



EDITORIAL

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PAUL ADAMS & JOHN O'NEILL

Joint Editors

I start thinking, 'Are we a parent-led service? Perhaps we could be a half-teacher and half-parent-led service!' We're in the middle ... I don't know – the Government seems to alter their encouragement of women to return to the workforce. They're encouraging with subsidies for childcare, tax breaks – 'Get back into the workforce women'. It's probably going to have an impact on the numbers of parents wanting to come to playcentre. They're not with their children – they haven't got the time to take them in [to the centre].

(Playcentre parent)

Since the *Before Five* and *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms in 1988, the early childhood education (ECE) sector has become officially recognised by the State as part of 'the education system' of Aotearoa New Zealand. While many readers of this journal (including the editors) would be strong supporters of a comprehensive and robust public education system, recent events in the ECE sector have raised serious questions about the influence, actions and motives of the State in the provision of education. Two examples from this sector provide some food for thought.

In 2005, one of the editors was involved in a large-scale national study of adult participation in playcentres commissioned by the New Zealand Playcentre Federation. The playcentre parents voiced concern for the future of the playcentre movement and particularly the view that recent governments had been implementing policies which were seen as anti-family and which had undermined parent-led services and local communities. The parents pointed out, for example, that blanket ECE sector policy and regulations in areas such as centre buildings, ratios, qualifications, free hours for childcare, and the artificial split between parent-led and teacher-led services (many playcentre sessions in the study were in fact led by fully qualified teachers) were having a serious impact on the way playcentres could operate.

In addition, the strong push to encourage mothers back into the workforce was undermining not only playcentres, but also community life:

The rural community is being eroded by the fact that people are working in town and so they tend to go into town for things. And, whilst that's great in terms of having personal choice it's not flash for the rural communities. It goes right from Saturday morning netball, hockey, whatever, kids go in all directions so the smaller communities now can't even field teams. So, great choice but effectively we're eroding our own social fabric.

(Playcentre parent)

Parents argued that despite the rhetoric of family values and supporting parent education, recent Government policies and regulations were threatening the playcentre and the playcentre movement. Many of the parents expressed a strong belief that Government regulatory and funding regimes discriminated against the playcentre movement. Government policies that encouraged mothers back into the workforce (and the need for two-income families) both devalued the role of women in the community and undermined the playcentre movement. Ironically, the parents argued that playcentre provided the very family-oriented philosophy and services that the Government had been advocating.

Moreover, the recent almost unprecedented strike action by more than 1700 kindergarten teachers that affected 45000 young children up and down the country simply reinforces the concerns raised by these playcentre parents. In December, kindergarten teachers (and parents) marched in the streets because the Government was seeking to make major changes to their work conditions. The Government wanted to increase teachers' contact hours but this is not achieved without also taking into account issues like remuneration, workloads, term breaks, ratios, building facilities, sessional or full day care and education considerations, non-contact time, programme quality, and parity with the compulsory sector. In effect, the State is seeking to alter the unique nature of the kindergarten movement in New Zealand through the mechanism of national award negotiations.

What these two examples demonstrate is that the price of membership of the education system for community-run ECE sector organisations is very high indeed. These organisations have traditionally had unique philosophies, management and administrative structures, support systems, employment relations, and funding mechanisms. They already meet the needs of particular groups in the community. Since *Before Five* and *Tomorrow's Schools*, changes to policy, regulatory and funding mechanisms have been used by the State to unify and standardise the early childhood, primary and secondary education system in line with laudable national goals (simply put as 'raising achievement and reducing disparity').

The issue is, though, should we blindly accept that the price of participation in the public education system (and meeting national goals) might be organisational and educational uniformity, lack of sector diversity and in these cases, the undermining of local communities and their unique educational organisations? This would seem to run counter to one of the core stated aims of the 'reforms' – returning more democratic control to communities over their own educational organisations and futures.