted that."
>
> *Teacher 2:* We heard through the grapevine that some kindergartens were saying: "No, I'm not taking two-year olds or under-three year olds" in their programme. And yet others are being questioned that they have been ... maintaining twenty-nine and twenty-eight at two-and-a-half.
>
> *Teacher 1:* But I think, you know, what's happened is with the different senior teachers that we've got, you know different problems, there's been different approaches.
>
> *Teacher 3:* And that's what I'm just wondering, whether it's just gossip, or whether it's the head teacher's interpretation? ... sometimes messages get put across differently. I know ... different kindergartens, and I know they don't have the same age children as what we do and their rolls aren't full, so how do they get away with it and yet we don't?

4. Current issues for kindergartens with two-year olds attending

As part of the national survey, associations were asked about current issues for their kindergartens, in relation to their two-year olds. As with the earlier questions they were provided with a list to choose from and an option for adding any other issues.

Multiple issues were identified by 19 of the 21 associations which answered this question. The most common areas identified were "funding to improve staff:child ratios" (68%), and "programming" (68%), followed by unreliable attendance (63%), physical environment (58%), teaching practices and equipment (both at 53%), curriculum goals and changing regulations (each at 32%) and changes to session structure (21%). Two associations reported having no concerns (See Table 3).

We also asked the associations to identify any general restructuring or diversification that had occurred in their association over the last ten years so as to look at the overall policies and planning of the associations which impact on all of the children attending kindergarten, and not just the two-year olds.

Table 3 Current Issues within the Associations in Relation to the Attendance of Two-Year Olds At Kindergarten

Current Issue	**Associations**	
	N	%
None	2	11
Teaching Practices	10	53
Programming	13	68
Curriculum goals	6	32
Funding to enable improved staff:child ratio	13	68
Physical environment	11	58
Equipment	10	53
Changing regulations	6	32
Unreliable attendance	12	63
Changes to session structure	4	21

The most common changes that the 28 replying associations reported making were in "extended morning sessions" (89%) and "programme and curriculum changes" (71%). The examples provided by the associations of the changes that had occurred reveal that the increased funding that accrued from longer sessions was a strong shaper of the changes made. The higher funding enabled the kindergartens to either remain open (viable), or to employ additional staff (administration and teaching). Significantly, one association, with 51 kindergartens and 222 (6%) of its children aged two years, described the changes made to sessions as:

> To meet community need and retain viability rather than catering for a particular age group. The 6-hour sessions reduce ratios to 10:1 so groups changed to 40 children with 4 staff from 45/45 [group size of 45 each session] with 3 staff. Staff indicate this has substantially reduced stress and provides a better service to children/families.

These issues and changes were also discussed in cluster group meetings. For example, teachers had much to say about the issue of teacher:child ratios and the changed session structures. These two issues are elaborated below to illustrate the teachers' perspectives on how the issues impacted in practice.

Two Practical Issues

1. ***Teacher:child ratio and group sizes in kindergartens with under-three year olds***

Improving the teacher:child ratio in kindergartens with under-three year olds was a significant concern for the national associations as well as the teachers in this study.

Both national and international research has demonstrated that qualified teacher:child ratio makes a difference for quality experiences in early childhood education (Smith, 1999; Smith, et al., 2000). A study conducted in 1994 of the Wellington Kindergarten Association to consider the introduction of increased group sizes (from 40 to 45 children) showed that the teachers believed that the increased group sizes had a direct impact on children, programmes, teachers and families (Renwick & McCauley, 1995). The major issues presented by the Wellington teachers in 1994 were:

- They had less time to work with individual children and small groups;
- Even though the adult:child ratio remained constant at 1:15, the larger group size was overwhelming for young children and had a marked impact on the type of activities teachers were able to offer;
- Teachers were being forced more towards a supervisory role, rather than being able to focus on the educative role for which they had been trained;
- Increased roll numbers had an adverse diluting effect on teachers' relationships with parents. Ninety families were too many for teachers to get to know and interact with effectively;
- In some kindergartens children were being admitted at a younger age, which placed extra demands on teachers;
- There had been little training or support for teachers to cope with the consequences of the new policy (Renwick & McCauley, 1995).

Our study showed that little has changed from these findings ten years later. At the level of teachers' daily experiences, adult:child ratios in most kindergartens meant that teachers ended up "feeling bad" about the amount of time they were NOT having with individual children. One teacher described the difference in how she experienced kindergarten teaching between a time when there were eighteen children in the afternoon session to the current roll of forty-three children. Looking back, she said:

> The enjoyment factor for me back then was much more. Sometimes, I came away from the afternoon session and I don't look forward to coming back. I feel bad about not spending time reading stories to kids because you're busy attending to kids who are having trouble settling and those with special needs.

Another teacher expressed a feeling of turning into a "supervisor" and "just scanning outside ... being a roving interacter." This lack of time was the constant concern raised by the staff, as it worked against their ability to have meaningful interactions with the children. Even in the smaller group sizes, and with increased adult:child ratios, the teachers felt that with the young children there was never enough time to do the job they wanted to do or would have liked to be doing. The teachers talked about the "flying past", the interruptions, and the "I'll be back in a minute" that never happened:

> When you are actually trying to work with one child, like one-on-one and you have got a lot of little children coming up wanting something else, and someone hits themselves and you forget the child you were working one-on-one with, because safety is more important and you never get back to that child because something else happens. And unless you make a concerted effort and say to the other staff, "look you deal with that, I'm going to sit here for five minutes with one child", it doesn't happen, because it's just too busy.

Time to spend with parents was another frustration as is evident in the following statement:

> I think time is a factor. You know time that you feel, as you say, working with this person, and you feel you need to do this and that parent's coming and you needed to talk to them. And you know, how much more time would I spend with this person and this little one and I need to move on to tell somebody else such and such. It's a time factor. And that anxiety of thinking: these children really need a story, they're asking for a story but ... so to me it's just a time factor. Of not being able to spend that valuable time that I really wanted to spend with that child or that parent.

Furthermore, the teachers identified that due to the different areas that the teachers were working in within the environment, and the large group size, each teacher did not necessarily interact with each child in every session. Beyond being a source of frustration for them, teachers were also concerned that parents would find this difficult to understand.

When asked, therefore, not every teacher would be able to comment on a child's afternoon. As one teacher lamented:

> ... unfortunately they all come in at the same time and they all leave at the same time and they've always virtually got the same questions like: how was my child today? And I know I'm so guilty of it, I just say: "oh, he's had a really good day, fine," you know. And after you've said this sort of twenty, twenty-five times – well, really what was their child like?

2. ***Session hours and times for two-year olds***

The timing of the session, and how long the children attended for, were seen to have a big impact on the quality of the session for children. Teachers from one kindergarten spoke about the positive impact of their decision to have three two-hour afternoon sessions each week. They saw this as having turned out well for the children: "A two-hour session seems short ... but sometimes it's long enough for the three-year olds." These teachers had also decided to start their afternoon sessions at 1:30 pm rather than 1:00 pm to enable younger children to have a nap before session; this had been a response to the issue of "children not coming in for afternoon sessions because they have to have sleeps." One teacher spoke at length about how "changing hours changes the whole pattern of things."

In kindergartens which had changed to single morning sessions with extended hours, and children aged from two-years old, there were concerns that the two-year olds were very tired, and that the parents themselves did not necessarily want their two-year olds to be attending for a four-hour session, or for five mornings a week:

> *Teacher:* We're also finding that our parents only want, at the max, usually three sessions a week for our two-year olds. Because we have a four-hour session for them, they find that's enough, and there's been no pressure to make them come five mornings either.

A consequence of the children not attending every day, and the requirement for full rolls to be maintained at all times, has been that more children are being introduced from the waiting list to fill the places that the younger children do not maintain over the week. This structural change clearly is financially necessary for kindergartens, but it also adds to the group of even younger children entering kindergarten. This raised concerns for teachers about the experience of being a two-year old in a group size of 45. One teacher asked:

> How stressful is it to bring a two-year old into a group of forty-five children, you know, for the child? Do we really consider that child?... that actually coming in and introducing that child to forty-four other children.... That's an awful lot for a two-year old, first day and seeing this sea of faces.

The tiredness of the two-year olds was raised by all the teachers, whether the children attended in the morning or the afternoon. Teachers who had children in the extended morning programmes (4-6 hours) reported that they had suggested to parents that the younger children should be collected earlier – before the tears and tiredness set in. One teacher said:

> We started seeing if they would pick them up at twelve, because I mean twelve o'clock till twelve thirty it was just – they were all starting to cry and you know they'd been there too long.

Conclusion

Our national survey showed that at the level of policy:

1. Associations were engaged in re-thinking their practices about how best to meet the needs of families and children in their region. This was reflected in the various ways that associations had made changes to their policies and strategic planning.
2. The necessity to maintain full rolls, to enable the continuation of the kindergarten within associations, has clearly shaped new structures within the kindergartens (sessions and hours), and introduced younger children to the sessions. It has also changed traditionally age-segregated structures into combinations of mixed-age sessions.

Data from the teachers' discussions at cluster group meetings show that the changed structures at association level had impacted on the teachers' daily experience of working in kindergarten. While the teachers involved in the study were able to reflect, discuss and reframe their work with two-year olds, they were not able to directly change the structural factors they worked within. Increased group sizes, the trained teacher:child ratio, and the changed ratios of under- to over-three year olds were sources of key frustrations in their work.

At both the level of lived experience and the level of association policy, the catalyst for change clearly originated in the macro context of early childhood policy at the national level.

The relevance of these findings is that they establish a picture that had not yet existed of the complex micro context in which kindergarten teachers currently work within the broader (macro) context of association policy and strategic planning. In this picture, the world of kindergarten teaching is revealed as no longer homogenous either within associations or across them. It seems to us that a homogenous approach to kindergarten no longer exists in New Zealand.

Postscript

We wish to note that this analysis is not about which service or centre provides better for two-year olds, nor about which change has been the most successful or should be applied across the kindergartens.

Rather, this study has demonstrated that in the case of two-year olds in kindergartens, the children's experiences emerge from a combination of factors that have to do with philosophies and with structures. The difficulties that undermine the best possible provisions for children in kindergarten are the same difficulties that would undermine provision in any other early childhood centre: large group sizes and low (trained) teacher:child ratios. This was summed up very well by one of the case study kindergarten teachers in her reflections on how, as the group size in her care grew, the difficulties increased:

> Well, I think probably, for me ... the issue that's come through is the more children you've got, the less time you've got to spend with children and we don't get to know them. So we can't answer those five or six statements: do you know me? Can I trust you? Do you let me fly? Do you hear me? Is this place fair?

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Annual Conference of the New Zealand Association for Research in Education (NZARE), 2006.
2. The full report is available from: <www.tlri.org.nz>.
3. *The full research team are:* Judith Duncan, Carmen Dalli, Raylene Becker, Michelle Butcher, Kristie Foster, Karmen Hayes, Sue Lake-Ryan, Bev Mackie, Helen Montgomery, Penny McCormack, Raylene Muller, Rosalie Sherburd, Jan Taita, and Wendy Walker, with: Chris Bowden, Kerry Cain, Helen Duncan, Julie Lawrence, Karen McCutcheon, Renate Simenaur, and Jessica Tuhega.
4. These were the usual afternoons for kindergarten sessions for the younger age group.

5. See Appendix 1 of the full report for details of the survey.
6. The early childhood regulations were being reviewed as this paper was being written and the group sizes and age bands are being re-examined, and so this may change for kindergartens in the future.
7. This may not apply to kindergartens with a high turnover of children occasioned by factors such as transient communities.
8. A full time position is 1.0, so part-time positions are divided in percentages of full time.

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