Quality early childhood education for my child or for all children?
Parents as activists for equitable, high-quality early childhood education in Australia

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Historical accounts of the development of early childhood education (ECE) in Australia up to the passing of *Child Care Act in 1972* (Brennan, 1998; Wong, 2006) show that parents' role in the development of the sector has been limited. This trend has continued since the 1970s, with parents seemingly contributing to the development and quality of individual centres more so than to the development of a quality system of ECE in Australia. In the absence of parent-driven demand for such a system, significant and longstanding barriers to the universal provision of high-quality ECE prevail. This paper suggests that three intersecting influences have collectively induced parents to think about ECE as a personal rather than a public concern. These influences are ECE policy as an 'art of government' (Foucault 1991[1978], p. 92); maternalist discourses that naturalise motherhood; and educators' limited engagement with and enacting of systems advocacy. The paper discusses possibilities for educators to subvert these influences and develop activist collaborations with the goal of achieving universal provision of high-quality education for all children in Australia.

Introduction

One of the most significant decisions faced by an increasing number of parents[1] across Australia (DEEWR, 2012) is whether, where and when to enrol their children into formal child care. *Parents who can demand, discern, and enrol their child in quality early childhood education (ECE) settings are in a powerful position to access significant benefits for themselves and their children.* Research unequivocally shows that quality ECE stimulates brain development, improves children's life outcomes, and enhances national productivity through increased workforce participation and social inclusion (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012). These child, family, community and national benefits, however, are predicated on parents having access to and enrolling their child in ECE settings that are of high quality.

The purpose of this article is to stimulate discussion and debate on the potential for parents to drive demand for an equitable system of high-quality ECE in Australia. A review of ECE policy since the passing of the *Child Care Act 1972* shows that, despite increasing government intervention in

the following 40 years, parents today still face significant entrenched barriers to accessing quality ECE for their child. Given how much parents stand to gain from an equitable system of quality ECE, I draw on historical accounts of the development of ECE in Australia (Brennan, 1998; Wong, 2006; Wong, 2007) to assert that parents have surprisingly had relatively little to do with the shaping of the sector, and thus the addressing of these barriers. Rather, their involvement has and continues to be confined to supporting the provision of quality ECE in individual settings. I suggest that this limited involvement is a result of three interconnected spheres of discourses from social policy, from society, and from the sector. I then turn to discuss possibilities for EC educators to develop activist collaborations intent on achieving universal provision of high-quality education for all children in Australia.

The increasing role of government in the development of the sector, yet sustained inequity

The provision of quality ECE first became a policy focus of an Australian government in 1972 through the passing of the *Child Care Act*. Through this Act the Australian

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1   In this paper the term 'parents' is used to denote any person or who has primary care responsibilities for a child enrolled in an ECE setting, such as biological parents, grandparents, or non-familial carers/guardians.

government made capital and recurrent funds available to not-for-profit long day care settings (Brennan, 1998). Significantly, the Act acknowledged teacher qualifications as a key contributor to the provision of quality ECE through its payment of early childhood teachers' salaries (Cox, 2006). By funding teacher salaries the *Child Care Act 1972* also represented, for the first time, an Australian government contributing directly to the quality of ECE settings.

Over the next two decades however, subsequent federal government policies reflected a shift in priority from quality to supply. These policies included the removal of operational subsidies to not-for-profit centres, the abolition of capital funding, the extension of fee relief to for-profit centres, and the introduction of parent subsidies (Brennan, 1998). These policies clearly positioned ECE as child care; a strategy to support women's increased workforce participation. Renewed focus on ensuring quality in 'child care' came 20 years after the passing of the *Child Care Act* through a national quality improvement and accreditation system (NCAC, 1993). This system was introduced in response to concerns from community groups and peak bodies about quality standards in an increasing number of for-profit services (Brennan, 1998). The introduction of this system signified the beginning of what has become an entrenched policy approach where successive federal governments have sought to ensure quality ECE indirectly through regulation. This approach culminated in the implementation of the *National Quality Framework* (NQF) (ACECQA, 2011a) in 2012.

The NQF represents a national approach from all governments in Australia to raise quality in the sector through robust, nationally consistent regulations and standards. Through a new assessment and rating system—which entails the publishing of centres' quality ratings against seven Quality Areas—the NQF is also designed to enable parents to make informed childcare decisions. Notions of consumer choice through 'transparency and accountability' (ACECQA, no date, para 9) are indicative of the neo-liberal, marketised approach Australian governments have adopted over the past three decades (Sumsion, 2006). In this model of provisioning consumer choice is intended to drive quality, through demand. Regulatory frameworks such as the NQF are intended to guide and support consumers' rational decision making.

Despite increased federal government involvement Australia still lacks an equitable system of quality ECE. Inequitable access to preschool education emerged as an issue in the 1960s (Brennan, 1998) and is still an issue today. In New South Wales, for example, children of middle-upper-class families are more likely to attend preschool than children from lower-class families, children with a disability, children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and children with limited English (Brennan, 2012). Inequities are also embedded in the NQF, with children's access to an early childhood teacher being dependent on the state or territory in which they live and the number of places the centre they attend is licensed for (Fenech, Giugni & Bown, 2012). Affordability

and availability of a place in any ECE setting, irrespective of the level of quality it is providing, continue to be significant barriers to equitable access (Brennan & Fenech, in press). While parents can access government subsidies, these are not available to parents whose children attend preschool/kindergarten (Brennan & Fenech). It also remains to be seen whether centres rated as a Centre of Excellence or Exceeding the *National Quality Standard* are significantly more expensive than centres operating at the baseline standards, and thus less accessible to low-income families.

The role of parents in the development of the sector: Private interests over public concerns

The issues outlined in the previous section have emerged in spite of lobbying from political and community groups, but notably not parents. Brennan (1998) and Wong's (2007) accounts of the development of ECE in Australia suggest that the role parents have played in the development of the sector—as current or potential ECEC users—has not been significant. Philanthropists, feminists (mostly childless), unions, ECE providers and peak bodies, educators, business, and even 'political radicals' have been highlighted for their contributions to the development of the sector (Brennan, 1998) but parents have not.

Indeed, since the implementation of the *Child Care Act 1972,* parent involvement appears to have been largely confined to the development of individual ECE centres rather than to the development of the ECE sector. Such parent involvement has been demonstrated in three ways. First is parents' governance of community-based centres. As the not-for-profit community-based sector grew in the 1900s parents became involved in the managing of these centres. The need for parental governance, however, has declined since the late 1990s with the expansion of private, for-profit services. Recent figures show that approximately 26 per cent of long day care centres and 48 per cent of preschools today are community-based (Productivity Commission, 2011). Moreover, perceived onerous regulatory responsibilities for voluntary management committee members are leading to calls for cluster models of governance[2] that will relieve parents of this responsibility (Brennan, 2012).

More commonly, parent involvement lies with the development of partnerships with educators to enhance the quality of education and care their child is receiving. Under the NQF (ACECQA, 2011b) educators are required to develop collaborative relationships with families. In quality settings therefore, parents are given meaningful opportunities to participate and contribute to the ECE setting in which their child is enrolled, and to provide information to educators about their child and family that can be used for curriculum development. In these ways, the parent-partnership is very much service, not sector, specific.

2   This model is already in operation in Victoria (Brennan, 2012).

Notably, the NQF does not require parents to rate the quality of the setting they are using. Providing formal ratings in the national system of accreditation that preceded the NQF (NCAC, 2005) was a third avenue of parental involvement. Under this quality assurance system centres were required to complete a self-study that included formal parent evaluations. This requirement was enforced from 2005 but ceased in 2009. According to the National Childcare Accreditation Council, the decision to disband parent surveys was made, in part, because parents tended to overestimate centre quality, thus rendering the surveys to be of limited value (Horin, 2009).

As noted earlier, these parental contributions have been largely confined to the development of individual ECE settings, rather than to the development of a system of high-quality ECE. In other words, parents appear to have had opportunities to ensure that the ECE for their child is of high quality. In contrast, parent involvement in ensuring that ECE is of high quality for all children appears limited. Given that ECE in Australia has been and continues to be hampered by longstanding inequities, I propose that parents' prevailing focus on individual rather than public interests is problematic. This assertion is not intended to denigrate parents' concerns for their own child's early education, but comes from the view that, in the absence of universal high-quality ECE in Australia, current and potential parent users of ECE settings present as a relatively untapped lobby group. As a way forward, I propose that educators are well placed to build activist partnerships with parents that focus on developing a system of high-quality ECE in Australia.

To frame possibilities for how such partnerships might be developed I first outline three interconnected spheres of influence from social policy, from society, and from the sector that can be seen to have narrowed parents' perspectives to private rather than public concerns pertaining to ECE. Accordingly, parents' engagement with the provision of quality ECE has been largely confined to a focus on individual service quality rather than a system of high-quality ECE for all children. The first influence is ECE policy functioning as an 'art of government' (Foucault, 1991 [1978], p. 92) that manoeuvres parents into operating as consumers with private interests rather than citizens with public concerns. Second is the maternalist discourse that positions mothers as a young child's best caregiver. Third is educators' desire and capacity to practise as advocates and activists for an equitable system of quality ECE, and to partner with parents in this work.

1. ECE policy as an 'art of government'

Foucault conceptualised governmentality as 'the art of government' (Foucault 1991 [1978], p. 92). The 'art' is a government's construction of parameters within which its constituents can act. The constructed parameters are economically viable and serve to meet a government's interests. Through these parameters, governments employ 'multiform tactics' (Foucault 1991 [1978], p. 95) to shape and align the interests of their constituents to their own. These tactics are subtle rather than explicitly coercive (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). A 'manifestation of truth' (Foucault, cited in Gordon, 1991, p. 8) becomes a central tactic, with governments propagating truth discourses to systematise and rationalise the exercising of political power for specific ends. Foucault's (1980, p. 93) entwining of power/knowledge, encapsulated in the following quote, is key here:

> In any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise, and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse … We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.

Successive Australian governments since the instituting of the *Child Care Act 1972* have implemented ECE policies that have effectively established governmentalist parameters and discourses. On their own and melded together, these parameters and discourses have served to keep parents focused on ECE for their own child, rather than for all children. Additionally, and as will be seen in the examples below, the concern for 'quality' has been mitigated in some of the ways ECE has been constructed in policy.

Parameters take the form of the 'institutional architecture' (Ben-Porath, 2010) established through government policy that defines and confines ECE options for parents (Marshall, 1996), and in turn shapes how parents think about ECE. That there is no and never has been universal entitlement to quality ECE in Australia—a stark contrast to the provision of primary education—is a significant frame that positions ECE as a private parent concern rather than a public good. Parents' options are further influenced by architecture that has established long day care and preschool as two mediums through which ECE is to be provided. Within this frame, parents working full time and wanting to enrol their child in a formal ECE setting can explore long day care but not preschool options. Similarly, given that fee relief is only available for approved and registered ECE settings, that is, long day care but not preschool, the choices of parents on low incomes are mostly likely confined to long day care and not preschool.

Both of these architectural designs reflect the longstanding construction of long day care as a means to enhance the country's productivity through women's increased workforce participation (Wong, 2007). Such a construction powerfully shifts understandings about ECE from early learning to 'child care'. While 'child care' is a high-profile policy issue, public debate appears subsumed by affordability and accessibility issues. Australian research (Dalton & Wilson, 2009), for example, has shown that newspaper articles pertaining to child care overwhelmingly focus on market and cost issues, with little attention paid to quality.

Parents' perceived need to advocate for a system of high-quality ECE is further diminished by policy that aims to ensure quality through regulation. Since the establishment of the national system of accreditation in 1993 (NCAC, 1993) to the recent introduction of the NQF (ACECQA, 2011a), parents have been assured that regulatory standards will ensure and improve the provision of quality ECE. In the new NQF assessment and rating system, parents will be able to check the quality rating their centre has received on a publicly available national register. The assumption here, however, is that all parents will have access to centres that are rated as operating to at least the *National Quality Standard*, and that this Standard is a robust reflection of quality contributors identified in research. A recent analysis of the NQF suggests that both assumptions are problematic (Fenech et al., 2012). Indeed, of the 1620 services that had been rated up to 31 March, 2013[3], nearly half (44 per cent) had been rated as Working Towards the *National Quality Standard*. It remains to be seen whether parents will seek ratings information from ACECQA and if so, whether there will be an ensuing demand to place their child in one of the centres rated as Exceeding the *National Quality Standard*, or a more collective demand for universal high-quality ECE.

The latter scenario seems unlikely given another policy influence that can be considered to have confined parents' interest in ECE to a personal rather than public consideration: the marketisation of ECE (Sumsion, 2006). Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) argue that 'the education market (like all markets) is intended to be driven by self-interest … the self-interest of parents, as consumers, choosing schools that will provide maximum advantage to their children' (p. 2). This proposition assumes that parents can and do operate as responsible, autonomous, free, proactive, rational consumers of child care, that is, as economic rationalist policy purports consumers will act (King & Meagher, 2009). While this portrayal may apply to some parents (most likely with the capital required to source quality options) Cox's observation that the marketisation of child care has diminished 'demands for collective solutions to problems such as child care' (Cox, 2006, p. 273) stems from the self-interest of a different kind of consumer. Cox contends that the burden of responsibility to find quality child care has desensitised parents' desire to 'form an angry lobby about childcare issues … [instead, they] accept the problems as personal albeit often devastating' (p. 274). While the onus of choice is in the context of limited available, affordable, and high-quality options *the current policy positioning of parents as informed consumers of child care has not generated and is unlikely to generate a powerful parent lobby that demands a quality system of ECE*. The maternalist and sectoral influences discussed in the following two sections further explain why this is the case.

3 The quality ratings of long day care centres, preschools, and family day care were published. Data pertaining to the proportion of each service type included was not available.

2. Maternalism

Resistance to the growth of ECE (or 'child care') has prevailed since the origins of the sector in the late 1800s (Brennan, 1998). Much of this resistance has been grounded in a discourse of maternalism, notably, that it is in young children's best interests to be at home with their mother, rather than in 'child care' (Ailwood, 2008; Brennan, 1998; Wong, 2006). In maternalist discourses a mother is considered to be biologically wired to be the natural and best caregiver of her children (Ailwood; Wong). Accordingly, societal expectations have been and arguably still are that mothers should fulfil their carer responsibilities, not their career aspirations. The influence of these societal expectations is evident in the feelings of anxiety and guilt mothers express when talking about their experiences of 'leaving' their child in formal child care. Drawing on Foucault's theorising of discourse noted earlier in this paper it seems feasible to suggest that any ambivalence about using 'child care' would exacerbate a parent's (mother's) private agenda of securing quality child care while also perhaps mitigating a concern about a quality ECE system for all children.

It is important to note that this discourse of maternalism is fuelled by the ECE policies discussed in the previous section. The entrenched education (preschool/kindergarten)–care (long day care) dichotomy is of particular significance to working mothers who may view long day care as inferior to preschool but who have no option, due to the hours they work, to enrol their children in what they may perceive to be 'child care' and not a setting where learning and teaching takes place. Conversely, ECE policies are developed in part, from politicians' ownership of these maternalist ideas (Bown, 2009). Challenging maternalism, therefore, may also serve to shift the values and agendas that underpin current ECE policy in ways that entice a more 'public good' view of ECE.

3. Educators' perceptions about advocacy and the positioning of parents in this work

The role of educators as advocates for a universal system of high-quality ECE is a third influence on parents' limited direct involvement in the development of the sector. Undertaking advocacy at a systems level (Waniganayake, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley & Shepherd, 2012) can be challenging for early childhood educators for a number of personal and contextual reasons, including: lack of time, lack of perceived experience, ambivalence about the exercise of power, sector fragmentation, and feelings of powerlessness and marginalisation (Macfarlane & Lewis, 2012; Mevawalla, 2009; Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012; Sumsion, 2006). When educators with whom parent users of ECE settings have relationships are reticent about advocacy, then it seems likely that the primary concern of these parents will be the level of quality those educators are providing their child, and not what is happening more broadly in the sector.

Further, when educators do engage in advocacy work this is positioned in the literature as something that is to be done for parents, rather than with them. Early Childhood Australia's *Code of Ethics* (2006), for example, states that 'early childhood professionals have a strong history of advocating *on behalf of* (my emphasis) children and their families' (p. 1). Educators are encouraged in the Code to continue advocating on issues that affect children and their families. Similarly, Sumsion (2006) envisions that activist educators 'would yield benefits … *for* (my emphasis) the families and children with whom they work' (p. 4) and parents are not included as a possible group with whom educator-activists could forge alliances. The following and final section of this paper considers how such an alliance might be developed.

Transforming the parent–educator partnership paradigm to an activist collaboration

In light of early childhood advocates' limited success in achieving universal, high-quality ECE, Sumsion (2006) proposed that 'we should consider shifting our priorities from advocacy to activism and from policy to politics' (p. 3). A focus on activism and politics requires challenging established discourses and modes of operation, and working within new frames of reference to secure a more equitable distribution of power. This section considers what such a shift in priorities might entail for educators if parents are to emerge as a powerful lobby group for a quality system of ECE in Australia.

I suggest that fundamentally a new frame of reference necessitates a shift from the dominant discourse of parent educator partnerships discussed earlier in this paper, to an activist parent–educator collaboration driven by a vision for high-quality ECE for all children in Australia. Such a shift requires activist leadership not just from peak bodies and unions, but from educators in ECE settings, particularly those employed in leadership positions. Significantly, while a professional and ethical responsibility, advocacy and activism are not required elements of practice in the *National Quality Standards'* Quality Area seven, which focuses on leadership and management (ACECQA, 2011b). This is a notable omission, with advocacy recognised *by sector leaders as a hallmark of high quality ECE settings* (Community Child Care Co-operative NSW, 2012). *There remains an onus of responsibility* on early childhood leaders to be intentional about working for a quality system of ECE (Waniganayake et al., 2012).

Findings from a recent small-scale Australian study (Fenech, Harrison & Sumsion, 2011) suggest that leaders' and educators' advocacy and activism can powerfully impact parents' understanding of the contributors to quality ECE and their involvement in advocacy and activism for a universal system of high-quality ECE. This study investigated the knowledge parents using high-quality settings had of contributors to quality ECE. Practising from a philosophy committed to children's

rights and social justice, staff at one case study centre became heavily involved in a state-wide 1:4 Make it Law campaign aimed at improving ratios for children under two years from 1:5 to 1:4 (for more details on this campaign see Bown, in press). This involvement entailed parent education about the importance of more robust ratios for young children, asking parents to sign petitions that were sent to relevant members of parliament, and inviting parents to an awareness-raising day and a public rally. Not only did parents participate in the campaign, but their exposure to the issue meant that, out of all six case study centres, parents from this centre demonstrated the strongest knowledge about staff: child ratios as a critical structural contributor to quality ECE. This finding highlights the value of forging activist collaborations that enable parents to broaden their focus from the ECE their own child receives to the ECE all children might receive. While just one example, it behoves the potential for early childhood leaders and educators to enhance parents' capacity to drive demand-led quality improvements.

More broadly, the findings from this case study attest to the value of educators intentionally challenging the policy and societal parameters and discourses discussed earlier in this paper with current and potential parent-users. Wong (2007) has argued that 'proponents of universal ECEC in Australia have to constantly struggle to construct ECEC in ways that engender public and government support' (p. 144). This argument can be extended to parents who research shows, generally have limited understanding of the importance of the early years, the value of a quality ECE, and the contributors to a quality ECE setting (Atkinson, 2011; Cryer, Tietze & Wessels, 2002; Fenech et al., 2011; Mocan, 2007).

Finally, another strategy educators could utilise is to engage with and subvert maternalist discourses that leave parents—mothers in particular—reticent about leaving their child in 'child care'. When developing relationships with parents, educators could give parents (mothers) opportunities to air feelings of guilt about not being a full-time stay-at-home mum, and address these feelings through promoting research that highlights the benefits of quality ECE for young children and which also articulates the value that a community approach to raising children has for families.

Conclusion

Prior and subsequent to the passing of the *Child Care Act 1972* parents in Australia have never operated as a strong political force lobbying for a universal system of high-quality ECE. Political, social and sectoral influences have collectively diminished both the capacity of parents to agitate for an equitable system of high-quality ECE and perhaps more importantly, a parent consciousness that such agitation is needed. To redress the positioning of parents as consumers focused on securing high-quality ECE for their own child but much less so for all children, educators are well placed to intentionally cultivate activist collaborations with parent-users.

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