

Commentary on ERO's evaluation indicators for early childhood services with a focus on infants and toddlers (Dr Maria Cooper)

In a scan of the current landscape, Cooper highlights the increasing participation of infants and toddlers in early learning settings, ongoing concerns about the quality of provision for infants and toddlers, and a reported lack of cultural responsiveness in many settings.

Citing the literature, the author argues that quality care and education begin with a positive view of the child as unique, imbued with capabilities, and agentic. But conceptions of the child and childcare have their origins in the worldviews of kaiako and parents. Where these are different, the lack of congruence can materially influence outcomes. Teachers/kaiako who lack awareness of the role culture plays in learning are unlikely to be responsive to the identities, languages and cultures of the infants and toddlers in their care. Outcomes are enhanced when kaiako view their assumptions and practices through a critical lens, become culturally responsive, and introduce practices valued by the children's cultural communities.

The author goes on to argue that warm, intersubjective adult-child relationships – in which adults and infants come together to share meaning, focus and attention – create the conditions for infants to learn to self-regulate for positive wellbeing. It is widely agreed that developing oral language capabilities in the early years is vital, but kaiako are often uncertain about how language develops and what they can do to promote it. Cooper draws attention to studies that highlight the role of the body in communication. A final section addresses the role of supportive conditions in enabling quality provision for infants and toddlers.

The paper concludes with a number of suggestions for revising the indicators and suggested practices for te pou Mātauranga and te pou Tikanga Whakaako.