Commentary/Discussion Paper

Facing the Challenge: Integrating Early Childhood and Primary Education Practices

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Abstract

The current policy to create closer ties between the early childhood and primary sectors is the culmination of a process that dates back two decades. I outline the steps leading to the current situation and then explore the practicalities of implementing the government’s policy in terms of curriculum approaches, pedagogy, pre-service training and teacher’s work. I ask who has set this agenda? What are the implications for early childhood? What should our role be?

Key Words: Seamless education, educational transition, curriculum, teacher education

Introduction

In this paper I look at the integration of early childhood care and education services into the education system and discuss some changes that are needed for the integration to be complete. Factors that currently stand in the way of a seamless transition for children between early childhood and primary education include: different curricula and philosophies, teacher knowledge and understanding of the curriculum of the other sector, policy development in each sector not sufficiently involving the other sector, lack of linkages in pre-service programmes, lack of effective transition programmes, and the differing nature of teachers’ work in the two sectors.

The process of early childhood education becoming part of the education system can be traced back to the mid 1980’s with the transference of childcare services from the Department of Social Welfare to the Department of Education in 1986 and the development of integrated training for childcare workers and kindergarten teachers in Colleges of Education in 1988. The Before Five policies (Lange, 1988), based upon the recommendations of the Meade working group published in Education to be More (Department of Education, 1988) further tied early childhood into the governmental regulatory system in ways which were similar to the compulsory sector. The move to a closer integration of the two sectors has accelerated since the Labour Party re-gained power in 1999. New policies since that time have included pay parity for kindergarten teachers with primary teachers, policy to make the diploma/degree of teaching the only recognisable qualification for someone working in an early childhood service, promised provision from 2007 of 20 hours fee-free early education for children from age three, and targets for the number of registered teachers in early childhood services. Teachers
themselves have created a much closer relationship between the two sectors as the Early Childhood Workers’ Union first joined with the New Zealand Kindergarten Teachers’ Association followed by the amalgamation of that group into the primary teachers’ New Zealand Educational Institute.

It is clear that current New Zealand education policy is to foster greater coherence in curriculum and teacher practices between early childhood and primary education. This move was first clearly signalled in the draft discussion document *Education for the 21st Century* (Ministry of Education, 1993a) with the statement that “early childhood education will be more clearly part of the government’s integrated education strategy” (p.11). The policy direction is most clearly evident in two documents. First, the government’s 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education (*Pathways to the Future*) states as a goal: to “promote coherence of education between birth and eight years” (Ministry of Education, 2002, p.17). To achieve this it is proposed to:

- Build on work underway such as improving primary school teachers’ knowledge of the early childhood curriculum *Te Whaariki*, the *Early Childhood Primary Links Programme*, and the early literacy and numeracy working groups.
- Promote better understanding between early childhood teachers and primary teachers about the links between *Te Whaariki* and the schools *New Zealand Curriculum Framework*.
- Promote better understanding between early childhood and primary teachers about the pedagogical approaches in early childhood services and schools.

Second, the Ministry of Education’s (2003) *National Curriculum Stocktake* document states that:

*The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* and *Te Anga Marautanga o Aotearoa* should include a section for primary schools on how to ensure a smooth transition between early childhood education for new entrants. This section should:

- Outline the similarities and differences between the school curriculum frameworks and the early childhood curriculum.
- Explain features of effective early childhood learning environments and ways that reception classroom learning environments can also reflect these features (Section 4, Recommendation 7).

The common elements within the two documents are the development of an understanding of the others pedagogy by early childhood and primary teachers, and an understanding of the different curricula that each sector works with. I shall consider the practicality of achieving both of these aims, but first I ask, “Whose agenda is represented by these two statements?” “Whose voices have been heard, and whose have been silenced?” and, “What is this new regime of truth based on?”
Curriculum Approaches

Very different philosophies appear to have motivated the primary and early childhood curriculum approaches. Within the two curriculum documents there are dramatically different views on the purposes of schooling, on the image of the child, on the nature of learning, on planning and assessment, pedagogical approaches, relationships with family, whanau and community, and the importance of biculturalism (Carpenter, 2001; Mutch, 2003). The early childhood curriculum Te Whaariki has been described as relatively permissive for early childhood educators to work with, while the primary schools New Zealand Curriculum Framework presents more structured requirements. Each document has resulted in the generation of different forms of assessment of children’s learning (Carpenter, 2001).

The separate curriculum documents for the early childhood and primary sectors draw attention to differences in philosophy. Separate curriculum documents may have accentuated differences in philosophy between teachers in the two sectors (Cullen, 2000) and have led to early childhood teachers’ perceiving any movement of the primary curriculum into early childhood as potentially negative (Mitchell & Cubey, 2003).

The NZ Curriculum Framework defines curriculum as comprising of “a set of national curriculum statements which define the learning principles and achievement aims and objectives which all New Zealand schools are required to follow” (Ministry of Education, 1993b, p.4). In contrast, Te Whaariki defines curriculum as “as the sum total of the experiences, activities and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within and environment designed to foster children’s learning and development” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.10). There are clear philosophical differences between the view of the learner, and the purpose of education contained in these two statements.

The difficulty primary teachers in the junior area have in coming to terms with the new curricula has been identified by May and Carr (2000) who observed that

…. in reality there is a mismatch and disruption for children at ages five as they move from early childhood programs into the early school years. . . . Many teachers are finding the complexities and requirements of measuring objectives and assessment for each child for each learning area a reason for a more timetabled and subject-driven approach (p.163).

The implications for the early childhood sector of a closer relationship with the primary sector envisaged in both the National Curriculum Stocktake and the 10-year strategic plan are serious, and may threaten the implementation of the principles and aims of the national early childhood curriculum as intended by the Ministry of Education and the authors of Te Whaariki.

Any attempt to create a greater coherence between the two sectors must address differences in curricula. We might expect that this need would inform the development process of the revised New Zealand Curriculum Framework. However this does not
appear to be the case. The revised curriculum framework which is emerging out of the Stocktake seems to be furthering the move to make teachers accountable in meeting the aims of the curriculum rather than addressing philosophical and pedagogical differences between the early childhood and primary sectors. One of the three key outcomes of the Stocktake was seen as “a higher likelihood of effective implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum and therefore of improved outcomes for students” (Ministry of Education, 2003). If, as seems likely, the philosophic gulf between the intended/official curriculum documents for early childhood and the primary sector is to remain in place after 2007 then increasing collaboration between the two sectors is unlikely to occur.

The New Zealand Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 1993b) claimed to “recognize pre-school learning” (p.3) noting, “Curriculum developments, particularly at the junior primary level, take account of the national curriculum guidelines for early childhood education in New Zealand” (footnote, p.3). Te Whaariki (Ministry of Education, 1996) has a section in each strand (e.g. Contribution, p.65) entitled “Continuity between Early Childhood Education and School”. In contrast, none of the three curriculum statements (Social Studies, The Arts, Health and Physical Education) which were published after Te Whaariki had been produced appears to have any reference to Te Whaariki or early childhood experiences. This lack of reference to children’s prior to school formal educational experiences is also a notable feature in the draft essence statements currently displayed on the curriculum project site on Te Kete Ikurangi (http://www.tki.org.nz/r/nzcurriculum. Date accessed 25/6/06).

There is one aspect of the curriculum framework development process where early childhood may be claimed to be influencing the nature of the revised National Curriculum Framework. The intention is to replace the current eight essential learning skills (Ministry of Education, 1993) with five key competencies (Ministry of Education, 2006b). The proposed key competencies (relating to others, managing self, participating, thinking and using languages, symbols and text) have some similarities to five curriculum strands in Te Whaariki. However it would appear that the work of the OECD Project DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations) (Rychen, 2003) has had a more influential impact on the choice of the key competencies.

Teacher Cross-Sector Knowledge

Commentators have noted that primary and early childhood teachers often know little about each others’ sector’s curriculum document (Britt & Sumsion, 2002; Cullen, 2000). Preliminary results from my research of primary teacher graduates from four tertiary institutions suggest a lack of knowledge of the early childhood curriculum by recently trained primary teachers, irrespective of which one of the four pre-service education institutions they had attended. The primary teachers, all of whom had completed their pre-service teacher education after the publication of Te Whaariki, had little or no knowledge of the curriculum document. They had not received general information about the early childhood sector and as teachers they had not accessed professional development related to links with the early childhood sector (Mawson, 2004a; 2004b). In contrast, the kindergarten teachers in my study sample were in
possession of the primary school curriculum statements and made conscious reference to them when documenting the learning of the children (Mawson, 2004a; 2004b). There was a belief among these kindergarten teachers that they had a greater knowledge of the primary system than primary teachers had of theirs.

The Ministry of Education currently has a project underway involving 27 schools and around 300 teachers to investigate the implementation of the key competencies. One of the four areas to be investigated are the implications for junior class teachers and the links with formal early childhood services (Ministry of Education, 2006b). Researchers are to work with teachers to capture stories about their practical experiences using the key competencies, and these are to be published later. It is difficult at this time to see how this information will improve inter-sector teacher understanding and knowledge of curriculum.

**Pedagogical Approaches**

Early childhood and primary teachers differ in their approaches to classroom management, planning of physical and social environments, as well as their teaching style (Cullen, 1991). Children come to school with knowledge and skills which new entrant teachers can build on. As Carr (1998, p.24) points out, “one of the key things that children take to school is a set of learning dispositions: courage, playfulness, perseverance, communication and responsibility”. However, such knowledge and skills are often not capitalised on (Bartholomew & Gustafsson, 1997; Cullen, 1991).

Joint professional development could be a solution to enable teachers in the two sectors to build shared understandings that lead to greater integration of experiences for children between schools and early childhood services (Mitchell & Cubey, 2003). These approaches may not be unproblematic and Mitchell and Cubey raise a concern that this may result in a downward shift of the primary curriculum that would compromise children’s learning in the early childhood curriculum. Nevertheless the success of this joint professional development would seem to provide one avenue toward a greater understanding and collaboration between both sectors.

A complicating factor is that while there may be a common pedagogy among primary teachers, this is clearly not the case within the early childhood sector. Difference may well be the defining characteristic of the early childhood sector, with regard to setting (centre-based and home-based), teacher qualifications, and teaching approaches (e.g. Steiner, Montessori, Reggio Emilio, and Kohanga Reo influenced pedagogy). There are also major differences within the sector with regard to the interpretation and implementation of *Te Whaariki*, between a developmentally appropriate focused pedagogy and a socioculturally driven pedagogy and the image of the child held by educators. Is it possible to talk about an early childhood sector? If the divergences outweigh the commonalities, can we expect a seamless interaction with the primary sector to occur? Government policy and intervention in the early childhood sector has done much to bring early childhood services closer to schools and part of the education system, but is greater coherence in beliefs and philosophies within the early childhood sector needed as a first step to a seamless education for children?
Pre-service Teacher Training

Current teacher education structures do not support coherence of the early childhood and primary sectors. Separate pre-service teacher education programmes reinforce beliefs in policies and practices of the two sectors (Cullen, 2000). Where there is linkage between the two sectors it is invariably the incorporation of primary curriculum elements into early childhood teacher education courses. It is very rare to find exposure to early childhood curriculum and pedagogical approaches in primary teacher education courses (Mawson, 2004a).

The curriculum document early childhood teachers are required to follow, *Te Whaariki*, neglects subject content knowledge. Recent research has shown that even very young children are deeply interested in and capable learners of content knowledge, and a lack of emphasis on subject knowledge can not be justified in early childhood education (Farquhar, 2003; Hedges & Cullen, 2005).

There is some justification for building curriculum content courses into early childhood teacher education programmes. The importance of early childhood teachers having domain knowledge is now well established. It was identified as one of the seven pedagogical principles of quality teaching in early childhood settings (Farquhar, 2003) and is one of the four specific areas of focus in Round Two of the Ministry of Educations ECE Centres of Innovation strategy. There has been an increasing call for early childhood educators to increase their subject content knowledge and to move to a sociocultural pedagogy (Backshall, 2000; Fleer, 1993; Gabet & Yourn, 2002; Hedges, 2000; Rodd & Savage, 1997).

There is often a fear expressed that a focus on subject knowledge will undermine the holistic approach of early childhood education (Corrie, 1999). Questions can be asked as to whether a shift in emphasis to a subject-centred curriculum is compatible with the holistic nature of *Te Whaariki*. Traditionally the knowledge base of early childhood teachers was focused on material from the child study movement and developmental psychology, and content knowledge was not valued. Experiences in mathematics, science, and technology have been regarded as less critical to children’s development than play-based experiences. Some commentators suggested that the reason for this was that the people working in early childhood education had a lack of lack of confidence in their own knowledge in subject areas (New, 1999). Hedges and Cullen (2005) suggest that there is a need for targeted professional development for teachers in the early childhood sector if teachers’ attitudes to, and need for, subject knowledge are to be changed.

The introduction of ‘birth to eight years’ teacher education programmes may go some way to resolve this lack of cross-sector subject learning material in teacher education programmes (Cullen, 2000; Cullen, Foote, Jordan & Marsich, 2002; Sumssion, 1997). However, the literature would seem to suggest that early childhood educators coming out of such courses in Australia struggle in the primary school environment (Stamopoulos, 2002; Statigos, 2002). There is also the struggle of connecting across two quite different languages, both in terms of specific vocabulary, and more powerfully in
terms of dialogue discussion and debate (Britt & Sumsion, 2002). Nearly all New Zealand graduates from the two birth to eight years programmes gain employment in early childhood services and not the primary sector, so a cross-fertilization of philosophy and pedagogy is yet to really begin. The are a number of possible explanations for the decision of these graduates to find employment in the early childhood sector (pay parity, perceived greater time demands and sole responsibility for a class of children in primary, perceptions of ‘otherness’) but this is an area which has not been researched.

The report on *Initial Teacher Education* (Ministry of Education & NZCER, 2005b) raises some questions about the ability of teacher education providers to produce graduates who are able to develop closer cross-sector links. There are also a number of findings that suggest that current graduates will be ill prepared to develop cross-sector links. The authors of the report found a lack of clarity as to the purpose and content of conceptual frameworks with respect to initial teacher education. They also found little evidence that initial teacher education qualifications are underpinned by critical themes or ethics, such as a commitment to inclusion or social justice. The report pointed to a high number of providers and qualifications compared to many other countries. There are 27 different institutions offering initial teacher education qualifications leading to teacher registration, of these 10 providers offer secondary qualifications, 17 offer primary qualifications and 20 offer qualifications in early childhood education. Between them they offer 85 ITE qualifications through a total of 131 programmes. Although the geographical nature of New Zealand and the need for people to have access to tertiary education may require a larger number of institutions than population figures would suggest, with numbers such as these, maintaining a consistently high quality of graduate outcome must be a matter of concern.

**Teachers’ Work**

The different day to day experiences of teachers within the two sectors is another factor that stands in the way of a closer relationship between the two sectors. For example, in early childhood centres teachers work in a group sharing responsibility; in classrooms teachers often work alone or with parent help or a teacher aid. Compared with early childhood teachers, primary teachers have a much more timetabled and structured or subject-based approach to teaching. Primary teachers tend to face greater demands on their time outside of the classroom.

There are also different levels of assessment expectations between the two sectors. While *Te Whaariki* contains 18 goals, with 117 sub divisions, early childhood teachers are not expected to formally assess all goals for all children. Primary teachers are faced with over 135 Achievement Objectives spread over the seven essential learning areas and are expected to formally assess all Achievement Objectives for every child in the class, and show that children’s learning has progressed.

The development of the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* in the early 1990s led to primary teachers implementing six revised and one new (Technology) curriculum statements in the period 1992 – 2000. In 2007 with the implementation of the revised
New Zealand Curriculum Framework primary teachers will again be faced with quite major revisions of the existing seven curriculum areas, a new curriculum area of languages and the replacement of the essential learning skills with the key competencies.

Immersed in a daily situation so different from early childhood educators, and faced with major curriculum change in 2007, what is the likelihood of new entrant teachers being able to also work to implement the seamless education policy? Teachers in this situation are unlikely to have the time, energy and motivation to involve themselves in the cross-sector educational dialogue required if a greater coherence is to be achieved. If this is the case, then what are the implications of this for early childhood teachers? Do early childhood teachers need to take the initiative and provide both the leadership and the structure for this dialogue?

Transition Programmes

Current transition programmes between early childhood services and primary schools do not appear to be resulting in any significant easing of the gap between primary and early childhood education. Timperley, McNaughton, Howie, and Robinson (2003) identified the need for teachers to acknowledge and have joint responsibility for effective transitions, and to have articulated and shared expectations. They found schools expected early childhood services to develop and establish routines and behaviour expectations. Early childhood teachers thought visits to primary schools would help, but arranging visits to school ranked very low on primary teachers’ expectations. The work of Dockett and Perry in Australia has provided a wealth of research on transition to school (e.g. Dockett & Perry, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2002a, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Dockett, Perry, & Howard, 2000) but little of this appears to be influencing transition practice in New Zealand. It may be time for early childhood educators to become more pro-active in developing more effective links with primary schools.

Policy Development

Cullen (1996) identified the absence of a collaborative approach to curriculum development with primary colleagues as hindering the development of continuity in education for children between birth and eight years. This separation of the sectors appears to have continued in policy-making processes in the decade since Cullen’s article.

The Government’s 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education development involved a government appointed working group of 31 members, but apart from a number of representatives from NZEI the teachers’ union the strategic plan working and writing groups did not include representation from the primary school education sector.

The Ministry of Education’s Stock-take report recommendation that stronger links be made between the New Zealand schools and early childhood curriculum documents is now being written into the draft New Zealand Curriculum Framework which is to be
sent to schools for feedback in August 2006. As part of the implementation process a group of educators involved in early childhood education are working together to produce material that will assist successful transition from early childhood education to school. The membership of the group consists of people from tertiary institutions, schools, and early childhood centres as well as advisers who have been working on transitions between early childhood education and new entrants both in mainstream and Maori immersion (Ministry of Education, 2005a). There is no indication on the Ministry of Education website as to the membership of the group, or of their terms of reference. It is important that there is a solid representation of people from the primary sector involved in this process, otherwise the success of any strategies to achieve a closer relationship between the primary sector and the early childhood sector may be limited.

For our own part, I feel there are some questions we need to ask? Do early childhood teachers have sufficient information as to who is representing them in this process? Are early childhood teachers from across different early childhood groups being equally consulted in the development of the material? What research in particular, if at all, into transition to school is informing the process?

**Where To From Here?**

The discussion has identified a number of factors that currently are likely to impede the development of a seamless link between the early childhood and primary sectors. None, however, are sufficient alone to prevent this from happening, and we need to look for ways in which we can address these factors. We need to look for solutions within the New Zealand context, as overseas trends do not seem to offer appropriate direction.

A question this paper has not asked but which needs to be asked and debated is whether the downward shift in the age of children’s entry to formal education (as signalled by the government’s fee-free policy of up to 6 hours a day or 20 hours a week in education with registered teachers for all three and four year old children) is what we as a society really want for children? If the answer is yes, then it is not just more effective transitioning for children into primary education that is needed but integration of primary and early childhood curriculum and pedagogical approaches, policy development, initial teacher education, and professional development.

The move for a greater integration of early childhood and early primary education in New Zealand is part of a wider movement. Internationally there has been a gradual but significant shift towards closer structural relationships between the early childhood system and the education system. This has reached its furthest development in Sweden, Scotland and England, where responsibility for early childhood and free time provisions have been brought within the education system, alongside schools (Moss, 2002). Where this has entailed a downward move of the primary curriculum, such as the foundation curriculum in England, such changes have often been problematic. Government involvement in early childhood education in England has led to more formal instruction in literacy and numeracy being directly and indirectly imposed on young children (Kwon, 2002). In Western Australia the introduction of ‘P1’ which involves grouping pre-primary and year-one students in the one class has resulted in teachers experiencing
major stress. Friction emerged between early childhood and primary teachers over the amount of formality considered appropriate for P1 classes with claims of increased academic pushdown. The change was faced with conflicting teacher attitudes, philosophy and traditional beliefs which impeded implementation of the new system (Stamopoulos, 2002).

In view of this research it would seem vital that early childhood and primary teachers play a leading role in the implementation of government policy to create a greater integration between early childhood and primary education. At the present time the gap between early childhood education and the primary system is very clearly demarcated by curriculum, pedagogical theory and teachers’ day-to-day work experiences.

Any move to create a seamless system will inevitably breach the barriers between the two sectors and create a challenging new zone of interaction between the two. Part of this process will be coming to an accommodation between a downward move of primary practices and beliefs into early childhood and an upward move of early childhood practices and beliefs. The end result of that process will have fundamental influence on the shape of children’s learning and on the early childhood sector. This paper has sought to identify contentious issues in this process. I believe that as a sector we need to become much more proactive in addressing these issues.

References


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Brent Mawson is Principal Lecturer in the School of Science, Mathematics and Technology Education in the Faculty of Education, University of Auckland, where he lectures in early childhood curriculum studies and technology. His interest in the interface between early childhood and primary was sparked during his doctoral study into children’s learning in technology during their first three years of schooling, and he has continued to research in this area. He is about to begin a research study into the factors encouraging collaborative play in early childhood settings.