

Quality in Early Childhood Services (August 2010)

Early childhood education has been an important focus for the Education Review Office for over 20 years. This report, *Quality in Early Childhood Services*, uses findings from ERO's national evaluations of early childhood education and individual services' education reviews to highlight the factors that contribute to high quality early childhood education and care, as well as those that contribute to poor quality. The report provides a good starting point for further discussion for anyone involved in early childhood education including education providers, policy makers and teachers.

Introduction

The quality of education and care in early childhood services has been a focus of the Education Review Office (ERO) reviews since 1990. Over time ERO's emphasis has shifted from concerns about services' compliance with regulations, to focus increasingly on aspects that affect the quality of performance. The emphasis is on assisting services to improve.

Change and development in the sector in recent years has led to:

- improvements in how educators assess children's learning and development
- increased understanding of the value and process of self review
- an increase in the number of qualified and registered teachers (educators) working in services.

Involvement in action research and participation in professional learning and development has enabled some services to push the boundaries of quality and to develop new ways of viewing children as learners.

ERO's Chain of Quality ^[1] shows how positive outcomes for children are linked to the management of the service, professional leadership, responsive educators, high quality relationships and programmes. Underpinning all the links in the chain are contextual factors including the philosophy of the service, and the involvement of families and communities. ERO reviews all individual early childhood services regularly, using the Chain of Quality as a basis for these reviews.

As well as individual reviews, ERO produces national evaluation reports. These gather nation-wide information on topics of interest in the early childhood sector. ERO's national evaluation reports ^[2] on early childhood education span a range of topics and highlight a variety of aspects over time and in different contexts. Reports have also been written about the quality of education and care in services with common philosophies, and to provide information for parents choosing a service for their child.

ERO's most recent national evaluation reports on early childhood education have been about the quality of assessment practice; the implementation of self review; and success for Māori children.

Quality in Early Childhood Services

As a result of its long-standing and extensive programme of evaluation in the sector, ERO is well positioned to comment on what contributes to quality in early childhood services. For this report ERO drew on findings from recent national evaluation reports and considered the

factors described in individual services' education reviews that contributed to high quality and poor quality. In particular, ERO considered the following questions:

In services considered to be of high quality, what were the characteristics?
What were the factors that contributed to this quality?

In services considered to be of poor quality, what were the characteristics?
What were the factors that contributed to this?

This report highlights key factors common to early childhood services ^[3] that provide high quality education and care for infants, toddlers and young children. It also discusses issues that contribute to poor quality in services, particularly those related to children's learning, wellbeing and safety. The report should be useful for people involved in the early childhood sector including: policy makers; professional development providers; initial teacher education providers; managers and educators in early childhood services; and students in initial teacher education programmes.

[1]

See Appendix 1 for ERO's chain of quality.

[2]

See Appendix 2 for a list of ERO's national evaluation reports relevant to early childhood education.

[3]

The early childhood services include kindergartens, education and care services, Playcentres and home-based education and care services. The Correspondence School and Kōhanga Reo are not included.

High quality education and care - an overview

ERO has found that in good quality early childhood services, managers and educators hold high expectations for all children and keep their focus on what really matters. In these services, educators are interested in children - who they are and what they bring to their learning. Educators' interactions with children create opportunities for meaningful conversations that provoke and extend children's thinking. Assessment practice enables educators to notice, recognise and respond to children's emerging interests and strengths.

Children who participate in high quality services learn in a safe and inclusive environment where they are respected, supported and challenged in their learning. They are happy, confident learners who are included and listened to. Their progress, achievements and successes are acknowledged and celebrated. Relationships between educators, parents and whānau, based on mutual trust and respect, strengthen partnerships for learning.

ERO has found that it is the interweaving of many aspects of practice that contribute to good learning opportunities for infants, toddlers and young children. In high quality services it is the interrelationship between the following features, rather than any one on its own, that underpins the quality of education and care provided.

- leadership
- philosophy
- vision
- relationships and interactions
- teaching and learning
- assessment and planning
- professional learning, qualifications and support
- self review
- management.

In this report each feature is discussed in terms of how it influences quality. The report includes relevant findings from recent national evaluation reports and examples of practice in high quality services drawn from individual service's education review reports.

Poor quality education and care

The factors that contribute to poor quality education and care for children are many and varied. It is generally not one particular aspect of the service that results in poor quality, but a combination of factors that have a negative effect on children's learning. Factors such as leadership, vision and professional learning and development that contribute to high quality in some services are lacking or ineffective in poor quality services. Rigidly implemented routines, poorly resourced or unsafe learning environments and inappropriate teaching practice are also factors in poor quality education and care.

In many services where quality is poor, there is little sense or understanding by managers and/or educators of what high quality looks like. Managers and educators lack the capability to change practice, often believing that their service is operating well, and are unaware of issues or risks to children. Poor quality practice is often entrenched and a lack of willingness or motivation to change prevails.

Ineffective leadership can result from lack of experience. Some leaders, although technically qualified, take on the role too early in their careers or are without the necessary support to do the job well. Some people in leadership roles are not well informed about what constitutes effective practice. Often they do not seek or have access to opportunities to engage in relevant professional learning and development.

Other issues in services where quality is poor include:

- educators not having responsive relationships with children, often coupled with high staff turnover
- programmes driven by imposed routines that focus more on adults' routines than the children's needs
- adult-directed activities, and rote learning methods, where adults decide what children do, and when and how they should do particular activities
- interactions that direct and control children
- adults being slow to respond to children or not recognising their cues or attempts at communicating
- a lack of modelling of good quality teaching practice
- practice not matching documentation expectations
- few qualified educators
- ineffective or non-existent self review

- poor personnel practices and inadequate working conditions.

Poor quality provision often results in children:

- appearing bored and flitting from one activity to the next
- hurting or bullying other children
- spending time waiting for food, toileting or sleep
- crying or showing signs of being unsettled
- trying to learn in a noisy and unsettled environment.

Poor quality education and care can contribute to high stress levels for both staff and children and can have a negative influence on relationships at all levels of the service.

ERO's national evaluation reports have included findings about poor quality provision, particularly in relation to assessment practice, self review, provision for infants and toddlers, and responsiveness to Māori children and their whānau.

ERO's report *The Quality of Assessment in Early Childhood Education*, highlighted poor quality assessment practice and the factors that contributed to this. Examples include:

- educators lacking a shared understanding of the purposes and intent of assessment
- little or no collaboration between educators about assessment and children's learning
- high staff turnover and had many new or unqualified educators on the team resulting in little consistency in assessment
- only one or two educators having any knowledge of the purpose of assessment
- educators not being involved in professional learning and development activities to increase their knowledge of effective assessment practice
- poorly written assessments, mostly describing participation and activities and with little analysis of children's learning
- a lack of strategies and systems to support assessment practice
- children being assessed as a group rather than as individuals
- a lack of leadership and higher-level professional discussion
- educators failing to see opportunities to increase the complexity of children's learning through their play and current interests

- very little evidence that interactions between educators and children extended and supported the development of children's language, understanding, and thinking and other interpersonal skills.

In *Implementing Self Review in Early Childhood Services*, ERO reported on how well managers and educators understood and implemented self review. Where self review was poorly understood and implemented factors included:

- managers and educators lacking a commitment to ongoing improvement
- managers and educators in leadership roles not having:
 - a good understanding of self review
 - a professional commitment to supporting self review
 - an awareness of the value and purpose of self review
 - the knowledge and skills to develop and implement manageable systems to guide self review
- leaders' inexperience and lack of an early childhood education background and/or qualification
- managers and supervisors or head teachers being isolated and working without professional support
- changes in management or ownership resulting in systems lapsing or other priorities dominating
- services struggling to manage the impact that staff turnover had on embedding self review as an integral part of the operation.

A report in ERO's monograph series, *The Quality of Education and Care in Infant and Toddler Centre*, January 2009, identified the following concerns in the provision of education and care for infants and toddlers:

- the lack of grass areas, gardens and natural resources available to children
- teachers not interacting with children during meal times because they were focused on cleaning tasks rather than engaging with the children
- teachers talking at children rather than interacting with them
- teachers not taking more time to listen and respond in ways that extended children's

learning.

In Success for Māori Children in Early Childhood Services, ERO confirmed some of the findings of an earlier pilot study, Māori Children in Early Childhood: Pilot Study, (July 2008) about services lack of responsiveness to Māori children and their whānau. In particular ERO found poor practice where:

- services stated that they “treated all children the same” and lacked strategies that focused upon Māori children as learners
- services included statements about values, beliefs and intentions in centre documentation that were not evident in practice
- they did not use effective processes to find out about the aspirations of parents and whānau of Māori children
- services lacked adequate self-review processes to evaluate the effectiveness of their provision for Māori children.

The following examples from ERO reports of poor quality services highlight some of these issues.

A lack of leadership has a negative impact on the management and operations of the centre. Staff do not have the guidance they need to operate as an effective care and education team. Poor teaching practices and ineffective child management strategies result in children who appear bored and fractious and whose learning needs are not being met. Underdeveloped self review and inadequate centre planning further hinder progress. The centre is unlikely to improve its standard of education and care without a major influx of trained and capable teachers, stronger centre leadership and a more effective and ongoing professional development programme.

The centre manager is currently the only registered early childhood teacher. She has been unable to access professional support and development to strengthen her knowledge of centre management, leadership and current early childhood education practice. This lack of professional support, mentoring and development is having a negative impact on the centre’s ability to provide appropriate education and care for infants, toddlers and young children. In addition, the three newly appointed educators have limited understanding or experience of teaching in an early childhood setting.

Improving quality in early childhood services

ERO's recent national evaluation reports highlight good practice and make recommendations in areas that services need to work on to improve quality. This is particularly in relation to assessment practice, self review and working with Māori children and their whānau.

In *The Quality of Assessment in Early Childhood Education*, ERO found that assessment practice in the sector was of variable quality. Good quality assessment was associated with:

- services having processes and support structures
- educators having a shared understanding of assessment and what it meant for practice
- active and meaningful participation in assessment by children, parents, whānau and other educators.

To improve assessment practice ERO recommended that early childhood educators:

- encourage and increase the genuine involvement of children, parents, whānau, and other educators in assessment of children's learning and development
- give children opportunities to revisit and reflect on their learning
- identify what learning in their service is valued or privileged, and consider this in relation to the service philosophy and Te Whāriki
- strengthen links between assessment and planning, focusing on interactions and teaching practice within the service
- acknowledge and respond to the cultural background of children, and their parents and whānau.

ERO also recommended that managers in early childhood services:

- provide guidance and expectations, both documented and articulated, about assessment to ensure shared understanding and continuity of practice amongst educators
- strengthen assessment policies and processes to give educators a sound framework and rationale for assessment practice linked to service philosophy
- provide targeted and ongoing high quality professional development, and appropriate noncontact and meeting time, to enable educators to participate in professional discussions about assessment and children's learning
- undertake robust and rigorous self review of teaching and assessment practice to improve outcomes for children.

Implementing Self Review in Early Childhood Services, reported that in services where self review was well understood and implemented, it was integral to the operation of the service. In these services self review was guided by established and well understood procedures for purposeful gathering, analysis and use of information. The perspectives of managers, educators, children, parents, and whānau were included in self review and the findings used to inform improvement.

To improve the understanding and implementation of self review, ERO recommended that early childhood services:

- improve processes for the gathering, analysis and use of information in self review
- seek professional development to improve their understanding and implementation of self review
- use existing Ministry of Education publications to increase their understanding of self review
- use external review to complement their self review.

Success for Māori Children in Early Childhood Services, notes that services that were highly responsive to the aspirations and expectations of the parents and whānau of Māori children did this through their:

- statement of philosophy
- vision and strategic intent
- relationships with parents and whānau
- communication and consultation processes
- self review.

Early childhood services focused on realising Māori children's potential through their:

- bicultural curriculum
- teaching strategies
- assessment practice
- partnerships for learning.

To improve the way services work with Māori children and their whānau ERO recommended that they:

- develop or review their processes for consulting and communicating with the parents and whānau of Māori children so they can be more responsive to their aspirations and expectations
- consider how effectively they integrate Māori perspectives in planning, assessment and evaluation processes
- provide professional development and support for managers and educators to increase their ability to work in partnership with the parents and whānau of Māori children
- strengthen self review to enable robust evaluation of the impact of learning programmes for Māori children.

Conclusions

This report highlights some features of high quality and poor quality services. These are not definitive or by any means complete. They are, however, useful as a starting point for further discussion and debate about quality both in early childhood services and in the wider early childhood sector.

Effective leadership is vital in high quality early childhood education. The role of well-qualified and experienced leaders in leading learning rather than just focusing on managing the day-to-day operation of the service is crucial to improving quality. Recommendations in ERO's recent national evaluation reports highlight the need for effective, professional leadership to improve assessment practice, self review and the responsiveness of services to Māori children and their whānau. This requires ongoing support for leaders at all levels of the sector to build leadership capacity and capability.

Regular, planned and targeted professional development is shown to have a positive influence on managers' and educators' practice. Services need to be pro-active in identifying priorities for development and seek relevant support either from within their service or from an external provider.

An ongoing issue in early childhood education has been the difficulty some services have faced in meeting qualification requirements. ERO has found that having all educators qualified does not on its own ensure high quality education for children, where other aspects are absent. Although qualifications are important, it is the combination of the factors discussed in this report that contributes to the overall quality of provision for children.

Where services are experiencing difficulty or need additional help, in areas identified by ERO and/or by the service, support needs to be timely and focused on building capability and capacity. A stronger accountability and compliance focus may be necessary for some services along with a wider range of interventions. Opportunities for high quality services to work collaboratively with other services in clusters or in regions may be useful.

Underpinning high quality provision is the capacity of services to review their own performance and improve practice. Through ongoing, robust self review services can find out what is working well and demonstrate what this means for all children at their service. They can also identify what they need to work on to improve quality.

ERO's external evaluation in individual services is an opportunity for them to discuss what they know about quality in their service.

ERO's Framework and Resources for Early Childhood Education Reviews ^[5]states:

In ERO's experience, the quality of self review in the early childhood sector is variable. Where services are carrying out high quality self review, the results of self review will be used to inform ERO evaluations. In many services, however, self review is not highly developed. In such cases ERO reviews will aim, through the external evaluation process, to support the development of self review within the early childhood sector.

Self review can help services consider what high quality looks like and engage managers and educators in discussions with ERO about improvement and quality. External review and self review can be used together to bring about ongoing improvement.

Appendix 1 includes ERO's Chain of Quality and lists questions services can use to review aspects of quality. These are based on the evaluative questions in ERO's Framework and Resources for Early Childhood Education Reviews ^[6] and on The Chain of Quality.

Appendix 2 is a list of ERO's national evaluation reports about early childhood education published between 1994 and 2010. Some of these reports include indicators of good practice that services could use in their self review. Reports are available on ERO's website www.ero.govt.nz, or on request to: info@ero.govt.nz.

[5]

See www.ero.govt.nz

[6]

See www.ero.govt.nz

Appendix 1: Reviewing quality in your service*



High quality programmes that contribute to positive outcomes for children

How well does our service promote and extend each child's learning and development through providing a high quality programme?

How effective is our:

- programme planning?
- assessment?

What is the quality of the programme children experience?

What expectations do we have about children's learning and development?

How well do we promote positive outcomes for children through acknowledging and supporting:

- tikanga Māori and te reo Māori?
- the culture and ethnicity of all children enrolled?

How well do we promote children's emotional safety and security?

Learning environment

How well do our environment and resources support children's:

- learning and development needs?

- physical, social and emotional needs?

Professional leadership and high quality teaching

What is the quality of our service's leadership in: curriculum development, programme implementation, quality improvement and involving parents in the service?

What is the quality of teaching practice, demonstrated through interactions between educators and children?

How effective are our educators in responding to children's learning needs?

Effective management

How effective is management in setting the direction for our service?

How well does management meet its obligations to be a good employer?

How effective are our systems for managing the performance, and identifying and meeting the professional development needs, of educators?

How effective is our self review in bringing about improvements that are likely to impact positively on children's learning, development and wellbeing?

Clear Philosophy

How does our service's philosophy impact on our service's operation, including the programme planned for children?

Involved Families and Whānau

How effectively are our families/whānau involved in:

- the operation and decision making of our service?

- setting goals for their children and knowing how well their children are progressing?

How well are our parents kept informed?

How effective are our systems for resolving concerns and complaints?

How welcoming is our service to parents and whānau and how effective are the opportunities they have for interaction with educators?

* See:

<http://www.ero.govt.nz/Review-Process/Frameworks-and-Evaluation-Indicators-for-ERO-Review>

Appendix 2: ERO's national evaluation reports about the early childhood sector

Success for Māori Children in Early Childhood Services, May 2010

Success for Māori Children in Early Childhood Services: Good Practice, May 2010

Implementing Self Review in Early Childhood Services, January 2009

Early Childhood Monograph Series: The Quality of Education and Care in Playcentres, January 2009

Early Childhood Monograph Series: The Quality of Education and Care in Kindergartens, January 2009

Early Childhood Monograph Series: The Quality of Education and Care in Home-based Early Childhood Services, January 2009

Early Childhood Monograph Series: The Quality of Education and Care in Infant and Toddler Centres, January 2009

Māori Children in Early Childhood: Pilot Study, July 2008

The Quality of Assessment in Early Childhood Education, December 2007

Early Childhood Education: A Guide for Parents, June 2007

Early Childhood Monograph Series: The Quality of Education and Care in Steiner Early Childhood Services, June 2007

Early Childhood Monograph Series: The Quality of Education and Care in Pacific Early Childhood Services, June 2007

Early Childhood Monograph Series: The Quality of Education and Care in Montessori Early Childhood Services, June 2007

Early Childhood Monograph Series: The Quality of Education and Care in Catholic Early Childhood Services, June 2007

Self-review in Early Childhood Education Services, December 2005

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Early Childhood: Readiness to Implement the 2005 Qualification Requirements, June 2004

Parent-Led Services in Early Childhood Education: Playcentres, June 2004

Playcentres: Maintaining Qualification Requirements from January 2005, April 2005

Catering for Diversity in Early Childhood Services, June 2004

Readiness for New Qualification Requirements in Early Childhood Services, June 2003

Provision of Early Childhood Education in Montessori Preschools, May 2002

What Counts as Quality in Home-based Care, July 2001

Early Childhood Services, May 2001

What Counts as Quality in Early Childhood Services, Winter 2000

Early Literacy and Numeracy: The Use of Assessment to Improve Programmes for Four to Six Year Olds, 2000

The Use of Te Whāriki in Early Childhood Centres, December 1998

What Counts as Quality in Playcentres, Summer 1998

What Counts as Quality in Kindergartens, Summer, 1997

What Counts as Quality in Childcare, 1996

Early Childhood Learning Programmes, Autumn 1995

Good Practice in Childcare Centres, Autumn 1994