

Investigating quality in early childhood education and care: A multi-perspective approach (Part 2): Developing a mosaic of research evidence

Symposium Overview

Jennifer Sumsion

What counts as evidence of quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC), by whom, in which contexts, and for what purposes remain contested and often ethically complex issues. As Penn and Lloyd (2007) and other commentators have noted, ‘scientific’ evidence based on primarily quantitative research methods has considerable appeal to politicians and policy-makers because of the certainty it can seem to provide in informing policy decisions. While not disputing the importance, usefulness, and indeed the seductiveness of such research, the purpose of this symposium is to highlight the value of drawing on diverse theoretical, conceptual and methodological frameworks to examine quality in ECEC and how it might be achieved.

The Rudd Government’s intent to increase already high levels of investment in ECEC in order to improve access to high quality services and its commitment to evidence-based policy has focused renewed attention on the need for substantial development of the still relatively small Australian evidence base concerning quality in ECEC. The socially and culturally constructed nature of understandings of quality, as well as contextual specificities in ECEC provision, raise questions about the appropriateness of continuing to rely primarily on international research findings. In its endeavours to respond to the need to develop a more substantial corpus of Australian research into ECEC quality, the Australian early childhood education research community faces many constraints. Foremost amongst these constraints are the continuing scarcity of substantial research funding; the intensification of academic work and consequent paucity of time available for research; and the relative lack of research capacity in early childhood education compared to other disciplines with an interest in the early childhood years (Dockett & Sumsion, 2004).

In this less than ideal research environment, identifying and pursuing research agendas that acknowledge but refuse to be overwhelmed by these structural limitations becomes essential. The papers in this symposium report on a sample of projects from an early childhood education research community that is pursuing a research agenda focusing on ECEC quality. The research program consists of a mosaic-like mix of ARC funded, internally funded and unfunded studies, and higher degree research projects. Individually and collectively, the studies are contributing to a larger, collaborative research agenda designed to address concerning gaps in the Australian evidence base about quality in ECEC.

PAPER 1

(Re) theorising political activism for enhancing quality Australian early childhood education and care: What can we learn from Deleuze?

Jennifer Sumsion

Fifteen or so years ago, Australian politicians, policy makers and early childhood advocates could claim, with considerable legitimacy, that Australia was a world leader in the provision of high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). This claim rested primarily on the introduction of a then innovative policy of tying government funding for long day care centres to meeting the requirements of a two-tiered regulatory and accreditation framework comprising state licensing regulations and a national quality assurance system (Wangmann, 1995). Considerable erosion of confidence in the effectiveness of that two-tiered framework (Fenech & Sumsion, 2007; Goodfellow, 2008) and, at least until the election of the Rudd Labor Government in late 2007, increasingly heavy reliance on market mechanisms as policy drivers have since rendered Australian claims to international leadership in high quality ECEC provision increasingly hollow. Even a generous reading of Starting Strong II, the OECD's second report on ECEC in 20 member nations (OECD, 2006) highlights that Australia no longer fares particularly well in cross national comparisons of ECEC provision.

This paper is concerned with the role that early childhood activists might play in addressing Australia's declining international standing in the provision of high quality ECEC. Its purpose is twofold: to consider how concepts taken from philosopher Giles Deleuze and his collaborators might provide 'new weapons' or tools for sharpening the strategic focus of early childhood activism; and to illustrate what critical imagination, which I have argued elsewhere is central to effective political activism (Sumsion, 2006), might look like in practice. The paper begins with a brief explanation of critical imagination (Sumsion, 2006) and how it can be enriched by theory. It then makes a case for turning to Deleuze. Several Deleuzian concepts (territories, territorialisation, rhizomes, lines, politics, political forces, and desire) are introduced and illustrated with examples from the Australian ECEC context. Their potential for critically imagining new possibilities for ECEC political activism is explored with reference to two entrenched 'problems' frequently seen as militating against substantial change in Australian ECEC policy and impinging on efforts to enhance the quality of ECEC — the selfless, easily exploitable, emotional commitment of ECEC educators and the fragmentation of the early childhood 'field'.

Paper 2

Influences on politicians' decision making for early childhood education and care policy: What do we know?

Kathryn Bown, Jennifer Sumsion and Fran Press

Politicians play a key role in determining policy content and outcomes for early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Brennan, 1998). As a result, the quality of formal ECEC provisions for children rests to a considerable extent on the policy decisions of politicians. While there are direct and indirect effects of politicians' policy decisions for the ECEC field, relatively few empirical studies have explored influences on politicians' decisions concerning policy, and fewer still pertaining to ECEC. There is a significant gap in the research investigating how and why politicians make the decisions that they do.

In this paper, we present a case for a research agenda to investigate politicians' policy and political decision making processes. Specifically, we argue the need to understand how politicians develop awareness of ECEC policy issues, how politicians make decisions for policy on these issues and what informs politicians' decisions. It is hoped that by investigating influences on politicians' policy decision making, the study will make a valuable contribution to the improvement of current policy strategies. It is clear that current policy is not adequately addressing significant policy problems facing the Australian ECEC field. Some of the more pressing concerns warranting improved policy and investment include fragmentation across jurisdictions and internal struggles to find common agreement for policy (Press, 2007); poor working conditions and low remuneration for those employed in the field (Pocock & Hill, 2007); rigorous but often disparate debates around issues such as the measurement and achievement of quality (Sims, 2007); and the unaffordable nature of high quality ECEC affecting accessibility on many levels (Pocock & Hill, 2007). The large proportion of ECEC services in Australia owned and operated by childcare corporations listed on the Australian stock exchange is also the subject of much debate (Press & Woodrow, 2005; Sumsion, 2006).

We begin the paper by conceptualising the policy sphere to illustrate the complexities of social policy development and implementation in a democratic political system. We then review literature pertaining to influences on political decision making, generally, and note the lack of attention to early childhood policy specifically. The paper concludes with a discussion of the possible implications such a research agenda could have for the early childhood field.

Paper 3

'Are you thinking what I'm thinking? Early childhood teachers' understandings and provision for quality in long day care services: An exploratory investigation.

Helen Logan

For several decades, the quality of early childhood services has been the subject of considerable discussion and increasing attention from governments, legislators, business, employers, early childhood educators and parents (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007). Yet, in many ways, 'quality' remains a loosely defined and contested term. Although it is widely accepted that the quality of a child's experience in long day care is linked to the qualifications of staff, little is known about how early childhood teachers construct understandings of and make provision for quality. The paucity of research in this area is a concern, given that early childhood teacher perceptions, conceptualisations and beliefs influence decisions and practices that in turn affect outcomes (Genishi et al, 2001).

This paper presents the findings of an exploratory Masters of Education project that investigated how early childhood teachers employed in long day care centres in a regional Australian city understood and made provision for quality. The six participants in the study came from a variety of service auspice types: community based, privately owned and corporate. Data were collected through in-depth interviews. Transcripts were analysed inductively to identify emerging themes (May, 2001). Interpretations of the data were also informed by Cleveland and Krashinsky's (2006) distinction between the tangible and less tangible aspects of quality. The former include staff qualifications, teacher-child ratios, group size, staff/management characteristics and physical resources. The latter include enthusiasm, leadership, motivation and personal staff characteristics and child – staff interactions.

Paper 4

Professionalism and professional identity in corporate childcare

Michelle Ortlipp, Jennifer Sumsion, Christine Woodrow

The former Howard Government's market-oriented approach to the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) saw the rapid growth of corporate childcare (long day care provision by listed childcare corporations). Despite much speculation and commentary, little is known about the impact of corporatisation on the quality of ECEC provision. Australia's largest childcare corporation, *ABC Learning*, (with approximately 21% of Australian long day care centres and 17,000 staff (ABC Learning, 2006), claims to have contributed to workforce professionalisation – and hence to the quality of ECEC provision. As partial evidence, it reports a staff attrition rate of 8%, substantially below the attrition rate for the ECEC sector as whole (ABC Learning, 2006). Given that numerous studies have shown that staff qualifications, commitment, continuity, beliefs and practices are key determinants of quality (OECD, 2001), and in light of threats to quality posed by continuing staff recruitment and retention difficulties in the Australian ECEC sector generally, it is possible that ABC Learning's approaches to staff professionalisation may have relevance for the sector as it struggles to address workforce challenges.

This paper considers that possibility by reporting on a qualitative, interview-based study with former ABC employees (access to current employees was not possible). The study investigated interrelations between employment in corporate childcare, constructions of professionalism and professional identity, and career intentions amongst early childhood (EC) teachers. Specifically, it aimed to: ascertain whether corporate childcare has given rise to new discourses of EC professionalism and professional identity; document how EC teachers employed in corporate childcare select from, position themselves within, resist and / or subvert corporate discourses and practices; gauge the career intentions of EC teachers employed in corporate childcare, and the capacity of corporate childcare to offer “satisfying, respected and financially viable” careers (OECD, 2001, p.11).

Conceptually, the study was framed around understandings that what constitutes professionalism remains a continuing “site of struggle” between respective interest groups (Sachs, 2001, p. 149), characterised by a tendency to essentialise in “unhelpfully crude ways” (Stronach et al, 2002, p. 109). Like Stronach et al, we were interested in “different possibilities” (p. 116) that resisted reductionist analytical lenses. Our thinking was enriched by Hargreaves and Goodson's (1996) principles of professionalism; Sachs' (2001) work on competing discourses concerning professionalism and professional identities; traditional ECEC ecologies of practice (Buchbinder et al, 2006; Osgood, 2006), and Foucault's (1984) reminder that there is always choice and the possibility of resistance.