

Knowledgeable and qualified early childhood teachers: Tensions, constraints, and possibilities

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The Early Learning Action Plan 2019-2029 (Ministry of Education, 2019b) Objective 3 is “Teaching staff and leaders are well qualified, diverse, culturally competent and valued” (p. 3). Tensions, constraints, and possibilities arise from analysing historical developments and positionings of early childhood teacher knowledge amongst policy aimed to provide well qualified and valued teaching staff. We advocate for investment in what we conceptualise as ‘knowledgeable teachers’ who educate children at the most important time of their lives.

Keywords: teacher qualifications, professional learning, early childhood education

Introduction

Increased professionalisation in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand has been a goal for many years. Despite there being differing views about what constitutes a profession and how to achieve it, in Aotearoa New Zealand structural factors like teacher qualifications, professional registration, and the ongoing professional learning (PL) of teachers have long been upheld as key tenets (Cherrington, 2012; Stuart, 2019). Policy targets for increased qualification standards in so-called teacher-led, centre-based early childhood (EC) services have been a key issue within professionalisation debates with targets articulated and undermined repeatedly. We argue that recent policy suggestions about who should be constituted as qualified in EC services (Ministry of Education, 2021a) would, if actualised, serve to weaken the professionalisation and collective professional knowledge base of those who teach rather than strengthen it. The issue is exacerbated by a current minimum qualified staffing standard of 50% qualified teachers and the present constitution of primary qualified teachers ‘as qualified’ for funding and ‘person

¹ Statement of Interest: In 2018 Alex was a member of the Ministerial Advisory Group providing independent advice to the Minister and Ministry of Education on the development of the *Early Learning Action Plan*. Alex endorses the plan and its actions, which are designed to address major concerns over aspects of early childhood education scope, quality, and provision. The critique of policy implementation provided in this commentary works with publicly available information from October 2021 during the early implementation work of the plan.

responsible'² purposes. In this commentary, we argue that the pursuit of increased professionalisation has been complicated by the drive to include primary-qualified teachers in staffing and, under-funded, piecemeal, and broad-based PL provision. These factors, and associated constraints, will be elaborated on in relation to the *Early Learning Action Plan 2019-2029* (ELAP)(Ministry of Education, 2019b) Objective 3 "Teaching staff and leaders are well qualified, diverse, culturally competent and valued" (p. 3). We first address the historical context of qualifications and PL provision before commenting on how consultation over increasing the regulated standard for qualified teachers could be seen to be working against a long held aspiration for 100% qualified early childhood education (ECE) teachers in EC services. Our attention then turns to the topic of PL, and reporting on a small-scale project that inquired into teachers' knowledge and understandings of newly introduced learning outcomes in the early childhood curriculum framework *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). From this we comment on the kinds of PL activities and conditions for learning that knowledgeable teachers say are needed, contrasting this with currently available methods. Tensions, constraints, and possibilities arise within and from this paper as we advocate for investment in knowledgeable teachers who educate children at a time in their lives when most growth, development and learning occur.

Historical context and current developments: Tensions and constraints

Of many hallmarks of quality provision of ECE, teacher qualifications and ongoing support for teacher PL are two big ticket items in the range of possible policy levers available to Government to advance its quality improvement aims (Mayall, 1996 in Smith et al., 2000; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2017). As structural components of the system each are readily measurable and able to be budgeted for, the positive effects of each on quality provision of education and care are well established (Mitchell & Cubey, 2003; Manning et al., 2019), in light of this, it might be expected that early workstream initiatives associated with the ELAP might address actions related to both teacher qualifications and ongoing PL.

However, rather than use their parliamentary majority to quickly reinstate and regulate the commitment to 100% ECE qualified staffing evident in action 3.1³ of the ELAP, two years into the 10-year roll out of the ELAP, the government began formal consultation within the ECE sector about moves towards an 80% qualified teacher⁴ workforce (Ministry of Education, 2021a) as an interim step towards a longer-term goal of 100% qualified teachers. The long-debated question of what would be recognised as early childhood teacher qualifications in Aotearoa New Zealand had been first reconciled in the year 2000 through the heralding of a benchmark standard ECE initial teacher education qualification (level 7 diploma) for 'persons responsible' in an EC setting (Mallard, 2000). The

² The 'person responsible' in an early childhood setting is one teaching member of staff with an early childhood education qualification who holds a practicing certificate and who is involved in day-to-day education and care and supervision of children and other teachers (Ministry of Education, 2021d). At least one person responsible is required to be in attendance in the service at all times when children are present. Presently, one person responsible is required for up to 50 children.

³ The ELAP qualification targets are situated in relation to the former ECE strategic plan that had a fully early childhood qualified workforce as a goal. 3.1 reads "Incentivise for 100 percent and regulate for 80 percent qualified teachers in teacher-led centres. Leading to regulation for 100 percent."

⁴ In *Te Whāriki* the term used for teacher is *kaiako*, partly to value a plethora of adult contributions in curricular enactment, and partly to recognise the mixed qualifications/status of those in educator roles in EC settings.

qualification had been available since the late 1980s but regulations had yet to require it; even so, many services were already employing ECE diploma qualified teachers at the time the policy was announced. The then Minister of Education, Trevor Mallard, estimated that between 2000-2200 services would already be meeting the new standard at the time of its introduction, and those that were not had until January 2005 for kaiako to upgrade.

Pathways to the Future (MoE, 2002), the then 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education, was to reify the qualification standard by setting a regulated goal of 100% ECE qualified teachers, who would also be fully registered by the professional body for teachers, by the year 2012. While teacher supply was of concern, that issue was to be addressed through additional strategic plan actions designed to increase the number of graduates from early childhood education teacher education qualifications. These included incentive grants, recruitment drives, bridging courses to study, and the retraining of teachers from other sectors. At that time, primary qualified teachers were expected to undergo a one-year graduate programme of initial teacher education to equip them with early childhood professional knowledge if they were to teach as qualified in EC services. Furthermore, mentoring and induction were to be provided within registration processes, in a system paralleling provision for teachers in the schooling sector.

Unfortunately, the goals were never fully realised. As the effects of the 2007-2008 global financial crises took hold and Government changed from a centre-left to centre-right coalition arrangement, plans for early childhood education were quickly shelved resulting in the erosion of important quality goals (May, 2014; Smith, 2009). This included in the area of qualifications despite there being plenty of evidence about the relationships between teacher qualifications and teacher learning for high-quality learner outcomes (see for instance, the 2005 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development review and the locality-based evaluation of *Pathways to the Future* (Mitchell et al. 2011)). Research suggested that specific knowledge and capabilities were required of early childhood kaiako, and that higher quality learning environments were associated with teacher qualifications (Manning, et al., 2019; Meade et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2011; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, n.d.). Where well-educated, well-qualified, and well-mentored kaiako are employed, favourable social and cognitive outcomes for children result.

At the time the ELAP was to pick up the challenge of attending to teacher qualifications again, only 50% of regulated teachers in EC services were required to hold (or be in their final year of study towards) a recognised ECE qualification. Then, almost all EC services (96%) were able to claim funding for a staffing profile of 80%+ qualified teachers (MoE, 2019a), although the proportion of primary sector qualified staff in this total was not reported and the proportion of qualified teachers in the overall sector had declined. Since the ELAP's introduction a more nuanced profile of qualified teachers has been reported (MoE, 2020, 2021b; Te Mahau, 2022). Data indicate that younger teachers are more likely to not hold a recognised qualification and that both the number and proportion of qualified teachers continues to decline.

In addition, PL became connected with the trial and development of a set of so-called 'practice and progress tools'⁵ (CORE Education, 2021; EducationGovtNZ, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2021c) that were meant to address formative assessment and

⁵ It is outside of the scope of this commentary to address the development and trial of the tools, however, a PL supported trial occurred in 2022 and was evaluated. The reports can be read on Education Counts: <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/ECE/pld-supported-trial-of-the-early-learning-practice-and-progress-tools-kowhiti-whakapae>

teaching practice in the context of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). The connecting up of centrally organised PL to an initiative in this way reflected an approach taken at the time the curriculum framework was revised. It involved an open tendering process by a contracted PL provider and applications by services to participate. This meant that for services who were not selected for participation, access to centrally organised PL was limited to self-directed learning using online resources on the Ministry's ECE specific website, *Te Whāriki Online* (<https://tewhariki.tki.org.nz>). As we note later after addressing the matter of teacher qualifications, there remains much yet to do to address the narrow focus, piecemeal, and low-level directions of current PL provision.

Consulting over teacher qualifications under the ELAP

As described earlier, the question of who could be counted as a qualified ECE teacher was seemingly reconciled in the year 2000 with the requirement for persons responsible in an EC setting to hold a benchmark level 7 EC diploma of teaching. However, in the context of ongoing teacher supply issues, since 2010 EC services have been able to employ primary sector qualified teachers as part of their staffing mix and claim funding for them as 'certified teachers'⁶ (MoE, 2021d) without any requirement for them to complete any re-qualification to teach in the field. Reifying the employment of primary sector qualified teachers into early childhood education further, a temporary change to regulations concerning the 'person responsible' category was introduced in 2019 (and operationalised since January 2020) to allow both early childhood education and primary sector qualified persons to hold that role. That decision was due for review in mid-2022 (Early Learning Regulatory Review Team, 2021) the outcome of which (at the time of writing) is unknown. So, when consultation over increasing the numbers of qualified regulated teachers occurred, there was a mix of both ECE and primary qualified teachers already working 'as qualified' in EC settings. The ELAP provided an opportunity to right the direction; however, consultation over regulating for a minimum of 80% qualified teachers failed to specify that the qualification that would count should be an ECE one. Instead, the generic term 'qualified teacher' was used – and that term was applied to both primary and ECE qualified (Ministry of Education, 2021a).

In short, the term 'qualified teacher' is a complicated conceptualisation in current policy and practice. Yet, a foundation of professional knowledge is the hallmark of a profession. In no other profession is an un- or under-qualified person, or a person with an alternate or related qualification, allowed to take on the duties of a professional. We advocate for the importance of EC professional knowledge in this commentary. Hence, we proffer the term 'knowledgeable teachers' rather than qualified teachers to advocate for the importance of EC professional knowledge (see Hedges, 2013) in the field.

Professional learning

Subsequent to being initially appropriately-qualified, ongoing learning is vital to keep up-to-date as research grows, policy changes, and the demands of teaching progress

⁶ The category 'Certified Teacher' comes from the teachers' professional body, the New Zealand Teaching Council, and is explained by them as a person holding a New Zealand early childhood education or primary sector teaching qualification and current practising certificate (or equivalent).

(Timperley et al., 2007). We shift attention to ELAP 3.6⁷ and 3.7⁸ in the second half of our commentary to raise matters about PL provision and matters of teacher inquiry.

PL provision has long been inadequate. Government-funded PL has not focused on continued teacher knowledge building to support the implementation of *Te Whāriki* since its advent in 1996. Instead, development of management systems and accountabilities, and concerns and considerations of improving poor quality practice has long dominated (e.g., see Gaffney, 2003). Only more recently has PL shifted to enactment of *Te Whāriki* (Clarke et al., 2021). Furthermore, we have known for some time about the attributes of effective PL such as incorporating participants' aspirations, provision of theoretical and content knowledge, and using critical reflection (Mitchell & Cubey, 2003).

More recently, evidence about the ways teachers can be supported to effect and sustain change through ongoing collaborative processes when learning from inquiry into self-selected goals and using practice data has developed (Cherrington & Thornton, 2013), along with ways PL can be thoughtfully-designed (Liu et al., 2023). The shift to a PL inquiry model following the introduction of *Te Whāriki* took advantage of this knowledge, however, the inquiry aspect of the PL assisted trial was not available to all; webinars were produced to support self-initiated learning by others as a way to introduce new and foregrounded aspects of the *Te Whāriki* revision.

Topic decisions, PL approaches that effect and sustain new practices, and overall funding are all kinds of PL concerns that need attention by the Ministry if teachers are to be supported to enact *Te Whāriki* in its depth and complexity. Recent resources such as *Te Whāriki Online* have been designed to provide material for all those persons who work in educative roles, that is, for knowledgeable teachers as well as un- and under-qualified staff, including those with primary teaching qualifications. In effect these resources cover the basics of ECE, and so are aimed at serving the self-directed learning needs of under-ECE-qualified staff. This learning is therefore ad hoc and lacks coordination and oversight. In our estimation and in relation to promoting with our student teachers, *Te Whāriki Online* does not yet provide sufficient substantive, contemporary, evidence-based, and updated material to inform under-qualified staff nor stretch knowledgeable, inquiring early childhood-qualified teachers' understandings and practices.

To illustrate and advocate further for actions associated with 3.6 and 3.7 that are responsive to what researchers have long pointed out about effective PL, we briefly report on a small-scale project Helen Hedges led in 2020. The project projected forward to the gazetting of the full curriculum framework of *Te Whāriki*, including its 20 learning outcomes, an action occurring now in 2023. International debate about outcomes for young children commonly reflect varying considerations around notions of "school readiness," hence arguments ensue about whether academic (i.e., knowledge-based and cognitively oriented) or social-emotional outcomes should be prioritised, and what kinds of pedagogies might be used (Bingham & Whitebread, 2018). In *Te Whāriki*, the outcomes, both English and Māori, are high-level, holistic in relation to incorporating academic and social-emotional components, designed to be interpreted in context, and complex to understand. They reflect a capability approach (Buzzelli, 2020), and are designed to be developed over time with support from teachers. Such outcomes required sophisticated research-based professional knowledge to be understood and used (Hedges, 2022).

⁷ 3.6 reads "Develop a sustained and planned approach to professional learning and development (PLD)". We use the term professional learning (PL) in this paper.

⁸ 3.7 reads "Develop innovation and research hubs for early learning services."

Teachers from the South Canterbury Kindergarten Association participated in the research. They represent those who are not typically involved in research as they are geographically distant from universities, and spread out over a wide rural area, so epitomise the kinds of teachers that the Ministry wants more fully involved in ELAP initiatives. Helen had met these teachers a year earlier during a two-day hui on working theories.

The project researched teachers' knowledge and confidence in relation to all the revised outcomes in *Te Whāriki*. It inquired into what teachers knew, how they were learning about the outcomes, and how they might recognise and use them in their assessment and planning. The following methods were used to ascertain understandings and usage of outcomes:

- A focus group discussed teacher knowledge and confidence about the outcomes.
- Self and peer analysis of selected assessment documentation followed. Teachers selected 5 children, chose 5-10 examples of each child's assessment documentation, and self-analysed for the presence of learning outcomes using an Excel spreadsheet with identified foci and questions. After this, a cross-analysis of the same assessment documentation was undertaken by a peer to see if they could interpret the material similarly or differently.
- A second focus group discussed learning from this analysis exercise.
- A third focus group discussed what kinds of PL would support further understanding and embedding of the outcomes.
- Teachers completed reflective journal entries to identify points of growth and/or questioning and inquiry.

The findings were perhaps unsurprising given the access of teachers to PL about these new outcomes: teachers expressed variable confidence. They were confident about learning dispositions and writing learning stories that identified these given the extensive PL that had been available over 20 years. This points to the time needed, depth of learning, and access to research and inquiry required, to support and embed and sustain new knowledge and practices (Cirkony et al., 2021).

There was some confidence about working theories due to the hui the year before, and teachers understood the connection between these two parallel, overarching outcomes (working theories and learning dispositions). There was little confidence about these two overarching outcomes connected with the other outcomes sited in the strands though – there is significant work needed here. Pockets of confidence existed about the other outcomes depending on personal and professional interests and knowledge, and/or personal motivation or postgraduate study opportunities.

Similarly, there were small pockets of confidence with regard to te ao Māori interpretations of the outcomes. One teacher noted that “Whereas at one time you ... kept it for the children that identified as Māori” (Carol), that team now used concepts across all children's documentation after whānau brokered relationships for them to learn from local iwi. There is action mooted to support teachers in these ways to understand the forthcoming Māori interpretations of the framework's goals and outcomes developed by Lesley Rameka and Brenda Soutar (MoE, 2022). We hope the English language versions in the document will also be supported in the spirit of “the advancement of a bicultural curriculum and bilingual outcomes” (Ministry of Education, 2019b, p. 26). As the findings of this project show, there is still a lot of work to do to support teachers with these.

In the project, teacher analyses of assessment documentation identified and rationalised foci outcomes as those related to:

- assessment of children's interests and learning and fostering these;
- outcomes prioritised by their families and communities, and therefore what mattered in the kindergarten and created localised curriculum;
- outcomes prioritised by overall curricular planning and assessment emphases.

Through peer reviewing their documentation for evidence of all 20 outcomes, teachers realised that they not only prioritised those that connected to these points, but that these also represented outcomes they were comfortable with and felt they knew, recognised, and understood.

Two teachers pondered about coverage, particularly whether or not it matters if not all outcomes beyond the overarching two are covered. Given the weaving and local curriculum intentions of *Te Whāriki*, it is important that teachers are reassured that full or even coverage is not expected. Emphases reflect what matters for children and curriculum priorities. However, our point is that teachers need to know, understand, and interpret with families the full range outcomes in order to be able to recognise and use them. Teachers also recognised that they document only a portion of what children do and achieve, so it is possible that "a child ... might cover many learning outcomes ... that you would not choose to document" (Julianne). These are also important matters to follow up in further teacher inquiry and research in relation to an holistic curriculum over time.

The kinds of PL and inquiry activities knowledgeable teachers want/need include:

- access to research/ers with in-depth expertise on the outcomes they were less confident about – including direct contact and webinars and videos. External expertise has long been identified as a critical factor in successful PL (Gaffney, 2003; Nolan & Molla, 2018).
- access to journal articles (something many teachers comment on when they lose access to tertiary libraries after study) and summaries of research written by those with research-based expertise as examples of high-quality, relevant learning material (Clarke et al., 2021). The Ministry might arrange and fund teacher access to libraries at the Ministry of Education, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, and tertiary institutions.
- time and expert support from research-active critical friends to continue to learn from their own practice-based evidence, and engage in ongoing learning, inquiry and feedback. One teacher commented how empowering it was to engage with this process and the value of connecting with other teachers, aligning with what Cherrington and Thornton (2013) have consistently argued.

Ongoing issues and challenges

It appears that in the consultation over regulating for a minimum of 80% regulated qualified staff, an opportunity to reinstate a former policy goal and lead in the direction of 100% EC qualified teachers has been lost. Each option for regulation change proposed in the consultation document failed to specify that the regulated minimum standard for qualified and certificated teachers should mean EC qualified teachers. The generic term of 'qualified teachers' has (un)intentionally come to mean ECE and primary-qualified (certificated) teachers. This is despite the fact that in the consultation over qualifications,

recognition was afforded to the relationship between qualification level and type and the quality of teaching and learning possible in early childhood education (Early Learning Regulatory Review Team, 2021). The document also suggested that ECE and primary qualifications may result in different sorts of teaching, knowledge bases, and capabilities. Contradictions, tensions, and challenges abound that need further attention.

We think there are also further, fundamental questions for the Ministry to address as they work on actioning ELAP 3.6 and 3.7. First, we must contend with how to create planned and sustained PL across the breadth of curriculum, in every setting, and at a pace and scope relevant to teachers. Second, the question of how to fund and provide equitable access to high quality research and evidence-informed learning, dialogue, and inquiry in “innovation and research hubs” just be grappled with. We note this is especially demanding in a context where disparity of resources and internet access still plagues rural and isolated communities nationwide. Finally, we wonder how the Ministry can make PL initiatives able to include external expertise in the topics that teachers want to explore in further depth. Only when there are 100% qualified ECE teachers in the sector, the full goal of action 3.1 in the ELAP, can attention fully turn to the kinds of PL that continue to inspire and nurture such professional growth. Until then, the under-funded and lackadaisical nature and provision of current PL cannot work towards the goals of actions 3.6 and 3.7 in the ELAP.

Future priorities and possibilities

To recap, despite there having been a decade of non-early childhood education qualified and certificated teachers working in the field as qualified, the ELAP provides an opportunity to right the direction and reconnect with the lost policy goal of 100% ECE qualified teachers now. We argue for an urgent and genuine reconnection to the 100% early childhood education qualified target indicated in the ELAP as a necessary step to realising the other kinds of quality improvements indicated in the plan and evidenced in international reviews such as that from Manning et al. (2019) and the Organisation for Educational Cooperation and Development (2005).

In order then to consider ways to create and grow knowledgeable teachers, we need a foundation of appropriately credentialed and professionally certified graduates who begin their careers with contemporary, research-informed EC professional knowledge to enact *Te Whāriki*. These graduates can then be supported to grow their knowledge through workplace inquiry and research into their teaching if given sufficient time, funding, and opportunity to engage with each other, research, and critical friends in ongoing PL. In these ways they can engage with EC teacher knowledge that also assists them to advocate for themselves, the children they teach, and the whānau and communities they serve. Our teachers, children, whānau and communities in Aotearoa New Zealand deserve such investment.

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