

## The Quality of Early Childhood Centres for Children: Teachers' Views\*

ChildForum ECE Service and Research National Network

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October 2015

### Executive Summary

Children as young as one month to 5 years are at risk of the negative consequences of being in early childhood education (ECE), a nationwide survey of more than 600 teachers reveals. Teachers are under pressure to provide safe quality care and education but can lack support.

The survey found that a quarter of teachers held reservations about the quality of their centre such that they would not choose to enrol their own child at it or any other centre comparable to the one they worked at.

About one-fifth of teachers reported not having time to develop relationships with children due to insufficient management support of caregiving practices and low teacher to child ratios. In the absence of positive conditions teachers sometimes chose to take work home and arrive before they were scheduled to start work or stay longer after work hours, putting themselves at risk of emotional and physical burnout.

A small but alarming proportion of teachers (12%) reported consistent under-staffing - their centre was operating in breach of the minimum teacher-child ratio regulations. When minimum staffing ratios are not maintained added stress is placed on teachers trying to provide quality particularly when dealing with many young children with different needs at one time. There was also concern that while a facility may on paper meet or exceed regulation standards on ratios, adequate staffing for child supervision was not always possible when adults counted as teachers within the ratio were doing other things. The rules for who counts as a 'teacher' in various situations do not appear to be always well understood, suggesting a possibility of not enough education on this and a lack of enforcement and regular spot checking by the Ministry of Education.

Teachers who were significantly more likely to be happy to enrol their child at their centre or another one like it worked at centres with higher than the minimum staffing ratio ( $p = .05$ ) and staff were paid well ( $p = .05$ ). When an ECE centre shows it supports quality it is valuing children and their teachers.

The results suggest that a greater emphasis by centre operators and the Government/ Ministry of Education on relationships in centres is needed to support all teachers to provide quality care and education. The ability to develop relationships with children is fundamental to providing quality care that supports children to be capable and confident individuals and meet childhood curriculum (Te Whāriki) requirements.

It is recommended that the Government and the Ministry of Education focus on quality to ensure that each and every centre supports its teachers well to provide quality care and education. The ministry should be more open about quality assurance problems and limitations, allowing greater transparency.

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Teachers clearly have a unique insiders' view and are a key source of information about quality and what goes on in centres when parents cannot stay with their children. It is therefore important that their views are sought and listened to.

## Introduction

The quality of centre care is under the microscope in this report of the views of a sample of 601 childcare and kindergarten teachers drawn from a larger nation-wide NZ survey that also included centre managers and parent-led and home-based care services.

The availability of childcare of a standard that any parent is comfortable with is important to support the participation of parents in the labour market.

While NZ's education policy has focused on growing the number of childcare places and encouraging greater use of childcare by parents, an aspect that has received much less attention is the quality of the care provided.

This report sheds light on how teachers view the quality of children's care and experiences, their ability to develop relationships with children, and adult to child ratios.

## The survey and respondents' characteristics

From a larger online survey of employment in early childhood education (ECE) covering a range of workers and types of services conducted at the end of 2014, the responses of 601 teachers at early childcare centres (79%) and kindergartens (21%) were analysed for this report.

The teachers who gave their locations (583 out of 601) came from all the main regions as shown in the table below.

### Regional distribution

Auckland	30.36% (177)	Northland	4.46% (26)
Bay of Plenty	8.58% (50)	Otago	7.20% (42)
Canterbury	8.40% (49)	Southland	1.72% (10)
Gisborne	1.72% (10)	Taranaki	2.40% (14)
Hawke's Bay- Wairarapa	2.92% (17)	Waikato	6.86% (40)
Manawatu – Wanganui	7.03% (41)	Wellington	14.24% (83)
Marlborough	1.03% (6)	West Coast	1.20% (7)
Nelson – Tasman	1.89% (11)		

Most teachers held a permanent teaching position (88%), were female (96%), between 25 to 44 years of age (52%), were fully qualified and held or were working toward full registration (88%). In regard to job descriptions, the majority were working as qualified teachers in a normal teaching position (55%), 20% were head teachers and 11% were senior teachers or the most senior teaching

employee. Others included team leaders for groups within their centre (4%), teachers in training (7%) and unqualified teachers (3%). Asked about how well paid they thought they were 5% gave a rating of “extremely well paid”, 30% “quite well paid”, 26% “moderately well paid”, 20% “slightly well paid”, 18% “not at all well paid” and 0.5% “not paid”.

This report focuses on respondents’ answers to three questions pertinent to the quality of ECE centres for children.

1. Hypothetically, if you have or had your own children, would you be happy to enrol them at the service where you work, or another comparable one?
2. Do you feel there is time to develop individual relationships with the children you care for?
3. Are the adult-to-child ratios at your service usually below the legal minimum, at the legal minimum, above the legal minimum, or do you not know?

The three questions were drawn from an Australian survey of 578 staff working in full-time childcare by the Australia Institute (Rush, 2006) and were modified for the NZ survey. The Australian study differs in that it reports data pertaining to perceived differences in the quality of community-based, private, and corporate chain centres.

## A quarter of teachers would not enrol their child

Teachers could be expected to be happy for their child to attend the same or a similar centre to the one they taught at. To find out if this was the case, the teachers were asked the following question: “Hypothetically, if you have or had your own children, would you be happy to enrol them at the service where you work, or another comparable one?”

A quarter of teachers (25%, n= 153/601) indicated they would not be happy for their child to attend their centre or one like it. Kindergarten teachers however were more positive about enrolling their child compared to early childcare centre teachers.

A significantly higher proportion of childcare centre teachers reported not being happy for their child to attend their ECE centre or a comparable one (30%) compared to kindergarten teachers (8%).

Teacher reasons for not enrolling their child related to quality and to personal beliefs about the needs of young children and values for them e.g.

- The ratio in the babies’ room is one to five. This is ridiculous. When one goes to change nappies the other teacher is left with 9 babies. One day I was feeding a baby and the other

*A quarter of early childhood teachers would not enrol their child at their centre or another comparable one.*

*Teachers at centres with better than minimum staffing ratios and well-paid staff were significantly more likely to be positive about centre care for a child of their own.*

*The teachers who were positive about their child being enrolled liked the quality they saw. Cost and convenience were also factors.*

teacher was changing a nappy, another child started crying while two babies were hitting each other with toys - how can you handle this kind of situation?

- I'd prefer a smaller service, with fewer children per teacher and a more harmonious teaching team.
- There are several things I have challenged and been told off for challenging - too much teacher led time and age group programmes. I also strongly disagree with all children being forced to lie down for rest time.
- High staff turnover which I think is hard on the children.
- It is like factory farming for children; I have said to my friends "do not wait list your child here... ". I want my child to run on grass and have space to explore or be secluded. I want my child's thinking and humour to be extended by meaningful connection with consistent people.
- I would prefer in-home care with a carefully selected carer.
- I want to be a stay-at-home mum; and for many reasons I think my children will be better off with me than in any centre.
- Because of the behaviour of children in ECE centres compared to part-time or at-home children, there is a lot of aggression in ECE.

The teacher-child ratio was a significant concern for teachers. Centres that did not have above minimum staffing levels had teachers who were significantly less likely to be comfortable with a child of their own being enrolled ( $p = .05$ ), e.g.

- If I had a young child I feel the numbers are too high for 2 year olds in kindergarten sessions of 40 children.
- Although there are some amazing teachers at my centre I would not want my child in a centre that ran on the ratios we do.

How well teachers felt they were paid was also found to be a significant factor. Centres with teachers who perceived they were paid moderately to extremely well also had teachers who were more likely to be happy for their child to be enrolled ( $p = .05$ ). It would seem that when centres value staff, by maintaining better than minimum staffing levels and paying good wages/ salaries, centres are also perceived to value quality for children.

The main reasons why teachers stated they would be happy for a child of their own to be enrolled at their centre or another comparable one were quality, cost and travel.

- My son attended this kindergarten before I started as head kaiako (teacher). I chose it because of the environment and the kaiako.
- My child attended this kindergarten, being the only one that takes under twos and governed by our Kindergarten association. I felt so incredibly lucky - both for me and my child as I know the quality of the service provided here is good.
- I have my own children at my centre and I'm grateful for that. There's a new policy that teachers from now on won't have their own children with them. If my workplace didn't have a salary sacrifice scheme however I would consider having my children elsewhere as my centre is terribly expensive.

- For convenience I would have my child at the same centre I work at so there is no extra travel.

Within the comments provided by some teachers there was also a suggestion of possible compromises between expectations for quality and the practicalities of being a working parent, for example:

- I expect 'reasonable' and I'm not a dreamer. I think my kids do OK where I am working and they are looked after and looked out for!

## Obstacles and aids to relationships with children

The ability of teachers to develop relationships with children is perhaps the most important indicator of centre quality for children. It is important for secure attachments especially for under-threes, it reduces stress, and it enables teachers to learn about children's needs and better support their development.

In quality early childhood education we would expect teachers to have time to develop individual relationships with the children they cared for but as many as 17% of teachers surveyed did not.

Teachers reported they lacked time to relate with individual children for reasons such as their manager wanting them to focus on other tasks such as documentation, cleaning duties, and supervising large groups. Also a large number of children in the centre was reported to be an obstacle.

- My manager said to me that cleaning is more important.
- We are always too busy with routines that there is no quality time to spend with the children.
- Only the basics are considered good enough such as nappy changing.
- There is too much pressure to produce documentation like learning stories rather than build relationships.
- We could do with another teacher on the floor so at least one engaging activity or conversation with each child could happen instead of having to supervise a big group singularly.
- It's hard to get to know each child really well

*As many as 17% teachers report not having time to develop relationships with children.*

*The main obstacles to teachers developing relationships with children were workplace expectations to prioritise tasks such as cleaning, documentation and group management. Another obstacle was having too many children in their centre to get to know.*

*Teachers at better staffed centres (with higher than the minimum adult-child ratio) were significantly more likely to have time to develop relationships with children.*

*At centres with key teacher or primary caregiving systems teachers were supported to develop relationships with children. When this was not the case and staffing ratios did not permit teachers were only able to develop relationships with children if they put themselves at risk of burn-out by taking work home or working additional unpaid hours at their centre.*

individually because there are too many children.

- It's mostly crowd management.
- The only way to be noticed where I work is if you are the child throwing equipment, kicking, screaming, etc.

Interestingly, teachers at childcare centres were significantly more likely to report they did not have time to develop relationships with children (18% teachers) compared to kindergarten teachers (10%). This difference may possibly be explained by a greater emphasis on care routines and management within childcare centres compared to kindergartens which usually do not have children under the age of 2 years attending and children attend on average for a shorter length of time.

Teachers who reported being able to develop relationships with children were significantly more likely to be working at centres with higher than the minimum staffing ratio ( $p = .05$ ). A primary caregiving or key worker approach to children's care in centres also supported teachers to develop relationships with children.

- Our centre is based upon a 'family' environment philosophy and we have primary caregiving so each individual child has his/her needs met and is looked after by all teachers but has a primary caregiver also.

When ratios were poor and a key teacher or worker approach was not supported, some teachers put themselves at risk of emotional and physical burnout by doing additional unpaid work outside of normal hours e.g.

- I make sure I get time to develop relationships with the children even if it means starting earlier or finishing later without pay.
- This is a priority for me - I make time. For this reason, I take a lot of work home and I also work through my allocated lunch time, to complete other tasks e.g. learning stories, meeting minutes, policy schedules etc.

Teachers were also conscious of times when it was possible and not possible to interact personally with children, e.g.

- When I am on outside duties there is more time. Indoor duty is usually taken up with tasks.
- I can only get time to spend with a child when we've got some of the children away sick or if most are sleeping.
- Yes it is possible to spend time with individual children, but on some days the centre owner lets in more children than we are licensed to have and that really ups the workload.

## Adult to child ratios at centres

Child safety and welfare may be compromised when there are not enough adults to children for supervision and to attend to children's basic needs. The minimum number of adults to children is set in legislation to safeguard children's interests and has not changed over the past couple of decades even though early childhood teachers today are responsible for implementing a curriculum and assessing and reporting on children's learning. In all-day kindergarten and childcare centres the minimum number of adults to children is 1 adult to every 10 children (2 adults if more than 6 children); or 1 adult to every 5 children under 2 years. In part-day centres the minimum adult-child ratio is 1 to 15 (2 adults if between 8 and 15 children). The Ministry of Education is responsible for ensuring early childhood centres comply with regulations.

Twelve percent of teachers reported their centre was consistently operating with ratios below the legal minimum requirement. A further 36% teachers stated that staffing was at the legal minimum only, for example "the age group of our children are 3yrs and 4yrs, 40 children per session - teacher ratio is 1 teacher: 10 children". Fifty percent of teachers reported that their centre operated above the legal requirement for ratios, for example "1:4 for infants and toddlers and 1:8 for over twos". Close to 2% of teachers did not know if their centre met the minimum ratio requirement or what the ratios applied.

Teachers' comments suggest a possible lack of enforcement by the Ministry of Education and a lack of knowledge by ECE providers/managers of the rules concerning who counts as a teacher and where the teacher needs to be counted within ratio, e.g.

- They count the person in the kitchen (cook) as a staff member (teacher) but they should not be counted in ratio.
- The manager will record herself as being 'on the floor' teaching - but she will be working at her desk. My centre takes advantage of this and it is very hard for teachers.
- We are often below legal minimum due to staff taking lunch hours when they feel like it (leaving the centre under-staffed) or they sit inside and do not go out with the children on cold days.

Many of the teachers who reported that their centre met or exceeded minimum staffing ratios also expressed concerns about 'paper' ratios not being adequate for 'best professional practice'.

Comments included:

- Above ratio but there are huge loopholes. Yes we have 4 teachers for around 35 over 2s but this is then split into two rooms and sometimes (e.g. on lunches /non contacts) you can end

*Twelve percent of teachers perceived the adult-child ratio at their centre to be consistently below the legal minimum requirement, and a further 36% stated that ratios were operating only at the minimum required level*

*A problem of adult-child ratios being different on paper than in practice emerged from teacher comments, with teachers reporting that the 'paper' ratio was not always as high as what they and the children experienced in practice.*

up with 1 teacher with 20 toddlers as they move from inside to outside areas. So it is legal in theory but in practice – no.

- We are lucky to have quality ratios at least on paper, most of the time, although there have been times when I have been alone with 7 to 8 under ones.
- Above ratios but this includes untrained staff and student teachers in the count.

The majority of kindergarten teachers reported their kindergarten operated at the legal minimum level for ratios (70% teachers). Childcare centre teachers were significantly more likely to report that their centre operated at above the legal minimum requirement for ratios (40% teachers) compared to kindergarten teachers (22.5%). However, more childcare teachers (13%) reported that their centre operated below the legal requirement compared to kindergarten teachers (6%).

## Discussion

The quality of early childhood care and education has been a concern in NZ for a long time, especially as research has shown that the best outcomes for children result not from being in care but from sufficient time spent with parents/ guardians who offer consistent support throughout childhood (e.g. Carroll-Lind & Angus, 2011; ChildForum 2014; Farquhar 1991, 1993, Meade 1985, Smith & Swain 1988).

Our country's early childhood education policy is focused on increasing participation and not on quality. This report has highlighted some major questions over the quality of teacher-led centres for children that policy makers should not put aside. It would seem that the policy push for increased participation is very likely putting children's attachment and development of secure relationships, brain development, learning and life-long outcomes at risk.

When a quarter of teachers say they would not enrol their child at a centre, such as the one they work at or another one like it, we should be seriously worried. Teachers are in a unique position of knowing what goes on in centres when parents are not there. Moreover the majority of early childhood teachers are formally educated in child development and care so they are well placed to notice and comment on what really matters in the day to day running of a facility for children's wellbeing.

We should also be worried that around one-fifth of teachers do not have time to develop relationships with children. These are very young children, most are aged under-5 years and may be as young as just one month old. An orphanage or institutionalised approach to care is not healthy for children and not what our society expects children to experience in early childhood education. Furthermore consistent under-staffing seems to be happening in a minority of centres in breach of education regulations

Supporting teachers to provide quality care and education means an emphasis on relationships as being paramount to quality for children. The ability to develop relationships with children is fundamental to being able to provide quality care and support children to be capable and confident learners as the curriculum Te Whāriki encourages teachers to do.

## Recommendations and solutions

In New Zealand's early childhood education system there is insufficient focus on quality and quality assurance and this places children's attachment, development and learning at risk. The Government and the Ministry of Education should strengthen the focus on quality to ensure that each and every centre supports its teachers to provide quality care and education at least to the standard that any teacher would want for her or his own children. In addition, adult-child ratio rules do not appear to be always well understood, suggesting a need for education along with enforcement or penalties for breaches.

Greater transparency in the quality of ECE would encourage ECE owners/ operators to make sure teachers are adequately supported to provide quality. Teachers should be regularly surveyed by the Ministry of Education and confidential survey results such as that provided by ChildForum in this report should be used to inform reviews of ECE quality.

Regular reporting by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with other government departments such as the Ministry of Health relating to mental and behavioural issues arising from children's participation in ECE is needed.

The Ministry of Education has shown reluctance to release information about complaints it has upheld against centres and will not release information on individual cases (My ECE website, 2013). When criticism and problems to do with quality are reported by the media or in public the ministry has tended to take a public relations defensive approach perhaps because it cannot be seen for political reasons to be undermining the Government's 98% children in ECE participation goal. But, the ministry should push the pause button on any more spending of the taxpayer dollar on promoting participation in early childhood education until it can show that every child will experience quality care and education and problems with quality assurance have been addressed.

Where can parents worried about whether their child will receive quality care and education go for information?

1. **My ECE New Zealand** also provides a forum for parents to post and share their reviews and ratings of centre quality and ask questions. A document outlining the rights of children in ECE is available from the My ECE New Zealand website.
2. Written evaluations of centres are available from the **Education Review Office**. But reports can be up to 4 years old and centres are warned in advance of being visited so it is possible to give a false image, for example by making sure staffing numbers are high for ERO's visit. Also reports can be written by evaluators who are primary or secondary teacher trained with limited knowledge and experience of ECE settings

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