



Being a Critical Consumer of Research is Important: Consider the Political Spin and Shortcomings of NZCER's *Competent Children* Study For Example

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What we found when we took the time to read the New Zealand Council for Educational Research's reports on the *Competent Children* research was quite different to what we had been led to believe about it. So we wrote a paper reviewing this longitudinal study. The research project started in 1992 and the latest published report is of children at age 12, with funding granted by the Government to follow children until age 16.

A Ministry of Education (2001) paper to the OECD states that 'the Competent Children Study has been and is a significant resource ... the study is the only one of its kind in the New Zealand context, and has, over an extended period, influenced policy and practice' (pp. 10-11). The research is already having implications for teaching practice and has been cited by the Ministry of Education and the Education Review Office within recommendations for practice. It has also been used by some early childhood groups to provide justification for what they do.

The research has also received much political acclaim. The Minister of Education Trevor Mallard has for a number of years cited the research to back stated policy directions and funding decisions in early childhood education. In a media statement as recently as 1 June 2005, the Minister of Education stated that:

As I have repeatedly said, that research shows that regular, quality and intensive early childhood education makes a positive impact on children's learning later in life ... The research includes a New Zealand study – the Competent Children research series, undertaken by the independent research organisation New Zealand Council for Educational Research. It has so far followed a group of around 500 Wellington region children from age 5 to age 12, and measured their key competencies and what affects their learning.

We had become increasingly concerned about how the findings were being reported widely and rather superficially with very little critical concern about it expressed within the education sector. Given the political and professional prominence given to the research we were aware that a review of the research in relation to the claims made about it would not be well received by everyone. However, we believe that publicly funded policy-driven research which is used to legitimate education policy and spending should not be exempted from scrutiny and critique.

The research has relied on statistical analysis to tease out associations between the variables selected for study. As the researchers have noted, any significant associations between variables can not provide 'proof' of relations between individual factors. Yet, some of the resulting discourse on the implications for teaching practice flowing from the reported analyses appears to ignore this distinction, reflecting a rather unsophisticated understanding of how such research should inform practice.

For example, a small number of benefits of 'quality' early childhood education were found in the research, but in the absence of a good understanding of the research methodology and the subsequent limitations, meaningful discussions of these are not possible. Given (a) the sheer number of different aspects of children's lives, (b) the fact that the study sampled children at the end of their early childhood education experience only, and (c) that most of the study since then has been of their experience within the compulsory school system, it seems possible that even these benefits may be due to uncontrolled factors rather than the benefits of early childhood education alone.

Our review, published on-line at www.childforum.com/publications.asp, points to a number of shortcomings in the research, including the sampling technique and the composition of the sample, the research design, data analysis, and interpretations of the data. Assumptions made in the research about children's competencies, quality in early childhood education and the measurement of quality therefore need to be questioned.

The research was reviewed in relation to eight claims about its importance for early childhood education.

1. It is a study of some 500 children
2. It drew on a random selection of centres
3. It is nationally and internationally recognised
4. It provides proof of the educational benefits of early childhood education
5. It is a flagship study of early childhood education in New Zealand
6. The study relates to early childhood targeting and is of important strategic value
7. The study relates to early childhood resourcing and is of important strategic value
8. It confirms the Government's intention to 'beef up' children's participation in quality early childhood education

The above claims were found to be either simply incorrect or a distortion of the research in the form of putting the best 'spin' on it. For example, in relation to the size of the sample, what is not often stated in media releases is that the study actually started with 307 nearly five-year-old children who were about to begin school. When the children were age 8 the researchers brought in more children from a separate study. To say now that it is a study of 500 children is misleading and masks the problems of bringing together two different sample groups with data obtained from different sources using different methodological approaches.

Our review then provides an example of, and a lesson in, why publicly funded policy-driven research such as the *Competent Children* study should be more critically examined and openly discussed. We hope that readers will take the time, too, to examine the research and understand it better.

REFERENCES

Ministry of Education (2001). *New Zealand's Educational Research and Development Systems. Background Report*. Ministry of Education: Wellington.



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Gillian Croad has been involved in early childhood for 23 years through her experiences in the Playcentre movement and in raising her five children. Coming from a paediatric nursing background she found her fascination of working with children and their parents was maintained. Qualifications include a B.A. [English Major], NZRN, NZPF National Certificate, Diploma of Teaching (ECE) and Postgraduate Diploma in Education in Early Years.

Currently she is the training co-ordinator for Playcentre Education, the registered training provider for the New Zealand Playcentre Federation. Current interests include the ongoing debate about where early childhood education should fit into children's lives and a belief in the important role of parents.