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Introduction

Linda Mitchell

Faculty of Education
The University of Waikato

This special issue of the *Waikato Journal of Education* offers three thought provoking examinations of recent research relevant to early childhood education (ECE) policy. These range from a big picture view of the changing nature of New Zealand's kindergarten provision to a close up of one kindergarten that has collaborated with other agencies to combine parent education and support and early childhood education. Complementing the two New Zealand articles, a third from an Australian research study explores the multiple challenges in working in an integrated way across professional boundaries. These are articles for teachers, managers, and policy analysts who are interested in leading developments for offering a holistic early years curriculum.

Claire Davison discusses the fundamental changes that have occurred in early childhood funding in the last decade, including an almost four-fold increase in funding amounts and the introduction of “free” 20 hours per week for three and four year olds. The article explores how kindergarten associations under the umbrella of the national body New Zealand Kindertartens Incorporated, took up opportunities offered by more secure and substantial funding levels to develop their kindergarten provision so that it became more responsive to the life circumstances of families. The changes they are making are starting to address a long-standing need of families for more flexibility around hours of attendance. The kindertartens were able to use the additional funding to improve staffing ratios and teachers' professional support, and to change the balance of parent contributions from fundraising to a focus on children's learning. The article offers research-based evidence on how kindertartens responded to the current funding regime—a timely contribution as a review of ECE funding in New Zealand gets underway.

The article by Jeanette Clarkin-Phillips focuses on an innovative kindergarten that was awarded a Parent Support and Development contract to collaborate with other agencies to support parents and their engagement in early childhood education. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development, she discusses how pedagogical documentation in children's portfolios was developed to strengthen the microsystem connections between home and kindergarten. The idea of “book bags” borrowed from junior school classes in which to send home the child's portfolio and invite parent comment was one of the several significant practices that supported these



connections. Varied opportunities were developed to support the wellbeing of families and their connections with community groups and agencies. A key message was that the “teachers and management did not want to be seen as ‘experts’ who knew what was best for children and families”. Instead they worked alongside the community and in this way are helping families realize their aspirations.

Frances Press defines integrated services as providing “access to multiple services for children and families in a cohesive and holistic way”. Her article draws on literature and data from two Australian studies to examine the complexity of working across professional boundaries. She pinpoints the roles played by governance and leadership in developing and sustaining successful integration. A strong message that has clear parallels to what was found by Jeanette Clarkin-Phillips is that “sustaining integration requires the building of strong participative and collaborative cultures which recognize and nurture staff and family strengths and potential”.

The articles and features in the second part of this collection go beyond early childhood education in their focus. An intriguing account is given of the development and testing of an interactive role-playing game for tertiary students in Marine and Environmental Management courses, aimed at illustrating problems of managing common property. Michael Morris explores ways in which the game was used to teach the social and political skills required for resource management. He argues that role-playing games can be used across disciplines and can be effective in teaching social skills and interaction in many fields that require these skills.

In this issue is an interview with Emeritus Professor Ted Glynn, whose research and teaching have made a significant difference to education. The interview focuses on Ted’s role in special education, his advocacy for an inclusive educational framework, and his insistence that ‘culture counts’ and that members of cultural communities are best equipped to design interventions and determine valued outcomes.

A review of Waring and Kearin’s 2011 book *Thesis survivor stories: Practical advice on getting through your PhD or Masters thesis* highlights that this book offers a fund of inspirational ideas, insights on the thesis process, and practical tips for students embarking on their own thesis. Finally, the four abstracts from recently completed University of Waikato PhD theses provide interesting accounts of investigations undertaken in diverse cultural contexts of Malawi, China, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Solomon Islands.