

Why there should be no place for profit in early childhood education ^[1]

Author: Neuwelt-Kearns, Caitlin & Ritchie, Jenny

Source: Stuff

Format: Article

Publication Date: 31 Jul 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

OPINION: Many understand education to be a public good that promotes the wellbeing and prosperity of society.

Yet, despite evidence affirming the importance of a child's first few years for their long-term wellbeing and development, our early childhood sector is being left largely to market forces and as an opportunity for private investment.

As discussed in our recent report for the Child Poverty Action Group, Investing in children? Privatisation and early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand, the impacts of neo-liberal policy settings are limiting access to quality appropriate care, particularly for children from low-income families.

Children are spending increasingly more time in early learning services, encouraged by policies that seek to make early childhood education (ECE) more accessible

Successive governments have emphasised the value of ECE, as seen in the 20-hours subsidy.

However, there have been recent reports of inadequate supervision, under-resourcing, workplace bullying and neglect of children. Teachers, staff and parents have described what they see as a sector at breaking point and needing radical transformation.

Evidence suggests that attending a poor-quality service can be detrimental for children, and potentially worse than not attending a service at all. For instance, children may be exposed to excessive noise levels, which can affect healthy brain development and exacerbate stress for them and their teachers.

These poor-quality environments are more prevalent in for-profit, privately owned centres

Privately owned centres are a significant and growing feature of the sector. Policy settings have enabled their expansion to 41 per cent of the sector in 2019, up from 23 per cent in 2002.

Privatisation is of significant concern, given the relationship between for-profit services and poor-quality early learning environments. Regulatory requirements may be barely adhered to while profits are pocketed rather than used to employ more qualified staff.

Across a range of quality indicators – including, but not limited to, staff qualifications, workloads and retention, child-to-staff ratios and cultural responsiveness – the evidence is unequivocal. On average, not-for-profit services deliver a better standard of care.

The impacts of poor-quality ECE are distributed unevenly

Access to high-quality, culturally relevant ECE provides foundational learning experiences for children, and emotional and parenting support to families.

Such provision can mitigate challenges associated with intergenerational poverty. And yet lower socioeconomic areas are over-represented in the number of early childhood services that have received Education Review Office reports indicating poor-quality provision.

This is particularly concerning when we consider that people receiving core benefits are “socially obliged” to enrol their children in an early learning programme. Beyond being discriminatory, such a mechanism may be doing more harm than good to children if the provision is poor.

An investment in quality public ECE is an investment in our future

Children develop important cognitive and social skills, setting them up to be able to contribute to society as they grow. Beyond immediate concerns we have for the wellbeing of early learners and their teachers, the downstream costs of enduring with a broken ECE system are too great to justify inaction.

Early childhood care and education should not be viewed merely as a baby-sitting service for working families. As we continue to experience growing social and economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, many families experiencing income loss will need to reduce childcare days or remove their children from early learning.

All young children have the right to high-quality, culturally resonant early learning opportunities, regardless of the employment status of their care-givers.

While some of the objectives detailed in the 2019 Early Learning Action Plan laid out pathways or tightening regulations, the Government should be funding community-based not-for-profit services, with fully qualified staffing, in order to provide fees-free early learning for all families.

It is time to reconsider what role the early childhood sector ought to play in New Zealand. Do we want services to operate as instruments for individual and corporate profits, or do we seek to deliver high-quality support to give our children the best possible start?

** Caitlin Neuwelt-Kearns is a researcher for the Child Poverty Action Group ; Associate Professor Jenny Ritchie is in the School of Education at Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington.*

Related link: Investing in children? Privatisation and early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand [3]

Region: Australia and New Zealand [4]

Tags: for-profit [5]

non-profit [6]

Source URL (modified on 17 Sep 2020): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/08/why-there-should-be-no-place-profit-early-childhood-education>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/08/why-there-should-be-no-place-profit-early-childhood-education> [2]

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/opinion/122260073/why-there-should-be-no-place-for-profit-in-early-childhood-education> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/20/08/investing-children-privatisation-and-early-childhood> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/australia-and-new-zealand> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/profit> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/non-profit>