



Quality in Early Childhood Education: A Manukau Perspective

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Introduction: why is quality important?

Children receiving good quality early childhood education (ECE) have improved educational outcomes

Overseas and New Zealand research clearly shows that there are improved educational outcomes for children who receive quality ECE. Research shows that good quality ECE is far more likely to ensure improved educational outcomes than ECE of lower quality. In particular, it underlines the importance of providing children with high quality staff-child interaction in their ECE experience.¹ The New Zealand Early Childhood 10 year strategic plan *Pathways to the Future*² reflects this in that a key aim is to increase participation in quality ECE services.

Benefits of quality ECE extend into adolescence

Benefits of quality ECE can extend into adolescence, as shown in the New Zealand Competent Children,

¹ Farquhar, S. (2003). *Quality Teaching Early Foundations: Best Evidence Synthesis*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
Mitchell, L. & Cubey, P. (2003). *Characteristics of professional development linked to enhanced pedagogy and children's learning in early childhood settings: Best Evidence Synthesis*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Mitchell, L., Wylie, C., & Carr, M. (forthcoming). *Outcomes of Early Childhood Education: A Literature Review*, cited in Wylie, C. & Hodgen, E. (2007). *The Continuing Contribution of Early Childhood Education to Young People's Competency Levels*, New Zealand Council for Educational Research. Available at <http://educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/publications/schooling/cc16-ecce-adult-summary.html>

Wylie, C., Hodgen, E., Ferral, H. & Thompson, J. (2006). *Contributions of early childhood education to age-14 performance: Evidence from the longitudinal Competent Children, Competent Learners study*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

² Ministry of Education. (2002). *Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki. A 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Competent Learners longitudinal study.³ Some aspects of ECE were still making a statistically visible contribution to young people's competency levels, 11 years later, over and above the contribution it had made to their performance levels at an age of nearly 5. Although the associations at age 16 were weaker, on the whole, than they were at age 14,

*[y]oung people who had attended an ECE service which had high ratings for the quality of teacher-child interaction, and those whose ECE service had moderate or high ratings for providing lots of printed material to use or display on the walls of the centre had higher scores on average for literacy, numeracy, logical problem-solving, and their social skills.*⁴

Quality of ECE is a factor in parents' decision making

Another factor is that recent New Zealand research indicates that the most important factor taken into consideration by parents when choosing an ECE service is the quality of different services (other factors include cost and the extent to which the service is culturally appropriate).⁵

³ Hodgen, E. (2007). *Early childhood education and young adult competencies at age 16: Technical report 2 from the age-16 phase of the longitudinal Competent Children, Competent Learners study*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

⁴ Wylie, C. & Hodgen, E. (2007). *The Continuing Contribution of Early Childhood Education to Young People's Competency Levels*, New Zealand Council for Educational Research, p2. Available at <http://educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/publications/schooling/cc16-ecce-adult-summary.html>

⁵ Robertson, J., Gunn, T. R., Lanumata, T. & Pryor, J. (2007). *Parental decision making in relation to the use of Early Childhood Education services*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, p1 and 71.

However, even if they have a need for Early Childhood Education services parents will only use them if services of sufficient quality are available. For lower income families the cost of the service and the availability of subsidies are important factors and for Maori children the availability of culturally appropriate services is important.⁶

This paper seeks to identify what comprises quality ECE, and considers what challenges exist in ensuring quality ECE within different settings, that is, within ECE services and within families.

What constitutes 'good quality' early childhood education?

Overall characteristics of quality ECE

The New Zealand Competent Children, Competent Learners age-14 study found that aspects of students' early childhood education still had associations with performance nine years later. The aspects that showed a lasting contribution were:⁷

- high quality staff interactions with children
- an environment providing lots of books and written material and where children could select from a variety of learning activities
- the child's starting age and the total length of early childhood education
- the socio-economic mix of the children attending the centre

Generally the associations applied regardless of maternal qualification or family income, that is, there were benefits for all children, regardless of their background.

The age-16 study defined aspects of ECE quality contributing to age-16 competency levels as follows:⁸

⁶ Robertson, J., Gunn, T. R., Lanumata, T. and Pryor, J. (2007). *Parental decision making in relation to the use of Early Childhood Education services*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, p 1.

⁷ Wylie, C. & Hodgen, E. (2007). *The Continuing Contribution of Early Childhood Education to Young People's Competency Levels*, New Zealand Council for Educational Research. Available at <http://educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/publications/schooling/cc16-ece-adult-summary.html>

⁸ Wylie, C. & Hodgen, E. (2007). *The Continuing Contribution of Early Childhood Education to Young People's Competency Levels*, New Zealand Council for Educational Research. Available at

Staff responsiveness

Staff at top-scoring centres responded quickly and directly to children, adapting their responses to individual children. They provided support, focused attention, physical proximity, and verbal encouragement as appropriate, were alert to signs of stress in children's behaviour, and guided children in expressing their emotions. A centre that had the lowest possible rating would have staff who ignored children's requests, and were oblivious to their needs.

Staff guiding children in activities

Staff at top-scoring centres moved among the children to encourage involvement with materials and activities, and interacted with children by asking questions and offering suggestions. They offered active guidance and encouragement in activities that were appropriate for individual children. A centre that had a low score for this aspect of quality would have left children to choose all their own activities.

Staff asking children open-ended questions

Staff at top-scoring centres often asked children open-ended questions, giving them opportunities to come up with a range of different answers, to encourage thinking and creativity. Centres where no open-ended questions were heard would receive a low rating.

Staff joining children in their play

At high rating centres, staff frequently joined in children's activities, offered materials or information or encouragement to facilitate play and learning around a particular theme. A centre whose staff only monitored children's play but did not join in it at all would receive a low rating.

Providing a print-saturated environment

High rating centres on this aspect of quality are very print focused. They would encourage print awareness in children's activities, have a lot of printed material visible around the centre, at children's eye-level or just above, and offer children a range of readily accessible books. A centre with no books, posters, or other forms of writing would receive a low rating.

Characteristics of quality ECE teaching

A wide review of national and international research on teaching and learning linked to child outcomes has produced seven characteristics of quality early foundations teaching. They are:⁹

- Effective teaching practice involves working with children as emergent learners, that is, they are developing competencies and dispositions to learning which are important for successful adjustment to later school learning¹⁰
- Teaching practice is informed by contextual knowledge of children's learning
- Effective teachers use content knowledge confidently to support and extend children's learning in interactive and play-based situations
- Teaching practice scaffolds, co-constructs, promotes metacognitive strategies and also facilitates children's learning in the context of adult/older child activities
- The social setting is organised in ways that support learning and maximise outcomes
- The physical setting is organised in ways that support learning and maximise outcomes
- Teaching is responsive to children's physical and emotional well-being

Also crucial to quality teaching is the need to build on children's experiences and to establish effective links between home and ECE service.

Evidence about effective pedagogy shows the need for teachers/educators to understand children's experiences, and focus on children's interests and understanding. Building linkages between settings, especially home and

⁹ Farquhar, S. (2003). *Quality Teaching Early Foundations: Best Evidence Synthesis*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, pp 1-4.

¹⁰ Cullen, J. (1998b) *What do teachers need to know about learning in the early years?* Keynote address to Early Childhood Development Unit seminar, 23rd April, Auckland, cited in Farquhar, S. (2003). *Quality Teaching Early Foundations: Best Evidence Synthesis*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, p 19.

early childhood service, by sharing curriculum and learning aims supports such understanding and shared experiences.¹¹

How do we ensure quality teaching? Professional development is one part of the picture, along with some 'structural' factors which will be discussed later in the paper.

Professional development plays a key role in achieving good quality ECE

There is evidence that professional development can make significant contributions to enhancing teaching practice in early childhood settings, for example by enhancing teachers' ability to acknowledge and build on children's and families' existing knowledge, skills and experiences and to strengthen linkages with home.¹²

Mitchell and Cubey¹³ identify common features of professional development associated with changed teaching practice, such as that the professional development offers theoretical and content knowledge, and knowledge about alternative practice, generating deeper or new understanding. Children's experiences and adult interactions related to these within the participant's own service are a focus. These features are summarised in the following table.

¹¹ Mitchell, L. & Cubey, P. (2003). *Characteristics of professional development linked to enhanced pedagogy and children's learning in early childhood settings: Best Evidence Synthesis*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, p vii.

¹² Mitchell, L. & Cubey, P. (2003). *Characteristics of professional development linked to enhanced pedagogy and children's learning in early childhood settings: Best Evidence Synthesis*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, pp vii-viii.

¹³ Mitchell, L. & Cubey, P. (2003). *Characteristics of professional development linked to enhanced pedagogy and children's learning in early childhood settings: Best Evidence Synthesis*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, p ix.

Characteristics of effective professional development linked to enhanced pedagogy and children's learning in early childhood education settings

The professional development incorporates participants' own aspirations, skills, knowledge and understanding into the learning context	The professional development provides theoretical and content knowledge and information about alternative practices	Participants are involved in investigating pedagogy within their own early childhood settings	Participants analyse data from their own settings. Revelation of discrepant data is a mechanism to invoke revised understanding	Critical reflection enabling participants to investigate and challenge assumptions and extend their thinking is a core aspect	Professional development supports educational practice that is inclusive of diverse children, families and whānau	The professional development helps participants to change educational practice, beliefs, understanding, and/or attitudes	The professional development helps participants to gain awareness of their own thinking, actions, and influence
<p>The professional development takes on board participants' own aspirations, skills, knowledge, and understanding, and recognises the context for learning. This is a starting point: the programmes introduce new ideas and provide opportunity for participants to question their experiences and views, and not simply validate them.</p>	<p>Theoretical and content knowledge related to effective pedagogy is provided. This may be generic or content specific, such as generic areas of co-constructing learning, scaffolding, learning dispositions as outcomes of Te Whāriki, and specific areas such as early literacy, mathematical and scientific understanding, creativity. Content knowledge is integrated with pedagogical knowledge. The theoretical and content knowledge expands participants' knowledge base. Information and knowledge about alternative practices are provided.</p>	<p>The programme involves participants investigating real life examples of pedagogy within their own settings. Investigative methods, such as action research, are useful. Investigation by participants in issues within their own setting (e.g. interactions and behaviour) encourages work on issues that are important to participants and that make a difference to their own pedagogical practice. An external professional development adviser or researcher engages in the investigation.</p>	<p>A key process in contributing to revision of assumptions and understanding is "creating surprise through exposure to discrepant data" from the participant's own early childhood service. Understandable data that reveals "pedagogy in action" and others' views is helpful in these investigations. Useful approaches to data collection include video and audio-tape recordings, observations, surveys of others' views, and assessments of learning. The professional development programme supports data collection and analysis.</p>	<p>Critical reflection involves teachers/educators in investigating and challenging their assumptions. This in turn encourages insights and shifts in thinking. This is particularly valuable in challenging deficit views associated with ethnicity, socio-economic status, child's age, parental knowledge, and gender. Some conditions that encourage critical reflection: 1) collaboration with others and being exposed to their views. These views include views of colleagues, professional development advisers, parents, and children; 2) using deeper or different theoretical understanding; 3) teachers/educators thinking about their own thinking, e.g. through use of journals and diaries.</p>	<p>Professional development supports practice that is inclusive of all children, families and whānau. Its focus is on pedagogy that understands, values, builds on and extends the competencies and skills that every child brings to an early childhood setting. It supports participants to work closely with families so that both are better informed about and able to extend the child's experiences and learning. Professional development in support of inclusive practice helps participants analyse data obtained through close observation of relationships between children and people, use formative assessment, and offer curriculum differentiation.</p>	<p>Professional development is linked to tangible changes in pedagogical interactions and this in turn is associated with children's learning in early childhood settings. The professional development helps participants to change educational practice, beliefs, understanding, and/or attitudes. Participants are encouraged to investigate ideas and practices that stand in the way of an equitable society. Participants may become aware of ways in which they disempower or limit groups or individuals.</p>	<p>The professional development assists participants to gain greater awareness and insight into themselves, and a stronger appreciation of the power of their role as educators.</p>

Mitchell, L. and Cubey, P. (2003). Characteristics of effective professional development linked to enhanced pedagogy and children's learning in early childhood settings: Best evidence synthesis. Wellington: Ministry of Education, p xi.

In addition, the duration and intensity of professional development, characteristics of professional development participants, the professional development adviser, and organisation of the service are influential in supporting or hindering the ability of participants to learn from professional development and change their teaching practice.¹⁴

A reported Manukau example of effective professional development was *Picking up the Pace*.¹⁵ This project, which provided professional development for teachers of 3, 4 and 5 year olds, was part of the Early Childhood Primary Links (ECPL) initiative, which in turn was a component of Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara (SEMO). It arose from the desire of the communities in the Mangere and Otara areas to improve literacy achievement. This professional development resulted in significantly improved children's literacy levels (in English) so that children in the study were reading at their expected level by age six, and those whose early childhood teachers had received the professional development arrived at school with significantly higher scores on some aspects of reading and writing and in expressive and receptive skills in English compared with previous cohorts of children.¹⁶

What factors contribute to ECE services' ability to provide 'good quality' ECE?

Structural factors or conditions that assist staff/adults to engage in processes that foster children's learning include:¹⁷

- adult:child ratios
- group size

- staff training, education and experience
- staff wages and working conditions
- staff stability

As discussed previously, research shows that quality staff-child interaction is a key component of ensuring lasting effects of quality ECE. Quality staff-child interaction is supported by:¹⁸

- having staff whose training gives them understanding of how young children learn, and of their role in supporting and scaffolding that learning by building on children's interests and deepening their thinking and language use
- having staff:child ratios that allow staff to both know children as individuals, and to be able to work with them in ways that help children develop confidently
- having staff stability

However, a recent New Zealand ECE survey revealed high levels of teacher turnover which it concluded makes it harder for services to sustain service wellbeing and build on professional development undertaken.¹⁹ This is of significant concern in terms of our ability to sustain quality ECE teaching and environments.

We need to ensure that services keep their qualified staff (turnover rates remain high in ECE services), and continue to enlarge the number who are qualified. We also need to ensure that staff:child ratios allow time for high quality interaction with children (not all of which has to be one-to-one), and for staff to work together to share their knowledge and keep improving their ECE centre quality.²⁰

¹⁴ Mitchell, L. & Cubey, P. (2003). *Characteristics of professional development linked to enhanced pedagogy and children's learning in early childhood settings: Best Evidence Synthesis*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, p ix.

¹⁵ Phillips, G., McNaughton, S. & McDonald, S. (2001). *Picking up the pace: Effective literacy interventions for accelerated progress over the transition into decile one schools*. Auckland: Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara, Report to the Ministry of Education. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

¹⁶ Phillips, G., McNaughton, S. & McDonald, S. (2001). *Picking up the pace: Effective literacy interventions for accelerated progress over the transition into decile one schools*. Auckland: Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara, Report to the Ministry of Education. Wellington: Ministry of Education, p 79.

¹⁷ Smith, A., Grima, M., Gaffney, M., Powell, K., Masse, L. & Barnett, S. (2000). *Strategic research initiative literature review. Early childhood education*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, cited in Mitchell, L. (2002). *Differences between community owned and privately owned early childhood education and care centres: a review of evidence*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research, p 4. Available at www.nzcer.org.nz/pdfs/11743.pdf

¹⁸ Mitchell, L., Wylie, C., & Carr, M. (forthcoming). *Outcomes of Early Childhood Education: A Literature Review*, cited in Wylie, C. & Hodgen, E. (2007). *The Continuing Contribution of Early Childhood Education to Young People's Competency Levels*, New Zealand Council for Educational Research. Available at <http://educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/publications/schooling/cc16-ecce-adult-summary.html>

¹⁹ Mitchell, L. & Brooking, K. (2007). *First NZCER national survey of early childhood education services: Executive summary*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research, p 3. Available at www.nzcer.org.nz/pdfs/15318-execsum.pdf

²⁰ Wylie, C. & Hodgen, E. (2007). *The Continuing Contribution of Early Childhood Education to Young People's Competency Levels*, New Zealand Council for Educational Research, p 3, Available at <http://educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/publications/schooling/cc16-ecce-adult-summary.html>

What factors contribute to families' ability to provide 'good quality' early childhood education?

It is important to recognise that parents and other family/whanau members are also their children's early childhood educators.²¹ However, it is not always easy for them to know how to educate their children, or to have time or the resources (or knowledge of how to access resources such as libraries) to do so.

Professional development for early childhood teachers can play a key role in this regard also.

There is powerful evidence that professional development aimed at strengthening linkages between parents and teachers/educators can contribute to increased learning opportunities for children, changed perceptions by teachers of parents' knowledge and skills, changed perceptions by parents of their roles as teachers/educators, and greater understanding of children's experiences and interests.²²

Partnership programmes with families (such as HIPPY (Home Interaction Programme for Parents and Youngsters), PAFT (Parents as First Teachers), Parent Mentoring Playgroups²³ etc) are invaluable in assisting parents/carers and whanau to provide their children with quality ECE in the course of their everyday lives (and in addition to centre-based teacher-led ECE).

²¹ Farquhar, S. (2003). *Quality Teaching Early Foundations: Best Evidence Synthesis*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, p 5, 16.

²² Mitchell, L. & Cubey, P. (2003). *Characteristics of professional development linked to enhanced pedagogy and children's learning in early childhood settings: Best Evidence Synthesis*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

²³ Currently running in 9 Manukau schools.

Recommendations

All necessary steps should be taken to address structural factors and thereby ensure the retention of, and increase the number of, qualified staff in Manukau ECE services. Without this, making quality ECE available to all three and four year olds in Manukau will be very difficult.

Families are frequently an underutilised resource in their children's education and as such, partnership programmes with families should be a top priority in Manukau.