

Defining quality in a divided sector: A review of policy and practice in early childhood settings in New Zealand from 2008 to 2018

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This review examines major changes in the early childhood sector during the National-led government from 2008 to 2017, with discussion of the possible future under the new Labour-led government. The changing pattern of provision and access to quality early childhood services for families is critiqued, along with changes in funding models, qualifications, and professional development. The revision of Te Whāriki is examined, together with tensions between the revised curriculum and the early childhood centre regulations. Specific issues such as regulatory changes around group size and licences and choices for families are explored. This review concludes with an examination of the potential of the new strategic plan, highlighting the tensions within the terms of reference and consideration of directions for research that may help inform the vision for policy and practice laid out in the strategic plan.

Keywords: Early childhood, policy, regulation, teachers, standards

Introduction

The invitation to contribute to this annual review was timely, as early childhood education (ECE) in New Zealand is at a significant crossroads in terms of policy direction. As we write this, the Government is engaged in one of the largest reviews of education that has ever been undertaken, with few aspects of the sector from ECE to tertiary escaping a strong critical gaze by Government. This paper outlines major shifts that have occurred since the National-led government took power in 2008 and how those shifts have contributed to the current status of the ECE sector. We also examine the context to the revision of *Te Whāriki* in 2016 and how there is an essential tension between the regulatory framework which sets minimum standards and a child-centred curriculum that aspires to quality standards. The intricacies of decision-making for parents and whānau are examined within this complex political landscape. Finally, we critically examine the terms of reference for the new strategic plan for ECE and question whose priorities are championed. Implications for the future of ECE in New Zealand are explored.

Major changes in ECE from 2008 to 2017: Provision, access and funding models

At the time that the new National-led government took office in 2008, considerable progress had been made towards the implementation of the ECE strategic plan for 2002-2012, *Nga huarahi arataki: Pathways to the future* (Ministry of Education, 2002). Several supporting strategies, including the introduction of equity funding in 2002, the 20 hours free ECE policy for three- and four-year-olds in 2007, and the promulgation of revised ECE regulations and licensing criteria in 2008 enabled progress on achieving the strategic plan goals. For example, in relation to the goal of increased participation, by 2009 the (by then) 20 hours ECE policy initiative had supported increased participation rates for three- and four-year-olds with increased hours of enrolment also evident (Mitchell, Meagher-Lundberg, Mara, Cubey, & Whitford, 2011).

In relation to the second policy goal of improving quality, the implementation of equity funding had “helped services that were receiving it to improve overall levels of quality” (Mitchell & Hodgen, 2008, p. 6). Significant progress was made towards achieving the proportion of qualified, registered teachers in teacher-led services: in 2008, just over 60% of teachers were qualified and registered, ahead of the 2007 50% target. Round five of the Centres of Innovation programme was established in 2008. At the time that funding for the programme ceased in 2009, 20 ECE services had participated with 16 of these completing their projects (Meade, 2011). Support to strengthen service quality was also offered through the publication of *Kei Tua o te Pae Early Childhood Assessment Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2009) and *Ngā Arohaehae Whai Hua*, the ECE self-review guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2006). Professional development to support services to strengthen their practice in both these areas was available through Ministry of Education-funded programmes. Progress towards the plan’s third goal, promoting collaborative relationships, was more evident at a government agency level with work between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Social Development focused on improving agency links in relation to ECE (Mitchell et al., 2011).

A new government: shifting policy priorities

Significant changes to ECE policies rapidly followed the change of government in 2008. These included a reduction in the previous teacher registration target of 100% down to 80% in 2009, a move argued to considerably ease ECE teacher supply pressures (Ministry of Education, 2010). These workforce goal reductions were followed by the replacement of the 80-99% and 100% funding rates (that recognised the higher costs to services of employing more than 80% qualified, registered teachers) with an 80%+ flat rate for the funding of child places, which took effect in February 2011. Further budget reductions in 2009 included the cessation of the Centres of Innovation programme, effective June 2009 (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2009) and the adoption of a targeted approach to the delivery of Ministry of Education-funded professional development, with a concomitant halving in funding from 2010 (Cherrington, 2017).

Alongside these changes came an increased focus on increasing ECE participation rates with a Better Public Service target of 98% of children having attended ECE prior to starting school (Ministry of Education, n.d.). Budget funding of \$91.7million over four years was included in the 2010 budget to improve participation, particularly for Māori and Pasifika children with “up to 3,500 children over four years [expected to] access quality ECE” including: “intensive community participation projects, improving the supply of responsive high-quality ECE, and redesigning existing initiatives” (Ministry of Education, 2010).

Whilst participation rates increased by 2.3% between December 2010 (94.6%) and December 2017 (96.9%), more significant increases have occurred in the length of time that children are enrolled in ECE. The proportion of children who attended ECE for three or more years prior to starting school has grown from 38.1% in September 2014 to 44.7% in December 2017 (earlier data not available), an increase of 3,862 children (Ministry of Education, 2018a). Whilst government funding has increased since 2010 to meet the additional demand, the per child subsidy rates have remained static since 2011, leading the Early Childhood Council (2017) to estimate that the average ECE centre had lost \$105,000 in funding in the 2010-17 period.

At the time the newly elected National-led government took office in late 2008, just over 60% of staff in teacher-led ECE services were qualified and registered. Nine years later, in 2017, the proportion of qualified and registered staff had increased only slightly to 68.7%, well below the maximum funded rate of 80% (Ministry of Education, 2018b), meaning that many centres were missing out on potential funding and the levels of qualified staff were quite static.

There is some evidence that these policy shifts, particularly in relation to funding, are having a negative impact on the quality of ECE services. For example, the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) Te Riu Roa's survey of members following the 2016 budget found that services were coping with the lack of increased funding through a "combination of teacher pay cuts, increased reliance on untrained staff, reduction of children's time with qualified teachers, and a steady increase in the fees asked of parents" (NZEI Te Riu Roa, 2016, p. 4).

Changing patterns of provision and access

The period since 2008 has also seen considerable change in the provision of ECE services across service type, management structure, and licence type. Teacher-led services have seen growth, particularly in the number of education and care centres (up 25.2%) and home-based services (up 97.5%) and to a lesser extent, kindergartens (5.8%). In contrast, the number of playcentres and kōhanga reo have reduced by 9.1% and 2.8% respectively (Ministry of Education, 2018c). Interestingly, there has been a one-fifth increase in unlicensed playgroups (20.7%) during this period, which is arguably reflective of the Ministry of Education's policies, whereby participation in such playgroups counted towards the 98% participation target (Ministry of Education, 2018c).

Shifts in both management structures and licence types have also occurred since 2008. All kindergartens, playcentres and kōhanga reo have retained their community-based management structures. Whilst there has always been a mix of community-based and private management structures amongst education and care and home-based services, all the growth in these two sectors has been in the private sector: a 41.8% increase in privately owned education and care and a 173.7% increase in privately owned home-based services. This has resulted in shifts in the proportionality of ownership models across these two service types with the proportion of community-based services declining from 39.5% in 2008 to 28.7% in 2017. Whilst across the entire ECE sector there are still more community-based services (52.6%) than privately managed services (47.4%), this is a reduction from a 60|40 split in 2008 (Ministry of Education, 2018c).

The third key shift that has occurred over this period concerns licensing type. A trend away from sessional to full-day licences that began around 2002 (Cherrington, 2017) has resulted in only 20 teacher-led services still holding a sessional licence in 2017 (Ministry of

Education, 2018c). Playcentres are the only licensed ECE service to fully operate under sessional licences.

Collectively, these changes in patterns of provision suggest some changes in access to ECE for families. Whilst there is evidence that parents can access longer hours for their children to attend ECE services because of the 20 hours ECE policy and centres shifting to full-day licences (Mitchell et al., 2011), the shifts in service-type provision and operating structures do make for some reduction in choice for families. The lack of evidence of the impact of the changes outlined in this section on parental choice and children's experiences of ECE is an issue that requires addressing.

The revision of *Te Whāriki*: Addressing concerns about curriculum quality

Against this backdrop of a changing policy environment, there has also been mounting evidence of a troubled ECE sector in terms of providing high quality curriculum. There is probably an inevitable tension between the regulatory environment for the ECE sector, which is determined by the Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations (NZ Government, 2008) and sets minimum standards for operation, and the child-centred, aspirational, competence-based (Bernstein, 2000) ECE curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (McLachlan, Fler, & Edwards, 2018; Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017a).

In order to maintain a licence to operate, ECE centres must meet minimum standards around matters like adult:child ratios, space, safety, and delivery of the gazetted curriculum (currently *Te Whāriki*). They must also have a successful cyclic review by the Education Review Office (NZ Government, 2008), using established criteria. The regulations provide minimum standards for "structural quality" (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence 2007), while *Te Whāriki* specifies principles, strands, goals and learning outcomes, and guidance is offered in a range of additional documents to support "process quality." However, choices remain with service managers and/or teachers/educators for decision-making about the curriculum, as long as they can demonstrate consistency with regulations and the curriculum. Although the opportunity for choice is inclusive of different service types and philosophies, this also means there is considerable scope for interpretation of curriculum guidelines and variability in quality, an issue which has been identified by a succession of Education Review Office (ERO) national reports (2013, 2016).

There has been mounting evidence that the ECE sector has struggled with implementation of the curriculum (ERO, 2007, 2013, 2016), in addition to, or as a result of the changes in policy outlined in the previous section. The ERO (2013) review of the implementation of *Te Whāriki*, in particular, showed that teachers were struggling with implementing the principles and strands, assessing learning outcomes, and reviewing the effectiveness of their local curriculum. Although NZEI TE Riu Roa (2014) claimed that this was a result of increased privatisation of the sector and the reduction in funding for centres discussed previously, the ERO reports revealed that centres with 100% qualified staff were also included in those struggling centre statistics. Of particular concern was the ERO (2015) review of provision for infants and toddlers, which showed that centres with 100% qualified staff were included in the list of 'least responsive' services and were not promoting the curriculum strands of *communication* and *exploration* with children. ERO (2015) identified that teachers were delivering a 'selective' curriculum which focused on well-being and belonging, but provided limited emphasis on communication and exploration, inconsistent with the gazetted principles, goals and strands.

In 2011, the then Minister of Education, Anne Tolley, established an ECE Taskforce to review the ECE sector and make recommendations to the Government on ECE across funding and policy settings. In addition, two national advisory groups were established in 2012: one focused on improving the quality of ECE services sector-wide; the other focused on improving quality for children under two years. As a result of these and other reviews (Ministry of Education, 2011; New Zealand Government, 2012), the Minister of Education established an advisory group to review the implementation of *Te Whāriki*. The *Advisory Group on Early Learning's* (AGEL) report (Ministry of Education, 2015) stated that: implementation of the curriculum had been subject to 'drift'; the curriculum needed updating to recognise significant changes in society; it needed alignment with the key competencies of the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) to support transition to school; and children's progress needed greater attention using assessment for learning strategies. A stronger focus on children's learning outcomes was also recommended.

With this backdrop of concern about the implementation of *Te Whāriki*, Hekia Parata, the then National Government Minister of Education, called for a revision of the curriculum and established a set of working parameters for the revision. She based the update of the curriculum on the recommendation of AGEL (Ministry of Education, 2015) which argued for a need to strengthen curriculum implementation and early learning continuity. After the revision was released the Minister explained regarding *Te Kete Ipurangi*¹ that the revised curriculum:

...includes a stronger focus on bicultural practice, the importance of language, culture, and identity, and the inclusion of all children. The learning outcomes have been reviewed and condensed to twenty to enable a greater focus on "what matters here" when designing local curriculum.

Seven writers were appointed by the Minister to complete the update within a compressed timeframe between July 2016 and the release of the new curriculum in April 2017. The writing team comprised four academics and three teachers who were collectively considered to have the requisite knowledge and skills to undertake the revision. The writing team were supported by the writers of the original curriculum – Professors Helen May and Margaret Carr and Sir Tamati and Lady Tilly Reedy – along with other consultants from ERO, the Ministry of Education, and the ECE sector.

Parata determined there would be no changes to the gazetted parts of the curriculum – the principles, strands and goals. Beyond that, the guidance of Ministry taskforces, ERO reviews, and recent research were expected to be reflected in the update. The update was required to also reflect societal changes since 1996, including the increased ethnic and linguistic diversity of the New Zealand population. The further development of *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga reo* to become a standalone curriculum document published alongside and within the same document as *Te Whāriki He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa Early Childhood Curriculum* was an additional major change.

The revised document (Ministry of Education, 2017a) includes stronger links to the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), *Te Mārautanga o Aotearoa* (the curriculum for Māori medium schooling) (Ministry of Education, 2008) and *Te Aho Matua* (Tākaō, 2010) (a philosophical document that sets out principles for kura kaupapa Māori). There is also a reduced number of learning outcomes: from 118 to 20, in response to the AGEL

¹ <http://tewhariki.tki.org.nz/en/the-story-of-te-whariki/>

recommendation to pay more attention to children's progress (Ministry of Education, 2015). Teachers are portrayed as 'intentional' in the update and responsibilities for kaiako (the term for educators/teachers used in the curriculum) are consistent with professional standards for teaching (Education Council, 2015). There are suggestions for leadership, organisation and practice, and questions for reflection for each strand. Revised guidance on assessment and evaluation has also been included.

The revision of the curriculum was received with mixed reactions from the consultation via 36 hui with over 1400 people, 774 survey responses and 727 submissions, about *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017b). The Ministry of Education's summary of consultation feedback revealed the following themes:

1. The nature of the consultation and development process
2. Focus on learning outcomes
3. The level of inclusiveness shown by the draft document
4. Focus on theory and the coverage of dispositional and working theory concepts
5. Kaiako and service guidance and support
6. Implementation support
7. Layout and design.

Although many people expressed the view that a longer development and consultation period was needed, there were mixed reactions to the changes in the curriculum. There were a number of reactions to the reduction in the learning outcomes, with some fearing that the enhanced focus would lead to summative assessment. This fear revealed teachers' lack of understanding that the learning story approach commonly used by teachers is primarily summative assessment, and only becomes formative if teachers consider the 'where to next' in terms of learning and teaching (McLachlan, Edwards, Margrain, & McLean, 2013). There were also dichotomous views of the approach taken to inclusion, with many applauding the greater inclusion of bicultural guidance, while others stressed the need for greater emphasis on multiculturalism. The inclusion of more information about underpinning theories was also controversial, as was the use of the term "kaiako" as an inclusive term for teachers and educators. There was considerable comment about the layout and the photos used, with people divided over their usefulness.

Despite the contention around the re-writing of the curriculum, it was released to the sector in final form in April 2017, following a launch in Wellington. With a general election looming, the overall feeling was that the curriculum should be finalised in case the next government decided that the updating of the early childhood curriculum was no longer a priority. However, the release of the revised *Te Whāriki 2017* does not, on its own, address the current concerns about quality provision within the sector.

Quality provision: Curriculum implementation, structural features and genuine parental choice

Despite the wealth of existing research that offers insight into factors that support quality in ECE, the sector continues to face persistent issues in key areas of curriculum implementation, structural features of quality, and genuine parental choice (ERO, 2013a,b, 2015, 2016). The ongoing policy focus on minimum versus quality standards, combined with limited funding to support implementation, has resulted in a sector that has focused on surviving rather than

thriving. Access to quality ECE affords many opportunities for children and their families (Wylie & Hodgen, 2007; Yoshikawa et al., 2013) but there remains a critical need to address the systemic barriers that inhibit quality provision for all children, as well as targeted groups of priority learners, including infants and toddlers. Quality in ECE remains a challenging and contested space, with little current momentum (Moss, 2016). As a framework, *Te Whāriki* offers much to the sector, but its promise requires effective implementation of the principles, goals, and strands in order to develop appropriate local curriculum that is reflective of, and responsive to each unique setting and its community (ERO, 2017). This is a complex and sometimes challenging task, made more difficult in the context of a workforce in which not all staff hold a relevant teaching qualification. As well as navigating the multiple daily requirements of an ECE service, qualified teachers must serve as pedagogical leaders to guide curriculum implementation (Ord et al., 2013), with little access to mentoring, or funded or targeted professional learning and development opportunities. For significant change to occur in relation to quality ECE, policy must attend to the need for a fully qualified teaching workforce who have ready access to targeted professional learning opportunities, and funding that supports enhanced ratios and reduced group sizes. A focus on participation without concurrent attention to the quality of the early learning experiences puts children at risk and creates inequalities that can have lasting impacts (McLaughlin, Aspden, & Snyder, 2016). Future policy directives must promote both participation and quality as well as teaching and learning in ECE in order to attain *Te Whāriki's* aspiration for children.

The diversity of early childhood services in New Zealand reflects a sector with a long history in navigating elements of care and education, the influences of educational theorists, innovators and philosophers, as well as unique grassroots movements from community and cultural groups (McLachlan, 2011). Such diversity should offer whānau (extended family) and tamariki (children) the opportunity for meaningful choice and options that meet whānau needs and aspirations. Yet this is not the reality for many families. Families find long waiting lists, and limited availability in quality settings (Angus & Carroll-Lind, 2011). Costs of provision can be preclusive, compounded by the government's 20-hours ECE policy which applies only to three- and four-year-old children. Funding requirements can limit the flexibility of hours offered by settings, which may not respond to whānau employment requirements. It is typical for many children to experience mixed caregiving arrangements to best meet family needs. In such contexts, genuine choice seems limited and may reflect why families continue to enrol their children in services that are not providing a high quality experience. As much as kaiako need ongoing professional development to enhance curriculum implementation, so too do families need knowledge and tools to help them understand notions of quality and opportunities to actively contribute to shaping curriculum implementation (Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Fenech, 2013) and local application of quality principles.

The future of early childhood in New Zealand: some reflections on possibilities

As the wider public, individual governments, and multi-national non-government organisations have recognised the importance of learning and development in the first five years of life, as well as the additional benefits to workforce participation for women, the provision for engagement in quality ECE care and education has increased dramatically around the world. As outlined earlier, the New Zealand Labour-led government set a vision for the provision of quality ECE in 2002. While successive National-led coalition governments focused this vision on participation and service expansion for nine years, the Labour-led

coalition government elected in 2017 has outlined they will re-set the vision through a new strategic plan. Chaired by Professor Carmen Dalli, the Early Learning Strategic Plan Ministerial Advisory Group and Reference Group is comprised of distinguished educators, leaders, researchers, and stakeholders in ECE. The terms of reference set by the Minister of Education outline three key themes and five key objectives, together with a multi-step development process including gathering sector/stakeholder views through two ‘education summits’ and engagement through an online survey. Further sector/stakeholder consultation has been sought following the release of a draft plan.

Table 1 outlines the key themes, objectives, and considerations within the 2018 Early Learning Strategic Plan Terms of Reference. While few will object to the surface messages of “the principle of a free public education” (p. 4) and “putting the ‘free’ back into the policy of 20 Hours Free early learning for all three and four year olds, and those five-year-olds who aren’t yet in school” and improved quality and equity in the service provision, there are several complex issues embedded within the considerations that may cause tensions between how individual objectives are achieved. For example, issues related to providing choice and a diverse range of service types and philosophies have the potential to be in conflict with issues related to supporting quality. Similarly, issues related to raising quality, specifically defining and measuring quality, have the potential to be in conflict with equity. There are tensions in a sector that has espoused diversity in philosophy, resists the notion of defined or universal quality and embraces the importance of locally defined curriculum with potential government definitions of what constitutes quality in ECE. These potential tensions are particularly observed in the stated consideration that highlights the need to balance choice against the drive for quality and equity (see Table 1). The positioning of choice *against* quality and equity is an interesting one. This potentially implies providing choice is not part of ensuring quality and equity, which is likely to be a contested point.

Table 1. *Themes in the Strategic plan terms of reference*

Scope	Themes and Objectives	Considerations within
Themes:	Raise quality	How can government and sector work together to raise the quality of early learning provision? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rich curriculum and empowering pedagogies • Developing teaching and leadership capability • Regulatory and funding settings continuity as children travel across educational settings • Measuring quality (determining improvement) • Develop and support parents and whānau understanding of what high quality services look like
	Improve equity	How can government and sector work with parents and whānau to improve educational equity? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure access regardless of background or learning needs • Foster connections with broader social sector agencies, iwi and communities • Drive pedagogical innovation and interventions to support equity
	The role of choice	How best can the government and sector support parents and whānau understanding of high quality ECE so that they can make informed choices in their children’s early learning while avoiding unnecessary duplication and quality services being undermined by competition? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government management of supply for demand • Choice balanced against drive for quality and equity • Support te reo Māori to thrive

Scope	Themes and Objectives	Considerations within
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educational, cultural, and language aspirations of parents and whānau Choices available to parents regarding type, philosophy and location of services
Objectives:	Learners at the centre <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personalised learning Celebration of diversity Environments culturally and socially responsive 	
	Barrier Free Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Putting the 'free' back into 20 free hours for 3 - 5 years olds
	Quality Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Championing quality teaching 100% qualified teachers for centre-based teacher-led services Group size and teacher:child ratios for infants and toddlers
	Quality Inclusive Public Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investing in public education system for all students "turning the tide away from a privatised, profit-focused education system"
	21 st Century Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning relevant for today Technology and skills to thrive

Another potentially contentious point is the singling out of private, for-profit services and the need to move away from this type of provision. As the terms of reference state, "The Government is committed to investing in and backing our world class, public education system for all students. This involves turning the tide away from a privatised, profit-focused education system". While this focus may be in response to that uneven growth of services under this ownership model over the past decade and the need for better public investment in community-based education that meets the needs of families, we believe it is important that these points are not confounded with notions of quality service provision and that ownership model alone is not sufficient for addressing issues of raising quality. Nonetheless, voices within the sector often position the large for-profit chains as the potential source of quality concerns (cf. May & Mitchell, 2009); however, this position may be more ideological than evidence based.

Although ERO reviews are inclusive of a range of service types which are due for evaluation in any given year, these rarely report on distinctions between service types. A few notable exceptions, however, have reported no difference in the variability of quality by service type. For example, the 2012 ERO report on the inclusion of children with special needs reported there were no statistically significant differences between service types related to inclusiveness or support for learning for children with special needs. The 2013 ERO evaluations on use of the curriculum also reported no differences by service type. One of the issues with these reports is that whilst distinctions may be made between different service types, no data are provided that would allow for comparison of quality by ownership model.

An exception is the 2015 ERO report on infant and toddler provision. Data extrapolated from this report are shown in Table 2. Data reported on privately owned and community owned services are nearly equivalent in relation to the proportion of services rated across the quality categories. While we are not advocating for service provision approaches that position children as profit-making commodities and we strongly support public investment in education, we would suggest that the minimum regulations for service provision, as discussed above, need strengthening in order to support quality systems and oversight, regardless of service type. There is growing anecdotal and research evidence that the regulations for centre environments need revision to ensure children are in healthy

environments (see Woulfe, 2018), but this still concerns structural quality, rather than the process quality which we know is of equal, if not greater importance.

Table 2. *Data from 2015 Infant Toddler ERO Report*

	Highly Responsive	Somewhat Responsive	Limited Responsive	Not Responsive	Total
Private (<i>n</i> = 132)	12%	45%	30%	13%	100%
Community (<i>n</i> = 103)	13%	43%	31%	14%	100%

Despite the well-intentioned position within the terms of reference for the development of the new ECE Strategic Plan to raise quality and ensure equitable access to quality services, defining and *measuring* quality is fraught with difficulties. Thus, the terms of reference consideration related to quality: “How best is quality measured across the early learning sector? How will we know it is improving?” is provocative. These questions evoke issues of measurement, quality assurance and accountability. Whether approaches to measure quality and the improvement of the sector extend beyond the current ERO individual service and national reports is unknown at present.

Any move to new approaches for defining, reviewing and evaluating the quality of ECE services may be met with strong resistance in the sector, depending on the approaches adopted. Such resistance was recently observed in the ECE sector action to block the adoption of the OECD study on Early Learning and Child Wellbeing in New Zealand, with concern that a standardised approach to measuring children’s outcomes was a potentially ‘disastrous’ match with the educationally rich sociocultural curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Carr, Mitchell, & Rameka, 2016). While the concerns with the OECD proposed measures related to issues of cultural compatibility and potential for mis-use of international comparative data in an unintended high-stakes accountability system, negative perspectives about the use of standardised assessments for any purpose in early childhood are somewhat ironic, potentially problematic, and may need to be shifted in order to build a more robust evidence base for ECE in New Zealand.

For example, many of the offshore research studies that have evaluated quality and that have been instrumental in defining features used in this country to advocate for quality services are based on research and measurement using standardised assessments for quality provision and child outcomes (e.g., Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study; Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development). While the regular reference to the large-scale longitudinal or correlational studies conducted in the UK, US and elsewhere are informative, these studies cannot contribute to our ability to understand more clearly, inform, and evaluate the key features of quality as enacted in New Zealand.

New Zealand health and child and family social services have long valued the powerful data collected through longitudinal studies (e.g., Growing up in New Zealand study, Dunedin Longitudinal Study) to inform sound advocacy, policy, programmes and practice to improve child outcomes. With the exception of the smaller-scale Competent Children study conducted in the early 1990s, ECE researchers and policy makers have had to sit on the sidelines of big data research focusing instead on smaller, in-depth investigations into the lived experiences of children, families, and teachers as research funds have not been available for this type of research in an already overstretched funding environment. While much can be learned about children’s experiences in ECE services from smaller scale studies, there is also a place for

harnessing the power of other research methodologies for informing practice and policy-level decision-making.

Studies such as *Growing Up in New Zealand* or the *Dunedin Multidisciplinary Study* demonstrate that this type of research can be conducted in ways that can be standardised while also embracing person/child-centred, ecological approaches to understand the dynamic interactions among children's biological, environmental, cultural, and social contexts. While we do not advocate for the privileging of one type of research methodology over another, we highlight potential concerns when one type of research methodology is systematically excluded in ECE in New Zealand. Moreover, as new methodologies are used that may benefit from standardised approaches, we need to ensure that these methods are fit for purpose and that their use is positioned with nuanced understanding and full disclosure of their limitations and de-limitations. These are critical issues the government must address as it sets the vision through the strategic plan.

Summary and conclusions

As this paper has argued, New Zealand is currently at a crossroads for ECE. The year may reveal a brave and bold strategic plan for early childhood, but the reality is likely to be something that is constrained by competing agendas. These competing agendas include some of the following: the impact of minimum standards in regulations that are too low to ensure quality versus the aspirations of *Te Whāriki*; the continued growth in demand for early childhood services and competition between providers; the challenges of ensuring structural and process quality within early childhood settings without the guarantee of a robust infrastructure of qualified staff, ongoing professional development and good working conditions; and the challenges that a restricted funding environment has placed on the types of research undertaken. Other agendas include how we might achieve the widespread desire to improve the quality of ECE, leading to questions such as: How might such quality be articulated and measured? How do we understand quality within the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context when our history of limited research funding and the resulting preponderance of small-scale research projects means we have often relied on large international studies to inform our perspectives? How are the tensions created by a sector that has a strong profit driven agenda managed when strengthening quality? These issues are important ones to be considered by researchers, teachers, and policy makers as we contemplate the future.

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