

Early childhood education professionals in New Zealand kindergartens

Commitment and challenges

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Introduction

On its introduction in 1996, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Tē Whāriki* was innovative in its holistic, integrated, dispositional and socio-cultural orientation (Nuttall, 2003). It provided a huge challenge to the largely unqualified early childhood care and education sector not only in its non-prescriptive complexity, but also in its commitment to the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi |Tiriti o Waitangi (Ritchie, 2003). This required teachers to parallel Māori language and culture alongside the English language and western content of the dominant culture, known in New Zealand as *Pākehā*, a huge challenge to the monocultural educator workforce (Education Review Office, 2013). In the twenty one years since its promulgation, the sector has risen to the challenges provided in the curriculum, becoming increasingly more professionalised, adopting ‘learning stories’ as a way of documenting children’s learning from a narrative, dispositional lens, and working to increase the Māori content of their programmes (Ritchie & Rau, 2006).

The current chapter is part of the wider international study where early childhood teachers from seven countries have been interviewed about their understandings of professionalism, quality of early childhood education and sustainability and relationships between all these concepts. Altogether, 101 teachers participated, 11 of these were from New Zealand. In this chapter, we offer an introduction of findings from the research in New Zealand. The following are the key questions explored in the study:

How do teachers understand the notion of professionalism in early childhood education?

What are teachers’ views of quality in early childhood education and how does this relate to their views of professionalism?

How do teachers understand sustainability in early childhood education and how is this related with professionalism and quality in early childhood education?

Professionalism

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the ideas of Goodson (2013) and of representatives of the critical ecology paradigm (Urban, 2010), according to which professionalism and its discourses and practices could link (global) macro and (local) micro systems, allowing for local and diverse practices and experiences to inform the professional knowledge in democratic practice-based evidence. According to Urban (2010) professionalism may be viewed as a focus on relationships within a complex ecology of the profession, space for dialogue and critical questions which value diversity and focus on the Freireian notion of hope.

According to Carmen Dalli's research findings, there are three themes in relation to the **professionalism** of early childhood teachers: a distinct pedagogical style; specialist knowledge and practices; and an early childhood professional (Dalli, 2010).

Professionals engage in a process of constructing new knowledge and applying it to practice. Understanding the complexity of professional knowledge and practice is an important step for all practitioners wishing to improve the quality of their practice (Dayan, 2010).

Formal qualification requirements for early childhood education teachers have increased around the world, not least resulting from the initiatives of teachers' professional unions. University-based initial teacher education, research-based professional practice and high-quality in-service training are regarded as essential ingredients of high-level teacher qualifications. Altogether this tendency is considered as part of the wider political, professional and public movement to enhance early childhood teachers' professionalism.

Research can make a positive contribution to each aspect of teachers' professional knowledge: practical wisdom, technical knowledge and critical reflection (Winch, Oancea, & Orchard, 2015). According to reports commissioned by the European Commission (2014) and OECD (2012), the professionalism of early childhood teachers is a key factor in ensuring the quality of early childhood education. Study by Peterson et al. (2014, 2016) is based on the contextual approach in the bio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and critical ecology theory of early childhood professionalism (Urban 2010). The research question was: what are ratings of principals and teachers regarding the professionalism of pre-school teachers in interaction and family involvement, the planning of education and the evaluation of children's development, using teaching strategies and support for professional development, creating a growth environment and the development of values. Structured questionnaires were compiled based on the Estonian, Finnish, Swedish and Hungarian national preschool curricula. According to Peterson et al. (2016) the data consisted of the views of Estonian, Swedish, Finnish and Hungarian teachers and principals. There were similarities between Finnish and Swedish teachers and principals and between Estonian and Hungarian teachers' and principals' ratings in the above mentioned areas. Estonian and

Hungarian teachers' and principals' ratings were higher than Finnish and Swedish teachers' and principals' ratings. In the area of teaching strategies there were similarities between Estonian and Swedish teachers' and principals' ratings. In other countries, there were significant differences. In the teaching strategies, the highest ratings were of Hungarian teachers and principals, then Estonian and Swedish and lowest were ratings of Finnish teachers and principals.

Quality in early childhood education includes most often the use of a curriculum, staff characteristics, teacher behaviours and practices, and the staff-child interactions. Quality in most countries involves structural features of the settings (space, group size and other standards (OECD, 2012; OECD, 2017). According to Öun (2009), quality is higher in childcare institutions that apply a child-centred approach, and a study by Öun, Nugin, Veisson, Tuul, and Leppik (2014) showed that the indicators of the quality of the learning environment differed in different preschool groups, whereas spatial conditions of the groups had an impact on several factors. The findings of Campbell-Barr (2016) highlight how attitudes are bound by socio-cultural understandings of ECEC.

The research problem is that teachers in different cultural contexts understand 'quality' in early childhood education in different ways. The purpose of the current research was to find out how early childhood teachers in New Zealand understand the notions of quality, professionalism and sustainability in relation to their work.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 teachers in New Zealand from two different kindergartens. New Zealand public kindergarten teachers are required to hold a degree level qualification. The mean age of the teachers interviewed was 32 years. Their work experience in early childhood care and education ranged between two to 23 years. Nine of the teachers were women, and two were men. All teachers participated voluntarily, with the permission of their kindergarten association, and signed a written consent form after reading the information sheet and having been briefed on the ethical considerations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, taking around 30 minutes. Both researchers were present. The interview questions were divided into three blocks: questions about professionalism, quality and sustainability.

The interviews were then transcribed and sent back to the teachers for member-checking purposes. After this stage, they were coded using the qualitative data software analysis programme Nvivo.

Results

The teachers from New Zealand considered teaching qualifications to be very important in relation to both quality provision and professionalism. This was important to ensure that teachers had reflection skills, good theoretical and

practical knowledge, a clear teaching philosophy and teaching strategies. Being professional was equated with the provision of quality education. The second important category appeared to be understanding children (their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development). Supporting children's learning (and creating social and learning environments) was the third very important category. Partnerships with children, families, colleagues, and community were also highlighted. The teachers considered that building relationships with all parties is important. Teamwork, responsibility and respect towards children with special needs and different cultural backgrounds was mentioned as the fifth category. The sixth category was the need for appropriate teacher-children ratios. The seventh category was the philosophy that the curriculum should be based on children's interests and needs.

Another study, by Mikser, Tuul, Veisson and Goodson (forthcoming) indicates that during the professional career of Estonian teachers, demands have increased and teaching has become more difficult. In the opinion of their respondents, this is caused by changes in educational life as well as in the society as a whole. However, most teachers also think that teacher's freedom to make decisions about the content and the results of one's work has also increased.

Sustainability

There are two different definitions of education for sustainable development (ESD):

- 1 as a threefold approach to education, based on questions concerning education about, in, and for the environment. The research has evolved from teaching children facts about the environment and sustainability issues to educating children to act for change.
- 2 as an approach to education that includes four interrelated dimensions – economic, social, environmental, cultural. The first area relates to how teachers understand ESD, while the second area focuses on how ESD can be implemented in educational practice (Hedefalk et al., 2015).

A study by Ritchie et al. (2010) showed ways in which teachers in Aotearoa (New Zealand) have been implementing programs within early childhood care and education settings that offer Maori perspectives on caring for ourselves, others, and the environment.

Research in Australia (Dyment et al., 2014) has shown that participants widened their understandings of ECEfS from a narrow environmental focus to a broader understanding of the social, political and economic dimensions. According to Pipere et al. (2015) and Wals (2013) one of the issues connected with this field is that most of the universities that engage in sustainability are universities that have a focus on education rather than on research. Strong research universities tend to pay less attention to both ESD and sustainability in general (Wals, 2013).

Context

This section describes the macro context of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Aotearoa (New Zealand) followed by some contextual information regarding the two kindergartens whose teachers participated in this study.

In Aotearoa (New Zealand) there is a range of different kinds of early childhood care and education provision. Services may cater to children from birth to 5 years of age. In 2015, 96.5% of four-year-olds attended some early childhood care and education (Education Counts, 2015). The traditional public kindergarten service, which previously offered either morning or afternoon sessional programmes, has in recent years been forced by government funding policies to adopt a school day format. Kindergartens make up 15.6% of all ECCE enrolments. Full day early childhood services are predominately privately owned and run as for-profit businesses. These make up 63.1% of enrolment. Playcentre, a parent-run cooperative early childhood model, makes of 6.3%. Home-based services receive 10.3% of children enrolled, and the Māori language, Māori run programmes, *ngā kōhanga reo*, have 4.5% of the total enrolments (Education Counts, 2015).

Whilst demographically, the Indigenous Māori make up around 15% of the population, the New Zealand government and correspondingly the Ministry of Education recognise the 1840 treaty, *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, that allowed for British settlement in exchange for protection of Māori lands, language and cultural beliefs, values and practices. Accordingly, the national early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017), which has recently been ‘refreshed’, requires early childhood education programmes to incorporate recognition of these obligations. The 2017 version states that: “*Te Tiriti the Treaty has implications for our education system, particularly in terms of achieving equitable outcomes for Māori [children] and ensuring that te reo Māori [the Māori language] not only survives but thrives*” (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 3). This is a strong mandate for teachers to ensure the sustainability of *te reo Māori* which, in turn, supports cultural sustainability, as languages encapsulate cultural knowledges (Pere, 1991).

UNESCO is the lead organisation within the United Nations in pursuing Education for Sustainable Development. According to UNESCO:

The aspiration of sustainable development requires us to resolve common problems and tensions and to recognize new horizons. Economic growth and the creation of wealth have reduced global poverty rates, but vulnerability, inequality, exclusion and violence have increased within and across societies throughout the world. Unsustainable patterns of economic production and consumption contribute to global warming, environmental degradation and an upsurge in natural disasters.

(UNESCO, 2015, p. 9)

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is thus described as a model of education that “aims to enable learners to constructively and creatively address

present and future global challenges and create more sustainable and resilient societies” (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Project, 2016, p. 494). Recognition of our planet as a finite ecosystem however, results in a “definition of sustainable development constructed from an ecocentric worldview” which serves as a “pathway to a future where environmental, social and economic growth” are recognised as being synergistic (Holdsworth et al., 2013, p. 352). In addition to ecological/environmental sustainability, considerations of cultural, social, economic and political sustainability refer to the maintenance of diverse cultures and the languages and identities of their members, to wellbeing and quality of life, justice, citizenship, peace and participation. It is also salient to observe that both cultural diversity and biodiversity are being simultaneously seriously diminished by destructive development forces (Gorenflo et al., 2012).

The original *Te Whāriki* (NZ Ministry of Education, 1996) did not draw directly on the understandings of ESD. It did reflect a strong commitment to cultural and linguistic sustainability, promoting the sustenance of Māori language and culture, and of the heritage and home languages of other children. It also required teachers to liaise with local tangata whenua (Indigenous people – people of the land) and to promote respect for Papatūānuku (Mother Earth) (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996). It encouraged awareness and concern for both people and the environment, as in the following expectation: “*Rules about harming others and the environment are natural topics of conversation and negotiation with adults, so that children become aware of them*” (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 53). It also recommended that teachers foster “*children’s growing capacities for empathy*” (p. 71).

The recent iteration of the curriculum goes further with regard to ecological sustainability in articulating that teachers should “*support mokopuna [grandchildren/children] to engage respectfully with and to have aroha [love and respect] for Papatūānuku. They encourage an understanding of kaitiakitanga [active guardianship] and the responsibilities of being a kaitiaki [guardian] by, for example, caring for rivers, native forest and birds*” (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 33). Teachers are to “*nurture empathy through interactions, modelling and respectful practice*” (p. 40).

New Zealand government policy currently requires a minimum of 50% of early childhood educators to be qualified teachers. However, public kindergartens maintain a commitment to upholding 100% qualified staffing, despite the lack of government funding support in this regard (New Zealand Kindergartens Inc, 2017). Having well qualified teachers who have received high quality initial teacher education of a sufficient duration is regarded as a significant contributing factor in relation to quality provision (OECD, 2017). The OECD reports that “*High staff qualifications result in a more stimulating environment and high-quality pedagogical practices, which boost children’s well-being and learning outcomes*” (OECD, 2017, p. 103). In New Zealand in recent years there has been a growing trend towards one-year graduate level diplomas replacing the former three-year

under-graduate degrees. Current government policy is to move these one year qualifications to post-graduate level. Whilst the level of study will be higher, the duration of one year remains.

Recent government policy has aimed at increasing the already high early childhood participation rates, whilst ignoring the fact that participating in poor quality programmes can be detrimental to young children's growth and wellbeing (Ritchie et al., 2014). The government seemed to be cherry picking research that identifies the benefits of early childhood care and education whilst ignoring the evidence that these benefits are only likely to be provided by high quality provision. The government could thus congratulate itself on achieving its own 'Better Social Policy' targets of high ECE participation, whilst continuing to underfund the sector, and to rely on for-profit corporate and un-qualified home-based providers, thus denying the opportunity for many children to receive the high quality care and education that all children deserve.

Both of the kindergartens in which data was gathered for this chapter are public kindergartens that are operated under the management and guidance of a wider regional kindergarten association. Both are licensed for up to 40 children to attend on any particular day. One runs a school-day model in which children from 2–5 attend in the same session, with many sets of siblings attending together, although not all the children attend every day. The other runs a school-day session for younger children two days per week and for older children on the other three days. So whilst there are no more than 40 children in attendance at any one session, there may be a larger total enrolled, attending across various days. At Kōwhai Kindergarten (these are not the real names), there were at the time of the interviews 62 children enrolled, of which 33 were boys and 29 were girls. In terms of ethnicity, 35 were Māori, 10 were European/Pākehā, 14 were from Pacific Islands backgrounds, and three were of Asian ethnicities. At Pūriri Kindergarten, there were 80 children on the roll, of which 47 were boys and 33 were girls. Of these, 50 were European/Pākehā, 13 were Māori, six were Indian, three were Samoan and three Chinese, with a further five children from other ethnic backgrounds. Each kindergarten had six teachers, some of whom worked part-time. The ratio of staff to children was at least 1:10, as per the government regulations. Both kindergartens have spacious indoor and outdoor areas and are well equipped with standard early childhood equipment such as books, blocks, jigsaw puzzles and art supplies indoors, and a sandpit and climbing equipment outside.

Teachers' perspectives

In the New Zealand iteration of the wider study, eleven teachers from two separate kindergartens were asked a range of questions related to their views regarding professionalism, quality early childhood care and education practice, and sustainability.

Relationships were a priority in relation to professionalism for the teachers in this study:

Being professional means being welcoming, friendly, being approachable, developing positive relationships with others and clearly communicating children's interests and developments and their progress with whānau [families], yeah having strong relationships . . . having positive relationships with teachers, families and children and promoting kindness and respect.

[T9]

For me first and foremost to be a professional you have to have good relationships with tamariki [children], and good relationships with whānau [families], good relationships with your [teaching] team and relationships with the community, because you can be as professional in a regulation way and going to all the courses that you want, but if you don't have those really great reciprocal, respectful relationships then it doesn't mean anything, so for me that would be number one.

[T7]

Helping maintain the mana of the child, yeah and also working collegially with other colleagues, other kaiako [teachers], other teachers, and of course parents and whānau [families]. It's just having those professional conversations with children, and sharing what the children have done with their families.

[T5]

Maintaining professional ethics was also strongly apparent. They referred to the importance of adhering to their professional code of ethics, maintaining integrity, tact, confidentiality, fairness and equity.

Another strong feature within their discussions regarding professionalism was the need for teachers to have a teaching degree, and to maintain the currency of their professional knowledge via ongoing professional learning and reflection:

So I guess it means being part of a team of teachers who are committed to providing high quality early childhood education, who are committed to furthering their ongoing professional development and who are open and responsive to new ideas and reflective of their own practice I think that's important all for the benefit of the children and families that they are working alongside in partnership with. So I think for me that's those are sort of keystones in terms of being a professional teacher . . . Be qualified, again have ongoing support and mentoring and look for ways of furthering your own knowledge within the profession, being adaptable and again I said reflective as well.

[T6]

I suppose being a reflective teacher, I think that you prove your professionalism when you're always thinking about 'ok, how else could I do this?', 'how better could I do this?', and I suppose with that goes hand in hand is professional development, always sort of because with that reflection comes ok maybe I could learn more, read more about something else you know what I mean, so I think that professional development and being a reflective teacher go hand in hand.

[T8]

Other aspects that were also mentioned as being important for professionalism in early childhood care and education included having a "genuine passion" for teaching young children, having pride in yourself and your work, and having the temperament that enables working with children, colleagues and families:

I think you have to have the right temperament, if you don't like children, you can't do it and if you don't, if you can't work as part of a team, you can't do it and you, you know you just, you know when you see someone with it you know it.

[T3]

Teachers discussed quality in relation to structural factors such as well-funded services, teacher qualifications and ongoing professional learning, good ratios of teachers to children, small group sizes, teachers' non-contact time. They also emphasised how these structural conditions impacted on process factors such as awareness of and responsiveness to children and families' wellbeing, needs, and interests.

Well-trained teachers but not only trained, teachers that continually still do professional development to keep up with current theory and practice; having enough funding to be able to provide a good ratio and enough non-contact time as well as contact time; . . . good ratios; not too huge a group size, you know how some places have 80 or 120 or whatever children. But I think not only being trained and all that, having teachers that are passionate about early childhood and actually wanting to make a difference in children's lives, that are understanding of people's different circumstances, and take each child as a child, . . . so flexible, yeah.

[T11]

Quality is about ratios like having low ratios, group size, qualified staff. This is a personal point of view but having free play, a lot of free play for children, having a team that values self-motivated learners, who strive to perseverance and where they can gain confidence and learn social and emotional skills. Having primary care or key caregivers for under 3s. Having a respectful philosophy and a suitable environment with challenges for varying ages and

indoor outdoor flow so the childcare centre or kindergartens the doors are not shut there's a flow between both.

[T9]

I think it means quality is about teachers and interacting with children and supporting children's learning but not dominating children's learning, not putting a teacher spin on it or you know doing it the teachers way it's actually allowing children to develop things for themselves and the teaching role is there to support and facilitate children's learning. And so for me for quality you see children are engaged and busy and focussed and moving forward and really, and quite good at articulating their ideas and things forward so yeah.

[T8]

Well it is 100% qualified teachers, so it's having qualifications, having a diverse team so not just having all one flavour, one age, having everyone different that can add different things, I think having quite staunch guidelines to your documentation, so you can be accountable to ERO and to senior management, and I think like having a program and environment that is responsive to the family and the community.

[T11]

Teachers had a range of understandings regarding sustainability. Some understood the question to be in relation to the sustainability of professionalism and quality in ECCE. Many were not familiar with the UNESCO emphasis on Education for Sustainable Development, but were able to make connections to the concepts of cultural and ecological sustainability in particular.

Well sustainability yeah, there's environmental sustainability and teaching children that our resources are finite so which is just you know water play or you know looking after equipment and sustainability. But there's also, there's the sustainability around building on children's experiences and knowledge, there's sustainability around keeping Maori language alive, there's sustainability around building social relationships I think you know it's not a. Yeah sustainability is, well I suppose it also means working within the resources we have available which you know can vary depending on what government's doing what to us.

[T1]

Yeah right, so I guess within the Aotearoa context it is about ensuring that te reo Maori [the Māori language] and the ideas and concepts are totally integrated and are used in a meaningful but everyday way. As well that they're totally interwoven throughout the program, they're visible and they're relevant for children, and the children see the ideas around culture and cultural sustainability as ongoing. And they become comfortable and value the idea

of being a citizen here and having shared histories you know that cover a broad range of experiences but there is an idea of actually acknowledging and valuing Maori as the Indigenous people here and ensuring that that is always visible and respected. In terms [of] social and economic – again that is about those ideas of supporting children in citizenship and understanding that we're all part of something bigger and that we all have a responsibility to support each other to our environment, to our community, to our whānau, to our friends. And that idea that we can make positive choices to make the world a better place, you know, through recycling but also caring for people, ensuring that people are treated with respect and are seen as equal and no one is disadvantaged as well, and that differences are valued as well. So for me that's really important.

[T6]

Yeah definitely, sustainability has always sort of been a big thing for me. I have been, and this is kind of on a little bit of a tangent, but I have been a vegetarian for about 35 years now, and that came from sort of thinking about animals, the environment all that sort of thing so it's always been something that you know has been sort of strong for me, and as a whānau my personal whānau we try and make good choices. But in terms of the kindergarten, . . . it's part of our kawa [philosophy of practice], we talk about kaitiakitanga which is basically looking after the environment, and looking after things in the environment. And so . . . it's just an integral part of our program, so from you know if the tamariki find a worm in the garden, to how you treat that worm, to you know recycling newspaper and making fire bricks for whānau that might need it, need them over the winter. And I think . . . it's become the language also for the tamariki [children] like when we go down to the school, we always have two kaitiaki [guardians] who take a rubbish bag each, and we pick up rubbish at the school, as you know basically a thank you for being able to use their grounds. And I suppose that's that reciprocity too isn't it? . . . And that understanding that everything you do actually has an impact on somebody, something, so yeah I suppose it's more global you know here, and I know I'm just talking about sort of environmentally sustainable but it, it also involves manaakitanga [caring, generosity] as well, it's like how we look after each other.

[T10]

In the context here, we've worked with it mainly around the environmental sustainability. So that's about imparting with children an understanding of they're going to inherit a world that's got major difficulty, environmental, and so therefore for children to understand ways of being able to, have sustainable practice in the environment. But it's also by creating this global citizenship, this understanding of the effect on the world, what I see is also children become, have more of a sense of place. They become this global

citizen that can go out and advocate for the world, know that things should be done in a certain way. And you see it done in wrong ways, children in particular are quite black and white in that respect, so they will often be the ones that will argue and will fight for it. So yeah again here it has been more around that whole idea of environmentally sustainable, but also bringing it back to giving children a sense of empathy and place, and therefore their place in the world, their responsibilities as well as the consequences of what could happen, without making it scary and horrible.

[T7]

The teachers described many pedagogical strategies that enacted these philosophies. They also clearly articulated connections between their understandings of professionalism, quality early childhood care and education, and sustainability.

Discussion

The purpose of the current research was to find out how preschool teachers in New Zealand understand professionalism, quality of education and sustainability. For the teachers who participated in this study, professionalism means, above all, good relationships with children, parents, colleagues and community. Professional ethics was also very important for teachers. To have a teaching degree and having “genuine passion” were also significant for these New Zealand teachers.

The teachers in this study prioritised the importance of teacher qualification (reflection skills, good theoretical and practical knowledge, teaching philosophy and teaching strategies). Being professional is equated with providing quality education. They also placed a great deal of importance on the need for teachers to work hard at understanding children from a holistic perspective (their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical wellbeing). Supporting children’s learning and creating a conducive social and learning environment was another very important category. Partnership with children, families, colleagues, and community was also mentioned often. The teachers considered that building relationships with all parties to be very important. Teamwork, responsibility and respect towards children with special needs and different cultural backgrounds were also prioritised. Another was the category of teacher-children ratios. Teachers strongly emphasised that the local programme needed to respond to children’s interests and needs. These New Zealand teachers demonstrated a deep awareness of cultural differences and similarities.

Initially, many of the teachers understood the question regarding sustainability to be in relation to the sustainability of professionalism and quality in ECCE. When talking about the environment, teachers mentioned using natural resources, green garden projects, recycling, respecting and caring for the planet, living in harmony and with limited resources, and about teaching sustainability from the beginning. When talking about cultural sustainability, the teachers valued different cultural backgrounds, respect for different cultures, cultural identities and languages.

Among the social aspects of sustainability were mentioned good relationships with children, families and community, networking, teamwork, giving power to your colleagues, advocating ECEC in the community, inclusion of children with additional needs, collective values and goals, and that each child is different and individual. Some of the economic aspects of sustainability mentioned were the reuse of materials, involving materials into play and practice, and demonstrations of recycling skills.

The interviews with the teachers demonstrate their strong commitment to implementing the challenging components of *Te Whāriki*, which include the complexity of the holistic, integrated curriculum, along with Māori language and worldviews. The sector, once provoked by this innovative curriculum, has achieved a much stronger state of professionalism than was evident in 1996. The kindergarten sector in particular, through its ongoing requirement for its teachers to be degree-qualified, has responded to these challenges by strengthening the Māori cultural components of programmes offered. The teachers in this study greatly valued their relationships with Māori children and families, seeing these as pivotal to the authentic delivery of Māori world views within their teaching. They saw reflective practice and ongoing opportunities for professional learning as key to continuing to provide culturally responsive programmes in partnership with their local communities.

Conclusion

As we know, and are further reminded by socio-cultural and ecological theories, education is culturally and contextually located. The recently ‘refreshed’ New Zealand early childhood curriculum (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017) like the preceding 1996 document, places a high value on cultural sustainability. It is therefore not surprising that the New Zealand teachers placed such importance on respecting and including cultural components in their programmes. Teachers advocated strongly for teacher qualifications being key to professionalism and to quality provision. It should be noted that all the teachers in this study were qualified kindergarten teachers. The public kindergartens have upheld their commitment to fully qualified staff despite current government policy for the early childhood sector only requiring a minimum of 50% of the teachers to hold a degree level qualification. With the very recent change of government, the sector is hoping to see a return to the previous commitment of requiring all teachers to hold such a qualification. These teachers held detailed views regarding ecological sustainability, and it will be interesting to see how their practice in this regard may be influenced by the commitment to ‘kaitiakitanga’ outlined in the new iteration of *Te Whāriki*. It will also be interesting to see if the commitments expressed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals filter down into educational practice in New Zealand and elsewhere. Lastly, we look forward to learning about how the teachers in the other countries in this study have responded to the same questions, and to comparing the similarities and understanding the differences that appear across the different sets of teachers’ responses.

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