Qualified teachers in early childhood centres: do we need them?
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As the dust settles after the budget and we become involved in discussions about the possible consequences for the early childhood education sector, we have been interested in the debates in the media about qualified teachers versus non-qualified teachers. We find it startling that questions are being raised about whether educators in early childhood centres should be qualified, when we now know so much more about the significance for life-long learning of the early years and about the complexity of the care and education task. The Prime Minister has said that “it is a matter of personal belief as to whether a high proportion of all centre staff should be trained teachers”. This is not so. It is a matter of an informed and evidence-based educational decision. These questions would never be raised about the adults who teach 5- and 6- (or older) year-olds in school.

The previous government had set a target for early childhood centres to be staffed by 100% qualified and registered teachers by the year 2012. The current government last year changed the required targets to 80% registered teachers in centres for children over two years and 50% registered teachers for children under two, but funding remained in place for centres that wanted to employ more than the required 80%. 57% of children attending early childhood centres are currently in centres where over 80% of staff are qualified and registered. The May 2010 budget has now cut all this additional funding, and centres will no longer be able to afford to employ qualified teachers above the requirement.

Some correspondents to the media suggest that this is reasonable. Let’s not forget that there is a private for-profit early childhood education sector that makes a profit out of childcare services. It is the for-profit lobby that gains from this reduction in a 100% standard for qualified staff and argues vigorously for the value of unqualified teachers. Qualified teachers cost more. In a 2009 paper entitled Strengthening Community-based Early Childhood Education in Aotearoa New Zealand, Helen May and Linda Mitchell discuss some of the consequences for quality early childhood education of this rise in corporate and for-profit childcare services in New Zealand.

The comments in the media appear to make the following three assumptions: funding for early childhood education has already increased to a level where the sector is overfunded; scarce funding can be reasonably shifted from qualified teachers to programmes designed to increase participation; and unqualified adults can do the same job as qualified teachers. We discuss each of these assumptions.

Early childhood funding: money spent now saves money in the long run

A 2008 UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre report, The childcare transition. A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries, proposed benchmark standards that are directed towards what governments can do to ensure that childcare is managed in the best interests of children and societies. The suggested minimum level of public funding was 1% of GDP. New Zealand’s current level of education funding on early childhood is well below this benchmark at 0.6% of GDP. New Zealand’s spending has increased three fold in the last few years, but it was woefully inadequate before these increases.
One of the reasons why spending has increased in the last few years is that the number of children attending early childhood education has grown and the number of hours children attend per week has increased from an average of 16.6 hours per week in 2005 to 19.5 hours per week in 2009. Overall, enrolments have increased by 10 percent since 2005. Enrolments for younger age groups have increased the most – up 21% for children under one, and up 18% for one year-olds. Funding is based on the number and ages of children (funding for under-twos is highest) and their hours of attendance.

What is the long-term cost of funding quality early childhood? Together with Cathy Wylie at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) we have recently completed a literature survey of outcomes of early childhood education (ECE), published by the Ministry of Education and on their Education Counts web site. The Ministry asked us to write a chapter on economic returns from ECE. We reviewed a number of studies, and provided a table of cost-benefits. One very relevant study of quality provision with teaching staff qualified in special education and early childhood development followed the children to middle age, and reported that a dollar spent in early childhood saved $17 at age 40 in terms of the later cost of social services and criminal convictions, and the tax benefits from employment. Four major projects followed children to age 21 or later, and in all of these studies the projected long-term benefits far exceeded the costs. A reduction of funding in the early years creates a financial debt for a future generation.

**Quality participation provides quality outcomes**

Our literature survey emphasised that positive outcomes for children and families participating in early childhood provision depended on the following features: the quality of staff-child interactions, the learning resources available, programmes that engage children, and a supportive environment for children to work together. A 2003 United States National Institute of Child health & Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network study on the impact of childcare quality on children’s preschool cognitive development pointed out that all of these features are associated with centres where adults working with children have ECE teacher qualifications. Also in our literature review of early childhood outcomes is a 2006 study of 1897 children in 10 countries published in the Early Childhood Research Quarterly which reported that as the level of teacher education in pre-primary provision increased, the measure of children’s language performance at age seven improved. They pointed out that teachers with more education use more complex language in communicating with children. In the same journal a research study of 800 US four-year-olds reported that teachers’ education was linked to gains on standardised measures of mathematics skills across the pre-K year.

We are now receiving worrying reports which indicate that reducing the funding for qualified teachers will harm participation, a major government target for ECE. For example, one mixed age community centre in Christchurch reports that six of their seven staff are qualified and registered, and the seventh will complete her registration as a fully qualified teacher by July next year. This centre provides care and education for mostly low income families; 70% are Māori.
They tell us that
"For the current band we are in we will lose $27,000 per year. If we were in the 100% band (which we would have been in July 2011) we would lose $73,830. We are a not-for-profit centre, and are currently financially sustainable with very little surplus income. The situation that we face is that with this funding cut we are unable and do not want to increase our fees for our families. Increasing the fees would inevitably decrease participation from our community; already they are facing financial hardship and an increase in fees could mean the difference in being able to provide adequate food or power for their family”.
They add their view that, because some of the funding saved by this policy will go to programmes designed to increase participation in targeted communities, "the government’s strategy on increasing participation in target communities could decrease the participation for children in other areas of the country”.

Qualified teachers set high standards
Three strands of research remind us of the serious implications of reducing the percentage of qualified staff in early childhood centres. The first of these is recent brain research and new knowledge about how children learn and continuity of learning, the second is our recognition of the significant role of families in the educational achievement of children and the diversity of families in the 21st century, and the third is our understanding about the relationship between a nation’s economic equality and educational equity.

New knowledge about brain development points to the significant role in the early years of imitation and language development. Habits of mind and patterns of thought are established early in facilitating environments, and the foundations of empathy are developed in social contexts where empathy and communication are valued and carefully practised. As Guy Claxton has said in a book on Learning Power Heroes: "We must be careful to be at our learning best around young children, especially if they like or admire us, for their 'heroes' are the people whose habits they will find most contagious". An influential Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project from the University of London concluded that those early childhood centre environments where children achieve high quality outcomes are characterised by ‘sustained shared thinking’: relationships between children and adults that are responsive and reciprocal and sustained. These relationships come from knowledge about human development, the ways in which young children learn, and a recognition of the ‘funds of knowledge’ that families can contribute. The NZCER Competent Children (now Competent Learners) Project has provided us with valuable longitudinal data about the influence of early childhood experience on later school achievement. For instance, that project found that children who attended ECE centres with a high staff-interaction quality rating scored significantly more highly on mathematics and literacy at school at age eight (and this association was robust even after taking family income into account). Teacher education programmes assist student teachers to recognise the continuity of education across the sectors and to understand the precursors of robust literacy and numeracy development. They learn to work with children and families to develop the key learning habits and competencies of reciprocity, resilience and imagination that will set them on a life-long learning journey.
We also know that parental expectations are of central importance to children’s achievements, and developing responsive and reciprocal relationships with diverse families is a skilled task. By 2010 a number of children in most centres are likely to have a home language that is not English. According to 2006 Census results, the Asian population in New Zealand increased by almost 50% between 2001 and 2006, and Pasific nations people by 14.7%. Relationships between early childhood teachers and the increasingly large numbers of families of under-twos participating in their centres calls for an especially professional capacity for understanding and support. We now expect all teachers to be able to assess the continuity of children’s learning, to plan for improvement, and to communicate this in accessible ways to families. The Education Review Office expects this, and qualified teachers can do it well.

The Prime Minister says that “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.” 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. The book The Spirit Level, by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, provides evidence that international educational scores are closely related to income inequality. They affirm that quality early childhood programmes can alter the long-term trajectory of children’s lives, and that cost-benefit analyses show that they are high-yield investments. We had hoped that 100% qualified teachers for all children in early childhood made us different from other countries with a high level of income inequality and would contribute to the government’s aim of equitable and quality outcomes for children from all backgrounds. However, the new education policy established by the May budget says that we cannot afford the financial cost of qualified teachers to provide care and education for all of our youngest and most vulnerable of children. We say that as a nation we cannot afford not to: the long-term social, economic and educational cost is too high.