

The Quality Journey

Kia ora koutou,

It is great to be here and standing before you today. Some of you own small centres, some of you are involved in running large chains, or large community owned providers, others are officials in government agencies or involved in local authority initiatives.

I am here because I am a teacher. Every day I go to work I am greeted by around 40 children. The response I get is way more enthusiastic than you probably receive from your colleagues, although that's not why I spend every day with young children.

Sometimes people ask me how I do it., but today I want to talk about why I do it.

I know that teaching is one of the most important jobs there is, and that quality early childhood education gives children the best start in life.

Although we here today all know that, it has been a long journey to get New Zealand children the early education services they deserve.

I have been part of that journey, which has seen New Zealand get an early education system that leads the world.

In some countries early childhood education has some similarities with the fast food sector. Training is limited, turnover is high, commitment is low, wage and conditions are poor. We have been there, and do not want to go back.

In New Zealand we know our children are more important than hamburgers, but that is a recent phenomenon.

We now know that quality in early education is associated with structural factors – things like ratios, group size, regulations about premises and most importantly, qualified teachers.

Quality also relates to process factors – things like warm relationships, connections between families and services, awareness of families' cultural priorities, and high quality interactions between teachers and children.

We know those high quality processes are more likely to occur with qualified teachers.

Yes, there are always a few qualified teachers who let the profession down, and there are some unqualified teachers who do a great job, but the research is unequivocal.

So, we want qualified teachers for the quality they bring to services. This is not a new idea. Froebells who started the first kindergarten qualification in Europe in the 1850s recognised the need to a specialist qualification to work with young children.

Government policy has been focused on moving to a fully qualified teacher workforce. While this government has indicated it will not continue with improvements for under twos – arguably the most deserving of quality – recognition of the advantages of qualified teachers remains.

Some in our sector have voiced concern about the union engaging with private employers about the teacher supply issue. It is because we are secure in the knowledge that we all want quality for our children that we have organised this meeting today.

Our sector is diverse, and there is not just one answer to the teacher shortage. As a union, we have concentrated on improving pay and conditions for teachers, and enhancing professionalism to make teaching more attractive as a career. We have had great success in this, with pay rates lifting by around 60 per cent as a result of the parity funding.

Our job here is not finished though as there remain disparities across the sector, particularly in the professional conditions associated with quality.

In addition, as you know, there are ratio improvements to support, participation rates that need to lift, and an increased birth rate to accommodate.

While we have achieved much, we still have some way to go and we hope that, working together, today can be part of that.

No reira, etc.