Commentary

Current perspectives on the increase of infants attending early childcare settings: The impact on children, families, teachers, the sector and wider society.

Charlotte White
Graduate Student
New Zealand Tertiary College

This commentary recognises the increased participation of the under two age group of children attending early childhood settings, and considers the impact this has on children, whanau, families, teachers and the wider society in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Research suggests that there is increasing discourse regarding the impact of children attending these environments at such a young age, focussing on health and attachment issues, alongside offering support to disadvantaged and vulnerable children through into adolescence. Many infants spend the majority of their early years in long hours of day care, however, research findings report that parents and caregivers are supported by being able to return back to work and financially support their families. Due to this growth in ECE, Government spending on the early childhood sector is now being closely monitored, and the current National government has established an ECE Taskforce to monitor effectiveness and efficiency of this spending. Missing from this discourse however, is the question of whether it is better for the whole of society if infants should stay at home. Politicians may lead the way by giving parents more freedom of choice in who cares for their infant.

Increased under two participation in early childhood education in Aotearoa/New Zealand

Increased numbers of infants are attending formal and home-based early childhood settings in contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand and other western countries. This phenomenon has been evident over the last decade and currently 32,000 infants are attending centre and home based settings under the age of two, which has been a dramatic increase (Bell, 2011). Figures published by the Children’s Commissioner (Angus, 2010) state that there has been a 21.4% increase in attendance in centre-based childcare for the under-one age group from 2004 to 2009 in New Zealand. Figures for the one-two age group are similar, with attendance increasing by 26.1% over the same period, and together with an increase in duration of hours in attendance, this age group has become the fastest growing group in early childhood education. Moss (2000) also pointed out a vast increase in provision and attendance since 1990 as early childhood centres attempt to cater for the needs of families in a changing society, a view also supported by Bedford and Sutherland (2008).
Several socio-economic, cultural and political ideological factors influence this trend in New Zealand, affecting families and early childhood education. Rapidly increasing urban house prices, alongside costly food and fuel prices, mean that single incomes cannot support families, forcing women to contribute to the family’s earnings (Bedford & Sutherland, 2008). Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) statistics verify this trend, reflecting an increase in the female employment rate in New Zealand to 67%, well above the OECD average rate of 57% (OECD, 2011). Adema (2006) notes that since the 1990s, New Zealand women have contributed more to the workforce, impacting on the nature of the early childhood services, where the demand for, and supply of, centre-based early childhood services has increased as a result. The New Zealand Ministry of Education has responded to these social changes by ensuring that the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, caters for infants as well (Ministry of Education, [MoE], 1996).

Another contributing factor affecting this current trend is that existing New Zealand parental leave law provides minimal support to mothers or fathers to stay at home to care for their infants. Currently, parents are provided only 14 weeks paid parental leave, forcing them to make decisions soon after giving birth on how they are going to financially support their families. Adema (2006) argues that this is a shortcoming in New Zealand legislation, proposing instead a system that grants parents six months paid parental leave each, giving parents and infants a year of bonding and attachment without jeopardising their job prospects and earnings. Social Development spokesperson of the New Zealand Labour Party, Annette King, also views the current legislation for parental leave in New Zealand as inadequate for families with infants, and believes that New Zealand needs to extend paid leave to compare with Australia’s current 18 weeks, enabling parents to have more freedom in caring for their infants (Trevett, 2011). Although faring well compared to the United States of America, which does not have any parental leave law in place, New Zealand was one of the last OECD countries to implement paid parental leave legislation. On the other hand, the New Zealand government has been proactive in providing tax credits under the Working for Families scheme, and offered other financial support and care for the under two age group, through child care subsidies (Angus & Carroll-Lind, 2011).

**Impacts of increased under two participation in early childhood education**

**Children and families**

Much controversial discourse currently exists on whether long hours spent at formal early childcare settings impacts on infants’ early development. Farquhar and Galtry (as cited in Akitt, 2007) refer to research suggesting that infants who attend long hours at day care are prone to glue ear, chest infections and gastrointestinal diseases, which hampers their early learning and development. These writers argue that the best nutrition during children’s infancy is breast milk, which aids healthy development of the central nervous system and enhances brain development, and also decreases the risk of the infant contracting glue ear and meningitis. World Health Organisation (WHO) (2011) research suggests that infants should be exclusively breast fed up to the age of six months to achieve optimal growth. With infants now the growing sector in
early childhood education, where they can attend from the age of three months, there is need for more guidelines and national policies to be put into place in early childhood services, to support breast feeding mothers. This would enable a coherent approach alongside *Te Whāriki*, which promotes infant health and well-being (Ministry of Education [MOE], 1996).

Credible research shows that attachment deficits occur between infants and their primary caregivers when they have been placed in full time day care before the age of 12 months. Berk (2009) cites a North American study showing 7% more infants had a greater level of insecurity, compared to children who were placed in non-formal child care settings. Infant brain development and learning is greatly impacted by insecure relationships and attachments stemming from lack of quality interactions with their caregivers in formal settings (Angus & Carroll-Lind, 2011). From six months of age, infants are able to form attachments to people who respond to their needs, and when babies are unable to access their main attachment figure, they experience an increased sense of stress, releasing higher than normal cortisol hormone levels in the body. Raised levels of cortisol can harm the immune system and furthermore decrease the number of brain cells, therefore damaging the infant’s memory (Angus & Carroll-Lind, 2011).

Sims takes up a contrary position in this debate, arguing that the “mother taking sole responsibility may, in fact, [pose] a risk factor” (2009, p.7) to the infant, as the quality of care the child receives and the relationship between the caregiver and infant is critical. Sims also points out that those infants who have secure attachments outside of the mother-child relationship are in some cases less exposed to hazards and danger. In cases where the infant may come from a disadvantaged family or where the mother may be absent due to illness or even death, alternative positive attachment figures in the infant’s life provide the necessary support to develop into healthy children. Berk (2009) agrees, pointing out that where high quality attachments occur within early childhood settings, infants’ cognitive, social and language development will most likely be enhanced.

Infants coming from disadvantaged and vulnerable families who attend early childhood educational settings at a young age gain a significant advantage. The current New Zealand Prime Minister’s Chief Science Advisor, Sir Peter Gluckman, has pointed out that children from high-risk families, who attend good quality early childhood educational settings, are greatly supported during their transition into adolescence. In an interview on national television, he stated that as many as 20% of adolescents in New Zealand make mistakes that will affect them for the rest of their lives, due to lack of self control and resilience. Young children who develop skills early on in life during early childhood education, where they are able to gain social skills and empathy for their peers, will be in a better position to manage challenges later on in life (Gluckman, 2011).

**Early childhood teachers and the early childhood sector**

Alongside the increase in participation of New Zealand women in the work force, the nature of the early childhood sector has changed dramatically. Decreasing participation in Kindergartens has been noticed, while full time enrolments in privately-owned settings have occurred. While Kindergartens once dominated the education sector, providing more education than care, for the three to four-
year old age group, in contemporary New Zealand, the sector is now dominated by home and centre-based services, reflecting on the needs of parents, where education and care can be provided for infants and toddlers (Angus, 2010).

The New Zealand National Party government has formed an ECE Taskforce, to look at the effectiveness and efficiency of spending in the early childhood sector and to make recommendations on spending priorities. In June 2011, the Taskforce report, An Agenda For Amazing Children, recognised the increasing number of under twos attending formal early childhood settings (Reynolds, 2011, p. 12). High quality education is an area of focus for the report, which also points out that parent and teacher relationships need to be warm, respectful, reciprocal and trusting. These quality indicators are synonymous with Te Whāriki, which states that “children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things” (MOE, 1996, p. 43), a fundamental foundation for infants’ learning and development. However, the ECE Taskforce contradicts itself, viewing the early childhood as professional and innovative, yet agreeing with the National government that regulating a minimum 80% of qualified teachers rather than 100% will not weaken quality for the education and care for the under two age group (Mintrom, 2011).

The previous Labour Party government saw a “strong correlation between quality ECE and teacher qualifications” (MOE, 2002). Further, the increase in attendance for the under two age group requires that educators have more specific training with infants and toddlers. Angus (2010) points out in his report that having specific training for this age group may raise the status for educators, as the education and care of this age group is viewed as babysitting by some. Having to cope with the challenges of this age group often leads to high staff turnovers, especially of those who are not formally trained to deal with these everyday challenges. Bell (2011) agrees with this view, and points out that many under twos do not have qualified teachers due to current government legislation that requires no more than 50% of qualified teachers at any one service.

Wider society

Research by Forster and Mira d’Ercole (as cited in Adema, 2006) suggests that a child who is brought up where only one parent is in employment is three times more likely to grow up in poverty than a child with both parents working, therefore, a key to avoiding child poverty is for society to provide high quality educational services for infants, enabling both parents to work. Adema (2006) also states that 10% of adults in couple families have not progressed in looking for employment due to infant care restraints and some parents have turned down jobs because of limited childcare availability.

In rural parts of New Zealand, families are sometimes unable to work full time, due to lack of access to high quality care and education for their infants. Some rural areas struggle to gain qualified staff, may not have the required opening hours, may not have enough centres, and could experience long waiting lists. Apart from these issues, infants’ attendance at early childhood educational settings does not necessarily eliminate financial stress for parents. High fees and general living expenses can impact on local families, communities and the wider society. Fea (2011) reports that family violence in the Wakatipu area of Otago has increased dramatically from 179 to 800 cases in four years. Fea
believes that this increase is due largely to families migrating into the area where both parents work to keep up with the expensive costs of living. Further, by residing in a resort area, many parents work shifts and need to juggle childcare. These factors impact greatly on the time families can spend together. Awareness of these social changes will mean that early childhood educational settings will seek to provide supportive, reciprocal and warm relationships with families.

Longer hours spent by under twos in formal childcare settings isolates these young citizens from other community settings, confining them to places that are designed specifically for young children (Bedford & Sutherland, 2008). Synonymously, Berk (2009) points out that Bronfenbrenner believed that informal social settings for infants to participate in that did not contain children, such as the parent’s work place, or visits to other places within the community, would have a powerful impact on the child’s development, using many complex systems of relationships.

**Conclusion**

Increased under two participation in early childhood education provides much discourse among politicians, educators and parents; however, that discourse must include the question of whether it is better for the whole of society that infants stay at home, perhaps attending only sessional infant care. Politicians may lead the way by giving parents more freedom of choice in who cares for their infant.

**References**


