



IN THE MARKET FOR AN ECE TRANSITION-TO-SCHOOL PROGRAMME?

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ABSTRACT. This article draws on a small evaluation research project, conducted in one early childhood education (ECE) centre in Auckland, New Zealand, with the aim of supporting its capacity for self-review. The centre management and governance team was motivated to seek out the support of research as part of their response to two recent Education Review Office (ERO) reports that had cast doubt over the value of their transition-to-school programme, and the pedagogy used at the centre. This article draws on this evaluation research to discuss knowledge debates that featured in the discourses of the centre and its community: dispute about the value of the transition programme; the paradox of mandatory self-review; and the difficult work of changing practice, in responding to ERO advice to move away from teacher-directed pedagogy.

Keywords: discourse; Early Childhood Education (ECE); evaluation research; pedagogy; self-review; transition-to-school

Small-scale qualitative research walks a difficult path between positivist ideals of research that privilege verifiable data and ‘evidence’ on one hand, and the danger of making unwarranted judgements based on purely subjective responses, on the other. This article reports on a small evaluation research project, conducted in one ECE centre located in Auckland, New Zealand. The Centre Supervisor was motivated to seek the support of research in this instance in response to Education Review Office (ERO) reports in 2011 and 2014 that had queried the value of the

centre's transition-to-school programme, and the pedagogy of the teachers. We draw on the data collected during the evaluation project in February 2015–September 2016, to discuss a knowledge debate that was prominent in the 'talk' of the centre and its community. We investigate this example of education discourse for its philosophical meanings (Taylor, 2001). This prominent knowledge debate concerned the educational value of the centre's transition-to-school programme. The purpose of this article is to critically examine this example from the centre, demonstrating how this debate illustrates the workings of 'discourse' in Foucault's sense, as the power to produce social truth and identity through ideas and words, i.e. language (Fairclough, 1992).

Context and Background

The ECE centre is located in an affluent suburb of Auckland, New Zealand's largest city. In New Zealand, ECE caters for children up to the age of six, though children mostly commence their primary (elementary) education on or soon after their fifth birthday. ECE is not compulsory, but licensed services are heavily subsidised by government, which since 2007 has aimed additional funding to ensure that 3–5 year olds can attend free ECE for 20 hours per week (Ministry of Education, 2016). The ECE sector offers families a richly diverse range of programmes, reflected in part by the Ministry of Education's categories of services being 'teacher-led,' 'parent-led,' and 'whānau-led' (whānau is a Māori word approximating to 'family,' in this usage referring to the extended family of the child in ECE). ECE providers must be licensed; they are required to follow the mandated early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996); and they are subject to formal review by the Education Review Office (ERO), a government agency that reports on the quality of education provision in ECE centres and schools (www.ero.govt.nz). For teacher-led services at least 50% of the staff must be qualified ECE teachers.

The centre in this study is a licensed private ECE provider, established in the 1980s under the auspices of a Christian church community, now operating as an independent legal entity. When we undertook this research, the centre was licensed for 58 children over the age of two, with a total roll of 81 children enrolled across all sessions. Children have a range of attendance options, full-time and part-time, and most enrolled children are three or four years old. Families receive a copy of the Bible upon enrolment, and the curriculum includes a regular programme of Scriptural education.

At the beginning of our study, the centre teachers and management considered the transition-to-school programme to be a strength and 'unique selling point' in its marketing profile. With only small changes during its 10-year-plus history, this programme for 4-year-olds ran in the afternoons, with the express aim of supporting the children's transition to primary school. The centre referred to the transition programme as being 'semi-structured' or 'semi-formal': it offered an

introduction to various learning areas of the New Zealand Curriculum taught by experienced, qualified ECE teachers. The parent community was highly supportive of the transition programme, which ‘sold itself’ by word-of-mouth referrals and multiple enrolments within families. The staff and community generally understood the transition programme to be the reason why the centre had a substantial waiting list.

ERO evaluated the centre according to its normal schedule in 2011 and 2014, resulting in review reports that demanded careful consideration by the management and Board of Trustees. Despite the positive overall tone of these reviews, ERO recommended developing an ‘emergent’ and more ‘child-centred’ curriculum, and in its formal recommendations, as well as face-to-face feedback offered by the ERO teams at the time, the Board and staff understood ERO to have challenged its transition programme as well as its approach to pedagogy in general.

Undertaking the Evaluation

The centre management therefore asked us to focus in particular on its transition programme in conducting evaluation research on and with the staff of the centre, as well as other stakeholder participants including children, parents and Board members. The Centre Supervisor wanted our research to find out what the centre staff might do to improve the transition programme. In planning to collect empirical data, we wondered whether there would be much appetite for a critical review of the transition programme, given its declared importance to the centre as a business. Together with the Board Chair and Centre Supervisor, we devised the following evaluation focus points:

- The role of overt teacher direction in the centre generally, which ERO had criticised;
- The difference made by the transition programme to the school entry experiences of its graduates;
- Suggestions for improvements to the transition programme;
- Whether or not the transition programme should continue.

Our evaluation research aimed to support the centre to engage with the principle of ‘complementary review’ promoted by ERO: ‘ERO’s review process is a differentiated and complementary evaluation approach. It provides external evaluation that responds to a school’s context and uses and builds on each school’s capacity for self review’ (Education Review Office, 2017).

This emphasis by ERO on complementarity is a manifestation of a change in its own practice towards a more democratic and inclusive approach (Mutch, 2013) compared with its earlier punitive and authoritarian image that came under severe critique from educationalists (Thrupp, 1998). We undertook to work ‘with’ the centre, so in some respects our evaluation research constituted an instance of ‘self-

review.’ As researchers, we were external to the centre, but our evaluation aimed to help the centre work towards the changes ERO had suggested. We were ‘insiders’ in the sense of already having existing relationships at the centre, which is a practicum centre for our ECE teacher education programme. We and the centre staff and families are all, in a sense, in the same ‘community’; some of its staff are our graduates. While cognisant of the impossibility of being ‘objective’ in this research scenario, we sought to keep roles somewhat separate by withdrawing from evaluative lecturer duties at the centre while our data collection was underway.

We conducted interviews with the Centre Supervisor and Board Chair, five parents, and New Entrant leaders from two local primary schools, which most of the children from the centre attend upon turning five. We undertook repeated lesson observations with five teachers at the centre, taking field notes and talking with the children during the lessons about their learning, and their perceptions of what they expected school to be like. At the end of data collection in September 2016, we held a feedback meeting attended by the centre teachers and supervisor, some parents and a Board representative.

Adding Value, or Not?

The centre found itself caught between two opposing forces over its transition programme. On one hand, the centre management understood its statutory obligations to respond to the criticisms of its transition programme made by ERO, acting as the ‘watchdog’ for national education systems. On the other hand, they saw the value of the transition programme in market terms, as increasing their ability to attract families to the centre, and ensure their loyalty.

The parents we interviewed were emphatic about its value: they believed it provided their children with an advantage when they turned five and started school: ‘it’s important to get ahead.’ Being ahead means that a child can ‘go straight into actually learning words rather than starting at the letter level.’ One parent clarified this competitive idea about learning, stating, ‘I don’t want my children starting off on a back foot.’

We sought to establish whether the transition programme makes a positive difference to the children when they get to school by collecting the views of the New Entrant leaders at the two schools attended by most of the centre’s graduates. We asked these lead teachers if they or their colleagues noticed any difference between these children and those from competing ECE centres. Their responses denied any noticeable differences by ECE centre amongst their New Entrant cohorts, one saying ‘we see no difference and we’re not looking for it either’ while the other noted there ‘seems to be very little difference in children coming from our three different main feeder kindergartens.’ This leader could ‘guarantee’ her teachers knew the originating ECE of only ‘one or two of the children’ and reiterated, ‘So no, we don’t see a big difference.’

On delving further into this lack of differentiation, one leader said parents do not identify the child's originating ECE centre on the school enrolment form. The other leader suggested such information was not even of any interest, claiming that parental backgrounds and family life were more important than the ECE the child had attended. Both leaders, speaking on behalf of their colleagues and schools, advanced views that adhere to recognised professional standards of fairness and neutrality towards all children and all ECE centres: 'The kindergartens need to know that we accept the children and take them from where they're at when they start here. There's nothing specifically that they have to do to be here except be here. So it's not like they have to know their alphabet' (New Entrant leader).

The lead teachers expressed their views in terms that affirmed the hallowed traditions of meritocracy in New Zealand education, according to which all new entrant children start school on a 'level playing field' irrespective of previous experiences. The school leaders also reserved to themselves and schools, not the ECE centres, the expert knowledge and skills required for teaching literacy and numeracy.

Yet the parents who attended the final feedback meeting held at the end of the data collection process strongly contested these statements made by the lead teachers as being inconsistent with comments the teachers of their children had made to them. The parents believed the teachers could confidently identify the children from the centre as being at an advantage over classmates from competing ECE centres. There are various explanations for this disjunction in views and it is pointless to speculate on causes, but the dispute suggests that 'education' has become a commodity with 'scarcity value' in the current social climate of early childhood education in New Zealand.

While our evaluation failed to find any evidence that the children from the centre enjoyed any learning advantages in the new entrant classroom over classmates coming from other ECE centres, it highlighted the existence of a binary set of oppositional beliefs concerning the transition programme. The centre staff and the parents saw the transition programme as valuable, while the lead teachers and the ERO review teams saw it as of little to no benefit. But what does it mean to 'know' that the transition programme makes a difference, or not, to the children? Without 'hard evidence' one way or the other, what might prompt those on either side to soften or change their views?

This dispute over the value of the transition programme is a telling illustration of economic thinking in relation to parenting and education. One of the key discourses in economic thinking is Human Capital Theory, which underpins views of education in service of the economy, and advances the idea that the purpose of schooling is to prepare children for 'jobs' (Fitzsimons, Peters, & Roberts, 1999). When these ideas are dominant in society, they will exert influence over how people in general think about the education their children receive at centres and schools. These are powerful ideas about schooling from the perspective of the parents at the centre. These ideas resulted in the views the parents expressed

of school as a sort of competition or race, in which they expected the transition programme at the ECE centre to give their children a head start.

In asking us to focus on the transition programme, the centre seemed initially unwilling to accept the negative scorecard its transition programme had received from ERO in 2011 and 2014. The centre had its own economic rationale for believing in the transition programme, as noted above. The claim that the transition programme advantaged children at school was unprovable either way, but nonetheless of significant positive value to the centre in brute business terms. The resulting intransigent opposition between the views of the parents and the views of 'experts' including ERO and the lead teachers is an interesting example of the ability of discourse to produce truth (McHoul & Grace, 1998). The paradoxical aspects of this dispute are poignant and fitting within the prevailing political conditions, including impatience with experts, in which our children now live and learn.

Too Teacher-driven?

The highly visible dispute over the transition programme obscured the need for a deeper, more complex conversation within the community of the centre concerning pedagogy and praxis. Pedagogy is the philosophical and theoretical framework that informs teaching practice, which underscores why it is important for all teachers. For this reason, programmes of initial teacher education usually include a focus on developing the student teacher's own 'personal philosophy of teaching.' Praxis means theory-and-practice, and in this context is a one-word conundrum since there can be no teaching practice without theory: the purpose of 'praxis' is to remind us of their intertwined nature.

ERO had expressed concerns about the dominance of teacher direction they observed at the centre, in particular in the transition programme, which was a critique of the philosophy underlying their teaching practice that went to the heart of pedagogy. Our observations confirmed ERO's findings. The corollary of dominant teacher direction is lack of student agency: increasing the teacher-directed nature of the pedagogy of any programme inevitably entails decreasing the time devoted to actively student-directed learning. Dominance of teacher-directed pedagogy is widely perceived as old-fashioned if not outmoded in education, nowhere more so than in the ECE sector. New Zealand has a longstanding tradition of critical reflexive ECE scholarship (Clark & Grey, 2010), including analysis of power relations (May, 2009), and an international reputation for high-quality, innovative, bicultural ECE (McLachlan, 2011). Since ERO's brief includes attention to professional standards, it is unsurprising that their reviews criticised the overly directive, teacher-led nature of 'normal practice' that was dominant in the centre when we began our research.

Compelled to Self-improve

The centre managers were clearly motivated to improve the performance of the centre in response to the criticisms expressed in the ERO reports, saying, ‘we have made improvements to what they have talked about’ and ‘we can improve it more and more’ (Centre Supervisor). During the period of time when we collected data, the staff engaged in an on-going programme of professional learning and development, and attempted to change the approach to teaching and learning portrayed in their programmes and everyday standards of professional practice in the centre. The Board’s decision to seek external help with evaluation was part of their strategic, long-term commitment to improvement, spurred on by the reports. One of the primary school lead teachers we interviewed praised the efforts that the early childhood centre’s teachers were making: ‘I think they’re a very knowledgeable, experienced, fantastic bunch of ladies who work there and they’re very open to communication and I think it’s a great looking centre...I think they’re very brave and they’re very professional and looking for that continuous improvement, which is what we all strive for’ (New Entrant leader).

Self-review in ECE was the topic of doctoral work by Anne Grey: ‘The concept of self-review first appeared on the early childhood landscape in 1999 with the publication by the Ministry of Education of *The quality journey: he haerenga whai hua*, [which] outlined a framework for introducing quality improvement systems into early childhood education in New Zealand. Since that time the sector has grappled with the notion of self-review so as to build a shared understanding of the process and its impact for early childhood teaching practice’ (Grey, 2010, p. 8).

Self-review is an important plank in ERO’s ‘complementary approach’ noted above. The Ministry of Education promulgates this complementary approach as part of a ‘sharing of control’ over reviews and quality assurance, despite the fact that this review regime is imposed by statutory mandate on teacher-led ECE centres. There is fundamental irony in the notion of being ‘forced’ to undertake self-review. Nevertheless, transformative learning can take place when schools and centres undertake serious self-assessment of their own achievements and deficiencies (Feinstein, 2012).

Self-review in New Zealand education is a regime of self-surveillance that falls into the category of practices Foucault termed ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault, 1994). Foucault argued that obedience in this context requires failings to be in full view, and that the exhibition of contrition by public acts of self-punishment will lead to the creation of a new self (p. 249). What Foucault meant by ‘obedience’ equates to ‘compliance’ by ECE centres with the statutory frameworks including ERO review systems. ERO reports are ‘in full view’ since they are available in the public domain. What Foucault termed ‘acts of contrition’ relates to the Board’s obligation to implement changes as directed by ERO. The centre’s decision to seek independent evaluation advice was another indication of their willingness to ‘make a good act of contrition’ and seek out the steps required to bring about improvement.

The centre staff had no choice but to accept the need to commit to professional learning and self-review, but this does not detract from the significance of the real learning that ensued. As the evaluation proceeded, the centre's initially defensive response to the ERO reports gave way to a more authentic openness to self-examination and change. The phrase 'creation of a new self' is an apt description of the rigorous process of self-examination and change we witnessed the teaching staff undergoing during the process of evaluation and self-review.

During the time we spent in the centre, the teaching staff grappled with the implications of the ERO reports. The staff focused on learning how to provide more opportunities for the children to use their own agency, and the pedagogical approach of the transition programme gradually changed. Staff members directed themselves towards greater collaboration with each other, and to deepening their shared understanding of emergent curriculum. In short, the teachers were engaged in a difficult process of thinking and learning together to become more thoughtful and responsive to children's interests. Learning by definition is a risky and 'dangerous' business, and responding to the criticism of their practice was no easy undertaking, but a challenging complex process requiring considerable commitment and courage. More choice of activities, emphasis on project-based lessons, and making the home reading programme voluntary were some of the significant, tangible changes in the transition programme during 2016 as an outcome of this process of professional self-review, learning and development.

Conclusion

Knowledge is 'core business' for schools and arguably, by extension, also for ECE centres. In particular, beginning to attain competency in literacy and numeracy is core business for New Entrant programmes. This knowledge is arguably the 'powerful knowledge' Michael Young refers to, by which he meant 'the knowledge of the powerful' (2012). The parental support for the centre's transition programme reflected their awareness of the importance of this powerful knowledge to shape the whole of their children's lives. The parents wanted a transition programme to offer their children an educational advantage, a head start when they went to school. This reasoning is entirely understandable, especially under the influence of neoliberalism in public policy, which views education as a 'private good' or commodity, linked to ideas of competition, individualism, and a 'banking' or transmission model of education (Freire, 1970/1996; 1998).

Over two years the centre teaching staff engaged in an extended process of self-review and critical self-examination, supported by our evaluation project, as a substantive response to the directives from ERO in their 2011 and 2014 reports. Over the course of the process, the focus shifted from the surface dispute over the transition programme to a deeper more open-ended examination of pedagogy. To fully understand how these knowledge debates operated within the centre calls for critical awareness of the power of dominant discourses to produce local 'truths,'

and draws attention to the workings of this power, through key ideas and dominant discourses, to shape the identities of individuals and organisations.

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