Pedagogical Silences in Australian Early Childhood Social Policy

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ABSTRACT Growing international interest in the early childhood years has been accompanied by an expansion of public programs in Australia targeting young children and their families. This article explores some of the influences and rhetoric that frame these initiatives. It encourages critical examination of the discourses that shape the nature of early childhood programs in Australia and identifies a range of barriers that inhibit the involvement of early childhood teachers in the design and delivery of social policy initiatives for young children. As the imperatives of programs seeking to overcome social disadvantage take prominence in Australian early childhood policy initiatives, pedagogical perspectives that promote universal rights to more comprehensive early childhood experiences can easily be silenced. The article calls for pedagogical leadership to overcome these barriers and promote the democratic rights of all children to high-quality and publicly supported early childhood education and care programs.

Moss (2001) observes that early childhood education and care can often be viewed as ‘technology for social stability and economic progress, the young child as a redemptive vehicle to be programmed to become a solution to certain problems’ (p. 13). This powerful observation sets a context for the following critical analysis of the influences on early childhood social policy in Australia. Often expressed in the separate domains of health, welfare and education, this article exposes the dichotomies that these artificial demarcations create in a social policy context. While early childhood teachers may consider themselves influential in the design and delivery of education and care programs, powerful policy agendas are dominating the discourses of early childhood education and care that favour health and welfare imperatives over more comprehensive and pedagogically driven possibilities. Within this context, the term ‘pedagogies’ is used to express approaches to curriculum, learning and teaching that recognise the complex interconnectedness of health, welfare and education in young children’s lives – approaches that are grounded in images of children as capable and resourceful.

The article begins by outlining the global impetus for public interest in early childhood as an important life phase. It then analyses Australian responses to these influences and describes consequent changes to public provisions for young children within this country, drawing on specific examples, particularly within New South Wales. It argues that the selective use of particular types of research evidence and reliance on a narrow range of evidence is diminishing the importance of early childhood pedagogies. The article highlights a subtle and yet powerful shift in the intentions and outcomes for children’s services across Australia. It alerts early childhood teachers to pervading images of the ‘vulnerable and needy’ child within social policy and how these images are acting to shape curriculum and ways in which teachers work with children and families. The article concludes with a call for pedagogical leadership to influence and shape early childhood policy agendas rather than simply adapting to the initiatives of more influential voices.
Acknowledging the contexts in which early childhood services are currently framed is crucial to this discussion as these contexts influence the form that public provisions for early childhood programs will take. Social policy discourses frame early childhood institutions as a strategy of social intervention ‘capable of protecting the society against the effects of poverty, inequality, insecurity and marginalisation’ (Dahlberg et al, 1999, p. 66). As Press & Woodrow (2005) observe, in Australia the early childhood sector is constructed variously as: facilities that enable maternal workforce participation; sites for compensatory programs for children experiencing disadvantage; and facilities that prepare children for school. The child within these institutions is commonly referred to as a future investment, ‘our most important future economic resource’ (Commonwealth Task Force on Child Development, Health and Wellbeing, 2003, p. iii.). Described as future workers, consumers and taxpayers (Commonwealth Task Force on Child Development, Health and Wellbeing, 2003), children are considered worthy of public investment in order to ensure a healthy later return. Moreover, the findings of recent studies on early years development indicate that interventions in the early years can be more effective and less costly than those in the later years (Commonwealth Task Force on Child Development, Health and Wellbeing, 2003). These images of the child as one, who if exposed to a range of interventions and prevention strategies will somehow ensure future societal stability, also shape to a great extent how public provisions for young children are delivered. Approaches that view the young child as the passive recipient of preventions and interventions are evident in a range of social welfare, health and education initiatives.

Emerging Interest in Early Childhood

Political interest in young children has emerged most recently in response to new understandings about the brain and its development in the early childhood years. Brain development research emerged in the USA during the late 1980s. One of the findings, that the development of young children’s brains is highly influenced and moulded by their early experiences, was initially welcomed by the early childhood professional community as ground-breaking evidence of the importance of high-quality early experiences for young children. These findings, however, have been selectively interpreted as most useful in overcoming disadvantage and addressing deficits, with governments in many Western countries drawing on these to promote a range of social welfare programs for children experiencing disadvantage (Mustard et al, 2000; Oberklaid, 2004; Vimpani, 2005). The benefits of non-targeted, mainstream early childhood education programs have somehow failed to gain the same attention.

Governments in both the United Kingdom (UK) and Canada responded to the brain research findings with expansive social welfare programs. In the UK, evidence from the brain research was used by government to promote substantial spending on the Sure Start program. This specifically targeted program designed to address poverty and its consequences on young children has been hailed as a successful whole of government approach to problems stemming from the early childhood years (Oberklaid, 2004; Leggat, 2004). Similarly, Canadian initiatives that initially targeted low-socio-economic communities with compensatory programs later found that children across all socio-economic groups made gains from universal, non-stigmatised programs that integrated early childhood development and parenting and that were ‘available and accessible to all children and families in all communities’ (Mustard et al, 2000, p.78).

It has been argued that each of these programs has been developed in direct response to the impact of earlier socio-economic policies that have prioritised a market-driven economic rationalist approach, which has in turn created substantial inequality within society (Vimpani, 2005). Countries that have made different choices about approaches to their economy have not seen the need to invent such deficit-driven programs to address the inequities created by market economies. Moss & Petrie (2002) report that developments in Sweden have not targeted particularly needy groups, but are grounded in a philosophical position of democracy and children’s rights. The authors argue that ‘issues of social exclusion [were] not prominent, perhaps because other policies have prevented or mitigated processes of inequality and dislocation’ (Moss et al 1999, cited in Moss & Petrie, 2002, p. 7). There are no broadly based comparable deficit-driven programs in Sweden. As such the Swedish Government has freed up the possibilities for all young children to be viewed as entitled citizens rather than targeting specific entitlements to particular groups. They are therefore
able to consider innovative approaches to early childhood provisions (Moss & Petrie, 2002). Swedish children, no matter what their family circumstance, are entitled in their own right to a publicly funded early childhood education. In recent years, Sweden has transferred government responsibility for early childhood education from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Science (Choi, 2002). Sweden’s universal pre-school provision is based on a decision to treat early childhood education similarly to other stages of education, a decision supported by increased expenditure (Choi, 2002). In contrast, programs dominating the social policy platforms of the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia, are increasingly targeted at vulnerable families. Moreover, they direct program entitlement to the parent, the child becoming the secondary recipient of the program delivery.

These comparisons highlight an important distinction. The ideological underpinnings of each program will determine, to at least some extent, the priority areas for spending and the design of the programs that will be made available to the entitled citizen. Swedish initiatives have enabled early childhood pedagogies to shape and influence the design of programs for young children, unlike the case in the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia where early childhood pedagogy is shaped by welfare policy. Grounded in deficit recovery, the explicit outcomes and evaluation measures inherent in the funding guidelines in these countries act to shape the pedagogical content of these programs. The expansion of early childhood education programs to include parenting support, family counselling and child protection and prevention strategies act to shape the purpose and intent of early childhood service provision. As government programs increasingly target specific outcomes, the possibilities for comprehensive education programs for young children become less likely.

Within Australia, three recent imperatives have driven the early childhood social policy agenda: worldwide interest in the early years in response to ‘brain research’ (Department of Family and Community Services, 2004); overwhelming evidence of the impact of economic policy on young children and families (Vimpani, 2005); and the shift in childcare provision away from a government controlled non-profit sector to a rapidly expanding for-profit, private provision (Press & Woodrow, 2005; Sumsion, 2006). The following discussion highlights Australia’s responses to these imperatives.

**Australian Responses to Brain Development Research**

It took considerable time for governments across Australia to commit to any substantive programs responding directly to new knowledge about children’s growth and development. While the then US President announced substantial investment in brain development related spending in 1997 (Vimpani, 2005), Australia continued to generate a number of investigative reports – the National Health Goals and Targets for Australian Children and Youth, 1992; the National Health Policy for Children and Young People, 1995; the National Health Policy for Young Australians, 1997 (Leggat, 2004). As evidenced by their titles, these reports focused on health issues, including preventable premature mortality, vaccine preventable diseases and social functioning. As Leggat (2004) notes, ‘Although the evidence supporting a broader definition of child health was strong, the focus of these national health goals and targets remained heavily focused towards surveillance and the reduction of injury and illness’ (p. 3).

Moreover, Goldfield & Oberklaid (2005) reported that in Australia there has been ‘no comparative data collected on other aspects of early childhood such as family functioning, despite the evidence suggesting that this is just as important as immunisation to outcomes for children’ (p. 3). As Goldfield & Oberklaid (2005) observe, the collection of data in the traditional areas of children’s health such as hospital admissions and waiting lists has been routine and clearly informs health policy. While the ‘Growing up in Australia’ longitudinal study (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2002) is designed to provide data on child development and well-being, the findings of this study will not be available until 2010. During the intervening period ‘major funding decisions [will] still be made with few or no data to either inform or evaluate’ (Goldfield & Oberklaid, 2005, p. 2). This seeming lack of available evidence relating to children’s learning and development inadvertently promotes health and welfare imperatives over other possibilities.
**Economic Policy and the Welfare Imperative**

In addition to the evidence base surrounding children’s health, the impact on children and young families of contemporary socio-economic policies is noted by the nation’s charities (Leech & Lewis, 2005). Woodruff & O’Brien (2005) suggest that an increasing number of children and families are facing multifaceted problems brought about by social and economic inequality. Vimpani (2005) alerts us to the impact of such inequality that is well entrenched in our society today. He reports, ‘we haven’t seen it here yet, but in Britain, mortality in younger age cohorts actually increased during the Thatcher years when income inequality widened’ (p. 1).

In an attempt to redress these concerning trends, Australian governments announced a raft of programs aimed at addressing the consequences of social and economic inequality. Best Start in Victoria, Families First in New South Wales, Every Chance for Every Child in South Australia and A Healthy Start for our Children in Tasmania (Oberklaid, 2004) were followed by the Australian Government Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. These programs heralded a new commitment by governments around Australia to target vulnerable families and communities. Significant in their expenditure, these programs share a commitment to improving outcomes for young children and are firmly grounded in evidence-based research (Families First, 2005; Department of Human Services, Victoria, 2005). While each program speaks of universal provisions, their strategies are clearly aimed at targeting inequality and disadvantage (Department of Human Services, Victoria, 2005), and prevention and early intervention (Families First, 2005). It is increasingly evident that Australian governments favour programs that identify and target specified disadvantaged social groups. Despite the provision by many state and territory governments of universally available early childhood programs for four year-old children, this is a somewhat limited interpretation of what inclusive and comprehensive early childhood programs might offer as an alternative to this patchwork of deficit-driven solutions. Vimpani (2005) notes the impact of the shifting priorities of the current Australian Government.

Whilst the Howard government has encouraged the expansion of child care and is in the process of launching a raft of early intervention strategies through the Stronger Families and Communities strategy, in some parts of the country more than half of school entrants currently have no prior to school group educational experience (p. 2).

While additional funding is available for deficit-driven programs, existing children’s services in some parts of the country have languished under conditions of inadequate funding. For example, New South Wales pre-schools funded by the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) have experienced funding constraints over the last two decades rendering services unaffordable for many families (NSW Children’s Services Forum, 2002). Despite a recent injection of funds by the NSW Government under the Preschool Investment and Reform Plan, this seemingly substantial increase in funds will still place NSW pre-schools, in funding terms, almost 50% below their counterparts in the other states and territories of Australia (Community Child Care, 2006). While the provision of a comprehensive pre-school education program in NSW has been largely disregarded, it is noteworthy that the NSW Government has announced further new funds to the early intervention program ‘Brighter Futures’ – yet another targeted program aimed at ‘vulnerable families’ (Department of Community Services, NSW, 2007). This apparent preference of government toward targeted rather than comprehensive early childhood program provision reinforces perceptions that children are entitled to early childhood programs only if they are ostensibly weak and in need. This view denies the potentials and possibilities that universal early childhood provisions might offer the community.

In 2003, a National Agenda for Early Childhood was announced on behalf of all three tiers of Australian governments (national, state/territory, and local). It aimed to articulate the priorities of governments in working together to address the needs of children (Australian Government Task Force of Child Development, Health and Wellbeing, 2003). Similarly to the state government initiatives, the National Agenda is couched in terms of prevention and intervention. The evidence base of this document is grounded in well-recognised assumptions about what constitutes risk to children’s development in the early years. Included in this list of evidence are factors such as the antenatal experience for the child, with an emphasis on nutrition and substance abuse. The areas of cognitive experience and social and emotional development are vaguely referred to as ‘stimulation’
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(p. 4). The National Agenda is clearly targeted at ‘early intervention that seeks to ameliorate risk factors reducing the likelihood of later substance abuse and crime, and increases the likelihood of children continuing education through high school and beyond being employed as adults’ (p. 4). As such, the intention of the National Agenda is about preventing undesirable behaviour in the future population. Clearly, these policies are consistent with Moss & Petrie’s (2002) observation that early childhood education is often viewed primarily as a cure for social and economic ills. While it is recognised that many children and families are likely to benefit from these programs, there is little opportunity within such a deficit-driven framework to consider how a more comprehensive and universal approach to service provision might address the same concerns.

It is predictable, then, that strategies to achieve such social and economic objectives manifest in prevention programs as opposed to progressive strategies that recognise the potentials of children as entitled citizens. It is interesting to note that the advisory body influential in framing this agenda – the Task Force on Child Development, Health and Wellbeing – was constituted by what the then Minister referred to as a ‘select group of early childhood experts’ (Australian Government Task Force on Child Development, Health and Wellbeing, 2003, p. 1). As a further initiative, the Australian Council for Children and Parenting (ACCAP) was announced as an advisory group to the Minister for Family and Community Services on early childhood issues. Health and welfare professionals and those with particular expertise in areas of disadvantage dominated the original membership of these groups. There was limited representation on these committees from the early childhood education sector. It is somewhat concerning that two such influential opportunities for shaping discourses within the National Agenda overlooked the contributions that experts in early childhood curriculum and pedagogy might offer to these discussions.

An analysis of the discourses emerging from the National Agenda provides insight into the policies and priorities of government. Of particular note is the dominant image of the child as a weak and vulnerable citizen in need of protection and support. In this way, government articulates its role as one of providing essential supports where families fail to meet the most fundamental physical, social and emotional needs of their children. These programs aim to target the most vulnerable members of the community. They use the language of ‘at risk’ (DoCS, 2007), ‘vulnerable’ (Families First, 2005) and ‘disadvantaged’ (Department of Human Services, Victoria, 2005). These terms frame the child as weak and in need of intervention. They serve to classify the type of child or family that is eligible for such government provisions and they in turn influence the types of programs that will be eligible for funding under these initiatives. These government initiatives promoted as early childhood programs are not universal provisions. They are specifically targeted programs established in areas where demographic data indicates a need for support. For example, Best Start claims to ‘aim to improve the health, development, learning and well-being of all children across Victoria ... through supporting providers to improve universal local early years service systems’ (Department of Human Services, Victoria, 2005, p. 2). Despite claims of delivering to all children through universal services, the program is targeted at areas identified by demographic eligibility requirements based on labour force status, family income, educational attainment and English proficiency of parents (Department of Human Services, Victoria, 2005).

The Increasing Emphasis on Market Forces: the changing face of early childhood services

The Australian Government argues that it resources universal provision of children’s services through programs such as Child Care Benefit (Department of Family and Community Services, 2005). This provision, available to all families using registered or approved childcare and indexed according to family income, acts to reduce the cost of childcare for families across Australia. Historically this payment (previously known as Fee Relief) was paid to approved services on authorisation of their annual budget. This budget approval process, by the Government’s own department, enabled government to play a major role in the monitoring of quality elements of children’s services programs such as the employment of qualified staff (Cox, 2005).

During the 1990s the Australian Government changed its approach to the distribution of these funds. Under the new title of Child Care Benefit, the entitlement was made available directly
to parents, enabling them to reduce their childcare costs in approved services. This move represented an ideological shift in the Government’s direct provision of children’s services. No longer wishing to carry the burden of funding services, the Government shifted its provision to fund parents. This shift facilitated the market to operate more independently of government and supposedly allowed parents to make choices within this broader market provision. The consequence of this decision was in effect to open the marketplace to a range of new service providers and has led to a rapid expansion of the corporate for-profit sector (Sumsion, 2006). This political approach to the provision of children’s services in Australia, Cox (2005) suggests, has encouraged ‘rising fees, poor planning and irresponsible spending’ (p. 1).

The listing of some childcare providers as public companies on the stock exchange has reframed the landscape of children’s services and positioned the Government as a provider of benefits to subsidise costs to parents along with an arm’s length surveillance role realised through quality assurance schemes and regulatory processes. As Press & Woodrow (2005) observe, this trend encapsulates a confidence in ‘regulated market mechanisms to respond appropriately to community needs for infrastructure and services’ (p. 283). The persuasive agendas of shareholder interest are now so influential in the provision of universal children’s services, thus raising the question: whose voices are most dominant in the design and delivery of programs for children under such an approach? A policy framework that privileges private interests limits the possibilities that a community might imagine for young children (Press & Woodrow, 2005).

The ideological shift away from direct provision of services has resulted in a new role for government in directing their attention to program gaps and largely leaving the provision of universal services to market forces. This shift positions government as the provider of supplementary services, enabling it to identify particular target groups as priorities in its overall agenda for children and families. The compelling agenda of families in crisis then begins to dominate the discourses of government programs for young children. Families NSW (formerly Families First) in New South Wales and the National Stronger Families program are firmly entrenched in the language of families and target many of their programs directly to parents, with children benefiting only as secondary recipients. This subtle shift in language redirects provision of government away from the child as a citizen with individual entitlements to education and care, to the broader context of the family. The child in this context is not viewed as an entitled citizen in their own right but rather, their rights become somewhat diffused within the broader context of the family and community.

Whilst acknowledging that many states and territories across Australia provide a universal pre-school year for four year-old children, this provision is somewhat narrow in its ambitions when compared to the possibilities that might be imagined for young children (Moss & Petrie, 2002). Recent Australian government initiatives for early childhood favour programs that support families, who can in turn influence the experience of the child. Under such programs the importance of early childhood curriculum designed not merely to address the diagnosed deficits of young children but to promote universal entitlement to broad early childhood pedagogies, appears lost. The persuasive argument of public provisions targeting vulnerable children and families is difficult to criticise or reject. While the ideas that these programs promote may be admirable, they need to be carefully examined for their potential to limit early childhood programs to those built on paternalistic themes perpetuating idealised ways of being (Cannella, 1997).

The Influence of ‘Evidence-based’ Research
This trend toward targeted programs brings into question the role of research findings in the development and direction of government policy. As Kingdon (1995) suggests, three factors come together simultaneously in order to influence policy decision-making:

- the problem needs to be recognised (data), a potential solution needs to be identified within a policy framework (evidence based strategies), and a political imperative needs to exist, with a potential for commitment and no severe constraints. (Cited in Goldfield & Oberklaid, 2005, p. 2)

Kingdon’s formula for political influence demonstrates clearly a need for evidence presented as tangible fact or hard data. The very approach of solution-driven policy implies the need for a
problem to solve. The consequent response then naturally prioritises deficit-driven solutions rather than progressive approaches aiming to address potentials and possibilities.

In addition, the reliance on ‘hard’ data lends itself to the more observable and measurable indicators. Immunisation rates, hospital admissions, notification rates of child abuse or domestic violence produce a substantial and reliable picture on which to build solutions. Despite being recognised as important early childhood developmental milestones, the less observable characteristics such as children’s social adeptness, their early experiences with problem solving, creative thinking and communication capacity are less likely to produce concrete data that can easily be translated into universal policy. This situation is perhaps exacerbated by an early childhood education profession that has been opposed to the production of standardised measures or an outcomes-based curriculum that might serve to produce such measurable data. This article does not promote the production of such measurable data and in fact is supportive of the views of early childhood professionals who have resisted the pressure to produce such evidence. It must be acknowledged, however, that this position leaves the less measurable but important factors in children’s development somewhat silenced in the current social policy arena that demands evidence as proof of a program’s worth.

This preference for some forms of evidence over others is considered by neo-critical theorists who question how some ideas come to dominate and are thereby prioritised by society. Marx & Engels (1965, cited in MacNaughton, 2005, p. 8) suggest that those ideologies that dominate are associated with the most powerful discourses produced by the most powerful groups within society at the time. The current focus of governments toward data as proof, and an insistence on evidence-based outcomes, acts to dominate early childhood discourses. It is understandable, then, that issues and dilemmas that are easily quantifiable, that demonstrate unquestionable need and that imply urgent attention can become the dominant discourses over time. As Dockett & Sumsion (2004) suggest, the wealth of research from other disciplines related to children can act to reduce the visibility of limited early childhood education research. In addition, they also note that much of the early childhood education research is carried out in the areas of child development as opposed to strategies for teaching and learning. This focus limits any evidence base for pedagogical practice. When competing with the convincing ‘hard’ data of the health and welfare sectors, early childhood education research can seem somewhat soft and intangible. There is very little ‘hard’ evidence that any early childhood pedagogical approach in Australia is producing measurable benefit to children. MacNaughton (2004) perhaps rightly alerts us to the dangers of justifying early childhood education according to ‘simple cause and effect statements’ (p. 100). Nonetheless, this position can act to silence the early childhood education agenda in a government environment convinced of the credibility of evidence.

What I have identified to this point is a difficult tension around the principles of equity that manifest themselves as silences. Contrary to contemporary government rhetoric, I am not advocating for a particularly vulnerable and silenced group. Rather, I am arguing that the universal is silenced. In the current discourses that frame children as vulnerable, needy and at-risk, it is the child with none of these deficits who is currently silenced in social policy and left to the diminishing non-targeted provisions of government, or to the private priorities that families give to their children’s education. Furthermore, the possibilities that universal rather than targeted social policy might offer the community are not realised within such a narrow interpretation of government responsibility.

This emphasis on targeted provisions creates a strange nexus and forces us to operate in uncomfortable dichotomies. Although the origins of early childhood education in Australia were driven by philanthropic responses to deficits, early childhood teachers have more recently framed early childhood education as providing for the potentials and possibilities of children. Generally, the early childhood field does not problematise early childhood as a stage of life but, rather, views it in terms of strengths and capacities. While agendas responding to the individual circumstances of children are not incompatible with approaches to early childhood curriculum, they certainly have the potential to influence the ways in which early childhood pedagogy is interpreted. There is a risk that early childhood pedagogy under these influences is reduced to models addressing developmental deficits and preparation for later stages of schooling rather than recognising the potentials of children and their universal rights in the present.
The importance of universal entitlements is perhaps not a persuasive argument to governments driven by economic rationalism and user pays principles that promote individualism. Under such ideological political approaches, the capable individual largely looks after their own discretionary needs and those of their immediate family. Government focuses attention on filling gaps.

A Call for Pedagogical Leadership

In Australia it is apparent that some government policies consider early childhood education discretionary rather than an entitlement. In this context, the lack of early childhood educational voices to inform decisions about the role and place of early childhood education in Australian public policy is a particular concern. Grieshaber (2000) notes that recent government policy initiatives at both the state and federal level serve to influence the practice of curriculum. She contends that the National Accreditation System for Childcare along with the states' recent interventions in the development of early childhood curriculum documents are based more on economic rationalist principles that on sound pedagogical influences.

In public conversations about initiatives for early childhood, the dominating voices are those of the health and welfare sectors that have been the major beneficiaries of the new government-funded programs for young children. Under the Stronger Families and Communities strategy, the most successful groups within the tender process have been the large charities. The Smith Family, UnitingCare Burnside, The Benevolent Society and Mission Australia have all received considerable boosts to their funding base as facilitating partners in this $143 million program (Department of Family and Community Services, 2005).

Despite the rhetoric from the welfare sector that it is committed to universal service provision, it is clear that this notion is firmly framed in a therapeutic response. The notion of universal service provision is viewed as ‘the core of primary prevention strategy’ (Scott, 2003, cited in Woodruff & O’Brien, 2005). Woodruff & O’Brien (2005) recommend a dismantling of the silos of health, education and welfare and promoting of more collaborative partnerships. The charity-driven discussion about alternative models is, however, dominated by the language of deficits and disadvantage. When considering what role the children’s services sector might play in these new partnerships, Woodruff & O’Brien (2005) suggest they can ‘operate as a form of respite’ (p. 51) and that children’s services staff might offer training to their welfare colleagues on ‘child development and play-based learning’ (p. 54). Within this model, children’s services expertise is reduced to offering advice on ‘playgroup activities, child development concerns and age appropriate behaviours’ (Sheeley & Tipper, 2002, cited in Woodruff & O’Brien, 2005 p. 54). The potential for children’s services to contribute pedagogical influence into the design of such programs is limited when relegated to the position of service delivery of pre-determined programs. This almost subordinate role for children’s services completely disregards the complexity and significance of early childhood pedagogies.

It is not only the welfare sector that is receiving prominence in these discussions. Conversations considering issues of education and care are clearly now the province of paediatricians. Notable examples include Professor Graham Vimpani, Head of Paediatrics and Child Health at the University of Newcastle, who has argued against the lack of early childhood pedagogy within current government initiatives (Vimpani, 2005), and Professor Frank Oberklaid, Director of the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, who has highlighted the need for attention to early literacy as being as important as childhood immunisation (Horin, 2005). Beyond these two medical professionals, there is an apparent lack of pedagogical voice informing these debates and the early childhood sector seems destined to be led in new directions. The silence of pedagogy is deafening and the absence of early childhood pedagogical voices within these discourses is alarming.

While government initiatives may bring hope of some short-term funding solutions to under-resourced children’s services, there needs to be due consideration of the long-term impact on the design and delivery of early childhood education programs. As Stonehouse observed in 1994, ‘we are not guiding the changes in our field but are more akin to victims of change, constantly having to adjust and respond to changes that we have not initiated’ (p. 9). The current situation in early

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childhood settings across the country may be a contributing factor to this allegedly weak leadership. There is evidence that a widespread qualified staffing shortage in prior-to-school settings may have an impact on leadership capacity within the sector (Ball, 2002). Hayden (1996) reported that 41% of directors of early childhood services in her study had worked in the field for less than two years before taking on the role of director. Sergiovanni implies that inspirational leadership (as opposed to competent administration) 'is an art which takes many years to develop' (Sergiovanni, 1984, cited in Hayden, 1996). As Hard (2005) reports, 'professional identity is an important underpinning to participants' sense of agency to lead' (p. 54). Critical factors such as the status of early childhood professionals within the education field along with low salaries and poor working conditions for early childhood staff in many Australian states and territories give rise to concerns about how effective early childhood professionals can be in disseminating their wisdom beyond the confines of the field itself.

There is perhaps some cause for concern that leadership within early childhood settings lacks the depth of experience that may be required to effectively lead others in influencing broader policy decisions. While discussions about pedagogical innovation are lively within the early childhood community (Fleet & Patterson, 2002; MacNaughton, 2005), there is little evidence that these discussions have had any impact outside the early childhood professional community. The significant knowledge base that has been developed over time is not effectively distributed beyond the early childhood profession in a way that can affect the broader policy arena.

In contrast, in Italy, the experience of the community of Reggio Emilia provides a sound example of an early childhood pedagogical program that is shaping government provisions. In Reggio Emilia, the local authority (commune) has established a system of early childhood schools guided by policies that are built on an image of children as ‘competent, strong and full of potentials’ (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 135). This image has been shaped through a process of democratic discussion and reflection in which early childhood pedagogy has been foregrounded. We can learn from this experience ‘how the local community, as a political entity, can make pedagogical practice, and childhood more widely, a vibrant and important part of traditional mainstream politics’ (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 137). This model encourages policy makers to consider programs for children in a different policy paradigm, one that does not rely on limited sources of evidence, but on meaningful dialogue.

Katz (1997) identifies that for early childhood leaders to be influential in the broader political arena, there is a need for professional consensus on the sector’s major contentious issues. Consensus may require moving beyond discourses of ideology so prevalent in the early childhood community and rethinking approaches to research and evidence that may be currently weakening the position of early childhood pedagogical perspectives in social policy decision-making. The current vulnerability of the early childhood education sector in Australia, and the lack of evidence-based research relating to early childhood pedagogies, presents significant challenges for early childhood leaders to articulate a strong and influential message. If we fail to respond to the current trends in early childhood social policy, we run the risk of permanently cementing ourselves as subordinate services to the broader health and welfare agenda that is clearly dictating the terms of early childhood policy today.

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