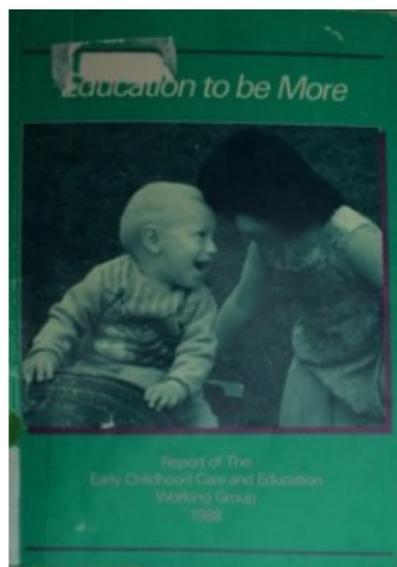




Columns

The legacy of *Education To Be More* for early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand

[Andrew Gibbons](#)



In 1980, Geraldine McDonald wrote: ‘Measures to promote the rights of children are frequently disguised ways of controlling the role of women.’ McDonald’s challenge to policymakers is cited in the 1988 report of the [Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group](#), *Education To Be More* (a.k.a. the Meade Report).

It’s on page 40, in a discussion of the enduring challenges that the early childhood sector has faced. The quote provides something of a prophecy: that the early childhood care and education care and education sector will continue to fail women and children by pitting one against the other in, for example, early childhood regulatory reviews.

Education To Be More recognised many enduring challenges, visions and strategies for the early childhood care and education sector. Some strategies, such as a national curriculum and the maximisation of participation, are now more or less entrenched in the sector’s policy and perhaps even in the nation’s psyche – although, of course, with many enduring concerns and debates about teacher qualifications, working conditions, the quality of initial teacher education and the translation of the strands, principles and learning outcomes into practice.

However, those concerns and debates are not the concerns and debates of interest in this brief commentary. They certainly interconnect with what I see as a vital debate.

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Executive summary

New Zealanders deserve a thriving early childhood education (ECE) sector that offers the best quality of care and education to children. We trust ECE service providers to protect and educate our youngest children, and we rely on services being available and affordable so parents and whānau can participate in the labour market and contribute to the national economy. New Zealand's economy also benefits from ECE enhancing the learning outcomes of those children who attend ECE services.

Without government intervention, through both funding and regulation, the ECE sector would not meet the safety and quality expectations of New Zealanders. In this regulatory review, we found market failures in the ECE sector that place undue limits on the abilities of all parties in the system to exercise choice, particularly parents and whānau.

Parents and whānau do not have easy access to comparable information about their ECE service provider options. This means they cannot accurately judge any ECE service by factors such as health and safety risk for their child(ren) or educational quality in comparison to other available ECE services. Also, given the undersupply of ECE services in many regions, parents and whānau often have little practical choice about which ECE service to access.

We also found the ECE regulatory system is not up to the expected standard of other regulatory systems in New Zealand or ECE regulations in comparable countries. The current ECE regulatory system is causing a range of problems for ECE service providers and parents and whānau, as well as staff in regulatory roles. The main problems are: the regulatory tools are not well-suited or proportionate to the risks they are trying to manage, and the biggest risks in the ECE sector are not being adequately addressed.

The current ECE regulatory system has:

- outdated settings, tools and practices are limiting the supply of ECE services
- excessive and confusing regulatory requirements are imposing undue compliance burdens on providers
- weak pressure on low quality ECE service providers to improve quality above minimum standards, and
- insufficient incentive for high quality ECE service providers to expand or innovate.

ECE regulations need to be carefully balanced; they must function to educate and protect children while also supporting the ongoing viability of ECE service provision. The government's response to this review also needs to balance finding ways to reduce compliance costs and administrative burdens on ECE service providers with protecting the quality of care and education for children that New Zealanders expect.

Taken together, the recommendations presented in this report chart a strategy for reforming regulatory design, leadership, capability practices and requirements. They provide directions for how to:

- modernise the ECE regulatory approach and its tools
- simplify the ECE regulatory requirements, and
- improve support for the ECE sector.

The recommendations will lift ECE regulatory capability in ways that would give clarity and practical support to ECE service providers. We need ECE service providers to have greater confidence in their ability to comply with regulatory requirements as this confidence could result in more services entering and expanding in the market to meet the demand for services. More competition in the ECE market could also drive more ECE service providers to lift their service quality above the regulated minimum standards.

We would like to thank all those who contributed to this work including all those who submitted feedback. We would also like to thank officials from across agencies in particular the Education Review Office and the Ministry of Education who have worked constructively and professionally with us through this process.

Executive Summary of the Summary Report of the Regulatory Review of Early Childhood Education

The problem we need to recognise as a nation is that the recent [regulatory review \(summary\)](#) is doing exactly what Geraldine McDonald said it should not be doing. A regulatory review can function as control through a proliferation of more restrictions and requirements that operate on a low-trust, high-surveillance approach to governing early childhood teachers (leading to more and more reporting and more and more pressure to spend a day in fear of not meeting the regulations). A review can also function as control by releasing the investment sector from the burdens of regulations (a scenario which could, in many instances, contribute to poorer working conditions and pay). Neither of those possibilities is particularly productive and empowering for early childhood teachers.

An open letter to the Prime Minister and Cabinet argues that the regulatory review does challenge the idea of children being leveraged to control women because there's not much about the review that suggests an actual concern for the lives of children. In addition, the letter argues that the review has been 'dismayingly' lacking in consultation and public debate. The review is controlling, in other words, through its impoverished approach to being inclusive, deliberative, and hence democratic. That impoverishment is likely to also lead to a failure in empowering the sector because it's so intensely disengaged from the sector.

The life and times of *Education To Be More* offer policymakers insight into how and why to think differently about a regulatory review and what early childhood teachers should expect of policy that impacts their lives and the lives of those with whom they work.

Between 1988 and 1996, the nation came together and produced a curriculum – the leaders of that policy process established an exhaustive and participatory approach to policymaking.

The perceived success of the curriculum in the 1990s is a hard-fought benefit that acknowledges the incredible efforts of many individuals and groups – notably the leaders who recognised a simple emancipatory possibility – that policy can be meaningful when it is inclusive and deliberative.

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In other words, the success was an inspiration in bringing the nation together in a slow and considered approach. This includes all the teachers who contributed their experiences and perspectives to the nationwide consultations and reviews and who could implement the new curriculum as active participants who had a sense of belonging in relationship to their contribution. This process is particularly important in the early childhood care and education sector because so many tensions create apparent divisions, factions, interest groups, and so on. The complexity of the sector demands a slow and careful and inclusive approach.

Consider the benefits of this process-focused approach to policy in terms of being 'on board' and 'living' the regulations. Consider also that the regulatory review could be an excellent time to celebrate the successes of the early childhood care and education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. This is where the 2017 curriculum updates and, more now, the regulatory review, are missing the essence of what makes policy work.

Success is not in the product; it's in the process!

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