

Notes on UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre Report Card 8: The Child Care Transition. A League Table of early childhood education and care in economically advantaged countries.

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We often consider ourselves leaders in the world of early childhood education but, as this UNICEF Report Card and earlier OECD reports demonstrate, now is the time for deep reflection in regards to the position of our youngest children and our families in New Zealand. Overall, we do not compare well to the other OECD countries (which we often align ourselves with) and this Report is a sharp reminder that for all our progress with early childhood education services we still lag behind on key indicators to correct systemic failure for our youngest and most vulnerable children and their families/whānau.

Looking carefully at the 6 benchmarks where we have met the minimum requirements these demonstrate an interesting pattern. These are the benchmarks that have involved community consultation, advocacy and activism by parents, communities and professionals, alongside strong governmental support:

For example:

- a) *A National Plan*: The development of both a national curriculum¹ and a 10-year strategic plan² has provided vision and coherence to the early childhood sector in New Zealand, and is focused on social and educational areas of greatest need. The strength of both of these documents is that, until recently, they have had support from the major political parties, thus enabling progress to be made in the early childhood sector over a length of time without constant disruptions or changes which hampered the growth and quality of services in ECE over the 1990s. Continual community consultation, sector cohesion, and consensus political decisions across the major political parties will be needed to maintain a stable, sustainable and quality service for the future.
- b) *Subsidized and regulated child care for both our under and over three year olds*: Once more this has been gained through increased financial support from government in response to robust research into child and family outcomes, evidence on

¹ Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te Whariki: Early Childhood Curriculum. He Whariki Matauranga mo nga Mokopuna o Aotearoa*. Wellington: Learning Media.

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.

ECE's contribution to the economy, and enhanced community cohesion. An increase in both subsidy and regulation has begun to ensure a level of equitable attendance at ECE services, increase quality in our services and to help remove potential barriers to participation. Continual commitment by government to increasing funding to enable universalized attendance is the next goal for New Zealand to achieve. Funding services rather than individual families can ensure sustainability of the service and enforce national standards to protect children and provide the best possible early years education and care.

- c) *Training and ratios*: While New Zealand meets the minimum requirement for the benchmark this is an area that continues to be of great concern as competing interests within the ECE sector debate staffing levels and necessary skills and qualifications. Our under-two year-olds and under-one-year-olds in particular are at risk. Our very youngest children have the greatest growth in attendance in out-of-home care and we now have conclusive research to demonstrate that it is this group of children who need to have the most highly trained staff to build responsive relationships and to meet their holistic needs. Yet, still our centers and home-based settings often have the less ECE trained staff working with infants and toddlers and for longer hourly arrangements than many of the older children who may be in sessional programmes with the most highly trained teachers. This needs to be addressed immediately, as meeting this minimum benchmark does not recognize the position of our most vulnerable children in ECE out-of-home settings in New Zealand.

Overall, while the number of benchmarks achieved by New Zealand was 6 out of 10, the impact on children and families of the other 4 (that we did not achieve) cannot be ignored. These benchmarks continue to be New Zealand's greatest challenge – for example, addressing child poverty. Interestingly, these benchmarks can be seen to be evidence of approaches to children and families, which are positioned around individualism, consumer choice, market viability and profits. While the last 9 years has seen a shift in early childhood education towards envisioning early childhood services as part of a wider campaign of family health and wellbeing alongside child educational success, wider systemic failures within New Zealand are demonstrated in the 4 benchmarks where we failed to achieve the minimum standard.

- d) *Parental Leave*: The arguments for supporting paid maternity leave (with a built in time for paternal leave also) are well recognized and the positive outcomes within countries that provide financial support for leave, recognition of service over

the leave time and return-to-work guarantees is conclusive³. However, these understandings of the worth, value and importance of financially supporting families are not addressed in our policies around leave in New Zealand. The emphasis on the cost to the 'employer' which dominates the debate in New Zealand, places our most vulnerable group of employees – new mothers and young babies – at most risk, and ignores the wider contribution to the community, the economy and the health and wellbeing of the nation that such provisions enable.

- e) *1.0% GDP spent on ECE and Child Poverty less than 10%*: Both of these benchmarks are a litmus test to the wider systemic issues that are facing our most vulnerable families (those with very young children). Once more we have substantial research to demonstrate that the younger the child is when experiencing poverty the longer the negative effects. An individualized response to child poverty (i.e. tax cuts) may well further exacerbate the poverty issue. Recommendations from the Office of the Children's Commissioner and Barnardos⁴ indicate a range of strategies which address a collective, system-wide support of health, education, welfare, income and social support as a wide-ranging approach to beginning solutions to child poverty.

- f) *Near-universal outreach of essential child health services*: Child health services have experienced dramatic changes and cuts to services since the 1980s. While internationally the move has been to centre services at ECE centres (the 'one-stop-shop model) New Zealand has been slow to support this approach. "*Centre-Based Parent Support and Development*" is one initiative. Jointly funded by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Development. While these are pilot programmes they provide models for similar service provision to be universalized across New Zealand. As ECE centres are universalized and non-stigmatized places for families, additional health and social support can be easily and acceptably accessed in these settings. There are similar international models demonstrating that using ECE services as a base for wider support services is an effective model⁵. The introduction of the "B4 School checks" will do nothing to further the health and development of our children without an accompanying commitment to universal free child-health services.

³ UNICEF. (2008). *The child care transition: A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries*.

⁴ Dwyer, M., & Fletcher, M. (2008). *A fair go for children: Actions to address child poverty in New Zealand*. Report for the Children's Commissioner and Barnardos, Wellington.

⁵ Duncan, J., Bowden, C., & Smith, A. B. (2005). *Early Childhood Centres and Family Resilience*, Ministry of Social Development.

While the authors of Report Card 8, and the accompanying documentation acknowledge the difficulties in any cross-national comparison, particularly in considering other factors that are important in the lives of young children based on culture or religion, these benchmarks provide a clear base-line which minority countries⁶ (or economically advantaged countries) should see as a starting point for building services and models rather than a finalized goal. New Zealand still has much to do for our children and families.

⁶ Minority countries is the term used by Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (2007). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Languages of evaluation* (Second ed.). London: Routledge.