
Misplacing the Teacher? New Zealand Early Childhood Teachers and Early Childhood Education Policy Reforms, 1984-96

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ABSTRACT Early childhood care and education services in New Zealand have experienced major policy reforms since 1984. Life history interviews were carried out over a two-year period to obtain insight into the impact of the major reforms on the lives of eight kindergarten teachers. This article looks at the teachers' own perceptions of the changes and how they often felt 'overtaken' or 'misplaced' within the reforms. The teachers' stories are positioned within an environment of competing discourses about education, where newly established discourses worked to relocate or misplace the teachers.

Introduction

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the early childhood sector along with the compulsory education sector in New Zealand were involved in periods of tumultuous change. In this study I talked with eight kindergarten teachers about their perceptions of these changes in their day-to-day lives teaching within the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Service (Duncan, 2001a).[1]

This article discusses the eight New Zealand kindergarten teachers' sense of being 'smothered', 'overtaken', and 'misplaced' by all the changes and reforms coming down on them during the time of New Zealand's educational reform in the 1980s and early 1990s. The teachers' interviews illustrate these feelings in the context of policy implementation delivered from both government and local employers. They also demonstrate how the wider social and economic changes occurring in New Zealand at the same time added to this sense of being 'overtaken' and 'misplaced' by politics and top-down decision making. The teachers were all experienced head teachers (or had been head teachers), who were able to reflect on their teaching years before the

changes in 1984 and who were both willing and able to articulate their experiences in an interview context. The New Zealand early childhood world is a small one, and, as I myself had been a kindergarten teacher for some time, I knew all the teachers before approaching them to participate in this study. The eight teachers were based in the lower half of the South Island of New Zealand. This was due to geographical convenience for myself as the researcher. Each teacher was interviewed twice, once in late 1994 and again, early in 1996. The first interview took the form of a life (history) focussed interview. This is a combined methodology, which brings the strengths of life history (which encompasses a person's life) alongside an analysis of a specified situation (in this case the experiences of being a kindergarten teacher at particular times of policy change). The second interview two years later had a twofold objective. Firstly, I wanted the teachers to be able to reflect on the initial analysis of their previous interview as set out in my proposed theoretical framework. Secondly, I wished to update the teachers' life stories, incorporating the changes and developments in their personal and professional lives since the first interview. Thus, this study was able to track the changes in both the personal and the professional lives of the teachers. This article discusses one aspect of their professional teaching experiences (see Duncan, 1999, 2001a, b, 2002, for other aspects of this doctoral study).

The New Zealand Kindergarten Service

I chose to research the impact of the early childhood education reforms on those within the kindergarten service, not only because I had been a kindergarten teacher myself, but also because the Free Kindergarten Service is unique, both in New Zealand and internationally, in its historical development, its philosophies, and its style of provision. The New Zealand Free Kindergartens (hereafter referred to as kindergartens and the kindergarten service) were the largest providers of early childhood education in New Zealand. They have only recently been surpassed by the provision of childcare centres (Ministry of Education, 2000). Kindergartens are administered by kindergarten associations. These associations operate as 'umbrella' organisations, responsible for managing the individual kindergartens in their region or area 'in accordance with their philosophies and Government requirements' (Education Review Office, 1997, p. 11).

A key philosophy of the kindergarten service has always been to maintain an accessible, high-quality, early childhood care and education service. The three key elements that support this philosophy are:

- fees are not charged for attendance, although substantial fundraising and voluntary donations are required;
- trained and qualified teachers are employed and supported by a professional team of senior teachers;^[2]

- parents and caregivers are involved in the running and management of the service, from the level of parent committees in each individual kindergarten through to association level.

The New Zealand Education Reform Context

Many commentators reflect that the years of the Fourth New Zealand Labour Government (1984-90) were the heyday for early childhood services (Meade, 1990; Smith, 1991; Wells, 1991; May, 1993). Gains were made across the whole sector and policies appeared to support and encourage quality in and accessibility to early childhood centres. The years 1987-90 were the period when policy and legislation began to address the pro-early childhood rhetoric of the 1984 Labour Government. This occurred alongside the general restructuring of educational administration in New Zealand. The Picot Report, *Administering for Excellence* (Taskforce to Review Education Administration, 1988), was the first overview of educational administration in New Zealand that included in its brief the issues involved in the early childhood sector. The pre-election promises of the Government led to a separate and concurrent review of the early childhood sector (May, 1990, p. 103). This review was undertaken by the Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group (1988). The Picot Report, however, was not a foreign or alien document for early childhood education, as it contained many aspects that were already consistent with practices in the early childhood sector: 'particularly the idea of a partnership between parent/employer/community groups and the government, where the main role of the government was to be one of ensuring standards and of bulk funding the different services/programmes/agencies' (May, 1990, p. 103). With the release of the Picot Report, the Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group then attempted to adapt the model to the early childhood sector in a way that would serve the needs of the sector and incorporate early childhood education into the bigger education picture. The resultant report, *Education To Be More* (1988), became referred to as the Meade Report, after the chair of the committee, Anne Meade.

The Meade Report was revolutionary in its holistic view of early childhood education and the key role Government should play in it. The Report made it clear that early childhood education was not only about providing good quality education for the very young child, but it was also about supporting women and Māori cultural survival (Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group, 1988). The language of the report and the integration of early childhood education within the reforms of the school sector indicated, to those encouraged by the direction of the Report, that early childhood education was no longer on the fringe. The Report was also clear on the role that Government had historically played in the early childhood sector and set out its current and future roles. This Report was to have far-reaching implications for the entire early childhood sector, not least the free kindergartens.

At the time of the Meade Report, kindergarten services, compared to the other early childhood services, were receiving the greatest amount of Government funding. For this reason commentators have referred to the kindergartens as the 'flagship of government support for New Zealand early childhood education' (Wylie, 1992, p. 2). Wylie identified how the historical level of Government support had meant that access to kindergartens had been 'free'. Parents had never been expected to pay fees, although they were asked for donations and expected to assist in fundraising.

The resultant *Before Five* document, the Government response to the Meade Report (Lange, 1988a), had substantial and important discursive differences from the Meade Report. As will be seen, the changes outlined in the document indicated particular philosophies that were not in keeping with the intent of the Meade Report and the politics of the early childhood sector itself. Within weeks of taking over office from the Labour Party in 1990, the New Zealand National Government undermined all the very recent gains that had been made in early childhood education. Firstly, newly created quality guidelines were replaced by a document entitled the *Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices*, released on 14 December 1990 and now commonly referred to as DOPs (Ministry of Education, 1990). These guidelines immediately removed the necessity for higher than minimum licensing requirements. Not only did this have the effect of lowering standards and mechanisms for monitoring quality, but many people who had already been working hard towards the higher standards were immediately alienated. Smith et al (1994) argued that the commitment to higher quality over and above the minimum standards was lost and 'in effect the only requirement is to meet minimum standards for licensing' (p. 3).

In the years from 1984 to 1996, which were the focus of this study, the teachers experienced the constant shifts of the education policy discourses and their resultant discursive practices. When the teachers were interviewed they were able to reflect on both the positive and negative consequences of these years.

Discourse

In examining the teachers' experiences within this context I turned to the ideas of Foucault and, in particular, his use of discourse. Foucault identified discourses historically as the specific ways of speaking knowledge and truth, i.e. what it is possible to speak at any given moment, who can speak, and with what authority (Foucault, 1970, 1971, 1980). Discourses then act as sets of rules and behaviours. In this way discourses are powerful and are:

practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. ...
Discourses are not about objects, they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention. (Foucault, 1974 cited in Ball, 1990, p. 2)

Thus, for Foucault, discourses do not merely reflect what already exists but they actually work to create reality. These discourses (and their resultant discursive practices) appear often as the 'taken-for-granted' ways in society (Weedon, 1987; Gavey, 1989). Individuals act on the basis of their ideas of how the world should be. Within discursive fields (i.e. the arenas, institutions, or organisations where discourses are occurring) complex negotiations and struggles between the various discourses occur over the meanings to be given 'truth' status and to be incorporated into outcomes, such as state policy (Yeatman, 1990).

Discourses surrounding the general early childhood sector reforms have had particular contradictory consequences for the kindergarten service. Policy documents may contain differing discourses and discursive practices throughout the various processes of their conception, consultation, construction, delivery, and final implementation. Commentators and writers looking at the education reforms (and the wider restructuring) within New Zealand that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s have described how the discourses of neo-liberalism were contrasted with social equity and community participatory discourses within policy and their resultant discursive practices (May, 1990; Middleton, 1993). The consequences of the changes brought about by the *Before Five* document placed the kindergarten service in a vulnerable and contradictory position in comparison to the rest of the early childhood sector, i.e. the flagship was downsized (Wylie, 1992; May, 1999). What are striking in the eight kindergarten teachers' accounts are the differences between the outcomes within the kindergarten service and the stated policy intentions at the time of the construction and initial delivery of the reforms. Beginning with the Meade Report, the discourses surrounding quality, accessibility, affordability, and cultural survival inspired the whole early childhood sector. While the changes between the Meade Report and the resulting Government White Paper, *Before Five*, signalled key discursive differences between the two documents (Wells, 1991; Mitchell & Noonan, 1994; Mitchell, 1997), the teachers were firmly positioned within the Meade Report's recommendations. The teachers felt this Report would improve their teaching experiences and reflected their beliefs about early childhood education, particularly the recognition and worth of early childhood education to society in general, i.e. the Meade Report was compatible with their existing discourses and discursive practices.

The eight kindergarten teachers in this study provided numerous examples through their stories of where the funding and management practices, which were introduced to meet the wider early childhood sector changes, worked to lower standards in kindergartens. A key example here was the changes in funding arrangements. The kindergarten service, now not the only early childhood service to receive Government funding or support, had to face capped funding while the other early childhood services caught up with its level of funding (Lange, 1988). In times of increased fiscal investment this would be fine, but in a climate of restraint, where many more had access to

less, new financial constraints and stresses arose. Neo-liberal and New Right discourses presented problematic discursive practices for the kindergarten teachers. Such discourses draw on beliefs that: individuals are fundamentally concerned with the pursuit of self-interest and in maximising individual gain; there should be no regulation and restriction in the market place; commodification of almost everything is not only possible but desirable; and choice and competition are the way to ensure efficiency, maximum use of resources, and accountability. While Fitzsimons et al (1999) argue that neo-liberalism has become a form of governmental rationality, which has worked to silence alternative discourses, the kindergarten teachers' stories offer an alternative view.[3]

Being 'Overtaken' and 'Misplaced': the teachers' experiences

Looking at the education changes overall, both Elizabeth and Maggie discussed how the outcomes of all the changes contradicted the original intentions of the Meade Report and other early childhood research recommendations:

Elizabeth: Some things are good things to deal with and some aren't ... '84, '85 were definitely good things to live with [*laugh*]. And then it kind of went down [*laugh*]. But, you know, I mean the Meade Report came out and everybody thought, "This is great. This is something positive. This is going to lift the standard of education." That's what it's s'posed to do and I'm sure that's what everyone wanted it to do. But, the reality is that because they had that one-to-15 minimum [teacher-child ratio] in there ... us who are in our one-to-13 are having pressure put [on] us to meet the one-to-15 or otherwise you're going to lose a teacher, or 45/45 rolls ... To me that is just totally against what *Education to Be More* is all about. I mean those were minimum standards. I mean minimum is something that, you know, you have to meet but you should be trying to make better, as far as I'm concerned. Whilst ... it was a good concept to get everybody, you know, all early childhood reaching some sort of a standard – it's a shame that it's been used to pull ... standards down. [*pause*]

Maggie: Our education system is crumbling. That's dreadfully sad. So that reform [bulk funding], if you wanted to call it [a reform], to me is a real black area – real black day in New Zealand. I can't see why they can't see it's failed everywhere else in the world. So why are we doing it? ... We're in the situation of possibly losing a teacher because we can't stuff 44 children in. They're not there to stuff and even if we did have them to stuff – 44 three-years-olds – you know, Lillian Katz, who was here relatively recently stated categorically that large group size is not conducive to good learning. The Roper Report [4], '86 was it? '86? has been filed in the too-hard basket. That working party [5] that had to re-convene three times with three different groups of people until they said things that the Government wanted, you know. All those so-called reforms are all the negative side.

There's been good stuff for accountability – the charters, the uniformity of conditions of services and protection for children. All that's good, you know. The ethics committees that are being set up about child abuse legislation et cetera. That's all good stuff you know. So it has been good but the bad is the bulk funding which has starved above everything bad and I just see the rot spreading, which is a shame.

The pace of change, which is often referred to in other reviews of the political and education changes during the 1980 and 1990s, was a significant factor in the eight kindergarten teachers' feelings of having been 'overtaken':

Maggie: I look at it now and I feel this oppression ... Like as a kid when you're playing with cushions – pillow fights – and you're the one at the bottom. All the pillows are on top. You know, that awful feeling of not being able to get out. That's the feeling I get when I read some of my stuff here ... 'cause that smothered feeling came to me. That's how I felt about it – like I was being smothered or that there was no fresh air around.

One new policy or directive had hardly arrived when the next one appeared. This meant that, even when the change may have been seen to have been a good one on reflection sometime later, for example *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996), at the time it was resisted due to the timing of its arrival. The pace and timing, combined with the procedures for introducing or implementing the change, created the context for whether the change was perceived by the teachers to be a good thing to get involved in, or added to their feelings of despair and low morale. Maggie's experiences with the draft of *Te Whāriki*, demonstrated this. Maggie described how receiving the document became the final straw, using the children's story *Who Sank the Boat?* (Allen, 1982) to draw an analogy. In this children's picture book, while it is the combined weight of all the animals in the boat which ultimately sank the boat, it is on the arrival of the mouse in the boat – 'the last to get in and the lightest of all. Could it be him?' – that the boat sinks:

Maggie: Looking back at it I think, 'Well, yeah, okay, all those things were going on. But I wasn't in control of them.' They were coming through the mailbox in their pieces of paper by the truckload [*pause*]. And I remember getting so upset about things ... So I don't think that there was ever anything wrong with the document and nothing wrong with the staff or anything. I just think it wasn't presented very well and everybody panicked basically. Others just put it to one side. Put it in the top drawer and thought, 'Well, no, I won't look at that this century.' ... So I just think it was bad timing. So I think perhaps it was bad timing that people just thought, 'Oh no' ... and I think that was just another thing, you know, like the wee mouse in the boat, you know, 'Who Sank the Boat?' [*pause*] and I think perhaps that was the bit that came along that tipped the edge.

So, despite the professional development packages that were put in place to support the introduction of *Te Whāriki*, the experiences of the teachers demonstrated that the timing added to the stress of the teachers and worked against the acceptance and implementation of the curriculum.

The ongoing creation and the volume of policies that kindergartens were expected to have, and continually update, was an ongoing issue for several of the teachers. Maggie reflected on the original introduction of the *Early Childhood Management Handbook* (Ministry of Education, 1989) [6] as one example of the mishandling of new policies in timing, volume, and management of change:

Maggie: The wonderful purple book got everybody all a flutter. We all got a very expensive little book and then we all went to untold meetings. Untold meetings. And then they replaced the whole purple book with four typewritten pages. I've never gotten over that [*pause*]. So, I mean, it just made you realise how futile the whole thing was anyway really. I couldn't believe it, you know. We've still got that purple book. We use the folder.

The introduction of the *Desirable Objectives and Practices* (Ministry of Education, 1990) – which are the four replacement pages just mentioned – led to a plethora of policy writing in individual centres. For kindergartens, there are centre-based policies and association-based policies as well as national guidelines and legislative standards. The sheer volume of policies overtook both the parents and the teachers in both the construction and the understanding of them, as Elizabeth's policy poster demonstrated:

Elizabeth: Oh you should see it! You should see it! We've got a folder full of policies and we have to have a lot of them, probably 80% of them, on display for our parents. So I've got this big poster on the wall with policies sticking out of it all over [*pause*]. No parent's ever been near it, but anyway [*laugh*] ... Things that are management have to have policies. Heaps of different things. Then there's other, I suppose, there's other people who come in, like EEO [7], where they [the association] had to formulate an EEO policy. Health and safety policy. I mean, that was another workshop. Health and safety – OHS 1 and OHS 2s [8] – and you just think, 'Oh, good grief' [*pause*]. It's just those sorts of things. Once they're all on board – it's just that it's all been going on the last two years really that they've been doing these policies and there seems to be a constant flow of draft policies for comment or policies that are already done or policies up for review. You know, every week something comes through the letterbox and you think, 'Oh dear, I hope I'm not supposed to know all of these' [*laugh*]. I know I don't. I've got them in the folder. If I need them I know where they are [*laugh*].

The introduction in 1989 of the new minimum standards for all early childhood centres became another source of stress for teachers and parents. While the kindergarten teachers could see the positive aspects of some of the improvements in their kindergartens, they and their committees were

overtaken by the changes they had to make due to the political and bureaucratic mismanagement of the implementation and direction of the standards – all tasks that they felt were taking them away from the work they wanted to do with the children. However, at one level, the improved health and safety requirements introduced with the new standards were seen as a positive move:

Margaret: So I can see a lot of the reforms and things that have come into place are good, you know. I'm thinking of [pause] ... the standards of the buildings and things like that. Just for an example, it's fair enough that they had to be a certain standard too. What a load of rubbish we thought it was, when it all first came in. We thought, 'Oh heavens. Here goes!' – all the things that we had to do. But the committee just worked away. That was what was expected. So away they went and, you know, sort of achieved one step at a time and, oh, it was good [pause]. It was good and I think of things like the fences for instance. I mean the tiny wee, wee low fences [we had] ... I mean we'd never had any major hassles with them but how much more secure really it is to be childproof and for the children to not to be able to escape [pause]. And like I remember you telling me about that glass episode.[9] I mean the hundreds of dollars that cost us [to replace all the windows with safety glass] 'cause all our windows were low and I mean rather than have the bars across we opted for the whole [replacement].

However, committees and teachers were quickly overtaken by the physical tasks of raising enough money to make the necessary changes within the tight time frame given to gain licenses and thus be eligible for continued Government funding (as set out in *The Education [Early Childhood Centres] Regulations*, 1990 (New Zealand Government, 1990). The changes often necessitated a large amount of physical work on buildings and playgrounds, and, while changes such as fencing, gates, and safety glass in windows made 'good sense', many of the other changes were perceived by the teachers and their committees as unnecessary or irrelevant to their centre, taking money and effort away from the more pressing and necessary maintenance and improvements of the kindergarten. For Elizabeth, Nikki, and Margaret, who were in a relatively new purpose-built building, the changes were particularly puzzling:

Elizabeth: The minimum standards was a [pause] mm [pause] that was a great have. I mean, we were in a 10-year-old purpose-built building which had been built for 40 children and, you know, all of a sudden we didn't have enough toilets for goodness sake [pause]. Well, you know, we had enough toilets for 40 children the day before, but now we haven't got enough toilets [pause]. It was really annoying. You just thought, 'This is ridiculous'. So we had to change it so that the adults' toilet could be used as one of the children's toilets. So we got all that organised and then they said, 'Oh no, you only need three toilets'. Oh shivers, you know, and nappy changing tables. I mean [*!*] ... We had to reglaze all our windows.

Thirteen hundred dollars it cost us to reglaze our windows. Only one of which had ever been broken and that was because some drunk threw a beer bottle through it one Saturday night [*laugh*]. So, you know, just, it was just all those things you thought [*!!*]. We worked out, we spent about 6000 dollars getting our purpose-built 10-year-old building up to minimum standards ... It was an exercise in time-wasting as far as I was concerned.

Nikki: They [the minimum standards] probably caused a lot of hassles financially for a lot of centres. We were lucky 'cause we were reasonably new and most of it was already up to scratch but things, like for a new kindergarten that had only been up for five years, we were altering sink units and replumbing. Just seemed crazy. Just crazy. Why was it any different to what we've been doing before? We weren't going to take any younger children so what difference did it make? [*pause*]. Just seemed too financial. It was just a lot of money going out when it could be used for the children rather than for the building ... it was just a waste of money. I think the whole business really has been a waste of money.

Centralised requirements had overtaken the teachers' and parents' more pressing concerns for their kindergartens. The committees were often left financially disadvantaged and disillusioned. In Margaret's case, for example, her committee had worked quickly to meet the standards and it had cost them several thousand dollars to do just that. They had finished the tasks when the new Government in 1990 'watered down' the requirements, thereby making many of the changes unnecessary.

Margaret, Elizabeth, Nikki, and Maggie were concerned about the new management, administration, and employer expectations for associations, particularly with the introduction of bulk funding. They discussed the potential use and misuse of funds, especially for associations who may not have the expertise to manage such large sums of money; the increased workload, which was acting as a deterrent for new members to join associations and for the balance of power in older established associations to change; and the new necessity to pay officials in the association to carry out the tasks – the monies being taken out of the bulk fund for this purpose. Elizabeth summed up the issues:

Elizabeth: I mean the old associations are always a bit of fly in the ointment but I think, if the bulk funding was gone, that added power would be gone and the added workload on them would be gone and hopefully that would mean that more people would become involved rather than at the moment they have terrible trouble getting people on the association because it's a huge commitment. It really is. I don't envy them at all ... I mean you do wonder what they get out of it. Why they do it? Why they would ever want to do it? [*laugh*]

All eight teachers also observed how the 'position' which was expected of parents within the changed administrative structures contrasted with the actual

outcomes for parents. One of the objectives of the *Before Five* document (paralleling *Tomorrow's Schools* [Lange, 1988b]) was to involve parents more in the management and governance of early childhood centres. Historically, however, the kindergarten service had always had a high level of parental involvement in its management, both at association level and at committee level in individual kindergartens (particularly with regard to fundraising and maintenance). Interestingly, the education changes requiring increased involvement and responsibility in the management of the kindergartens, the changed funding arrangements, and the resulting increased workloads for parent volunteers all occurred at a time when there were fewer volunteers available (Early Childhood Education Project, 2000). This has resulted in a discrepancy between what was envisaged in the *Before Five* document and what subsequently became possible. Throughout the teachers' stories, problems due to the lack of available and willing parents were apparent at both association and committee levels. At the kindergarten committee level, the turnover of parents and the effort involved in filling a committee with willing parents had become an increased stress for the teachers and placed the teachers in a new position within their kindergartens.

Lynne found that a combination of factors made the concept of parental management, rather than just involvement, an unworkable model for her kindergarten. Firstly, social changes, such as the age group of the children starting at the kindergarten, meant that the children were not attending for as long, so the parents did not have the same time commitment to the kindergarten. Secondly, employment changes, particularly for women, meant that more mothers were in paid employment and also there were fewer parents from one-income families who could financially afford the extra costs associated with voluntary work, such as travelling costs. Thirdly, the increasing level of voluntary work required at many levels from Plunket [10] through to schools often meant that parents had either experienced the processes already and had their fair share (were burnt out already) or were already committed elsewhere. Fourthly, the lack of training and support for the role of management, when combined with the increased accountability and responsibility for management decisions, left the parents feeling 'out of their depth' and 'unsupported'. All these factors led to a difficult position for a head teacher, who was expected to work with parent committees in order to keep the kindergarten functioning:

Lynne: Two years ago you [would] have [a] committee that would stick around for a couple of years – the core members. Now, because the families are getting smaller and there's bigger gaps between each child, someone might come and stand on a committee for a year. But then rather than staying for their second and third child they'll have a year or two off and then come back on when that next child comes on. So you lose all continuity. So I find that basically you're turning over a complete committee every 12 months virtually and ... another new thing that's happening is people will now leave when the child leaves and moves to

school; whereas before they'd always serve a year, so now they turn over every year. But then usually have another turnover halfway through the year so whereas you might start off with 10 you'd maybe lose five of those by July. You'd limp to the end of the year, lose everyone else and start afresh so there's no continuity whatsoever so the teachers' workload is [pause] just quadrupled overnight.

Discussion

Tracing policy change in education without listening to those it affects the most only gives us one side of the story. While numerous policy analyses have helped highlight the intention and some of the 'hidden' agendas behind policy documents and their construction (Lauder, 1987, 1990, 1991, 1993; Lauder et al, 1988; Codd, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1992, 1999; Codd et al, 1990a, b; Marshall & Peters, 1990; Peters & Marshall, 1990; Codd & Gordon, 1991; Peters, 1993; Lauder et al, 1994; Peters et al, 1994; Codd & Sullivan, 1997; Olssen & Morris Matthews, 1997; Lauder et al, 1999), it is when we listen to the accounts of those who deal daily with the realities of implementing these policies that we can begin to see a fuller picture. This article has presented the 'insider' stories, which contrast with the 'outsider' or 'official' versions of the changes to the kindergarten service over the past two decades. The teachers in this study talked in terms of reform and change in the kindergarten service, from the social and economic changes which had dramatically altered the cultural context within which they worked, through to the latest changes arriving in their mailboxes.

Feelings of being 'overtaken' and 'misplaced' within the reforms were the experiences described by the teachers in this study. As discussed, the teachers and parents had been working within contradictory discursive positions since 1988 with the introduction of the *Before Five* document and the resulting legislative and funding changes. While the intent of the *Before Five* document was to improve standards across the early childhood sector, the teachers argued that it had worked to drag down kindergarten standards. Likewise, the teachers who positioned themselves to be involved in the wider organisational side of teaching found that, while they had a better understanding of the issues and were in a position to work actively for teachers, it placed them in positions of conflict with their employer associations and often the other staff. Parents were offered conflicting positions also. On the one hand, they were being encouraged to be involved (indeed legislated to be involved) but, on the other, the wider economic and social changes which occurred in New Zealand during this time left many parents in positions where this had become impossible.

As I have described earlier in this article, the gains for the early childhood sector over the period of study (1984-96) can be seen as a reflection of the uneasy contradictions between the New Right economic philosophy and broader social justice goals. An outcome of this was the contradictory and competing discourses which surrounded both the introduction of the early

childhood reforms and the resultant outcomes – policies, practices, and political changes. The teachers in this study were committed to the philosophy of kindergartens as being places for all children, irrespective of the parents' ability to pay, and as being community resources, with the role of the kindergarten teacher being to educate and care for the children as well as to support families and communities. These discourses set the teachers in an oppositional position to a kindergarten service where managerial and decentralised administration had become the focus as part of the neo-liberal changes. The energy, resources, and, simply the time taken out of each day of the teachers meant that the changes driven from above left the teachers feeling 'overtaken' and 'misplaced' in their work by the reforms and the processes of decision making and implementation.

Conclusion

The concept of discourse has been used here to demonstrate how conflicting discourses positioned the teachers in different ways. Through the teachers' stories of their experiences between 1984 and 1996 it can be seen that the dominant discourses, which contained key neo-liberal ideas, were so encompassing and the discursive practices so all-consuming that the teachers felt 'misplaced' in their service and 'overtaken' in their work.

What does this all mean for the year 2004? In New Zealand we have a Labour Government once again, which has articulated its support for early childhood services and provisions. It also has dedicated resources and a 10-year plan (*Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki. A 10-year Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education 2002-2012*, Ministry of Education, 2002) to improve the participation levels and the quality of our early childhood services. While the feeling within the early childhood sector is one of optimism, I feel that the messages from the teachers in the 1990s is a cautionary one. Early childhood 'won against the odds' in 1984 and it did so again in 2000. Now, with 2004 an election year, the political discourses could shift dramatically once more with any change of Government. Thus, the experiences of the contradictory discourses and discursive outcomes experienced by the teachers in this study can add to our understanding of the attempts to bring about change in the future and to continue to provide quality early childhood experiences for children and families.

Notes

- [1] The word 'free' in the name indicates that the kindergarten is open to all, irrespective of ethnicity and/or class, rather than being free of fees or charges to attend. It is worthy to note, however, the many of the kindergarten associations have recently removed the word 'free' from their names as they have begun to increase the charges for attendance at their kindergartens (Mitchell, 2001).

- [2] The senior teacher in the kindergarten service is a management position as well as a professional support position. Since 2000 professional support has also been provided by other professional support providers, such as Colleges of Education and Early Childhood Development, in addition to or in place of the senior teacher support team.
- [3] The transcript quotes that are included in this article are those that most succinctly and clearly articulate the current discussion, and the eight respondents' accounts have not been drawn upon equally. Nevertheless, all teachers voiced very similar concerns and the quotes chosen may be considered a valid representation of the views offered by all those interviewed.
- [4] The Roper Report (1987) was named after the chair of the Committee of Inquiry into Violence, Sir Clinton Roper. This Report was to the Minister of Justice and contained recommendations for reducing the incidences of violence and violent crime in New Zealand. The recommendations that Maggie is referring to are: 'That there be an immediate increase in the length of training for kindergarten teachers and childcare workers; that there be equal status for teachers in the total field of education; that realistic teacher/child ratios be provided in centres and kindergartens; and that adequate and equitable funding of early childhood services be provided.' (New Zealand Committee of Inquiry into Violence, 1987, p. 20)
- [5] Maggie is referring to the Early Childhood Advisory Committee, a working group and early childhood training advisory group, which had been set up by the Qualifications Authority but in 1994 was 'sacked' and replaced. The reason given for its replacement was 'because the members could not agree after two years what qualifications should be developed' (Wellington [Press Association], 1994).
- [6] This Handbook arrived in a purple folder and thus became known by a range of titles, all referring to the colour purple. For further discussion see Farquhar (1991).
- [7] EEO – Equal Employment Opportunity (New Zealand legislation).
- [8] OHS 1 and OHS 2 refer to Occupational Health and Safety requirements, which all workplaces must demonstrate for their employees and clients, customers, or users of their services under New Zealand legislation.
- [9] Margaret is referring to a teaching incident of mine in the mid 1980s, when a child at the kindergarten where I was head teacher ran into a sliding glass door and received extensive facial injuries from the shattered glass.
- [10] The New Zealand Plunket Society is New Zealand's leading provider of child and family health services for children from birth to five years old. 'Plunket supports families with young children by providing appropriate clinical and support programmes and educational activities. They are the only non-profit organisation in New Zealand to provide these facilities to New Zealand families' (taken from New Zealand Plunket Society website: www.plunket.org.nz).

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