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Quality is
our middle
name

Learning
together:
Building
partnerships
from birth

Contemporary
issues in ECEC



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of quality



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ECEC in contemporary times

I recently asked an expert from one of our leading universities, what was the most important thing one could do to lift the quality of Early Childhood Education in Australia? He answered without equivocation, 'pay the teachers and carers more'. The response may seem simple, but at its heart is the complex matter of how we appropriately value the work of those who are entrusted with the care and education of precious and vulnerable children in their critical formative years.

My own education, in this space, has in part been informed by the work of Professor Jack Shonkoff M.D., the Director of the Centre for the Developing Child at Harvard University. A practicing paediatrician and renowned academic, Jack gave a number of presentations to the Victorian Government a few years ago which influenced government's thinking about how vital it is to invest in early learning. In Professor Shonkoff's own words:

We do this because society pays a huge price when children do not reach their potential, because half a century of policies and programs have not produced breakthrough outcomes, and because dramatic advances in science are ready to be used to achieve a promising future for every child.

The science to which he refers to is based on the knowledge of our brain architecture, which is profoundly affected by early experiences, especially traumatic events. Adverse childhood experiences can damage the brain's neural connections and this in turn can impact on learning, health and wellbeing into adulthood. On the one hand negative experiences can accumulate for children and disturb development, and on the other a positive and healthy environment lays the foundation for a resilient, happy and productive adult life.

For me, it was viewing the image of a scan of a child's brain that had experienced 'toxic stress' compared to that of a normal child's brain that made a profound impact. The damage to children in their early years has major consequences, not only for their own lives, but also for society as a whole as we are all diminished when others are not able to contribute in a positive and constructive way.

The good news is that the research shows that children can develop resilience even under the most challenging of circumstances. The most common ingredient for these children is having at least one stable and committed adult in their lives and that building coping skills can happen at any age.

All of this points to the need for us to all work much harder to continually improve the national accessibility and quality of programs for children in their early years and their parents, carers and educators. The 2009 Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) vision was that- 'All children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and the nation'. The National Reform Agenda has made some excellent progress in this regard, but there is always more work to be done to ensure that all children enjoy a positive early childhood which will, in turn, lead to increased social inclusion, human capital and productivity in Australia. This edition of the *Professional Educator* is a timely reminder of how important this task is.

**The Hon. Bronwyn Pike, MACE
ACE National President**

KAREN CURTIS

Quality is our middle name



Foreword by Rachel Hunter, former Chair for Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA).

My time as Chair of the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) has been professionally enriching and a leadership privilege. Over the past four years, I have worked with compassionate, committed and knowledgeable people who understand the importance of investment in quality early learning outcomes for children.

A nation's investment in quality early education and care benefits individual children, their families, their communities and the national interest.

For too long the debate about childcare has been captured by issues of access

and affordability. While these are critical considerations, no parent should feel they are compromising their child's future by leaving them in an environment which may be nurturing, but may lack the capability to stimulate and capitalise upon their child's inherent instinct to learn.

A child's brain develops at a faster rate in the years between birth to five years, than any other period in their lives. There is a strong body of evidence that quality early learning experiences promote healthy brain development, and establish social and emotional resilience—fundamentals for success as learners and citizens.

The National Quality Framework (NQF), introduced in Australia in 2012, provides a means of describing, assessing and improving quality in children's education and care. Importantly, the NQF enables a nationally consistent picture of quality outcomes in early learning. The data

which has emerged from the assessment of almost 12,000 services to date is important information for providers and educators in the children's education and care sector. However, the picture of learning in the early years is also vital for a broader population of educators—those who work with children and young people in their later schooling.

Education is a continuum. Research has demonstrated that improving learning and development outcomes for children in early education and care translates into improved performance in the early, middle and later years of schooling. Yet data also shows that the gains made in early learning can diminish over time in formal schooling. It behoves all of us as educators to strive to understand the reasons why, and to act to ensure that schooling is ready for children who love to learn.



Introduction

The recent publication of the Productivity Commission's report on government services (SCRGSP, 2016) resulted in a flurry of media stories about the standard of quality in early education and care services. As with most media coverage, there was a mix of good and, well ... less good. But from ACECQA's perspective, all of the coverage was cause for celebration. Why is ACECQA happy about news reports raising questions around the quality of education and care? Precisely, because the coverage is *speaking about quality*.

For far too long early education and care has been discussed primarily in terms of availability and affordability—too few available spaces affecting parents' ability to return to work or too costly, making it financially unviable to return to work. To see a shift in the focus from numbers and dollars to learning standards and educator qualifications, from headaches

for parents to head starts for children, is incredibly satisfying.

Satisfying, but certainly not grounds for complacency. There is still much to be achieved if every Australian child is to experience the kind of start in life that allows them to achieve their full potential, the start that governments had in mind when they signed up to the National Partnership Agreement in 2009 (COAG, 2009).

At the heart of the agreement is acknowledgment that early childhood is a critical time in human development. There is comprehensive international research that shows the experiences children have in the early years of life set dispositional, neurological and biological pathways that can have life-long impacts on health, learning and behaviour.

Further, a positive early childhood experience provides economic benefits not only to the individual, but also to society. It supports the learning and achievement necessary for the economic wellbeing of the broader community (PricewaterhouseCooper, 2011).

The argument for investing in education and care doesn't end there however. We also know that negative experiences in early childhood fundamentally undermine the building blocks on which later achievement relies (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

So, with a growing body of evidence highlighting how much there is to gain from maximising quality education and care from the earliest stages of a child's development, as well as research showing how much there is to lose if we don't give every child the best possible start, the case for reform in 2009 was strong.

Combine that with the increasing number of Australian children attending education and care services and associated increased public spending, and the argument for change was even more compelling.

Fast forward several years and as a nation we have made significant progress in improving the inputs to the sector. The introduction of the NQF in 2012 included national learning frameworks: *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* and *My*

Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia, the assessment and rating of services against established standards, higher qualification requirements for educators and improved educator to child ratios. For the first time in Australian history, the NQF replaced a fragmented state-based system of licensing and quality assurance arrangements with a single, cohesive national structure, merging nine regulatory and quality assurance systems into one.

The national reforms also put early education and care on the national agenda and started the conversation with parents, politicians and the broader community about this stage of children's lives. In the same way that society expects suitably qualified teachers in our schools, so too, many Australians are now beginning to understand the importance of employing specialists to nurture the development of our youngest citizens.

While there are still questions around the evidence base for some components of the NQF, including the Productivity Commission's report (Productivity Commission, 2015) which questioned the need for highly-qualified educators to work with children younger than three, those working in the sector know first-hand the difference that trained early childhood specialists can make on a child's learning and development. Recent research has found that high quality childhood settings for children aged birth to three protect against behavioural problems and increase academic skills (Mathers, *et al* 2014), and importantly, that the education level of educators working with infants and toddlers is a significant direct predictor of quality.

Yes, we need to make sure that our policy is evidence based, but we also need to show some courage in our convictions. How long do we want to stand on the sidelines watching and waiting for the research to incontrovertibly confirm what early studies and international and local experience is already telling us? If we want to prepare our children, and Australia, for a successful future, waiting for the longitudinal studies to confirm what we already intuitively know could see Australia fall behind other OECD countries.



The sector has embraced the NQF, recognising the importance of formalising the need for quality. With three-quarters of the nation's 15,000-plus services now rated, services are no longer unsure about the process and the remaining 5 per cent are keen to receive their quality rating.

Having necessarily focused on the inputs required to deliver the NQF, the next challenge is to examine the outcomes. We need to be able to show whether outcomes for children, families and Australia are improving as a result of the NQF. In short, whether it is delivering the quality that we know is required.

The OECD's *Starting Strong III* (2012) identifies five key levers as effective in encouraging quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and Australia has made substantial progress, particularly on the first four:

1. Setting out quality goals and regulations
2. Designing and implementing curriculum and standards
3. Improving qualifications, training and working conditions
4. Engaging families and communities
5. Advancing data collection, research and monitoring (OECD, 2012).

It's now time to turn our attentions to the final lever. There are five ratings under the National Quality Standard (NQS): 'Excellent'; 'Exceeding'; 'Meeting'; 'Working Towards'; and 'Significant Improvement Required'. State and Territory Authorities award all of the ratings except for the 'Excellent' rating, which is an additional, voluntary rating. In order to achieve this, services rated as Exceeding may apply to ACECQA to be rated as 'Excellent' against further criteria.

The assessment and rating data supplied to ACECQA shows 68 per cent of rated services are either 'Meeting' or 'Exceeding' the standard and 31 per cent are 'Working Towards' (ACECQA, 2015). These figures are in line with what was expected. The rating system was always meant to promote growth and continual improvement. If the standard

were set lower and every service achieved 'Meeting' from the very beginning, there may be little incentive to look for ways to improve quality or review practice.

Early data suggests this approach is working and that services do want to improve their practice. While it can only be considered indicative due to the very small and not necessarily random sample, of the fewer than 500 services that have been quality rated more than once, more than 60 per cent have improved their original quality rating. For example, around 200 services improved their quality rating from 'Working Towards' NQS to 'Meeting' NQS.

It's also worth recognising that while the aim is obviously for services to be rated as 'Meeting' or higher, a rating of 'Working Towards' doesn't necessarily mean that a service is failing. The benchmark is set high, requiring services to meet 58 elements and 18 standards across the seven quality areas. A rating of 'Working Towards' in just one standard means a service will receive an overall rating of 'Working Towards', resulting in many services only narrowly missing an overall rating of 'Meeting'. This is to say, data from the most recent NQF snapshot shows that of the services rated 'Working Towards', 51 per cent missed out on a rating of 'Meeting' by four standards or fewer. This is possibly something that isn't widely understood by parents and people outside the sector, and perhaps more education and awareness raising are needed in this regard.

In moving beyond the introduction of new standards and looking to see what outcomes the NQF is delivering, ACECQA will work with states and territories to develop an evaluation framework that sets agreed measures to determine whether the NQF is meeting its objectives, and in what ways.

Now that we have the means to identify high quality services, ACECQA can contribute to broader research which is examining whether children's educational and developmental outcomes are improved by attending a high quality service. This research has been ongoing in Europe for many years (Sylva, *et al.* 2004) and in Australia might include

measurement of improvements in the transition to school and whether children achieve better outcomes as indicated by the Australian Early Development Census and National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results.

Gaining a fuller understanding of the data provided by the initial ratings requires knowledge of the types of services these providers typically manage. For example, we know that 85 per cent of preschool/ kindergarten services are rated 'Meeting' or 'Exceeding' NQS compared with 65 per cent of long day care services and 61 per cent of outside school hours care services.

But we need to be familiar with the history of the sector to avoid drawing too many conclusions about what this data shows. Without detracting from the great work they do, the fact that kindergartens and preschools have a larger proportion of services 'Meeting' and 'Exceeding' NQS is unsurprising given their history. Most kindergartens and preschools have been employing early childhood teachers and delivering educational programs far longer than long day care or outside school hours care services. Educational Program and Practice - Quality Area 1 of the NQS, is the quality area that most often differentiates services between 'Working Towards' and 'Meeting'. Services often find it the most challenging but preschools and kindergartens have more experience in this area and this often translates to better overall quality rating results.

It should be noted that, in some jurisdictions, preschools and kindergartens are fully funded by State Government and this can also have an impact on their quality rating.

We can also see that 85 per cent of State/Territory and Local Government-managed services have been rated as 'Meeting' or 'Exceeding', compared with 60 per cent of private for-profit managed services.

To gain a fuller understanding of these percentages requires knowledge of the types of services these providers typically manage. State and Territory and Local Governments provide a high number of preschool and kindergarten services and

we've already discussed the historical reasons why these services are more likely to be 'Meeting' or 'Exceeding'.

Conversely, if you look at a breakdown of the types of services managed by private, for-profit providers, only one per cent of their services are kindergartens and preschools, with the majority offering long day care services. Before the introduction of the NQF, the dichotomy between education and care was more prevalent and because long day care services were typically funded to support workforce participation of families, fewer teachers were involved in the delivery of the educational program. So implementing the NQF required a bigger shift in practice for many long day care services.

At this stage of the NQF's implementation the link between providers and their service type is quite telling in relation to quality ratings and shows that while examining the data is important, the meaning we take from it is also crucial.

There is plenty to be gained from a transparent approach to identifying and understanding what quality looks like in early education and care. For example, the data could provide guidance for government provision of funding for training.

Recent economic modelling shows a net estimated benefit to the Australian economy by 2050 of up to \$10.3 billion from children participating in quality education and care. This would flow from growing Australia's GDP, improving workforce participation choices for parents, helping realise the full potential of Australian children and reducing the impact of disadvantage (PricewaterhouseCooper, 2014).

Looked at in these terms, it becomes clear that the NQF is a once in a generation opportunity to really make a difference in children's lives and to invest in Australia's future. Further to this, not only can we afford to make quality education and care a priority, but to do otherwise, will cost us dearly.

Karen Curtis is the Chief Executive Officer for Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), NSW.

Rachel Hunter is an ACE Board Member and chair of Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Board, Queensland.

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Social innovation through collective impact

MICHELLE LUCAS

George's smile broadened as he began to imagine his answer to my question. 'Superman,' he said with conviction. 'That's who I'll be when I grow up.' Maggie beside him laughed quietly. 'Not me. A doctor.' Tilaya cuddled her friend closely and whispered in agreement, 'Yes, a doctor.' Others among the gathering group of curious and enthusiastic five year olds spoke of their dreams to become policemen, teachers and nurses.

The reality for these young Indigenous children growing up in the geographical heart of our nation could well be vastly different. Throughout their development, the dreams and opportunities to become superheroes on any level will be tempered by the complexity of life in Alice Springs and Central Australia. This complexity, while allowing hope and inspiration to some, can also play out in Indigenous communities in particular through high incidents of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD), chronic illness and multiple streams of trauma. To achieve their aspirations, many children like George, Tilayla and Maggie, for example, may first have to overcome diminished oral language and cognitive development, social and emotional distress: the result of a family life marked by cyclical disadvantage.

Australia's remote Indigenous communities often provide an environment of exquisite natural beauty, of rich tradition and culture, of opportunity and, paradoxically, of complex social challenge. Across the generations, life for Indigenous children is often marked by deep and compounding levels of vulnerability and disadvantage. Despite the prosperity of our nation, within some of our remote Indigenous communities, up to 80 per cent of the early childhood population at age five experience levels of vulnerability (Department of Education and Training, 2016). Indeed, the recently released Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) 2015 (Department of Education and Training, 2016) report reveals that

Indigenous childhood developmental vulnerability rate nationwide still sits at 42 per cent. While globally, 76 per cent of Australia's indicators for children and youth wellbeing universally are in the middle or lowest level as compared with 34 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2013); critically our Indigenous children remain heavily over-represented within these categories of vulnerability and disadvantage.

Despite our best intentions and the application of billions of dollars of funds into the space annually, our efforts have been hampered by challenges including geographical displacement; transience; limited levels of community engagement; multiple, yet disconnected programs; language barriers both ways; and unilateral policy responses. This has resulted in only isolated impact over decades. Our best efforts in the Indigenous early childhood space have been unable to generate positive, sustainable outcomes for the majority of our young children. This is unacceptable.

In response to this crisis, across Australia, communities are beginning to dramatically reorganise themselves to give these young children a better chance in learning and in life. It now seems unlikely that a single program, unilaterally applied, will provide the solution to Indigenous childhood disadvantage.



It is, in fact, clear that no single agency alone has created this social challenge for our Indigenous children and, as a consequence, it is equally clear that we cannot work in isolation to unlock the disadvantage.

Over the past couple of years, a burning platform for change has emerged from amongst Australia's Indigenous communities, often emanating from within the community, the regional school or the State and Territory Departments of Education, see for example the Pre-birth to 4 Year Old Collective Impact initiative in Central Australia/Bagot Community Collective Impact initiative based in Darwin. As a nation, we are aware of the 7:1 return on investment in relation to investment in early childhood education universally (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2013). For some time, we have also acknowledged John Hattie's (Hattie, 2008) observation that more than two thirds of the influence and impact on a child's development sits beyond the school gates. And while we have known this for years, the situation now demands us to act on this knowledge with purpose.

Thus, there is an emerging interest in the power of collective engagement to address the challenge. This response is of course also reflected in policy nationally and internationally, where collaborative policy and approaches which link community engagement and place-centred solutions are increasingly seen as the way forward. In Australia currently, funders are aligning behind a collective approach and innovation labs are emerging with significant philanthropic, government and corporate funding, critically providing the runway we need to do the work. Social investment is currently favouring a 'joined-up' approach (Opportunity Child, 2016). But the work involved in tackling complexity requires us all to lead differently, to behave differently, to learn differently and to connect differently. The time is right to engage in actions deeper than passive networking and professionally stimulating learning programs as an end in themselves.

In a cross-sectoral and collective approach to Aboriginal Early Childhood Education and Care (AECCE) we need

to recognise the place of community and urgently mobilise capability, capacity and understanding amongst our families and carers. We need to engage with children and families ever-earlier and to simultaneously integrate our energies across the life course of our youngest Australians, linking our efforts from cradle to career. We know that without this connected, whole-of-life-course response, our efforts will remain disconnected rather than cumulative (Heckman, 2006). We need to take a long-term, whole of population-level view. We need to reform system delivery and to challenge policy to enable place-centred, relevant and culturally appropriate solutions. This work is urgent and our efforts now need to be commensurate with the scale of the challenge.

The timing for a collective response to Indigenous early childhood disadvantage is right

Collective Impact (Kania and Kramer 2011) specifically is increasingly being offered as a way forward to addressing early childhood disadvantage and, through early case studies is unfolding as appropriate, sensitive and relevant in Indigenous communities.

Collective Impact is an approach which allows the creation of place-centred solutions on a significant scale. Collective Impact speaks to cross-sectoral engagement beyond joint venture. It enables population level change, policy shift and systems reform using the local context and voice of community to ensure sustainable, intergenerational shift. The framework involves unwavering commitment to six key elements:

- community engagement and capability-building at the centre
- the adaptive leadership of a 'neutral backbone' as a resource to focus on strategy, create the 'ethical, safe space' for cross-sectoral and community participation, unlock funding, maintain high levels of accountability and build equity across the leadership table
- constant communication
- alignment through a common agenda

- a shared measurement system and supporting culture for feedback, data literacy and continuous improvement
- mutually reinforcing activities.

In Collective Impact, the highest levels of government and leaders across sectors engage deeply with the community to better understand each other, to build solutions together and to influence policy and shift systems to improve quality of life at population level. This work requires extensive participation and capability-building across all sectors and deep within community.

So, where and how is this work unfolding across our Indigenous communities? As a response to the compelling data around the quality of life conditions for young children in Central Australia, an initiative in Alice Springs is leading the way.

In this town of polarities, physically cradled by the magnificent MacDonnell Ranges, a core group of champions, leaders and change agents have been working together differently since 2013.

Since its establishment, the Pre-birth to 4 Year Old Collective Impact initiative has resulted in strong project outputs and early credible signs of success for young Indigenous and non-Indigenous children as the collective creates a shared vision and integrates activities with purpose. Participants have been asked to leave their assumptions behind, build a new and common understanding, pool resourcing and reshape the 'system' around our young children.

The community and agencies align behind a simple, clear aspiration: 'Learning and living are one'. Together, the members of the initiative hold close a collective philosophy.

- Start ever-earlier
- Highlight the children's story
- Use data and evidence to inform direction
- Engage our communities
- Create change together across generations
- Strengthen our practice
- Inform systems and policies



And the aligned approach is working. With progress against common performance measures including the development of an evidence-based Collective Plan and shared measurement system across sectors to improve outcomes for young children pre-birth to four years of age. These have been informed by community, government, service delivery specialists and other experts in the field.

A demonstration site has been established, allowing the implementation of the philosophy and approach. In time, the central school aims to grow into a fully integrated service delivery hub responsive to community requirements. A co-located preschool, therapeutic services and a community centre are already in place.

Further, a major community co-design forum is scheduled to develop a master plan of the broad environment around and within the demonstration site. Community will inform and own the relationships, services and opportunities in the broader community space. And finally, there has been purposeful interrogation, streamlining and integration of programs and interventions across the early years in the region.

Indeed, early outcomes are emerging as the effort proceeds:

- attainment outcomes and two-year growth for the demonstration Primary School in Literacy and Numeracy have increased at a rate three times higher than the expected improvement rate
- parental engagement and participation has increased exponentially
- attendance figures have increased from 75 per cent to 93.7 per cent. *(Northern Territory Review 2015).*

This progress is worthy of attention and is increasingly mirrored in Indigenous communities in which agencies, sectors and families are taking the time to learn how to work together differently.

Our Australian context cannot accept the growing gap between our most disadvantaged areas compared with the least disadvantaged areas. Australia needs a courageous, innovative and fresh approach. We need to bring people, communities and organisations together to collectively create a new system that works for our youngest Indigenous people. This work will be demanding and will require the engagement of reflective practitioners and policy makers who are prepared to leave assumptions behind, to interrogate long-held commitments to programs, policies and delivery methods and to work to evidence-based solutions described together. Most importantly, we need to do all of this with the greatest of urgency.

Michelle Lucas is the Executive Director of Opportunity Child.

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Reflections on the National Reform Agenda for ECEC and leadership

JANE PAGE & NICOLE PILSWORTH



What has been achieved and where to now?

The election of the Rudd Federal Labor Government in 2007 heralded a new era for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Australia. As part of the education revolution, the Labor Government designed, legislated and implemented an ambitious National Reform Agenda that included improving child learning and development, strengthening system effectiveness,

advancing the quality of a range of ECEC services and expanding a qualified early childhood workforce.

Nine years on, Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments have achieved a whole-of-country approach on how ECEC services are governed, legislated and regulated. They have put in place mechanisms to monitor the impact of their reforms over time and revised policy to ensure greater accountability and transparency.

As a result of the renewed national focus on reforming ECEC, early childhood educators working across a range of early childhood services have experienced changes to the systems, services, policies, frameworks, and programs that shape and influence their work with young children and families.

Almost a decade on from this key activity, it is timely to reflect on the impact of the National Reform Agenda, the progress made since 2007 and the challenges



and possibilities that exist for strengthening Australian ECEC in the future. In the following section there will be a focus on the national reform initiatives directed towards improving young children's learning and development and argue the importance of building Australian evidence on the lived experiences of enacting reform across diverse ECEC services into the future.

Reforming Australian ECEC

The National Reform Agenda for Australian ECEC aimed to improve, strengthen and develop nationally consistent, equitable, and high quality early childhood systems, services and programs. The outcome was a coordinated set of reform initiatives agreed to by Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments in the form of a National Early Childhood Development Strategy - *Investing in the Early Years* (COAG, 2009a). Underpinning this strategy was the vision '... that by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation' (COAG, 2009a: 4). Improving young children's learning and development outcomes was a central focus of this vision.

In order to achieve the wide-ranging reforms outlined in the National Early Childhood Development Strategy, the Commonwealth Government coordinated a mutually agreed agenda, approach and implementation strategy with the eight states and territories. The result of this focus included the development of a whole-of-country policy framework - National Quality Framework (NQF) for ECEC that detailed a set of mechanisms and actions for advancing young children's learning, development and health outcomes (COAG, 2009b). NQF was considered an important vehicle for lifting quality, addressing inequality and driving continuous improvement across a range of ECEC services including family day care, centre based long day care, kindergarten and outside school hours care services.

The NQF learning agenda was informed by a range of research evidence that confirmed the importance of early childhood experiences, detailed the features of early educational programs that positively impact on young children's learning and development and outlined the structural (qualifications, ratios, standards) and process elements (relationships and adult-child interactions) that effectively impact on the quality of support offered to young children. As a result, the NQF initiatives included more focused attention on the process elements of quality and early

childhood educators and were positioned as central to the building a continuous learning culture. This, in turn, shaped a suite of changes and reform initiatives that were embedded in the NQF and included the first National Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for children from birth to five years of age that outlined child outcomes, pedagogical principles and practices to support children's learning; a legal and governance system composed of National Law and National Regulations to monitor the quality of ECEC services; a National Quality Standard that contained benchmarks for quality improvement in ECEC services and a ratings system that provided information on quality and child outcomes within services (Cloney, Page, Tayler & Church, 2013). These interlocking initiatives brought a unity of purpose and coherence to a hitherto complex and fragmented system of standards, regulation and accreditation.

Positioning educational leadership in the national learning agenda

A renewed focus on process quality resulted in a greater emphasis on building the professionalism and capacity of the early childhood workforce (Hadley, Waniganayake & Shepherd, 2015). Several NQF initiatives were put in place to achieve this goal. These included setting out actions and targets for expanding a qualified early childhood workforce and appointing educational leaders in every ECEC service to build the capacity of educators to improve children's learning and development outcomes. The expectation to appoint a leader was embedded in the National Law and stipulated in the Education and Care Services National Regulations (2011) and the importance of leadership was acknowledged in the NQF, especially Quality Area 7 of the National Quality Standard (MCEECDYA, 2010, Parliament of Victoria, 2010, ACECQA, 2011).

In the Australian learning reform context the appointment of an educational leader in every setting was seen as a critical means of driving the continuous improvement process and building high quality ECEC programs. The framing of



▶ leadership in the NQF recognises that effective leadership is a relational process that builds a positive organisational culture and a professional learning community where all early childhood educators share experiences and expertise and develop, in collaboration with each other, the knowledge, skills and capabilities that enable them to offer quality learning experiences for young children and their families. Educational leaders play an integral role in leading this process. They are expected to share knowledge and provide feedback to educators on the effectiveness of their educational programs and pedagogical practices, set clear expectations and goals for teaching and learning and align this work to the local community and service context (ACECQA, 2011). Heikka & Waniganayake (2011) and Siraj-Blatchford & Manni (2006) argue that establishing and reinforcing shared beliefs and developing a shared vision for young children's learning is central to fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

While educational leadership is a key component of the NQF, there is a lack of clarity or consistency across the sector as to how educational leaders enact their role, the distribution of power and authority that is associated with the designated role of educational leader and what support they receive and need to lead learning in their services. A growing number of small-scale studies are emerging that identify the barriers and challenges for educational leaders within the Australian ECEC context. These studies identify factors such as a lack of authority, despite being in a designated role of leadership, a lack of time to work directly with other educators, a lack of clarity around their role and perceived limited support from management as barriers that limit the effectiveness of strategies used by educational leaders (Rouse & Spradbury, 2015). Others argue that the culture of an ECEC setting will influence the educational leader and their ability to initiate and implement change (Fleet, Soper, Semann & Madden,

2015; Grarock & Morrissey, 2013). There is currently limited Australian evidence on the techniques and strategies that educational leaders are using to influence educators' capacity to advance children's learning outcomes; what strategies educators feel enhance their ability to support young children's learning and development; and what are the lived experiences of early childhood educators in building capacity across a broad range of contexts.

Steering large-scale reform is a complex process and requires government to continuously monitor, assess and respond to the impact and success of their reforms in order to address gaps and build a robust Australian evidence base that will support plans for strengthening Australian ECEC in the future (COAG, 2009). Reviews, a national inquiry, a baseline evaluation of the EYLF, focus groups, community consultation, expert panels, ACECQA snapshots of assessment and quality ratings are all examples of the ways government has supported continuing reform activity (ACECQA, 2015, Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2014, Deloitte Access Economics, 2014, DEWR, 2011, Fleer, Shah & Peters, 2011). For reform to be successful, however, further attention needs to be paid to the lived experiences of early childhood educators' implementation of the reform initiatives across a range of contexts. Researchers need to focus further on capturing early childhood educators' perspectives on the challenges and possibilities that arise for them as they re-align their practices with the expectations embedded in a range of reforms and explore what supports them to navigate these processes as they continue to roll out into the future.

When policy makers, researchers and educators engage with these issues, they will be in a stronger position to develop future policy initiatives that build on past achievements in a systematic and purposeful way and align with the lived reality of teachers, children and families in Australian ECEC.

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Learning together: Building partnerships from birth



JANE LEMON

It is often said that parents are children's first teachers. Certainly they are children's first and most enduring influences. Children learn and develop within the context of their family. Across OECD countries at least there has long been an interest in engaging parents in early childhood and school settings. In many countries including Australia, Finland, Korea, Spain, Slovenia and Belgium, engaging or involving parents is included in curriculum, standards, or legislation. This is particularly so

for the early years. This involvement or engagement varies from the proportion of a governing board that must be parents through to the Australian requirement to 'form collaborative partnerships with parents and communities' (National Quality Standards). Most of the research on engaging families in their children's learning is focussed on school settings. However learning partnerships between families and educators can be developed from a child's earliest days.

There is a growing body of evidence to support the importance of the engagement of families in children's learning (Jeynes, 2005, 2007, 2012, Fan and Chen 2001). There is also evidence to suggest that the benefits of such engagement reach beyond academic outcomes to include social and emotional outcomes (Jeynes, 2012). Furthermore there is emerging and compelling evidence that voluntary engagement of parents is the most effective form (Jeynes, 2005, 2007, 2010). However for many parents there is a resistance, an uncertainty or a lack of confidence as to their role in engaging with their children's learning. For some it will be an extension of their own educational disconnection; for others it stems from their understanding of the roles of parents and teachers. So how can these barriers to learning partnerships be overcome?

Contemporary research, most notably from the Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) longitudinal study conducted in the UK, is pointing to the importance of the home learning environment in relation to outcomes for children (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2011). Unlike other risk factors for children's academic outcomes such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, poverty and mother's educational level of achievement, the home learning environment is one that can be positively impacted relatively simply. Whilst the overt and predictable aspects of learning at home such as reading, singing and number play with children are measurable and associated with positive learning outcomes there are two additional aspects to the home learning environment that are significant. These are a parent's sense of efficacy in relation to their children and their beliefs and attitudes related to learning (Siraj-Blatchford et al 2011). Supported playgroups can be viewed as ideally placed to support the development of positive home environments and to support families' efficacy, beliefs and attitudes towards schooling. They are also well placed to nurture learning partnerships between educators and families.

Supported playgroups are increasingly seen as a powerful way to engage particular groups of families. Supported playgroups tend to be targeted to particular communities or populations, and are usually facilitated by a qualified worker. They often have a particular focus and policy initiatives aimed at families who do not attend community playgroups (Williams et al, 2015). *Learning together* is one such program for families with children aged birth to prior to preschool. It focusses on engaging families in their children's learning from birth, Literacy and Numeracy development, and the growth of learning dispositions, attachment and wellbeing.

The South Australian Department for Education and Child Development (DECD) established *Learning together* in 2003, with the program initially operating in five disadvantaged locations across the state. It was developed as an innovative response to improving learning outcomes for children. It worked early with their families and drew on a growing body of evidence that pointed to the critical importance of the first five years in establishing lifelong foundations for future learning and development. It was also underpinned by the success of several intergenerational Literacy programs that had promising results stemming from the involvement of parents in partnership and recognising their role in their child's development in these crucial years.

In 2010 the program was expanded through the *Smarter Schools National Partnership – Communities Making a Difference* (previously known as Low SES School Communities) funded through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). The South Australian Government subsequently took over the funding of the expanded programs.

Unlike many other parent engagement programs, *Learning together* is designed with pathways for families to deepen their knowledge of children's learning and their parental role. Supported playgroups underpin the program, and families have the choice to engage in parenting programs, their own Year 12 studies and employment in the program. These

pathways are designed to enable families to build reflective capacity and confidence as well as knowledge.

Supported playgroups are the first level of engagement that families have with *Learning together*. These playgroups are run by early childhood teachers and have a focus on engaging families in their children's learning including Literacy and Numeracy. Experiences are developed to engage adults and children together and to build children's learning and dispositions. Information is available near learning experiences that points out the intrinsic learning or poses questions for families to explore together.

Educators use a technique known in the program as *notice and name* as they work alongside families. Staff point out the learning that children are engaged in and the role that a parent has played in it. This can be done immediately through conversation or through the use of photo stories shared later with families. The aim of this approach is for families to both understand how their young children are learning and to be able to notice it themselves. This builds knowledge and a sense of efficacy in the families leading to confidence both in their parenting role and as individuals. It has been described as 'letting families into the secret language of schooling' (Mulhearn and Hargreaves, 2014). This is particularly important for families who have had difficult histories in relation to their own upbringing and schooling.

Such interactions between families and educators can be characterised as learning conversations whereby a shared interest in the child and how to support their learning can be harnessed. These learning conversations, especially when approached from a strengths perspective, can support the development of partnerships between parents and educators. The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) has the building of partnerships between families and educators as one of its principles. The framework describes partnerships as including the recognition and valuing of the roles that each have in contributing

to the child; the knowledge that each has that can be seen as complementary; the development of trusting respectful relationships and the opportunity to engage in shared decision making about the child (p12).

Learning partnerships between families and teachers should be two-way relationships. As the EYLF argues, both parties have knowledge to share. Engagement should be seen as 'enabling parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, fitting together their knowledge of children, teaching and learning with teachers' knowledge' (Pushor, 2007). Indeed Jeynes (2012) argues that 'parents and teachers working together produce

something more than either working alone in isolation' (p733).

Families in *Learning together*, as indeed the vast majority of families with young children, express their desire for their children to do well in the world. Frequently they will state that they want their child's life to be better than their own has been. Working with skilled educators, they can harness these aspirations with practical and often co-constructed ways to reach them. Aspirations for, and high expectations of, children are pivotal ways that families can be engaged in their children's learning. Recognising that they can make a difference for their children [efficacy] through their actions and attitudes and

through partnerships with educators is powerful in disrupting cycles of educational disadvantage. The relatively relaxed space of a supported playgroup can be one in which such partnerships can be forged from a child's earliest days.

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It's a question of quality



JENNY JAY

Resisting the push down curriculum or maintaining a high standard?

Soon after curriculum and assessment requirements were published in the Australian Curriculum it became obvious to early childhood educators that the achievement standards for the Foundation and early years of school represented an increase of academic expectation of the knowledge, skills and understandings for children. Raising educational standards, improving Literacy and Numeracy levels and having an expectation that all children have a right to high quality education are worthy educational goals for Australian

children. This is particularly important in the early years where longitudinal research has shown the delivery of high quality programs can have a long term positive impact on children's lives (Siraj-Blatchford 2009, Heckman, Pinto & Savelyev 2013). The Australian Curriculum was endorsed by the Ministers for Education in September 2015 following an extensive review in 2014. It is within this context that it is timely to examine changes and pressures on the pedagogy and practice of early years' education in relation to the increased educational expectations, particularly those of Literacy and Numeracy.

An expectation of high quality education for the early years is essential. However, there must be a very clear resolve, that children entering school and learning centres, are taught in ways that will encourage their intrinsic motivation to learn and be curious about their worlds. The 2015 review of the Australian Curriculum recognised the uniqueness of the early years of school in a case study suggesting that the curriculum content for the early years should be 'regarded as quite distinct, and treated differently from the rest of the learning spectrum' (Donnelly & Wiltshire 2014 p99). The review also suggested that the teaching of Literacy and Numeracy be integrated pedagogically with other content which

► would make learning relevant and authentic for young children. If this advice is to be taken then curriculum in the early years needs to show a strong mix of intentional teaching and integrated learning in activities which reflect the best early childhood pedagogy and practice.

Early childhood pedagogy is well known for considering whole child development and respect for children's ways of learning such as play-based inquiry, child initiated, emergent curriculum, consideration of the physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language capabilities of young children who are transitioning to school from their home learning environments (DEEWR 2009). Young children are capable learners and can achieve gains in each area of development as they explore, interact with, discuss and experience the world around them when presented with challenging tasks and a supportive learning environment. An expectation that they will read and write along with these active ways of learning is essential and young children are curious and excited by their own text creation and meaning making through drawings, writing, speaking and listening. Technology should be used to enhance and widen their skills and understandings and support their increasing competence as literate and numerate beings. Attention to whole child development is crucial as Shanker (2014) reminds us that social and emotional learning is just as important as academic learning in the early years when children are developing their self and social awareness and self-management skills. It is important that children can experience academic success and develop positive attitudes to learning in the early years of school as they lay the foundation for later learning alongside the attitude of themselves as learners. Therefore in an effort to ensure a high standard of education for young children, it is important that school curriculum is delivered in ways that are appropriate to children's dominant ways of learning and supportive of the development of ability over time.

The danger of directly linking high quality education with additional content and over formalisation of the early years,

along with pressure on schools to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes has had some unfortunate consequences for many young children which may negatively impact on their attitude to themselves as learners and destroy the motivation to learn.

Formalisation of the early years of school

Achieving high quality teaching and learning in the early years is a matter which teachers and schools need to be constantly monitoring. Maintaining children's positive attitude to school will occur in classrooms which offer challenge and rigor in a way that gives children an opportunity to explore their own thinking in active ways. Intentional teaching is an essential part of early childhood classrooms and always has been (DEEWR 2009). However where an assumption that intentional teaching translates to formal, teacher directed lessons is a pedagogical confusion and needs revisiting by some educators and schools. Essential Literacy and Numeracy learning can be conducted by educators in ways that are intentional and effective which do not require children to sit and listen for long periods of time, complete worksheets or participate in long whole group sessions. Effective teachers in early years classrooms are skilled at using a range of strategies that involve focused teaching while children contribute and demonstrate their learning in play based, hands-on active ways that support the children's developmental capabilities. Research has shown that constant overloading young children with activities that are not appropriate can lead to physical and mental health problems (Thompson, 2014).

Learning goals for each year level are often created in schools to ensure that children's learning of Literacy and Numeracy is carefully monitored. This is a thoughtful and organised way to guarantee learning standards are met. Consultation with early years' teachers must be conducted to ensure the goals which are set are appropriate for each year level to avoid an 'earlier is better' attitude which disregards the capabilities of the children themselves. Over-formalised teaching of inappropriate

content with the intention of improving later educational outcomes has resulted in the emergence of an adult-centred curriculum where children's actual capabilities and developmental requirements are marginalised (Laevers, 2007; Whitebread, 2012, p. 3).

Consider, for example, the effort required by a young child when learning to control a pencil to write words and sentences. Connecting the eye, hand and brain to produce recognisable letters, in order to create words which represent objects is a challenging task and one most children relish. It is a challenging task made more difficult if the necessary fine motor control has not yet been developed. However add a layer of learning goals which must be reached within a school time frame, which does take into consideration the child's developmental

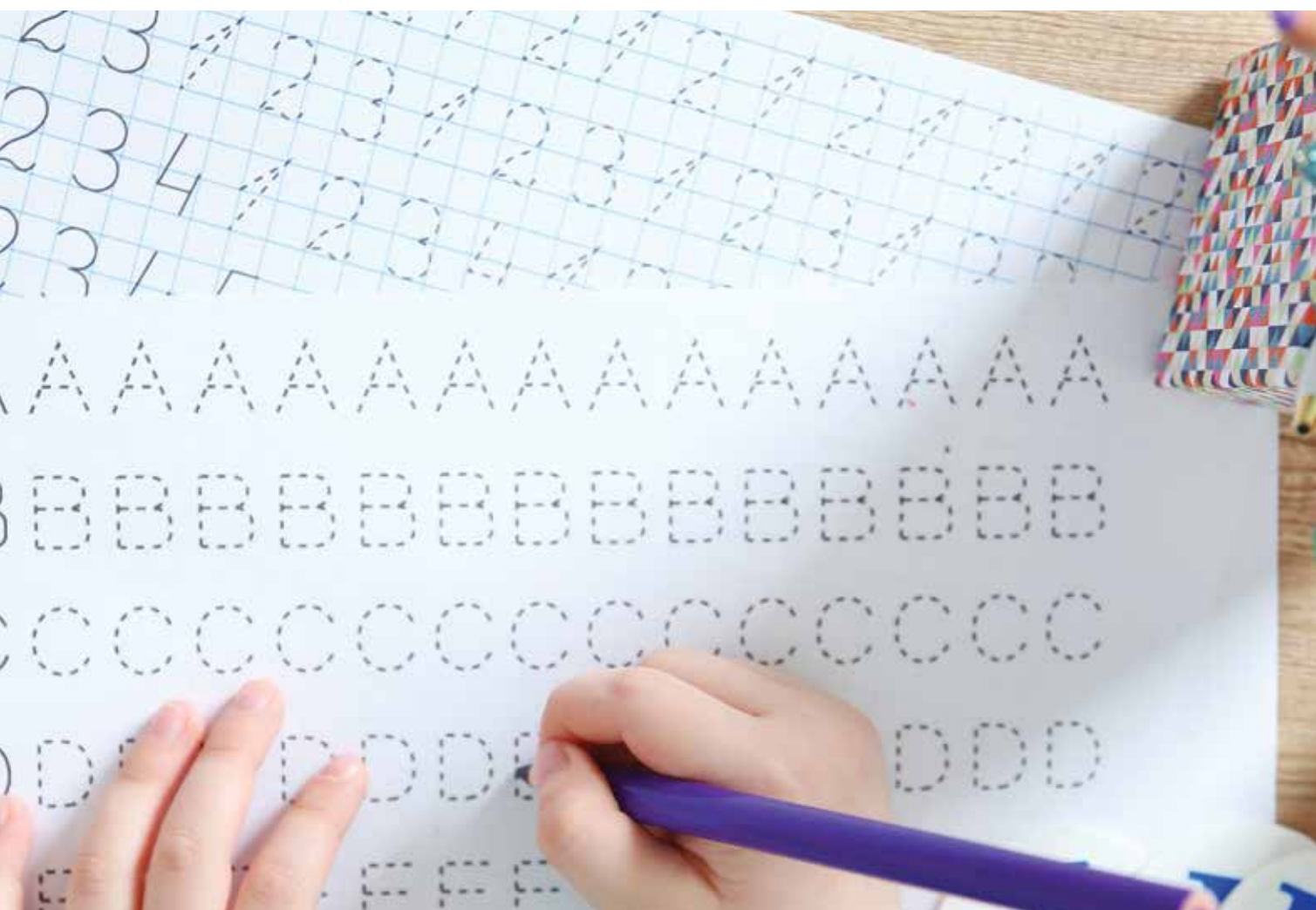


capability and we have a very different context. Children are pressured to complete extra tasks (and in some cases homework) to 'catch up' and can be labelled from the very beginning of their school experience as not reaching set benchmarks. Children not meeting set standards or benchmarks, whether they are developmentally capable or not, are labelled 'at risk'. The impact on children who very clearly understand they are not achieving and families who are told their child is not up to the 'expected' level of achievement is having a distressing effect on children who, in years before achievement standards, overcrowded curriculum and standardised testing targets, would not have been 'failing' but recognised as needing support and time to develop their skills and understandings.

Impact of standardised testing

The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) conducted in Year 3 (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2010), coupled with compulsory on entry (to school) assessments have added to the pressure to perform at higher and higher levels in the early years of school. Year 3 test results have been used to drive changes about what is being taught and how it is being delivered in many schools. As a result, the over formalisation of the early years of school is a product of the attitude and belief that tests results can be raised by pushing younger and younger children to perform more complex Literacy and Numeracy tasks earlier.

Single-minded focus on Literacy and Numeracy test results has, unfortunately, resulted in less time in the early years' timetable for children to learn in more, creative active ways. The narrowing of the curriculum and the implementation of more formal teaching strategies, coupled with less time for child-initiated play time, has raised alarm bells for early childhood teachers and health professions who are experiencing an increase in the number of children presenting at school with anxiety and other mental health issues (Herman, Reinke, Parkin, Traylor, & Agarwal 2009). These concerns include the long term social and emotional consequences of a 'too much, too soon' formalised education; the reduction of time for young children to learn through active, inquiry and play based activities, fewer activities using creative thinking





and the push to have children reach inappropriate academic targets before they have reached the physical and cognitive capacity to do so.

In a recent update, Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Chief Executive Officer, Robert Randal, writes:

I'm never happy to learn about students who may find NAPLAN distressing, but it's the adults in our students' lives who need to keep NAPLAN in context and work with young people to help them manage this and other "tests" that they will face. I have always maintained that while some familiarisation of NAPLAN and its style of testing in the weeks leading up to NAPLAN is important, I do not agree with buying NAPLAN books, or with excessive coaching or drilling, or diverting a student's attention for weeks on end to NAPLAN. I believe that teaching the English and mathematics curriculum, along with the other subject areas in our broad, rich curriculum, is the best preparation for NAPLAN (p.1).

This explicit call to keep the national testing in perspective with a 'broad rich curriculum' is an important reminder that children can be involved in creative, active, play-based learning and meet the required academic standards.

The value of play and active learning

A play-based curriculum is highly regarded in early childhood settings as fundamental, pedagogical best practice that promotes the learning and development recommended in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) but in over formal early years' classrooms this practice is being compromised. The importance and value of children's play is well recognised by researchers and policy makers (Whitbread, 2012, p. 3). Play is a child's natural dominant learning approach and contributes to their knowledge and skill development across the cognitive, language, social, emotional, creative and physical domains.

The context of play provides a range of rich opportunities to stimulate learning while encompassing children's interests. Effective learning takes place when it is tailored to the child's individual

development and understanding (DEEWR, 2009) and is visible in classrooms where a more child-centred approach to learning is implemented (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Learning experiences which have a relevant purpose can accommodate cultural and linguistic diversity and the teacher plays an important role as a 'co-player, supporting and extending the play' (Whitbread, 2012, p. 34). In this shared learning space, referred to, by Siraj-Blatchford (2009) as shared sustained thinking, the teacher forms a bridge between play and more complex learning. A high quality early years learning environment offers a balance between child-initiated and teacher-directed learning experiences with many conversations about what is learnt to help make connections between shared knowledge and the child's understandings. As children progress through the school years, play will change and look different, yet it still has purpose and relevance. Play and learning are not opposites on a learning continua and it is not helpful to think that if children are engaged in play then learning cannot be happening. Play is essential in the early school years and is recognised by both the Australian Curriculum and the EYLF as providing the foundations for effective learning in school and throughout life.

The provision of more time and space for active play-based activities will support the development of children's cognitive and self-regulatory abilities. Literacy and Numeracy concepts are best learned in environments that are meaningful to children where they can apply new learning and understanding in creative ways in the context of play activities. Active, play-based learning will allow children to make connections between meaning and higher level thinking. Through play experiences and interaction with more experienced, interested others young children will develop the cognitive thinking skills needed for more complex concepts. Cognitive thinking skills including problem solving, thinking strategies, planning, memory skills and self-regulation all of which provide a foundation for the higher mental functions required for literacy and mathematics can all be developed without the need for an over formalised learning environment.

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ROS CORNISH

Contemporary issues in ECEC

Data clearly indicates that more and more Australian children are accessing education and care services in the years prior to formal school. In the March 2015 quarter, 821,880 families used approved child care services for their 1,211,200 children with 16,966 child care services provided. This is an increase of 7.4 per cent since the March 2014 period. Fifty-four per cent is provided in long day care, 31.6 per cent in outside school hours care, 18.2 per cent in family day care and in home care; and 0.6 per cent in occasional care. The large Eastern Seaboard States have the largest proportion of long day care with 80 per cent of the market (Department of Education and Training, 2015). The importance of quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is now widely recognised nationally and internationally in terms of improved outcomes for children, families and indeed the community (PricewaterhouseCooper, 2014).





At the November 2015 Early Childhood National Reform Symposium in Adelaide, Professor Edward Melhuish reinforced the vital importance of the early years in a child's life. 'The early years are the most important in setting up the trajectories that will lead to favourable outcomes at both an individual and population level. There is huge potential for language learning in the early years. A child at age three with poor language development will have problems later in schooling unless we effectively intervene' (Melhuish, 2015). Melhuish, Professor of Human Development at the University of Oxford, outlined a progressive and evidence-based argument for investing in the early years. His address reinforced the notion that positive experiences in the first years of a child's life set a trajectory for wellbeing and success in learning and life. National and international research validates the quality and quantity of access to early childhood services have lifelong effects on numeracy, literacy, cognitive skills, social and emotional development and lead to higher employment levels, income generation and less reliance on welfare and government funded assistance (Cleveland et al 2006).

Yet despite a myriad of credible evidence based research, advocacy and lobbying by individuals and organisations for many years, it is ironic that the issues from past decades remain on the agenda and the sector continues to 'fight' for educational provision that should be automatic and universal for all children regardless of their demographic or socio-economic background. The affirmation of investing in the early years means that governments have a responsibility to individuals, to families and to society to get early learning support right.

The resources required to support all children's access to affordable, quality education and care relies on considerable financial contribution by government. Only when the value of ECEC is recognised, understood and valued by families and the broader community will this contribution be seen as an investment in the future and be funded adequately to ensure affordability

and accessibility for all. So often the education and care service is considered to be something that is provided to support families balance work and family responsibilities—a safe place for children to play while their families participate in the workforce or undertake studies until it is time for a child to commence formal school.

There is no doubt that the provision of care is part of the education and care program. Basic and essential care needs must be provided for children: sleep, nutrition, toileting—and these rituals and routines also form part of the educative provision as they are learning experiences for young children. These basic needs must be met in order for children to develop and learn, become resilient, confident, and independent. We must have an expectation of high quality care in this fundamental respect.

However, there is so much more to 'care' than the care expectation. Early childhood pedagogy recognises the intrinsic value of play and yet too often it is this play element that is undervalued by families and the broader community. Play is an integral part of the child's learning and development. Learning through play, inquiry and exploration and through reciprocal scaffolding of learning by responsive teachers and educators forms the basis of the child focused play-based curriculum. Teachers and educators must have the knowledge and skills to articulate to key stakeholders the importance of play and its relationship to intentional teaching. A clear articulation of the value of play is vital so that families and others become more aware of and understand the value of play in a child's day, irrespective of whether this is in an education and care setting or at home.

The National Quality Framework (NQF) for ECEC agreed to by all Australian Governments in 2009 recognised the importance of increasing the focus on the early years to ensure the wellbeing of children throughout their lives and to improve the productivity of our national as a whole. The drive for this change was based on clear evidence that the early years of a child's life are very



important for their present, and future health, development and well being. The National Quality Standards of seven quality areas and underpinning standards and elements provides the foundation for services to plan and implement a quality program for children.

This framework promises so much but of course is reliant on having a highly qualified professional workforce. An increased requirement of having degree-qualified teachers, 50 per cent of staff holding a diploma qualification and others holding a Certificate 111 or actively working towards this qualification aims to support this essential ingredient. This is one core ingredient in quality care, but qualifications alone are insufficient - teachers and educators must also possess the necessary personal qualities required to be a responsive and competent professional. These caring, nurturing qualities along with commitment, passion and importantly the ability to establish and maintain relationships with children, families, colleagues and allied professionals complement the qualification.

This is where the importance of rigorous and robust vocational and tertiary training is imperative as our higher education and training institutions have a significant role to play in preparing teachers and educators for the important responsibility of contributing to the educational, health and wellbeing outcomes for young children. It is now recognised that early childhood teachers and educators must hold specialised and recognised qualifications in the education and care of children from birth to age eight. They must understand how young children learn, and they need to practise play-based approaches to teaching and learning. Central to this is the ability to apply the power of inquiry driven learning with children to foster higher order thinking and transferable and sustained knowledge.

Increasingly however much of the delivery of education services for practitioners is derived from online sources. The emergence of technology and its use as a teaching tool has resulted in more

passive learning and less practical and experientially based study and learning. The value of professional face-to-face dialogue with peers and colleagues cannot be underestimated particularly when practitioners will be working in a profession that demands highly developed interpersonal and communication skills. And it is in this respect that the seemingly minor element of terminology becomes important. While this may seem to be trivial to some, it is an important fact to many in the sector. Many professionals working in the sector have altered their terminology to reflect their emphasis on education in an attempt to articulate to families, policy makers and the broader community that the services provided in the years prior to school have strong educative value—reinforcing the notion that learning begins at birth and not just when children begin school. Disappointingly, despite the NQF including education and care in the title, the new Federal Government Jobs for Families Child Care Package no longer includes the word 'education'. This is a retrograde step given the profound body of research validating the importance of the early years in improving educational outcomes for young children.

The education and care sector is on the cusp of major change with the proposed Jobs for Families Child Care Package Bill (2015). This Bill represents the largest change to the financing of early childhood education and care since the introduction of Child Care Benefit. The substantial additional investment of over \$3.2 billion over four years is welcomed by the sector. The stated goal of the package is workforce participation and whilst the critical policy and operational elements have not yet been released, the limitations of the proposed 'activity test' may compromise children's access and participation in education and care. Response by peak organisations, individuals and the government on the full impact of the change has varied with both positive and negative views. As with any policy change, the best interests of all children along with the obligation to uphold the fundamental rights of the

child must be paramount. The education and care sector has embraced a raft of changes over the past decade and will continue to view change as an opportunity to continually improve through reflection and refinement.

Our vision for the future is that education and care will be a holistic integrated system from birth onwards supported by ongoing investment to ensure all children have access to quality, affordable education and care provided by highly qualified well paid professionals who are supported with ongoing professional learning. Our nation's future depends on it!

Ros Cornish is Chairman of the National Board of Directors of Early Childhood Australia, ACT

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The best of times

WARREN MARKS

A new roadmap for 'soon to be' retired principals

The prospect of retirement from working as a school principal brings with it a strange juxtaposition of emotions: elation and anticipation on the one hand ('free at last'); and anxiety and apprehension on the other ('how will I fill my days?'). After a lifetime engaged in an intellectually demanding and people-focused career, the thought of not being important, not having a real purpose to each day, not being intellectually challenged, and losing the rich social and professional networks of fellow principals can bring feelings of deep anxiety.

Traditionally *conventional wisdom* seemed to indicate that the concerns of those approaching retirement were practical, such as financial difficulties, health issues and caring for ageing parents. However, principals have recently indicated quite strongly (Marks, 2012) that it is the emotional aspects (social and professional isolation, loss of identity and purpose, and loss of intellectual stimulation) which are the major challenges facing them in transitioning to retirement.

I love people and thrive on social contact. Lunches and morning tea gossip sessions don't do it for me. I need some depth and challenge in the relationships and that is lacking. So I do feel socially and especially professionally isolated. (Primary female)

The lack of intellectual stimulation has led me back into a form of anxiety if not depression. (Secondary male)

You suffer a huge loss of purpose and a huge loss of esteem. In retirement you can overnight become a no-body. You become invisible! (Primary male)

In part the fear of this loss of purpose, intellectual engagement and social networks may well explain why principals are rejecting the traditional model of retirement involving ceasing work altogether. This is no longer the preferred model. The other factor impinging on this shift is the Baby Boomer Generation's resentment of the very term 'retirement' as it has connotations of growing old (Mackay, 2007; McCrindle, 2009). Baby boomers now have a life expectancy closer to 90 years, so 60-80 year olds do not want to be seen as 'old'. This extended longevity may well mean 30 years (or more) living in the post-work phase of life—a long time (too long for many) to golf, lunch, travel and play Lego with the grandchildren. With this greater longevity has come a greater emphasis on fitness, on dressing smartly, on staying young, and on being seen as intellectually and physically capable of making a meaningful contribution to society (especially to the workforce).

Given these two intersecting factors the anxiety about social, professional and intellectual isolation (going from 'a rooster to a feather duster') and the generational values of Baby Boomers to

be seen as not ready for 'god's waiting room', it is probably not surprising that the old retirement model no longer meets the needs or wants of retiring principals. What then is replacing that old model?

Refocusing in retirement

The new model strongly involves *refocusing* (into other work). Recent research (Marks, 2012) indicates that the vast majority of principals are not retiring in the traditional model because this model is now seen as an indicator of growing 'old' (something to be resisted at all costs). Rather principals are re-engaging in the workforce in greater numbers than ever before. This re-engagement may take many forms such as full-time paid work, part-time paid work, casual paid work, contract paid work, consultant paid work, overseas paid and unpaid work and volunteer work. This may involve a totally new career (something once never envisaged) in a totally different role, or in the familiar educational domain. Whatever the shape, principals are now refocusing rather than retiring. The transition from work as a school principal into the next phase of life now looks like this (see below):

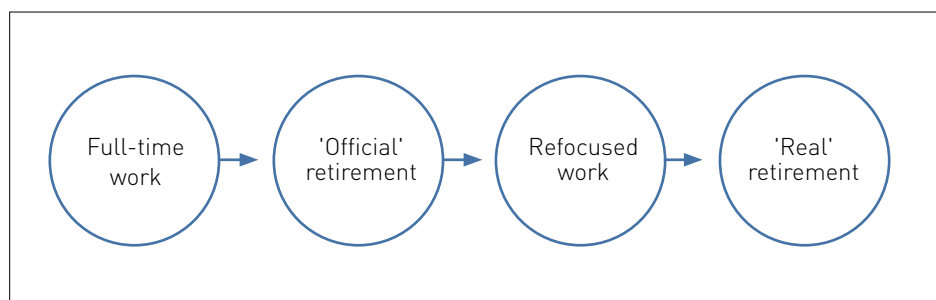


Figure 1: The refocusing model

Indeed the term retirement may no longer be appropriate or relevant to a 21st century workforce (Schultz & Adams, 2008). Rather the lifecycles of the 21st century worker will be more flexible and more circular (moving in-and-out-of work, training and leisure) as retirement becomes a less clearly defined entity. It might no longer be the prerogative of Generation X or Generation Y to be the only ones to have multiple careers? Retiring Baby Boomers are also now engaging in a new career in their 60s; a previously unthinkable scenario.

Beyond anyone's wildest predictions, retired principals are currently refocusing in huge numbers. Recent research (Marks, 2012) indicated that 92.6 per cent of retired principals in NSW had refocused (in some way and to some extent). This is a remarkable figure. In fact work in retirement (refocusing) was recommended by some recently retired principals as a very effective mechanism for avoiding/overcoming the difficulties and traps inherent in retirement:

I am currently tutoring in teacher education two days a week and feel valued and worthwhile. I don't want to work forever but I am enjoying this stage. (Secondary female)

In the first five years (after 60) I found doing some part time work quite rewarding. I think mentally it helps you adjust to retirement, gives you time to set yourself up for the social aspects of retirement. (Primary male)

Whatever the motivation (for example, generational, professional, intellectual, social, altruistic or financial), an ongoing connection to the workforce is being adopted by retired principals as a deliberate component of what social commentator Bernard Salt calls a 'portfolio retirement' (Salt, 2007).

Portfolio retirement

A portfolio retirement lifestyle has a variety of ingredients (investments) to make retirement a stimulating, active and fulfilling phase of life. One of those ingredients is refocusing into work. A typical portfolio retirement might look something like a bicycle wheel—one with many spokes.

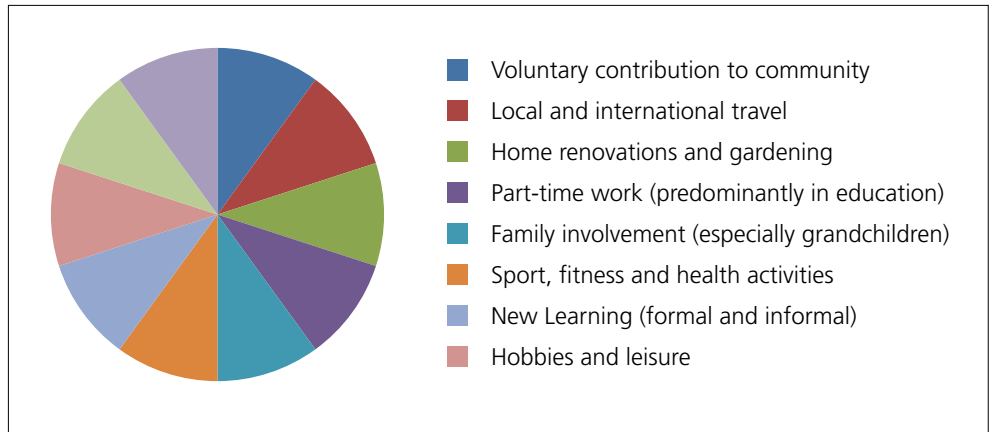


Figure 2: The portfolio retirement lifestyle

Retired principals explain their passion for portfolio retirement in terms such as:

My life is multi-faceted. My creative side is being met through greater involvement in photography that was always an unfulfilled passion. I have my consultancy roles that provide extra funds plus that sense of purpose. I have a much richer family role now. I'm also involved in house renovations pending a sale and re-location. In addition, we are attending the theatre regularly and having a full social life with friends. Travelling has also become a bigger part of our lives. (Secondary male)

It would seem that retired principals are replacing the previous image of retirees as 'old people' with one more aligned to the baby boomer values such as

fashionably dressed, physically energetic, emotionally adventurous, intellectually engaged and able to contribute to society by staying connected to the workforce for longer. Retired principals would seem to be clearly indicating that they want retirement to be an active (not passive) period of life involving a mix of work and leisure activities. The big question which then needs to be answered is 'what effect is this new retirement having on satisfaction levels in retirement?'

Satisfaction in retirement

In a recent research project (Marks, 2012) recently retired principals expressed a higher level of satisfaction with retirement than they had expected before they retired.

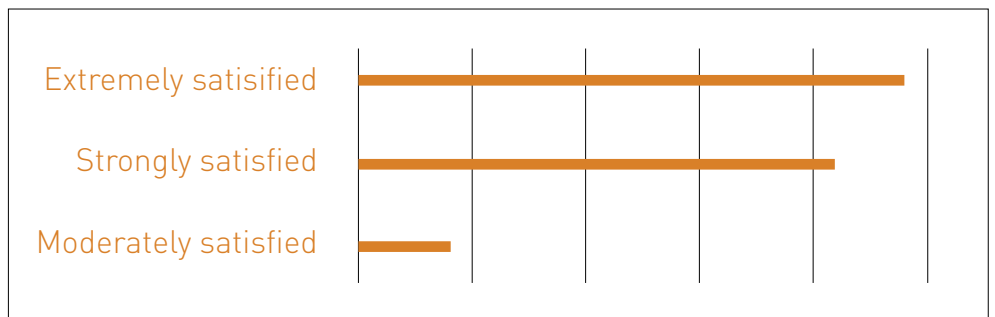


Figure 3: Satisfaction with retirement



Significantly for the principals who reported that they were either 'strongly satisfied' or 'extremely satisfied' with retirement, 70 per cent described their retirement as a 'portfolio' retirement and one that included some element of refocused work (either full-time, part-time, casual, paid or voluntary).

With the accumulation of high-level skills and knowledge in human resource management, financial and resource management, media expertise, team building and collaborative leadership, and pedagogical expertise, principals are well-placed to refocus into another career after their work at schools is completed.

The satisfaction levels with the portfolio-style retirement seem to be providing principals with a road map for the next phase of life. It might not be a matter of what you are retiring from, but rather what you may be able to refocusing into?

In Charles Dickens' classic *A tale of two cities*, the author effectively outlines the dilemma:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the hope of spring, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going the other way.

With knowledge (based upon research into the societal trends in retirement) and with good planning, good health and favourable economic circumstances, and with the right attitude, retiring principals may well be able to look forward to the 'best of times' in the next phase of their lives.

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The educated mind: How cognitive tools shape our understanding by Kieran Egan

Book review by Oliver Lovell, AACE



Kieran Egan's *The Educated Mind* is an ambitious book. In it, Egan posits that the English speaking world's perennial debate over best approaches to education fundamentally stems from an incoherent and self-contradicting conception of the role of education. But that's just the first chapter. The following seven are dedicated to proposing a new theory of education to remedy such contradictions.

Egan suggests that there are three dominant ideas of education's role, each of which contradicts the others. The first is viewing education as pursuing 'socialisation' purposes, the second that it should aim to produce knowledgeable and critically thinking individuals, the third is that it should simply make room for the natural development of the individual child.

It is interesting to compare this framework with Australia's 'Educational Goals for Young Australians', as set out in the Melbourne Declaration. The declaration states that it is a goal of Australian education to ensure that 'All young Australians become: 1. Successful learners, 2. Confident and creative individuals, 3. Active and informed citizens.' Here, Egan's tripartite model does seem to broadly fit.

Egan suggests that whilst these three objectives co-exist, no resolution will be reached in education policy or the sector more generally. Socialisation is about fitting into the status quo whilst knowledgeable, critical thinkers are likely to question it. Similarly, acculturation into society's social norms will influence a child's natural development. The third combination is also in conflict, shaping a student's mind through instruction will inevitably influence their natural growth.

This is where Egan's theory of education comes in. He proposes that the purpose of education should be to support students as they move through five kinds of understanding; Somatic, Mythic, Romantic, Philosophic and Ironic. Egan suggests that these kinds of understanding track both the development of the individual, and the development of complex human

societies, and that each phase is firmly tied to different linguistic phases. The ultimate goal of education (in the Western context) should be to help students to attain 'ironic' understanding, in which they see costs and benefits in multiple approaches, in multiple aspects of life, and judiciously select the appropriate approach/es for a given set of circumstances. Such an understanding represents a complex grasp of a society's cultural tools, and an ability to effectively utilise them in further pursuits.

At this point, readers may be shifting in their seats, feeling a little uneasy at the possibility of another high-brow, esoteric, western-centric view of what education could and should be. All I can say to this is that Egan provides a chapter entitled 'Questions and answers' to address these such questions, and does an excellent job of it. Chapters on implications for the

curriculum and for teaching help to reify Egan's ideas, even to the point of offering some lesson ideas.

No model can perfectly encapsulate the myriad intricacies of education (as Egan ironically puts it, 'all generalisations are false'), but I found Egan's model helped me to better understand both the education debate at a macro level, and how to pitch content to my high school Mathematics students. Egan set out ambitiously, and it's of little doubt that what he's created is a thoroughly researched, humorous, fiercely stimulating, and eloquently written treatise.

Oliver Lovell is a Mathematics teacher at Sunshine Secondary College and a Masters student at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, Victoria.



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