



**NEW ZEALAND COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH**

TE RŪNANGA O AOTEAROA MŌ TE RANGAHAU I TE MĀTAURANGA

## *Media Release*

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*Researchers will use baseline early childhood education survey to monitor changes*

A national survey released by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research paints a picture of a complex and fast-growing early childhood education sector in New Zealand.

Supervisors, teachers and parents in a representative national sample of early childhood education services were surveyed, including kindergartens, playcentres, community-based and private centres, and home-based and hospital services. Kohanga reo were not included.

It shows parents are generally very positive about the early childhood education their child is getting and teacher morale is high - higher than among primary and secondary teachers. Most teachers were participating in professional development and many studying for further educational qualifications. However teacher turnover is high and that can be detrimental for children's development.

The survey was conducted in late 2003/ early 2004 and was intended to provide a baseline picture of the sector shortly after the release of the government's strategic plan for early childhood education. NZCER will conduct a second survey this year, which should show the impact of funding and regulatory changes.

### **Free 20 hours**

The survey was conducted before the government announced an entitlement to up to 20 hours free early childhood education for three to four year olds, due to be available from July this year. However respondents strongly backed the idea of a free, universal entitlement, rather than one targeted at low-income families, for at least two years before school starting age.

A fifth of parents said they would increase their child's use of early childhood services if there was a free entitlement, and most of those were parents who were currently using early childhood services for less than 20 hours per week. Thirty percent of parents said a free entitlement would enable them to change what they did while their child was at a centre, mainly by starting or increasing hours of paid employment or taking up a training course.

“We strongly support the principle of free early childhood education and we think it will result in significant reductions in costs for parents,” researcher Linda Mitchell says. “However, we acknowledge the logistical difficulties some centres are having with implementation. NZCER will be closely monitoring that when we conduct a follow-up survey later in the year.”

### **Ratios**

The survey highlighted strong demand for more places for under-twos.

“It suggests education and care for babies and toddlers will continue to expand, warranting close attention to provision for this age group and high standards of quality,” researcher Linda Mitchell says. She says the proposed new ratio of 1:5 staff to babies and toddlers for New Zealand does not meet international recommendations for this age group.

### **Teacher employment and morale**

Half the services surveyed had one or more teachers leave in the past year. Ms Mitchell says that’s a lot in a sector where most services employ only a few staff.

“Staff turnover is likely to be associated with instability for children, administrative costs and time spent on recruiting staff.”

Competition over pay and conditions exacerbated the turnover and led to recruitment problems. Only kindergarten teachers are covered by a national collective contract; pay rates and conditions such as non-contact time are highly variable across the rest of the sector.

Overall teacher morale was high, with 73 percent rating it as good or very good and only five percent as low or very low.

### **Differences in centre ownership**

The survey threw up differences between community-based, not for profit centres and private centres. Teachers in private centres had significantly poorer working conditions (such as annual leave, non-contact time, frequency of staff meetings) than colleagues in community-based centres, and were less likely to be involved in decision-making as a team. They were more likely to rate their workload as excessive.

Private centres – the fastest growing part of the sector – are run on a commercial basis. Some are part of corporate commercial chains listed on the sharemarket and required to make a return on investment. All centres – community and private - receive more government funding if they employ more qualified teachers but there’s nothing to ensure that is reflected in better teacher pay and conditions.

Ms Mitchell says the evidence in this survey, coupled with international evidence about lower quality in private centres, raises questions about the effectiveness and accountability of using public funds to support for-profit childcare. As well, many private centres are now campaigning against the free 20 hours policy.

“If the government remains reliant on the commercial sector to ensure all children can get up to 20 hours free, then it becomes vulnerable to those services’ demands for higher government funding, not to spend solely in their centre but also so they can offer private investors - who may not even be New Zealanders - a return on investment.”

She says one option could be a moratorium on any expansion of private provision, while solutions to these issues are developed. There is also a need for systematic planning and support in all parts of the country to help address current and forecasted need for early childhood education services.

*For further information or to interview Linda Mitchell, contact NZCER communications manager Sarah Boyd 04-8021468 or 027-2314300*

*To download the full report or a summary, go to <http://www.nzcer.org.nz/pdfs/15318.pdf>*

#### ***About NZCER***

*The New Zealand Council for Educational Research is New Zealand's only independent, educational research organisation. Established in 1934 through grants from the Carnegie Corporation, it became a statutory body in 1945 and now operates under its own Act of Parliament. Its key focus is to provide educators, students, parents, policy makers and the public with innovative and independent research, analysis, and advice. NZCER is not formally attached to any government department, university or other educational organisation.*

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