



Early Childhood Council

Through the Looking Glass

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I have called my short address to you today “Through the Looking Glass”. This wonderful book by Lewis Carroll was one of my favourite childhood stories. I just loved hearing about all those amazing adventures that Alice enjoyed when she climbed through the mirror above her drawing-room fireplace to an astonishing world where flowers talked, chess pieces walked and the faster you ran, the more you ended up in the same place. Indeed there are days that I feel just like Alice!

After a lengthy period of regulatory stability during the decade of the 1990s, we have in the past six years seen considerable change in our sector. Much of this change has been positive.

Increased funding has allowed a much needed boost to staff wage rates. However the huge regional disparities that exist are of real concern.

In many regions the sector continues to struggle to attract sufficient qualified staff. On Friday we heard from Minister Maharey that 46% of staff in the sector are registered ECE teachers – a figure that should give some confidence about meeting the government’s goal of 50% registered teachers by 2007.

But you need to dig deeper into these statistics to understand the dilemma facing many regions.

In the Far North – just 32% of staff are registered teachers, just 33% here in Rotorua, whereas in Wellington 57% are registered teachers and in Christchurch a high of 62% are registered teachers.

And of course with the higher rates of funding available under the new funding system being driven by the number of qualified staff employed in a centre – there are huge regional disparities between the number of centres accessing the highest rates of funding.

For example – 85% of Christchurch City centres are on one of the two highest funding rates, whereas in Auckland City just 16% of centres are accessing either of the two highest rates. Rural areas and smaller provincial towns also fare badly.

Following on from the new qualification regime our sector is about to face two other major areas of change.

Twenty free hours ECE for 3 and 4 year olds is set to be implemented from 1 July 2007. On Friday the Minister told us that unenforceable donations will be able to be asked for, but top-up fees would not be allowed for the 20 free hours, and secondly that the maximum hours of free ECE in any one day would be six.

Both of these announcements raise questions about how well this policy will actually meet its objective of increasing participation in ECE. There is no clear rationale for limiting the hours per day that a child can access its free ECE. And the potential negative impact on quality of what is essentially a fee cap at a national average rate is of considerable concern. A cap on fees will mean a cap on quality.

We have a great system of early childhood education in New Zealand. Fantastically diverse. We have Te Kohanga Reo and kindergartens and of course the vast rainbow array of education and care centres including Montessori, Pacific Island language nests, Steiner and many more different philosophies.

If parents want education and care for 40 hours a week we deliver that. If they want nine hours on Monday and two on Friday we deliver that. We have a great diversity of education and care from which parents can choose the style and hours that suit their family and their children.

This allows parents to go to work confident they can get childcare for the hours they need it. And delivered in a style consistent with their parenting. A style consistent with their particular family values.

I am sorry to say that the crucial ability of parents to choose the sort of education and care they want is under attack. There is a piece of legislation called the Education Amendment Bill that is about to reach its Committee stage in Parliament. It may well do so next week. Our concerns are with section 317, which has sneaked past its first and second readings with nothing in the way of journalistic attention.

This is what section 317 is going to do. It is going to allow for the creation of something called 'criteria'. These criteria are micro-rules. And there could be thousands of them.

These rules will not be in legislation. These rules will not be in regulation. They will be created by either the Ministry or Minister and will exist beyond the normal powers Parliament. And beyond the usual ability of the Regulations Review Committee to scrutinise rules.

Our sector does not object to the regulations we have currently. We grizzle a bit perhaps. But most of us know it is entirely right that there should be high standards that apply to all.

These new micro-rules, however, could be something else. They threaten to cover almost every conceivable aspect of running a centre. And to do so in the tiniest of detail. We don't object to requirements that our centres be safe or of high quality – but we do object to being told there is only one way of doing that.

Worse, the intention is that this one very specific set of micro-rules will be applied to all the very different kinds of centres: Kohanga Reo, Montessori, Steiner, all the education and care centres, kindergartens and the rest. The Minister's SOP (that is the amendments he is proposing) water this down a little. But not much. All, or almost all of the very different kinds of preschool in New Zealand could be forced to do things in the same way.

This is how it will work. The Ministry is being given the power to create as many rules as it likes. It will then spend six years stomping about New Zealand making sure that all centres are complying with these new rules. That is the Ministry's documented intention. And those centres with even one micro-rule not implemented will be punishable with fines. The result will be disaster for New Zealand families and communities.

They will face centres unable to innovate because they are bogged down in rules. Had 'criteria' applied at the time of their genesis kindergarten, Steiner centres and Kohanga Reo might have been fined out existence whilst still infants.

The quality of care will fall as micro-rules make common sense a thing of the past. We all have a story about the craziness of bureaucratic controls. Like the one about the childcare group that takes mobile laptop computers in vans around its different centres. And how the Ministry has deemed that children going into the vans are on 'field trips' and must have written approval from all parents each time they step outside a centre's front door and into a van parked on the property.

Or the one about the Ministry official who recently required a teacher to not carry a child over a barrier 450 millimetres high.

Micro-rules will prevent Ministry officials from interpreting the general regulations with common sense.

Even if an official can see that the application of a specific rule will make a specific centre less efficient, less responsive to the particular needs of particular children or less innovative... that official will have no choice but to impose the compulsory micro-rule.

If section 317 of the Education Amendment Bill is passed, one set of micro-rules will soon be applied to very different types of centre. As a result centres will be less able to meet the different needs of different children, different families, and different communities. Compliance with micro-rules will enforce sameness.

And that sameness will rob New Zealand parents of their right to choose from a diverse range of early childhood services. Today many parents can go to work secure in the knowledge they have chosen childcare that reflects their unique family values.

If section 317 passes unmodified this may not be the case tomorrow.

We heard from Tariana Turia earlier in our conference. And I am pleased to say that the Maori Party has understood this threat to New Zealand families very well. The amendment they are proposing for section 317 is spot on. It allows for compulsory general regulations. But it opposes compulsory 'criteria', and replaces them with voluntary 'guidelines' instead.

This is a brilliant solution because the specific 'guidelines' would make clear to centres what is meant by general regulations, but allow centres to implement these intentions in a manner that suited the particular families they served.

The Maori Party clearly understands the importance of parental choice. They understand that Maori parents have a right to choose Maori education for their children. But impressively, they understand that non-Maori parents have that right to choose also.

In opposing section 317 of the Education Amendment Bill the Maori Party has shown it is prepared to take action based on these principles. For this they should be applauded by us. And applauded loudly.

We urge all political parties that understand the importance of parental choice to follow their lead. And to support the Maori Party's amendments to section 317 of the Education Amendment Bill.

We seek also the support of all parties that know you cannot create quality anything with thousands of little rules that prevent those on the frontline from responding flexibly to the particular communities they serve.

Most New Zealand parents currently take for granted that they can access the sort of childcare they want, the type that suits their particular family. We think these families should take a good look at section 317 of the Education Amendment Bill. And realise that their choices may be about to diminish. And to diminish substantially.

So just like Alice we are looking for our White Knight to ensure the diversity and responsiveness of our dynamic sector is preserved.

Thank you.