

Early childhood education in New Zealand



Caterina Murphy

This commentary offers a personal view, fuelled by the context in which I live and work as an early childhood teacher, researcher and senior lecturer. It highlights *some* recent developments in early childhood education in New Zealand, with a particular emphasis on diverse learners – in this instance, young children who are gifted.

New Zealand has a vision for early childhood education. Some might say a dream. How great it is that teachers and parents dare to dream for young children, as we want all New Zealand children to be able to access quality early childhood education, regardless of their circumstances, by 2012. The ten-year strategic plan for early childhood education, *Ngā Huarahi Arataki: Pathways to the Future*, captures this vision. This plan highlights New Zealand's collective responsibility to ensure that all children and their families have access to quality, through a diverse range of teacher-led and parent-led education services that are responsive to and inclusive of their needs and aspirations.

The early childhood sector has three goals that it is working towards, collectively, strategically and responsibly: to improve the quality of early childhood education services, to increase participation in quality early childhood education services, and to promote collaborative relationships. The government has had to be creative and innovative in its thinking and has worked closely with the early childhood sector to make this vision a reality. The ten-year strategic plan is owned by all of us, driven by all of us and, most importantly, monitored and critiqued by all of us. It is this collective responsibility, a strength of what it is to be a New Zealander, which is driving its success. Some say that without vision, without strategy, we would not know our future and I say that would be true. The ten-year strategic plan has undoubtedly catapulted early childhood education onto new horizons.

Here in New Zealand abides a rugged early childhood landscape. There is a rich dual cultural heritage that can be celebrated and treasured. New Zealand may be small but its people aim high; it may be located down under, but the people's voice is strong and globally noticed. New Zealanders are of pioneering and leadership spirit and in order to lead the world in early childhood education, they must be willing to change; and they are.

Early childhood education goals

Many teachers, researchers and parents believe that quality early childhood education provides strong foundations for life-long learning and enables our children to contribute actively to our knowledge-based society here in New Zealand. Early childhood

teachers play a pivotal role as they reflect on how our education system in the 21st century can be transformed, for the next generation and beyond. The early childhood sector is leading the way in transforming New Zealand into an exciting and innovative knowledge-based economy. The expectation levels of early childhood teaching professionals have been lifted; qualified, registered staff in our teacher-led early childhood services have been demanded; and a focus on children, their dispositions of learning, their diversities, their interests and the contributions they are competent to make, to this country of ours, remain. Stakeholders involved in the care and education of children value them and want them to fulfil their own potentials and be proud of their own identities as New Zealanders.

Key documents provide early childhood teachers with tools by which to guide and strengthen their own teaching practice. Socio-cultural theories underpin their thinking, emphasising how important it is to transmit knowledge to one another about how people live, work and play; what people value and believe. In addition, accepting and respecting the child as already competent and able to actively contribute to our knowledge-based society is one key driver. The early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, acts as guide and protector of children's learning rights in early childhood education. These rights, such as having their interests noticed, their learning recognised and enhanced, and their diversities embraced, creates opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively with those who know them best – their parents and their families. Teachers are taking responsibility for ensuring that children are given the opportunity to test their working theories. *Kei Tua o te Pae/Early Childhood Exemplars* and the professional development that is being delivered around the country now strengthens the responsiveness of teachers to children's interests and strengths. It offers teachers an exemplar of narratives that identify how children are taking an interest and getting involved in their learning environments and what learning is occurring. *Nga Arohaehae Whai Hua/Self-Review Guidelines for Early Childhood Education*, a self-review document complemented by beautiful weaving metaphors, focuses teachers on strengthening their teaching practice in relation to enhancing children's learning.

Creating and maintaining high standards

There is no doubt that here in New Zealand, early childhood education is taken seriously. Teachers, parents, *whanau*, lobbyists, teacher education providers, researchers, policy-makers, analysts and politicians, all play a part in ensuring that a difference is made



Schoolchildren in Hamilton, New Zealand

to children's early lives. Early childhood education needs to be of good quality and hard roads have been taken to lead the way to create such high standards.

In addition to this vastly changing early childhood landscape, for the first time in New Zealand history, 20 hours of free early childhood education per week is being offered to 3 and 4 year olds. There was much debate about this initiative prior to its commencement in July 2007, but its focus is to offer children equal opportunity, and to allow them to access and participate in quality learning experiences, regardless of their circumstances. The government wants 3 and 4 year-old children from all walks of life to be able to participate and be valued for the diversities they bring to the early childhood landscape. The scheme has seen an increase in their participation and an increase in centre and service provision. A diverse range of services is available and a diverse range of teaching professionals is embraced.

A key challenge in the early childhood sector here in New Zealand involves positively promoting the teaching profession as one good for men. There has been a scarcity of male teachers working in early childhood centres and a recent innovation in 2007 saw the first Men in Early Childhood Care and Teaching summit being held, with subsequent articles, discussions and support groups arising from it. In my view, more men in early childhood would bring greater diversity to our learning environments, add a richness to

our curriculum and a valued difference to our teaching practices. Men are important people in the play environments of young children and, hopefully, the future will see an increase in male applications for initial teacher education programmes.

In 2007, the New Zealand Teachers Council developed a new set of standards expected of all newly graduating teachers, aiming the bar high to ensure the best possible teaching practices across the sector. Within these standards is an expected response to diverse learners. The central thinking around the concept of diverse learners is that early childhood teachers must embrace diversity and pedagogically teach to cater for the diverse needs and aspirations of individual children, e.g., the learning approaches, learning pace, socio-economic considerations and ethnic considerations. Here in New Zealand, I see a growing awareness of culturally responsive and spiritually aware teaching, and a desire to manage simultaneously the complexities that diverse learners bring. The notion of a mainstream group and other group of children is now considered dated. Diversity and difference are now centralised in the learning environment and focused on quality teaching in early childhood services. Authentic teaching in contextually meaningful ways, and inviting meaningful child and family participation honour articles two and three of the Treaty of Waitangi. Learning diversities are not to be feared by teachers, but celebrated. The words of a previous Minister of Education, Hon. Steve Maharey, ring true when he said that we are not a main stream, but a braided river.



Recognising and nurturing giftedness in the young

Giftedness has received much attention here in recent years. Young children who are gifted are diverse learners, as they exhibit an ease and speed of learning. They can demonstrate very early in life their potential as creative and critical thinkers. As with all children, potential requires nurturing and support, and teachers are gaining further interest in how we can respond to the faster learning pace, the intense curiosity and advanced knowledge of these children. A range of international researchers has questioned how early in life a child's natural aptitudes emerge, acknowledging that young children could show signs of becoming specialists very early on. Young children who are gifted require a teacher who understands the phenomenon of giftedness and recognises the differences in play patterns and behaviours demonstrated by these children. It is very important to listen to children's thinking and not just focus on what they know, but also on how they think. Teachers can listen carefully and think more about thinking. Other steps they can take are listed below.

- Develop their own critical thinking skills.
- Develop an understanding or passion for the abstract and unknown.
- Be willing to gain advanced subject knowledge.
- Pay additional attention to abstract and conceptual themes during play, in particular pretend play.
- Be willing to be a pedagogical mediator.
- Be willing to be a play partner.
- Become attuned to the intellectual capacity of these children – act as a cognitive match or stimulator during co-construction of learning.
- Be willing to partake in stimulating and thought-provoking engagement, containing elements of divergent thinking.

I did suggest in the conclusion of my Master of Education research that ages of children should not become cages and I stand by that comment. There appears to be a trend developing here in New Zealand of segregating children by age in specific play areas. This may have an impact on young children who are gifted and may subtly support the stratification of family structures. Mixed-age groupings can provide young children who are gifted with the opportunity to engage in playful experiences with older children, who may provide differing levels of stimulation. Mixed-age groupings also support siblings being together in the early childhood environment.

The implications for teachers engaging with young children who are gifted are of interest, because in order to co-construct learning with these children, teachers must consider how quickly and easily they learn. Teachers can accelerate their own pace of inquiry and further develop their critical thinking skills in order to stimulate and enrich the learning experiences of the children on a deeper and more advanced level. In particular, it may involve developing a deeper interest in abstract and conceptual themes, which appear to be of great interest to young children who are gifted. Critical and divergent thinking skills are required. It is important to reflect on how teachers and young children who are gifted interact together; how teachers encourage them to think creatively, with fluency and flexibility and in deeply analytical ways. One key element in teachers' responses involves how highly imaginative children are nurtured, affirmed and valued. Finding out what young children think is not necessarily critical thinking, but finding out how children think is.

Setting the stage for the future

2008 and beyond brings new challenges. The 2007 initiatives I have highlighted are just some of the many initiatives developing. The 20 hours free early childhood education per week for 3 and 4 years-olds policy, the development of the Graduating Teacher Standards by the New Zealand Teachers Council, and the recent focus on encouraging men into the early childhood teaching profession, are just some aspects that provide New Zealand teachers, parents, researchers and politicians with the opportunity to further build on its capacity and capability to meet the aspirations of New Zealand families. Promoting participation through diversity, recognising the important role of parents/*whanau* as educators, and continuing as strong global leaders who have qualified, registered early childhood teachers, will ensure that our practices remain visible and always subject to critical dialogue and reflection. In addition, New Zealand offers an outstanding example of valuing diversity and embracing the holistic pedagogy that diversity brings.

CATERINA MURPHY is currently a senior lecturer for *Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa*/New Zealand Childcare Association. She owned her own early childhood centre for 11 years. She has a Master of Education (Hons) from Massey University and is now a PhD Candidate at Waikato University. She has specialised in gifted education at postgraduate level and is particularly interested in children's thinking.