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"For the child's sake, we need to do something"

An examination of teachers' beliefs and experiences regarding referral of young children to early intervention services.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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"For the child's sake, we need to do something"

(A quote from L., a teacher, 2003.)
Abstract

This is a study of the challenges that teachers face, in deciding whether a child should be referred for external early intervention support. Teachers reveal their thought, beliefs and experiences around referral and early intervention, and reflect on their own teaching practice, with a view to informing the field and developing appropriate professional development strategies. The central purpose of this study is to examine whether all children who need early intervention are being identified and referred to appropriate support systems.

The research was conducted in three phases. In the first phase, 50 teachers completed a questionnaire that captured baseline data around referral beliefs, practices, and experiences. From the belief that research should have reciprocal benefits for the researcher and participants, the second phase of the research then brought together early childhood teachers and early intervention practitioners for a workshop (question and answer time) on questions relating to identification and referral within teachers’ specific setting or situation. The final stage documented the discussions and reflections of one early childhood centre as they engaged in the process of developing a policy that would guide them in referral decision making. The result of this dialogue is a series of reflective questions that all early childhood centres may use as a framework for policy creation and professional development.

Many issues arise within the study, particularly around partnership with parents, cultural considerations, appropriate assessment tools, the need for policy and ongoing professional support and development, which are examined in light of contemporary research, particularly within the New Zealand setting. The findings clearly indicate that while some strong foundations are in place, there is still a way to go before the early childhood field can unequivocally state without reservation that all children who need support services are receiving them.
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Glossary of Terms

Assessment: An evaluation of a child in their learning environment, that outlines their skills and needs, and the level of support required.1

Caregiver: The adult taking responsibility for looking after a child – not necessarily the legal guardian.1

Communication: This is the area of special education work that addresses difficulties a student may have with speech, language and interactions with others.1

Compulsory Sector: Refers to the primary and secondary school system. In New Zealand early childhood education is not compulsory for all children. The legal age of school entry is six years, but the majority begin school on or around their fifth birthday, unless the parents choose otherwise.

Early childhood centres: Licensed and/or chartered providers of early childhood education based on sites.1

Early childhood services: In New Zealand the term early childhood education refers to the provision of education and care for young children and infants before they begin school. Services are offered by a range of providers, for example, Playcentres, kindergarten, childcare centres, home based care, te kohanga reo.

Early Intervention: Support for young children with special education needs which is available from birth to the child’s successful transition to school. The support is also available to families and early childhood services.

Early Intervention teacher: An early childhood teacher with a specialist qualification and interest in children with special needs. Will have knowledge of learning and development, curriculum, and programme development. Usually an itinerant role, visiting children in the home and early childhood education setting.2

Ecological Model: An approach which recognises that a child does not operate in a vacuum, but that surroundings and context also have an impact on abilities and needs.

Education Support Worker (ESW): Teacher aides, also known as paraprofessionals, who work alongside the child in the early childhood centre.

1 From Ministry of Education. Definitions of Terms for Special Education. www.minedu.govt.nz
2 From Group Special Education
**Identification:** finding out what a child’s particular support needs are so that they will receive the right assistance.

**Individual development plan (IDP):** an early intervention programme developed for young children with special education needs. It outlines the child’s goals and the resources, support, monitoring and evaluation required to enable the child to meet these goals over a defined period.

**Inclusion:** Care and education for children with special needs is provided within the diverse range of early childhood services. The curriculum assumes that their care and education will be encompassed within the principles, strands and goals set out for all children in early childhood settings.¹

**Te Kohanga Reo:** A specific early childhood service, designed to meet the needs of young Maori children, where the language of instruction is Te Reo Maori.

**Whanau:** A Maori term meaning family, encompassing parents and siblings, but also extended family.

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