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The 20 Hours Free Early Childhood Education Programme: A USA Perspective

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Abstract:

This article provides a comparative perspective on early childhood education (ECE) policy in the USA and New Zealand. The contrast between the two countries is significant. In the USA the federal government funds early childhood education only for the poor and disabled. Some individual states have created their own funding programmes, but again, they primarily target children from low-income families. Only a few provide universal access. By way of contrast, the New Zealand 20 Hours Free programme initiated in 2007 provides 20 hours of free ECE for three- and four-year olds regardless of family income. This article discusses the creation of the programme, starting with its genesis in 2005, and considers what are regarded as “wedge” issues, the controversy over the exclusion of private services and parent/whanau-led services, and the ongoing debate over the restriction on “top-up” fees. In the current global economic crisis, it remains to be seen whether the recently-elected National-led government will continue to fully fund the programme or revert to a subsidy strategy.

From February to July of 2008 I was hosted by the Ministry of Education through the Ian Axford (New Zealand) Fellowship in Public Policy. When I arrived in Wellington, I had just finished writing a book on the creation of publicly funded education programmes for three- and four-year olds at the state level in the United States (Bushouse, 2009). My main objective in coming to New Zealand was to conduct a similar analysis of the political process for creating the 20 Hours Free programme. However, once I arrived I quickly learned that whereas the universal preschool programmes in the United States

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were often created due to the inadequacy of national government funding for early education, in New Zealand the 20 Hours Free programme was created on top of a well developed and (through the eyes of this American) comprehensive early childhood education and care policy environment. As the mother of twins who paid in excess of NZD1700 per month for each child to attend preschool in the United States, I was utterly awestruck with the programmes that exist in New Zealand to subsidise the cost for every child in early education, with additional funding available to low-income families. Even if the 20 Hours Free programme had never been created, New Zealand’s early childhood funding scheme far surpasses what we in the United States provide.

In this article I first provide a description of the federal programmes for early childhood education in the United States, and this is followed by a synopsis of the movement to create state-level universal preschool programmes. I then turn to an analysis of the 20 Hours Free programme highlighting what I found to be three “wedge” issues that emerged with the announcement of the new programme, the exclusion of private services, exclusion of parent/whanau-led services, and a restriction on “top-up” fees. The article concludes with a look toward the future, following the election of the new National-led Government, and in view of the current world economic crisis.

The United States Early Childhood Policy Environment

In the United States there are three main policies that provide federal funds for the education and care of young children: the Head Start Preschool programme, child care subsidies for low-income families, and subsidies for special needs children. Head Start was established as one of several programmes authorized by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, an initiative of President Johnson’s War on Poverty. The goal of the programme was to lift children out of poverty by providing them with the necessary physical, emotional, social, and academic skills to enter school at age five. The programme targeted, and continues to target, children living below the federal poverty line (approximately NZD35,000 annual income for a family of four). The programme, administered through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provides federal grants for preschool education and comprehensive intervention services to low-income and special needs children.

There was a point in the United States history in which a universal, comprehensive programme could have been created, but it was vetoed by President Nixon in 1971. Even though the bill failed, it marked the first time that the federal government had considered an early childhood programme on its own merits (Cohen, 2001). Since that time, early childhood advocates have made little headway in advancing their agenda at the federal level. In the 1970s there were few states that regulated the early childhood education and care industry. Advocates pushed for federal regulatory requirements, but national standards were rejected because of the costs associated with both compliance and enforcement. The consequence of this was that each individual state created its own regulatory standards for childcare, and the variation among states is extensive (Bushouse, 1999; Gormley, 1999). In the 1970s, the only advances in federal funding for early childhood education were for programmes tied to welfare assistance for the poor. In 1974, President Ford signed Title XX of the Social Security Act,¹ which provided federal funds to the states for social services. The use of Title XX funds was left to the discretion of the states, but childcare provision was explicitly established as an allowable use of funds. Under the income eligibility requirements of Title XX, only low-income individuals and families could receive benefits. After 1974, no major changes occurred for nearly 15 years, despite rapidly increased labour force participation of women and subsequent expansion of demand for childcare services.

The 1990 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act contained allocations both for a Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and an At-Risk Child Care Programme under Title IV-A of the Social Security Act. These programmes were, and continue to be, targeted toward low-income families with working parents.² Federal provision of early childhood education appeared on the national agenda again in 1996 when the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 (PRWOA) dramatically reformed the nation's welfare system. This landmark legislation replaced the prior system of income-supports to enable mothers to stay at home with their children, and forced states to require both parents in a two-parent family to work in order to be eligible for PRWOA funds.³ Because the federal government required parents to work, it then had to increase federal aid for childcare.

The only federal early childhood education programme without income eligibility rules targets a separate group – special needs children. The Individual with Disabilities Education Act requires public schools to provide preschool services for special needs children. The federal

government distributes a formula-based grant to school systems and the schools can either deliver the services themselves or contract with an education provider to do so. Schools are not allowed to charge fees for the special needs preschool service; however, they often enrol non-special needs children for whom they are able to charge fees (United States Department of Education, 2007).

The Head Start preschool programme, childcare subsidies, and special needs preschool requirements firmly limit federal funding to low-income and special needs target groups. Several attempts to expand federal policy beyond these target groups have been unsuccessful. While advocacy for change continues, there is widespread agreement that federal policy change is unlikely, and therefore efforts have been redirected towards state-level policy change (Zigler, Gilliam, & Jones, 2006, p. 279).

With the lack of federal investment in early education, in the 1990s some states began to take action. Between 1995 and 2002, four states passed legislation to create universal preschool programmes. Georgia was the first state in 1995, quickly followed by New York in 1997, Oklahoma in 1998, and West Virginia in 2002. Both Tennessee (2005) and Illinois (2006) passed legislation that has the potential to create a universal programme, but the budget allocations by their state legislatures currently limit participation by income level. In 2009, 38 states and the District of Columbia provide state-funded preschool programmes (Doctors, 2008). Most of the states have targeted programmes to assist low-income families, but there is a “sea change” across the country in the appreciation of the importance of early childhood education.

Because of the peculiarities of the United States political system, the passage of universal preschool legislation in six states was an amazing accomplishment. It is not often in the USA that elected officials support investment in programmes for young children. The political culture is generally averse to the public sphere intruding into the private sphere, and there still remains a belief that “children should be home with their mothers” despite the high labour force participation of women in their child-bearing years (Bushouse, 2009). The successful passage of universal preschool legislation by several states is due to many factors, but the overarching one is the successful reframing of early childhood education (ECE) as the *solution* to the educational outcome *problem* (Bushouse, 2009). In order to pass legislation in their states, policy entrepreneurs presented the research on the importance of early brain

development and the results of longitudinal studies on the benefits of preschool to make the case that public investment in ECE is necessary to improve the educational outcomes of children. In some states, the policy entrepreneurs took it one step further. They linked investment in ECE to educational outcomes and ultimately to improved economic development. In this way they were able to bring in supporters who had not previously been advocates. Influential business leaders began to make the case for ECE investment, and they were joined by law enforcement advocates who publicized research that linked participation in preschool to decreased juvenile delinquency. The actions of a few states turned into a movement when a foundation with over \$5 billion in assets, the Pew Charitable Trusts, began a universal preschool giving programme. Pew funded research needed to inform policymakers, financed advocacy in individual states, and spurred media attention through the education of journalists about the importance of early education, among many other funded activities (for a full analysis see Bushouse, 2009).

The policymaking process in New Zealand was quite different from the process in the United States, in that the 20 Hours Free programme was created in a far more comprehensively-developed policy environment. In the section below, I provide an outsider's view of the policymaking process and the challenges that arose.⁴

The 20 Hours Free Programme in the New Zealand Early Childhood Policy Environment

The 20 Hours Free programme provides 20 hours of government-funded early childhood education (ECE) for all three- and four-year olds regardless of family income. The programme has been wildly successful in attracting services and children to participate. In its second year it reached 87 percent participation by services and 91 percent by number of three- and four-year olds (Ministry of Education, 2009). But its success makes it easy to forget the controversial creation of 20 Hours Free. After the inclusion of the new programme in the 2005 Labour Party manifesto, opposition arose on three wedge issues: the exclusion of private services, the exclusion of parent/whanau-led services, and a restriction on "top-up" fees.

The 20 Hours Free programme was a stark departure from previous early childhood policies because: (1) it limited participation to teacher/kaiako-led services; and (2) it marked a shift in funding policy from a subsidy to covering the entire cost of early education (at the

regulated quality level). Prior to the 20 Hours Free programme, the government already provided universal subsidies to all early childhood services for up to 30 hours per week for each child from zero to five years of age. In addition, the Ministry of Social Development provided subsidies for up to 50 hours per week of childcare. Unlike the subsidy programmes in which services could "top up" the subsidy with parent fees, the 20 Hours Free programme prohibits top-up fees, in exchange for providing a higher level of funding set to cover the average cost of care at the regulated quality level.

When the Ministry of Education was developing the proposal that ultimately became the 20 Hours Free programme, Minister of Education Trevor Mallard was firmly committed to universal access to free ECE in community-based services.⁵ He believed that community-based services could expand to meet the demand; however, nearly one-third of all ECE enrolments were at privately owned centres (see Table 1) and a backlash ensued. Despite the Minister's commitment to community-based provision, the political opposition leading up to the 2005 election was too great to sustain the exclusion of private services, and ultimately they were allowed to participate, thereby resolving one wedge issue. On a pragmatic level, expansion to private services increased the number of services that could potentially offer free ECE by around half, and thereby reduced the risk of a shortage of free ECE spaces (Minister of Education, 2006).

Table 1 Number of Enrolments in Early Childhood Education by Type of Service: 1995 and 2007

TYPE OF SERVICE	1995	% of Sector	2007	% of Sector	% change 1995-2007
Kindergartens	47,208	33%	43,695	26%	-8%
Playcentres	19,108	14%	14,664	9%	-30%
Education and care centres	53,769	38%	91,733	54%	41%
Te Kōhanga Reo	14,015	10%	9,236	5%	-52%
Homebased networks	6,114	4%	11,073	6%	45%
Correspondence School	901	1%	737	<1%	-22%
Total	141,115	100%	171,138	100%	18%

Source: Adapted from Early Childhood Enrolments Time Series Data, Sheet 7. Retrieved from <www.educationcounts.govt.nz/data_collections/ece_staff_return>.

The parent/whanau-led exclusion was a particularly sensitive issue, because in 2002 the Ministry of Education began implementation of a strategic plan for ECE that committed the government to improving its quality. One of the major parts of the strategic plan was to raise ECE quality by increasing the educational level of teachers, and by providing an incentive to hire more qualified teachers through the linkage of reimbursement rates to the number of qualified teachers per centre. Both Playcentre and Te Kōhanga Reo objected to the 20 Hours Free programme because of the linkage between teacher qualifications and quality of care. The Playcentre Federation and Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust wanted the recognition, expressed in policy, that there are multiple pathways to quality and, on that basis, to participation in Free ECE.⁶ But the Labour Government maintained the exclusion of parent/whanau-led services from participation in the 20 Hours Free programme. In 2008 the National Party reversed this policy by calling for the expansion of eligibility to parent/whanau-led ECE services in its manifesto, which resolved this wedge issue.

The final wedge issue, top-up fees, endures and presents the National Government with a choice either to maintain the paradigmatic shift to universal access or to revert to the subsidy approach of the past. However, the history of this issue is worth revisiting because it is likely to affect the reaction of the sector to the new government's policy decisions. Shortly before the 2005 election, Steve Maharey was appointed Minister of Education, and he noted that the expansion to include private providers in Free ECE would increase the cost, and could also increase the risk that the price paid for free provision would not be seen as adequate. He was right on both counts. The Ministry of Education (MOE) estimated that the Labour Party manifesto commitment would cost \$148 million over the 2007-2010 budget cycle (Minister of Education, 2006, p. 6). That led the media and the ECE sector to focus their attention on determining the funding rates. Early on in the development of the Free ECE programme, the Ministry advised the Cabinet to fund free ECE based on average costs for meeting licensing standards without charging parents. Some time earlier, Ministry of Education staff had advised the then Minister of Education, Trevor Mallard, that funding based on average cost would not cover all the costs of every service. They advised that the proposal would need to be carefully positioned to signal that the funding rate would not cover all costs but also to signal that government would continue to "subsidise" rather than "fund" ECE (Minister of Education,

2003, section 7a). MOE staff also warned of significant fiscal risks from a government commitment to meet the costs of the strategic plan. Because the government does not set fees for early childhood services, it was exposed to claims from services for funding increases. The MOE staff advised the Minister to carefully communicate the proposal to ensure that the government would not necessarily respond to every cost increase, or at least not respond in full (Minister of Education, 2003, section 7b). This indeed became a divisive issue in the implementation of the programme, as discussed below.

The Labour-led Government's 2006 budget commitments to ECE included not only the new 20 Hours Free programme but also the changes related to the strategic plan. In October 2006 Minister Maharey announced that, "Early childhood centres will be required to have 50 percent qualified teachers in all centres from December next year [2007]." He continued: "Cabinet has also agreed to improvements to adult to child ratios from 2009" (Maharey, 2006a, p. 1). With these increased costs for teachers and regulatory changes in the works, the sector became uneasy with the yet-to-be-announced funding levels for Free ECE. However, the 2006 budget included increased funding rates for providers of almost \$30 million over four years, to enable the ECE sector to "move more rapidly towards its goal of all teachers being registered by 2012" (Maharey, 2006c, p. 1). The budget provided all-day services with an up to 13 percent increase and sessional services with an up to 11 percent increase. The budget also included a 9 percent increase for Playcentres that was intended to support the cost of administration in order to free volunteers to spend their time with children (Maharey, 2006b, p. 1).

Even with these increases in funding, the controversy over Free ECE funding rates did not decrease. The Ministry set the Free ECE rates based on a survey of operating costs conducted in 2005 and 2006. The funding scheme reflects a cost-driver approach with the highest rates provided for ECE services with the highest costs. In this approach, all-day, centre-based ECE services with 100 percent registered teachers receive the highest funding rate, and services with sessional programmes, home-based services, and those with fewer registered teachers receive lower rates. Normally the rates would have been announced in May 2007 along with the budget, but because of the high-profile controversy over funding rates, the Ministry was allowed to release the Free ECE rates on 21 December 2006, a full six months early.⁷ The commitment of the government was to provide funding to cover

the regulated quality level, which would necessitate regular adjustments to the funding rates schedule.

The response from the sector to the funding rates ranged from full support to adamant opposition, with many undecided. The New Zealand Childcare Association, Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa, immediately voiced its support in a media release (NZCA, 2006). Barnardos New Zealand, responsible for 1800 enrolled children and half of the home-based providers, announced its participation in January 2007 (Barnardos, 2007). The New Zealand Educational Institute, the teachers' union representing some early childhood teachers, fully supported the 20 Hours Free programme and published positive articles with titles such as "20 Hours Free ECE is a Great Advance, say Centres" (New Zealand Educational Institute, 2007). Kindergarten Associations were undecided. New Zealand Kindergartens Incorporated, which represents two-thirds of the kindergartens (approximately 400) raised concerns about whether the Ministry of Education would consider the full range of costs kindergartens incur. Early Childhood Leadership (formerly the Federation of Free Kindergartens), which represents the other third of kindergartens (approximately 200) mainly in the Auckland area, criticised the Ministry's reliance on operating costs to set the rates because it did not include the potential growth costs (Hotere, 2005).

Organisations opposed to Free ECE included higher cost providers, such as the Montessori Association of New Zealand (approximately 80 services), that did not plan to participate because they thought the funding rates were too low. But the most vociferous and media savvy opposition came from the Early Childhood Council (ECC). The ECC had been a vocal critic of the exemption of private providers from the Free ECE programme and now was leading the opposition against participation in Free ECE. The organisation sent out a barrage of media releases announcing, "Thousands Face Missing out on Free Pre-school" (Oliver, 2007) and "Early Childhood Education Plan Causing Problems" (New Zealand Parents Association & Lewis, 2007). The media coverage continued with additional news releases from ECC opposing participation in the programme and subsequent news releases from NZCA in favour of the programme.⁸

As the June 24, 2007 deadline approached for services to declare participation in the Free programme, the tides started to turn. The Auckland Kindergarten Association (AKA) which had been undecided about participating in the programme, finally announced its decision to participate on June 13, 2007 (Radio New Zealand, 2007). The AKA's

indecision was due to funding concerns. Although kindergartens were allowed to charge fees long before the Free ECE programme was developed, the AKA had not instituted a fee policy. In its media release, the AKA indicated that it was instituting a \$0.50 per hour optional fee but would consider withdrawing from the 20 Hours Free programme if its financial position was threatened (Radio New Zealand, 2007). It was with bated breath that all involved waited to see whether the implementation would be a success or failure.

On July 2, 2007, just over a week after the initial implementation of the policy, the Minister of Education Steve Maharey announced it to be a success: "1703 services will be offering 20 Hours Free ECE from day one, which is a great start. More centres are still coming on board so the take-up rate of 62 per cent of providers will increase further" (2007b). The Minister referred to the new programme as a watershed policy. He stated: "20 Hours Free early childhood education is the most significant expansion of the education system since the rollout of free secondary education by the first Labour government in the 1930s. For the first time in history, the state is recognising the need to provide free quality education for under-five year olds" (Maharey, 2007a). He took pains to emphasise that the 20 Hours Free programme symbolised recognition that taxpayers see education of three- and four-year olds as essential; however, opponents continued to answer that 20 hours was a subsidy and not free. The ECC put out three media releases on July 2, 2007 taking issue with the Minister's characterisation of the programme as free, as well as including ECC survey data on take-up rates (Early Childhood Council, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). But media coverage dwindled after the implementation of the programme. With an initial take-up rate of 62 percent of services, it was high enough for the Ministry and the Prime Minister to claim success, thereby removing the source of controversy. As evidence of the turnaround in media attention, the *New Zealand Herald* published a column by political analyst Colin James crediting Trevor Mallard for Labour's "most important initiative, its biggest idea." James likened the 20 Hours Free programme to investing in infrastructure because of its ability to provide the path to build individuals' capacity to acquire skills and lift their earning power and ultimately contribute to their socioeconomic mobility. He then directed the government to do more for children from birth to three (James, 2008). Clearly 20 Hours Free, despite all the controversy leading up to its implementation, had secured its place in New Zealand early childhood policy.

ECE in Troubled Economic Times

When the Free ECE programme began, participation was large enough to affect the Consumer Price Index: “Education prices fell 5.2 percent [for the September quarter], due to lower prices for early childhood education as a result of changes to government funding” (Statistics New Zealand, 2007, p. 1). The most recent data indicate that 87 percent of eligible services participate and 91 percent of eligible children participate (Ministry of Education, 2009). With the tremendous success of the programme, 20 Hours Free ECE has become the biggest, most expensive early education programme in the country, with \$740 million dollars spent since its inception (Ministry of Education, 2009).

In New Zealand the government committed itself to fund 20 Hours Free at the regulated quality level. With the requirement for 100 percent of centre-based teachers to be registered by 2012 and the other improvements included as part of the ECE strategic plan, the cost of provision will necessarily increase. Because of the high participation rates in the 20 Hours Free programme, it accounts for approximately 70 percent of the \$807 million Vote: Education Early Childhood Education budget for 2007-08 (New Zealand Treasury, 2008a).⁹ An additional \$90 million was added to Early Childhood Education for the 2008-09 fiscal year (New Zealand Treasury 2008a).¹⁰ The question now is how the government will allocate funding if budget constraints force difficult decisions.

During the 2008 election, the National Party’s manifesto promised to expand eligibility to parent/whanau-led services and to allow five-year olds to participate. The promises of expansion were made prior to the precipitous decline in global economic conditions. If budget constraints force reductions in spending, the National-led Government will need to make a fundamental decision about whether the paradigmatic shift toward universal provision will continue, or whether it will revert to a subsidy programme. As Minister Trevor Mallard envisioned, the 20 Hours Free ECE programme is supposed to be free because it is a statement that the government is committed to paying for quality ECE for all three- and four-year olds regardless of a family’s ability to pay. The newly appointed Minister of Education Anne Tolley announced in November 2008 that new ECE regulations to have been implemented on December 1st would be delayed for six months to enable the Ministry to consult with the sector and parents (Tolley, 2008). While those regulations were already passed into law by the previous

government and will go into effect, her action could be a signal that the National-led Government wants to reassess ECE spending (and perhaps regulatory requirements). The new government also dropped “free” from the programme title, which could signal a potential reversal of the paradigmatic shift toward universal access.

In New Zealand, the 20 Hours Free programme represents an expansion of government provision of ECE. In the United States, the creation of universal preschool represents a similar governmental expansion. In both cases the government committed itself to make the education of three- and four-year olds a public expenditure, rather than a private one. It was a commitment by the governments to provide ECE regardless of family income level. One of the concerns with universal preschool programmes in the United States is whether the state governments’ funding levels will keep pace with the cost of providing quality care. In the USA, there is considerable variation in how states fund the programmes. For example, Georgia funds its programme through a lottery, Oklahoma and New York include universal preschool funding with the primary and secondary school funding, and Illinois has a block grant programme that includes an 11 percent component set aside for infant and toddler ECE. Some revenue streams are more stable than others, but if government revenues fall precipitously and budgets are constrained, there is the potential for universal preschool to become yet another under-funded public programme (similar to Head Start and many others).

As the political environment shifts, complicated by global financial turmoil, the choice for New Zealand may be to revert to a subsidy strategy. But even if that does occur, the improvements through the ECE strategic plan and the expansion of public funding for ECE in the last several years represent a quantum leap in government support for early childhood education. Whichever path the government chooses, New Zealand is head and shoulders above the United States in its ECE policy.

Notes

- 1 The Social Security Act (1974) consolidated four previous federal public assistance programs into a single grant program under Title XX.
- 2 CCDBG is limited to children in families with income below 75 percent of the state median income, and At-Risk Child Care is limited to families at risk of becoming welfare-dependent.

3. Exceptions included parental disability, the presence of a child under the age of one, or lack of access to child care. States could allow mothers with children under six to work only 20 hours per week (Cohen, 2001).
4. For an expanded analysis of the policymaking process, please see my Axford Report available for download at <www.fulbright.org.nz/voices/axford/2008_bushouse.html>.
5. Mallard, personal communication, April 17, 2008.
6. Marion Pilkington, personal communication, June 13, 2008; Arapera Royal Tangaere, personal communication, June 11, 2008.
7. (Name withheld by Ministry of Education), personal communication, May 29, 2008.
8. In February 2007, the ECC released the results of an email member survey which showed that only 23 percent of its services planned to participate in the Free ECE programme (Early Childhood Council, 2007d). Countering the ECC's message, the NZCA released a member survey in the same month indicating that "over 90 percent of early childhood centres surveyed will either offer the government's 20 Hours Free service or are still considering the issue" (New Zealand Childcare Association, 2007). The two organisations sent out competing brochures. The ECC's brochure warned parents that participation in Free ECE would force centres to lower quality because the government rate was too low and centres were not allowed to charge additional fees. The NZCA countered by releasing an official statement "Free ECE – Get the Facts Right." The release stated: "ECC is promulgating a number of myths. We want to set the record straight for our members."
9. Note that the spending data for ECE are from July 2007 to September 2008 and the budget data are for the corresponding fiscal year.
10. In addition to Ministry of Education ECE programmes, the Ministry for Social Development spent \$150 million on child care assistance in 2007-08 with a \$17 million increase for the 2008-09 fiscal year (New Zealand Treasury 2008b, Vote Social Development, M63, p. 285).

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