



Strategic Responses to the draft Early Learning Strategic Plan

*A discussion paper prepared for
Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG)
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Introduction

I have been involved in early childhood care and education since the 1970s, seeing our sector demonstrate some major commitments, attain significant development but also face many setbacks during this half century. Strategic plans are aspirational documents signalling key policy commitments. However, the recent document is disappointing on many levels. Some of my concerns are outlined briefly below. [Submissions can be made until 15 March.](#)

- Dr Jenny Ritchie

The phrase ‘Early Learning’ rather than ‘Early Childhood Care and Education’

This reflects a schoolification orientation rather than affirming the holistic way in which infants, toddlers and young children who are well cared for learn and grow, spiritually, emotionally and physically, as well as cognitively. Unless this wellbeing is in place, children are not responsive to learning opportunities. Furthermore, early childhood care and education is not just ‘preschool’ preparation for future education. It is a time for being supported responsively, by attuned adults who resonate care, concern and empathy, thus generating these same qualities in the babies and young children for whom they are caring and with whom they are engaging in responsive exploration of their social and cultural worlds.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Ka Hikitia and High Quality Culturally Responsive Practice

The draft Strategic Plan is embarrassingly weak with respect to articulating expectations regarding to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The plan also repeatedly uses the phrase ‘high quality’ rather than the description utilised in *Ka Hikitia*, the Māori Education Strategy, which is ‘high quality, culturally responsive’ practice. Repeated [Education Review Office national evaluations](#) have highlighted the inadequacy of early childhood practices in this regard, therefore it is clearly premature to drop ‘culturally responsive’ from this aspirational phrase. Children who are well-grounded in their

identities, language(s) and cultural worldview are more likely to succeed educationally and in life. Languages are best learnt from birth, from speakers of the language who provide excellent models linguistically. Fluent te reo Māori speaking role models for under twos should be prioritised and the provision of these given additional funding.

Pacific Islands language requirements and Initial Teacher Education

Languages are the repositories of cultural knowledges and identities. For Pacific Island families living in Aotearoa, it is incredibly important that their languages are sustained, alongside te reo Māori. Pacific Islands Language Nests desperately need qualified teachers who fluently speak one or more of the range of Pacific Islands languages. Yet there is a paucity of dedicated initial teacher education programmes for Pacific Islands teachers, and the new qualifications for Pacific languages are not at degree level which disadvantage Pacific Island teachers in relation to pay and status. [We also penalise potential teachers by insisting that they demonstrate very difficult English languages standards in test conditions in order to enter teacher education programmes.](#) which is patently unnecessary if they are intending to teach in a Language Nest where teaching is through the medium of Pacific Island languages. We need our Initial Teacher Education providers to ensure that they attract and retain Pacific Islands language speaking teachers, and for the Ministry to financially support these teachers during the period of their qualification.

100% Degree-Qualified Teachers

The plan is vague about specific strategies for 'investment in our workforce'. Well qualified teachers are a key factor in ensuring the provision of high quality culturally responsive practice. Poor quality early childhood experiences can be harmful, whilst high quality, culturally responsive provision can ameliorate socioeconomic disadvantage. Therefore, funding to achieve a fully degree qualified sector should absolutely be considered a priority. This funding should both provide fee allowances for unqualified teachers already working in centres to enable them complete degree level qualifications, and support centres that already have 100% qualified staffing. In addition to requiring all early childhood teachers to be degree level qualified, the government should require all early childhood services to pay teachers at the same pay salary levels as the NZEI collective. This would elevate and equalise the status and morale of the profession, fostering long-term employment rather than fast turnover, and thus contribute quality provision due to the stability of teaching teams and consistent, secure relationships for infants, toddlers and young children in early childhood centres. The lack of oversight by previous policy regimes has led to the situation of predominately corporate provision in low economic areas, and these chains are not recognised for their commitment to costly high quality components such as having all staff fully qualified. The Ministry of Education should offer for-profit services pathways for these services to become community-owned and run.

Ratios

It is very disappointing that the draft strategic plan only recommends a ratio of one to four for under two-year-olds (currently one to five). Those of us who have been parents know how hard it is to look after one baby, let alone four. Even for fully qualified, experienced teachers, trying to meet the needs of four babies is a tough call (or say two teachers supporting eight babies, or three with twelve babies...). A better

scenario is that for infants under one yearold, the ratio should be one adult to two babies and for one- to two-year-olds, it should be one to three.

These are a few suggestions, you may have your own thoughts on the draft. Please make these known. [Submissions can be made until 15 March.](#)