

**Rethinking and reshaping early childhood care
and education policy**

Visions and directions for the future

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At no time in the recent past has there been such keen interest in early childhood education. Finally, the decades of research showing the benefits of strong, rich early childhood programs on children's development and learning have captured community attention. Quality early childhood programs help children reach key developmental milestones and close learning gaps. At some point though, discussion on benefits and values must translate into vision, policy and action.

My presentation today is intended to highlight key issues facing early childhood education, to stress the importance getting the right mix of early childhood services, and to foreshadow some policy directions for the future. As part of this, I flag the important role of schools and other segments of the education market in the early childhood "debate" and in shaping early childhood policy and practice.

It's easy to dismiss early childhood education as someone else's problem-not ours, and to assume that some other education or community sector will deal with it. But there are serious issues to be addressed by the whole community and the education sector if young children are to have the best opportunities for social and cognitive development.

Early childhood education should concern all of us. Children who get off to a good start are likely to maintain an edge throughout their schooling. Cognitive and academic gaps that exist in the first year of school are difficult to close, even with targeted intervention.

So what are the big picture issues facing early childhood care and education?

What is the current picture of early childhood provision?

How did we get what we've got?

Who cares and who is in care?

What are the links between quality and inputs and outcomes for children?

Why are integrated services so important?

Why should schools and other education sectors be involved in early childhood policy matters?

Where should we be heading for the future?

How did we get what we've got?

Dramatic increases in the women's labour force participation have been the main force driving development of early childhood services. Australian Bureau of Statistics and Child Care Census data show that families use early childhood services for a range of reasons, but mainly to provide early education and care while they work and secondly, to provide early education experiences to prepare children for school.

Current early childhood service provision in Australia has grown from a long tradition of care and education for young children. Understanding its history helps make more sense of the myriad of provision and capacity and accessibility, affordability, equity and quality issues. It also sheds light on the complexity of relations between the Australian government and State and Territory governments, local communities, charities and churches, local governments, the public and independent education sectors, and private-for-profit operators.

Early childhood provision

There are two main types of early childhood services, preschools and kindergartens and child care centres.

Preschools and kindergartens for three and four-year-old children in the year (or two) before school have been part of Australian educational services since the late Nineteenth Century. They became popular in the 1960s as middle class families sought preparation for school and a break from day-to-day parenting. Today, children typically attend preschool or kindergarten on a 'sessional' basis, for an average of 11 hours per week. Preschool participation varies dramatically across the states, with some states having free preschool linked to public schools and others having largely fee-for-service provision run by private and community-based organisations. Generally, preschool programs have qualified early childhood teachers. In NSW, qualified early childhood teachers are also an integral part of most child care centres (Elliott, 1990; Elliott & Lindsay, 1996). It's more unusual to have qualified early childhood teachers in child care centres in states.

Child care centres (sometimes also known as Long Day Care centres, nurseries or crèches) started as charitable welfare services in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries to improve the health and nutrition of children from very poor or destitute families. During World War II they expanded to care for children whose mothers had joined the war effort. In the 1950s, privately operated centres offered child care to families unable to access community or government programs. But child care was not in demand as relatively few mothers worked outside the home.

Changing policy landscapes

The Australian government began to fund preschools and kindergartens in the early 1970s when it was acknowledged that early education benefits should be widely available, but that high fees excluded many children. By the mid 1970s, most funding for preschools was provided by the Commonwealth, with the balance by the states and territories.

In the late 1970s and early 80s, after much lobbying to provide child care places for the growing number of working women, the funding balance shifted from sessional preschools to “long day” care that could accommodate typical work hours. At the same time, research began to indicate the negative affects of separation and poor quality care on development and fuelled calls for better quality early childhood provision (Brennan, 1990; Brennan, 1994; Kelly, 1986).

By the early to mid 1980s, an ideological continuum emerged that seems to be lengthening. At one end is the concept of seamless child care and education experiences as a basic community service — like public schools and public hospitals. At the other is a deep seated belief that children are best cared for at home by their mothers and that child care is a private, rather than community responsibility.

While community beliefs wax and wane with time, there is still widespread perception that mothers are the best people to care for children in the early years and that non-parental care can have negative impacts on children’s development. This alarmist position is promoted by several well known commentators such as Steve Biddulph (Biddulph, 2006).

Clearly, the reality of women’s changing societal roles has resulted in rapid child care sector expansion, but this growth is mediated by broadly held community views on the sanctity of the family and women’s key nurturing role, as well as by employment growth and funding constraints. Today, the competing welfare *and* education traditions plus continuing polarisation of beliefs about responsibility for child care and education underpin contemporary understandings about early childhood provision and the two main types of provision- care and education

It’s telling that many of the fundamental issues in early childhood education — supply, accessibility, affordability, funding, staffing and quality — have changed little in the last twenty years. But they are sharpened by a new generation of families, educators, journalists and policy makers. Additionally, the increasing challenges presented by families and children with multiple risk factors who need community support and early intervention have brought health and early childhood sectors much closer together. The health lobby has been particularly influential in drawing attention to early childhood needs (Sayers, 2004; Stanley, 2003, 2005).

The release this week of a "Blueprint for child care" *What about the kids? Policy directions for improving the experiences and young children in a changing world* by the NSW and Qld Children's Commissioners and NIFTY, reflects the much closer connections between health, community and education sectors. The 'Blueprint' for child care, calls for policy improvements to support the care and education of young children and echoes the alarming developmental outcomes for many children and the eroding quality of early childhood services.

For too long, calls to put children at the centre of the debate have been eclipsed by a focus on funding and provision issues. Certainly, increased provision for child care is important, but provision and quality must go hand in hand. Increasing threats to healthy development mean that children need more nurturing and better care and early education than at any time in the past

These new collaborations between medical and health experts, social and community development sectors *and* early childhood care and education are raising awareness about the importance of the early years and changing the dynamics of early childhood policy making in previously unexplored ways. The impact on day to day provision and practice, though, is not yet clear.

Reflection on the development of early childhood services indicates a balance between change and continuity of ideas. But unless current concerns for improved developmental outcomes for children are translated into quality, integrated early childhood programs, children's wellbeing and later school success will be compromised.

As I've often indicated, early childhood education and care services have evolved haphazardly in response to varying community needs within changing ideological and socio-political environments. To date, lack of coordinated planning for young children's care and education has resulted in the current child care "shambles". Planning and building child care centres has been left largely to the commercial sector. Family Day Care is dependent on mothers being willing to care for children in their homes and having a house that meets certain safety requirements (Elliott, 2004).

Generally, provision has lagged well behind need, but this is not surprising given that social trends are difficult to predict and change such as workforce participation happens slowly. Across the country, early childhood provision is characterised by a myriad of types, funding bodies, and licensing and regulatory frameworks. There are widespread differences in quality, accessibility and cost and little shared understanding of service types and functions or terminology. Despite the family and child-friendly rhetoric and considerable government and community investment in children and families, early childhood service supply, distribution, funding and quality is at the best "fragmented".

Who's in care and who cares?

About half of Australia's children (1,510,500 million) aged 0-11 participate in some type of formal or informal out-of-home care (ABS, 2003a). About 80% of children 0-5 participate in an early childhood service. Demand for child care has resulted in strong growth in early childhood services, especially child care centres, Family Day Care and Out-of-School-Hours care as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Number of child care services eligible for Commonwealth funding in 1991 to 2002, 2004* and 2004**

	1991a	1993a	1996-1997	1999	2002	*2004 respondents	2004**
Not-for-profit community child care centres	958	1028	1063	1016	1,253	1,297	1,361
Private-for-profit child care centres	835	1264	2,593	2,617	2,178	2,515	3,345
Total					3,431	3,812	4,706
Family Day Care	314	329	321	313	318	318	
Before and After School Care			1703	1828	2098	2137	
Vacation Care			577	1080	1275	1340	

Sources: FACS (2003a). *2002 Census of Child Care Services*, p. 8. A total of 85% of child care services participated in the census; AIHW (2002) p. 4

* FACS (2005). *2004 Census of Child Care Services*, p. 9 & 10. A total of 88% of child care services participated in the census

** *Report of Government Services 2005*, 14A.29, 14A.38, 14A.65, 14A.47, 14A.56, 14A.74, 14A.83 Child care centres only

Of particular interest is the dramatic increase in the number of private-for-profit child care centres since 1991. This growth has increased the importance of commercial proprietors, including the "child care chains". Commercial operators now constitute a significant early childhood pressure group. To their credit, commercial operators have stepped in to meet demand where governments failed. Indeed, much of the pressure to provide places to meet families' child care need has been offset by growth in private-for-profit centres and in the low cost, home-based Family Day Care. Child care centres. In Queensland and Western Australia some 80%

of child care is commercially provided.

Table 2 shows the breakdown of child care services by management type on a state-by-state basis. There are no comparable, readily available national figures on preschool and kindergartens. Planned changes to Australian Bureau of Statistics data collection processes and the *National Preschool Census* suggest that this might change.

Table 2 Licensed and/or registered child care centres by management type 2003-2004

	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA
Community based	433 (23.5%)	203 (23.2%)	189 (16.7)	96 (25.2%)	130 (53.5%)
Private	1410 (76.5%)	559 (63.9%)	917 (81.1%)	282 (74%)	113 (43.5%)
Government	na	113 (12.9%)	25 (2.2%)	3 (0.8%)	0
Total	1843	875	1131	381	243

Table 2.4 cont.

TAS	ACT	NT	TOTAL
38 (51.4%)	68 (70.1%)	48 (77.4%)	1205
21 (28.4%)	29 (29.9%)	14 (22.6%)	3345
15 (20.3%)			156
74	97	62	

Source: *Report on Government Services 2005*, Tables 14A.29, 14A.38, 14A.47, 14A.56, 14A.65, 14A.74, 14A.83, 14A.92

Growth in child care centres is mirrored by growth in child care participation over the same period as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Children 0-5 using *formal* child care 1996/97, 1999, 2002 and 2004

Formal Early Childhood Services	1996-1997	1999	2002	2004
Community Child Care Centres	82,800	81,330	113,040	113,690
Private-for-profit Child Care Centres	211,900	220,210	254,100	269,330
Total children in centre-based care	294,700	301,540	367,140	383,020
Family Day Care	84,790	83,080	95,630	89,300
In home care			1,500	3,240
OOSHC	99,520	107,420	148,040	160,800
Vacation Care	30,970	69,300	103,560	101,710
Other service types	19,160	16,110	16,280	14,700

All formal care	529,320	577,450	732,150	752,750

Note: The above figures may include double counting as some children use more than one service.
Sources: FACS (2003a) *2002 Census of Child Care*, p. 11. FACS (2005) *2004 Census of Child Care*, p. 13.

The increasing use of child care by 0 to 5 year olds is also reflected in Australian Bureau of Statistics data. ABS surveys show a near doubling in long day care centre participation from 137,000 to 318,600 between 1993 and 2005 (ABS, 2006, p. 14). In contrast, preschool or kindergarten attendance remained relatively stable across the same period with 236,900 children in 1999, 239,100 in 2002 and 257,100 in 2006 (ABS, 2006, p. 39). Variations and inconsistencies in child care data from year to year and table to table are attributable to different counting methods, definitions and collection points.

Table 4 gives a picture of recent participation in the full range of early childhood services, including preschools, based on 2002 and 2005 Australian Bureau of Statistics data.

Table 4 Children aged 0-4 using formal early childhood services in June 2002 and June 2005

Service Type	0-4 years 2002	0-4 years 2005
Long Day Child Care	282,200	302,900
Occasional Care	33,800	47,200
Preschool/ Kindergarten	195,200	159,200
Total centre based care	477,400	599,900
Family Day Care	76,800	90,600

Source: ABS (2003a) *Child Care*, p. 12; ABS (2006) *Child Care*, p. 14; p. 39

While overall participation in early childhood services is quite strong, only 58% of four-year-olds participated in formal preschool/kindergarten education programs most for about 11 hours per week (ABS, 2006). Even in the important year or two before school many children do not have any formal early learning experiences.

Encouragingly, more recent data suggest increasing preschool attendance. According to the *2005 Report on Government Services*, preschool participation ranges from 100% in Tasmania to 59% in New South Wales

(2005 Report on Government Services, p. 14.9, p. 14.10). These data, and all other data on early childhood programs and participation, need cautious interpretation as there is some double counting, variation in school starting ages, "as well as issues with the synchronization of data collection times, leading to over estimation" of participation (p. 14.10).

Establishment of child care centres in Australia is very much market driven. Theoretically there is nothing stopping development of child care centres or preschools, except a combination of demand and the high cost of building and operating centres. The major source of Australian government funding for child care is the Child Care Benefit. There are no limits to the number of child care places eligible for the Child Care Benefit, however, as it is actually a fee subsidy scheme, many families miss out altogether and the benefits start to reduce once family incomes reaches \$38,000.

Caps on Child Care Benefit funded places in Family Day Care and Out-of-School-Hours care have recently been lifted, so theoretically these services could expand. In practice, Family Day Care growth will be slow because of a shortage of mothers prepared to care for other people's children in their homes. The areas where care is most needed are those where mothers are least likely to offer their services and homes to Family Day Care schemes. While demand for child care will continue, there are some indications that it may plateau as the children of the baby boomers will seek better home-work balances and workplaces become more "family friendly".

Continuing strong demand for child care is predicted and coupled with the substantial opportunities for capitalisation and profits within the child care sector, growth is likely to continue, at least in the near future (*Financial Review*, June 19th, 2004).

Issues of access and equity. Who misses out?

Increasing early childhood participation including evidence of some preschool growth is encouraging, but fails to highlight the seriousness of children who miss out on early childhood services, who are under-served, or who attend poor quality early childhood services. Unfortunately, both in Australia and elsewhere, children who are most likely to benefit from quality early childhood services because of family vulnerability are least likely to participate in them.

The much welcomed proposal for universal preschool announced recently by the Federal education minister will help address the urgent need for the most disadvantaged children to have some preschool education, but will need careful planning and management if all children are to benefit. In particular, early childhood services can no longer operate just between the hours of 9-3pm as they have done in the past if there is to be equitable participation. Further, gearing up for universal preschool will require a massive investment in early childhood teacher training, a process that will

take some years to operationalise and produce graduates. Presumably, many of these new preschool programs will operate *within* child care, rather than in stand-alone centres as they are now. This “integrated” model is the one that was proposed in the 1980s.

A related and rarely discussed equity issue is that little is known about children’s outcomes or progression within early childhood services. There is little or no serious discussion about whether there should be nationally consistent programs, agreed learning expectations, curriculum frameworks, or assessment of the quality of children’s experiences or their social and cognitive outcomes.

There is a similar dearth of quality control in respect of training and certification of early childhood care and education staff. There is no accreditation for early childhood or child care training programs and no registration for early childhood educators. Early childhood education is one of the last non-regulated professions, if indeed it can be called that (Elliott, 2005). At present in Queensland alone there are over 50 providers of early childhood Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications. There is little, if any, quality control of VET provided training for early childhood practitioners, especially by private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs).

Child care choices

This week’s *Blueprint* for early childhood highlighted yet again, that parents have few real child care choices. Variable child care provision means that finding child care and preschool services, and especially quality services that match family and child needs, is a continuing challenge.

Given the high costs of early childhood education and care and with little public early childhood provision, families have come to accept that early education is essentially a fee-for-service commodity. Most early childhood services are independently operated by commercial providers. Parents seeking early childhood services are thrust into educational consumerism from their child’s earliest educational experience. The reliance on commercial and other private providers and resignation to hefty fees may help explain the growing shift to independent schools. In most states child care and preschool fees rival those of the most expensive private schools- and private schools are not-for-profit, unlike most child care services.

In New South Wales, fees in preschools and kindergartens which are not part of a public school system start at about \$40 per day. Child care centre fees start at about \$50 to \$70 per day. Before-and-after-school care fees start at about \$20 per day. Similar fee ranges exist in all states. The practice of choosing and paying for an early educational service based on perceived reputation and quality, alignment with family values and locations is then continued to schooling selection (Elliott, 2000; Elliott, 2004).

The great divide. What happened to integrated care and education?

Policy and related funding formulas are critical in shaping early childhood education services. As mentioned earlier, there were substantial funding shifts from sessional preschools and kindergartens to long day care in the 1980s. At this time, the intention was for new long day care services to be built on to existing preschools or in new multi-purpose settings. These new services were to provide integrated, seamless early care and education for children from birth to school age. There was no intention to separate care and education. On the contrary, new "children's services" were to provide strong, integrated early care and education programs with appropriately trained early childhood professionals, including qualified early childhood teachers. About this time, universities developed early childhood degree programs to prepare educators to work across the 0-8 years age range as optimum developmental experiences were considered critical for *all* young children.

Obviously, the visions of the 1980s have largely *not* been realised. For a variety of historical, ideological, territorial and financial reasons, these integrated programs for children 0-5 did not develop as envisaged. Ironically, there are also both formal and informal "concerns" that families are using "child care" centres for educational purposes and as *de facto* preschools (Auditor General, 1994; Senate Employment, Education and Training Reference Committee, 1996, p. 12). And recent concerns that "yummy mummies" are taking up precious child care places, sometimes using up to 20 hours per week of subsidized care, while they "shop" or "lunch" has raised the question of priority care and access in the light of extreme child care shortages in some areas. Child care shortages have catapulted working and non working mothers into battle with each other, while missing the real point- the shortage of quality child care.

The funding shift from 'education' to 'care' without also providing strong developmental and learning programs in child care centres has widened the care-education divide and disadvantaged countless children. That child care centres provide the *only* early childhood service in some communities passes almost unnoticed. There is no choice, yet there is no qualified early childhood teacher, even for four year olds in the year before school.

The entrenchment of the 'care' and 'education' divide is vividly illustrated in some jurisdictions where children are moved between child care and sessional preschool for their 'dose' of education. Clearly, funding constraints prohibit many child care centres providing an early "education" program with qualified early childhood teachers, and as many of the most needy children do not and/or cannot attend a preschool program, they miss out on critical early learning opportunities.

So what does this mean for schools and the wider education sector?

All schools have to accommodate beginners' diverse social and cognitive diverse needs. So they are impacted, albeit indirectly, by the widespread differences in supply, quality, accessibility, cost and funding of early childhood services. But they rarely see themselves as major stakeholders in early childhood care and education.

A major concern for schools and the wider education community is the alarming developmental range amongst young children at school entry. Teachers frequently report that some children are reading fluently, for example, but that others can barely hold a crayon. Teachers often report poor language and social skills (AEU, 2003; Elliott, 2005).

Reception teachers are the first to recognise which children "didn't go to preschool". As indicated in the recent Australian Education Union's Preschool Enquiry teachers feel that children who have participated in good early education programs have a "head start" at school (AEU, 2003). The gaps that are apparent by age five or six are often too difficult to close, even with well targeted school interventions.

The substantial differences in children's entry level skills and competencies are now well illustrated in state based school entry level testing, such as in the ACT, and in the more recent population level data from the Australian Early Development Index (2005).

ACER researchers Ainley and Fleming (2003) have highlighted the critical role of the early years in their study of targeted literacy interventions in the early years of school. Their work shows that even though targeted literacy programs can improve children's reading skills in the first three years of school, the best predictor of reading achievement in Year 3 is entry level reading and language skills.

That many children, especially from the most vulnerable families, have had little opportunity to participate in rich preschool language and learning environments- at home or in formal care and education programs, puts them at an immediate disadvantage at school entry.

Teachers in schools are often surprised to learn that there is little consensus on what constitutes a good or quality early childhood program and that there is no cross-sectorial framework to describe what children should experience and learn. There is no agreed curriculum framework and no agreement on the appropriate qualifications for early childhood staff. About 30% of child care staff have no qualifications (FACS, 2005).

Schools have little input into or comment on early childhood curricula or pedagogy. They seem disinterested in whether early childhood centres

promote the learning outcomes they value, let alone whether they “prepare children for school”. In fact, within the early childhood field there is even debate about whether “preparation for school” should be a major goal of early childhood services.

Schools *do* want children to have rich preschool experiences and are well aware of positive impact of preschool and kindergarten programs. But despite this knowledge, they are remarkably silent in the debate about early childhood provision. There is almost no collaboration between schools and the early childhood sector on policy or program development. Frequently, there is not even a transition to school program.

Closing the early learning achievement gap requires early childhood programs that *both* optimise early learning and development *and* provide care during parents’ working hours. To date though, a national approach to seamless provision of early education and care is a long way off. There is little agreement on who would fund more integrated services and which pedagogical models and approaches would work best and in which contexts.

A key question to ask at this point is *should schools contribute* to the debate? Little is known about what schools need and want from early childhood programs? And does it matter? Should schools have a say in early childhood policy or program development or should early childhood care and education remain largely “in-house”, and disconnected from lifelong education? What will it take for schools to join the lobby for universal early childhood education and to close the “care” – “education” gap?

Where to now? Policy directions

As we have seen, early childhood education and care is a rapidly growing part of the Australian education landscape. Today, the early childhood sector caters for over half a million 0-5 year olds in a myriad of services that are legislated, funded and regulated by a complex network of agencies and organisations and operated by a range of government, community and private-for-profit concerns.

About three quarters of children aged 3 to 4 years used some type of formal child care including home-based Family Day Care (ABS, 2003b, p. 29), yet, little is known about how children fare. There are no consistent standards or learning programs across services, no agreed positions on staffing and staff qualifications, and no strategies for mapping, tracking or comparing children’s experiences and outcomes. In short there is little monitoring of early childhood settings and programs, little reporting of children’s progress, and little accountability for programs and outcomes.

Most early childhood sector growth has been in provision of care for young children while parents work. But in the scramble to provide affordable child

care, and without a national policy and vision for early childhood education, the once strong focus on early learning has slipped into the background.

In the early 1990s, concerns about quality within the rapidly increasing child care centres resulted in a National Quality Improvement and Assurance Scheme (QIAS) administered by the National Child Care Accreditation Council. While QIAS has ensured more consistent quality across child care centres, it does not focus on expectations for children's development and learning, the quality of their experiences, or on monitoring and guiding children's growth and progress across a range of learning and developmental areas.

QIAS does not apply to preschools and kindergartens. The preschool sector has no quality assurance framework, no explicit expectations for early learning and no mechanisms for reporting children's development or learning progress. Although most preschools have trained early childhood teachers who are expected to understand and foster early learning needs, there is no widespread agreement about what is valued and no framework for describing and tracking developing competence. Sometimes parents are confused about whether their child attends a preschool or a child care centre.

What should three and four year old children be learning? Should we have some national agreement or learning framework? Should we monitor provision of experiences and children's outcomes? Does it matter?

Lack of cross-service agreement and explicitness on what is valued, program shape and content and mechanisms for monitoring learning and educational progress, makes it difficult to gauge the educational significance of different programs types or individual programs on children's development.

Is it reasonable to compare the learning progress and outcomes of a four year old child in Child Care, Family Day Care and Kindergarten or Preschool when goals and purposes and programs are so different both within and across service types?

There is growing evidence of a widening 'care' – 'education' divide that is being supported and sustained by differential funding and resourcing. Closing it will be difficult unless there is a rethinking of early childhood policy and a commitment to supporting families, rather than the market driven approach that currently prevails.

Creating, sustaining and monitoring quality

Ideally, early childhood services should provide a comprehensive development, care and education program for children in the 0-5 age group. The early childhood literature is clear about the close connections

between care, development and education, but Australia's separate 'care' and 'education' traditions have resulted in a twin system of child care and preschools/kindergartens. This division along care and education lines has serious implications for children's learning and development and the overall quality of early educational programs. Children's development is being compromised.

Research on school effectiveness shows that teachers and setting have a major impact on children's learning outcomes. Similar evidence on the strong connections between staff quality and pedagogical environments for younger children is also emerging. Yet, as mentioned earlier, there is no nationally agreed position, or even state-based agreement, on how early childhood programs should look, how curriculum should be structured, what values, learning experiences and outcomes could and should be expected, and what staffing standards or qualifications are most likely to enhance opportunities and outcomes for children. There is even considerable confusion about who is or should be called an "early childhood teacher".

At present, there is dramatic variation in qualifications of staff in the early childhood sector and serious shortages of staff. Each state has its own staffing regulations detailing minimum staff qualifications. At present only about 10% of staff in child care centres have an early childhood education degree. Most staff have a one or two year vocational certificate in child care. About 30% of staff have no relevant qualification (FACS, 2005). Yet, as in the school sector, teachers' knowledge and understanding of learning and development, their interactions with children, and modelling and scaffolding, and questioning techniques are key factors influencing children's developmental outcomes. Higher quality settings are related to positive cognitive and social-behavioural outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Ingvarson, 1998; 2000; Sammons, Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart & Eliot, 2003; Sammons, Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart & Eliot, 2002; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002).

Ingvarson (2002) says the message from this research is that policy makers must invest *first and most* in teacher quality. The same is almost certainly true in the early childhood services sector.

As I have often argued (Elliott, 1999, 2002), funding and regulation of the child care sector provides little incentive or support for attracting and keeping appropriately qualified early childhood staff. And the major impediment is cost. If all staff were to have diploma or degree-level qualifications in early childhood care and education, costs of running services would be astronomical.

Unfortunately, the vision of integrated children's services, offering strong care *and* education programs promoted in the 1980s has faded. As new long day care services evolved, few centres were able or willing to provide a comprehensive, seamless and integrated education and care program for

young children. Mainly, the cost of qualified early childhood staff was just too high. The different staffing requirements and expectations for child care and preschools/kindergartens illustrate the care and education divisions most vividly. And the gap seems to be widening.

That this 'care' and 'education' divide exerts such a strong influence on policy, practice and perception of early childhood services despite contemporary knowledge about children's patterns of growth and development is worrying. At the same time, there is a self-serving dimension to the 'care' and 'education' divide. Maintaining and differentiating the 'care' function of child care and the 'education' function of preschools lessens pressure on providing universal, integrated and seamless early education and care services that would be so valuable but so expensive. Indeed private-for-profit child care centres, Family Day Care and other home-based care are relatively low cost child care options for governments.

Vision and directions

It is against this complex backdrop that early childhood services directions, visions and policy must be considered. Clearly, early childhood programs are a key community provision for many children and families. While availability and affordability are important, and there is a clear need for *more* early childhood provision, the current, somewhat haphazard approach to early childhood growth and policy needs review. Australia has some of the best early childhood services in the world, but quality is variable and many children, especially the most vulnerable, are poorly served. Thoughtful planning is critical if we are to avoid further erosion of quality and prevent child care from becoming a predominantly welfare service. Already, more affluent families with a range of work-family balance options shun group care for young children. And we must avoid the situation where working and non-working families, including those on Child Care Benefits, cluster in services where fees and hence quality are kept as low as possible to maximise affordability. The preschool and kindergarten system in some states is at "breaking point". Early childhood service quality must not be tied to family socio-economic status.

There is an urgent need for a national vision and action plan to build a comprehensive, quality system of early childhood education and care. This will include rethinking the current regulatory framework and especially the state-Commonwealth division of responsibilities and funding mechanisms.

For a start, four key commitments and actions are needed.

1. A whole-of-government commitment to quality, integrated early childhood education and care independent of families' ability to pay within a national policy, regulatory and funding framework. The current 'care'- 'education' divide must be closed.

2. At least one year of free “preschool education” for all children in the year/s before school, plus targeted two year programs for children from vulnerable families. New early education services should be embedded within child care centres and/or provided within the school system. All early childhood programs must have at least one qualified early childhood teacher.

3. A national approach to staffing in child care and preschools including staff qualifications and child: staff ratios, including a national accreditation system for professional preparation and certification, plus a national early childhood educator registration system. Pay parity for staff across early childhood centres linked to qualifications and experience.

4. A national curriculum framework for early childhood services (preschool and child care) to ensure greater consistency and comparability across programs.

Just a few years into the Twenty First Century there is an historic opportunity to invest in strengthening educational outcomes for all children. High quality early childhood programs impact positively on children, their families, communities and the government. All children benefit from early childhood education, but children from lower income families benefit most. Quality early childhood education puts all children on the right track. It sets the path to school and later social success. Children raised in poverty and who fail at school are less likely to become productive members of society and more likely to engage in crime, use alcohol and other drugs, suffer poor health and neglect their children.

Early childhood education promotes children’s wellbeing, especially within the most vulnerable families. The negative consequences of poverty and school failure on individual and community wellbeing are profound and well documented (Heckman, 1999; Heckman & Kruger, 2003). As a nation we need to take stock and commit to a comprehensive, quality early childhood education entitlement for each child. Fundamental to this quality dimension is dismantling the ‘care’- ‘education’ divide to create seamless, early childhood care and learning programs and providing high quality early childhood programs for all children. Our early childhood programs must *both* optimize early development and learning *and* provide care during parents’ working hours. Nationally, we know what the problems are- it’s committing to, funding and implementing the solutions that are proving difficult.

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