



SUBMISSION

Strategic Plan for Early Learning 2019-2029

He Taonga te Tamaiti: Every Child a Taonga

Submission 098/2019

Prepared by campaign director Alison Sutton on behalf of Talking Matters 13/03/2019

Talking Matters is a campaign of



TE HONONGA AKORANGA
COMET

[COMET - Te Hononga Akoranga](#) is an independent charitable trust and Auckland Council's CCO focused on education, skills and lifelong learning across Auckland and, increasingly, other parts of the country. Our latest Statement of Intent is [here](#).

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Executive Summary

Thank you for the opportunity to submit on the Strategic Plan for Early Learning 2019-2029 He Taonga te Tamaiti: Every Child a Taonga.

This submission is presented on behalf of [Talking Matters](#), a campaign to showcase the importance and impact of early oral language in young children's development, and to generate and support community action on talk. Early language is fundamental to a child's development and wellbeing. There is such a strong link between early language and other longer term social, emotional and learning life outcomes that a child's early language is a primary indicator of their wellbeing.

The quality and quantity of talk and interaction with a child in their 0-5 years, more or less sets a child up for future educational success and life opportunities.

Key points

- Children's language development in the first 1000 days is a crucial influence on their development, their learning and their later life chances.
- Parents and whānau are the first and most important communication partners for children in this vital stage of development.
- As more infants and toddlers spend this key developmental time in ECE, early language and consistent, stable relationships must become a key focus for all services and be incentivised. All services need to provide language rich experiences for all children.
- A high adult to child ratio is essential and we advocate strongly for a very rapid move to higher ratios.
- Initial Teacher Education needs a more intensive focus on early oral language.
- Much more professional learning and development is required across the country, which means growing the network of PLD providers and strengthening their expertise in early language.
- Evidence-based strategies and tools to build language and socio-emotional capability need to be introduced at scale to ECEs across the country. We would be keen to collaborate on a short course on early language - Talking Matters 101.
- We advocate for a network of early language champions in ECE services.
- We recommend that Kāhui Ako are encouraged to focus on oral language for enriching literacy (both reading and writing).
- Iwi boards can play an influential role, partnering with ERO and others to ensure language rich environments exist and sustain Te Reo so tamariki Māori can thrive.
- A national audit tool is required to make visible what services are doing to develop early language.
- National guidelines on the use of devices by and for children under 3 would be useful before the NZ curriculum goes digital in 2020.

Introduction

Talking Matters is a multi-year, multi-sector collaborative campaign. We have been supporting community action on early language and providing professional learning to a wide range of services and providers over the last three years.

We lead and support action in three communities (Tāmaki, Wesley-Mt Roskill and Māngere).

The Talking Matters Network supports professional practice, involving 350 family facing health and wellbeing services, early learning providers, schools, teacher educators, researchers and professional development experts.

Talking Matters is funded by NEXT Foundation and Oranga Tamariki. COMET Auckland, an education trust linked to Auckland Council, is the backbone organisation for Talking Matters. COMET works for greater equity and systems change in education and recognised the need for a much greater focus on early oral language if we are to improve education outcomes for priority learners.

Talking Matters has considered the proposed plan in relation to two questions:

- Will the proposed change ensure services provide language-rich environments and experiences for children?
- Will the changes result in staff with the skills and capabilities to ensure that children thrive as thinkers, talkers and early readers, and leave early learning as confident communicators?

Our submission is based on input from 28 Talking Matters Network members who attended a [Plan overview session with Tanya Harvey](#) (February 22, 2019), and on insights from our campaign experience over the past 3 years.

Children and whānau first

Talking Matters' first operating principle is that the wellbeing of children comes first. Parents, siblings and wider whānau are the principal communicative partners for very small children and the Early Learning Strategic Plan (the Plan) needs to recognise and affirm that front and centre. Neuroscience is illuminating the crucial role parents play in the development of a child's prefrontal cortex in the first 2000 days of life (and affirming what many families and cultures already know and practice). Our system has to hold and model the belief that all families have knowledge and resources and all families want their children to thrive.

At the same time, 50% of under 1-year-olds experience some sort of ECE services. The ECE system is as much an economic system as it is educational, because all employers depend on people who depend on childcare. This raises the bar for ECE services, who are increasingly responsible for providing sustained care for very small children. ECE services and teachers also have a vital advocacy and educative role to draw on the belief systems of families about the best ways to nurture the diverse children in their care. ECEs have a special responsibility to inform parents about developmental stages, to support parents to talk and engage with their children, and to develop parents' understanding of how their parenting actions literally grow their child's brain and emotional development. Who else can do it, if children are in care from 3 months of age?

Talking Matters members are concerned about the uncontrolled social experiment of having children as young as 3 months away from their whānau for hours a day, for years at a time. While recognising the economic imperative for parents to work, we aspire to a society where parents are supported to be with their infants and toddlers.

Goal 1: Raise quality by improving regulated standards

1.1 Regulate ratios: Yes, an unreserved agreement with the need for higher adult ratios with very small children, quality trained staff and small groups. A high adult to child ratio is essential to ensure quality time and responsive interactions with babies and toddlers. We advocate strongly for a very rapid move to higher ratios - 1:3 for children under 1, 1:4 for under 2s. Ratio changes are too important to be left as a longer-term aspiration.

1.2 Require services to support consistent relationships: Stable relationships for babies are so important (confirmed by neuroscience) that we advocate for continuity of care as a guiding principle for organising and resourcing ECE services. Increasing numbers of infants and toddlers spending full days in care and being in ECE for years makes it imperative that ratios and stable relationships are considered together.

We endorse a requirement that centres report on how they are promoting responsive relationships, because secure and responsive relationships must be at the heart of teacher practice and centre operations and incentivised in the Plan. The current group size regulations do not support teachers to have quality interactions with small children day to day. Some services transition children through age-specific groups, with resulting changes in key relationships. Children with challenging behaviours or who are at risk of language delay are more likely to be lost in large groups. A licenced service with 150 children often means services move teachers from room to room to cater for roster management, which in turn limits stable relationships. Teachers and children are constantly interrupted and they cannot have sustained interactions. We would like to see group size regulations being more attuned to real life in families, with a mix of children of different ages, so children can relate to older children through tuakana-teina relationships.

1:3 Incentivise for 100% training and regulate for 80% trained in teacher led centres: While a competent and skilled workforce is important, we are concerned that a 100% training requirement may have the unintended consequence of having a less diverse workforce. Recent changes in IELTS requirements for example have resulted in Pasifika teachers being shut out of opportunities to work in bilingual/immersion environments.

We would like more flexibility in the training system. Two strategies are worth considering:

- A robust on-the-job training system that starts with a fully funded ECE pre-employment certified short course with a strong focus on core child development and early language. New staff from diverse communities (hopefully many would be bilingual) would then have a base knowledge to build on.
- Offer scaffolded training toward a Level 4 qualification through a meaningful lower level qualification. There is already a Certificate in Intergenerational Education Level 2 which would be an appropriate stepping stone.¹

To strengthen the sector's ability to provide the cultural and language environment where tamariki Māori thrive, we encourage a system-wide endeavour to recruit te reo Māori speakers, a system that perceives bilingualism as a highly valued skill.

1.4 Develop advice on group size, physical environment: A key part of language acquisition is talk-mediated play in a whole variety of settings and contexts, both indoor and out. We

¹ Footnote: The Certificate in Intergenerational Education Level 2 maps to the NQF Certificate in Foundation Studies Level 2. It is delivered as Whānau Ara Mua, an intergenerational family literacy course owned by the Solomon Group (part of the Aspire 2 Group). Whānau Ara Mua (WAM) was developed and owned by COMET for 15 years. WAM is designed for parents with low-level literacy; it incorporates child development, literacy and numeracy support for parents and Parent and Child Time Together. WAM has been a pathway toward ECE teaching for many Pasifika parents in Auckland <https://www.solomongroup.co.nz/education-services/whānau/>

endorse a move toward a 5sqm space allowance so children have room to play. We agree on the importance of quiet spaces and environment that provides for 1:1 interaction as well as small groups, restful environments (particularly challenging in centres with large numbers), access to natural environments and a rich curriculum.

Experiences that expand children's knowledge and understanding of the wider world are critical for expanding children's language. Some centres in low-income communities are unable to fund experiences such as bus rides and pets. Excursion regulations are overly onerous (toilets, food spaces etc) so that children don't get to have meaningful experiences out of the centre - local reserves and public spaces, forest school type environments, wilderness. We advocate more flexibility in the system so a centre can easily use community members to provide support for trips outside and away.

In 2020, the NZ curriculum goes digital. National guidelines on the use of devices by and with children under 3 would be useful. Children develop their early language and communication skills through responsive interactions with adults who are responding to communication by the child. Devices do not wire up children's brains and do not provide optimal learning, yet children are increasingly exposed to devices and screens.

1.5 *Gazette Te Whāriki:* We endorse this recommendation. The Curriculum is sound. The most useful emphasis now is to support teacher practice and Te Whāriki implementation.

1.6 *Stop low quality services:* We strongly endorse the call for closing and restricting expansion of low-quality services. ERO reports have made it clear that almost half of existing services already find it challenging to provide stimulating language-rich environments for children. The system needs to have high expectations and quality practice in all services, so all children experience language-rich ECE services.

1.7 *Increased monitoring of services:* We advocate for a nationally mandated language environment audit tool that would help make visible what services are doing to develop early language. Talking Matters would bring insights from our wide experience with services to a partnership with the Ministry of Education. Audit models exist, see, for example, the Every Child a Talker approach <https://www.foundationyears.org.uk/2011/10/every-child-a-talker-guidance-for-early-language-lead-practitioners/> and the REAL tools developed by Professor Cathy Nutbrown

The current system is a long way from responding to the needs of Tamariki Māori. Kaitiakitanga of Māori language sits with Iwi. Iwi boards can play an influential role, partnering with ERO and others to ensure language rich environments exist and sustain Te Reo so tamariki Māori can thrive.

Goal 2: Timely access to resources

2.1 *Ensure equity funding:* Equity starts if and when whānau have what they need for children to thrive when a new-born arrives. Then, when very small babies arrive at ECE services, ideally their families would encounter a service that recognises how important it is that the first year of life is optimal for the baby emotionally, cognitively, linguistically and socially and is able to connect and support families to provide that. We advocate for employment policies, income support and parental leave that enable babies to be with families for as long as possible.

ECE and family services as well as schools report a substantive increase in children with challenging behaviours including low executive functioning behaviours, and language delays. Waiting lists for support services are long. Many children at risk of language delays and challenges will not meet specialised funding criteria yet they are experiencing trauma

and stress. There is a need for evidence-based strategies that build language and socio-emotional capability to be introduced at scale into ECE services across the country.

Psychologist Bessel van der Kolk advocates for programmes with more than one dimension:

- Mind. Ensuring children have the socio-emotional language to explain, connect and describe their feelings. ENGAGE and Play 30, the two programmes being trialled in New Zealand by Methodist Mission South are local examples. A recent study of ENGAGE has just found the structured play environment was as effective as Triple P for tackling parent-reported preschool behaviour problems <https://rdcu.be/bpwHa>
- Brain. ‘Rewiring’ the brain so it understands danger has passed and can live in the reality of the present. Examples include providing a safe predictable environment, caring relationships, rhythm in singing/music, drama and dance, yoga and martial arts, all of which focus on self-control.
- Body. Physical self-awareness, strengthening the body’s system for regulating arousal e.g. breathing and body awareness to mitigate flight/fight/freeze as seen in mindfulness, yoga, kapa haka, indigenous dance and arts.
- Spirit. Taha wairua - meaning and purpose in life, and personal identity and self-awareness e.g. whakapapa, religion/ models for looking at the world.

We clearly need more SLT expertise, more roles for providing advice into the ECE sector and a larger pipeline of SLT students. In addition to specialist services, centres want access to informal advice - ‘What if/ How might I, can I just chat about this child...’ advice that builds teachers’ capability to provide a richer language environment for many children. Both the ministry’s Oral Language and Literacy Initiative (OLLI) and Talking Matters have found that ECE teachers need extra information and skills relating to early language development.

2.2 Co-construct progress tools to support learning and wellbeing: Yes, we endorse this approach providing tools are collaboratively developed, particularly with Māori and Pasifika whānau/aiga and services.

2.3 Expand ECE services that facilitate wrap around social services: Yes, we strongly endorse the need to better increase access to health services through ECE services. But the complexity of achieving this has to be recognised. COMET and Talking Matters are part of the Tamaki Early Years Hub planning group and the process has taken years. Services have to do extensive investigation themselves (with frequent planning hold-ups) and may be challenging to fund long term (the Victory School and Great Potential Hubs, for example).

Hubs will not be a system response when we have 4,000+ ECE centres. The already proven network of Health Promoting Schools could be expanded to include ECEs because early language is a child health and development issue for very young children before it’s an education issue.

Hubs require meaningful collaboration between services. Successful cross-sector collaboration requires a backbone function and stable long-term funding. [The Achieving @ Waitakere](#) is a successful collective impact initiative in west Auckland with an independent backbone. A@W methodology is now being applied in the local Kāhui Ako, which has a number of ECEs in it.

Talking Matters is exploring the effectiveness and impact of an early language-focused hub, created when a school, co-located kindergarten and HIPPO programme collaborate to increase the language children experience. Early insights suggest this is a workable and powerful model.

Goal 3: Investing in our workforce

3.2 Strengthen Initial Teacher Education: Given the foundational nature of early language in children's development and wellbeing, its place in ITE needs to be strengthened:

- Teachers need to understand the importance of early communication for life and more about the theory of language acquisition, for both monolingual and multilingual children. Knowledge of early language development is highly variable, which is unsatisfactory for such a foundational concept. We understand that an ECE teacher may experience 40 hours of specific language/communications-related course work in a 3-year degree, while language and communication will be implied in other subjects. This is insufficient to prepare teachers to deal with the diversity of languages and cultures they will now experience in our classrooms.
- Our system needs to have more explicit support for bilingual and second language learners and for their teachers. There are cognitive, social and linguistic advantages for children learning in more than one language, so children and our system would benefit if we encouraged families to raise their children as dual language learners. We need a system that encourages more bi/multilingual services - and ensures they are resourced to achieve quality. Bilingual babies have bigger brains!
- We encourage providers of pre-service education to offer combined courses where SLTs and ECE teachers build a common basic understanding of language development.

3.3 Improve PLD: Language and communication- focused PLD is a particularly important part of the training needs of the sector. Professional development must be encouraged and be accessible, affordable and high quality. Teachers need more exposure to the technical skills of teaching language and communication (in initial teacher education as well as PLD):

- responsive interaction and eye contact, vocabulary building, listening, the practice of reading a story, questioning, the practices needed for working with children who are learning to communicate in more than one language.
- a key part of all teachers' jobs is sharing high quality information about language learning with families, particularly the benefits of children retaining home language and culture. Teachers need skills in having sensitive conversations with whānau about children's development
- The sector needs more modelling of effective teacher practice on the job.
- Ongoing and systematic training, not one-off sessions.

Opportunities for PLD in early language should be readily available across the country. Release time is required for teachers to have opportunities to think deeply, with costs. Team meetings are held late at night after long and tiring days working with children and families. Access to relievers is a challenge - so cost is a barrier. The current private model of professional development means that many teachers are being offered low quality PLD that is insufficiently focused on teacher practice and teaching and learning - a private business may appear to be providing training, but it may be focused on marketing of the business and not about teacher practice and knowledge.

- PLD provider capability also has to be maintained and grown. PLD providers need opportunities to learn and grow their skill base.
- We need to grow a new generation of early language leaders. To get the importance of early language on centres' radars, we advocate for a network of Early Language Champions, one in every centre, a senior practitioner with strong knowledge and skills.
- Talking Matters would be keen to collaborate with the Ministry on at-scale solutions: For example, a widely available short module on early language acquisition in very small children, 'Talking Matters 101'.
- Community early language initiatives supported by the Ministry of Education need to be funded to include a realistic timeframe for transition to community ownership and

sustainability. To test their efficacy, community initiatives need longer time frames for post-programme evaluations so providers can see the long-term impacts of the work.

3.4 Teacher workforce strategy

No comment

Goal 4: Provision that is valued, sufficient and diverse

No comment

Goal 5: Early Learning system continues to innovate, learn and improve

5.1 Innovation hubs: Hubs may be an effective strategy if there is adequate funding for sustained periods (5 years minimum) and strategies for dissemination of insights right at the start.

5.2 Support collaboration with other services: It has been challenging to get early language set as an achievement challenge in Communities of Learning. ECEs are hardly integrating into the model. Yet children's oral language capability is key to success in literacy and learning throughout the curriculum. Talking Matters recommends that Kāhui Ako are encouraged to focus on oral language for enriching literacy (both reading and writing).

Well Child providers Plunket play a critical role in promoting early language within broader child development. Where Plunket is not able to support families, Tamariki Ora providers are picking up the overflow of whānau whose needs are not being met. Tamariki Ora providers are extremely stretched and there needs to be more resources for health providers that are visiting in homes.

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