



# Initial Early Childhood Teacher Education: A Look at Some Research, Some Policy and Some Practices

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## INTRODUCTION

Currently in New Zealand there is an increasing demand for early childhood education (ECE) provision. This is illustrated by Le Quesne (2006) who reports a 32% increase in numbers of children engaged in licensed early childhood centres in the past decade (1996 – 67,124 children *cf* 2005 – 88,589 children). With the increase in children engaging in ECE is a growing demand for more trained and registered ECE teachers. This demand is driven, both, by the increasing enrolments and by the New Zealand Government's 10 year strategic plan for early childhood education, *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002). This plan states that quality ECE provision is premised on a number of interacting factors:

ECE research shows that quality is the result of the interaction of the ratio of trained adults to children, the number of children (or group size) and, in some services, the qualification levels of teachers. Collectively, these factors form the foundation on which quality ECE is built.

(p. 12)

Ngā Huarahi Arataki sets a target of 100% of teaching staff in licensed teacher-led ECE services being trained and registered by 2012 in order to assist in achieving the factors it says form a foundation for quality ECE. There are considerable challenges in achieving this goal. Le Quesne (2006) reported that 44% of the early childhood teaching workforce were registered with the New Zealand Teachers Council in 2005. In order to achieve the laudable 2012 target there is the need for several thousand additional ECE teachers to undertake initial teacher education (ITE), leading to registration, over the next six years.

In her book *Politics in the Playground: The World of Early Childhood in Post War New Zealand*, noted ECE academic Helen May (2001) states that research evidence convincingly presents the importance of qualification levels for ensuring quality experiences for children and yet the level of qualification to work in New Zealand early childhood education was contested throughout the 1990s. In the book May describes the issue of ITE for ECE qualifications as 'the tangled tale, too complex to unravel fully here' (p. 249).

Professor May is right. ITE for ECE is most complex. This short paper looks at some of the policy imperatives requiring significantly increased numbers of trained and registered ECE teachers. Some research into ITE is

briefly examined, some reflections on past ITE for ECE policies are made, and then a discussion is had on whether or not current policy directions might impede or facilitate what research indicates needs to be done to prepare ECE teachers well for the demanding role they undertake.

## **AN OVERVIEW OF SOME RESEARCH**

In a comprehensive report on New Zealand's initial teacher education policy and practice, Professor Ruth Kane (2005) reflects on some of the international and national discourse on ITE. Kane asserts that recent best evidence syntheses in New Zealand and international research evidence clearly point to the significant impact teachers have on the quality of teaching and learning (p. 5). The notion of what a teacher knows (knowledge), shows (attitudes) and does (skills) having an impact on the learners they work with (and on what the learners learn) is a long held 'given' amongst education practitioners, parents and policy makers the world over.

This 'given' is supported in an iterative best evidence synthesis (BES) on quality teaching in early childhood education in which researcher Dr Sarah Farquhar (2003) states, 'Given the young age of children and the particular complexity of teaching this age group both teacher education (including knowledge and pedagogical skills) and the teacher's personal characteristics matter.' (p. 9). Farquhar cites Smith (1996) in arguing that teachers have a powerful role in enhancing children's learning by bringing together the educational and care functions when working with young children. Evidence from a British longitudinal study by Blatchford, Burke, Farquhar, Plewis & Tizard (1989), which found the best outcomes for young children are achieved in settings where cognitive and social development are seen as complementary, is also reflected upon in Farquhar's BES.

The crucial role teachers play in social and economic advancement is discussed in an article on teacher preparation and professional development by Linda Darling Hammond (2005) in which she states that, internationally, the importance of, and focus on, education has increased at breathtaking speed as the new knowledge-based economy has emerged. Darling Hammond says the growing consensus about the importance of teachers has led many countries to focus on improving teacher education; preparing accomplished teachers who can effectively teach diverse learners to high standards is essential for economic and political advancement (p. 237).

Darling Hammond discusses some ITE innovations in the United States which have seen the creation of professional development schools/ centres akin to teaching hospitals for medicine which provide sites for extended practicum that is integrated with course work on teaching pedagogy and educational theory. Darling Hammond looks at trends internationally that show teacher education moving to the graduate level – adding pedagogical study and intensive practicum to a base of undergraduate preparation in curriculum disciplines (p. 238).

Developing teachers who have a strong grasp of both the 'how' and 'why' of teaching and learning is a theme within the professional literature. By way of example, in a discussion on preparing early childhood professionals, Hyson (2003) says the value added by quality education and training goes beyond specific skills or techniques. As early childhood professionals develop they need

to become better able to make connections between research and practice, between curriculum and individual children, between home and centre and between prior knowledge and new information: 'What does matter is what early childhood professionals know, what they are able to do and the dispositions or 'habits of mind' they possess to nurture and promote children's development and learning' (p. 4).

The interactions between teacher and learner within the social context they are engaged in are also crucial in ensuring quality learning and development. This social construct is well described by educational philosopher John Dewey who viewed the mind and its formation as a communal process. Dewey maintained the individual is only a meaningful concept when regarded as an inextricable part of his or her society and the members that make it up, and that society has no meaning apart from its realization in the lives of its individual members. This is contained within Dewey's epistemology of transaction; that is, the theory/ inquiry/ experimentation of knowledge and the interactions between people ("The Educational Philosophy of John Dewey", 2006: 2). This fits well with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of teachers and learners working together within the 'zone of proximal development'.

Providing student teachers with extensive opportunities to work with children (alongside mentor teachers) during their initial teacher education programme has long been a strong feature of ITE programmes in New Zealand. Bell (2004) says there is a huge literature around the centrality of field experience (or practicum) in teacher education programmes, much of it arising from a pragmatist view of the value of learning through experience (praxis). Bell goes on to state that education as praxis fits well with the theories of Dewey and sees the teacher as a reflective practitioner constantly constructing and reconstructing his or her working theories through action and reflection (p. 10).

The scholarly views mentioned above fit within a paradigm that children's learning achievement is significantly influenced by what their teachers know, can do and the socio-cultural dispositions they have. Kane (2005: 5) reports this is a position taken by Darling Hammond (2000) and Rice (2003). Using such an approach to define and develop teacher quality sees the need to identify the characteristics of teachers that impact *most* positively on student learning.

Kane (2005) mentions another approach to defining teacher quality – that which seeks to measure this in terms of student achievement outcomes. Kane (2005: 5) cites Hanushek (2002) who argues, 'Good teachers are ones that get large gains in student achievement in their classes; bad teachers are just the opposite'. Kane says both conceptions of teacher quality feature in recent New Zealand literature and education policy statements. The discourse around pre-determined student achievement outcomes and the push to constantly measure them in quantitative terms is something, in my view, early childhood educators need to guard against.

## **SOME PREVIOUS ITE FOR ECE POLICIES AND HOW THEY INFLUENCED PRACTICE**

Up until the 1970s, New Zealand kindergarten teachers completed a 2-year diploma course at one of 4 kindergarten teachers colleges under the control of regional kindergarten associations. In 1975 these colleges were disbanded and kindergarten teacher preparation moved to the teachers colleges alongside

primary teacher courses. These colleges also offered a government funded 1-year qualification for childcare workers. This approach delineated education and care with 'care' suffering from a lower status exemplified by shorter course length and lower pay. Indeed the kindergarten 2-year training was perceived as a lower status course compared with the primary 3-year training programme it sat alongside in the teachers colleges.

In 1985 responsibility for early childhood education and care policy and funding was combined within the then New Zealand Department of Education. May (2001) reports this move prompted a 1986 childcare working party to recommend the establishment of a three year integrated ITE for ECE training programme. Despite opposition to this from within some quarters of government (notably Treasury officials) this policy was adopted and the first of these programmes started in 1988. Colleges of Education were directed to develop programmes that were inclusive of care and education, cover programmes for care of babies, have more emphasis on education studies, and the cultural and family context of children's lives. 'New Zealand again became an international leader in breaking down the historical divisions between preschool and childcare training', May argued (2001: 207).

In 1989 there was a fairly wide consensus view within the early childhood fraternity that this integrated DipTchg (ECE) needed to become the benchmark for licensing purposes. This led to a licensing points system under the auspices of the newly formed New Zealand Qualification Authority (NZQA), which provided a system whereby early childhood practitioners could gain credit for studies they had done and then complete further work in order to qualify for an equivalency diploma.

This process did not find favour with practitioners and early childhood academics. May (2001: 250) quotes noted ECE academic Dr Anne Meade as saying:

100 points built up by a hodge-podge of courses does not equate to a qualification. I have fears for what this might mean for children's education. Will such staff be able to plan, implement and evaluate their centre's curriculum based on *Te Whāriki*?

It seemed not. May reported that this equivalency process ended in 1994 given few regarded the outcome as a real DipTchg (ECE).

Kane (2005) states the 1990s were marked by an increase in the number of providers (other than Colleges of Education) tapping into the demand for trained ECE teachers by offering 3-year diplomas registered under NZQA. Indeed a proliferation of providers of ITE for ECE ensued. Kane argues this added to the complexity of qualifications and there were significant, and justifiable, concerns regarding the lowering of teacher education quality (p. 5).

By the late 1990s the government sought to tidy up the chaos that was occurring within ITE for ECE. A change of government occurred in 1999 and on May 9, 2000 the new Minister of Education Trevor Mallard wrote to the sector (as cited in May, 2001: 250) stating:

My vision for early childhood education is one where all centre-based early childhood educators will have at least a Diploma of Teaching (ECE) and will be registered teachers. I realise that it will be some time before this vision can be fully realised ... Improving the qualifications and quality of early childhood educators will be done in phases.

This phasing-in approach was embodied two years later in the 2002 ECE strategic plan *Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002) which set out a 10-year timeframe for reaching the goal of 100% trained and registered ECE teachers in teacher-led services. Incentive grants to centres to help with the payment of trained teachers, numerous scholarships, pay parity recognition and mentoring and support for teachers undertaking ITE for ECE are contained within the strategic plan in order to assist with realising the 2012 goal.

### **DOES CURRENT POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPEDE / FACILITATE WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US?**

Clearly the, much applauded, policy of working towards a 100% trained and registered ECE teaching service accepts the growing literature on the positive effects of qualified staff on early childhood education provision (Podmore & Meade, 2000). The place of practicum and the developing of understandings and skills in the 'how' and 'why' of teaching and learning are well embedded in the ITE for ECE approach.

Kane (2005) reports the central position of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) in the conceptual frameworks of many of the ITE for ECE programmes on offer. This demonstrates a holistic and integrated focus on preparing teachers for working in diverse settings in partnership with families/whānau (p 59). Kane goes on to state that socio-cultural theory (co-constructed, authentic learning experiences situated in diverse cultural and social contexts) as a guiding theoretical perspective is made explicit in many of the ITE for ECE programme outlines (p. 60).

Through a number of policy statements the Government shows it understands that opportunities to work directly with children, whilst training, is a vitally important aspect of ITE for ECE. Indeed, in 2004, in a press release announcement on the budget, the New Zealand Government (2004) said,

Initial teacher education provided through centre-based programmes is an important pathway for early childhood teachers to gain the qualifications they need to become registered teachers. From 2012 services will be able to meet the target by having up to 30% of teachers enrolled in such programmes. This change will provide services with more flexibility in staffing, maintain the strong tradition of centre-based teacher education and ensure all staff in a service are either registered or working towards qualifications to become registered.

Encouragingly, there has been significant government investment in early childhood education in recent years in New Zealand. This has come about

through the recognition of the powerful influence quality early childhood education provision can play in the lives of children, families and local communities. It is also motivated by the economic advantages a skilled workforce (in the present – the parents of young children and in the future – the children themselves) can have to New Zealand.

With investment comes the natural desire to know whether value for money is being achieved. On the face of it this is a reasonable expectation. The conundrum, however, of cost-benefit analyses of what happens in dynamic, evolving and complex learning processes and environments is how best does one go about 'measuring' and determining this. Indeed, what is it that one measures in terms of success?

The notion of student achievement outcomes being the measure of teacher effectiveness (and, therefore, investment success) such as espoused by Hanushek (as cited in Kane, 2005: 5) carries with it accountability mechanisms and measures that could well work *against* the notion of holistic, contextualised, relationship-grounded child development and happiness, as a positive and desirable outcome in its own right.

In terms of this, O'Neill and Scrivens (2005) 'can see some dark clouds looming' (p. 189). They argue that the implementation of pay parity, the introduction of assessment exemplars, the restructuring of the compulsory sector's curriculum framework, the implementation of required registration, and dramatic increases in funding carry with them the potential for a plethora of teacher accountability mechanisms that may have some significant implications for the early childhood sector (p. 190).

So, then, in amongst the euphoria of finally having some clear strategic policy frameworks, decent funding support and genuine governmental interest in New Zealand ECE, words of circumspection such as those provided by O'Neill and Scrivens are useful. One only needs to look 'over the fence' into the New Zealand compulsory school sector to see that neo-liberal approaches such as contestable funding, variance reporting on achievement targets, national norms of student achievement, national testing tools and devolved surveillance processes such as 'e-admin' databases are, indeed, 'lurking about'.

## **WHAT THE FUTURE MAY HOLD?**

It's 'boom time' for New Zealand early childhood education at present. The demand for early childhood provision looks set to continue in the foreseeable future. By virtue of this ITE for ECE is, once again, on a 'growth trajectory'.

This presents enormous opportunities to contribute positively to the public good, to social justice, to the hauora of families/ whānau and to the development of confident, competent and happy children. Such laudable outcomes of participation, quality provision and collaborative partnership policies need to be kept 'front and centre' in the times to come.

In her report, Kane (2005) chronicles the extensive number of reviews of New Zealand ITE that have taken place since 1990. The Education Review Office has published four evaluative studies on aspects of ITE during this time. The Education Forum has published their views, as has Te Puni Kokiri.

In 2001, the Education and Science Select Committee also inquired into the scope, standards and provision of teacher education in New Zealand. Kane (2007) notes that 'One might be forgiven for deciding that ITE has indeed been

overly reviewed' (p. 7). Kane's own comprehensive study followed a 2004 literature review by Cameron and Baker (as cited in Kane, 2005: 6) and looks in-depth at the diversity of offerings of ITE currently available in New Zealand.

This climate of review continues with the Ministry of Education currently reviewing ITE policy through a 2006 discussion paper (Ministry of Education, 2006). The rationale for this is to provide Government with advice on what policy changes may be necessary to ensure that beginning teachers are as well prepared as possible.

The Ministry's discussion paper seeks to engage in debate around accreditation of programmes, professional standards, entry standards, student selection, development of a research and development culture, competency attestation processes and transparent, rigorous and trustworthy registration processes.

Will approaches such as these add value to what teachers and children do within the socio-cultural context they teach, learn and interact in? Will such processes facilitate the joy and 'sparkle' in children's eyes as they are helped to learn 'to know', 'to do' and 'to be'? Will such policy inquiries assist in unravelling the 'tangled tale' of ITE for ECE as May (2001) so aptly describes it?

This commentator doesn't know that they will. These are interesting times in which to begin work in ITE for ECE in order to find out!

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