

Summary of Academy of Social Science Workshop 'Childcare: A Better Policy Framework for Australia'

Ten Policy Principles for a National System of Early Childhood Education and Care

Preamble

This report documents a national workshop '*Childcare: A Better Policy Framework for Australia*' sponsored by the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA) and convened by the University of Sydney and University of South Australia, 13-14th July 2006, through the 'Work + Family Policy Roundtable' (<http://www.familypolicyroundtable.com.au>).

The workshop brought together twenty-one Australian and international researchers on early childhood education and care and related policy perspectives, from a diverse range of disciplinary backgrounds, including economics, sociology, paediatrics and child health, early childhood, political economy, psychology, government and working life (see list of expert participants attached). Five experts from the community sector and governments also attended.

This group of experts discussed the current research evidence about early childhood education and care in Australia and internationally. Fifteen papers were presented (see program attached). The workshop will result in an edited book to be published by end-2007 by Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) edited by Dr Alison Elliot, Dr Elizabeth Hill and Professor Barbara Pocock.

Policy Principles for a National System of Early Childhood Education and Care

The workshop's researcher participants agreed on a statement of principles that arise from the existing body of research on early childhood education and care, in the Australian context and the presentation of research at the Workshop.

To summarise, the group of experts agreed on the need for a new nationally coordinated, planned approach to an integrated system of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Discussion supported an ECEC system that gives priority to the needs of children and their well-being, places the issue of high quality care and education more centrally on the policy agenda, and recognises the pressing need for increased public funding to ensure universal access to early childhood education and care services for all children from birth to school entry. Discussion also recognised the need to locate good ECEC policy alongside other important policy initiatives like paid parental leave and a progressive individual tax system.

This academic workshop was held at the same time as the Council of Australian Governments was meeting to consider a National Reform Agenda covering, amongst other areas, Human Capital. The resulting communiqué (14th July 2006) includes Human Capital reforms in four priority areas including:

Early childhood – with the aim of supporting families in improving childhood development outcomes in the first five years of child's life, up to and including school entry.

Childcare – with the aim of encouraging and supporting workforce participation of parents with dependent children (COAG Communique, 14th July 2006, p 6).

Participants at the ASSA Workshop hope the principles derived from our discussions and the summary of the workshop can help inform Australian governments as they move down the path of reform in the area of early childhood education and care.

Ten Policy Principles for a National System of Early Childhood Education and Care

1. Promote the well-being of all children

The primary goal and guiding principle of a national system of early childhood education and care (ECEC) should be the well-being of all children.

A system of high quality education and care should emphasise children's development and well-being. This will have measurable positive effects on the health and well-being of children in the present and into the future and promote social equity.

2. Early Childhood Care and Education is a Public Good

A high quality early childhood education and care system is a public good, and so requires significant public investment.

The benefits of high quality early childhood education and care accrue to children and their families, but they also accrue to society more broadly. High quality early childhood education and care that prioritises the needs of children will have a positive impact on women's participation in employment, gender equity, human capital development and economic growth. This 'public good' property of high quality ECEC means that significant, ongoing government investment is required to ensure adequate resources are devoted to it.

3. Universal Early Childhood Education and Care

Australian governments should implement a national, universal and integrated early childhood education and care system, particularly for children in the two years prior to starting school, and up to three years for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

International evidence about the positive role that early childhood education and care plays in the development and well-being of all young children provides a strong case for this. The evidence supports access to at least two years early childhood education for all children under school age, and access from the age of two for children in disadvantaged households. Education and care interventions in the early years have a demonstrated capacity to narrow social inequity and improve the health, educational and economic outcomes of children from disadvantaged backgrounds over the life course. Universal access to a guaranteed option of education and care prior to starting formal schooling will complement the services available to babies and infants under a nationally integrated ECEC system.

4. Rational Planning of ECEC System Growth

Governments must collaborate to plan a rational expansion of the ECEC system in order to meet the needs of all children equitably, to ensure that service quality is high, and to maintain diversity in provision to give parents genuine choice.

Private investment decisions, rather than need, increasingly determine the distribution of ECEC services in Australia. Further, increasing rates of corporate provision of ECEC services in Australia, especially long day care, pose a significant challenge to accessible, high quality outcomes for children. A growing body of international and Australian evidence suggests that quality is threatened where the interests of shareholders conflict with the interests of children. Government support should therefore be adjusted to expand public ECEC services, especially those linked to other services and community-capacity-building activities, in the context of a rationally planned expansion of provision. This includes renewed support for capital grants and/or the provision of land at concessional rates to encourage public services to be built in poorly serviced areas and integrated with other public services.

5. High Quality Standards

High quality education and care, especially a high ratio of university or TAFE trained and appropriately qualified staff to children, is the priority issue in ensuring positive outcomes for children.

An accumulating body of international evidence suggests that positive outcomes for children arising from early childhood education and care are directly related to the quality of these environments. High quality is a function of staffing ratios, carer and teacher skills and qualifications, and the size of the care group. National quality standards must reflect international best practice. Research supports staff/child ratios of at least 1 adult to 3 children for infants (1:3); at least one adult to four children for one to two year olds (1:4), and at least one adult to eight children for three to five year olds (1:8). A commitment to high quality care requires implementation of these ratios in all sectors of ECEC. Teachers and other ECEC staff must be appropriately trained and qualified. To be effective, these standards must be linked to a robust regulatory and compliance regime.

6. Good Employment Practices

High quality care depends upon stable, qualified, appropriately rewarded staff.

Children and parents benefit from long-term care relationships. Stable care relationships, and the recruitment and retention of skilled teachers and carers, requires secure jobs, attractive pay and conditions, and rewards for higher education and training. Wages in the sector remain too low despite recent increases, and many services lack enough skilled teachers and carers. Professional qualifications and wages for carers and teachers must be upgraded. Trained and qualified staff must be rewarded commensurate with other comparable workers. Resources must be made available to allow teachers and other staff adequate time to undertake program design, documentation, reporting and in-service training. Government has a strategic role to play in developing a workforce planning strategy to meet current critical shortages of appropriately qualified ECEC teachers.

7. A Robust Regulatory System

High quality early childhood education and care requires a robust and integrated system of monitoring and compliance that is based on best practice standards and which targets structural, process and adult work quality dimensions.

Government regulation can play a critical role in promoting and safeguarding high quality ECEC. Australian research suggests that the current national accreditation system and state regulations have limited capacity to effect high quality ECEC. An effective regulatory framework will promote high structural standards (ie. staff to child ratios, small group sizes, and qualified teachers); standards of excellence in children's experiences whilst in ECEC services; and best practice adult work experience (eg. job satisfaction, work conditions, staff retention rates). A robust system must be able to identify and enforce sanctions on centres that provide poor quality care, whilst also actively recognising and supporting ECEC teachers and staff committed to providing high quality education and care. An effective regulatory system will be transparent and subject to ongoing independent review by appropriately qualified reviewers.

8. Affordable and Equitable ECEC Services

Access to ECEC and good outcomes for children depends upon affordable services.

Evidence suggests that the costs of ECEC are increasing much faster than inflation in Australia. The cost of high quality care makes affordability a significant and ongoing concern for parents and ECEC providers. An investigation into alternative funding methods to ensure affordability and sustain the growth of ECEC provision into the future must be undertaken. COAG is urged, as part of its National Reform Agenda addressing the promotion of Human Capital, to investigate the feasibility of pooling public sector funding for early childhood infrastructure and funding from different jurisdictions and government agencies to create a more affordable, equitable and integrated system of ECEC.

9. Supportive Parental Leave and Tax Policies

A high quality ECEC care system requires supportive, complementary policies.

International evidence shows that significant benefit will flow to children and working carers from Australia's adoption of a universal system of paid parental leave that gives parents and primary carers the practical opportunity to take leave from work for at least a year, and preferably up to eighteen months, to care for infants and young children. This requires a payment system that confers a living wage during the period of leave, allows it to be combined with other forms of leave (including the opportunity to request to return to work part-time) and allows parents to share leave (and requires fathers to use a portion of it on a 'use it or lose it basis'). The effective and efficient use of parental leave policies requires a progressive individual tax system that does not penalise parents who move between paid work and caring duties or disadvantage dual-income households.

10. Building Healthy Communities and Social Capital

Well resourced ECEC centres provide a focal point or 'hub' for multiple community services that support families with young children and strengthen community capacity.

Co-locating ECEC services with other educational and child and parent health clinics and services facilitates important 'social joins' and strengthens social connections for both children and parents. These settings can be sites for other universal family support services for families with babies and very young children. This will ensure that all adults responsible for the care of young children are able to access the support they need to offer young children the best possible experiences for nurture and learning. ECEC services that link with schooling facilities help to build child and parent communities and create natural bridges for children into formal education and social life. These are cost effective and transport and time efficient.

**Participants: ASSA workshop, 'Childcare: A better policy framework for Australia'
The University of Sydney, July 13-14 2006**

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PROGRAM
Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia Workshop
Childcare: A Better Policy Framework for Australia



DAY 1: Thursday July 13th 2006

THE SITUATION AND THE CHALLENGE

9:00 – 10:30 Session 1

Welcome, Introductions and outline of the policy challenge
Barbara Pocock and Elizabeth Hill

10:30 – 11:00 Morning Tea

11:00 – 1.00 Session 2

A quality childcare system: what is necessary, what is possible?

- Anita Nyberg, National Institute for Working Life, Stockholm: 'Lessons from the Swedish experience'
- Deborah Brenan, University of Sydney: 'The policy context in Australia'
- Patricia Apps, University of Sydney: 'The new discrimination: taxation and childcare' University of Sydney

1.00 – 2.00 Lunch

2.00-3.30 Session 3 Designing a good system

The goals of a good national system? The welfare of children, the good of the labour market, gender and socio-economic equality or....?

- Bettina Cass, University of NSW, 'Goals for the system'
- Lynne Wannan, National Association of Community-base Childcare, 'Goals for the system'

3.30 – 4:00 Afternoon tea

4:00 – 5:30 Session 4

Perceptions, current provision and policy context

- Gabrielle Meagher University of Sydney, 'Perceptions about care of children: recent survey evidence'
- Rebecca Cassells, NATSEM 'Affordability, availability and subsidies'
- Emma Rush, The Australia Institute, 'Employees views on quality'

5:30 Drinks

6.00 DINNER

DAY 2: Friday July 14th 2006

PRINCIPLES AND POLICY RESPONSES

9.00-10.30 Session 5 Quality Care

- Frances Press, Charles Sturt University: 'Public investment, fragmentation and quality care: Options for the future'
- Alison Elliott, Australian Council for Education Research: 'Regulating for quality: Registration, standards and accreditation'
- Margaret Sims, Edith Cowan University: 'The determinants of quality care'.

10:30 – 11:00 Morning Tea

11.00-12.30 Session 6: Who should pay? Who should provide?

Employers, consumers, community, government and/or the market?
Principles to guide the best approach

- Juliet Bourke, Chair Taskforce on Care Costs.
- Joy Goodfellow, Macquarie University
- Eva Cox, UTS

1.00 – 2.00 Lunch

2.00-3.30 Session 7: A framework and set of key policy principles

Elizabeth Hill and Barbara Pocock

3.30-4.0 Afternoon tea

4.00-5.00 Session 7 (continued): Sum up: research gaps and publication outcomes

Elizabeth Hill and Barbara Pocock

Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia Workshop
Childcare: A better Policy Framework for Australia

Presentation Abstracts, Key Themes and Recommendations

Overall Workshop summary

Early childhood education and care has been discussed and debated for decades in Australia. In recent years it has undergone significant changes that reflect wider social and political trends and which many believe are shifting the focus of early childhood services away from the needs of children and families. Some forms of services, like long day care, are seeing new interest groups like shareholders entering the picture, with relatively untested outcomes for children.

A common theme throughout this workshop was the competing goals of early childhood education and care services. These goals range from those that put the child's developmental needs at their centre, to those that focus on parent's need to participate in the labour market (neither of which is mutually exclusive) to those that prioritise corporate needs for profit. There is some evidence that pursuit of the later goal undermines the needs and rights of children and, in cases where quality is compromised, may be impacting on the health of children in long day care.

Affordability, availability and choice are key concerns for parents and this workshop has heard various economic arguments for a change in funding policy and tax models concerned with ECEC. Such changes should coincide with paid leave entitlements for parents and proper recognition (in training, pay and stability) for child care workers. **The overwhelming consensus among workshop participants was for a universal public system of ECEC that was integrated with the school system and consistently accredited and regulated across states and territories. Such a system should be affordable and accessible to all Australian children and their families.** The responsibility for ECEC is multi layered, however it would be led by government, through appropriate policy and funding, in consultation with parents and communities.

INDIVIDUAL PAPERS

DAY 1

Barbara Pocock – Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia

Elizabeth Hill – Faculty of Economics & Business, University of Sydney

The childcare policy challenge and some principles for discussion

In their introduction to the workshop Barbara and Elizabeth outline issues with childcare policy in Australia. The primary goal of the workshop was to discuss childcare in terms of current policy, research and practice in order to develop a set of key policy principles within which an equitable, evidence-based childcare policy can be developed. This childcare policy would clarify the relationship between early childhood education and care, and children's health, development and future prospects, as well as respond to the needs of carers and workers. This paper highlighted problems with affordability, access, quality, provision, and

equity in childcare in the Australian context and suggested eleven policy principles for discussion during the course of the workshop.

Anita Nyberg – National Institute for Working Life, Stockholm

Lessons from the Swedish experience

In this presentation Anita highlights key principles that underpin childcare policy in Sweden. These include the principle that all adults should be given the opportunity to support themselves through work and that all children should have equal access to childcare conditions that support their social, emotional and educational development. Since the 1960s, childcare policy in Sweden has shifted from a focus on providing public childcare for parents who work or study, to the provision of childcare for all children. This shift in focus from enabling women's employment to child development and wellbeing has been accompanied by policies that maximise quality (staff education and staff/child ratios) and equitable access (income related fees with a capped maximum) for all families.

Deborah Brennan – University of Sydney

The policy context in Australia

In this presentation Deborah makes a case for the analysis of childcare policy in the international, national and sub-national contexts. Such analysis allows the identification of problems at the national and local level and the identification of possibilities through international comparisons. International evidence can then be used to formulate policy recommendations when lobbying government and policy makers. In her analysis of the costs of childcare, Deborah describes current national and state policy as inadequate but suggests there are some potential strengths (such as access to a subsidy) that could be better implemented.

Patricia Apps – University of Sydney

The new discrimination: taxation and childcare

In this paper Patricia describes current government taxation and childcare policies as the 'new discrimination'. This discrimination is based on two driving assumptions. The first is that family income is a reflection of family living status; the second is that childcare can be left to the 'market'. Both of these assumptions are flawed and the tax and childcare policies into which they feed result in inequity and an unfair tax burden for dual earning families with a 'middle' combined income.

Bettina Cass – University of NSW

The goals of a good national system: Placing priority on the wellbeing of children

In this paper Bettina takes a child-centred approach to the discussion of childcare goals. She acknowledges the substantial literature providing evidence for the benefits of good quality childcare on children's social and emotional wellbeing and cognitive development and argues for the right of all children to have access to early childhood education and care. By introducing the notion of children as *present citizens* (not just *future citizens* with a human capital worth) the discussion focuses on children's early childhood education and care needs.

Quality in this context includes the provision of education and care that enhances wellbeing and cognitive development, the opportunity to improve social networks among parents, the provision of a safe, stimulating and social environment and the protection of children at risk. Access and affordability are key issues in the provision of early childhood education and care but these are seen as issues, especially for disadvantaged children, in the current setting.

Lynne Wannan – National Association of Community Based Childcare

Childcare – the goals of a good national system? The welfare of children, the good of the labour market and socio-economic equality?

Lynne extends the discussion of child focused ‘children’s services’ (a term inclusive of education, care and individual child needs), and stresses the importance of a nationwide network of sustainable, quality, community owned, not-for-profit early years children’s centres. Such a system would meet the needs of all stakeholders by supporting children’s developmental needs, supporting parents need to work and raise their children, supporting community cohesion and safety and enabling participation of all in Australia’s social and economic life. The current rise of corporate players in the childcare sector is likely to undermine the goals of a good national system due to a fundamental focus on profit which seems incompatible with a focus on children.

Gabrielle Meagher – University of Sydney

Perceptions about care of children: recent survey evidence

In this paper Gabrielle presents findings from an analysis of attitudes towards working mothers and child care, using data from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) and the International Social Survey Program. Her findings suggest three key things. 1. Although attitudes towards working mothers are softening, full time childcare for preschoolers is still not preferred. 2. Childcare is an arena of gender contestation: women significantly less likely than men to have negative attitudes to child care and working mothers. However, there is little difference in attitudes between those who identify with the Labor Party and those who identify with the Coalition. 3. Perhaps surprisingly, children and recipients of childcare subsidies do not present a clear constituency for a particular policy focus and direction

Rebecca Cassells – NATSEM

Affordability, availability and subsidies

Using HILDA and ABS longitudinal data Rebecca describes childcare usage in Australia and highlights issues with availability and affordability across household types. In general cost, as a reason for not using additional childcare, has decreased over time and availability reasons have increased. Significant numbers of households report difficulties with cost and availability and these problems are persistent for many. Overall, lone parents report more problems with availability and couple households report more problems with affordability.

Emma Rush – The Australia Institute

Employees' views on quality

In this paper Emma reports on a national survey of long day childcare staff. Six hundred long day care staff responded to questions related to the quality of the care provided to children in the long day care setting within which they worked. While most staff believed the quality of the care offered in the centre was quite high, there were differences across provider type. With corporate chains perceived as providing poorer quality care than community based and independent private child care centres. A number of recommendations are made to improve the quality of care across all types of childcare centres. These include the following: improve staff-to-child ratios; maintain and increase the supply of qualified and experienced child care staff; monitor the quality provided by different provider types; fund the development of new community-based centres.

DAY 2

Frances Press – Charles Sturt University

Public investment, fragmentation and quality care: Options for the future

In this paper, Fran describes the context of early childhood education and care in Australia as fragmented; with various levels of government responsibility, various regulations, various quality standards and various curricula. Increased corporate involvement in this area is also shifting the focus of responsibility from children, families and communities to shareholders and profit. Challenges facing early childhood education and care are competing policy frameworks (enabling workforce participation; developmental rights of children), lack of functional integration of care and education, the need to develop a child centred system and, need to improve levels of teacher qualified staff. This paper concludes with suggestions for a way forward which are underpinned by a national vision that values children in the 'present', and includes coherence within and across early childhood education and care systems, system supports reflective of the fundamental criteria for quality, and a nexus between early childhood education and care policy and maternity and parental leave policy.

Alison Elliott – Australian council for education Research

Regulating for Quality: Registration, standards and accreditation

In this paper Alison echo's the arguments of the previous paper by highlighting the need for consistency across early childhood education and care systems and coherence between care and education in the preschool years. She calls for a formal system of registration, accreditation, and regulation to improve practice quality in this sector and suggests that the professionalisation of this sector will lead to better outcomes, particularly for the most disadvantaged.

Margaret Sims – Edith Cowen University

The determinants of quality care

In this paper Margaret reports the findings of research studying cortisol levels in children and caregivers in 16 childcare centres around Perth. Cortisol is produced by the brain under

conditions of stress and levels of cortisol typically decline over the course of the day. When cortisol levels are chronically high, damage can occur to that part of the brain that controls cortisol levels, resulting in long term outcomes such as impairments in health, wellbeing, social, emotional and cognitive development and behaviour problems. In this study, cortisol levels were directly correlated with child care quality. In centres rated as unsatisfactory, cortisol levels in children increased. Where quality was satisfactory, cortisol levels declined slightly and, where quality was good and staff were well trained and experienced, cortisol levels declined in the typical way. Interestingly, cortisol levels in caregivers increased in good quality centres and decreased in unsatisfactory centres raising concerns about staff health and wellbeing in good quality centres.

Juliet Bourke – Chair, Taskforce on care costs

Who should pay? Who should provide?

Note: Not for publication or public comment because of forthcoming release

Juliet introduces the background and aims of the Taskforce on Care Costs and highlights recent findings from current research investigating the impact of the costs of care on workforce participation. Key findings include the following: 1 in 4 workers with caring responsibilities are likely to leave the workforce due to cost of care, 1 in 4 workers has already reduced their hours of work due to costs of care, 35% of workers would increase their hours of work if care was more affordable. Affordability was an issue for all income groups. In addition, there are high levels of informality in care arrangements, particularly for preschool children, and there are significant tax losses for the majority of employees who pay for care but do not declare these costs.

Joy Goodfellow – Macquarie University

A better policy framework for Australia

In this paper Joy discusses the influence of ‘free market economy’ ideas on the provision of early childhood education and care. She argues that such ideas do not fit with, or work for, early childhood education and care because it is a unique ‘market’ with multiple goals (such as child development and enabling work participation) and numerous benefactors (such as children, parents, community, schools society and government). Responsibility for early childhood education and care lies heavily with government but in collaboration with parents and communities. Quality should be a primary consideration and this should be underpinned by a focus on the child and informed by knowledge about children’s social, emotional and cognitive development.

Eva Cox – University of Technology, Sydney

Funding children’s services

In this paper Eva reviews the political and social environments that have influenced the provision of early childhood education and care over the past 30 years. The recent move toward parental choice and market forces has opened up this area to commercialisation and resulted in the commodification of early childhood education and care. In this environment the focus is shifted away from the needs of the child. This paper suggests an alternative to current models of funding for early childhood education and care which starts from the

assumption that the child is the focal point of the services on offer. Commonwealth funding would be given to individual centres rather than chains and this funding would be linked to service contracts that cover such things as quality, budgets, fees etc. Within this model, centres become community hubs, offering opportunities for social capital building and social support networks.

Future Research

- Partnership research is desirable with other interested parties
- Many issues exist for future study, including:
 - Quality – What is it, how does it vary?
 - How to fund high quality universal childcare?
 - Measuring the social and economic benefits of ECEC
 - Access to ECEC
 - Low income access, how and why?
 - How to increase access
 - What is the quality of the care?
 - Who is using, not using informal care?
 - Consolidated data about how public funds are spent across the entire ECEC sector, including data on preschools, family day care, long day care etc.
 - New data
 - Submission to ABS regarding data collection
 - Submission to Australian Institute of Health and Welfare for a new ECEC series
 - Ways to improve and validate accreditation system
 - Conditions of workers, impact on workers and quality of care
 - Funding modelling
 - Scenario planning – expansion versus quality (workforce supply, funding, service substitution)
 - Affordability
 - Cortisol/ stress – unpack it – how to get quality care and a sustainable workforce
 - Survey of ECEC services – parents, kids, workers
 - What is the experience of long day care
 - Observational studies of Australian children in care (ECERS, ITERS – research tools)

Workshop participants agreed that a coherent national research agenda would best be served by establishing a National Centre for Research on ECEC

Workshop Closed, 5pm Friday 14th 2006