

Submission on the Final report of the ECE taskforce from the:

IEAG, The Inclusive Education Action Group (www.ieag.org.nz) .

IEAG is a group of parents, teachers, disabled people, principals, teacher educators and researchers who are committed to ensuring that all disabled children, young people and adults participate fully in their local, regular educational setting. We want early childhood education, schools and tertiary institutions to be inclusive and places where all children and young people, including those with disabilities:

- experience a strong sense of belonging;
- have a positive self- and group-identity;
- are valued by teachers and students;
- participate fully in the curriculum and in the life of the school;
- learn well;
- have friends;
- are well prepared to make the transition into a full and active adult life; and
- are fully participating members of inclusive communities.

IEAG advocates for changes in the education system so that it has the resources, understandings, values and commitment to teach all children well in non-discriminatory settings. Inclusion cannot happen alongside ‘special education’, because ‘special education’ involves a particular way of thinking about disabled students that separates and differentiates them from their peer group. It involves belief systems and structures that identify students as separate and ‘special’. Therefore inclusion must replace the present dual system of regular and special education with a system in which all students’ needs can be met in inclusive environments.

IEAG’s purpose and work is supported by the research that shows inclusive education results in students who are better educated and better able to participate and contribute as members of society, and can be both cost-efficient and cost effective.¹

We believe that :

- All children and young people have the right to learn together, so that they can develop relationships, skills and knowledge for everyday life.

¹ United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Victor Munoz, The right to education of persons with disabilities (19 February, 2007).

- NO disabled person should be denied the right to participate fully in education with others of their age. The role of education is to support people to be and become participating citizens in a civil democratic society.

These ‘inclusive education’ rights are enshrined in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities*. New Zealand is a signatory to both of these Conventions.

IEAG has 250 members throughout New Zealand, of whom 25% work in the education sector as principals, teachers (from both regular and special schools), early childhood workers, specialist teachers, teacher aides, therapists and education support workers; 17% are researchers and academics in the education field; 27% work in the disability sector as advocates, policy analysts, caregivers and service providers; and 31% identify primarily as people with disabilities or a parent of a child with disabilities.

IEAG’s governing committee is Dr Jude MacArthur (Co-convenor), Ian Armstrong (Co-convenor), Dr Nancy Higgins (Secretary), Alex Smith (Treasurer), Matt Frost, Andrea Graham , Trish Grant, Dr Bernadette Macartney, Dr Hazel Phillips, Dr Gill Rutherford, Vivienne Thompson. The majority of IEAG’s governing committee are parents of disabled children, disabled people, or whanau of disabled people. Five members of our committee work in educational research and/or teacher education with a particular focus on disability issues, including early childhood education, and disabled Māori. They have won research grants at a high level (e.g. from the Marsden Fund, TLRI, HRC, MSD, & MOE). Six committee members work in the disability sector as advocates, policy analysts and support workers. One member is a post-graduate student of specialist teaching. IEAG is an incorporated society and a registered charity.

Key Points

- IEAG supports the Taskforce report’s general emphasis on universal professionalism in early childhood education, on quality in early childhood services; on research-based developments in policy and practice; and on professional development to support strong leadership and quality teaching. These features in new Zealand’s early childhood services will support quality teaching and learning for all children, including children with disabilities.
- Our submission suggests that the report needs to focus on and uphold current understandings about **inclusive education** as an approach in early childhood education that supports both teacher responsibility for all children, and quality teaching for diverse groups of students. Inclusive education is upheld in the New Zealand Disability Strategy and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of people with Disabilities as a necessary feature of inclusive societies.
- This involves a rejection of, and paradigmatic shift away from ideas about ‘special education’. These ideas are associated with the segregation and exclusion of disabled

children, and deprofessionalising of teachers. They have been thoroughly critiqued and rejected in education research (MacArthur, Kelly, & Higgins, 2005)(see, for example, McDonnell, 2003; and MacArthur, Kelly & Higgins, 2005).

A focus on inclusive education

Including Everyone - Te Reo Taataki (Ministry of Education, 2000) is a Ministry of Education statement on inclusive education in New Zealand early childhood services. It draws from most of the policies and the same legislative environment that ‘An Agenda for Amazing Children’ does. The MOE distributed *Te Reo Taataki* to early childhood centres/services as a guide to inclusive practices in 2000. The contents of *Te Reo Taataki* and its socio-cultural approach to the inclusion of disabled children and their families in ECE are consistent with *Te Whaariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and other documents that outline and/or elaborate on Ministry of Education requirements of licensed and chartered services (Ministry of Education, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2005).

IEAG would like to see *Te Reo Taataki* referred to in the special education essay of this report as it is contextualised in understandings about inclusive education in early childhood services, rather than ‘special’ education. The focus in *Te Reo Taataki* supports teachers and early childhood services to understand and carry out their responsibilities to be fully inclusive of the diverse range of learners within their communities. In contrast, ideas about ‘special education’ promoted in the Task Force Report encourage teachers to view disabled students as the responsibility of ‘specialists’, and contribute to their exclusion from the policies and practices of early childhood education (MacArthur, Purdue & Ballard, 2003; Purdue, 2004).

Emphasising inclusive approaches rather than basic rights to access

IEAG supports the focus on legal requirements to enroll disabled children (New Zealand Human Rights Act, 1993). It would like to see the report place a much stronger emphasis on inclusive education in early childhood services. This would involve exploring initiatives that support inclusive pedagogies, and improve the *quality* and responsiveness to diversity within all early childhood services.

One of the key recommendation is for “sufficient initial education and professional development to support a workforce that can identify and work effectively with children with special education needs” (p.99). IEAG would like to see consideration move beyond issues of physical access, identification of ‘special needs’, and ‘effective practice’, to a an emphasis on welcoming and inclusive educational environments for all children, including children with disabilities. In this regard we recommend:

- Providing early childhood services with whole-centre/service, on-going professional development on (1) inclusive pedagogies and (2) meeting the needs of diverse and marginalised children in all early childhood settings (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2000; Ministry of Health, 2001);

This could be achieved through initiatives such as:

- Establishing MOE funded model inclusive early childhood education centres/services in the main centres throughout New Zealand. Planning and implementing this

endeavour as a partnership between the MOE, early intervention services, initial and field-based teacher educators, researchers and professional development providers and early childhood teachers, centres and services.

- Incorporating supportive links between the model inclusive early childhood centres/services and their communities, government agencies and social networks, thus supporting families to make and develop connections between the early childhood service and their community. This inclusive approach may be referred to as ‘joined up services’ or ‘community hubs’. An inter-agency and community focused approach is consistent with the Start Strong (IHC) initiative which has significant and growing support from education, health, social service, family and community agencies.
- That the MOE support staff at senior and leadership levels to have a sound theoretical and practical knowledge of both inclusive education and *Te Whaariki*.
- That the MOE support disabled children and their families to:
 - attend the early childhood education service of their choice; and
 - ensure all children have equitable access to high quality early childhood education (Ministry of Education, 1998; Ministry of Health, 2001; New Zealand Human Rights Act, 1993).

‘Agents’, ‘suitable’ services, and diminished choices

Disabled children should be afforded the same rights as non-labeled children to full participation and learning in their local community (Ministry of Health, 2001; New Zealand Education Act, 1989; U. N. General Assembly, 2007). The report recommends that “agents” support parents to locate “suitable and appropriate” early childhood services. It is not clear who such agents might be (in terms of experience and qualifications); what comprises “suitable and appropriate” services; or who determines what is suitable and appropriate, the agent or the parents or both. If agents make this decision, there is a risk that disabled children and their families will not be afforded the same rights as non-labeled children to access an inclusive, *Te Whaariki*-based education in their local community.

Deeming some early childhood services as more “suitable” or “appropriate” for children with disabilities implies an acceptance that some services will be unsuitable or inappropriate and will be permitted to exclude some children. This is inconsistent with the goals of the New Zealand Disability Strategy. It is unacceptable for any early childhood service to reject a child and their family because the child has a disability. Suggesting that some early childhood services are more ‘suitable’ than others also suggests that children with disabilities require different and ‘special’ approaches that are beyond the expertise of early childhood teachers. This idea has been thoroughly rejected in the research as it has led to segregation and poor learning and social outcomes for

children with disabilities (McDonnell, 2003; MacArthur, Kelly and Higgins, 2005; Purdue, 2004).

“IEAG supports the goal of all early childhood services being supported to be inclusive, where teachers value diversity and know how to include and teach all children well. IEAG would like to see the report focus shift to the goal of universal inclusion. Agents are not required when early childhood services are inclusive.

IEAG suggests that:

- 1. The Ministry of Education ensures that ALL early childhood services are fully inclusive and that teacher education and professional development in inclusive education is prioritised.**
- 2. That early childhood teacher education includes a focus on how teachers can work with other professionals (e.g. Early Intervention teachers; teachers with experience in the areas of blindness, deafness or autism), and with Education Support Workers (ESWs), to ensure that children with disabilities are in the heart of every early childhood service, have full access to Te Whaariki, and are fully included along with their peers.**

Exclusion and ‘special education’

The report indicates that some New Zealand early childhood centres and schools are not meeting their legal, ethical and professional obligations to welcome, respect and fully include disabled children and their families. New Zealand research supports this claim (Gordon-Burns, Purdue, Rarare-Brigs, Stark, & Turnock, 2010; IHC, 2008; Macartney & Morton, in press; Purdue, 2004; Rietveld, 2005; Rutherford, 2009). These researchers argue that disabled children and their families do not need ‘special’ placements or ‘alternative interventions’. Disabled children and their families ask for support to enjoy equal access to good quality, inclusive education alongside their peers in their local communities. This request is consistent with New Zealand policy and international guidance (Ministry of Education, 1996; Ministry of Health, 2001; New Zealand Education Act, 1989; U. N. General Assembly, 2007). IEAG supports the goal of inclusion as a solution to segregation and exclusion, as stated in the New Zealand Disability Strategy.

IEAG suggests that:

- 1. The report upholds the goal of the New Zealand Disability Strategy and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of people with Disabilities for the development of an inclusive education system in New Zealand as a necessary precursor to an inclusive society.**
- 2. The report responds to the current international focus on inclusive education in early childhood education and on supporting children to transition into inclusive schools.**

3. Ideas about ‘special education’ in the report be critiqued and rejected in light of current research that highlights their limitations.

Focus on professional compliance and development, rather than financial rewards

The report states (p. 103) that:

Our proposed funding model will ensure better financial incentives for services to enroll children with special education needs in a *limited supply market*. Creating financial incentives is very important in a *market driven setting*, where early childhood services are free to accept or decline any family (while respecting the Human Rights Act and other laws).

IEAG does not agree that the early childhood sector should be viewed as a market driven setting and that centres should benefit financially from enrolling children who are legally entitled to equal access to the curriculum and to additional resources to support their full access to the early childhood curriculum. The early childhood sector, like the compulsory education sector is and should be curriculum, community, policy and needs driven. As the above statement points out in the bracketed section, the law is to be respected. IEAG would suggest that declining a family on the grounds of ability/disability is disrespectful to current laws, guidance, curriculum and policy.

- The recommendation to provide additional financial rewards to government funded and regulated centres when they enroll disabled children seems inconsistent with centres’ legal, human rights and professional responsibilities. Where centres/services are found to be not meeting their legal and curriculum obligations, existing Ministry of Education and Education Review Office procedures for non-compliance can be invoked. Centres who need to improve their practices and environments to become more inclusive of diverse learners would benefit from professional support and mentoring, rather than financial incentives. Centres should, of course, receive the supports and resources they need to include and teach all children well and within the aspirations, principles, strands, goals and learning outcomes of *Te Whaariki* (Ministry of Education, 2000, 2005).

Targeted funding and labeling children

There is a combined emphasis in the current report on targeted funding based on professional judgments that ‘identify’ children with ‘special education needs’. This approach creates a strong, direct and mutually dependent relationship between labeling/assessment/identification and the receipt of funding which could lead to over-identifying and labeling infants, toddlers and young children as having ‘special education needs’. Individual and deficit-based responses to disability and difference are inconsistent with *Te Whaariki* which recognises individual differences and needs as *an integral aspect of each learner*, rather than something to be separated out, highlighted and treated.

Although early ‘identification’ and labeling are often assumed to be positive and desirable, targeted funding applications, assessment and documentation invariably require, and therefore encourage, an emphasis on individual children’s perceived deficits or ‘problems’ (Dunn, 2004; Macartney, 2011; Purdue, 2004).

Research draws attention to links between ‘special education’ labeling and the over-representation of marginalised groups in society (Brantlinger, 2004; Danforth, Taff, & Ferguson, 2006; Erelvelles, Kanga, & Middleton, 2006; Slee, 2003). Maori, migrant, and children experiencing poverty, for example, are over-represented in special education figures. ‘Difference’ and individual children are therefore pathologised (Bishop, Mazawi, & Sheilds, 2005).

The report also points out that interpretations of what constitutes a ‘special education need’ (such as ADHD) are socially constructed. Systems that over-emphasise early identification, particularly when this is tagged to individual funding may increase the numbers of children labeled as such. The negative impacts of labeling can lead to low expectations for children’s learning and restrict, rather than expand access to the curriculum and to opportunities for learning, particularly when deficit views of disability dominate (Ministry of Health, 2001). Alongside these issues are the very wide variations of development and behaviour of children within the early years. This means that the ‘accuracy’ of early identification and/or the necessity for early intervention should always be open to question and should remain tentative.

IEAG suggests that:

- 1. The report acknowledges and respects children’s differences as part of the diversity expected within society.**
- 2. The report emphasises that it is the task of all teachers to ensure that “care and education will be encompassed within the principles, strands, and goals set out for all children in early childhood settings” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 11).**

Conclusion

Our submission suggests that the report needs to focus on and uphold current understandings about **inclusive education** as an approach to early childhood education that supports both teacher responsibility for all children, and quality teaching for diverse groups of students (Ministry of Education, 1996). Inclusive education is a necessary feature of inclusive societies (Ministry of Health, 2001; U. N. General Assembly, 1990, 2007). This means rejecting ideas segregate and exclude of disabled children, and deprofessionalise teachers. These ideas have been thoroughly critiqued and rejected in education research (see, for example, McDonnell, 2003; and MacArthur, Kelly & Higgins, 2005).

Families and disabled/labeled children need a government and educational provision that actively ensures and supports their basic human rights to full access, participation,

inclusion and learning alongside their peers and within their community. Improvements could be achieved through increasing professional development, mentoring and advocacy related to inclusive education, alongside a ‘zero tolerance’ approach towards centres/services not meeting their obligations to include all children and families. We support the Taskforce report’s general emphasis on universal professionalism in early childhood education, on quality provision in early childhood services; on research-based developments in policy and practice; and on professional development to support strong leadership and quality teaching. These features in New Zealand’s early childhood services will support quality teaching and learning for all children, including children with disabilities.

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