



Not the Bottom, but the Beginning: The Failure of the Teaching Profession to Value Early Childhood Education

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INTRODUCTION

At a presentation for early childhood teachers, by the Ministry of Education, on how early childhood teachers can and should understand the Communities of Learning (COL) programme, and where they fit in this programme, one of the presenters did something very simple, very casual, very unselfconsciously, that unwittingly posed the problem of the perceived value of Early Childhood Education (ECE). The presenter, an ex-secondary school teacher, put her hands out. One hand was at the level of her hips and one at the level of her shoulders. She proceeded to explain the stages and relationships that made up a COL. She said something along the lines of: the COL involves everyone in the community from early childhood (imagine her shaking her bottom hand to symbolise ECE) to university (and imagine her shaking her top hand). It's such a subtle gesture of course. But in that subtlety lies a telling truth. For this presenter, ECE is the bottom, and university is the top. That relationship indicates how the presenter, and I would argue the wider teaching profession, the Ministry and nation as a whole, regards ECE (keep in mind that the audience was a group of dedicated ECE teachers keen to learn more about how they can be engaged in COLs). While it is such a subtle gesture, it also takes some effort if one thinks of how dramatically different the gesture would have been had the presenter put her hands out side by side, horizontally rather than vertically, and said, ECE is the beginning and university is the end. Of course, that is also problematic because we know education does not begin or end with either of these sectors.

There is far more obvious and damning evidence of this failure to appropriately value ECE. Look at how ECE is not involved and not recognised in the development of a COL project, and how ECE teachers are not remunerated for their contributions to involvement in those instances where they are actually at the table. The funding for all the COLs should be frozen until each COL's ECE centres are substantively involved in design, implementation and resourcing of the project. That involvement will be a challenging task given the complex arrangement of ECE services in any community. What we know however is that a community addresses challenges no matter what the complexity, if they take it seriously.

SO WHY IS ECE NOT BEING TAKEN SERIOUSLY HERE?

Now, despite the views recounted above, the work of early childhood teachers has long been recognised by the New Zealand Government, and by many other organisations (including for instance the OECD) as a significant contribution to communities and nations—and so it should be. This recognition is in part an awareness that, daily, across the country, the beautiful work of early childhood teachers keeps the country going. Think for instance of the way in which this work is seen, by Government, as essential to freeing up parents and whānau for employment, and as an investment in long term social and economic benefit. Early childhood teachers, and the profession as a whole, often, and increasingly, hear just how important it is for children’s care and education—and it is. But the recognition ends with the rhetoric. The rhetoric is easy to share, and has a very important function in obscuring the very challenging realities that early childhood teachers increasingly face in their work.

In the public eye that challenging reality is typically the complexity of working with children before school age. The actual reality is a far greater structural and political problem. The early childhood teacher is incredibly undervalued. The political rhetoric of value has not translated into any significant forms of professional value. Status, pay, and working conditions are all miserable (at best) and highly and intentionally exploitative (at worst) when compared to the rhetorical recognition of the contribution of early childhood teachers.

There are many factors that can be seen to influence this very critical problem for the nation and for its communities. All these factors have been the focus of debate and advocacy for many years, yet with little, and arguably decreasing traction. For instance, it’s clear that the ways in which the nation continues to discriminate against women is clearly a factor. It is also clear that established cultural traditions and practices of responsibility for care and education before school is a critical factor. A third factor might be an impoverished attitude towards the rights of the child—or at least a reality regarding children’s rights that does not quite match what the nation tells itself.

The 2018 budget emphasises this third factor by declaring that the welfare of children is a central budget priority. A number of health, welfare and education budget developments have been argued as addressing better government for children. Across the sector it is recognised that the budget, far from addressing better government for children, has only halted the slide precipitated by the previous National-led Government, which, for instance, argued that ECE centres did not need all their teachers to be fully qualified and did not need cutting edge research partnerships between early childhood centres and higher education (two goals in the 2002 strategic plan for ECE that were quickly disestablished by National). So here are some budget questions for teachers to ask:

- Government funding for ECE per child did rise, but where does that funding go, and how do we know it is sufficient?
- Why did the budget not address teacher qualifications and teacher-child ratios?

- How does funding impact differently on community versus private and for profit organisations?
- How much of the budget is dedicated to getting more children into services, and how much is comparatively dedicated to the actual quality of experiences in those services?

There is an important vehicle through which teachers can ask these questions. The Government is currently involved in setting up a significant and very commendable process for consultations for a new strategic plan. The terms of reference for the Ministry of Education include:

- Developing principles for a strategic plan
- Determining a process for designing the plan
- Designing an inclusive and participatory process

In introducing these terms of reference, the Minister acknowledged that the sector has changed since 2002. For one, the sector has been rebranded as early learning rather than ECE. One argument for this has been that ECE as term failed to properly represent the philosophy of Te Kohanga Reo National Trust. I am concerned that the substitution of learning for education exacerbates this failure, because the idea of ‘care’ is arguably further removed from the child’s experiences through a focus on learning. Learning, as Gert Biesta argues in *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (2013), has become a very dangerous concept in educational policy making. The ‘learnerfication’ of educational experiences tends to focus on inputs and outputs, rather than on the idea of a child’s relationships and wellbeing. Given that the 2019 Labour-Led Government budget will focus on wellbeing, it is critical that the Government has a very clear understanding of how ECE impacts on the wellbeing of children, and of teachers.

Another change since 2002 is the significant corporatisation of the sector, with large private organisations expanding to meet an apparent need. The now opposition National Party observed that the growth of the private sector is evidence of the success of education markets in allowing for parental choice. There are major flaws in that argument, particularly the idea that the majority of parents have any real choice in relation to their children’s education and care experiences before school. The opposition comments were responding to the Labour-led Government suggestion that a more active public role in provision of services was within the scope of a new strategy. While opponents of the role of for-profit organisations in the ECE sector will definitely be very supportive of this possible evolution, those concerned with the quality of care and education experiences may be a little more suspicious that there is too much focus on demand and not enough on quality—particularly for children before the age of three. The Ministerial press release on the new strategic plan did state that quality of experiences is a critical issue to address. Focusing on quality will involve attention to a wide range of issues, including but not limited to the minimum regulations for size and space, the teacher to child ratios, and the qualification expectations.

The pathway of a qualification has a highly symbolic function here—it says as much about what we value as what we think is effective. And the effectiveness of qualifications is very debatable, as well as the effectiveness of professional learning opportunities. The ineffectiveness of both is in some ways a symptom of the problem of status. So rather than think just about getting more teachers qualified, the entire sector, and the wider teaching profession, and the higher education institutions, should be necessarily and critically addressing the status of the early childhood teaching profession as an essential element of the quality of experiences in ECE. The budget was an opportunity to address the working conditions of teachers. However, it has not. Organisations including Te Rito Maioha and NZEI have been quick to point out the failing of the budget, at the same time as recognise the opportunities afforded in the development of a new strategic plan for addressing the issues associated with working conditions. Meanwhile, Peter Reynolds of the Early Childhood Council pointed out that the budget allowances for ECE highlighted, as noted above, the largely rhetorical nature of ECE policy directions. The teaching profession as a whole can, and should, lead the nation out of this problem of rhetorical recognition.

So, if you are on a COL, if you have a child or friend who is keen to work with children in an ECE centre, if you have a child in an ECE centre, if you have a concern for the lives and wellbeing of children and families, if you are concerned with discrimination, start thinking about what work you, as a teacher, can do in your educational communities to address the failure of the teaching profession to value early childhood education. A first step could be to connect with your colleagues who already know and value the work of ECE teachers and already recognise the benefits of this knowledge for their own work as teachers in primary, secondary school, and higher education settings. Then, as a teacher, as a member of the teaching profession, *get involved* in the development of the new strategic plan to show solidarity with and commitment to ECE.

REFERENCES

Biesta, G.J.J. (2013). *The beautiful risk of education*. Boulder, CO/London, United Kingdom: Routledge.