[**Pre-publication chapter**]

How much longer? Four decades of shifting politics in teacher qualifications

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Abstract

Almost 40 years ago, an integrated 3-year common core qualification for teachers in childcare centres and kindergartens was implemented in the six colleges of education. It followed years of advocacy for a 3-year qualification for kindergarten teachers comparable to that of school teachers and for equivalent qualifications for teachers in childcare centres. Rationale for the policy was grounded in research evidence linking training and qualifications with "quality" outcomes for children, recognition of the complexity of teachers' work, and an aspiration for an equitably paid and professionally supported early childhood teaching workforce. This chapter focuses on teacher-led services to analyse the teacher qualification debates, advocacy, policy reversals, and advancements from the implementation of this "benchmark" qualification in 1988 and 1989, to March 2025, where we still fall far short of plans for a 100% qualified teaching workforce. The chapter offers analysis of politics, advocacy, protest, and research; the people

and processes that shaped policy developments; and the tumultuous shifts, advances, and reversals in policy direction that were encountered along the way as elected Governments changed. The story is informed by the authors' experiences in union and early childhood organisation leadership, activism, policy advice, research, and writing during these years. The chapter ends with a stocktake of where we are at, of what changes are needed, and how these can be achieved.

Introduction

A consistent theme since the 1970s has been advocacy for fair and coherent policies on early childhood qualifications and training that recognise the skills, knowledge, and attributes needed for early childhood education (ECE) teaching and align with mainstream teacher education developments for teachers in schools. The rationale for these policies is grounded in research evidence linking teacher education and specialist ECE teaching qualifications with "quality" outcomes for children, recognition of the complexity of teachers' work, and an aspiration for an equitably paid and professionally supported early childhood teaching workforce.

A breakthrough came in 1988 when an integrated 3-year common core qualification for teachers in childcare centres and kindergartens was implemented in the six colleges of education. The policy was agreed despite dissenting views of the Treasury that "it is inadequately justified, [and] it has potentially large downstream costs" (Irwin, 16 June 1987, cited in May, 2019, p. 207).

The need for a fully qualified ECE teaching workforce has always been a contested issue in Aotearoa New Zealand. The divisions are largely between neoliberal thinkers and proponents of choice and markets who favour deregulation and lower teacher qualifications and others holding a view of ECE as a public good centred on the rights of the child who favour regulated standards for teacher qualifications. The divisions have played out in phases, with ascendency of thinking and teacher qualification policy development coinciding with Government terms of office: 1990–1999 (National); 1999–2008 (Labour); 2008–2017 (National); 2017–2023 (Labour); 2023–current (National).

Yet powerful alliances and influential advocacy have been sustained through all these times.

The chapter offers first-hand experience and critical analysis of politics, advocacy, protest, and research, the people and processes that shaped policy developments and the tumultuous shifts, advances, and reversals in policy direction that were encountered along the way as elected Governments changed. As authors (referred to as "we" throughout the chapter), we have drawn on our personal experiences in union and early childhood organisation leadership, activism, policy advice, research, and writing during these years to include our personal stories and insights.

This chapter starts by describing the background to the integration of care and education in the 1980s. It then focuses on teacher-led ECE services to analyse the politics, advocacy, protest, and research, the people and processes that shaped policy developments, and the tumultuous shifts, advances, and reversals in policy direction that occurred as elected Governments changed from 1990 to 2025. The 2024 ECE Regulatory Review, the adoption of its recommendation for flexible teacher qualifications by the Cabinet, and the divided debates within the ECE sector that have followed this recommendation are analysed. The chapter ends with a stocktake of where we are at, of what changes are needed, and how these can be achieved.

Integration of care and education in the 1980s

The need for fair and coherent policies on early childhood qualifications and training that align with mainstream teacher education developments for teachers in schools, has been a consistent theme since the 1970s. Until 1986, divisions between concepts of "care" and "education" were embedded in a split system, where childcare services were administered by the Department of Social Welfare and kindergartens and playcentres by the Department of Education.

The split was reflected in striking differentials in levels of government funding and support and in the qualifications of "teachers" in kindergartens, and "workers" in childcare centres. All kindergarten teachers were required under the Kindergarten Regulations 1959 to

be trained in a 2-year kindergarten training programme. Kindergarten associations were paid grants for kindergarten teachers' salaries and for allowances for students enrolled in kindergarten training centres. Childcare was not regulated until the Childcare Centre Regulations 1960 after a scandal where children were discovered in backyard care with broken bones and suffering serious neglect. These regulations provided only minimum standards focused on health and safety. There was a 1-year certificate for childcare workers, and many had no specialist training at all. It was not until 1985 that childcare supervisors were required to have even this minimum level of 1-year training (Childcare Centre Regulations, 1985).

The integration of care and education within the Department of Education originated in feminist movements of the 1970s and took over 10 years of persistent advocacy, mainly by women, to be realised (May, 2019; McDonald, 1981; Meade & Podmore, 2002). A main argument for addressing the inequitable treatment and artificial divide between kindergartens and childcare centres concerned the rights of the child to access and experience good-quality ECE. The *State Services Commission Report on Early Childhood Care and Education* (State Services Commission [SSC], 1980) proposed that "administrative responsibility for kindergartens, playcentres and childcare lie with the Department of Education, which would have responsibility for the inspection and recognition of services, and advisory, funding and training functions" (p. 94). It proposed equitable funding for childcare, that "this be based not on the welfare principle, but on the principle of a contribution to a [legally] recognised service" and that the government eventually subsidise up to 50% of the cost to parents (p. 95). These recommendations would have brought childcare into the range of government-funded education services and legislation.

An enduring theme in ECE policy debate has been the vociferous resistance of for-profit childcare providers to policy that restricts their potential to run childcare as a business and reduces their capacity to make profits. This was evident in the reactions to the SSC report. Of 54 submissions by early childhood organisations, educators, and researchers, all but two—the Private Childcare Federation (representing the owners of some private childcare centres) and Barnardos—supported the transfer (May, 2019, p. 148).

In 1986, all ECE services were brought under the administration of the Department of Education. Research at that time (Schweinhart et al., 1986) was demonstrating that good-quality education benefited children. The rationale for the integration was grounded in the idea that we should no longer think of childcare centres predominantly as a commodity that enables women to undertake paid employment and "disadvantaged" children to be cared for outside the family but think of them instead as educational and an entitlement for children.

Integration was intended to offer a basis for a good-quality education for all children in whatever service they attend but needed other policy to support this goal. Improving teacher qualifications was an urgent priority. In 1988, 3-year integrated training in colleges of education for teachers in childcare centres and kindergartens was introduced.

During the period 1988–1990, new overall policy was being developed for schools and ECE. The Government ECE policy document, *Before Five,* promised that "at all levels of education, the early childhood sector will have equal status with the other education sectors" (Lange, 1989, p. 2). Qualifications were central to achieving the Government's aim to improve the "standards of care and education in this sector" and to also realise "equal status" across the profession (Lange, 1989, p. iii).

Against the odds and attributable to women working inside parliament and to advocacy from our union-organised campaign for quality ECE (Meade, 1990; Wells, 1991), a huge funding increase of $43m, a 125% increase, in the ECE budget for quality education was won. We were at Kelburn Playcentre in July 1990 when Prime Minister David Lange announced this massive funding increase. He referred to his struggles with Cabinet colleagues and Treasury officials who were proponents of New Right economic theories and said that gaining this increased funding was "like snatching raw meat out of the jaws of a rottweiler". We were jubilant at these funding increases. But unlike many others in the ECE sector (some we thought were naïve about policy implications and others were seeing profit-making opportunities), we continued to be highly critical of the *Before Five* policy to have funding delivered through a bulk grant, with no regulated requirements for how that funding was to be used. We wanted certainty about staffing (qualifications, ratios, and group size) and teachers to be paid by government through a central payroll system.

Regulations set in September 1990 provided only minimum and low standards for licensing, health and safety, and curriculum, management, and staffing. Higher standards were to be set for chartered services in national guidelines. The benchmark qualification for chartered early childhood services gazetted in August 1990 was equivalent to the 3-year integrated teacher education course offered at colleges of education. A staged plan was set to achieve this for the supervisor and half the other regulated staff in childcare centres. But guidelines determined outside of regulations are precarious and able to be changed without public scrutiny.

At this time, teachers in kindergartens, parents and supervisors in playcentres, and kaiako in ngā kohanga reo were required to hold certain qualifications that were determined by their parent organisations and met regulatory standards. Kindergartens were part of the state sector, and their teachers were required to be qualified and registered and paid on a national award. Staff in childcare centres could hold a teacher education diploma or other diploma or degree qualification, a certificate qualification, be in training towards a qualification, have a mix, or hold no qualification at all.

Over the coming years, the policy intention was that staff in childcare centres would hold the Diploma of Teaching. However, given the range of qualifications and experiences held by staff currently employed, there was general agreement they should not have to start again; rather, there should be mechanisms in place to recognise what they had done to date and to fill in the gaps around teaching theory and practice. Under a *Blueprint for the Future* (Ministry of Education, 1990), a points system was set up as a way of assessing the content of various qualifications and the experience people already had, against the core content of a Diploma of Teaching. The Diploma was awarded 120 points. The assessment identified the gaps in knowledge or practice that the person then sought to close by undertaking "equivalency modules" or upgrading programmes which were also allocated points. Having successfully completed the requisite courses and acquired the 120 points, the person was deemed to have equivalency to the Diploma of Teaching and could become a registered teacher. The equivalency process was to be available until the end of 1995 and was managed by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA).

But the expressed aim for equity with the rest of the education sector was compromised by market mechanisms that, unlike for schools, gave individual ECE service management wide-ranging flexibility to use the bulk grant how they wished, pay teachers what they decided, and that left questions about regulated ECE qualification requirements, and who should provide training, open. This set the scene for the aggressive growth of private training provision and the shambolic dismantling of the desired 3-year qualification benchmark when a centre right government was elected in November 1990. The policy direction shifted from an aspiration for a regulated 3-year ECE teacher qualification to what we saw as a senseless accumulation of course completions.

Erosion of qualification standards and proliferation of training providers: 1990–1999

The 1990s was a time of immense pressure to make cuts in government spending, sell off state assets, and reduce the role of the state (Kelsey, 1997). Fuelled by the Treasury, the Business Roundtable, and the State Services Commission, economic arguments were dominant in the debate around government's role in ECE. Teacher qualifications were forcefully targeted in the Treasury's 1990 briefing:

> ... tight regulations of premises, equipment and staff ... drives up costs ... Tightening regulations on the qualifications of staff is likely to reduce the role of volunteers and have a substantial influence on cost and availability ... many of the existing regulations are likely to raise the pay of staff. (The Treasury, 1990, p. 132)

The qualification standards required for staff working in ECE were also strongly contested by the Early Childhood Council (ECC), previously the Licensed Childcare Centres Federation, and the Associated Childcare Council representing predominantly private for-profit owners of childcare centres.

In 1990, new regulations were introduced and, in the following year, the Government changed the *Blueprint* and adopted the points system for a different purpose: to determine a standard for licensing. The licensing requirement for the person responsible in ECE was set at 100 points. The shift caused confusion for many who continued to collect points believing they would be assessed as being equiva-

lent to the Diploma of Teaching. However, 100 points was not a qualification—it was a collection of points that could be made up from any combination of courses, qualifications, and experience. For many, their collection of points did not amount to the core content of the Diploma of Teaching.

In 1995, a new "quality funding" (Ministry of Education, 1995) rate provided financial reward to centres employing staff holding the Diploma qualification. The ECC was in strong opposition, echoing similar views to those held by the Treasury and describing the policy as "probably the worst, most ill-considered decision that has been made by this Government … Choosing a single (and relatively uncommon) qualification … will simply drive their pay rates right up, extra costs but no extra benefit to children" (Early Childhood Council, November 1995, p. 1). The ECC expressed a minority view. Others in the ECE sector, particularly community-based childcare service providers and the union, wholeheartedly supported the new policy.

As a further complication during the 1990s, NZQA introduced a new way to gain qualifications. Central to NZQA's brief was the development of unit standards—an approach developed predominantly for the trades, and for ECE another way to package qualifications. Margaret Carr critiqued the approach as being more appropriate for training a technician than an early childhood teacher who, she argued, needed pedagogical understanding and to be a critical thinker in their work with children (Carr, 1993, cited in May, 2019, p. 251). Each unit standard focused on a specific aspect of a qualification or on competencies required in a role. The idea was to bring together relevant unit standards which collectively would be recognised as a qualification. The qualifications were ranked from levels 1–7, with the Diploma of Teaching sitting at level 7. A group was set up to develop unit standards for ECE. The majority of the group sought to establish unit standards to meet the level 7 diploma qualification—a minority, including the ECC, wanted lower-level qualifications to apply. The group could not reach consensus as NZQA required and, in 1994, the group was sacked.

The political views and exhortations of the ECC underpinned the reason for the sacking. An article in the *Evening Post* reported the group:

> … was sacked at the direction of Associate Minister of Education John Luxton and Education Ministry chief executive Maris O'Rourke … A group

> member, the Early Childhood Council, asked the authority to disband the group because of the politicisation, intransigence and abuse of the process … 12 of the 15 [working group] member organisations including kindergartens, playcentres, the Nanny Education Organisation, the NZEI and the Childcare Association—were angry that the group had been sacked and believed the authority should have heeded the majority view. Those members sought a 3-year, early childhood teaching diploma as the minimum qualification. However, the Early Childhood Council was pushing for a lower qualification at certificate level. Early Childhood Council training executive manager Ross Penman said a diploma would be suitable only for supervisors—not all childcare workers should have to study for three years. (Press Association, 1994)

The Industry Training Act 1992 opened the door for employers to be more involved in determining qualifications for their "industry", and for more private training providers to be approved to offer qualifications. In education, the Government's approach to industry training conflicted with the traditional pedagogy of teacher education and restricted the ability of the teaching profession to determine standards. The impact on ECE was profound. The demand from new training providers to be recognised and for their qualification to be approved put considerable strain on the system. In the absence of an agreed core curriculum for teacher education programmes, providers designed their own. The inconsistency across programmes in the depth and breadth of content created significant variation in the quality of programmes offered. Five separate bodies determined the standards for teacher education. Competing standards between these bodies and the proliferation of teacher education providers added to the confusion. Several providers were offering programmes that did not meet the standards required for teacher registration. ECE was hard hit, with some new providers and programmes being shut down or collapsing, leaving students stranded with a part or inadequate qualification and out of pocket. The checks and balances were not in place to safeguard students from unscrupulous training providers. They were failed by the system.

The stories of the rise and fall of two private training organisations—Creative Learning Environments (CLE) and the Chrysalis College of Early Childhood Education—reveal the inadequacies of

the system. NZQA approved both organisations and their Diploma of Teaching qualifications. Poorly qualified staff, loose interpretation of requirements, poor entry criteria, concerns about the content, lack of effective monitoring, and inadequate practicum featured in the failure of both providers. Stories of the training fiasco were described by the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) Te Riu Roa in its journal *NZEI Rourou*. In 1998, CLE, formerly SEACOH Training, went into liquidation, affecting around 600 students. At the time of its collapse, CLE was under investigation "by NZQA over its financial practice and performance. NZQA was looking at a complaint from a student the company had acted unprofessionally and provided misleading information about the status of its diploma" (NZEI Te Riu Roa, 7 May 1998, p. 1). Another provider, Seeds Institute International, with links to CLE, similarly came into view when a student identified that after 3 years of study she was "still no closer to becoming a registered teacher" (NZEI Te Riu Roa, 7 May 1998, p. 4). In the following year, some of the students who had been with CLE had their part qualification recognised as prior learning (RPL) when they enrolled with Chrysalis College of Early Childhood Education. The Teacher Registration Board had serious concerns about Chrysalis, noting:

> It is very possible that a student was granted RPL by CLE, whose procedures did not stand up to scrutiny, then granted it again by Chrysalis for the work they had supposedly done at CLE. The effect of this is that a student could end up with a diploma for doing very little work and learning very little. (NZEI Te Riu Roa, 10 March 1999, p. 1)

The headline in *NZEI Rourou* announced "Another private training course shown to be shonky—what is NZQA doing?" The owner of Chrysalis initiated legal action against the union objecting to the use of the word "shonky". We briefed David Caygill, former Minister of Finance and partner in prominent law firm Buddle Findlay, to respond to the legal action. The case was dropped.

In parallel to government policy, the unions—first the Combined Early Childhood Union of Aotearoa (CECUA) then post-amalgamation, NZEI Te Riu Roa—developed an approach for the recognition of qualifications in industrial awards and contracts. The kindergarten teachers' salary scales recognised both years of experience and qual-

ifications, the same as for teachers in the schools sector. Kindergarten teachers were required to hold the Diploma of Teaching as the base qualification and be registered teachers. The multiple industrial arrangements covering staff in childcare centres rarely recognised qualifications. The union strategy included negotiating structures in childcare industrial agreements to recognise qualifications and pay appropriately and a campaign calling for increased government funding to meet the costs. The aim was to align pay, qualifications, and conditions across the education sector (Mitchell & Wells, 1997). The introduction of the ECE quality funding rate in the mid-1990s persuaded some employers to agree to the new qualification and salary structures. By 1998, union-negotiated agreements covering the majority of its members in childcare services recognised the diploma and higher qualifications. The structural alignment was an important step towards ensuring equal status with the compulsory sector and providing a mechanism to ultimately implement pay parity.

However, as the union was trying to build a strong pay and qualification employment structure for teachers in childcare centres, the Government had its sights on cutting kindergartens adrift from government responsibility and effectively privatising them. On 30 April 1997, the Government passed legislation under urgency to remove kindergarten teachers from the State Sector Act. Use of urgency meant that the usual select committee process and hearing of submissions would not happen.

In these troubled times, NZEI Te Riu Roa called together representatives from national early childhood organisations to work in partnership "on a major project on the future directions of early childhood education" (Early Childhood Education Project, 1996, p. 2). Geraldine McDonald was the chairperson, we formed the secretariat, and seven national community-based ECE organisations participated. Our aim was to advocate for radical change to early childhood policy through "developing proposals that will take the whole sector forward on a sound basis into the 21st century" (Early Childhood Education Project, 1996, p. 2). Through a democratic, consultative process, the group investigated problems and challenges, and developed proposals to address these. Representatives used their networks and organisational

structures to ensure proposals were well understood and supported. The story of *Future Directions* has been told in several publications (Mitchell, 2019a, 2019b; Wells, 1999). The recommendations included that the Government develop a strategic plan for early childhood as a sector and advocacy for addressing problems of unsatisfactory training and an insufficiently qualified workforce through financial and other support for workers to gain appropriate qualifications.

Radical shifts towards a fully qualified and registered ECE workforce: 1999–2008

After 9 years of a National Government, the fifth Labour Government was elected in 1999. This was a majority Labour Government formed in coalition with the Alliance Party, and support from the Green Party. It heralded a period of immense optimism and radical action for ECE that was pursued single-mindedly by the Minister of Education, Trevor Mallard, and supported by the Prime Minister and Labour politicians. One of us, Clare Wells, was Trevor Mallard's political adviser during the period September 2001 to March 2003 and her extensive experience, understanding of ECE, and political astuteness added weight to the Minister's arguments.

An immediate government decision was to develop a long-term strategic plan, in consultation with the sector. A plan was needed to address the problems identified in the *Future Directions* consultations, problems of ad hoc policy change, reactive rather than proactive policy, inadequate consultation between government and the sector, and a need to address big issues of funding, qualifications, regulations, planning, and accountability. The carefully researched and supported *Future Directions* proposals, ECE organisations' advocacy, and political acceptance played a key role.

Further significant announcements served to recognise the importance of teaching qualifications and registration for ECE teachers. On 13 March 2000, kindergarten teachers were returned to coverage of the State Sector Act, a move that ensured a legal requirement for teachers to be qualified and registered ECE teachers. It linked kindergarten teachers to the school sector. The Government again had responsibil-

ity for being party to kindergarten teacher employment negotiations and for funding the agreements made. Then on 24 April 2000, the Government announced a requirement for existing staff who were in charge of ECE centres to upgrade their qualifications within 5 years. Very quickly, further announcements followed: the establishment of a working group to develop and consult on the strategic plan; new qualification requirements for teacher-led ECE services; and rescinding of the National Government's decision to recognise 100 licensing points as the qualification required for the person responsible in ECE.

Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki was the Government's strategic plan for ECE, intended to cover the years 2002–2012 (Ministry of Education, 2002), but was cut short in 2009 by the newly elected National Government. The plan tackled issues intended to improve implementation of the curriculum and the quality of education, children's participation and access to ECE, and collaborative relationships to support coherence of education and more integrated services to children, parents, families, and whānau. Amongst its actions were improving teacher qualifications and pay parity with school teachers for kindergarten teachers and its flow-on effects for other teachers in teacher-led ECE services. Changing the funding system to a cost drivers system that included equity funding was a supporting strategy.

The Government set targets[1] and provided initiatives[2] to increase the proportion of registered teachers in teacher-led services. The aim was that, by 2012, all regulated staff in teacher-led services would be registered early childhood teachers or at least 70% would be registered teachers and the rest would be studying for a New Zealand Teachers Council (NZTC)-approved qualification. Assessment and

1 Targets: 2005—all persons responsible are required to be registered teachers; 2007—50% of regulated staffing to be registered teachers; 2010—80% of regulated staffing to be registered teachers or services can count teachers studying for an NZTC-approved qualification as up to 10% of the 80% requirement; 2012—all regulated staff to be registered teachers or at least 70% of regulated staff to be registered teachers and the remainder to be studying for an NZTC-approved qualification.

2 TeachNZ Scholarships; higher funding rates for services with more registered teachers; Loan Support; National and International Relocation Grants; Returning to Teaching allowances; A Teacher Registration Support Kit; Recruitment Brokers; Incentive Grants; and Primary Study Grants.

other professional resources congruent with the sociocultural framing of *Te Whāriki*, Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996) were published. Funding was provided for associated professional learning and development.

Voices opposing the qualification targets were strident. The ECC was once again a vehement opponent of lifting teacher qualification requirements:

> Hundreds of early childhood teachers could be forced out of the profession. (*Dominion*, 20 May 2000)

> Hundreds of preschools across New Zealand face closure next year as the sector struggles to cope with new qualification requirements. (*Sunday Star Times*, 8 February 2004)

The Ministry of Education contracted evaluation of the implementation of the Strategic Plan between 2004 and 2009 (Mitchell et al., 2011) showed the ECC's objections were unfounded. The job losses and centre closures never eventuated. The Strategic Plan targets and qualification incentives led to a marked and steady increase in the percentage of qualified teachers in teacher-led ECE services nationally and in the services in the study. Nationally, the proportion of teacher-led services with 50% or more of their teachers with teacher registration rose between 2004, 2006, and 2009. Overall, in 2004, 37.3% of teachers held teacher registration, compared with 56.4% in 2006 and 64% of teachers in 2009. In 2009, 98.6% of home-based co-ordinators, 96.5% of kindergarten teachers, and 58.4% of education and care teachers were registered (Mitchell et al., 2011, p. 83).

A striking finding was the relationships with observed quality. One hundred percent of the staff in each of the teacher-led services that were rated "very good" quality were registered teachers at the time the observations of quality were made. This was true in every evaluation year. Those rated "poor" or "fair" quality had lower levels of qualified teachers and did not take up the comprehensive opportunities for teacher qualifications and professional development or make full usage of the Ministry of Education's professional resources.

However, at the end of Labour's term of government, the ideals were still only partially realised, the plan for a fully qualified teach-

ing workforce incomplete, professional learning and development not embedded, and pay parity achieved only for kindergarten teachers. The Strategic Plan needed to continue for its full term.

Qualification benchmark undermined again: 2008–2017

The policy advances made under Labour were eroded as neoliberal ideologies and old ideas that position ECE as only requiring the employment of "substitute mothers" came to the fore again under the National-led Government's term, 2008–2017. Very quickly, the Government removed funding to support staff to get registered. It removed the target of 100% registered teachers. The targets became 80% registered teachers in centres for children over 2 years and 50% registered teachers for children under 2, but funding remained in place for centres that wanted to employ more than the required 80%. The May 2010 Budget cut all this additional funding.

Prime Minister John Key was outspoken in arguing against a fully qualified workforce: "It is a matter of personal belief as to whether a high proportion of all centre staff should be trained teachers" (Carr & Mitchell, 2010). At that time in 2010, 57% of children attending early childhood centres were in centres where over 80% of staff were qualified and registered. With the budget cuts, these centres would no longer be able to afford to employ qualified teachers above the requirement. The Prime Minister's response: "There will be some [centre owners] that in the end say, 'I want to be 100% teacher-led', and I suspect that will be driven by the parents who send their children there and they may be prepared to pay a little bit more" (Cheng, 2010).

Again, there was dissent from early childhood organisations, academics, and the public about the changes to policy. In response to Key's claims about personal belief, Margaret Carr and Linda Mitchell wrote in an opinion piece that:

> It is a matter of an informed and evidence-based educational decision … High income families whose children participate in early childhood centres will be able to afford the fees to maintain the high quality standard of 100% qualified staff, but low income families will not. Economic inequality will now be associated from the early years with educational inequity. (Carr & Mitchell, 2010)

Two writers for the *New Zealand Listener* expressed distinctly opposing views:

> I did not send my children to crèche for an education; I sent them because I was a solo parent with two preschool children and a full-time job. I needed someone to look after them. (Black, 4 July 2009)

> Would Black be happy to have the unqualified mechanic who loves cars fix her car, or the unqualified nurse who is very kind, tend to her medical needs? I think not. Why then should we allow unqualified teachers to teach our children. (Simpson, 11 July 2009)

The old emphasis on a restricted role for ECE services as childcare, that the integration into the Department of Education aimed to squash, was still alive. The events show how quickly gains in qualification policy can be eroded in a sector that is not united in viewing ECE as education and that needs to be staffed by trained and qualified teachers. And competing interests are at play: the best interests of the child versus the best interests of private business owners.

Getting back on track: 2017–2023

When Labour was elected in 2017, ECE was high on the agenda again. Instead of completing the actions already agreed in *Pathways to the Future,* including meeting targets and providing incentives for 100% qualified teachers, the Government opted for developing another Strategic Plan, *He Taonga te Tamaiti—Every Child a Taonga: Early Learning Action Plan* (Ministry of Education, 2019). The Minister of Education, Chris Hipkins, announced in its terms of reference that:

> The Government is committed to championing quality teaching and the importance of a respected and supported teaching profession at all levels of the system. In the context of early learning, this includes revisiting decisions by the previous government [that] have undermined the shift towards a more qualified workforce. Over time, the Government's aim is to achieve 100% qualified teachers in all centre-based teacher-led early learning services and to improve group size and teacher:child ratios for infants and toddlers. (Hipkins, 2017, p. 4)

The terms of reference proposed "investing in and backing our world-class, public education system for all students. This involves

turning the tide away from a privatised, profit-focused education system" (Hipkins, 2017, p. 4).

The process of development and implementation of the Action Plan prevented transformational solutions. We were both members of the plan's Reference Group tasked with drafting the plan. Ministry of Education officials dominated the work of the Group through setting agendas, making cursory notes of discussions, and writing what was reported to Government ministers. The teacher qualification proposal was to: "Incentivise for 100 percent and regulate for 80 percent qualified teachers in teacher-led centres, leading to regulation for 100 percent" (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 23). The Ministry determined the priority placed on the actions, the order in which they would be implemented, and how they should be implemented. It set out the sequencing and time frames for actions in a "Dashboard" that was discussed with the Ministry's Early Childhood Advisory Group. Priority for early implementation was given to "Practice and progress tools". The first practice and progress tools to be drafted were *Practice and Progress Tools* (*Kōwhiti Whakapae*) *Social Emotional Learning* (*SEL*). A highly critical review of these was written by 13 early childhood academics, teacher educators, and teachers and discussed with the Ministry of Education (Mitchell et al., 2022). In particular, the tools were criticised as inadequate in their conceptualisation of children and te ao Māori concepts, and inappropriate in approaches to assessment that were out of kilter with the holistic principles of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education 1996).

The final plan was timid in its demands around teacher pay parity, stating simply a need for "more consistent and improved teacher salaries and conditions in the early learning sector" (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 25). While the Government did eventually determine to implement pay parity, it did not promise to fund the full cost or address the problems with ECE funding mechanisms and employment arrangements.

The *Early Learning Action Plan* (Ministry of Education, 2019) had the potential to reach the target of regulating for 100% qualified teachers in teacher-led services, achieve pay parity for all teachers through a national collective employment agreement, and reconceptualise

ECE as a public service. A regulation for 80% qualified teachers and a timescale for reaching 100% was never made. Without courageous political will and in the face of contestable advice, including advice from the growing and demanding private sector, it failed on all these issues.

Regulatory reviews and further privatisation of ECE: 2023–

The National coalition Government elected in October 2023 was quick to move into reviewing policy in the ECE sector. The term of this Government (2023–2026) will be a time of enormous challenge. Hard-won gains have already been removed and there are impelling signals that this Government will try to unravel further gains, including to qualifications, that have been decades in the making.

David Seymour was appointed Minister for Regulation and Associate Minister of Education with responsibility for the ECE portfolio. By early 2024, he had rescinded planned requirements due to come into effect later in the year for the "person responsible" in an ECE service to be fully registered. Later in 2024, he announced that from "October, only permanent part- or full-time certificated teachers will need to be paid the required pay steps" (Seymour, 4 September 2024). This means that relief teachers do not need to be paid the relevant pay parity salary that the service has opted into.

The first sector to be reviewed by the Ministry for Regulation was ECE. Seymour's early media statements signalled his view that regulations are "burdensome rules" and pay rates and qualifications are "increasingly stringent requirements" (Coughlan, 9 April 2024). The review was announced on 5 June 2024. One day before Parliament stopped sitting for the year (18 December 2024), the report on the ECE Regulatory Review was delivered to the Minister for Regulation. The Minister accepted all the report recommendations and Cabinet agreed them in April 2025. No room was made for broader sector and democratic public scrutiny of the conclusions the Ministry had reached before the Cabinet consideration.

The direction taken on crucial issues of licensing criteria linked to curriculum standards and regulations about staff qualifications will have a substantive impact on the quality of New Zealand's ECE ser-

vices and outcomes for children, families, and government. The Report recommendations included:

1. Remove many of the licensing criteria related to curriculum standards. These criteria address the nature of interactions children should experience, the kinds of knowledge educators should hold, how the curriculum should support children's cultures and identities (including identities as a learner), and how children's interests should be promoted jointly by parents and educators.
2. Allow greater flexibility in workforce qualifications to support access and quality across all areas and service types.

The Review set off a heated and divided debate about these proposals. Predictably, the ECC is at the forefront of organisations supporting all the recommendations, including flexibility for determining qualifications:

> A recommendation to explore flexibility for childcare centres when employing people without a teaching qualification could mean improved access to childcare for parents and children, says the Early Childhood Council. It could be a positive for providers now hamstrung by restrictive regulation, the 10,000 people currently working in ECE without a teaching qualification and will help address the ongoing teacher shortage. (Early Childhood Council, 14 February 2025)

Kindergartens Aotearoa, NZEI Te Riu Roa, and Te Rito Maioha Early Childhood New Zealand were critical of many aspects of the Review focuses and the process. Kindergartens Aotearoa's[3] strategic approach to arguing against these Regulatory Review report recommendations and asserting alternatives includes letters to the Prime Minister and Cabinet, public statements and media interviews, extensive discussion in kindergartens with teachers and whānau, and organisation of the forum *ECE as a public good—building a strong community-based sector*. The forum included presentations by two panels of ECE champions (academics), open discussion with kindergarten governance board and leadership team members, and discussion and development of actions to influence the political agenda.

3 https://kindergartensaotearoa.org.nz/

NZEI Te Riu Roa organised a petition[4] and resources to support members and families to approach media and members of parliament urging the Government not to scrap recommended changes to licensing criteria and undermine qualification requirements. At the end of May 2025, there were over 11,000 signatures on the petition.

Kathy Wolfe, Chief Executive of major ECE teacher education and professional development provider, and advocacy organisation Te Rito Maioha Early Childhood New Zealand, argued that the Regulatory Review solutions for issues around affordable access and teacher shortages were:

> not underpinned by evidence that supports quality ECE, but rather market-driven solutions that are not backed by evidence … We need to support the teaching profession and ensure the attraction and retention of qualified teachers by having an effective teacher workforce strategy, including conditions such as full pay parity to address current challenge. (Wolfe, 2024)

A group of leading ECE academics (who have collectively done extensive research in ECE policy and practice over decades) analysed the Review Report from the basis of the best interests of children and their rights to high-quality early childhood provision as evidenced in research. The Group's open letter and background paper (ECE Academic Group, 2025) to the Prime Minister and Cabinet warned that proposed changes to ECE regulations are not in children's best interests and go against decades of research evidence on how to ensure high-quality ECE. The Group pinpointed recommendations to remove licensing criteria related to curriculum standards and to shift away from the commitment to a qualified teacher workforce by allowing qualification requirements to be flexible as particularly problematic. The report stated:

> By proposing a shift away from qualified staff, the review goes against 40 years of research evidence, across multiple jurisdictions, that identifies qualified staff as one of three policy variables—together with appropriate adult–child ratios by age and group size—that form the 'iron triangle' of quality (Ruopp et al., 1979). The variables impact both adult and child be-

4 https://action.nzei.org.nz/petitions/put-tamariki-at-the-heart-of-decisions-about-ec

> haviour, with fewer positive interactions and less advancement in development associated with lower staff qualifications and larger group sizes. (ECE Academic Group, 2025)

The Group called for these recommendations to be removed altogether and made its own recommendations on how to address the qualified teacher shortage through measures similar to those used in *Pathways to the Future* (Ministry of Education, 2002) and that have been shown to be successful.

In the 22 May 2025 Government Budget, ECE received a miniscule 0.5% funding increase, equivalent to a cut because it did not keep up with inflation. Later in May, David Seymour announced that education and care service employers would no longer have to pay new teachers pay parity rates (Ministry of Education, 29 May 2025) or take into account new teachers' qualifications and experience. In a question in the House to justify the policy, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon conveyed an image of ECE as a business, of families and children as "consumers", and of teachers as "workers" whose specialist qualifications were not relevant and who could be exploited by entrepreneur owners wanting to save on labour costs:

> … we don't believe that just because you've got a qualification … you should be paid more and be mandated to pay more than someone who's got 25 years' experience in ECE. That's up to owners to work out what to pay their workers so they can work out what they charge to their consumers … That is normal business practice. (New Zealand Parliament, 3 June 2025)

In 1994, in response to a growing concern about the erosion of quality provision in training and qualifications, nine people with long-standing involvement in ECE met as the Early Childhood Group[5] to discuss and examine government policies and trends. A review of the previous 15 years grew out of their discussions and found that, from early 1980 to mid-1990, there were over 30 government and sector reviews and reports on ECE qualifications and training. "Major common strands run through the reports … backed by research evidence

5 The Early Childhood Group's 1994 report, *Early Childhood Qualifications and Training: A Summary of Key Developments* has not been published, but a copy can be obtained by contacting the chapter authors.

and support from early childhood organisations. Given the diversity in philosophy and style of operation it is a remarkable achievement that diverse groups reached agreement on these key issues" (Early Childhood Group, 1994, p. 2). The common strands included an integrated training programme for kindergarten and childcare services and establishing the Diploma of Teaching as the regulated minimum qualification for ECE teachers. The first strand was realised in 1987—the second strand has never been achieved.

The sticking point is achieving the benchmark qualification for all staff meeting regulated ratios. And associated with that is achieving pay parity for all qualified and registered early childhood teachers with qualified and registered teachers in the schools sector.

What got in the way of achieving these goals?

Looking back, we identify longstanding tensions that have never been shaken off. Despite increased policy priority given to ECE and the integration of ECE into an education administration, a prejudice continues that work with young children requires only "mothering" skills that are in large part instinctual or skills of a technical nature that do not require extensive training. In this thinking, strongly portrayed in statements by the ECC, previous Prime Minister John Key, current Minister for Regulation and Associate Minister of Education David Seymour, current Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, and the Treasury, there is no necessity for all regulated staff to be qualified teachers.

A second tension is around conceptions of the purpose of ECE. Is it first and foremost to provide care for children of working families? Or is its primary purpose the education and wellbeing of all young children and their families, as the women of the 1970s and 1980s advocated when they argued for integration? An integrated ECE system is education-based and caters for the needs and rights of children and their families, including needs of working parents. However, the dominance of a childcare discourse "reflects a deeply embedded and narrow way of thinking about early childhood services, a conceptual split that seems to trap the ability of people and society from imagining something different, 'confining the boundaries of public debate'" (Moss & Mitchell,

2024, p. 199). This thinking was evident in media statements by some parents and the resistance of for-profit business owners to the original integration. Regarding the workforce as childcare rather than education is used to justify a low-cost employment model.

A third tension is around the question of whether ECE is seen as a public good or a private benefit and tradeable commodity. This relates to who should fund ECE and the fear expressed in government agency submissions that government will have to pay more if qualified teachers are regulated. In Aotearoa New Zealand, there is increasing reliance on marketisation and privatisation, with a growing number of for-profit ECE providers, who operate as businesses in an international market, selling a commodity to consumers (parents) and in competition with each other. With that comes resistance to policies that might hinder owners from trading in a free market and prevent their capacity to employ who they want, pay whatever salaries they determine, and charge whatever fees they wish. Supported by the Associate Minister of Education and Prime Minister, the ECE Regulatory Review and subsequent policy announcements frame ECE provision as a marketised model.

What progressed the goals for a fully qualified and equitably paid early childhood workforce?

Throughout the decades, groups and individuals committed to these goals held out a vision for ECE to be understood as *education in its broadest sense*. As public services, they should be universal in coverage, free to attend, and employ qualified staff. In this view, qualified ECE teachers are essential because they understand how children learn and develop, understand pedagogy, understand the ECE curriculum and are skilled in its implementation, provide age-appropriate learning environments, and maintain the currency of their professional practice. They are critical thinkers and researchers, and responsive to their communities and accountable to meet and maintain professional standards. This vision and goals were progressed through collective organisation by the union, community-based organisations, and academics who researched and documented qualification and training

developments over years, made policy proposals, and sought support for these.

The progress made through the development and implementation of *Pathways to the Future* (Ministry of Education, 2002) shows the value of government establishing a consultative and democratic process in the formulation of policy. It illustrates the importance of setting and meeting targets for staff to become qualified and registered teachers and of offering tangible support for staff and management to enable the targets to be met. Critical to this progress were the political beliefs of a visionary Minister of Education, Trevor Mallard, who had the courage to lead policy development towards a qualified and equitably paid teaching workforce, against advice from government officials and opposition from some in the private sector.

What changes are needed and how might these be achieved?

Our account of the teacher qualification debate, the progress, and setbacks under different governments shows a need to address big and complex issues. The changes needed are transformational—not just tinkering at the edges to improve the status quo. Change needs to include a shift in understanding of the purpose of ECE and the image of the ECE teacher, and the interrelated systems that are needed for ECE to move from a private to a public responsibility. Aotearoa New Zealand examples of non-government initiatives that shifted policy thinking and of government initiatives illustrate the value of a critical and participatory review of the current early childhood system and of what needs to change to ensure high-quality education that meets the needs of children and families. This needs to be set within a shared vision for ECE and seek widespread views and evidence. Perhaps non-government community organisations could take on such an initiative.

Immediately, the challenge is to improve regulations and action the recommendations of both the 2002 and 2019 ECE strategic plans and of the 30 plus reports and reviews of the past 40 years. The priority is to regulate firstly 80% and then 100% qualified teachers for teacher-led

centre-based services. In parallel, targeted support needs to be offered to staff in centres who are in training or untrained to enable those people to complete and gain their teacher education qualification. The current regulatory review provides opportunity for researchers, teachers, and organisations to be outspoken in responding to any potential for change in staffing regulations and the reasons why.

It is frustrating to have to reiterate evidence. Research has shown very clearly the powerful connection between teacher qualifications, uptake of professional development, and quality interactions with children in Aotearoa New Zealand (Meade et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2011). This finding is replicated in many earlier international studies (Mitchell et al., 2008) and a recent meta-analytic review that found that teacher qualifications are significantly associated with higher-quality education and care environments (Manning et al., 2019).

In 1988, the then Prime Minister Rt Hon David Lange, stated, "the early childhood sector will have equal status with other education sectors" (Lange, 1989, p. 2). The sector is still not there some 36 years later. Let's not wait another 30 years. There is a need to regulate the Diploma of Teaching or its degree equivalent as the benchmark qualification for all staff in teacher-led, centre-based ECE services and recognise that qualification, other degrees, and postgraduate qualifications in a national collective employment agreement covering all ECE teachers. Pay parity could be locked into the centrally negotiated agreement and funded by the government. Then, teachers in ECE services would have equal status with their colleagues across the profession focused on the best interests of children.

Underpinning transformation is an urgent need to turn away from conceptualising ECE services as marketised businesses selling to parent consumers. Instead, early childhood services should be reconceptualised as a public good and a public responsibility, that require public funding and are democratically accountable to the public. They are education-based, integrated, and universal in coverage. A project that harnesses powerful collective organisation and advocacy, as has happened in the past, could reverse current directions in ECE policy and turn the pathway towards transformation.

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