

**Implementing the UNCRC in New Zealand:  
How are we doing in early childhood?**

Anne B. Smith

University of Otago College of Education

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*The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*

Ten days ago, 20th November 2009, was the date on which in 1989, the United Nations General Assembly agreed to adopt the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and to open it for ratification by Member States. So this is its twentieth anniversary. Although New Zealand did not ratify the convention until 1993, it has had a profound influence on our policies and practices for children even before 1993. It has changed the way we conceptualise children and created a new culture of childhood. The convention has been useful for child advocates because it provides us with an incentive to action and reasoned arguments based on its moral imperative (Freeman, 2007). The convention is based on 10 years of negotiation between many countries of the world, and it represents international agreement on children's basic entitlements. It is one of the most widely ratified of all conventions, with only two countries not ratifying it.

Children's rights, however, do not receive widespread public or political support in New Zealand or elsewhere. They have often been perceived as "a political hot potato", which, rather than advance children's interests, jeopardize them (Melton, 2005, p. 655). This is a disturbing state of affairs, which I would like us to fight against. We need to educate government and local agencies about UNCRC and use it to provide a common basis for understanding, and a framework to plan and operate services for children. We also should be using it to evaluate changes to policy in all areas.

It is therefore very appropriate that Sarah and I were invited to talk about children's rights at this early childhood hui, 20 years after its adoption. Sarah has focused on how ideas about children's rights are enacted at the microsystem level of the early childhood centre – what teachers do to recognise and realise children's rights, and how their constructions of childhood influence their actions. Sarah talked about the tension between protection and participation rights, but I will focus on provision rights. In my talk I will focus on the macrosystem level of government policies for young children. My question is how have the actions of recent governments advanced the implementation of the UNCRC in New Zealand? While I intend to focus on the impact of their actions on young children and mostly in relation to education, I will touch on other areas of young children's lives, which have been affected.

The mechanism through which the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child monitors whether countries are meeting their obligations, is that the governments of each country have to submit periodic reports (2 years after initial ratification and then every 5 years thereafter) to the United Nations. The periodic report is usually co-ordinated by the Ministry of Youth Affairs. Non-Governmental Agencies also present a report, and their representatives meet with the Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva. The Committee then examines each report and addresses its concerns and recommendations to the State party, in the form of "concluding observations." Our 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>h</sup> Periodic Report was submitted in November 2008, providing information on relevant activity undertaken by the Government that responded to the UN Committee's 2003 recommendations. There has been a change of government since that report and currently New Zealand's Alternative NGO report is in the process of being written. I must thank Action for Children Aotearoa (ACYA), the co-ordinating body for NGOs in New Zealand, for giving me access to the first draft of their current report.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) remedied the omission of ECE from the original UNRC by holding a day of discussion in 2004 on children's rights in early childhood (defined as below 8 years of age). This discussion resulted in the publication of General Comment No. 7, (2005) (published in September 2006), which contains a set of recommendations which explicitly address dominant assumptions about early childhood. The CRC was concerned that young children as rights holders were not being given sufficient attention by state parties in their laws, policies and programmes.

The General Comment drew attention to several articles of particular importance in early childhood (a time of both vulnerability to harm and potential to benefit from quality environments). They mention Article 6, which is the child's right to survival and development, and the wording here sits well with our early childhood philosophy.

..the right to survival and development *can only be implemented in a holistic manner*, through the enforcement of all the other provisions of the Convention, including rights to health, adequate nutrition, social security, an adequate standard of living, a healthy and safe environment, education and play (arts 24, 27, 28, 29 and 31), as well as through respect for the responsibilities of parents and the provision of assistance and quality services (arts 5 and 18). (General Comment 7, 2005, III, 10, my italics)

The General Comment is critical of countries and regions where early childhood is fragmented and has been given low priority. It emphasizes the importance of quality standards, and qualifications for staff including for those who work with young children.

It is essential that they [staff] have sound, up-to-date theoretical and practical understanding about children's rights and development; that they adopt appropriate child-centred care practices, curricula and pedagogies; and that they have access to specialist professional resources and support. (General Comment 7, 2005, V, 23)

They commend the disappearance of the traditional "care" and "education divisions, and the shift towards integrated services and coordinated multisectoral strategies, within a comprehensive framework for early childhood services, provisions and facilities. They urge state parties to develop appropriate resource allocation so that young children's rights are realized during this crucial stage of their life. Even when there are competing priorities, the Committee believes that it is:

...important that there be sufficient public investment in services, infrastructure and overall resources specifically allocated to early childhood, for the many reasons set out in this general comment. (General Comment 7, 2005, VII, 38)

*Progress in Reducing Poverty and Violence for Young Children*

In 2003 the UN Committee's response (UN CRC, 2003) to New Zealand's reports recommended that New Zealand undertake a comprehensive review of its legislation, encourage better coordination of stakeholders, collect data to monitor the convention, allocate budgetary priorities to ensure implementation, educate the general public about UNCRC, and legislate against corporal punishment of children in the home. They also welcomed the adoption of a new plan for children entitled *Agenda for Children* (Ministry of Social Development, 2002). The plan was a promising initiative, which looked as if it would have a strong influence on the well being of children in this country. AFC aimed to "promote the place of children and young people in society and make the country a better place for them" (p. 6). Sadly, AFC, along with other useful initiatives for children's rights, like the Child Health Strategy seem to have faded into the background and even disappeared. According to the Draft NGO Alternative Periodic Report (2009, I, 19):

It [AFC] disappeared from government policies soon after its introduction. A review by ACYA found no evidence that the Agenda had been implemented by the Government in any sustained, systematic way in formulating policy or making decisions. The *Agenda for Children* has been made obsolete through lack of implementation. The Government has not replaced the *Agenda for Children* with any other National Plan of Action regarding children.

## *Poverty*

There are two areas relating to children's rights in early childhood, which I want to comment on, which profoundly influence the lives of young children, before turning to specifically early childhood education issues. The first is poverty which, especially during early childhood, is a toxin, which can have an impact across the life span setting children off on cumulative negative developmental trajectories with diminished health and educational outcomes (Hertzman & Wiens, 1996). Article 27, which recognises the right of every child to a standard of living which promotes adequate physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development, is a fundamental right for young children. Poverty is more prevalent in New Zealand for families with children under 6 compared to families with children in any other age group (Ministry of Social Development, 2008). In 2007 the child poverty rate was 20% for children aged 0-6, 16% for those aged 7-11 years and 14% for those aged 12-17 years. The overall poverty rate is 16% (setting the poverty line at 50% of median income) but using another measure (60% of median income) it is 22% - meaning that almost one in four families with children is below the poverty level. An end to child poverty was Action Area 3 in the government's plan for children, Agenda for Children. Needless to say child poverty has not been eliminated in New Zealand, but there have been modest improvements for some children.

The CRC in its Concluding Observations (2003) recommended that the State took measures to assist parents, in particular single parents, to ensure the child's right to an adequate standard of living was met. Child poverty did indeed fall from 29% in 2001 to 16 % in 2007 (Ministry of Social Development, 2008), which reversed the trend of increasing poverty, which had been happening since the late 1990s. The improvement seems to be largely due to the Working for Families package, which was introduced in stages between 2004 and 2007. WFF aimed to improve income adequacy for working parents through a family tax credit, accommodation supplements, and child care and after school care subsidies. It is a concern to see, however, that the family group which the CRC was particularly concerned about, single parent families, experience significantly higher poverty (42%) than those in two parent families (9%). (This compares to 64% for single parent families and 20%

for two parent families in 2001). New Zealand was 10<sup>th</sup> out of 30 OECD countries in the OECD for rates of child poverty, although it was above the EU average.

We should applaud the improvement in poverty levels reported in the government's most recent periodic report (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2008) but still be extremely concerned at the ongoing level of child poverty, especially for Maori and Pacific children. Also, Working for Families only applies to families where parents are working, which mean that families on benefits are ineligible, despite them experiencing the worst economic hardship. So we are penalising the wellbeing of young children whose parents are not working. Combined with the fact that, according to a UNICEF Report Card (2008), we are 23<sup>rd</sup> out of 25 countries in the adequacy of our parental leave policies, we are placing our families with babies and young children at risk with our policies (Duncan, 2009a). We need to be vigilant that new economic policies are not introduced which would erode the gains which have been made, as well as correct the current discrimination against families who are not working.

### *Corporal Punishment*

The second big issue is corporal punishment, which also affects preschool children more than at any other age, because it is in the years before five that its use is at a peak (Gollop, 2005; Ministry of Health, 2008). In 2007 we went some way towards implementing Article 19, children's right to protection from all forms of physical and mental violence, and acting upon Action Area 4 of the Agenda for Children – addressing violence in children's lives by becoming the first English speaking country in the world to prohibit the use of physical punishment by parents to correct their children. The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act 2007 was passed on 21 June 2007. We joined 24? other countries in the world who have also banned physical punishment. This reform removed the defence provided by the previous law (section 59, Crimes Act 1961) so that parents who are prosecuted for assaulting their child can no longer invoke the excuse that the force they used was reasonable in the circumstances and for the purpose of correcting their child. The initiative for this change came from Green MP, Sue Bradford, whose Private Members Bill was drawn by ballot in June 2005. Her determined and principled leadership (Wood, 2008)

steered the bill through its first reading and into the Select Committee. From then on the efforts of advocates like Beth Wood and Cindy Kiro and the many agencies who worked with children and families like Barnardos and Save the Children, ensured that politicians were very well informed about the negative long-term effects of physical punishment and the moral imperative not to discriminate against children. This resulted in a majority of the Select Committee supported it. In a remarkable cross party agreement, all parties except Act and individual members of other parties, supported the Bill, which was voted into law by 113 to 8 majority on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 2007 (Taylor & Smith, 2008).

While I admire the principles and courage of the politicians who supported and continue to support the new law, there is a lesson to be learned from those events. We have since had a public referendum where the majority of the public opposed corporal punishment becoming a criminal offence. The attitudes expressed in the referendum illustrate the failure of the government to properly explain to the public why it was necessary to change the existing law (and hence the public attitudes expressed in the referendum). There was a complete absence of educational and media campaigns to explain and justify the law change. In contrast the German government, which changed its law in 2000, launched a two year nationwide multimedia strategy to advertise the change in the law under the motto “More respect for children” (Bussmann, Erthal, and Schroth, in press). There has been nothing like that in New Zealand. Moreover Bussman et al (in press) have shown in a cross national study of European countries that prohibiting corporal punishment is linked with a decline in violence against children. Parents in countries with such laws, apply less corporal punishment than they do in countries without a ban. In Sweden childrearing violence began to be outlawed in the late 1950s with the prohibition in 1979 marking the end of a series of legal reforms, but continuing regular public education has maintained public awareness of the law. Similar trends but on a lower level have occurred in Germany and Austria, where laws were passed later and less intensive media campaigns took place. Whether the law change will make any difference here, when there has been a total absence of public education, is yet to be seen though there are some encouraging signs in recent studies (Children’s Commissioner, 2008; Lawrence & Smith, 2009; Ministry of Health, 2008) that parents are using less physical punishment. So while we can be proud of the change that has happened in our

country towards realising children's rights, the journey is by no means over and is missing an important component – educating the public about the law change.

### *Realising Children's Rights in Early Childhood Education*

I turn now to looking at whether children's rights are being realised in early childhood education in New Zealand. Article 29 has particular relevance for ECE. It says that the education of the child should be directed to “the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential”, the goal being to “empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence”. (Note that education is not directed at increasing scores on tests or meeting educational standards.) This sits alongside Article 6 (the right to survival and development) and Article 2 (non discrimination). There are of course many other articles, which are of relevance to ECE, but I will focus on these three. One of the cornerstones of the UNCRC is the responsibility of governments to promote optimal development (Woodhead, 2005), which means that they need to make ECE a high priority and provide it with appropriate resources. Participation in high quality ECE has a dramatic impact on whether children can develop to their fullest potential (Katz, 2003; Mitchell, Wylie & Carr, 2008; NICHD, 2006; Smith, Grima, Gaffney & Powell, 2000; Wylie & Thompson, 2003).

The evidence is now irrefutable that any provisions for young children, whether in the home or outside of it, that is less than top quality represents missed opportunities to make substantial contributions to the rest of their lives. Today no one argues against that statement...But no one today with serious educational and social policy-making responsibility for a community or a country all around the world would now argue against the proposition that the experiences of the early years of life have a powerful influence on the later ones. (Katz, 2003, p. 15)

So to what extent are all New Zealand children participating in ECE that will promote their optimal development? In 2002 there was quite a radical shift in ECE policy towards a new drive for increased participation and quality in ECE, with the introduction of the government's strategic plan (Nga Huarahi Arataki, Ministry of Education, 2002; May, 2009). This comprehensive 10 year plan "has provided vision and coherence to the early childhood sector in New Zealand, focusing on our social and educational areas of greatest need" (Duncan, 2009a), p. 7). Perhaps the plan's biggest impact was in its recognition that a qualified teacher workforce in ECE leads to better quality and more favourable outcomes for children. The strategic goal that 80% of all EC staff would be registered or completing qualifications by 2010 and 100% by 2012 was a welcome policy change designed to enhance quality. The plan also aimed to improve quality through more favourable teacher-child ratios and group size (especially for the under twos), and more effective delivery of Te Whariki. Note in particular this commitment to:

Review and strengthen the provision of professional development so that it is aligned with the Government's strategic goals and all ECE services have access to professional development that meets their needs. (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 19)

Another creative initiative from the strategic plan in the effort to improve quality, was the establishment of six Centres of Innovation on a three-year cycle "to showcase excellence and innovation in ECE" (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 10). This initiative resulted in many national and international presentations by COI teachers and researchers, to packed audiences enabling innovative curriculum and policy initiatives to be showcased and disseminated. By April 2006 16 were operating and 3 were preparing their final reports.

The introduction in 2007 of 20 hours free ECE for 3 and 4 year-olds was a further effort to improve ECE quality and to make ECE affordable and accessible to parents. A national survey of early childhood services in 2007 (Mitchell & Hodgen, 2008) showed that most parents were very positive about free early childhood education and that it had made the difference between their children attending or not. Also parents

reported that it had resulted in family savings, which were invested in other enriching activities for children.

In 2008 UNICEF brought out a league table report on ECE in the OECD countries, and at first glance New Zealand does quite well on this international comparison. The UNICEF Report Card sets 10 benchmarks which suggest basic standards for early childhood services - including parental leave, an ECE national plan, training, staff:child ratios etc. New Zealand met 6 of the 10 benchmarks, with Norway, France, Finland and Denmark meeting 8, Iceland meeting 9 and Sweden meeting 10 – 4<sup>th</sup> equal out of 25. (Australia met only two so this is one respect in which we are doing a lot better than our neighbours across the Tasman!) But apart from the usual critique of such league tables, it is important to look at this data critically, as Judith Duncan (2009a, 2009b) has done. She points out that the benchmarks which have been achieved are those which have “involved community consultation, advocacy by parents, communities and professionals, alongside strong government support” (Duncan, 2009a, p. 7). She acknowledges that increased subsidies and regulation have helped to remove barriers to participation in ECE, but points out that our greatest challenges come from the benchmarks we did not achieve. The most concerning of these is that we spend less than 1% of GDP on ECE. (The other three failed benchmarks were lack of parental leave, absence of universal child health provision, and high child poverty rates.)

Both in the small amount of GDP spent on early childhood education and our high child poverty rates (which mean we do not meet these benchmarks) is a litmus test to the wider systemic issues that are facing our most vulnerable families (those with very young children). (Duncan, 2009b, p. 5)

ECE only rates one brief half-page section of three paragraphs in the government’s 2008 Periodic Report to the UN CRC. I was surprised that there had not been more coverage of ECE in the periodic report (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2008), as in many ways we had been through a very positive period for ECE in 2008 (James, 2008, cited by May, 2009, p.295). The Periodic Report mentions New Zealand’s high rate of participation of under-five year-olds in ECE, the introduction of twenty hours of free ECE for three and four year-olds, discretionary grants and the Promoting Participation

project. Ninety-five per cent of children participate in ECE before attending school in 2007; the cost of ECE was reduced by 34% for most families; and progress had been made towards increasing the number of qualified staff in ECE (Ministry of Education, 2008). Sixty per cent of all early childhood teachers were registered or qualified in 2007 (an increase from 49% in 2002). Despite the positive figures and increasing levels of participation overall, the problem of the gaps between participation rates for HSES and LSES children and between ethnic groups, remained. There were still considerably more (98%) European/pakeha children entering school with ECE experience, than Maori (91%) or Pasifika children (84%).

In 2008 there were some qualified reasons for optimism that New Zealand was making satisfactory progress towards meeting its Article 6 and 29 commitments to supporting children's development and helping them achieve their optimal potential, through increased participation in EC services and improvement of ECE quality. There was a worrying concern though, about whether all children were getting the benefits of ECE (Article 2 – non discrimination). We were, however, moving in the right direction. But what is happening now and are we still on the pathway to improvement?

### *The Erosion of Quality*

We are just coming through a recession, and this is not proving to be a good time for early childhood education, although the government still claims that ECE is a top priority (Parliamentary Debates, Sept 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009). Just when families and children need support in difficult economic times and when the strategic plan was showing results, it looks as if an erosion of quality in ECE is beginning. There are worrying signs that the current government is not committed to key characteristics of quality targeted by the Strategic Plan, which research has shown to be crucial. The iron triangle of structural quality in ECE identified in research (Smith et al. , 2000) is adult-child ratio, staff training, and group size. Recent policies have chipped away at these aspects of structural quality, and impacted on process quality as well.

- *20 Hours ECE*: We should celebrate the fact that the '20 Hours Free' policy has been retained and extended to Playcentre and Kohanga Reo, but be concerning that the policy has been renamed '20 hours ECE'.

- *Ratios:* After a lengthy period of review of consultations in the development of new regulations for ECE in 2008, the government decided not to implement them.<sup>1</sup> The Minister also decided to rescind previously agreed ratio changes to lower the ratios for 2 to 2 ½ year-olds (they were to drop from 1:15 or 1:10 to 1:5) and in sessional centres (from 1:15 to 1:14). This is a disappointing example of an erosion of quality, and one which threatens the rights of our youngest and most vulnerable children in EC centres.
- *Qualifications:* The recent announcement from the Minister of Education that there will be an extension of the timeframe for achieving 80% teacher registration by 2012, and the scrapping of the 100% target, is a second example of the erosion of quality. The increase in qualified and registered ECE staff at the last State of Education report by 11% in 5 years (Ministry of Education, 2008) showed that it is possible to increase trained staff, when there is a political will for it. There are many people wanting to undergo EC training, and more trained EC staff are urgently needed in centres. Lifting the cap on ECE initial teacher enrolments would have allowed the planned improvements to the proportion of trained staff to proceed and the strategic plan goal of quality improvement met.
- *Implementation of Te Whāriki:* Our most precious resource in EC in New Zealand is, Te Whāriki, which focuses on process quality – responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things. One of the most important goals in the Strategic Plan was to ensure that Te Whāriki was properly implemented (Ministry of Education, 2002, p.4). It reflects our holistic, bicultural vision for childhood, and makes a political statement about the uniqueness, culture and rights of children in New Zealand society (Smith & May, 2006). It also meshes well with Article 29 of UNCRC, which has a similar broad goal for education for the fullest development of human personality. Submission to the ECE regulatory review showed how widely it is valued in the sector (Ministry of Education, 2008). Rather than providing recipes for what to do, Te Whāriki makes demands on teachers and challenges them to apply theoretical knowledge to their practice. Effective

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<sup>1</sup> Currently New Zealand's child:staff ratios for under one year-olds in full time education and care centres are poorer than for many of the OECD countries participating in the OECD review of 20 countries and poorer or similar for one year-olds.

implementation of Te Whāriki, requires interpretation, reflection, dialogue, careful planning, observation, and consultation with parents/whanau and children. Professional development is essential to this process. Improvements in assessment and self-review and teachers' understanding of Te Whariki have resulted from MOE professional development and publications (Mitchell & Hodgen, 2008). Yet in the budget announcement in May 2009 (Ministry of Education), it was announced that government funding for professional development programmes to support Te Whariki and for assessment resources (Kei Tua o te Pae) would end. Future professional development is to be focused on the government priorities for ECE. We will hear more of these later.

- *Centres of Innovation:* The COI initiative was created in order to help to improve quality in ECE. It was an innovative addition to mainstream top-down methods of improving quality (such as regulations and training requirements), and provided encouragement and support for new ideas arising out of best practice in early childhood education. The project provided resources and support for excellent practice. Researchers worked in partnership with teachers and the innovations came from the ground upwards. The projects were energizing and exciting for participants, providing models of good ideas for the EC sector, empowering EC teachers and helping them to develop professional expertise and showcase effective teaching and learning practices. They enhanced quality ECE in New Zealand and promoted our excellent overseas reputation. The COIs were abruptly terminated with only a few weeks notice, after a huge amount of work had gone into their planning and creation (Ministry of Education, 2009). This was unnecessary and inexcusable, wasteful of the time and money that had already been invested in the projects, and another way that quality is being eroded.
- *National Standards:* Recently the government introduced a new national standards policy, costing \$36 million dollars, which is important as it gives us clues about where the government's educational priorities are, and has some worrying implications for ECE. From 2010 schools with children in Years 1-8 will be tested against National Standards in reading, writing and mathematics (Ministry of Education, 2009). These National Standards are going to be applied after one year at school so it is easy to see the potential trickle down

and narrowing effects on the EC curriculum. According to the Ministry of Education (2009) “National Standards will help children do better in reading, writing and mathematics by being clear about what they should be able to do, and by when.” The assumptions which underly this policy are fundamentally wrong. The fallacy is that assessing things actually improves them! What it is likely to do is to increase the teaching focus, time and resources into these narrow areas, rather than encouraging holistic learning, dispositions, key competencies and motivation for lifelong learning. It is hard to see what the problem is. New Zealand 15 year-olds were 4<sup>th</sup> for Reading Literacy and 7<sup>th</sup> for Mathematical Literacy out of 29 countries in the PISA Assessment Study in 2006 (Ministry of Social Development, 2008, p. 93-96). Diagnostic assessment of literacy and numeracy is already an integral part of the practice of primary teachers but it occurs within meaningful contexts, and is closely linked to classroom goals and practice and the individuals in the class. Teachers usually already know which students need help. What they need, instead of pressure on them to meet national standards, is to receive the additional resources so that they can extend help to the children who need it. All the overseas evidence shows that national testing has only negative effects on student learning, and that there are numerous unintended and negative effects (Behrent, 2009; Nichols & Berliner, 2008). Why are we wasting money on potentially corrupting our education system and taking the joy out of children’s learning?

The more any indicator whether that be a test or a stock price or the percent growth of a corporation that year, takes on too much value, it is overly valued. Then that indicator gets corrupted and so do the people around it.... When the indicator takes on too much value and it’s too consequential, then people start gaming the system and they start, sometimes, cheating. (Interview with David Berliner, Demos, 2009, p.4)

You may ask what relevance National Standards have to early childhood education. In my view National Standards represent a move away from holistic learning, an infringement on teachers’ professionalism, a narrowing of the curriculum and an unethical infringement of children’s rights which will diminish children’s motivation and pleasure in learning (especially children from less privileged backgrounds). It is

hard to see how National Standards will not impact on programmes for children entering school, unless EC teachers are very vigilant.

### *Summary and Conclusions*

The UNCRC and General Comment 7 (2005) give New Zealand obligations in terms of children's rights. In this paper I have argued that while progress has been made in implementing Article 27 and Article 19 to reduce poverty and violence for children, we have some distance to go in terms of fully realising these rights for young children. In relation to Article 29, 2 and 6 and rights to education and development without discrimination, I have outlined progress between our 2<sup>nd</sup> and our most recent 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> periodic report. Rates of participation in ECE have increased and there has been some progress in improving quality through providing professional development for staff and increasing the proportion of trained staff in EC centres and plans to enhance ratios for under 2 ½ year olds and for sessional centres, were developed. There were still, however, inequities in terms of participation of children from Maori and Pasifika backgrounds and low income families in ECE. Sadly in the past year there have been some worrying signs that progress towards the UN CRC vision of a holistic high quality early childhood education for all young children, has halted. Whilst 20 hours of ECE for 3-4 year-olds has been retained, an erosion of quality ECE is visible in not improving ratios, extending the time frame for achieving 80% qualified staff, cessation of Professional Development focused on Te Whariki, and ending the COIs. Most worrying of all is the introduction of national standards focused on literacy and numeracy for primary education, since these indicate the narrow priorities of the present government for education, and have the potential to adversely influence holistic programmes for younger children.

What we need is a strong commitment to the following vision:

The government's objective should, broadly speaking, be that every child, whatever their family circumstances, whether their parents are solo, separated or married, at work or at home, whether they be rich or poor, whether they live in town or country, are Maori or Pakeha, should have a right as a citizen to a free early childhood education that meets their family needs, recognises their cultural heritage and provides a rich learning environment in a community of

learning and empowers both adults and children to learn and grow as equal participants in a democratic society. (May, 2009, p. 298)

Only then can we resume our journey towards being one of the most advanced countries in the world in the quality of our early childhood education and our commitment to children's rights.

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