The Early Childhood Education Taskforce and Playcentre Parent Cooperatives: A Mismatch of Policy Discourses in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Playcentre is a parent cooperative early childhood service that has been a part of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector in Aotearoa New Zealand since the 1940s. Government reviews in the mid-20th century endorsed Playcentre as a preferential provider of ECEC alongside Kindergartens (Committee of Inquiry into Pre-School Education, 1971; Consultative Committee on Pre-School Educational Services, 1947). However by the 21st century, Playcentre was being actively marginalised in policies and policy proposals designed to support the ECEC sector, such as being excluded from the 20 Hours Free funding policy[1] (May, 2004-2008) and being categorised as a second, lower-quality tier of ECEC services by the Early Childhood Education Taskforce [hereafter 'the Taskforce'] (ECE Taskforce, 2011a). The exclusion occurred despite the longstanding rhetoric that the diversity of services was a strength of the ECEC sector in Aotearoa New Zealand and something to be encouraged (Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group, 1988; ECE Taskforce, 2011a; Ministry of Education, 2002).

In this paper I argue that the marginalisation of the Playcentre ECEC service type has arisen from a mismatch between Playcentre philosophy and discourses underlying government policy for ECEC. The specific mismatches addressed in this paper are the parent cooperative nature of Playcentre which is at odds with the increasing professionalization of the ECEC sector, and the inclusion of adult education in Playcentre in contrast to the narrower government focus only on child educational outcomes. These tensions are evident in relation to the Playcentre philosophy and practice of using parents as the educators in the service (Manning & Loveridge, 2009), as well the development of communities of learners (van Wijk & Wilton Playcentre members, 2007).

Policy seeks to solve problems, but the way these problems are represented are socially and politically constructed (e.g. Bacchi, 2009; Mitchell, 2010; St John, 2014). The way problems are represented matter because policies based on these representations advantage some groups and disadvantage others (Bacchi, 2009). In order to change the effects of policy, the problem representations on which the policies are based need to be changed. As a first step, the discourses underlying these problem representations need to be made visible and problematised. This paper seeks to take this first step by examining and comparing the discourses evident in the language used in the series of videos which accompanied the Taskforce report (ECE Taskforce, 2011a), and an introductory video produced by the New Zealand Playcentre Federation (2011). The aim of the analysis being undertaken here is to "to identify shared patterns of talking [and] understand how people construct their own version of events" (Dawson, 2013, p. 140).

The first half of this article sets the context for the policy analysis. First, I trace the origins of Playcentre's parents-as-educators philosophy, including the development of the Playcentre

[1] The 20-hours policy affords a higher rate of funding for children aged 3-5 years, meaning children's attendance is subsidised to up to six hours a day and up to 20 hours a week.

qualifications and the practice of group supervision. Then I present an overview of ECEC policy changes since the late 1980s from a Playcentre perspective. The second half of the article first details the videos that are being used as data, and then the analysis attempts to make visible the discourses evident in the language used in the videos. The objective is to explore the contrast between government policy and Playcentre constructions of the roles of parents in ECEC and of desirable outcomes of participation.

Playcentre: A parent co-operative, 1940s-1980s

Playcentre is an ECEC service which grew out of the unique conditions of Aotearoa New Zealand (for overviews of Playcentre history, see Manning & Stover, 2014; May, 2009; Stover, 1998). The modern organisation has an emphasis on parents-as-educators in the centres, and a training programme has been developed to support parents in this role. These features differentiate Playcentre from most other services in the Aotearoa New Zealand ECEC sector. They also differentiate it from the many other parent cooperative services around the world which tend to operate with a trained teacher supported by parent helpers (Canadian Co-operative Association, 2007; Mach, 2009). Indeed, the early Playcentres operated in this trained teacher-parent helper manner, but adapted to changing circumstances over time.

The Playcentre movement officially started in Wellington in 1941 with a group of women who were looking to support each other while their husbands were overseas in World War II. The women formed a committee to manage the group, and contributed funds to pay for a hall, equipment, and the services of a kindergarten teacher (May, 2013). The idea quickly spread, with other Playcentres opening within months. Other initiatives from different parts of the country soon joined together with the fledgling Playcentre movement, and in so doing, changed the character of Playcentre by emphasising adult education alongside children's education. One such initiative was the nursery school run by Doreen Dalton in Christchurch, where high school girls were taught about parenting while gaining practical experience at the nursery school. Another initiative was the group run by Gwen Somerset in the Feilding Community Centre, where parent education classes and a nursery school were run concurrently. Somerset became the first president of the NZ Playcentre Federation (NZPF) in 1948, and was instrumental in embedding parent education within Playcentre philosophy and practice (Manning, 2014; May, 2013).

The number of Playcentres expanded rapidly and the organisers soon realised that, to be sustainable, the movement had to train its own supervisors. The first series of child development lectures occurred in Wellington in 1945 and the programme expanded rapidly into a system of certificates for parent helpers, assistant supervisors, and supervisors. During the 1950s and 1960s, Playcentre and Kindergarten training developed separately, with Kindergarten teachers being trained in Kindergarten colleges and Playcentre supervisors being trained through the field-based Playcentre training. Formal training for those working in services outside of Playcentres or Kindergartens began in the 1970s (May, 2009).

Playcentre supervisors were generally former Playcentre parents who had completed the supervisor training. This "traditional" model of a supervisor with a roster of parent helpers (McDonald, 1982) started to change under the influence of Lex Grey. Grey became president of the Auckland Playcentre Association in 1953, and was committed to empowering current Playcentre parents, rather than outside "experts", to both manage the centres and educate the children (Stover, 1998). His later work with the Māori Education Fellowship and the Māori Women's Welfare League in the 1960s encouraged the opening of many new Playcentres in northern and rural areas of New Zealand's North Island. From these, a new model of Playcentre

supervision arose; the entire parent group stayed for the session and all took responsibility for the supervising and educating of the children (Manning, Woodhams, & Howsan, 2011).

Auckland Playcentre Association introduced a three-year tenure for supervisors in 1967 (Stover, 1998). The practice led to the development of team supervision, which was a hybrid between the single supervisor and the whole group supervision models. Team supervision slowly spread through other parts of the country, resulting in a variety of models in different areas by the late 1980s (Manning et al., 2011).

Playcentre and Early Childhood Policy: *Before Five, 1988.*

The government restructured the administration of the entire New Zealand education system in 1988-1991, as part of the transformation of the public service to align with neoliberal principles (Roper, 2005). The ECEC policy document from this time of reform was titled, "Before Five: Early childhood care and education in New Zealand "(Department of Education, 1988, hereafter "Before Five"), which was based on the working group report "Education to Be More*"* (Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group, 1988). That report positioned ECEC as complementary to the family, serving the interests of children, caregivers, and cultural transmission. The rationale for government investment in the *Before Five* policy was less broad, and focused only on children's formal education. The "Before Five" and "Education to Be More" documents produced a plan for administering ECEC services that did not differentiate between service types such as Playcentre, Kindergarten, Kōhanga Reo[2] or childcare. There was to be a universal funding formula rate based on children's enrolments, available to all services who could meet the minimum licensing standards. The minimum standards handbook was published in August 1989 and included such things as property requirements and adult-to-child ratios (Ministry of Education, 1989).

Minimum standards for qualifications to be held by teaching staff took longer to be decided. Kindergarten and childcare training had been merged into a single three-year diploma level course in 1987 (May, 2009). The initial proposal for the teaching staff qualifications in "Before Five" was that all licensed services, including Playcentre, would nominate a "person responsible" and this person would have to have the new integrated Diploma qualification. The NZPF was concerned that the policy would not allow the continuation of their group and team supervision practices, or the practice of using parents-as-educators (NZPF, 1989-1990). After much debate in political circles, a compromise was reached. A qualifications blueprint (Ministry of Education, 1990) set out requirements for two groups of ECEC service types based on a points system, originally developed to help transition old ECEC qualifications to the equivalent of the new benchmark three-year diploma. Group 1 services comprised services with "high parent involvement", such as Playcentre and Kōhanga Reo. This group was allocated a number of points because of the high parent involvement, and the rest of the points would come from the teams of parents/kaiako[3] with different levels of Playcentre or Kōhanga Reo qualifications. Group 2 comprised services without high parent involvement, and these services would need to designate a single person responsible who held the 'points' equivalent of the Diploma qualification. The NZPF considered this dual policy to be an endorsement of their philosophy and practice of parents-as-educators (Playcentre Journal Editor, 1990).

[2] An indigenous Māori language immersion family service that started in 1982.

[3] A Māori term for a teacher, and is the generic term used for educators in Kōhanga Reo.

The points system was used throughout the 1990s with ongoing modifications, but by the end of the decade both Ministry officials and sector organisations agreed that the system was administratively unwieldy and philosophically flawed. The new policy proposal was to designate the three-year Diploma as the basic qualification for ECEC teachers (May, 2009; Meade, 1998). The NZPF therefore entered into negotiations with the Ministry of Education to develop a new licensing agreement which would allow Playcentre to continue to use parents-as-educators and group supervision in the new policy environment (NZPF, 1991-2002). The new licensing agreement was based on the updated Playcentre training qualification (Playcentre Education, 2000) and was phased in from 2002 (Ministry of Education, 2001).

Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education, 2002.

A change of government in 1999 brought a new wave of policy initiatives for ECEC. The Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education (SPECE) (Ministry of Education, 2002) firmly positioned ECEC as the foundation of the education sector and of later school achievement, in line with growing international interest in children's rights to education and the potential of ECEC to contribute to future individual economic outcomes (Dalli & Te One, 2003; OECD, 2001). The SPECE laid out a ten year plan with three major objectives: to increase participation in ECEC, to raise the quality of services, and to increase collaboration between government departments to achieve ECEC goals. The three-year diploma was set as the qualification for ECEC teachers, as well as a target of 100% of staff in ECEC being fully qualified and registered teachers by the year 2012. Strategies to support this plan included reviews of funding and of regulations, as well as professional development initiatives.

The SPECE acknowledged that targets for qualified teachers related only to those services that did not have high parent involvement, as detailed in the 1990 qualifications blueprint (Ministry of Education, 1990). Specific strategies for services with high parent involvement were deferred until research was completed into what influenced quality ECEC in these services (Mitchell, Royal Tangaere, Mara, & Wylie, 2006). The SPECE introduced the terms "parent-led" and "teacher-led" services to describe the two groups of services.

Deferring the development of strategies for improving quality in parent-led services had an effect on the funding review that was undertaken in 2003-2004, in that the review outcome focused solely on teacher-led services (May, 2003-2004). The new funding system that was announced in the 2004 government budget, the "20 Hours Free ECE" policy, was designed to fund the increased costs to services generated by the SPECE and specifically by the requirement to employ qualified and registered teachers. Parent-led services were excluded from this new funding as costs had not increased for these services (Bushouse, 2009). The new policy was promoted with the message that the government was increasing funding for quality ECEC. An unintended effect of this rhetoric, alongside the exclusion of parent-led services from the policy, was an implicit message that the government did not consider parent-led services to be quality services (Bushouse, 2009; Woodhams, 2008). After protests from Playcentre, the Ministry of Education included statements in support of Playcentre in information about the new policy (May, 2004-2010). Parent-led services were eventually included in the policy after 2008 when there was a change of government from a Labour party-led to a National party-led coalition (NZPF, 2010).

The ECE Taskforce, 2011.

By the time the government changed in 2008, the work of James Heckman and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) had provided economic rationales for government investment in ECEC and were influencing international policy development

(Heckman, 2006; Mahon, 2009; OECD, 2001, 2002). The arguments were based on human capital theory, as developed by the Chicago School of Economics. Human capital theory linked educational achievement with employability and adult productivity, suggesting that government investment in effective education systems would increase the country's economic performance and global competitiveness. ECEC had been calculated to provide a better return on government investment than expenditure on education for older children, thus making ECEC an attractive site for government intervention (Heckman, 2006; Lightfoot-Rueda & Peach, 2015). The incoming centre-right government in 2008 was therefore predisposed to continue support for ECEC. The focus of policy development of the new government was on targeting the ECEC funding to attain the best returns from government investment, especially as government expenditure on ECEC was escalating because of the 20 Hours Free policy (May, 2009).

A Taskforce was appointed in 2010 to review the government's investment in ECEC and to recommend policies that would ensure educational outcomes needed for effective human capital development. The Taskforce (ECE Taskforce, 2011a) recommended that a distinction be made between centre-based, teacher-led services and other services, because they considered that:

> ...high-quality, teacher-led services should be encouraged and supported by the new funding system. We consider that 'other' services, (for example, parent-led services) should qualify for some financial support, but should not be the main focus of the new system. (ECE Taskforce, 2011a, p. 76)

The distinction between services using parents-as-educators and those using employed teachers was originally made in the 1990 qualifications blueprint to accommodate diversity within the sector (Ministry of Education, 1990). Accommodating diversity was also a rationale for the parent-led/teacher-led distinction in the SPECE (Meade, 2011). The Taskforce used the same distinction to marginalise rather than accommodate parent-led services, using logic based on economics and human capital theory.

There were immediate and widespread protests at the report, especially from Playcentre, Kōhanga Reo, and home-based ECEC services who had been categorised as other. As a result, the government made an assurance that funding to these types of services would not be cut, and instead set up working parties to work through the Taskforce's recommendations, which reported back in 2012 (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Since 2012, the direction of government ECEC policy has remained. Targets have been set for increasing participation in ECEC (State Services Commission, 2013), and the early childhood curriculum has been updated, as recommended by the Taskforce (Ministry of Education, 2017b). The funding system has remained much the same, with Playcentre continuing on lower funding rates than any other licensed ECEC service (Ministry of Education, 2016). Another funding review underway in 2016/2017, incorporating both the ECEC and the compulsory schooling sector (Ministry of Education, 2017a), has been halted by a new government. A Teacher-Led Innovation Fund has recently been extended to ECEC, but is only eligible for teams of "certified ECE teachers and kaiako in kōhanga reo holding Tohu Whakapakari" (Ministry of Education, 2017c, p. 3), thereby excluding teams of Playcentre parents-as-educators from applying. This is in contrast to a similar scheme initiated by the previous government, the Centres of Innovation scheme, which was open to participation by Playcentres (van Wijk & Wilton Playcentre members, 2007). Past policy development shows a history of compromises designed to accommodate Playcentre philosophy and practice, and protect the diversity of ECEC services; current policy appears to marginalise and exclude Playcentre.

Methodology

The main methodology for this analysis was the approach developed by Carol Bacchi (2009). Bacchi's premise is that we are governed by the way problems are constructed and represented in policy. Therefore to create radical change these problem representations need to be disrupted. One of the first steps in Bacchi's process of policy analysis is to make visible the underlying discourses contained in the policy, through the policy documents and the way that the policy is written. These discourses construct the problems that the policy seeks to solve, and both enable and constrain the ways that these problems can be examined. This paper seeks to make visible the discourses contained in the policy recommendations of the Taskforce, and indicates how these discourses construct the policy problems in a different way than Playcentre parents would. My argument is that this mismatch of discourses and the consequent problem representations results in policy that marginalises Playcentres.

This paper analyses oral texts, rather than the written Taskforce report. In written documents, the language has been reified through careful editing and official approval of the final version. Oral texts provide a slightly different window for analysis. The oral texts used here are monologues and therefore are less spontaneous than conversations, but at the same time the language used by the presenters is more spontaneous and less scripted than an edited and approved written report. Such oral texts therefore have the potential to reflect the discourses or patterns of speech (Dawson, 2013) that are current in everyday usage for that group of people.

The oral texts used were taken from publicly available videos. The Taskforce produced a series of short videos to explain the different sections of their report, and these were published on their public website in 2011. The videos, twelve in total, were all approximately one to three minutes long, and consisted of different members of the Taskforce talking to the camera/audience. The Playcentre oral texts came from an introductory video produced by the NZPF for new parents, also in 2011. The video was ten minutes long and was compiled from edited interviews of Playcentre members and footage taken at several Playcentres (NZPF, 2011). Both sets of texts were therefore from the same year, and were organisationally edited and approved messages designed to represent the Taskforce/Playcentre to the general public through the spoken word. This paper therefore does not refer to individual Taskforce or Playcentre members by name, as it has been assumed that each person represents the general views of the whole group even if the expression of those views is uniquely individual.

The videos were transcribed and the analysis focused on the words and language used by the various presenters. Working with transcriptions meant that language features such as intonation, fluency and animation were not taken into account, nor were body language or other visual clues analysed. The intent was to look for patterns of speech and ways of talking, particularly for the assumptions that the speakers were making about what was taken for granted in ECEC as they perceived it. My background of working in Playcentre was used to interpret the meaning and identify the assumptions of the Playcentre parents. My wider ECEC academic study enabled identification of where these meanings and assumptions conflicted with those of the Taskforce members. This analysis showed that the two groups of speakers were constructing the roles of parents and teachers and the purposes of ECEC, in different ways. The findings are presented in four interrelated sections: the distinction between teachers and parents; the meaning of parent involvement; the provision of parent support; and quality and variability in relation to communities of learners.

Findings

The framing of teachers and parents within the videos.

A basic philosophical principle of Playcentre is that the close relationship parents have with their children allows them, with support and training, to be effective educators during their children's early years. Although I use the term "educator" to differentiate the trained parents at a Playcentre from those who hold an ECEC teaching qualification, Playcentre parents generally consider themselves to be doing the work of teachers and often refer to themselves as teachers. The terms "parent", "teacher" and sometimes "educator" tend to be used interchangeably in talk by Playcentre members. For example, during the introductory video the NZPF Co-President quoted a phrase often used in Playcentre: "Parents are the first and best teachers of their children" (NZPF, 2011, 0.57-1.00 min). In another Playcentre video example, a centre member commented, "The parents all bring unique things to the children, in the sense that we come from all different backgrounds … they can teach children so many different and wonderful things" (NZPF, 2011, 1.57-2.13 min). Parents as teachers has been an important practice and a dominant discourse for Playcentre members, differentiating Playcentre from most other ECEC services.

However, in the wider ECEC sector, the term *teacher* has become professionalised and reserved for people who have a teaching qualification. Three decades ago, writers of government documents were hesitant to use the term teachers in relation to ECEC, as shown by the term *staff* being used throughout the "Education to Be More" document (Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group, 1988). Three years later in 1991, the government was happy to use teacher in relation to parents when it introduced the "Parents As First Teachers" initiative (Smith, 1991). A shift had occurred by the time the SPECE was published in 2002 (Ministry of Education, 2002). The SPECE aimed to increase the numbers of teachers in ECEC services with the Diploma qualification, and also introduced teacher registration for ECEC. The SPECE document referred to parents and *whānau* responsible for providing ECE (or variations on that wording) throughout the document to differentiate parents in Playcentre and Kōhanga Reo from qualified, registered teachers. The new terminology of teacher-led and parent-led services also reinforced the message that teachers were professionals, and parents were not teachers.

In the videos accompanying the Taskforce report in 2011, the Taskforce members often referred to teachers and teaching, always in the context of the professional teacher. The video, "Staff education and professional development*"* focused exclusively about teachers, and no other type of staff. That presentation started with the statement, "the Taskforce vision is to have a highly paid, well qualified, and respected early childhood profession" (ECE Taskforce, 2011g, 0.0-0.09 min). There was no reference in this or any of the other videos to parents taking on the role of educators in the service. The closest statement was when a Taskforce member talked about "aiming for high-quality services" and wanted to ensure "it's not just the teachers in the coal face, and the parents and the educators that are delivering that" (ECE Taskforce, 2011b, 0.14-0.19 min). However this is a somewhat ambiguous statement as it could apply equally to parents-as-educators and to parents as supporters of teachers. The same Taskforce member acknowledged, "there's a diversity of services available within early childhood education" (ECE Taskforce, 2011b, 0.25-0.28 min) and listed a number of services (but did not include Playcentre). In this "Aiming for high-quality services" video she did not say how these services constituted themselves as diverse from each other, nor mention that the Taskforce was recommending withdrawing support for parent-led services on the grounds that they were not considered quality services. The discourse of parents-as-educators, one of the key historical aspects of diversity in the ECEC sector, was notably absent from this discussion.

I would argue that the construction of the teacher as a professional in the Taskforce video worked to exclude the discourses of parents taking on teaching roles. In contrast, the discourse of parents-as-educators was a dominant feature in the Playcentre video. Policy based on the Taskforce construction of parents would therefore inevitably marginalise Playcentre practice and philosophy.

Constructions of parent involvement within the videos.

For both the Taskforce and Playcentre members, it was important that parents were an integral part of ECEC services. However this meant different things to each group. The Taskforce discourse was of "parent engagement" where parents were supporters of the ECEC service, working in partnership with teachers. For example in the video, "Supporting parents", the Taskforce member talked about the role of parents in supporting the teachers, where the teachers' role was to work directly with the children:

> And what we talk about in this section of the whole paper is making sure that we have the right incentives, the right support, and the right structure and framework to ensure that the parents are part of this journey, to ensure that parents engage, to ensure that communities engage, to ensure that the whānau are all part and parcel of the learning and development of children. It not only enhances the learning outcomes for children, but it also creates a better understanding for the teachers that work directly with children. (ECE Taskforce, 2011e, 0.58-1.31 min)

The Taskforce videos presented the roles of parents and teachers as complementary but distinct and separate. Parents had the personal knowledge of the children and were responsible for their care and overall wellbeing; teachers had professional knowledge about ECEC, and were responsible for children's education as well as helping parents understand their children's education. This discourse positioned parents primarily as carers and teachers primarily as educators, despite the official rhetoric that care and education in early childhood were inseparable (May, 2009).

In contrast, the Playcentre discourse was of "parent involvement", which encompassed a broader range of activities than the discourse of parent engagement evident in the Taskforce videos. In Playcentre, the lines between carers and educators were blurred. Parents in the Playcentre video talked about working directly with children and learning about early childhood education:

> My favourite place at Playcentre is definitely the sandpit. Looking at erosion, and doing some of that sciencey stuff with the kids. (NZPF, 2011, 0.18-0.24 min)

> The Playcentre training has taught me how to do observations and what to look for in the children's learning, and how to extend on their learning so they can develop more skills. (NZPF, 2011, 7.53-8.05 min)

The discourse of parent involvement in Playcentre assumed the physical presence of parents at the centre at least some of the time. This physical presence was expected and welcomed by parents, and was seen as part of the benefits of belonging to a Playcentre. One mother was happy that

> I was encouraged to stay, I could stay if I wanted to, I had the choice of whether to come or go, and it really helped with my son too, 'cos come time when I was leaving, he was quite happy with that, waving to me at the gate (NZPF, 2011, 2.14-2.27 min)

Whereas staying with children at Playcentre was an accepted part of the philosophy of the service and a large part of what constituted parent involvement, this physical presence was not part of the parent engagement discourse of the Taskforce members. Part of the rationale for this distinct separation of the role of the parent from that of the teacher was to enable parents to be available for other activities. At the time of the "Education to Be More" report, ECEC was positioned as allowing women to "have a real choice about whether or not they wish to re-enter the paid workforce; to do voluntary work; to be available for public duties…; to further their own education; to have regular rest and leisure time" (Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group, 1988, p. 6). The SPECE in 2002 acknowledged that ECEC should meet the "training, education and employment needs of parents" (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 9). In 2011, the Taskforce simplified this statement to an expectation that ECEC allowed parents to work in paid employment. The video, "Supporting parental engagement in paid work*"* (ECE Taskforce, 2011f) stressed the importance of parents maintaining a continuous connection with paid work. This was a key economic and human capital development rationale for government provision of ECEC through encouraging economic productivity of parents. Such a rationale did not fit with the Playcentre discourse of parent involvement in ECEC which required the physical presence of parents.

Talking about parent support within the videos.

Within Playcentre discourse, "parent support" was not about supporting parents to be in the paid workforce. Rather, parent support meant support for active parenting by providing opportunities for parents to be involved with children and sharing ideas and information about parenting. One parent commented, "you pick up ideas as a parent, and things you can do with your children" (NZPF, 2011, 7.12-7.16 min). Another parent mentioned, "unfortunately we have no family here, so it's been really good being able to learn and watch other parents and how they interact with other children" (NZPF, 2011, 7.01-7.09 min).

An important part of parent support in Playcentre was the construction of parenting as a valued role in society, thereby validating the choices that the Playcentre parents were making. One parent clearly articulated this discourse:

> When I first started at Playcentre, I was very shy and would actually prefer to stay behind the paint sink cleaning up the paint pots. In the process [of participating in Playcentre], I have gained a lot of confidence. A lot of that came from the understanding that my role as a parent is valued in Playcentre. (NZPF, 2011, 1.45-1.56 min)

A notable aspect of parent support as talked about by Playcentre parents was that it was peer support. Support came from being involved in a network of parents who were sharing experiences and knowledges, where all parents could both give and receive support. The sense of belonging to a peer group of parents was an important part of the benefits and support acquired through participation in Playcentre. This was noted in a number of comments such as these two:

> Whānau tūpū ngātahi for me - families working together - I think it fits perfectly, because it's not just for the children. Us as parents, we get quite a bit out of it too. (NZPF, 2011, 5.35-5.45 min)

> I think the shared purpose of being here for the children, is a wonderful joining factor. […] As an adult I don't know that I fit in with a group of adults better in my life. (NZPF, 2011, 6.41-6.50, 8.53-8.57 min)

Support for Māori and also Pacific cultures in Playcentre was discussed in terms of partnership, a discourse derived from Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the bicultural learning journey that the NZPF had been undertaking for several decades (Manning, 2014). One Māori woman said, "it's about working in partnership, and partnership to me means having respect and trust in each other, and we're learning as we go along as well" (NZPF, 2011, 5.15-5.26 min). In another example, a Pasifika woman showed that she had a sense of belonging to Playcentre and that she felt her voice was heard: "Playcentre has acknowledged my children's cultures by doing certain things and asking me about the correct protocol and if we're doing it right by acknowledging certain ceremonies" (NZPF, 2011, 4.53-5.03 min). The partnership approach was based on a non-hierarchical peer network, where parents were supported through belonging and participating in a community of learners.

Within the Taskforce videos, the discourses of parent support were multiple, complex, and at times, confused. One video titled, "Supporting parents through early childhood education" (ECE Taskforce, 2011e), suggested the ECEC services were the supporters and the parents in need of support. However, the Taskforce member also presented a different argument in the same video, that the parents were the ones supporting the ECEC teachers. He emphasised parent and services working together but used "support for" and "support by" parents interchangeably:

> It's one of the key points that you can't work with children if you don't bring the parents along. The journey in terms of early childhood education, learning and development, starts at a very early age, and without *support for* these parents it makes it really hard to get a community that's engaging and connecting, and achieving the learning outcomes that we want for children. Without the *support of* parents it's very difficult for this to go forward. (ECE Taskforce, 2011e, 0.23-0.56 min, my emphasis).

'Support for parents' had different meanings throughout the Taskforce videos. One meaning was that parents needed to be supported to engage with the ECEC services. The Taskforce had several recommendations as to who could be giving that support to parents, as in the videos on "Achieving access for all" and "Supporting parents":

> The recommendations around achieving access for all is about enabling communities to support families to enable children to attend and participate in early childhood. (ECE Taskforce, 2011d, 0.44-0.55 min)

> One of the key recommendations that we have is ensuring that services are supported to work effectively with parents, to engage with parents. (ECE Taskforce, 2011e, 2.07-2.17 min)

The meaning of parent support as support for parenting, which was prominent in Playcentre discourse, was almost absent in the Taskforce discourse. This emphasis fitted with the human capital development basis of the Taskforce approach, where parents were being supported to remain in the paid workforce while their children were being educated by professional teachers. The exception is the one Taskforce member whose contribution to the "Our vision for ECE" video included learning for parents as part of ECEC support, in the context of being part of a learning community:

> So, my vision for early childhood is that we have communities of learning, where children and their families feel part of the learning environment and they also set themselves on a pathway of learning for life. (ECE Taskforce, 2011h, 3.48-4.26 min)

Constructing communities of learning.

The idea of ECEC services as a community of learners is not new. The Taskforce report cited Pen Green in the UK (ECE Taskforce, 2011a, p. 92) as an example of such a community (Whalley, 2007). There are other examples from Aotearoa New Zealand which include Te Aroha Noa in Palmerston North (Munford, Sanders, Maden, & Maden, 2007) as well as Playcentres around the country (van Wijk & Wilton Playcentre members, 2007). There was only a small emphasis of this concept in the Taskforce videos or report, which I would argue is because of the Taskforce predominant focus on achieving economic returns on the government's ECEC investment. The value of communities of learners tend to be broader than improving economic earning potential, and when power and control is relinquished to communities of learners, the outcomes cannot be guaranteed. Lack of certainty and control of outcomes of ECEC was seen as a problem for the Taskforce, which their recommendations sought to rectify through quality control.

The Taskforce members were clear that variability in quality was a problem that needed to be eliminated through various strategies to ensure that a particular standard of quality was delivered by all services, at all times. This example from the video on "Aiming for high-quality services" indicates how important risk management was to the Taskforce:

> Our aim with the recommendations is to ensure that all children receive the best possible start in life for their lifelong journey of learning and to *ensure* that, we need all services to be held more accountable and *ensure* that they are providing quality. (ECE Taskforce, 2011b, 0.46-0.59 min, my emphasis)

The concept of quality is one that is rooted in the modernist paradigm of certainty, measurability and standardisation (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2013). Quality has been used as the evaluation concept for ECEC since the 1980s, despite the acknowledgement that quality can be problematic (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Dalli et al., 2011). Human capital theory assumes that the control of quality in ECEC will guarantee the desired outcomes of a good educational foundation and that this will result in later school achievement for children and increased adult earning potential. It is the discourse of human capital theory that was evident when a Taskforce member explained why reprioritising government expenditure to support ECEC was a good idea by linking ECEC to "better performance at school, more likelihood in the future of being a productive worker, less health problems, less likelihood of being engaged in criminal justice" (ECE Taskforce, 2011c, 0.12-0.23 min). The Taskforce was concerned to develop policy to create as much certainty as possible so that such outcomes would be achieved. The Taskforce members in the videos used language such as 'ensure'/'make sure', having the 'right' incentives/support/structures, the 'best possible'/'highest quality'. The choice of language reflects the importance to the Taskforce of certainty and predictability.

The problem of variability was linked with the diversity in the "Aiming for high-quality services" video in the comment that "overall we felt that the quality of service provision was generally good, however there is also variance because of the very diverse nature of the sector" (ECE Taskforce, 2011b, 0.37-0.45 min). The context of this comment meant that the Taskforce member was likely to be referring to the diversity of centres rather than specifically to the diversity of services, as Aoteaora New Zealand centres are not operated by the government and are treated as administratively autonomous. However, the implication was that diversity was a problem because it generated variability, which is in opposition to certainty and predictability. This was in contrast to the Playcentre acceptance of variability as part of the process of being a community of learners.

Playcentres have been identified as communities of learners due to the focus on learning for both adults and children (van Wijk & Wilton Playcentre members, 2007). Given this focus, Playcentre encompasses broader aims than just providing ECEC to improve the chances of children's later school achievement and economic outcomes. The aims for Playcentre are about supporting parenting as a valuable role, building communities that support its members, and the transformation and growth of both adults and children depending on their own wants, needs and opportunities. The NZPF co-president phrased this as "we take families from all walks of life in New Zealand, and we develop them and grow them as families" (NZPF, 2011, 5.49-5.55 min). This necessarily includes a lot of variability, as families come to Playcentre with a wide range of prior experiences and backgrounds, and each person's learning journey takes its own path. The outcomes are also variable and cannot be pre-determined. In the Playcentre video, the parents mentioned a variety of different learnings, not all of which would have a specific economic value:

> It's from being in Playcentre that gave me license to be creative myself. (NZPF, 2011, 6.50-6.55 min)
>
> It's led to things outside of Playcentre where I've started taking on that type of leadership role that previously I wouldn't have felt comfortable doing. (NZPF, 2011, 6.23-6.32 min)
>
> I was interested in learning some Te Reo and incorporating that into our life. (NZPF, 2011, 5.03-5.07 min)

An important part of being a learning community is an acceptance of mistakes being made, as people learn and develop (Manning et al., 2011; van Wijk & Wilton Playcentre members, 2007). Accepting and expecting mistakes results in variability of ECEC service delivery, both within and between Playcentres. The language in the Playcentre video indicated the focus was on learning rather than getting it right, with comments such as, "I didn't think I was a children sort of person, but since I've been coming here I'm just loving play" (NZPF, 2011, 1.27-1.34 min) and "I never realised how much children learn from playing" (NZPF, 2011, 3.04-3.07 min). In Playcentre, adults and children undertake a learning journey together, resulting in growth, transformation and unexpected benefits and challenges, but also resulting in variability and unpredictable outcomes. The aim of Playcentre to build community is at odds with the quality control and risk management approach of the Taskforce.

A mismatch of discourses: Discussion

The discourses of the Taskforce, as presented in the videos that accompanied the report, showed a focus on human capital development. ECEC was presented as the answer to improving children's future school achievement, as well as children's and parents' future earning potential. To ensure that ECEC services were able to deliver the expected educational outcomes for children, the Taskforce members spoke of requiring professional teachers to standardise the teaching delivered and parent engagement with ECEC whilst still allowing parents to be available for paid work elsewhere, support for parents provided by services and external communities, and quality control through elimination of variation.

In contrast, the Playcentre video emphasised building a community of learners, where ECEC and adult education were dual focal points. The discourses connected parents as teachers, parents being physically present and involved in the service, a support network of peers that valued parenting as a role in its own right, and acceptance of learning and variation as part of the process

of transforming lives. The Playcentre constructions of parents, their roles and their interactions with the ECEC service, were at odds with the constructions of the Taskforce.

It would be expected, then, that policy based on the discourses of the Taskforce would disadvantage Playcentre. This discourse has been shown to be the case in the first half of the Taskforce report. The Taskforce discourses were not totally new, but instead arose from the trends that had been developing in the previous two decades with a restructured state based on neoliberal economic ideology, and the rise of human capital development as a rationale for ECEC. The Taskforce, as an endpoint of policy for the purposes of this paper, no longer attempted to accommodate Playcentre philosophy and practice. This lack of accomodation was a first for an Aotearoa New Zealand government ECEC report, as previous policy had made attempts to accommodate Playcentre, albeit with various levels of success. The deliberate exclusion of Playcentre in the Taskforce recommendations on the grounds that it was not the preferred model of teacher-led and centre-based ECEC was a message that the Taskforce did not value diversity in ECEC provision. Instead diversity was represented as a problem that had to be eliminated.

The requirement for parents in Playcentre to take on the role of educators does not meet the needs of every family. Yet there are parents for whom the involvement in a community of learners centred on the value of parenting is a conscious choice. The government might consider moving beyond the binary of parent cooperative/teacher-led services, and encourage the development of more ECEC services which include both teachers and parents as educators. The models of Pen Green in the UK and Te Aroha Noa in Aotearoa NZ, mentioned above as examples of communities of learners, are exemplars of how parents and teachers can work alongside each other. Such a move would also require Playcentres to modify their stance of having a completely separate and distinctive parent cooperative philosophy to that of teacher-led services. If the problem is represented as a need to find ways to support parents and families, rather than ensuring ECEC supports the current and future economy, then surely some compromises could be reached.

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