

DI NAILON & KIM BESWICK

CHANGES IN POLICY RELATED TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN AUSTRALIA: THE JOURNEY TOWARDS PEDAGOGICAL LEADERSHIP

This chapter provides an overview and commentary on two decades of policy changes in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Australia that led to a National Quality Framework (NQF) for ECEC services for children from birth to five years (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009a). It can be argued that the direction of the policy changes has meant that educators in these services have been increasingly asked to adopt pedagogical leadership skills and practices. Highlighting the recent shifts and influences on ECEC policy in Australia provides a context for future research into the development of pedagogical leadership by educators working in ECEC services. For the purposes of this chapter ECEC relates to formal, non-parental, education and care arrangements available to children before they commence formal schooling. While the nomenclature may be different in the various States and Territories the term ECEC broadly includes services such as long day care (centre based and home-based), and pre-school (Brennan, 2008), offered in a range of locations.

The provision of education and care for young children in Australia is big business for governments and providers. A 5 year snapshot to 2009 outlined in a Report by the Office of Early Childhood Education and Child Care (OECECC) “State of Child Care in Australia” highlighted the growth of investment, accessibility and utilisation rates in the sector (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2010b). The OECECC Report, based on administrative and survey data from DEEWR, the Productivity Commission and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), noted that early childhood education and care funding had more than doubled during those years, up from \$1.7b in 2004/5 to \$3.7b in 2008/9 (DEEWR, 2010b). Much of this funding was used to offset service fees for eligible families. By the September quarter of 2009 around 500,000 children from birth to 5 years were in approved care across Australia with families paying on average \$60.80 per day and \$287.00 per week for long day care (DEEWR, 2010b). The magnitude of the overall investment by individual families and governments keeps ECEC service provision high on the nation’s economic, social and political agendas. Some might say that recent policy changes which have resulted in a coherent national approach to funding and service provision could have been forecast on economic

grounds alone. There is, however, more to the story of the direction of ECEC policy changes that have occurred in recent times. While the changes have responded to the need for accountability in government spending, they have also been informed by policy outcomes from previous decades and from research that has centred on young children's development and learning. It is these influences that have impacted most on educators' practice as pedagogical leaders. The remainder of this chapter describes policy influences and changes in Australia leading up to the introduction of the NQF, and the resultant press for educators to see themselves as pedagogical leaders who adopt an active role in promoting their practice "especially those aspects that involve building and nurturing relationships, curriculum decision-making, teaching and learning" (DEEWR, 2010a, p. 6).

ECEC POLICY IN AUSTRALIA: LANDMARKS OF CHANGE

All three levels of government in Australia, federal, state/territory and local, have been involved in the provision of ECEC services for almost half a century - providing funding and regulating sites and practice. Over time, administrative responsibilities of each of the levels of government have been re-arranged, or changed, as policies were developed and agreements reached. Periods of policy change and influence on these changes have been highlighted elsewhere using lenses such as 'the rise of quality' (Logan, Press & Sumsion, 2012, p. 4), or 'the mixed economy of child care' (Brennan, 2007, p. 214). Our tracing of ECEC policy agendas that, in part, led to a focus on pedagogical leadership reflects intentions similar to those outlined in Logan et al., and McLachlan (2011) who noted the importance of reflecting on history to address current concerns. Such reflection also provides a necessary basis for future research in the area.

Policies for Parent Workforce Participation

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Australian federal and state governments developed parallel ECEC systems and responsibilities (MacDonald, 2002). During that time operational grants were provided by the Federal Government to child care centres to cover staffing costs according to prescribed formulas, and linked funding to priority of access to children of working parents. The decision by the conservative Liberal/National Coalition in 1996 to change funding arrangements marked the beginning of a new era of assisting families rather than funding ECEC services directly (Harris, 2007). Much of the Federal ECEC funding focus was on increasing parents' workforce participation. By undertaking this move, Cass and Brennan (2003) note that operational subsidies for services were significantly reduced, and eligibility for fee assistance through Child Care Assistance and the Child Care Rebate was tightened and combined with a Family Tax Initiative. In 2000, the Child Care Benefit was introduced, replacing Child Care Assistance and the Child Care Rebate (Brennan, 2008). According to Brennan, the Child Care Benefit provided a

higher level of support to more families and increased the hours of care that could be claimed. The Child Care Benefit, Brennan added, targeted parents who were employed, studying or seeking employment.

Australia's Quality Agenda: Moving Toward a Focus on ECEC Practice

From 1993 the Federal Government required that long day care centres operating under the Child Care Program participate in a quality assurance process if families using the centre were to be eligible for fee assistance (Press & Hayes, 2000 p. 30). Press and Hayes noted that licensing, and health and safety continued to be the province of state and local jurisdictions, while the following structures were established to enact federal quality related policy directions:

- The National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) was charged with overseeing the quality improvement and accreditation process for long day care.
- Support staff were employed by the Commonwealth to provide advice to long day care centres on accreditation matters and to coordinate the accreditation system.

Brennan (2008) confirmed the growing influence of the federal government at that time. The NCAC was an incorporated association, however, its chairperson and members were appointed by the Federal minister responsible for children's services (Brennan, 2008). The child care quality assurance system introduced as a "standard of quality beyond the minimum requirements described by licensing regulations" (NCAC, 2006, p. 4). Having a "beyond minimum" standard of care meant that for the first time the significant role of educators as curriculum decision-makers was alluded to in policy. Under the quality agenda the need for upgrading educator skills and knowledge became a priority for services attempting to meet the 52 high quality standards established under the Quality Improvement and Assurance System (QIAS). Australia was described in a report to the Organisation for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD) by Press and Hayes (2000) as "unique in having a national, government supported, accreditation system for its long day care centres that is directly tied to the provision of funding, with over 98% of centres participating" (p. 39). The QIAS focused primarily upon the determining components of quality, and at the time of writing their report, Press and Hayes commented that the QIAS was under review. They noted that although the QIAS process had been widely supported there had been a number of concerns raised by service providers and the community. The concerns described by Press and Hayes focused on the consistency of the application of QIAS processes and the lack of penalties applied to services failing to achieve accreditation or failing to participate in the system.

The Child Care Advisory Council [CCAC] was charged with the task of conducting the review. Solutions were to "be within current funding arrangements where possible and be supported by a cost effectiveness analysis, exploring the impact on small business and on the Commonwealth" (Press & Hayes, 2000 p. 40) According to Press and Hayes, the Council consulted extensively during the course

of the review with the consultations showing strong support for the QIAS, and a widespread desire to maintain a high level of quality in child care centres, but also the need to make the process less complex, less time consuming and better coordinated with state licensing provisions. The Council's final recommendations, according to Press and Hayes aimed at streamlining and simplifying QIAS administrative requirements and ensuring greater validity and consistency in the accreditation process.

Press and Hayes (2000) noted that from 1 July 2000 early childhood policy would be broadened to fund eligible families in a wider range of family support services. The Family Assistance Act 1999 partially replaced the Child Care Act and through its Child Care Program was concerned with policy and funding in relation to long day care services (including family day care); multifunctional services and multifunctional Aboriginal services; some occasional care centres; and outside school hours care. This change in policy and funding was described by Press and Hayes as having other than workforce ideals by tagging funding to quality of care provided to children. In addition, there was a shift towards upgrading child care practice. Federal funding was made available for the provision of support, advice and training to the staff and management of services under the Child Care Program (Press & Hayes, 2000).

The new decade saw the responsibilities of the NCAC expanded to include family day care (2001) and outside school hours' care (2003) (NCAC, 2006, pp. 3-4), and in turn focus on the practices of educators working in these services. Based on educator feedback from the review of the accreditation system, the QIAS was streamlined in January 2002 to 10 overarching Quality Areas and 35 Principles. A standard 2.5 year accreditation was introduced at that time. While these changes made some differences it became evident that the quality process required further streamlining and educators required more assistance balancing their educational and care roles and complying with the QIAS system. A QIAS Source Book, and Quality Practices Guide were introduced in 2005 to provide additional information about practices that would inform the QIAS process. The quality standards were reduced from 10 to 7 standards. The first accreditation decisions were made under the 7 re-classified standards in July 2006. Further changes to the Child Care Quality Accreditation System (CCQAS) in 2006 included the introduction of unannounced validation visits, spot check visits between self-study reports, the employment of non-peer validators by NCAC, and the intended development of a more integrated CCQAS to promote consistency and equity across child care sectors. It could be argued that lessons learned from the introduction and revisions to the QIAS informed the development of the 2010 National Quality Standard (NQS) and legislation pertaining to the Standard.

The Birth of Australia's Unified Children's Agenda

Brennan (2008) outlined a range of political and policy activity from 2000 that steered the course of ECEC policy and practice over the years from 2001 to 2010. The appointment of the CCAC in 1998 was pivotal not only to reviewing and

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initiating the changes to the quality assurance program, but according to Brennan, the future of ECEC in Australia. She noted that the CCAC was required by the Federal Government to investigate the likely child care needs of Australia after 2001 and to identify action which might need to be taken to ensure appropriate child care would be available (p. 39). The CCAC Report titled “Child Care: Beyond 2001”, advocated the reconceptualisation of child care to incorporate both care and education (CCAC, 2001). It recommended the creation of a National Children’s Agenda aimed at;

- recognising the importance of children’s early years,
- helping to retain and attract ECEC workers with skills,
- better ensuring equity of access to children’s services, and
- enhancing collaboration between levels of government and children’s services.

In 2003, the Federal Government released a consultation paper “Towards a National Agenda for Early Childhood.” A draft agenda was released in 2004 and the final agenda in May 2007 (Brennan, 2008). The Agenda established four action platforms: healthy families with young children; early learning and care; supporting families and parenting; and creating child-friendly communities (Australian Government, 2007, pp. 19-26). The early learning and care platform promoted parent involvement in early learning for children, consistency of ECEC systems across Australia, access to ECEC among the most disadvantaged children and the need for a skilled ECEC workforce (Australian Government, 2007, p. 21). Highlighting early learning was a landmark in Australian ECEC policy, and one that elevated informed pedagogical decision-making in debates that followed.

The federal election of November 2007 brought to power a Labor Government and into the new ministry a dedicated Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Childcare (Brennan, 2008). Brennan pointed out that prior to the election, the Australian Labor Party emphasised the need for education in children’s services policy at a federal level, declaring that “Federal Labor will put learning and development at the centre of Australia’s approach to early childhood education and care” (p. 30). Labor, she said, was committed to:

- developing universal pre-school for all four year old children for 15 hours per week;
- the creation of new long day care centres on the grounds of educational institutions (schools, universities and technical colleges);
- establishing new standards for ECEC quality; and
- increasing the number of qualified early childhood educators.

After the 2007 election, the scene was set for the Federal Government, under Labor, to work with the states to refine and create policies, agreements and a National Law to advance the national quality agenda beginning with the development of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). The EYLF was and continues to be the catalyst for developing ECEC educators’ skills, practices and knowledge and taking up pedagogical leadership roles in their services.

On January 1st, 2012 the National Quality Framework (NQF) for early childhood services in Australia became fully operational. It formed part of a suite of policies that responded to social and educational imperatives that informed the discourses, and agreements driving the National ECEC Reform Agenda agreed to by Federal and State governments between 2008 and 2011. During these years, a comprehensive set of policies and strategies were developed and agreed to by the Council of Australian Governments (see COAG, 2009b). They included:

- The Council of Australian Governments’ Early Childhood Commitment
- National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (NQF) including the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), and Framework for School Age Care
- Indigenous Children including Providing a Solid Start in School, Indigenous Preschools and Indigenous Early Childhood Development National Partnership
- Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)
- Early Learning and Care Centres
- Early Childhood Education – Universal Access including National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Universal Access Strategy
- Early Years Workforce Strategy (EYWS)
- Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY)

Overall, the policies, agreements and strategies listed above focus on much more than the nation’s economic business of ECEC related to parent workforce participation of earlier policies, or the later funding-associated links to quality care provision. The aims, guiding principles and rhetoric contained in the documents promote the need for ensuring that the nation’s children are well served. There appears to be some intent on the part of the Federal and State Governments to prioritise “learning” in ECEC services in order to meet the vision of the *Early Childhood Development Strategy* (ECDS) endorsed by COAG in July 2009. That is, “by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves, and for the nation” (COAG, 2009a, p. 4). The delivery of this lofty vision falls on ECEC services and the educators responsible for creating the relationships and the environments where young children can get their “best start”. To this end a plethora of professional development strategies have been created to support educators in their pedagogical leadership roles. The content and processes of the professional development initiatives introduced across the sector are based on the research that informed the policies themselves. Several key research influences are discussed in the following section.

RESEARCH INFLUENCES ON CURRENT ECEC POLICIES AND PRACTICE

Australian ECEC policy and practice has been heavily influenced by the internationalisation of the ECCE agenda based on the results of brain research (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2008; Schonkoff & Phillips,

2000), and early childhood economic investment research that has highlighted later pay-offs for money spent on children's health, well-being and learning in their early years (Galinsky, 2006). The 2001 CCAC Report made significant use of international studies to inform their recommendations to the Federal Government. Arguments have been made, however, for caution in the direct application of findings from elsewhere to ECEC in Australia. For example, Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) have raised several points about the need to examine in a critical way the perspectives used to evaluate quality and child outcomes in other countries. These authors prevail upon us to question results and problematise findings by relating our analyses to local social, political and philosophical contexts.

Significant research and evaluation has been conducted in Australia and elsewhere over the past decade specifically to advance the ECEC sector and inform policy. A meta-analysis by Gilliam and Zigler (2001) of ECEC evaluations conducted during the period 1990 to 2000 was used to inform a later social policy report by Brauner, Gordic, and Zigler (2004) for ECEC in the United States of America. These authors argued that an infrastructure that combines care and education must be built, either by placing educational components in the child care system, or by locating care into the educational system thereby achieving a more enduring approach. Brauner et al. also noted the need for reframing the relationship between care and education by changing the current terminology and constituency of child care and increasing parental and societal awareness of the components and benefits of quality care. They claimed that only when this happens, will the state of child care begin to improve. It would seem that Australian ECEC policy has attempted in part to reflect Brauner et al.'s recommendations. For example, the term "educators" is now used as a role descriptor for all staff working with children of all ages in ECEC services.

ECEC policies, practices, and research from elsewhere have played a major role in informing Australia's shift towards prioritising children's "best start". In its report to the Australian Federal Government, Boston Consulting Group's (2008) executive summary stated;

There is good evidence from trials and long term studies around the world that investment in basic early childhood services more than pays for itself ... Furthermore, evidence from other countries suggests that a more intensive integrated 'recipe' of services significantly enhances long-term prospects of more vulnerable children.

The Boston Consulting Group's report highlighted several strategies that other countries had adopted which have now been incorporated into Australian policy. Importantly, each of the strategies noted by the Boston Group had been informed by trials and long term studies. Strategies reported by the Group and adopted by the Federal Government include:

- Seeking greater integration of services (that is, from 2010 onwards, 39 integrated child and family centres will be built across Australia) (DEEWR, 2012)

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- Expanding early childhood services (note the target of 15 hours additional preschool for Australia’s children) (DEEWR, 2012)
- Developing national early childhood strategies (note the 2009 emergence of the NQF/EYLF in Australia)
- Consolidating early childhood services under one government department’s jurisdiction (note the COAG agreements that aim to consolidate arrangements between jurisdictions including the passing of legislation supporting the National Quality Agenda) (COAG, 2009b)

A number of debates about ECEC policy and practice in Australia have drawn upon successive reviews of OECD countries, where recommendations have been made for greater coherence in early childhood policies and services (Bennett, 2003; OECD, 2001, 2006). Press and Hayes (2000) wrote a summary of ECEC policy in Australia. Their “Report to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development” contributed to the OECD agenda so that when comparisons were made Australia’s performance (or lack thereof) could be highlighted by ECEC advocacy groups. The use of recommendations from OECD Reports was evident in the development of the NQF (see for example, Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority, 2008).

One consequence of regional variations in the delivery of early childhood education and care, according to Moore (2008), is that there is no guarantee of consistent outcomes for children across Australia. Moore argued for more consistent and coherent policies across early childhood sectors and greater cohesiveness and integration within and between services in order to achieve better quality programs and better outcomes for children. His argument is echoed by others (see also The Boston Consulting Group, 2008; Bennett, 2007; Doctors, Gebhard, Jones & Wat, 2008; Elliott, 2006; Press, 2008), and has had some impact on ECEC policy decision-making. What this has meant for ECEC educators across Australia is a commitment by governments at all levels to support, as well as measure through the NQF quality assurance process, their capacity to advocate for and to build nurturing relationships, curriculum decision-making, teaching and learning – that is their pedagogical leadership skills and knowledge (DEEWR, 2010a).

IN CONCLUSION: ECEC POLICY SHIFTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON PEDAGOGICAL LEADERSHIP

The impact of greater attention to the early years is evident in policy and practice. International research on the importance of the early childhood years to children’s future well-being and development has resulted in a children’s agenda. In Australia, information from such research has contributed to a number of reforms in areas concerned with the early years, and to a greater degree of interdepartmental collaboration and exchange. However, ECEC settings are complex. ECEC policy directions in Australia have aimed to provide increasingly comprehensive approaches to the provision of education and care (DEEWR, 2010b). Each of the state and federal agreements, the legislated quality requirements and the national curriculum

framework has taken pains to profile the complexity of children's lives. Initiatives in the ECEC reform agenda introduced in 2009 and fully operationalised on January 1, 2012, are intended to promote consistent early childhood practice in all ECEC settings. They are also aimed at breaking down the division between education and care by promoting the understanding that children's learning and development occurs in all contexts (DEEWR, 2010b).

The success of ECEC policy depends on how well ECEC services can enact and meet the intended policy outcomes. At the service level it requires pedagogical leadership. Current ECEC policies and practices in Australia have been based on a series of integrated reforms from past decades briefly described in this chapter. Tracing the history of policies and influences on ECEC policy-making and highlighting them here has provided some evidence of the need to understand the complexities underpinning the national reform agenda. Insights gained can provide a starting point for educators coming to terms with the National ECEC Reform Agenda, and for determining its success. In brief, ECEC policy informs pedagogical leadership in ECEC settings. Within the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) pedagogical leadership is related to educator's professional judgments based on their:

- professional knowledge and skills;
- knowledge of children, families and communities;
- awareness of how their beliefs and values impact on children's learning; and
- personal styles and past experiences (DEEWR, 2009, p. 11).

The EYLF is intended to guide professional conversations and embody the activity of pedagogical leadership. Well informed, reflective, and rigorous pedagogical leadership has the potential to fulfil much of the intended ECEC policy outcomes for Australia's children. How, and how well, this occurs will need to be the focus of future research, especially given the on-going debates (Edwards, 2007; Harcourt & Keen, 2012; Nutall & Edwards, 2007) about theories and evidence-based practices that contribute to individual and collective understandings about preferred pedagogies in ECEC.

Our position is that it is important to examine the progression of ECEC policies, research, debates and discourses that have led to, and informed, the current policy agenda. Insights gained provide a necessary a-priori step to developing pedagogical leadership in ECEC in response to the current National Quality Agenda for ECEC in Australia. This chapter has attempted to summarise two decades of ECEC policy changes and the rising focus on what educators do to make a difference in children's lives.

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