

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

*“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

Master of Education (Special Education)

Massey University (Albany campus)  
New Zealand

Karyn Michelle Aspden

2003





*“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.



# *Acknowledgements*

This thesis is the culmination of several years of work, and thanks must go to many people without whom it would never have been completed.

*Very sincere thanks to;*

- ❖ The teachers who took the time to complete the questionnaire and attend the workshop. Thank you for deciding that even though you were busy, that you wanted to contribute to something that would help other teachers.
- ❖ The teachers of Hope kindergarten and childcare, and Emma, who not only gave of themselves and their time to make sure this thesis happened, but also were my friends and encouragers along the way.
- ❖ My supervisors Barbara Jordan and Ken Ryba, for their encouragement and feedback, and 3 way conversations that made my work better.
- ❖ Wendy and Ruth for their contribution, advice and professional discussions that have inspired me to do this topic.
- ❖ Steph M and Jalaine, for the wonderful transcription job, and Annemie for the blessing of her proof-reading.
- ❖ My husband, who backed me up (and my work too!). I love you Tony.
- ❖ My God, who opened this path for me, and taught me to never give up.

# Table of Contents

	PAGE
<i>Title</i> .....	i
<i>For the Child's Sake, We Need to Do Something</i> .....	iii
<i>Abstract</i> .....	v
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	vii
<i>Table of Contents</i> .....	viii
<i>List of Figures</i> .....	xii
<i>List of Tables</i> .....	xiii
<i>List of Appendices</i> .....	xiii
<i>Glossary of Terms</i> .....	xiv
<i>Chapter 1: Introduction – What is this all about?</i> .....	1
<i>Chapter 2: Literature Review – What do we already know?</i> .....	5
<b>Introduction</b> .....	5
<b>Why are teachers important in referral?</b> .....	6
<b>Teacher beliefs</b> .....	7
<b>Timing</b> .....	8
<b>The subjectivity of referral</b> .....	9
<b>The structure of referral</b> .....	13
<b>Why is this important?</b> .....	14
<b>Involving teachers</b> .....	15
<i>Chapter 3: Methodology – What was done?</i> .....	17
<b>Introduction and purpose</b> .....	17
<b>Research design</b> .....	17
<b>Setting</b> .....	21
<b>Participants</b> .....	22
<b>Procedure</b> .....	23
<b>Materials and instruments</b> .....	25
<b>Data analysis</b> .....	26
<b>Ethical considerations</b> .....	27
Access to participants .....	27
Informed consent .....	28
Anonymity and confidentiality .....	29
Potential harm to participants .....	30
Potential harm to the researcher .....	30
Participants' right to decline .....	30
Uses of the information .....	31

<i>Chapter 4: Results – What did we find out?</i> .....	33
---	----

**Phase 1 – Questionnaire results**

Current teaching role .....	33
Current teaching position .....	33
Early childhood education experience .....	34
Early childhood qualifications .....	35
Special education qualifications .....	36
Professional development .....	36
Intervention beliefs .....	36
Decision making responsibility .....	37
Actual referral practise .....	38
Level of confidence .....	39
Factors that discourage referral .....	42
Formal referral procedures .....	44
Involvement of parents .....	45
Cultural considerations .....	47
National screening programme .....	49
Professional development .....	50

**Phase 2 – Interview transcript information**

Description .....	52
Factors influencing decision making .....	53
Parent concerns .....	
Other issues .....	55
Different perspectives	
- what are the challenges of a parent led service? .....	56
Concern over cultural factors	
- what if a child doesn't speak English? .....	56
Tools for referral	
- what is used to help decision making? .....	57
Other tools – what else is there? .....	58
Policy development	
- is there a need for a universal or centre based policy? .....	59
Parent involvement: When and how? .....	60
What do I do? If a parent refuses consent .....	61
Referral practices – are there differences in referral? .....	61
A hard decision – any regrets? .....	62
Tell me about your service	
- how does early intervention work? .....	63

### Phase 3 – Results from centre staff meeting

<b>Description</b> .....	64
<b>Coding</b> .....	64
<b>The meeting</b> .....	65
<b>Prompts</b> .....	65
<b>Developmental domains</b> .....	65
<b>Tools for referral</b> .....	67
<b>Involvement in and responsibility for decision making</b> .....	68
<b>Timing</b> .....	69
<b>Working with families – roles and responsibilities</b> .....	71
<b>Parent involvement</b> .....	72
<b>Information</b> .....	73
<b>No parental consent</b> .....	75
<b>External support services</b> .....	75
<b>Being informed</b> .....	76
<b>Professional relationships</b> .....	77
<b>Team unity</b> .....	78
<b>Pulling it all together</b> .....	79
<b>Chapter 5: Discussion – What does it all mean?</b> .....	81
<b>Demographic issues</b> .....	81
Qualifications .....	81
Experience in early childhood .....	82
Professional development involvement .....	82
Referral practise .....	83
Beliefs around early intervention .....	83
<b>What factors influence teachers’ decisions to refer/not refer? ..</b>	85
Parent response .....	85
Service provision .....	89
<b>Do teachers feel confident in referring children? What factors influence their identified level of confidence? .....</b>	91
Confidence rating .....	92
Teacher efficacy .....	92
<b>Does the level of teachers’ training or experience affect referral decisions? .....</b>	95
<b>Which children are most/least likely to be referred? .....</b>	96
Development differences .....	97
Cultural issues .....	98
<b>Do teachers have a protocol for referral? .....</b>	100
The need for policy .....	102

National screening for special needs? .....	103
<b>What process do teachers follow in considering referral? .....</b>	<b>104</b>
Involvement of parents .....	104
Timing .....	107
Subjectivity of referral – does intuition play a part? .....	108
Tools for referral .....	110
Who is making the referrals? .....	114
How is information presented? .....	116
<b>Do teachers believe that further support, training and resources are necessary – if so, of what nature? .....</b>	<b>117</b>
Rethinking professional development – future possibilities .....	122
<b>Are children who need early intervention support getting it?..</b>	<b>124</b>
<i>Chapter 6: Conclusion – Where do we go from here? .....</i>	<b>125</b>
<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>Recommendations .....</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>Limitations of the study .....</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>Areas for future research .....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>The conclusion’s conclusion .....</b>	<b>133</b>
<i>Epilogue: What I now know .....</i>	<b>135</b>
<i>References .....</i>	<b>137</b>
<i>Appendix A</i>	
- Questionnaire .....	<b>143</b>
<i>Appendix B</i>	
- Letters to participants and consent forms .....	<b>149</b>
<i>Appendix C</i>	
- Transcript of workshop 26/05/03 .....	<b>153</b>
<i>Appendix D</i>	
- Interview with Hope Centre 20/06/03 .....	<b>173</b>
<i>Appendix E</i>	
- Copy of Hope Centre referral policy .....	<b>187</b>

## *List of Figures*

<b>Figure 4.1</b>	<b>Respondents current teaching role .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Figure 4.2</b>	<b>Responsibility for referral decisions .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Figure 4.3</b>	<b>Actual referral practice - number of referrals during 2002 .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Figure 4.4</b>	<b>Actual referral practise - early intervention services accessed .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Figure 4.5</b>	<b>Actual referral practise - type of need referred .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Figure 4.6</b>	<b>Teacher rating of confidence in referral .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Figure 4.7</b>	<b>Teachers confidence rating across developmental domains .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Figure 4.8</b>	<b>Factors influencing referral decisions .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Figure 4.9</b>	<b>Professional development suggestions from teachers...</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Figure 5.1</b>	<b>Stages of grief .....</b>	<b>89</b>

## *List of Tables*

<b>Table 3.1</b>	<b>Timeframe of research .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Table 4.1</b>	<b>Respondents' teaching position .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Table 4.2</b>	<b>Respondents' years of experience in ECE .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Table 4.3</b>	<b>Respondents' highest teaching qualifications .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Table 4.4</b>	<b>Prior professional development .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Table 4.5</b>	<b>Factors influencing referral confidence .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Table 4.6</b>	<b>Factors influencing referral decisions .....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Table 4.7</b>	<b>Referral procedures .....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Table 4.8</b>	<b>Timing of parent involvement .....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Table 4.9</b>	<b>Parents' role in referral process .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Table 4.10</b>	<b>Consideration given to cultural factors in referral .....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Table 4.11</b>	<b>Beliefs around a national screening program .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Table 4.12</b>	<b>Teachers' identified professional development needs..</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Table 5.1</b>	<b>Questions to prompt policy development .....</b>	<b>120</b>
<b>Table 6.1</b>	<b>Policy prompts .....</b>	<b>130</b>

# *List of Appendices*

<b>Appendix A</b>	
- Questionnaire .....	143
<b>Appendix B</b>	
- Letters to participants and consent forms .....	149
<b>Appendix C</b>	
- Transcript of workshop 26/05/03 .....	153
<b>Appendix D</b>	
- Interview with Hope Centre 20/06/03 .....	173
<b>Appendix E</b>	
- Copy of Hope Centre referral policy .....	187

## *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.<sup>1</sup>

**Caregiver:** The adult taking responsibility for looking after a child – not necessarily the legal guardian.<sup>1</sup>

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

**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.<sup>1</sup>

**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.<sup>2</sup>

**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.

---

<sup>1</sup> From Ministry of Education, Definitions of Terms for Special Education, [www.minedu.govt.nz](http://www.minedu.govt.nz)

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

**Te Kohanga Reo:** A specific early childhood services, 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> from Ministry of Education (1996). *Te Whaariki*. Wellington: Learning Media.