OMEP Aotearoa Submission to the Ministerial Advisory Group Early Childhood Education Funding Review

Organisation Mondiale pour L'Éducation Préscolaire
World Organization for Early Childhood Education
Organización Mundial para la Educación Preescolar
Te Rūnanga ā-ao mō te Mātauranga Kōhungahunga

ABSTRACT

This submission argues that early childhood education (ECE) should be recognised and funded as a public good, a universal human right, and a core public responsibility.

Grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Te Whāriki, and OMEP World policy, it advocates a funding system that places children's rights, wellbeing, belonging, participation, and holistic development at its centre.

OMEP Aotearoa recommends universal public funding strengthened by targeted equity funding where barriers exist, a fully qualified teaching workforce, pay parity, protection of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Te Whāriki, and the rejection of narrow outcomes-based funding.

Together, these measures provide the strongest foundation for educational equity, social cohesion, and the long-term wellbeing of Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Executive summary

OMEP Aotearoa welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Ministerial Advisory Group's review of early childhood education funding.

This review presents an opportunity to reconsider not only how early childhood education should be funded, but what it is fundamentally for. Funding decisions reflect assumptions about the purpose of education, the role of government, the status of children within society, and the kind of future Aotearoa New Zealand seeks to create.

OMEP Aotearoa argues that early childhood education is first and foremost a public good, a universal human right, and a public responsibility. While ECE supports parental participation in employment, these are important social benefits rather than the primary purpose of the education system. The principal purpose of ECE is to uphold every child's right to education, wellbeing, participation, belonging and holistic development from birth.

OMEP therefore recommends a funding framework that recognises ECE as:

- a universal public good
- retains universal public funding
- strengthens targeted equity funding
- restores a fully qualified teaching workforce
- protects Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Te Whāriki
- rejects narrow outcomes-based funding models
- strengthens pay parity
- recognises investment in ECE as an investment in democracy, social cohesion and collective wellbeing.

About OMEP

The World Organisation for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) is an international, interdisciplinary non-government organisation that was founded in 1948. It is affiliated to the United Nations, working collaboratively with UNICEF, UNESCO and the Council of Europe. OMEP advocates for the rights, wellbeing and education of young children. OMEP provides a meeting ground for representatives from a range of professions and nationalities, all concerned for the wellbeing, education and rights of young children and their families.

OMEP World states that all countries and chapters are to: "Promote Early Childhood Education and Care as a sustainable a Public Good :

> − Advocate for the recognition of ECCE as a public good that warrants public investment and support.
>
> − Highlight the societal benefits of investing in early childhood, including improved educational outcomes, social cohesion, and economic development".

OMEP Aotearoa is one of over 80 member countries of OMEP World. Our key objective is to promote and protect the rights of young children (birth to 8) under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). We are an incorporated society and registered charity (CC53036). We have members across Aotearoa with five regional rōpū: Tāmaki Makaurau, Waikato, Te Whanganui-a- Tara, Ōtākou and Waitaha.

OMEP Aotearoa recognises Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand. Our objectives and goals promote a uniquely Aotearoa New Zealand approach to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child understood through the articles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Goals and objectives of OMEP Aotearoa pertinent to this submission are:

- Promote optimum conditions for children's holistic well-being, development (including mauri, mana, rangatiratanga, wairuatanga), and welfare in the context of their whānau, hapū, iwi, institutions, communities, and wider society.
- Address inequities in early childhood educational provision
- Promote quality in early childhood education in all forms in Aotearoa New Zealand
- Uphold te reo Māori and NZ Sign Language as official languages and respect the additional languages used within Aotearoa.
- Support any organisation, institutional group or individual activity which furthers the cause of children's rights within the limits of the Organisation's resources.
- Support programmes which promote kaitiakitanga and local curriculum that stem from the whakapapa and pūrākau of the local iwi.

The Purpose of Early Childhood Education

OMEP welcomes the Government's commitment to strengthening Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood education funding system. However, before considering how early childhood education should be funded, it is important to consider what it is for.

OMEP has consistently maintained that education, in its broadest sense, including early childhood education, is a public good and a core responsibility of the government. Public investment in early childhood education is not justified solely because it contributes to economic growth or workforce participation. It is justified because every child has an inherent right to education, development, participation, wellbeing and belonging. Governments therefore have a responsibility to ensure that all children can access high-quality early childhood education as a matter of right.

OMEP's position is consistent with growing international scholarship that understands early childhood education as a democratic public institution rather than simply a service supporting labour market participation. It is informed by the **76th OMEP World Assembly Declaration (Bangkok, 2024)**, which calls for the promotion of a United Nations Decade for Early Childhood Care and Education. The Declaration affirms that Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) should be recognised as a **sustainable public good** that warrants sustained public investment and support. It calls on governments to recognise that investment in early childhood strengthens not only children's educational outcomes but also social cohesion, democratic participation and long-term societal wellbeing.

While participation in early childhood education undoubtedly supports parents and caregivers to engage in employment and study, these are important social benefits rather than the primary purpose of the education system. The purpose of early childhood education extends beyond these social and economic benefits. Quality early childhood education enables children to develop identities, relationships, languages, confidence, curiosity, wellbeing and a sense of belonging. It provides the conditions through which children participate in their communities, experience inclusion, develop empathy, and begin contributing to democratic life.

This understanding is reflected in the New Zealand ECE curriculum ***Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa***, which translates to "the educational mat for the children of New Zealand". *Te Whāriki*'s vision is for children to grow as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging, and confident that they make a valued contribution to society. This vision recognises children as citizens in the present, not simply future workers.

Based on the above discussion we argue:

> *It is inequitable that, because of their parents' status, children should receive different access to quality ECE*

- Early childhood education should be framed as a :
    - universal human right,
    - public responsibility,
    - public good,
    - and foundation for children's learning, wellbeing, participation and belonging.

Children's Rights Must Be the Starting Point

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises young children as rights holders from birth. The Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasises that children's best interests should always be the starting point for service planning and provision, and that governments are responsible for ensuring comprehensive, coordinated and rights-based early childhood services.

The Convention further recognises that children's right to education begins in early childhood and should be directed towards the full development of children's personality, talents, dignity and capabilities. Early childhood education should complement families and communities while remaining a public responsibility supported through appropriate legislation, funding and regulation. Children's entitlement to education belongs to children themselves.

Universal Funding and Equity

OMEP supports universal public funding as the foundation of New Zealand's early childhood education system.

Universal funding reflects children's equal right to high-quality early childhood education regardless of family income, geographical location, parental employment, or other personal circumstances. This commitment is particularly important in Aotearoa New Zealand, where child poverty continues to undermine many children's opportunities to participate and flourish.

As Susan St John has argued, child poverty remains a significant and persistent issue. In her analysis of the Government's 2026 Child Poverty Report, released last week, she notes that New Zealand is far from on track to achieve its target of reducing child poverty to 6% by 2028. One of the most important indicators—material hardship—could not even be estimated by the Treasury and was instead calculated to be 14.3% in the 2024/25 financial year. These figures highlight the continuing reality that many children experience deprivation that affects their wellbeing, learning, and participation. In this context, universal access to high-quality early childhood education is not simply an education policy but an

important equity and social justice measure that helps ensure all children, regardless of their circumstances, have opportunities to belong, participate, and thrive.

OMEP has consistently stressed the importance of universal funding for inclusive practice that values diversity and removes barriers to participation. OMEP understands equity as more than directing additional resources towards disadvantage. Rather, equity means ensuring that every child can participate, belong, and flourish through education that honours *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, protects and affirms children's languages, cultures, and identities, supports children with disabilities, values diversity, and actively removes barriers to participation. Equity therefore requires not only fair access to high-quality early childhood education, but also educational environments where every child is recognised, respected, and able to thrive.

Additional targeted funding has an important role in addressing structural barriers experienced by some children and communities, but it should strengthen and not replace a universal system. Likewise Te Tiriti o Waitangi should not be understood as another category of targeted funding. It establishes constitutional responsibilities that should underpin the entire early childhood education system.

Quality is a Public Investment

Research consistently demonstrates that the benefits of early childhood education depend upon quality.

OMEP considers high-quality early childhood education to include:

- fully qualified and certificated teachers working directly with children;
- implementation of *Te Whāriki*;
- meaningful enactment of Te Tiriti o Waitangi;
- culturally and linguistically sustaining pedagogy;
- reciprocal relationships with children, whānau and communities;
- inclusive education for all children;
- children's right to play;
- easy access to a natural environment;.
- professional conditions, including pay parity, that attract and retain a highly qualified workforce.

Responding to the Funding Review

Recognising early childhood education as a sustainable public good has important implications for funding policy. Funding should be designed to realise children's rights and strengthen the common good rather than primarily responding to labour market objectives. Universal public investment should therefore remain the foundation of New Zealand's early childhood education system, with additional targeted funding addressing structural barriers experienced by particular children and communities.

As OMEP World argues, investing in early childhood is not only an investment in educational outcomes but also in social cohesion, democratic participation and sustainable societies. These broader public benefits should remain central to decisions about the future of early childhood education funding.

> **OMEP is concerned that aspects of the current review increasingly frame early childhood education as a mechanism for supporting labour market participation and future economic productivity.**

Supporting parents to participate in employment is an important social policy objective. However, it should remain an important outcome of early childhood education rather than its primary purpose.

Recent legislative changes identifying support for parental labour market participation as one purpose of the early childhood education system risk shifting policy attention away from children's educational rights.

OMEP encourages the Ministerial Advisory Group to ensure that funding decisions continue to reflect the principle that children's access to education should never become contingent upon parental employment status or economic participation.

Children are not future economic units waiting to be developed.

They are citizens with rights in the present.

We would like to see universal public funding that provides quality ECE based on -

- 100% qualified teaching workforce
- Universal free ECE for all
- Universal funding should remain the foundation because every child has an equal right to high-quality ECE.

Additional Evidence Supporting OMEP Aotearoa's Position

Quality should not be reduced to technicist measures

OMEP Aotearoa refers the Ministerial Advisory Group to the commentary by Alex Gunn and Linda Mitchell on the MartinJenkins literature review, *What does the evidence say about the relationships between ECEC structural quality and children's outcomes?* prepared as part of *The Role of Funding and Other Levers in Supporting Quality Early Childhood Education* (2025).[1]

The MartinJenkins report proposes that public funding could be linked to regular independent evaluations of service quality, stating:

> Instead of licensed service providers being automatically entitled to receive funding under the Act, funding could be dependent on the outcome of

> regular independent evaluations of service quality. The evaluator would assess the level of service against specified criteria. Only service providers that met or exceeded a specified level of quality would be entitled to receive funding.

OMEP Aotearoa strongly opposes any move towards funding that is contingent on technicist evaluations of quality or narrow outcome measures. As Gunn and Mitchell observe, the MartinJenkins analysis draws heavily on a very small evidence base of only eight studies, making it an insufficient foundation for significant policy reform.

Quality in early childhood education cannot be reduced to measurable outputs or predetermined indicators. Children's learning is relational, contextual, emergent and non-linear. Narrow outcomes-based funding fails to recognise individual developmental pathways, cultural diversity, children's rights, or the structural inequities that shape educational experiences. It also risks encouraging compliance and performativity rather than thoughtful pedagogical practice.

Targeted funding has an important place within the system where additional barriers to participation exist. However, **targeted funding should complement, rather than replace, universal public entitlement**.

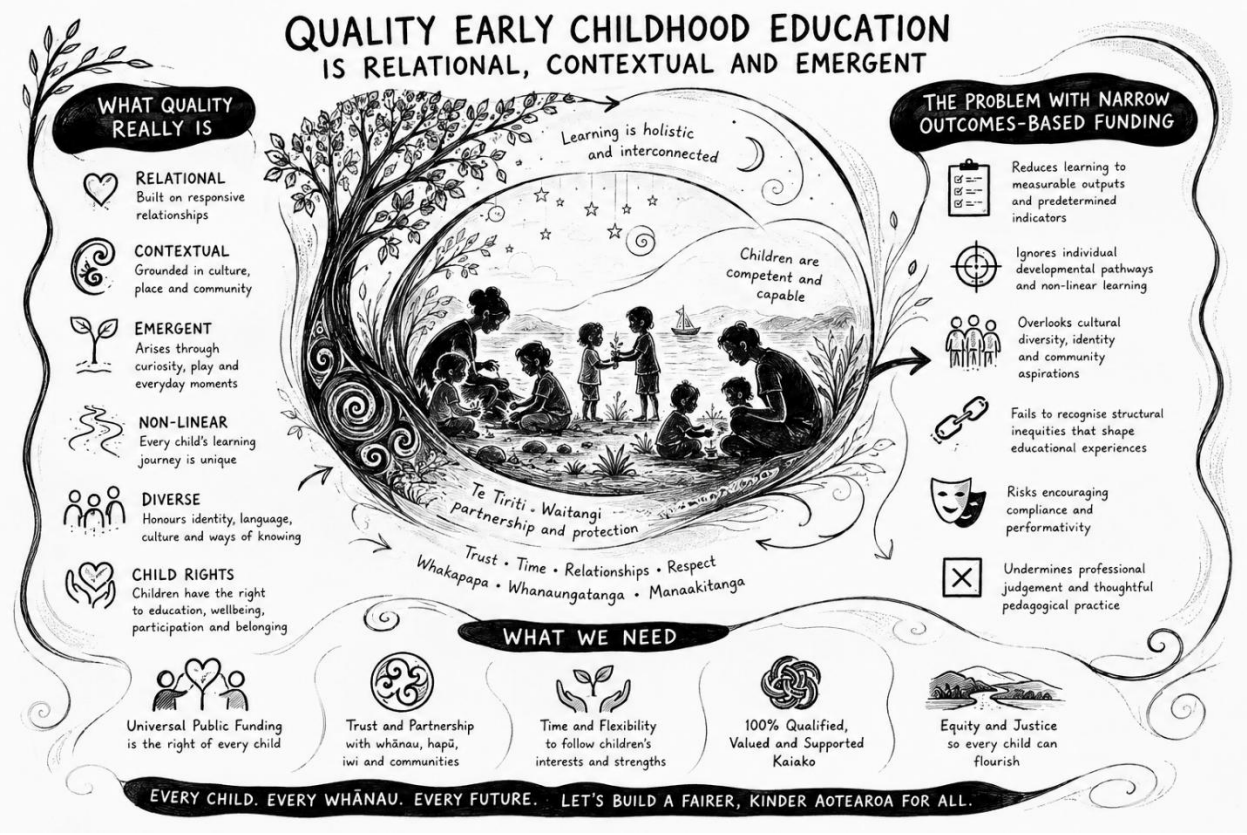

Figure 1. This conceptual model illustrates that quality in early childhood education is relational, contextual, diverse, and emergent rather than reducible to measurable outputs. It contrasts this holistic, rights-based understanding with narrow outcomes-based funding, arguing that quality is

best supported through universal funding, fully qualified kaiako, professional trust, equity, and pedagogies that honour children's unique pathways, cultures, and relationships.

Early childhood education is a public good

OMEP Aotearoa supports the growing body of scholarship that positions early childhood education as a public good and a collective societal responsibility rather than simply a mechanism for increasing labour market participation or future economic productivity.[2]

We are concerned by the continued policy framing of early childhood education as primarily a *merit good* within the Ministry for Regulation's *Regulatory Review of Early Childhood Education* (2024). This approach privileges Public Choice Theory and Human Capital Theory, positioning children primarily as future economic contributors while simultaneously responsibilising parents to participate in paid employment.

This framing is also reflected in the Education and Training (Early Childhood Education Reform) Amendment Act 2025, which states that one purpose of the legislation is to:

> ...support the choice of parents and caregivers to participate in the labour market.

While supporting families is an important outcome of early childhood education, OMEP Aotearoa rejects the positioning of children's education primarily as an economic instrument. Human development theories, children's rights frameworks, Te Tiriti o Waitangi and *Te Whāriki* instead recognise children as competent, capable citizens whose wellbeing, participation, identity and learning matter in the present.

Although economic analyses such as those by James Heckman are frequently cited internationally, these arguments rely substantially on a small number of longitudinal intervention studies, including the Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian Project. While historically influential, these studies should not be treated as universally applicable foundations for contemporary funding policy.

Quality research from Aotearoa New Zealand needs greater priority

Aotearoa New Zealand possesses a substantial body of internationally recognised research on early childhood quality that should be given greater prominence within funding deliberations.

OMEP Aotearoa particularly acknowledges the work of OMEP World members and OMEP Aotearoa Life and Honorary Members, including Professor Linda Mitchell, Anne Meade and Diti Hill, whose research has examined process quality, teachers' work, children's rights, democratic participation and public responsibility for early childhood education over many decades.

Their work consistently demonstrates that quality emerges through well-qualified teachers, responsive relationships, appropriate adult-child ratios, rich pedagogical environments and sustained public investment rather than narrow accountability mechanisms.

Recommendations

OMEP Aotearoa recommends that the Ministerial Advisory Group:

- guarantee free, high-quality ECE as a legislated right
- provide universal public funding as the foundation of New Zealand's early childhood education system
- provide additional targeted funding where genuine barriers to participation exist, while maintaining universal entitlement
- ensure and strengthen pay parity across the sector and fair working conditions
- continue progressing towards a fully qualified teaching workforce in all teacher-led services, recognising that infants and toddlers deserve highly qualified teachers during the most significant period of language, cognitive and social development
- define a fully qualified teacher as holding, at minimum, a Level 7 Bachelor of Teaching (ECE), Diploma of Teaching (ECE), or equivalent recognised teaching qualification
- protect and expand public, community-based and not-for-profit services
- ensure adult-child ratios based on meaningful relationships, oral language development and culturally sustaining pedagogy, including children's rights to learn through their home languages in accordance with Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- improve transparency of fees and information for families without adopting reductive colour-coded quality ratings similar to those used in compulsory schooling
- Plan provision around national, regional and community needs.

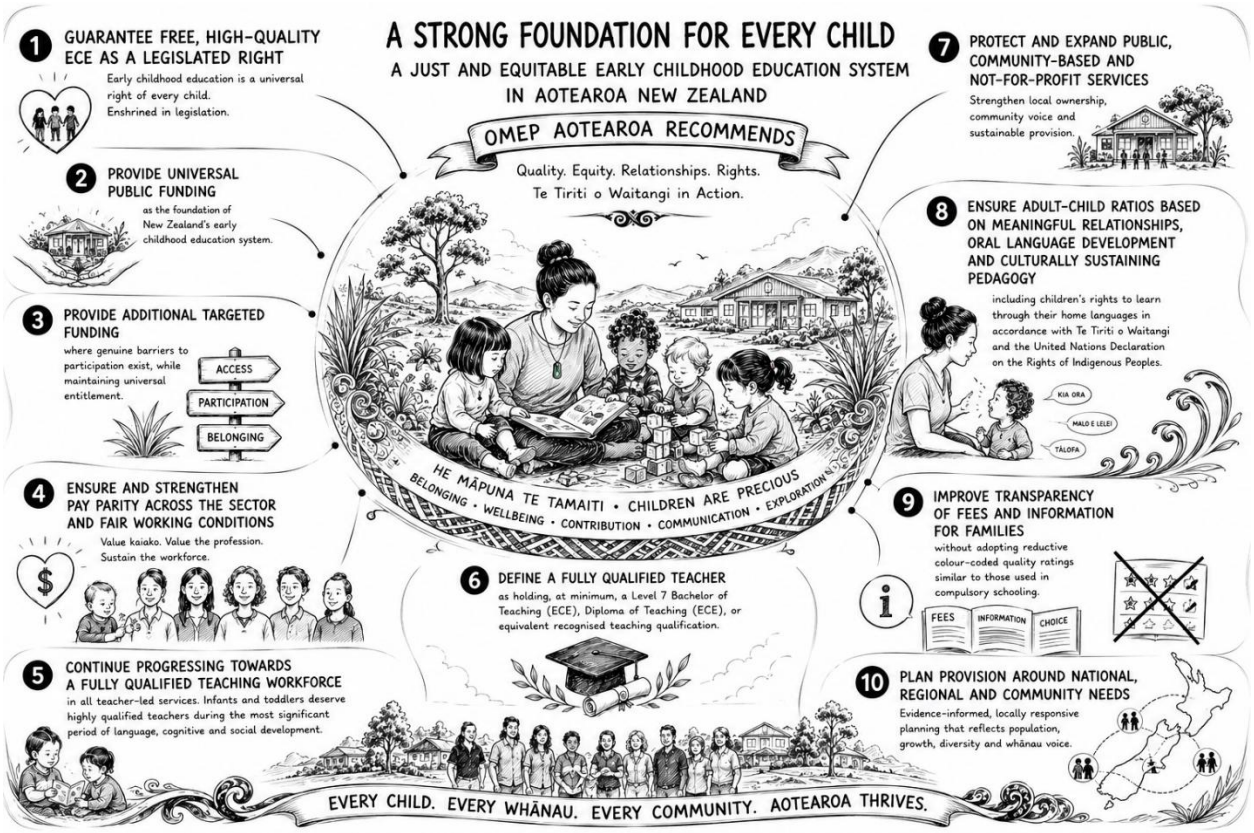

Figure 2. This conceptual model illustrates OMEP Aotearoa's recommendations for a high-quality, equitable early childhood education system grounded in children's rights, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and universal public provision. It emphasises that quality is sustained through universal funding complemented by targeted support where barriers exist, pay parity, 100% qualified kaiako, appropriate adult–child ratios, and transparent information for families, ensuring that every child has equitable access to high-quality early childhood education.

Conclusion

OMEP Aotearoa encourages the Ministerial Advisory Group to place children's rights at the centre of all decisions concerning early childhood education funding.

Funding should recognise early childhood education as a universal educational entitlement, a public responsibility, and an investment in the collective wellbeing of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Universal public funding, strengthened by additional support where barriers exist, provides the strongest foundation for ensuring every child can participate, belong and flourish.

Investment in early childhood education is ultimately an investment in democracy itself. When every child experiences high-quality education grounded in *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, children's rights and *Te Whāriki*, Aotearoa New Zealand strengthens not only children's learning and wellbeing, but also the social, cultural and democratic fabric of our nation.

Appendix A. References informing OMEP Aotearoa's position

References supporting Footnote [1]

Gunn, A., & Mitchell, L. (2025). *A commentary on the MartinJenkins literature review: What does the evidence say about the relationships between ECEC structural quality and children's outcomes?*

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Moss, P., & Mitchell, L. (2024). *Early Childhood in the Anglosphere: Systemic Failings and Transformative Possibilities.* https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800082533