

First NZCER national survey of early childhood education services

Linda Mitchell and Keren Brooking

New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2007

Executive summary

Downloaded from <http://www.nzcer.org.nz/pdfs/15318-execsum.pdf>

This national survey of teachers, managers, parents, and committee members in licensed early childhood education services in New Zealand was undertaken in late 2003/early 2004, a year after publication of the strategic plan for early childhood education, *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Crown, 2002). It provides a baseline picture of the situation for all services except kōhanga reo at the beginning of a period of considerable change, against which the impact of the strategic plan can be monitored. Where possible, we have made comparisons with other New Zealand evidence.

The sample was a stratified random sample of 531 ECE services, approximately 15 percent of all services. The percentage of sampled services where there was at least one response was 60 percent overall. Response rates were highest in kindergarten (87 percent), then playcentre (69 percent), home based (46 percent), education and care (45 percent), hospital (43 percent), and Pasifika (17 percent). Each service in the sample was sent one questionnaire for management, two questionnaires for teachers/educators, two questionnaires for parent/caregivers, and one questionnaire for parent committee member or office holder.

Key findings

Opening hours and enrolment patterns

The opening hours of early childhood services are quite variable. Most playcentres are open for 15 hours or less a week, and home-based and education and care services have the widest range of hours. More children from playcentres and home-based services left before they started school.

ECE services were catering for parents from a range of income levels, but income levels of families using ECE services were higher than those of families with children under five in the 2001 Census. As well, some ECE service types provide ECE for different socioeconomic groups:

- Kindergartens were more likely to cater for mainly middle- to low-income families.
- Hospital services were more likely to cater for a wide range.
- Playcentres were more likely to cater for middle-income families or a wide income range.
- More education and care centres catered for middle/high-income families. Within the education and care sector, private services were more likely to cater for high-income families.

From 2002–2004, education and care centre enrolments increased at a faster rate than enrolments in other forms of provision. Managers reported some demand for more places for children under two in education and care centres, suggesting education and care for this age group will continue to be an area for expansion. Where ECE rolls were decreasing, the main reasons were general population or housing change, and changes in parent preference.

Irregular attendance was associated with low family income and affected by poor child health, bad weather, and parent needs. Transport availability was another factor. These findings indicate the value of ECE services being within walking distance (with small children) in local communities.

Parent views

ECE attendance patterns

Overall, most parents were satisfied with the times that ECE provision was available to them and the type of provision.

A small percentage of parents (6 percent) said the times their child attended an ECE service did not suit them. Home-based service parents did not have such needs, suggesting it was the flexibility of provision that suited these parents. Eight percent of parents wanted more hours. Fourteen percent of parents wanted to use a different type of ECE service, especially

kindergarten. The reasons parents could not access different services when they wished was because of waiting lists or the service was not available in the locality.

Consistent with other studies, incidence of children attending more than one service was reasonably high at 22 percent, and increased with age. Parents seemed to choose more than one service because of benefits to their child or the hours available. Cost is also a factor: 14 percent of parents using more than one service would use only one if ECE was free. Dual attendance is not necessarily harmful for children: the Competent Children, Competent Learners study has found no impact on children's competencies either at age 5 or later.

Playcentre was under some pressure, with a larger percentage of children leaving before they go to school. Playcentre parents were more likely to want more hours and to want to use another type of provision, especially kindergarten.

ECE services allowed parents to undertake paid employment/training, participate in housework, contribute to work in the ECE centre itself, and have time for their own interests and families.

Parent choices and information

A good quality education programme and teachers were the main reasons for parental choice of ECE service. Distinctive features of service types also appealed to some parents, reflecting parental needs, e.g. for employment.

Most parents found out about their current ECE service through word of mouth, but only a third made decisions about enrolling their child through visiting the ECE service, and fewer used Education Review Office (ERO) reports or asked professionals about the service quality. Many parents said they would find it useful to have information about ECE services available through health professionals and community noticeboards, as well as community organisations and schools.

Parents were generally very positive about their ECE service. Teachers had a range of strategies to induct families, e.g., a guided tour of the service, encouraging parents to attend at any time, discussing information about the child with the parent, and providing a handbook about the service.

Relationships between parents and ECE services

Teacher-parent contact was mainly informal, made when parents were at the ECE service. Parents talked to teachers primarily about their own child. The emphasis on informal contact was an issue for some parents who wanted a set time to talk, such as a parent interview.

About half the parents and two-thirds of the committee members were involved in assessment and planning for their child. A sizeable minority of parents wanted more ideas for how they could support their child's learning at home, information about their child's progress, and assessments used by ECE staff.

Playcentre parents had the highest level of contact with staff (who are mostly also parents) and were most satisfied with information about their child, and kindergarten parents had the lowest level of contact with ECE teachers.

Over a third of parents had experienced some problems or concerns in the ECE service. These were mainly about *affective* issues, especially their child settling, or other children in the programme. Most parents who had raised concerns reported they had been fairly listened to, but about a third of parents did not know who to raise concerns with.

Consultation with parents and community

Overall, parents were happy with information about their ECE service and did not want more say in it.

A third of parents and about two-thirds of committee parents had participated in formal discussions of the ECE service's philosophy and goals. Most of these parents valued these discussions as a way of having input into goals and developing understanding of the teaching and learning environment. Those who wanted greater involvement were constrained by the time discussions occurred, methods of gathering input, and feelings of inadequacy.

Committee members were generally satisfied with levels of parent involvement in their service but a third thought the volunteer workload fell on too small a group of parents.

Consultation with Māori was limited and mainly with local Māori parents/whānau. Few services consulted with Pasifika communities, or other ethnic communities. Not knowing how to consult with Māori and Pasifika communities was an issue for committee members.

Playcentre parents were more involved and satisfied with consultation and kindergarten parents more likely to want more information.

Resources

Funding

Insufficient funding was the major issue confronting ECE services. Government bulk funding was the principal source of funding. Parent fees were a second major source for education and care centres and home-based services, and fundraising and charitable grants contributed to funds for kindergartens and playcentres.

A fifth of services were in deficit at the end of their last financial year and a similar percentage expected to be in deficit at the end of their next financial year. More of these were education and care services.

Almost a third of parents experienced difficulties in meeting the cost of fees or donations, with low-income families more likely to be experiencing difficulties.

Free early childhood education was very widely supported by all groups, delivered as a universal entitlement, not targeted to low-income families. Participants were equally divided between free ECE for up to 10 hours, 15 hours, 20 hours, or more than 20 hours per week. There was considerable support for free ECE for all ages (managers, 43 percent; teachers, 44 percent; and parents, 30 percent). About a third of participants thought free ECE should be restricted to 3- and 4-year-olds.

A fifth of parents said they would increase the number of hours their child attends if ECE was free. The greatest demand for more hours was from parents using less than 20 hours per week, and parents who were dissatisfied with hours and times. If ECE was free:

- Ninety percent of parents who would increase the hours were currently using less than 20 hours ECE a week. Parents using 15 hours or less per week ECE were most likely to want to increase their hours if ECE was free.
- Fifty-seven percent of parents who said they would like more hours of ECE would increase the number of hours (compared with 17 percent who were satisfied with the number of hours). About 26 percent of those using less than 20 hours would like more hours.
- Fifty percent of parents who would like ECE at different times said they would increase the hours (compared with 18 percent who were satisfied with provision times).

Most parents (86 percent) said they would not change the type of service their child attended if ECE was free. Fourteen percent of those parents who were using more than one ECE service¹

¹ Twenty-two percent of parents were using more than one ECE service.

would use only one if ECE was free. This suggests cost is a factor in parents using more than one service.

Around 20 percent of managers would consider extending their hours and 20 percent said they would be more responsive to the hours wanted if ECE was free.

Thirty percent of parents indicated that free ECE would enable them to enrol in education/training, start employment, or increase hours of employment.

Data gathered on characteristics of children on the rolls of the ECE services showed variable distributions of children from non-English speaking homes, special needs, and from low-income families. Each of these presented particular challenges that have implications for provision of funding and support services. The Equity Index used to capture services with higher numbers of children from non-English speaking homes and children with special needs does miss some services with a large number of such children.

Managers were divided about whether the Government should replace the current system of bulk funding with payment of teachers' salaries and a grant for other costs, with teachers and parents being largely unsure.

Resources and surroundings

Most teachers rated their teaching and learning resources as good or very good. Professional publications and parent library were less satisfactory, except in playcentre.

Over half of managers and teachers had email, Internet access, and digital cameras at their centre, and some have a range of other ICT peripherals. Internet access was poor in 42 percent of services. Playcentres had lower levels of ICT access, and kindergartens higher levels. ICT was used in documenting children's learning, and communicating with parents through newsletters and notices. The most frequent problems teachers reported with ICT use related to their own limited expertise and confidence.

Staffroom space, office space, space for storage and preparation, and adult furniture were the most pressing needs, especially for playcentre and kindergarten.

Ratios, child places, and group size

Over half the ECE services operated above regulated adult:child ratios, and these services were more likely to rate their ratios as adequate. Most were playcentres and education and care services, and services with children under two. Kindergartens were likely to operate at regulated staffing requirements and to rate ratios as inadequate.

Sizes of groups varied by service type, with home based (maximum four children), followed by playcentre (less than 10 up to maximum 25), and kindergarten the largest (most 41–45). Most kindergarten teachers thought the group sizes were too big.

About a fifth of education and care and home-based managers, and some playcentre managers, wanted more places for under twos in their centre. Few wanted more places for over twos.

Teacher employment and morale

Most services employ few staff. Means for the different service types were: kindergarten, 2.81; playcentre, 1.75; education and care, 7.29; home based, 7.71. These means are the number of teachers actually employed: full-time equivalents are lower.

There were high levels of teacher turnover. Half the services had one or more teachers leave in the last 12 months. This level of turnover is a large percentage in a sector where most services employ a small body of staff. Staff turnover is likely to be associated with instability for children, administrative costs, and time spent on recruiting staff. Turnover makes it harder for services to sustain service wellbeing and build on professional development undertaken when new staff members have not participated in the professional development experiences.

Among those who left, the main reasons were the teacher moving to another location (15 percent), changing career to another occupation outside education (11 percent), or taking parental leave (10 percent). Common reasons for changing to another ECE teaching position were another service was more attractive (7 percent) or better pay (6 percent), especially in education and care centres (12 percent and 10 percent respectively). Teacher turnover was higher in private education and care services than community-based services. There is a cost in the need to train more teachers, where teachers are lost to another position outside of education.

Unattractive pay and conditions within a competitive environment are also making it difficult for services to recruit staff in the education and care sector. Almost half the education and care service managers had difficulty finding suitable and qualified teachers for any teaching vacancy, because of competition with other ECE services over pay, better leave provisions in other ECE services, and better noncontact provisions in other ECE services. Playcentres were more likely to have difficulties because of remote location.

A sizeable minority of teachers in paid employment had only the statutory minimum entitlement of three weeks annual leave. In some centres, there was very little or no noncontact time, and staff meetings were held infrequently (once a month or less). These opportunities provide conditions to support processes of planning, assessment, evaluation, and review that contribute to effective teaching and learning.

Teachers in private education and care centres had poorer working conditions (annual leave, noncontact time, frequency of staff meetings) than teachers in community-based education and care centres, were less likely to be involved in decision making as a member of the team, and more likely to rate their workload as excessive.

ECE teachers/educators' morale was generally high; higher than the morale of primary and secondary teachers. Seventy-three percent of teachers rated their morale as "very good" or "good", 18 percent as satisfactory, and 5 percent as "low" or "very low".

A fifth of teachers rated their workload as "excessive". Morale was associated with workload. Most teachers describing their workload as "excessive" also rated their morale as "low" or "very low".

Kindergarten teachers and playcentre educators, followed by teachers in community-based education and care services, were more likely to say they felt consistently part of the decision-making team, and home-based educators and teachers in private education and care services were less likely to say this. An exception for home-based educators was communicating with parents. Home-based educators were more likely to say their views were not sought by those making decisions.

Volunteer work

High levels of voluntary work were supporting and sustaining community-based ECE services, especially playcentre and kindergarten. Most volunteer work was in the education programme, fundraising, maintenance, working bees, and management. Parent committee members reported the longest hours of voluntary work. At the high end, some parents were working voluntarily for more than 15 hours per fortnight.

The main reason for not volunteering was parents not having such an opportunity because the ECE service did not use volunteer help. Other reasons were being in paid employment, not having time, or not being asked.

Most playcentres and over half the kindergartens provided training for volunteers, but few education and care services did (but they did not use volunteers so much).

Volunteering is placing some pressure on services where workload levels are high, especially playcentres. A substantial minority of playcentre participants thought their volunteer workload was too great, with too much responsibility, and that volunteers were struggling. A minority also reported difficulties in recruiting parents, mainly because the workload fell on too few parents, or parents were in paid employment.

Many parents gained an array of benefits for themselves and their child through involvement as a volunteer, with more committee members reporting gains. Benefits for parents were primarily from the enjoyment, companionship, and sense of belonging that involvement engendered. Many committee members also gained heightened confidence in their abilities and a sense of achievement. Parents reported overall benefits for children, better understanding of their child's progress, and better understanding of the education programme. Most playcentre parents and committee members also gained benefits, as well as training and qualifications.

Teaching and learning

Assessment, planning, evaluation, and curriculum matters

Most teachers were collecting assessment data which could be shared with others and used formatively, e.g., photographs, records of children's conversations, examples of work, learning stories, and anecdotal records. Teachers also placed store on discussion amongst themselves, and consultation with parents, to gather information about children's learning. Just over half the teachers were involving parents and children in making decisions about the education programme. Playcentre parents were more involved than other parents in these processes.

Insufficient time was the main barrier to assessment, planning, and evaluation and was also linked to having little/no noncontact time in the working day, especially for teachers/educators from services other than kindergarten.

In most ECE services, at least a little te reo Māori was spoken every day. However, the main usage was limited to greetings and commands. About half the teachers said they placed a little emphasis on biculturalism.

Over half the teachers said they placed a little emphasis on multiculturalism, but teachers in services with five or more children from non-English speaking homes said they placed a lot of emphasis on multiculturalism.

Teachers' main achievements over the last three years were related to improvements in teaching and learning practices. They reported increasing their knowledge and skills, creating a more positive learning environment, becoming better at meeting needs of individual children, improved assessment and evaluation practices, greater confidence in using *Te Whāriki*, and involving parents in children's learning.

Professional development

Most managers and teachers had participated in professional development in the previous 12 months, and many had undertaken more than 15 hours professional development. Management professional development commonly focused on management roles of staff appraisal, self-review, and leadership. Teachers' professional development commonly focused on teaching and learning, e.g., assessment, evaluation, educational theory, te reo and tikanga Māori, and children's behaviour, as well as staff appraisal.

The most common delivery of professional development was through one-off seminars or courses, followed by whole service professional development.

Managers and teachers favoured a range of professional development providers, but a higher percentage of playcentre educators and parent management preferred professional development from someone skilled within their own service.

Almost all managers and teachers thought that professional development resulted in their trying new strategies. Teachers gained their most useful ideas from other practising teachers.

Teachers' greatest needs for advice and information were about stress management, ICT use, staff appraisal, and children with special needs. Information about becoming a registered teacher was wanted by education and care teachers. These were also many of the areas where teachers felt they were missing out on advice.

Overall, education and care centre teachers had fewer hours professional development and kindergarten teachers more. Playcentre parent management were less likely to focus on staff appraisal and self-review, and more likely to focus on leadership and administration.

Reviews of ECE service provision

Self-review against the Desirable Objectives and Practices (DOPs) was being undertaken by most services. The aspects least likely to be reviewed were communication and collaboration with community, meeting needs of Māori, and meeting needs of Pasifika. These were also aspects where participants were lacking in confidence. Many were using Ministry of Education resources. Parents were more likely to be involved in reviews undertaken by management, than reviews undertaken by teachers, and community and children were rarely involved. On the whole, reviews were perceived as useful, with most reporting positive change occurring as a result.

A substantial minority of services had had a "new style" ERO review, focused on educational improvement as well as compliance. Of these, most managers found the review helpful. Almost half thought their ERO review provided positive impetus for change to the ECE programme,

especially in processes of assessment, planning, and evaluation, strategic planning, self-review processes, and health and safety.

Only about half of the committee members and parents had read the most recent ERO report on their service or knew how to contact their local ERO office, although most parents knew that ERO reviewed their service. Where parents had read the report, most thought it was helpful and had used it.

Relationships with local ECE services and schools

Collaboration between ECE services of different types was minimal. Where there was collaboration this was mainly to share professional development, followed by sharing resources and providing mutual support. Kindergartens reported the highest levels of collaboration, and this was with other kindergartens in their association. Main obstacles to forming closer relationships with other ECE services were time, resources, and competition between services.

When children attended more than one ECE service, about half the teachers/educators reported no relationship with the other service. The most usual contact was through parents. A substantial minority did not know whether any of their children attended more than one service.

Most teachers regarded transition of individual children to school as largely a parental responsibility. A third of ECE services had no or limited contact with their local school, but many (over half) had children going on to three or more schools. Where ECE services had specific transition practices these were mainly visits to one school with children or visits from school children to the service. These practices were more likely in services where children went on to only one or two schools.

Teachers thought continuity for children would be strengthened through primary and ECE teachers sharing curriculum and pedagogical understanding, and sharing ECE assessment information about individual children.

Major issues, priorities, and change wanted

The major issue confronting managers, parents, and parent committee members at the end of 2003/early 2004 was insufficient funding. Top priorities for change after funding reflected pressures that were distinctive for service types:

- Kindergarten respondents wanted improved staff:child ratios and reduced group sizes.
- Education and care respondents wanted better pay and employment conditions.

- Playcentre respondents wanted reduced administration and paper work.
- Home-based respondents wanted better pay and employment conditions.

Overall, from all groups—managers, teachers, parents, and committee members—there was agreement about the highest three priorities for government action. These were:

- improving teacher quality
- increasing funding levels
- lifting teacher pay.

Conclusion

Overall, the survey findings show ECE services are picking up on Ministry of Education initiatives to benefit their practices. Professional resources and professional development opportunities have helped teachers develop their assessment approaches, and teacher morale is high. Parents are generally positive about their relationships with the ECE service.

Some issues pose challenges for policy and practice:

- Teacher turnover was high, especially in education and care centres, where it was exacerbated by competition over employment conditions. High levels of teacher turnover can be detrimental for children’s development, since children’s wellbeing is supported by secure relationships with adults who know them well. The ECE service culture and capacity of staff to build on professional development experiences may also be eroded by turnover.
- There was pressure on services for more spaces for under twos, and some demand to use different types of provision. A fifth of parents said they would increase the number of hours their child attends if ECE was free. The greatest demand for more hours was from parents using less than 20 hours per week, and parents who were dissatisfied with hours and times. These findings indicate there may be some pressure for expanded or new ECE provision when free ECE is implemented. Under the current policy framework there is no systematic process of planning to ensure all services are meeting needs.
- Significantly poorer employment conditions were found in private education and care centres compared with community-based centres.
- High levels of voluntary workload were placing pressures on community-based services, especially playcentre, although volunteering was also associated with benefits—greater community cohesion, parent support, and parent learning. Ways to reduce workload and support volunteers so that benefits from volunteering are sustained is a policy and ECE service challenge.

- High child:staff ratios and large group sizes were problematic in some services, especially kindergartens, making it hard for teachers to interact responsively with all children.
- Aspects of collaboration that could be strengthened were: collaboration between ECE centres sharing the same children; transition to school, especially where children graduate to three or more schools; sharing information and integrating action between home and school; and working with Māori, Pasifika communities, and other ethnic communities. These could usefully be targeted as aspects for professional support.