

Early childhood education and care: politics, policies and possibilities

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This paper considers some of the current knowledge about our understanding of and provision for early childhood internationally. It looks at its relative importance, offers a short overview of research and terminology, outlines a global perspective (the big picture) and provides a brief summary of the current South Australian policy and position.

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Early childhood: its importance

In the twenty-first century it is probably evident to every parent, professional childcare worker, kindergarten and primary teacher that early childhood is high on the political agenda almost everywhere. Politicians and priests, criminologists and medical practitioners, researchers and police, social workers and psychologists talk and write about it constantly. It has been the subject of major reviews in *Time* magazine in the USA, in numerous weeklies in Europe and the UK and is a frequent issue in the Western mass media generally. From the Baltic to the Southern Ocean it is a topic of concern, crucial in the shaping of our children's lives and of future societies (see Ball, 1994; OECD, 2001, 2003; DfES, 2004).

The early nurturance of very young children and the importance of consistent high-quality attachment between the caregiver and the child are in themselves recognized as *the* vital components in optimal brain development; a part of every child's birthright and pivotal features in carefully crafted, loving, educational and socio-emotional experience from birth. These are essential ingredients if the brain is to achieve something akin to its real potential, and if humans are to grow into fully functioning, creative and caring adults.

We have more than the individual comment and observations of past philosophers, clerics and poets, more than the preoccupations of teachers and other professionals engaged in work with children. We now have convincing evidence from

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neuroscience, from longitudinal development studies and from population studies that early childhood is the period when the human organism responds to the environment with such malleability that the very architecture of the brain is affected. In fact the child's brain is immensely 'plastic' and remarkably responsive, during the first three or four years of life especially, and 'who we are' as teenagers and adults is critically shaped by the influence of our very early relationships with 'significant others' and the immediate external environment we experienced as children. Above all, we know that the child's brain thrives best in a loving, consistent and reliable socio-emotional environment—one best characterised as exhibiting security, high-quality attachment (where others are emotionally available to provide comfort and support when needed: Gerhardt, 2000, p.24) and predictability, yet permitting exploration, initiative and some degree of choice. Equally important, we know that impoverished early experiences are debilitating, and, if persistent, can critically limit physical and mental well-being. They erode relationships, inhibit learning and creativity and create a poor 'seedbed' for sensitive growth, casting a long, misshapen shadow across the developmental profile of children, affecting later school and other vital social learning, blighting adulthood and even (perhaps) creating destructive circumstances for others within the social orbit. Gerhardt (2004, p. 18) refers to this as 'active harm':

The babies who are born now and in the years to come will be the adults who nurse us in our old age, who manage our industry, who entertain us, who live next door. What kind of adults will they be? Will they be emotionally balanced enough to contribute their talents, or will they be disabled by hidden sensitivities?

(See also Keating & Hertzman, 1999; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2001; Brown, 2005.)

Of course, we have always known in general terms how important childhood is: from Juvenal, Shakespeare, Freud, Spock, among countless others. We also know from the observations of parents, teachers, paediatricians and psychologists that the imprint of early experience seems to build upon our needs and emerging dispositions, to shape and compel our minds into avenues which become the 'highways' of our personality, as individually different as each snowflake, assertive or submissive, creative or passive, affectionate or indifferent. Throughout history men and women have commented on this. 'Men are but children of a larger growth', said Dryden (1631–1700), and Wordsworth (1770–1850), 'The child is father of the man'. Vygotsky, a psychologist with high current credibility and whose views resonate with perspectives of social constructivism (the creation of one's own world from the experiences and constructs which surround one), wrote in the 1930s:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level, and later on the individual level: first between people (interpsychologically) and then inside the child (intrapsychologically) ... All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57)

John Dewey, the American pragmatist philosopher and educator, said something similar in the context of his 'educational creed' of 1897:

I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of social situations in which he finds himself. Through these

demands he is stimulated to act as a member of a unity, to emerge from his original narrowness of action and feeling and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs. Through the responses which others make to his own activities he comes to know what these mean in social terms [and] this educational process has two sides—one psychological and one sociological ... Of these two sides, the psychological is the basis. The child's own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education. (1897, p. 77)

Such a comment by Dewey neatly foreshadows that made by George Herbert Mead, who said, in the 1920s that, 'all learning is social'; it is 'socially constructed', yet, as he put it (when discussing perception), we look through eyes that are peculiarly our own (Mead, 1956). One cannot be said to have much of a personality in a desert. One's identity, one's sense of self, depends upon, develops with, models and 'borrows' from, interaction with others. As our brain develops and concepts form and sharpen, feedback becomes ever more crucial. Generalised percepts become refined and constructs sharpen. The paradox is that our understanding of ourselves as *separate* from others depends upon this process. We are literally constructed 'brick by brick' in the interplay with salient others. We learn our value, our own salience and our agency from others. We construct our attributions of causality (what works, how things happen, what appears to be causal and contiguous) from our experience with others. We learn what is considered of value in the company of others. In short, humankind is the supremely 'social' animal; dependent and interdependent, the gatherer, the communicator, the copier, the initiator, the creator of cultural change, the reflective thinker. And much of this depends upon interaction with the minds, ideas and behaviours of others. Our sense of identity and separateness comes from our awareness of others. As Arnold succinctly puts it in her discussion of 'mirroring', an infant needs 'to connect with others in order to thrive, develop and experience a sense of self' (Arnold, 2005, p. 39).

Research and terminology

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (see glossary of terms in Appendix 1), which is a non-government grouping of 30 of the richest countries in the world, has long been involved in comparative and cross-national surveys of policies and provision at all levels of education. The publication, *Starting Strong* (OECD, 2001) presented a carefully written perspective on early childhood education and care in 12 countries of the world, including the USA, three states of Australia, England and the Nordic countries. The term 'Early Childhood Education and Care' (ECEC) is the term that is increasingly used by governments and international organisations (such as UNESCO) worldwide, because it neatly encapsulates the many different national systems of both care and education for children from birth to eight years. Moreover its congruent use of two different aspects of upbringing emphasises a feature of crucial importance, that is terms like 'preschool' and 'kindergarten, have become increasingly difficult to use, imprecise, because, throughout the world and prior to elementary school, children attend different centres at different ages, for different lengths of time and are taught and

viewed in somewhat different ways by different sorts of professionals. Consider, for instance, that many Swedish and Finnish children are in the equivalent of long day-care from 6 months or so until 6 or 7 years of age. Only at 6 years (by choice) or 7 years (by law) does official kindergarten style ‘schooling’ commence. British children (the majority of whom are now in ECEC from age 3 or 4), contrastingly, by age 4 are, very much in settings that look like schools and which follow a curriculum designed to ‘fit’ them for primary school. The USA, with its federal emphasis on the policy ‘No Child Left Behind’ (NCLB) deliberately causes pressure on a variety of state and private ECEC provision; and tests are used to ascertain the degree of readiness for schooling. It expects children to be ‘school ready’ on entry to grade school. NCLB policies have caused deep divides among many professionals in the USA and are sometimes regarded as emphasising quite the wrong elements thought desirable in good early childhood provision—i.e. too academic, too future orientated.

Broadly speaking, research into the lives of children has taken four main avenues. These are not discrete and are conceptually extremely rough categorizations:

1. The developmental study, ranging from the observation of an individual child over a period of its life as it grows, to the study of a whole cohort of children, from, say, birth to adulthood and the detailed collection of medical, developmental, social and intellectual data on those children (or the specific gathering of a focused portion of data concerning an event, particular pathology, or condition deemed important). These studies are often seen as life trajectory studies or ‘outcome’ studies. They give valuable insight into the impact of certain conditions on human development—e.g. the association between poverty and tobacco smoking, or obesity, or between poverty and later school achievement.
2. The cross-sectional study, whereby a group, of a specific age range or developmental ‘stage’, may be focused upon and a specific topic examined—e.g. TV interests of 6-year-olds.
3. The study of a single child or small group of children using developed ‘psychological’ tests. Large and difficult questions emerge here concerning the nature of the test, what such tests or assays purport to examine and the underlying assumptions about both the material of the ‘test’ and of the settings. For example, are the verbal reasoning tests used for different ethnic groups of children (speaking English) ‘culturally fair’? What assumptions are made about ‘typical’, normal development and are these in any way reflected in the tests inappropriately (see especially the discussion by Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000)?
4. The macro-analysis of childhood, whereby the historical and cultural assumptions are studied or observed and certain conclusions reached. Usually, this is broadly sociological research, interested in examining commonalities and differences in whole ranges of constructs, from collective attitudes to individual ‘story lines’, from systems and structures for the socialisation and education of children (e.g. childcare and schooling) to the general social and cultural representation of childhood within a group, language or set of practices (comparative studies) (see Christensen & James, 2000).

Ideology and theory

We should note that the social and medical sciences not only construct specific ‘lenses’ through which we may usefully observe children, but also provide ways for critically analysing those very lenses and the perceptions thus attained—an equally important role. Witness the changing assumptions about the measurement of intelligence, or the definitions of the concept itself. Concepts of normality and pathology also change and have greater or lesser salience in different cultures, yet, like many attitudes, seem remarkably enduring at the time. Moreover, the values associated with upbringing and educating children are themselves fraught with assumptions; and ideologies play a large part in the construction of those assumptions, sometimes lent spurious weight by the populist press. Attention to babies who cry (put them down and leave them, some ‘authorities’ say), or opinions on corporal punishment and discipline are areas of common controversy (‘spare the rod and spoil the child’ is a maxim still not entirely forgotten). The substitution of ideology for any recognisable, empirically tested theory is especially common in ECEC.

Ikons

In addition to the above, certain ‘case histories’ of children, of childhood, of schooling, or of group provision have become ikonic throughout the world, that is how the children were/are treated is taken as a lodestar for further provision or for similar approaches. There are several significant international exemplars that especially affect the ways we view our children and the ways we provide for them. Such ikons tend to be enduring over time and to ‘catch the public eye’. There have been many of these ikons internationally, but three that particularly stand out are: Head Start and High Scope (USA) and Reggio Emilia (Italy).

Over the past four decades since its inception by Ladybird Johnson, Head Start has cost approximately US \$66,000,000,000. It has, as all acknowledge, been a multifaceted approach, funded by the federal government (until recently, when there have been some adjustments and inroads into that). It has been delivered variously and somewhat differently by different states and through their approaches to welfare, employment and training, care and health, and education. It has fuelled much research, generating different cohort, cross-sectional and outcome studies. It has been largely applauded by professional carers and teachers, but especially in the beginning, bore the brunt of fierce criticism by academics and economists. And, as Kafer said relatively recently:

The school readiness gap between poor children and their middle-class peers remains stubbornly large ... [and] perhaps no government program can compensate for what a hard life takes away. (2004, p. 38)

However, despite the initial criticisms of Head Start, the ‘sleeper effect’ (i.e. that children benefit from the programmes long after their period in any school) is increasingly accepted (Melhuish, 2004).

Reggio Emilia is an ikon of considerable significance. It would be easy to criticise its limited impact on its own host country (Italy), or the possibly naïve way that it has been frequently represented in the USA (as almost the originator of the project approach!), but it clearly has a profound impact on the English-speaking world and on the Nordic countries, notably Sweden. Its espousal—especially that by Swedes and Americans, in particular—has been that of a major force sustaining ideas (like that of Howard Gardner on the integration of graphic arts), such as project work and in-depth study; and such as the emergent curriculum being best construed as whereby the professional leader is always trying to take the enthusiasms and interests of individual children and build upon them appropriately. In this manner it clearly employs theories of social constructivism in all it exemplifies.

High Scope has high credibility in the international world of ECEC and is possibly better known in practical terms than any other ikon. It is one of those long-term, well-researched interventions with a longitudinal and cross-sectional research base. It is ‘nested’ within the major initiative Head Start. It is the oft-quoted source of: ‘For every dollar invested at three years of age, the return is sevenfold by age 27.’ The Ypsilanti Perry preschool studies of Weikart-inspired provision for African-American children born into poverty (from 1962 to 1967) have shown consistently that high-quality early childhood programmes appear to have the benefits of ‘good citizen’ return, because they add markedly to the social capital by providing circumstances that:

Empower children by encouraging them to initiate and carry out their own learning activities and make independent decisions. Empower parents, by bringing them into full partnership with teachers in supporting their children’s development. Empower teachers, by providing them with systematic inservice curriculum training, supportive curriculum supervision, and observational tools to assess children’s development. (Schweinhart, 2005, p. 2)

There are other studies of provision throughout OECD countries; and many of those are influential and convincing. Some have been gathered together by the Rand Corporation (Károly *et al.*, 1998). Others, like the 20-country review by the OECD, are cross-national studies of the different types and systems of ECEC provision; and yet others (such as the Canadian McCain & Mustard study, 1999) have had a differential, but important, impact on policy-makers in some but *not all* of the major English-speaking countries. For instance, Bailey’s view of ‘critical periods’ or ‘windows of opportunity’ in early childhood learning is generally considered by the academic community to be somewhat more subtle and accurate than that described by Mustard in the 1999 study (see Bertram & Pascal, 2003, p 14; see also Bailey, 2000; Blakemore, 2005).

The global perspective

Increasingly, countries are recognising that they must provide a stable, well-structured (‘scaffolded’ is often the term used) career for carers, if they are to ensure that young children in our society are consistently and carefully cared for.

Short-term staff—poorly trained and poorly paid—are less and less likely to be the norm. In short, ECEC is at a position politically in our modern societies not unlike that of the stage in which elementary/primary education found itself in the nineteenth century. There is a clear social need for ECEC. The professional skills needed in the early stages of provision are almost indistinguishable from those needed by professionally trained teachers employed in the age range 5 to 8 years (the later stage of ECEC). They certainly complement them and many professional skills would seem generic. We know much more about the crucial nature of early learning (from neuroscience and other sources) than, perhaps, previously; and we thus must increasingly ensure that our children get the best care and education possible in those formative early years. This is not about ‘hot-housing’ children, or about forcing them into early academic endeavour. It is about providing social and emotional experiences that are rich and meaningful, enjoyable and securing. Of course, it is not as simple as that; and the causes of the heightened interest in the early years are really multidimensional. Consider the following issues.

In the world of OECD membership (the so-called ‘developed’ world) the birth rate is now approximating some 1.8 children per family. There is a notable lower rate in some countries; e.g. 1.46, Portugal; 1.55, Italy; and 1.2, Japan (2001 figures: Gammage, 2003). At current mortality rates we need about a 2.2 rate overall for replacement. What this birth rate also means is that many children are destined to be ‘only (perhaps lonely) children’. Add to that the fact that many first children are not born until the mother is about 30 (i.e. age of first parturition is now about 29.9 years: OECD, 2003), and one realises that the picture is of many women having worked for a considerable period of their lives *before* the birth of the first baby. This may well mean commitment to long-term careers, and frequently means habituation to two incomes and all that such money implies. Moreover the workforces in developed countries are increasingly dependent upon women, and many countries, like Denmark, now have high female employment rates (where would education or medicine be without women professionals?). True, women’s overall contributions are often more mixed and part-time, but are of very high importance to the economies of the relevant countries and in the lives of women. All this implies, too, that women often wish to re-enter the workforce relatively soon after the birth of the baby. Perhaps, Handy was right when he said that it would appear the economic maps of the world were not only redrawn by globalisation and by the multinational companies, but are also being slowly and irrevocably redrawn by women (Handy, 1994).

To the compressed picture above one needs to add factors such as those of relatively high divorce rates and the increasingly large numbers of re-made families and of single-parent families in our Western societies; and then one begins to see the crucial need for high-quality ECEC even more starkly. We do not need childcare, or kindergarten, because imaginary ‘feckless’ women go to work outside the home; we need it from necessity, as secure and loving provision in settings which support and supplement the family, and which enable rich attachments and happy learning experiences for our children.

The politics of it all are relatively simple, but far-reaching. Broadly speaking, they cluster around five key issues.

1. Intentions which ensure that *all* our children have confirming and appropriate experiences to start them off well in life (universality).
2. Interventions into poverty and high need (targeting provision such that the dispossessed, the poor and those with special needs are better helped and supported).
3. Ensuring that women have the same career choices and same power and responsibility options as do men.
4. Recognition that early brain development benefits from consistency, attachment, stimulation and being ‘bathed’ in language.
5. Awareness that investment in our children pays handsome dividends in the future, with less delinquency, criminality and with greater societal ‘well-being’ as likely outcomes.

There are other important issues, too; and some might object to the last point especially, saying our children must not be viewed merely as little ‘investments for the future’, but as having a right to enjoy the ‘here and now’. This point is frequently made by professionals, who especially regard the child as having rights to happiness and to the unscripted opportunity for play and ‘mucking about’, rather than being made to settle to a narrow curriculum, or to a programme designed for academic outcomes and full engagement at the expense of well-being and a long-term love of learning. Politicians are more likely to ignore such a point, however, and many see the opportunity (and imperative) for social justice and social engineering as overriding such issues; they see early childhood as the golden age of ‘easy’ and practical social intervention. Yet others have their eyes on a well-trained and adaptive workforce able to support them (and us) in old age; and ‘welfare to work’ has become a vital part of the overall argument (especially in the UK). Measures of individual and societal ‘well-being’ are very popular with politicians and economists nowadays, yet in the main constitute assays of normative, physical and attitudinal attributes likely to account (in the round) for a stable society, relatively full employment and for a high gross domestic product (GDP).

Policies, therefore, have tended more and more towards the establishment of ECEC as a public good, as a definite advantage prior to all formal schooling. This has not stopped private ventures, of course, and the same ethical and political battleground exists for ECEC provision, as one has become used to at other stages of education. Some prefer to pay for specific religious beliefs; some to pay for the ‘right peers and climate’. Yet others (particularly in the Nordic countries) point to good early childhood experience as an especial ethos, a social ‘glue’ in a well-functioning democracy, a state need, not something to be simply regarded as a privilege or a commodity. Be that as it may, political perspectives vary, from those on the Right seeing it as a purchase and choice approach, to those of the Left who see it as a way of producing a more equal and balanced society. Whatever their

current political persuasion, most countries are beginning to examine the importance of *integrated provision*. In itself this is not a new idea: it goes back to England in the early nineteenth century, to New Lanarkshire, to Robert Owen and the establishment of home, health and school for workers' families. Over the years there have been sporadic attempts at integrated services and they have meant different things with different features and different components for different audiences. Nowadays most people, when talking of policies of integration, refer to the ways in which genuine partnerships with families can be established, so that childcare, occasional care, after-school care, modest health service provision (e.g. immunisation programmes, parent counselling/advice), kindergarten and lower primary school can all be operated together—the 'one-stop shop', as it is sometimes called, or 'wrap-around provision'. The total cluster, preferably located in one site, becomes the 'integrated' provision. Such provision is then staffed by multi-professional teams, each specialist giving his or her own specialist knowledge to the whole.

There is little doubt, if one reads the report *Starting Strong* (OECD, 2001, 2003, in press), that many countries have been and are rapidly moving in the direction of integration of family and early childhood services. The possibilities have been seen and are largely good, despite vociferous critics (like Belsky and others), who have views which largely seem vigorously to oppose *any* institutionalised childcare). High-quality ECEC seems to provide many opportunities for both the child and the family. When appropriately integrated with other support services and fully embedded in the community, it seems to help create a better social atmosphere and greater community security and regard. It certainly seems to pay in terms of money invested (see Early Excellence evaluations in England in Bertram & Pascal, 2003; or see Ball, 1994; Lynch, 2004), and it changes, or weakens, the trauma of transitions between care, kindergarten and primary education stages. Drawbacks do exist, however. One of these may be that there is a tendency for state systems of ECEC (quite properly) to demand accountability in ways they can most easily understand. Parents commonly do this, too; and the accountability can so often be couched in terms of 'desired outcomes' from the children. Thus, there is a tendency to what the Swedes call the 'schoolification' of ECEC, such that children are being pressed into a narrow curriculum at ever-younger ages. Their 'performance' is seen in school-like terms and perhaps not sufficiently in individual, social, emotional and creative ones. On the other hand, many, many professional carers and teachers are well aware of this and do their very best to see that ECEC is warm and 'home-like' (the latter is much valued in the Nordic countries), that it epitomises love as well as cognitive stimulation.

Benefit–cost analyses

In the UK and the USA there have been several attempts at examining provision of early childhood services in terms of the putative return to the community.

The most well known are probably those by Lynch (2004) and by Bertram and Pascal (2003). Lynch was commissioned by the Economic Policy Institute in the USA (a non-partisan ‘think tank’) to examine the possible benefits of investment in high quality, large-scale institutional provision of early childhood services. These services were a mixture of care, education, health and family support. Four programmes,¹ for which there were reliable longitudinal data available, were studied. Lynch noted that:

ECD programs easily pay for themselves over time by generating very high rates of return for participants, public and the government. Good programs produce \$3 or more in benefits for every dollar of investment. While participants and their families get part of the total benefits, the benefits to the rest of the public and government are larger and, on their own, tend to far outweigh the costs of these programs. (Government of South Australia, 2005, p. 35)

Bertram and Pascal were charged with the task of evaluating the Early Excellence pilot programme provision (integrated ECEC services) based in 29 schools in England. Like Lynch, but using a qualitative, case-study approach, their study clearly demonstrated that the returns to the community were considerable. As well as identifying reduced stress among families, they reported that the benefits to the children included (Bertram *et al.*, 2002), p. 77:

- Enhanced social and emotional competence;
- Enhanced cognitive development, particularly in language skills;
- Early remediation of special needs and improved rates of inclusion in mainstream settings;
- A reduction in the rates of Child Protection Orders and ‘looked after’ children;
- Improved physical well-being.

The British Economic Research Council summed up the position very clearly in their 2004 report. They thought that, in general terms and after examining the evidence, the rightness of ECEC provision was demonstrated by the following (ERC, 2004):

- Patterns throughout life are heavily influenced by experiences in early childhood according to compelling evidence from a wide range of disciplines;
- Irrespective of socio-economic background, high-quality early years education and childcare raises cognitive and social/behavioural outcomes and ability to learn;
- Propensity to engage in criminal activity can be significantly reduced by forms of early years provision;
- Health outcomes (heart disease, depression) into middle age and beyond are heavily influenced by well-being in infancy;
- Patterns of physical activity in early childhood become ingrained for life;
- Early problems, if not addressed, tend to become entrenched and bring about long-term damage and disadvantage—conversely getting the early years right can help tackle inequalities in health, education and economic prospects.

Professional training

There is then the business of professional training itself. The implementation of Early Excellence and Sure Start in England has accelerated England into the twenty-first century, as far as ECEC is concerned (see DFES, 2004):

By 2020 the vision is for the main early years worker to be working within a completely integrated care and education framework. She, and increasingly he, should be educated to a level that is equivalent to or exceeds the best in other European countries. The main qualification is a degree level education that provides career opportunities both within early years and in related work in children's services. With this qualification, early years work in 2020 is well rewarded with good salaries, ongoing training and educational opportunities. (Cameron, 2005, p. 3)

However, optimistic visions of a well-trained, properly rewarded profession in ECEC are, as yet, a long way from being realised in the majority of the OECD countries, or anywhere, except perhaps in the Nordic countries. Currently we still rely on minimally trained, poorly paid staff for the nurturance and education of our most vulnerable in society. This has to change and it is doubtful whether many governments are sufficiently seized of its urgency and pivotal importance in the make up of our future communities. Australia as a whole spends a relatively small amount on its earliest citizens. Its contributions are well below those of most of its OECD partners: 'Despite Australia's sound economy, it languishes at the bottom of the chart, with the smallest expenditure of all countries, except Turkey and Ireland' (Government of South Australia, 2005, p. 3, referring to data from OECD, 2001).

There is change in the air, however, and the Commonwealth Government of Australia *does* now have its sights on ECEC and has made clear commitments to its importance, (Patterson, 2005) not only through funds donated to long-term research, but in its recognition of the importance of improving and upgrading training.

South Australia and the future

It seems to me that the possibilities are very good. In Australia there are now at least two states which have an active interest in genuine, full-blown integration of early childhood and family services. There is the South Australian major report, *The virtual village: raising a child in the new millennium* (Government of South Australia, 2005), with its imaginative and 15-year perspective of what is desirable for all young children. Within a department that unifies Education and Children's Services (DECS), it is intended that government works explicitly in conjunction with the other major public services of health and family support and child protection. The report focuses on policy thoroughly supported by international and national research and upon inquiry into the specific needs of families. It offers a clear commitment to the integration of Early Childhood Services, birth to 8 years, by proposing a 'seamless' approach that unites the delivery of childcare, education and certain health and support systems for all families and children. It seeks to build universality of approach, while at the same time catering for targeted interventions with those

who have special needs. It considers training and leadership carefully and acknowledges the need for extending and stabilising the profession, minimising staff turnover and providing real career opportunities for advancement, such that multi-professional teams can eventually confidently staff the new integrated centres.

At the same time, we in Australia have Tasmania building a system of stable professional advance, mentoring and degree-worthy studies intended to properly upgrade the profession of childcare: a clear preparation for a more integrated approach to ECEC. We have a federal government which now seems well committed to the value of family support and of effective ECEC (if for somewhat different ideological reasons). We have a strong interest in the quality of the experiences our youngest children have and have attempted (minimally) to control the quality of childcare provision throughout the country (QIAS). We are not afraid to talk about the value of play, nor even of the crucial importance of building strong relationships. One recognises, therefore, that this is a cultural shift of huge proportions, almost of the same sort as the establishment of basic education for all during the nineteenth century.

It seems to me that the benefits for our society, if we get it right, are huge. Good social and emotional experience; rich patterns of sharing and of play; consistency in relationships and attachment; advice and support for those in need; a better understanding of cultural differences and different perceptions; communities that are joined and talk to one another; and citizenship which really counts. In short, a chance to build bridges, to see early childhood education and care as everyone's birthright and a way to build a better and more humane society. The stakes are very high. Considerable portions of public money have to be diverted to a long-term cause. Many politicians and policy-makers will not see the results in their lifetimes. They will need a long-term conviction and commitment, similar to those shown by our forebears when dealing with public education as a whole. There will be those who begrudge the huge outlay of public money, who see children as the duties of that specific family only. There will be those who criticise an institutionalised provision and say that it diminishes the role of the family. There will be those who (perhaps rightly) point out that *poor* provision can be damaging; and those who simply see it as a market opportunity for yet greater exploitation of families at their most vulnerable point. Many of us, however, are inspired by the chance and the change. We see it as a chance to get things right ... to offer riches to our children, which are lasting, 'brain-feeding', personality-supporting: the possibilities are endless:

We have enough people who tell it like it is – Now we could use a few who tell it like it can be. (R. Orben)

Note

1. The four programmes considered by Lynch were: the Ypsilanti Perry Preschool Project; the Prenatal/Early Infancy Project; the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention; and the Chicago Child-Parent Centre Programme.

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Appendix 1. Glossary of initials and terms

- DECS, Department of Education and Children's Services (South Australia).
- DfES, Department for Education and Skills (UK).
- Early Excellence: term used in England for integrated early childhood and family centres set up by the DfES in school locations and under educational leadership.
- ECEC, Early Childhood Education and Care: generic term used by OECD for the care, development and educational provisions for children from birth to 8 years.
- ERC, British Economic Research Council.
- GDP, Gross Domestic Product.
- NCLB, No Child Left Behind (Federal education policy, USA).
- OECD, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.
- QIAS, Quality Improvement Assurance System (for licensing approved child care nationally across Australia).
- Sure Start: term used in England for initiative of child and family centres provided for approx 20% of the child population and focused on those families most in need; ultimately, there is to be universal provision.
- Unesco, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

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