

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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At last some honesty and clarity in the debate! I have read the *Innocenti* working papers and summary of Report Card No. 8 and am most impressed. The conclusions reached are similar to what I discovered when I reviewed the best international research evidence on childcare effects as an independent researcher before coming to head the Early Childhood Council. The *Innocenti reports* and *RC8* go bravely and articulately further!

Figure 1 in *Innocenti RC8* (p. 8) highlights a national embarrassment for NZ. NZ has received a tick only for those benchmarks specific to early childhood services and not for the supporting context for children (parental leave, child poverty rate, near universal outreach of essential child health services). The challenge this poses to government is one of needing to coordinate across education, social development, health, employment and economic policy areas.

While NZ is given a tick for having a national plan with priority for the organisation and financing of early childhood services for disadvantaged children, the *RC8* states that it cannot assess or compare countries on this in a satisfactory way. In New Zealand, if funding was targeted to families in lower socio-economic areas and families on low incomes that struggle most to afford and find suitable childcare then childcare would be a stronger mechanism for reducing child poverty and supporting the families of children at-risk. The 20 hours Free ECE funding does nothing to target at-risk children.

It is acknowledged that the benchmarks are necessarily "crude" and the *RC8* correctly expresses caveats about their limitations. Care should be taken in using staff qualification as an indicator of quality childcare. In NZ the recognised qualification is a diploma or degree in early childhood education and teacher registration. However, as *RC8* acknowledges, the fact that a staff member holds a paper qualification is no indication of quality of experience and care for an infant. I often hear centre managers and committees expressing frustration in the context of a staffing shortage, being made through government policy and funding requirements to employ someone/anyone who holds the government-

recognized qualification over someone with special ability to work with infants. Quality for infants is about how the adult interacts with the infant, the adult's responsiveness, consistency of care, and real connection at the emotional level.

Note that NZ has been recorded as meeting 6 benchmarks. This perhaps should be 5. Group size especially in kindergartens, many of which are changing from a part-day to full-day license to receive the higher rate of government funding, exceeds 24. It is however, more common in childcare centres with infants and toddlers for children to be grouped into different rooms (classes) with 20 or fewer peers.

As children spend more hours in non-parental care and from a younger age a key lever to ensuring good outcomes for children is the relationship between the family and the early childhood service.

What we should be seeing as a result of the publication of the *Innocenti RC8* is a greater emphasis on the importance of partnership between parents and childcare providers.

1. The traditional partnership between parents and early childhood services has been replaced by government over recent years (through the Government's 10 year strategic plan for ECE). There is a need for government to step back from pulling and shaping parental choices, defining quality, and taking increasing control of the early childhood sector through micromanagement and overwhelming centres with paper work.
2. The 20 hour Free ECE campaign has impacted negatively on parental perception of early childhood services. Good childcare, as I often hear teachers say, is an extension of and a support for good parenting. Marketing campaigns based on 'use it, its free' are not helpful. Parents should not be pressured by a financial carrot to make choices in a hurry that are not right for family circumstances and their infants' needs. Government policies and funding rules should instead make it easier for childcare services to be flexible and responsive to changing parental wishes for support.
3. The role of early childhood services in the education of young children has become politically emphasised and valued more than the care and nurturing of young children. The movement over recent years to fashion the early childhood sector into something more like the school sector should be of concern in the light of the *Innocenti RC8* findings.

Innocenti RC8 has some particularly good messages for NZ – especially in relation to doing well in early childhood education and care international benchmarks but very poorly in targeting and addressing child poverty. It's not that spending in terms of GDP needs to be raised for the early childhood sector, as we are doing comparatively well through our mix of private, community and public services – but where spending falls short is ability to reach out to those who would benefit most.

The Early Childhood Council is the largest representative body of licensed early childhood centres in NZ. Our 1,000 member centres are community and commercially owned, employ more than 7,000 staff and care for more than 50,000 children.