



## Snake-Oil Or Fair Early Childhood Education Policy?

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JOHN O'NEILL & PAUL ADAMS

*Joint Editors*

On 15 December 2008, the Deputy Secretary for Early Childhood Education (ECE) presented the new Minister of Education with a proposed work programme to address the incoming National coalition government's initiatives in ECE, one of which was 'to tackle the early childhood teacher shortage' (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 1). The immediate problem facing the government was looming deadlines set by the previous Labour coalition government for the proportions of trained, registered early childhood teachers that 'teacher-led' centres were required to employ: 80 percent by 2010 and 100 percent by 2012. The government's dilemma was neatly summarised by the official:

One of the key factors affecting the sector is supply of qualified teachers. To date, initiatives to improve quality have been focussed on increasing the number of qualified teachers in services. Research has shown that having qualified ECE teachers can support improved educational outcomes. However, improving access to ECE may be constrained by limited supply of qualified ECE teachers.

Ministry of Education (2008, p. 5)

The problem was therefore a political one: qualified teachers are clearly better educationally for children and parents, but if there aren't enough to go around, the highly commercialized early childhood education services marketplace provider cannot operate efficiently. Yet, the problem was also a fiscal one: the policy inherited by the National coalition government awarded higher government subsidy rates to ECE services, the higher their proportion of qualified teachers, up to 100 percent qualified. Qualified teachers cost more but as officials pointed out, the cost of having better qualified ECE teachers is largely a cost on the public purse, not on families who actually use the services.

How, then, might a government solve these political and fiscal problems? The argument supplied to the Minister by her officials was nothing if not slick. It was noted that: 'While research identifies that teacher qualifications are related to better outcomes for children, it does not point to a specific level or type of qualification, nor an optimal qualification rate for the teaching workforce' (p. 9). Given that around 60 percent of staff in centres nationally then had teaching qualifications, the Ministry argued that 'Expanding professional learning and provision of teaching and learning resources may be a more cost effective way to ensure better learning outcomes for children are realised' (p. 9).

Note the complete logical slippage here: on the one hand, the Ministry is prepared to argue for abandonment of the requirement for 100 percent qualified teachers in centres on the grounds that no specific research supports the case. On the other hand it is prepared to substitute qualified teachers with professional

development (PD) opportunities and material resources without any research evidence to demonstrate their greater effectiveness or efficiency.

Over time, officials developed the basic argument for the Minister further. By February 2009, the officials' line was that 'the optimal level of qualified teachers required by a service to sustain the quality of ECE necessary to maximize educational benefits has not been established' (Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 1). This observation might appear sensible only until the moment one tries to imagine just how difficult it would be to ever design and fund a credible research study to try and establish 'optimum' qualified teacher levels and associated 'maximum' educational benefits.

A more immediate workforce supply problem, however, was that 'as at 21 January 2009, projections indicated there will not be enough qualified teachers to meet the 2010 teacher target. Approximately 1,500 extra qualified teachers, on top of current projections, will be required for the sector to meet the 2010 target across all services' (Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 5). The document presented four options to the Minister: postpone the target dates, continue funding rate incentives without regulating the 2010 and 2012 target dates, lower or broaden the benchmark qualification, or invest in other ways to improve quality, such as PD.

Handwritten annotations on a subsequent document in July 2009 show that the Minister preferred a different option from those presented: to 'move the 2010 80% target to 2012, and remove the 2012 100% target' (Ministry of Education, 2009b, p. 3). Doing this would simultaneously address the major fiscal problem faced by the government with the 80 percent and 100 percent qualified teacher targets, namely that the previous government 'undertook to meet the cost of additional teachers [up to 100 percent] so that these costs were not passed on to parents' (p. 2). Given the Ministry's assessment that over one third of centres would struggle to meet the 80 percent requirement by 2010 (p. 5), a pragmatic strategy was needed to relieve 'sector pressures' to appoint qualified staff; the obvious solution was for the Minister to ask Cabinet 'not to regulate the 2010 target, and potentially the 2012 target, and announce this to the sector' (p. 9).<sup>1</sup> On 4 September 2009, the Group Manager Early Childhood Education presented a draft Cabinet paper seeking Cabinet approval to 'move the 2010 80% target to 2012, and remove the 2012 100% target, *to ensure high standards are maintained across all ECE services*' (Ministry of Education, 2009c, p. 2; emphasis added). Note the second logical slippage: no research evidence was provided on the possible impact on learning ['maintaining high standards'] of staying with the existing regulatory requirement of only 50 percent qualified teachers.<sup>2</sup>

The Executive Summary subsequently presented to the Cabinet Social Policy Committee in early October 2009 diluted even further the importance of qualified teachers:

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<sup>1</sup> The Ministry also warned that if there was to be confidential discussions with 'selected sector groups' about this proposal there was a risk that it would 'lead to a very public response which could make consideration of the matter difficult'. (p. 9)

<sup>2</sup> Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008 (SR 2008/204) (as at 24 September 2009), 44(3).

3. ... Registered teachers are important, but evidence does not suggest that a fully registered workforce is necessary to achieve high standards. Achieving a fully registered workforce is costly to government, and is generating significant pressures on ECE services, as the intermediate 2010 target of 80% may not be achievable in over a third of services.
4. The ECE sector is concerned that Government intends to regulate the 80% target in 2010, which may force some services to close ...

Ministry of Education (2009d, p. 4)

Moreover, an 'aide-memoire' prepared for the Committee by the Minister's Group Manager ECE dated 9 October stated that the Minister actually did 'not intend to regulate 80% in 2012' (Ministry of Education, 2009e, p. 1) but would consider further information closer to the time. In other words, an 'aspirational' target with no teeth. Finally, the Cabinet Social Policy Committee met on 14 October 2009 and decided to move the 80 percent target to 2012 ('with no intention of regulating [that] at this time'), to remove altogether the 100 percent target, and the Committee noted simply that 'registered teachers play an important part in maintaining high standards in education, in early childhood as in schools' (Cabinet Social Policy Committee, 2009, p. 1).

So, qualified ECE teacher shortage problems (political and fiscal) solved? Not quite. The Ministry of Education's own commissioned review of early childhood research literature in 2008 cites one study which, in its design and results, provides enough empirical evidence to raise the possibility that it might actually matter very much to individual children at a particular age whether the adult they principally interact with in an early childhood centre is educated and trained, or not (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1999). This US study followed around 1,500 children over 36 months, gathering outcome data from their early childhood experience and using both structured observational and interview data to assess the quality of child care against four standards (child-staff ratio, group size, caregiver training and caregiver education). Significantly, for our argument here, it was the individual child's caregiver whose education and training was assessed against the standard, not that of the centre or service staff as a whole. This means that the researchers could provide measures of the difference in educational outcomes between those children whose caregivers had met a clear standard of education and training, and those who did not.

The study found that at 24 months there was no statistical difference in outcome (mental development, behaviour problems, positive social behaviour) between children whose principal caregiver met the education and training standard, and those who did not. However, at 36 months, there were statistically significant beneficial differences in three measures – school readiness, language comprehension and behaviour problems – for those children whose primary caregiver was educated (some college level education) and/or trained (some post-high school training in child development, ECE or a related field) ) (see p. 1074, Table 2). While the results do not provide conclusive evidence of an optimum level of teacher qualification for early childhood education – far from it – they do at least suggest that children who interact principally with qualified teachers in an ECE service may be likely to do significantly better educationally

than those who do not. It may not be 'best evidence', but it's the best we have for now; certainly better than the snake-oil argument used for choosing not to regulate the 80 and 100 percent targets. And, it is surely evidence enough to challenge the Cabinet Social Policy Committee's claim that while qualified and registered teachers are important in ECE they are, by implication, not essential. This one study, identified for Ministry of Education officials, illustrates the need for much greater policy caution on the part of Minister and Cabinet than has been the case to date in their haste to reduce public subsidies to families and to defer to the lobbying of private sector ECE providers.

The Minister of Education has said that her decision to change ECE qualified teacher targets can be justified because there is no research evidence to show that 100 percent is any more efficacious than 80 percent qualified teachers. The Prime Minister is similarly reported as having said that the educational benefit of all ECE teachers being qualified is no more than a matter of personal belief. The truth seems rather more complex than government politicians would have us believe, while 'evidence-based' policy advice from the Ministry appears less than full and frank. And given the Minister's reluctance to regulate for even the 80 percent target in teacher-led services, in 2012 families may only have a 50:50 chance that their child's early childhood teacher will be qualified. Is that a fair go?

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