
Beyond the teacher/parent separation

Questioning the 100% qualified teacher policy

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The draft early learning strategic plan *He Taonga Te Tamaiti/Every Child a Taonga* (Ministry of Education, 2018) has a goal to improve quality by regulating for 100% teachers in teacher-led services. This proposal assumes a distinct separation between teachers and parents, and between services employing professional teachers and those with parents-as-educators. This paper uses the “What’s the problem represented to be?” (WPR) policy analysis approach of Carol Bacchi (2009) to examine and disrupt the underlying problem representations contained in this policy. An alternative policy is proposed that assumes professional teachers and parents-as-educators can work alongside each other in the same service, to mutual benefit.

Quality and parents-as-educators

The draft early learning strategic plan *He Taonga Te Tamaiti/Every Child a Taonga* (Ministry of Education, 2018) rejects the quasi-free-market approach that has dominated early learning¹ policy since the late 1980s. Instead, the Government is accepting responsibility for co-ordination and regulation of services to ensure all children have equitable access to quality early learning services (Gerritson, 2018). In *He Taonga*, the first of the five goals is dedicated to improving the quality of services. Quality is a contested concept (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2013), and over the past three decades has become linked with the increasing professionalisation of the early learning workforce. The effect of this has been to create a teacher/parent divide, where the discourse of qualified teachers discourages parents from being, or thinking of themselves, as educators of their children.

Aotearoa New Zealand has a long history of services based around the philosophy of parents-as-educators. Playcentres, which started in 1941, operate as parent co-operatives where the parents (or other whānau) are trained to take on the role of educator at the centres, for both their own and other children (Stover, 1998). Kōhanga reo started in 1982 and were established along similar operating lines as playcentres, with whānau involved as educators. The purpose of kōhanga reo, however, was very different: to nurture the Māori language and culture through an immersion environment for young children (May, 2009).

This article problematises the teacher/parent-as-educator divide, by using a policy analysis framework to examine the quality goal of regulating for 100% qualified teachers in *He Taonga*. The framework or approach was developed by Australian/Canadian Carol Bacchi and is called “What’s the problem represented to be?” (WPR) (Bacchi, 2009). The WPR approach takes the view that the problems contained in policies are socially and politically constructed, rather than being objective realities. These problem representations benefit some groups of people more than others, and the objective of a WPR analysis is to disrupt the problem representations to suggest policy alternatives that benefit those who are currently disadvantaged. In this article, the focus is the effect of the problem representations in *He Taonga* on parents-as-educators. The discussion is centred on playcentres, although there are similarities with kōhanga reo because of their philosophy of holistic whānau development and using whānau as educators in their centres.

The next section of this article will introduce the WPR framework in more detail. The subsequent sections broadly follow the WPR framework by identifying problem representations and the concepts on which they are based, then tracing the history and effects of these concepts and problem representations, and finally proposing alternative policy that attempts to disrupt the problem representations.

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What's the problem represented to be?

There are objective issues that materially and negatively impact on people, but what we think the problem *is* determines what solution will be proposed. As Bacchi says, the WPR approach “challenges the conventional view that public policies are responses or reactions to problems that sit outside the policy process, waiting to be discovered and solved” (Bacchi, 2017, para. 2). Instead, the WPR approach considers that there are multiple ways a problem could be constructed, and policies do the work of constructing the problem. An example is government participation policies from 2002, where the lack of participation in early learning services by certain population groups was constructed as a problem to be solved. In contrast, the current policy proposals in *He Taonga* construct the problems as a lack of resources and planning, resulting in inequitable access to services. It is not the “real world” situation that has changed, but rather the problem representations.

Bacchi's WPR approach uses guiding questions to examine and disrupt problem representations in a policy:

1. What's the 'problem' ... represented to be in a specific policy or policies?
2. What presuppositions and assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?

3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
6. How/where is this representation of the 'problem' produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?

(Bacchi, 2009, p. 2)

Although these questions provide a framework for systematic analysis, the questions overlap to some extent, and analysts will emphasise different questions depending on the purpose of the analysis. This paper draws on research on the impact of early learning policy on playcentres since the late 1980s, so the history aspect is foregrounded.

Problem representations and underlying concepts

The concept of quality

The first goal in *He Taonga* is: “Quality is raised for children by improving regulated standards” (Ministry of Education, 2018, p. 22). The problem is represented as a lack of quality due to insufficient regulation. This relates to the prior dominance of the free-market approach where quality was supposed to be ensured through consumer choice (Devine, 2004), but which has not resulted in acceptable standards of quality throughout the sector (Ministry of Education, 2018). This problem representation rests on the concept of quality, and it is implicit that everyone understands what is meant by “quality” in this context.

The concept of quality in *He Taonga* assumes that quality is an objective aspect of an early learning service, which can be measured and improved through focusing on specific elements. These elements include structural things such as physical space, adult to child ratios, group size, and staff qualifications (Dalli et al., 2001), and relational elements, as shown by goals to “require early learning services to support secure and consistent relationships with children” and to “gazette *Te Whāriki* to support shared expectations” (Ministry of Education, 2018, p. 2). However, Dahlberg et al. (2013) have contested the assumption that quality is the best concept to use when evaluating an early learning service. Their view is that the concept of quality is rooted in a modernist paradigm which privileges certainty and standardisation,

leading to a technical approach to teaching. Broadening the view of the elements that contribute to producing quality does not alter the fundamental nature of the concept, and Dahlberg et al. argue for alternative evaluation methods to be explored. Other commenters have questioned whether quality can truly be defined, as quality means different things to different people (see Dalli et al., 2001). This begs the questions as to whose view of quality is dominant when standards are set, and what the desired outcomes are (e.g., Hunkin, 2017). *He Taonga* appears to work with quality as an unproblematic concept.

Professional teachers

One of the seven sub-goals for improving quality focuses on the proportion of qualified teachers in a teacher-led centre: “Incentivise for 100% and regulate for 80% qualified teachers in teacher-led centres, leading to regulation for 100%” (Ministry of Education, 2018, p. 24). The problem representation is that the free-market approach has not led to 100% qualified teachers, and therefore regulation is needed to solve this. The assumption is that 100% qualified teachers is the ideal staffing to achieve quality in an early learning service, and this is based on a body of research that shows a positive link between staff qualifications and outcomes for children (e.g., Dalli et al., 2001; Mitchell, Wylie, & Carr, 2008). The problem representation incorporates the concept of the professional teacher. It should be noted here that this goal is aimed at teacher-led services and not at parent co-operatives with parents-as-educators, such as playcentres and *kōhanga reo*.

The concept of a professional teacher in an early learning service has developed over the past few decades. Helen May (2007) discussed the changing terminology of “minding”, “working”, and “teaching” in childcare, and more recently Andrew Gibbons (2018) also discussed the implications of language used to describe those who work with children in early learning settings. The different terminology carries expectations which are often implicit, and also often contested. Traditional concepts of professionalism entail exclusive entry to the profession, a specialist body of knowledge, autonomy, and adherence to a code of ethics (Urban, 2010). This traditional view as it applies to teachers in the early learning sector has been problematised (Dalli, Miller, & Urban, 2012; Urban, 2010). It has also been problematised from the

perspective of parents-as-educators, where it has been argued that, in Playcentre, professionalism is a feature of the collective teaching team, rather than of individuals (Woodhams & Manning, 2012).

The focus on increasing professionalisation of teachers in the early learning sector has resulted in a growing divide between teachers, who must now have a 3-year degree or diploma qualification and be registered, and parents. Parents are encouraged to be involved in the early learning service, but are not “teachers”. When this discourse is promoted strongly, it becomes difficult for parents to see themselves as capable of being active educators of their children.

A history of quality and teachers

Despite the concept of quality being contested, and despite parents-as-educators being acknowledged in policy (see, for example, the definition of “kaiako” in the updated *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017)), there is a strong focus in *He Taonga* on quality and professional teachers. This section will trace the history of these concepts, highlighting the way that parents-as-educators have come to be treated separately in policy, and leading to the proposal for 100% qualified teachers in teacher-led services.

Minimum standards for quality applied across all types of services for the first time in the *Before Five* reforms of the late 1980s (Ministry of Education, 1989). The standards that were the most contested were the qualifications required by the designated “person responsible” during a session/day; the majority of the standards were published in 1989, but a decision was not reached on the qualifications until 1990. The main point of contention concerned the proposal to require the person responsible to hold the equivalent of a diploma of teaching, the new qualification for those teaching in either kindergartens or childcare centres, which had been approved in 1987 (May, 2009). However, parent co-operatives had developed their own training programmes, designed to be undertaken while the parents-as-educators gained experience at the centre, and wanted these recognised in the standards. As the NZ Playcentre Federation (NZPF) President said, “Playcentres felt it important that their parent supervision methods and field-based training would be recognised and acceptable in future” (Chapman, 1989, p. 8).

The eventual compromise was the *Qualifications Blueprint* (Ministry of Education, 1990) which created two categories and a “points”

system: Group One with limited parental involvement in sessions, where head teachers would need to hold a teaching qualification; and Group Two with extensive parental involvement, where some points would be given for the quality associated with parental involvement and the other points coming from supervisors with specified qualifications. For Playcentre, these qualifications were specific parts of the Playcentre training programme, and allowed for the continuation of involving parents-as-educators as being collectively responsible for sessions.

The strategic plan working group in 2000–2001 was a new opportunity for discussion of improvements in the early learning sector. Improving quality was a preset goal, thus the problem representation had been already decided before the working group met.² The working group developed clear strategies for Group One services. These focused on regulations for teachers, such as introducing registration, and setting a target of 100% qualified teachers in centres by 2012 (this was capped in 2010 at 80%, after a change of government). Strategies for Group Two services, those with high parental involvement in sessions, were more general and vague. The final plan (Ministry of Education, 2002) deferred strategies to improve quality in Group Two services until after research was conducted. This differentiation between strategies for the two groups introduced the terms “teacher-led” and “parent-led” services into public discourse.

The research into quality in parent- and whānau-led services was eventually completed (Mitchell, Royal Tangaere, Mara, & Wylie, 2006), but too late to make an impact on the funding and regulatory reviews. The findings showed that parent co-operatives could achieve quality in their services, but specific policy levers were hard to define. A Ministry of Education official told a meeting of parent co-operatives, prior to the release of the research, that:

Sometimes it is difficult to see how government might influence things e.g. the finding that more years of experience helps. The question is how to keep people. Finding that openness to special needs is influenced by attitudes: how can you influence attitudes? What can government do?³

A funding review for teacher-led services was undertaken, resulting in the 20 Hours Free ECE funding announced in 2004. In the promotion of this policy, quality of services

and qualifications of teachers were tightly linked. Since parent co-operatives were initially excluded from the policy, the public perception was that these services were not considered to be quality services. The two categories of services created a binary, with “teacher-led and quality” on one side, and “parent-led and low quality” on the other (Bushouse, 2009; Woodhams, 2008).

The Early Childhood Education Taskforce (2011) went one step further, and stated that teacher-led, centre-based services were quality services, and other types of services were not. This was in order to prioritise funding to services that employed teachers, to improve overall quality in the sector. The Taskforce stopped short of recommending a return to the regulated target of 100% qualified teachers as a means to achieve quality, because they had been tasked with making their proposals fiscally neutral overall and because it went against the government policy of the time. The proposed system was never implemented, due to public protests. The NZPF argued that Playcentre was able to achieve quality within its philosophy of parents-as-educators (Doig, 2011), and Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust filed an urgent Waitangi Tribunal claim arguing that the Government was not protecting the Māori language, by marginalising their centres (Waitangi Tribunal, 2012).

Therefore, by the time of the current early learning draft strategic plan, *He Taonga*, quality had been well established as the evaluation tool used by government. Strategies have predominantly focused on increasing the professionalisation of teachers, and the proportion of teachers in early learning services. These strategies are in tension with an acknowledged commitment to maintaining diversity in the sector, in particular making it possible for parents-as-educators to continue contributing within parent co-operatives. This tension has been dealt with by making a clear policy divide between parent co-operatives and teacher-led services, and between parents-as-educators and teachers. I would argue that this situation does not serve the best interests of parents, children, and teachers. Perhaps it is time to question the impact of this division.

Bringing teachers and parents-as-educators together

One way that the Bacchi WPR approach is different from more traditional policy analysis is the active looking for silences in the problem representation, and asking what is left assumed

and unproblematic. The history outlined above showed that, in Aotearoa New Zealand, teachers and parents-as-educators are found in different early learning services, and government policy has accommodated both through having separate policy streams. This is now the accepted approach to maintaining diversity in the sector. What is silenced by this segregation is the idea that teachers and parents-as-educators could work alongside each other, in the same service, to mutual benefit.

The effects of the current policy approach to quality, and its tight link to professional teachers, is that the prevailing discourse discourages parents from considering themselves as competent educators of their children. Further, if a parent does want to pursue this option, then a specialised early learning service must be chosen; yet parent co-operatives are not always conveniently located or available, as the numbers of both playcentres and *kōhanga reo* have dropped over the past three decades.⁴ The segregation also makes it harder for parents to choose different options at different times. For example, parents choosing to return to the paid workforce after their first child, but later spending some time out of the workforce and focusing on the care and education of their children, must change their early learning service to be able to become a parent-as-educator at a centre.

There are at least two models of early learning services currently operating that bring together professional teachers and parents-as-educators. The Pen Green centres in the United Kingdom are recognised as centres of excellence, based on a philosophy of acknowledging parents as educators of their children (Whalley & the Pen Green Centre Team, 2017). Parents are welcomed to stay and join in at the centres if they choose, and some are given the opportunity to join the teaching team and undertake training. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Te Aroha Noa in Palmerston North also operates in this way (Munford, Sanders, Maden, & Maden, 2007). This centre has many parents and whānau who often stay and contribute to sessions, and take part in weekly training sessions. Some parents are invited to join the teaching team, and take on a stronger commitment. However, the government funding for this extra work with parents is limited, and things such as food at the training sessions tends to be paid for personally by the staff (pers. comm., Te Aroha Noa staff, July 2017). The current funding system does not cope well with an approach that blends the capabilities of professional teachers and parents-as-educators (Munford et al., 2007).

These examples point to an alternative to the problem representation in *He Taonga* that teacher-led services need 100% qualified teachers. My proposal is that the Government should regulate and fund for 80% teachers, and 20% either parents/whānau members in training or student teachers, in what are now called teacher-led services. Parents and whānau would have choice in whether to be involved in the teaching team, and could choose differently at different times in their family life cycle without having to change the type of early learning service they attend. Those who choose to be parents-as-educators would undertake education designed to support their participation; the current New Zealand certificates and diploma in early childhood education and care, levels 3–6, would provide a good option for this training and could be funded by the Government. The main body of staff in the centre would be qualified teachers, and this would provide the stability to support the parents-as-educators, allowing them to learn at their own pace without the immediate responsibility of meeting all Ministry of Education regulations.

In some areas and at some times, there may not be enough parents wanting to be on the teaching team. In this case, student teachers could make up part of the 20%. This maintains the tradition of field-based training, which is the Playcentre preferred approach and has been a valued option in the wider sector, but which could be endangered by regulations requiring 100% qualified teachers. Whatever the actual detail of the funding and regulation, it would be important not to provide a disincentive to include parents-as-educators (Munford et al., 2007).

This proposal is itself based on a problem representation: that parents should be given opportunities to become actively involved in the education of their children through working in an early learning service. This still assumes a division between professional teachers and parents, but it softens the divide by allowing them to work alongside each other. Power issues and adult group dynamics would need to be addressed in order for the system to work. These topics have been included in Playcentre training for many years and could usefully be integrated into pre-service teacher training.

Conclusion

Critique can start discussions which help the final version of a draft policy to be the best that our collective knowledge and experience can produce. This article has critiqued *He Taonga*

(Ministry of Education, 2018), and specifically the first goal relating to quality and the sub-goal relating to regulating for 100% qualified teachers in teacher-led services. The framework for critique was the “What’s the problem represented to be?” approach developed by Australian/Canadian Carol Bacchi (2009). The problem representations were identified as being focused on professional teachers and the contested concept of quality and, in the process, leaving unproblematic the separation of early learning services into categories of teacher-led and parent co-operatives. The outlined history showed how separate policy streams have evolved in Aotearoa New Zealand to accommodate services with professional teachers, and those with parents-as-educators. Policy references to maintaining diversity in the early learning sector assume this division should continue. An alternative proposal has been presented here, which problematises this division and suggests that teachers and parents-as-educators could co-exist within the same service, if regulations were structured to permit and encourage this model.

Notes

- 1 The Ministry of Education is currently using the term *early learning* for the education sector that was previously referred to as Early Childhood Care and Education, Early Childhood Education, or Early Childhood Education and Care. The term “early learning” appears to encompass care and education in a more holistic way than the previous terms, and is therefore my preference in this paper, except when quoting historical names.
- 2 The discussion of the strategic plan working group draws on archival sources, particularly Anne Meade’s papers, and the NZPF archives.
- 3 Notes of Research on Quality in Parent/Whānau-Led Services Advisory Group meeting held on 9 December 2005. Ministry of Education, Parent-led research, OIA 892278.
- 4 See Ministry of Education data at <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/early-childhood-education/services>

Archival sources

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