

Ngā tikanga a ngā mokopuna: Crises in early childhood education policy in
Aotearoa New Zealand
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In this paper I propose the existence of a multi-faceted crisis in early childhood care and education in Aotearoa, comprising:

- privatisation of the sector (in 2009 40% were privately owned, as opposed to 26% in the year 2000) (ECE Taskforce Secretariat, 2010)
- low expectations for qualifications of staff
- concerns regarding capacity of ECCE staff to demonstrate engagement with and responsiveness to whānau Māori (only 23% of services in a recent ERO review valued the language, culture and identity of Māori children) (Education Review Office, 2012), and only 9.3% of ECCE staff are Māori (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2013b)
- ongoing in-service professional learning for ECCE staff is not available to all services but to those 'targetted' by the Ministry (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2013f)

Copious research has shown that 'quality' early childhood education is most advantageous to those children most 'disadvantaged' (Children's Commissioner, 2013).

The Ministry of Education's 'Amazing Children' Taskforce report (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011) has been critiqued for its capture by neoliberal discourses of mistrust of educators and their pedagogies (Nuttall, 2013):

- Silent on children's human rights
- Instead we see increasingly language of 'vulnerability' of 'children at risk'
- Children as human capital, ECCE as economic benefit
- Ideological shift away from common good, social well-being to individualising/corporatizing profit-orientation

The view of early childhood education as an economic good is seen in the languaging of the research summary which underpinned the Taskforce's work:

Most of the economic evaluations of ECE programmes have shown that benefits of public spending exceed the costs. Gains are not realised, or

are not as great, if the ECE is of poor quality. (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2010, p.13)

The Ministry of Education's Early Childhood Taskforce Report of 2011 then stated that "Government funds should not be directed to low-quality, potentially harmful services"(New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 56) .

The Taskforce recognised that teacher qualifications are a strong indication of quality provision, recommending a minimum of 80% of staff in should be registered teachers (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011). The previous Labour-led government had set the target of 100% by 2012 (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2002).

Whilst the government is highlighting its success towards meeting its "Better Public Services" targets for participation in early childhood education (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2013a, 2013e) it is ironic that this push for participation is occurring in a context whereby the government has lowered the requirement for teacher-led early childhood care and education settings to a minimum of 50% of staff to be qualified in any early childhood care and education setting.

Last year, the Ministry of Education's Māori education strategy discussion document stipulated the need for 'high quality culturally responsive early childhood education' (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2012) and this was endorsed by respondents to their online survey on the proposed strategy, who have stipulated that early childhood education centres need to be "more culturally responsive and meaningfully engage whānau" (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2013d, p. 6). This year's most recent iteration of *Ka Hikitia*, the Ministry of Education's Māori education strategy affirms the value of the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*:

Te Whāriki, the early childhood education curriculum, is an expression of biculturalism and provides a strong basis for teachers and leaders to promote aspects of Māori language and culture in early learning environments. *Te Whāriki* must be embedded within all services (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2013c, p. 33)

Meanwhile, recently implemented welfare reforms require all beneficiary parents to ensure that their children attend an early childhood service from ages 3-5, and face the penalty of their benefit payment being halved if they don't comply with this 'social obligation' policy (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Previous research has pointed out the inequitable access to early childhood services for those living in low socio-economic areas (Ritchie & Johnson, 2011).

There is, therefore, a serious question as to whether under current government 'Better Public Services' targets for ECE participation families will be able to access the culturally responsive high quality (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2012) support that is more likely to be provided by qualified, registered teachers.

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