



CHAPTER
2

Early childhood landscape in Australia and reflective comments on Finland and Norway

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The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) landscape in Australia is a kaleidoscope of settings and models designed to meet the needs of children and families seeking full-time or part-time services before children start school at an age anywhere between 4.5 to 6 years. These settings are referred to variously as long day care, childcare, preschool, kindergarten, family day care and include before or after school care, outside school hours care and vacation care.

Across Australia's history, government commitment to and provision of ECEC reflect changes in social and economic circumstances as well as shifts in ideologies of the political party controlling the parliament (Bown, Sumsion & Press, 2011; Cheeseman, Sumsion & Press, 2014). In seeking to increase economic productivity, there is more emphasis today on the importance of childcare as an enabler for mothers' participation in the paid workforce. This approach is also reflected in the historical split between the Australian government's funding of childcare services, and early years education being deemed a state/territory government responsibility (Productivity Commission, 2015, p. 4). Moreover, "this preoccupation with economic gains also not only reflects the adult centric nature of ECEC provisioning in most Western societies, it can also detract attention on the here and now of today's children and their current lives." (Waniganayake, 2013, p. 21)

An historic shift in policy direction occurred in 2008, following the election of a Labor government. The poor performance of Australia in international

benchmark studies on ECEC (Adamson, 2008) was a concern, especially given the increasing scientific evidence about the importance of early childhood for life course development. The newly elected government was committed to universal access to ECEC and forged ahead with implementing policy reforms that upheld the rights of children with equal access to a socially just and inclusive ECEC system.

A National Early Childhood Development Strategy – Investing in the Early Years was developed to provide a comprehensive approach to building an effective ECEC system and its vision for 2020 was that “all children get the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation” (Access Economics, 2009, p. 3). The Strategy was implemented through a policy framework encompassing a nationally coordinated ECEC system, comprising a regulation and accreditation system attached to the *National Quality Standard (NQS)* (ACECQA, 2011) and an *Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)* (DEEWR, 2009). For the first time, state funded preschool centres were included in a national accreditation system that moved beyond regulation and addressed the quality of environments, relationships, programming and children’s learning, health and safety and leadership and management (ACECQA, 2012), and the accreditation of ECEC training courses offered through various training providers across the country.

In 2012, the government introduced the role of the Educational Leader, as a way of steering attention to the national *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009). This role, embedded in Quality Area 7 of The National Quality Standard, is described as influential in ‘inspiring, motivating, affirming’ and for challenging the practice and pedagogy of educators through inquiry and reflection.

Whilst denoted in legislation, the development of the educational leader responsibilities has been left in the hands of the sector and state regulatory authorities. In the absence of specific guidelines, the requirements and expectations of this role have been open to interpretation. It also holds no industrial position and therefore these jobs do not have a standard rate of remuneration. There is agreement about the importance of having educational leaders but there is also no policy guidance on the level of qualifications or length of experience required of those appointed into these jobs. It is also unclear whether educational leaders should focus on pedagogical matters exclusively or carryout a mix of teaching, managing and leading roles performed traditionally by centre directors/coordinators.

Three primary factors driving change are the desire to corral a system to ensure political party ideology is expressed in current policy, a different efficiency measure in ECEC spending and the enactment of a 'non interventionist' approach to government founded in neo-liberalism. Currently, the dominant party ideology driving national policy is founded in self-determinism and the market economy with mothers returning to paid work as a centre piece. The national government also is divisive politics by highlighting state responsibility for education, refusing to provide ongoing security of universal access funding, and the repeated emphasis on each state's financial responsibility for any ECEC program provisions.

Financial measures that are being touted as necessary to curtailing a system's overspending appear to be out of step with international trends. "Child and family polices are developing and expanding in dynamic ways around the world, despite the fiscal austerity that enveloped many countries in the wake of the global financial crisis." (Brennan & Adamson, 2015, p. 8).

The long-term implications of the proposed changes identified in the Productivity Commission's Report (2015) are also unknown and remain largely unexplored. Primary features of the previous Labour government's reforms – social justice, inclusion, and equality enabled by mandated universality of early education have been replaced by 'othering' of disadvantage through the narrow focus on engagement of children with a disability as a view of inclusion, and an ongoing scrimmage of determining state and federal responsibilities.

Private provision now outweighs the not-for-profit provision of ECEC and this impacts the role of leadership. With financial viability of services being a priority the primary focus is upon sustaining service delivery as opposed to one that focuses on education or child wellbeing. For the first time, a system of unregulated care is being piloted and funded and some are fearful of the indications of a move to more unregulated ECEC. There is also a lack of political will to fund ongoing professional development of ECEC professionals.

The stalling point for this is the timing of changes and government machinations required to implement policy and legislation. The majority of change is mooted for 2017 following the next national election. The proposed system requires funds that are esoterically linked to the abandonment of a Paid Parental Leave scheme and a streamlining of a system of benefits for disadvantaged families that could mean those families are worse off, with reduced access to and exclusion from the system possible outcomes.

There remain some key points that determine on ongoing leadership agenda. The Federal government has been forced to leave the primary tenets of the National Quality Framework alone. Legislative responsibility is with the states and territories and Ministers have staunchly refused to undercut the bar that determines quality.

Finally, there is no consideration of ECEC workforce issues and the shortfall in numbers of trained and willing educators, which may require a curtailing of services or exemptions to ensure services can operate. The challenge remains, in a constantly changing landscape, how can ECEC leaders ensure their practice has strong philosophical foundations to ensure the delivery of high quality education for all children?

REFLECTIONS ON FINLAND

Unlike in Australia, Finnish legislation defines that EC leaders (and teachers), must have an EC bachelor degree and “adequate management skills”. In both countries however, the lack of definition and separation between leadership and management makes it difficult to design well targeted training programs for leadership preparation. Based on a systemic analysis of Finnish EC research, **Eskelinen and Hujala** show that these teacher leaders “feel they lack leadership power” (p. 12). In Australia, it can be stated that this situation is exacerbated especially if the teacher leaders are new graduates with limited experience.

Fonsén, Akselin and Aronen show that the speed of policy change can create chaos and confusion. This is a timely reminder for Australian educational leaders, to ensure that sufficient time is allocated to think critically, and discuss issues carefully when implementing major policy reforms. Likewise **Halttunen’s** study is a reminder that lack of evaluation research, with long-term follow up, makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness or impact of professional development and learning on everyday practice.

The findings in **Heikka’s** research are also relevant to centres in Australia that are governed and managed under a group structure/system with several layers of authority and decision making. The inclusion of non-EC stakeholders, such as local politicians, with power to influence leadership enactment in centres raises questions about the importance of deep disciplinary knowledge when leading EC settings. There is no Australian research about the role or impact of these stakeholders, including parents and shareholders of centres that are part of privately listed companies, and the impact on shared strategic thinking and planning.

REFLECTIONS ON NORWAY

Emerging competition between centres for enrolments in Norway is also reflected in centres promoting speciality products according to subject based content knowledge as in school. This trend has implications for children's learning in ECEC settings. Whilst local politicians elected by popular voting can play a key role in local policy and politics, little is also known about their influence over educational leaders of ECCs. **Flormælen and Moen** lament that parents and municipality personnel can also exert pressure on ECC centres and there is a lack of clarity about their expectations of learning during early childhood.

Granrusten highlights tension created through the recent transfer of ECEC in Norway to the Ministry of Education and Research. A similar pattern of the push-down curriculum emanating from school education authorities is also being felt in Australia. This research is a timely reminder of the importance of having a deep disciplinary knowledge base and specialist pedagogical and leadership skills when working as an EC leader.

In Norway, local politicians and parents can exert pressure on ECC directors regarding program content and quality matters. **Flormælen and Moen** indicate that when centres merge with schools, the principals, with limited or no knowledge of ECEC assume unit manager status. The emerging disconnect between centre staff and unit management creates tension as schoolification pressures override EC pedagogical expertise of ECC directors. Consider these findings against cluster management models emerging within Australia and inquire what influence does discipline based expertise of EC directors have in local decision-making?

Consideration of challenges of leading learning within ECCs comprising staff with a mix of professional competence levels by **Boe and Hognestad**, resonates well with contemporary praxis in Australia. This research raises questions such as, how does your teaching practice and leadership create site-based or local knowledge construction? To what extent is your focus on care and sensitivity towards other staff influence personal agency or power dynamics within your centre?

Careful analysis of Government policy documents by **Skjæveland** offered little clarity regarding how leadership for learning was practiced in Norway although there is increasing pressure to focus on learning within ECCs. The development of an *Annual Plan* for an ECC centre resonates with the *Quality Improvement Plan* developed in Australian centres. In the same way, how do

Australian policy documents such as the EYLF and the NQS, 'exercise power' over the EC sector in defining the work of centres in this country?

Research by **Vannebo and Gotvassli** shows that centre managers were unsure about how to adopt a learning centred approach to pedagogy. They argue that the concept of learning in ECEC policy was more focused on staff learning and organisational development, and favoured academic learning, characteristic of schools. Can this kind of resistance undermine the value of ECEC in Norway?



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