

**Title:** Tensions and challenges in Australia's early years field: Views from the inside

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# **Tensions and challenges in Australia's early years field: Views from the inside**

## **Abstract**

Traditionally private responsibilities for mothers and families, early childhood health, development and care have emerged as legitimate objects of public policy in contemporary welfare states. But despite renewed public interest and commitment, the early years field in Australia remains complex and contested. With the sector considered poorly co-ordinated and under-resourced compared with many other wealthy countries, the next stage of attempted reform may risk exacerbating a series of system-level tensions and challenges.

In this paper, we use interview findings to take stock of early years policy in Australia, identify some current challenges, and outline some principles for change. We show that while developments in the field have been spurred by advances in research evidence, sustained advocacy and the renewal of government commitment, progress remains compromised by unresolved tensions around the goals and vision of the system, fragmented system design, unsustainable resourcing, and an unstable service delivery workforce.

## **Introduction**

Over the last decade, promoting wellbeing and development in the early years of life has become increasingly important in contemporary welfare states. Managing and supporting early childhood health, welfare, education and care offers governments ways to pursue some broader social policy goals, including ameliorating inequality and social exclusion; sustaining fertility rates; ensuring labour supply; and maintaining national productivity as the population ages.

In Australia, the emergence of the early years as an object of public intervention and discrete policy field has been gradual and partial. Of course, some elements of policy and professional practice promoting a more integrated approach and

seeking increased investment in early years can be traced back over three decades. In recent years however, the pace of change has stepped up, driven by powerful research information, along with sustained advocacy efforts. Local champions have seized on mostly overseas research evidence (e.g. Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000), propounding what have been called the ‘killer facts’ (Bowen et al, 2009) that powerfully demonstrate the difference early childhood interventions make throughout the life course, and the human and economic costs of non-intervention. A stream of influential overseas visitors helped raise the profile of the early years as worthy of public investment, interpreting and disseminating evidence strategically throughout the community, among practitioners, and in federal and state governments. These visitors included Fraser Mustard (1999, 2001, 2002), Bruce Perry (2000, 2007), Clyde Hertzman (2003, 2004), Naomi Eisenstadt (2005), James Heckman (2006), and Jack Shonkoff (2006); some of whom were privy to dedicated Ministerial or Cabinet meetings. Competition among researchers in separate disciplinary silos came to coalesce into cross-disciplinary partnerships, underpinning the development of comprehensive national longitudinal studies (LSAC and LSIC<sup>1</sup>) and strong networked constituencies at the nexus of research, policy and practice (e.g. ARACY<sup>2</sup>, NIFTEY<sup>3</sup>).

Australian governments responded with institutional and policy innovations, firstly by creating Ministerial portfolios for children’s services, departmental Offices for Children, and Children’s Commissions with statutory powers; and secondly, drawing on overseas developments like the UK Sure Start program, governments funded large scale, collaborative and targeted preventative initiatives with names like ‘Best Start’, ‘Families First’, and ‘Communities for Children’. At a federal level, the Australian Labor Party came to office in November 2007

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<sup>1</sup> Longitudinal Study of Australian Children and Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children, see <http://www.aifs.gov.au/growingup/>

<sup>2</sup> Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, see <http://www.aracy.org.au/>

<sup>3</sup> National Investment for the Early Years, see <http://niftey.cyh.com/>

promising decisive action in the areas of children's services, child protection, paid maternity leave, and Indigenous health. Building on the COAG agreement of 2006 to incorporate early years issues into a human capital or productivity agenda driven by Ministers, the new federal government initiated a series of consultation processes, including developing a national quality framework for early childhood education and care (Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008), and exploring prospects for a national child protection framework (FAHCSIA, 2008). Other recent federal initiatives include establishing early learning and care centres in areas of unmet demand, developing a national early years workforce strategy during 2009, and a research-based initiative to roll out the Australian Early Development Index<sup>4</sup> nationally to assist communities, governments and researchers monitor child development and tailor resources and programs to local needs.

The unprecedented pace of change, and promise of further reforms, makes it an opportune time to take stock of the early years field in Australia, identify current challenges, and suggest some guiding principles for change. To this end, we draw on interviews with elites in the field to show that while developments have been spurred by advances in research evidence, sustained advocacy and the renewal of government commitment, progress may be compromised by unresolved tensions around the goals and vision of the system, fragmented system design, unsustainable resourcing, and an unstable service delivery workforce. With early years services and infrastructure in Australia generally considered poorly coordinated and under-resourced compared with many other wealthy countries (Adamson, 2008; OECD, 2006), resolving these challenges will be fundamental to restoring service standards and achieving outcomes for children and families.

## Methodology

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.rch.org.au/australianedi/>

Analysing policy and policy processes is usually a mixed methods affair, involving scrutiny of case studies, official actions, documents and decisions; historical, media and economic analysis; and evaluation studies. For this study, interviews were a key means of inquiry, enabling us to explore the workings and limitations of policy processes in this developing and complex policy field. Interviews enable exploration of perspectives and processes which may escape the public or media gaze. Indeed, official or public accounts rarely expose a critical range of perspectives about how policy processes work in practice or the mind-sets and visions of actors involved, and those offering detail about internal policy-making debates and processes may be embargoed under archival legislation (Richards, 1996; Lilleker, 2003).

To overcome these limitations, we interviewed informants selected from the small number of individuals who work, or who have worked, in close proximity to policy making or the exercise of power in the early years field (broadly encompassing child health, welfare, education and care). Because policy processes consist primarily of interactions between politicians, advisors, and public service managers (who each may be influenced by advocates and researchers), we targeted individuals who had actively sought to shape an area of early years policy in bureaucratic, advocacy, research, political, management or advisory capacities. The sample was compiled primarily through public records, and through snowballing (following up key people identified by interviewees). Overall, we invited 26 individuals in late 2008 to participate in this initial study. 16 agreed to be interviewed either by telephone (12) or in person (4). As Richards (1996) points out, elite interview samples are usually small, because there are generally few actors at the upper echelons of power; because those with influence may be difficult to access due to their schedule and priorities; and because elites may feel the need to protect the information afforded by their 'insider' role.

We used a semi-structured interviewing schedule to explore interviewees' experiences of policy processes; the changes they have seen achieved for children over the years (including the main drivers and inhibitors of these changes); what

(if anything) they consider is distinctive about the policy process in the early years field (compared with other areas of policy); the challenges of policy making in this area; what would improve the early years policy agenda in Australia; and what would improve the ways policies affecting children are developed and implemented. Interview data were analysed thematically, and considered in the context of recent policy developments, to identify key factors influencing policy and processes of change in the field.

All interviewees held high public and/or professional profiles in fields related to child health and welfare, and had generally been outspoken in their attempts to effect changes in service systems and to mitigate disadvantage through prevention programs. All had long careers in a series of senior roles in the bureaucratic, management, advocacy, advisory and research sectors. Interviewees' careers tended not to have followed 'traditional' trajectories for professionals in their field; these people had been self-consciously stretching the boundaries of their roles and their organisations to develop new ways of thinking and working. Several, for example, had begun their careers as practitioners without foreseeing a broader policy role, but felt frustrated with the individualised focus of clinical work and found themselves 'drawn into' policy processes as they became increasingly driven to pursue change on a larger scale. Most had careers that spanned across more than one sphere, for example senior bureaucrats (or former bureaucrats) with backgrounds in service management or advocacy; and researchers whose influential work and advocacy had led them into advisory positions for ministers, departments, political parties or community organisations.

### **Tensions and challenges in Australia's early years field**

Interviewees talked about the main changes achieved in the early years field, their experiences of policy making processes, the challenges they observed, and the principles they thought should shape policy development and action. Although the interviews generated a plethora of information, this paper focuses on one strand of discussion only: tensions and challenges in early years policies and

service systems, as identified by interviewees. These related to four broad themes: the goals and vision of the system, system design and coherence, resourcing and sustainability, and workforce challenges.

### **System goals and vision**

Interviewees traced tensions in the early years field to a lack of clear and shared goals. One basic problem relates to the way the goals are shaped, mediated and interpreted by adults, without children's involvement:

*...the direct stakeholders, the kids, they're invisible and silent... .. you're almost working through those who are caring for kids, and they're low status and haven't been particularly articulate and haven't been able to speak with one voice. (#1)*

Perhaps resulting from the absence of children in mainstream policy discourse and the preoccupations of a system targeted on the disadvantaged (Cheeseman, 2007), children were seen to be constructed in simplistic, homogeneous or stigmatising ways, for example, as victims requiring statutory intervention in child protection, as objects for control in relation to justice and crime, and as 'empty vessels' in education policy. As one interviewee described:

*public policy is quite conflicted, it's got contradictory constructions of children depending on the arena in which it's acting. (#12)*

In terms of childcare, interviewees identified a lack of process and leadership for developing consensus around the goals of service provision:

*...the attempts to bring things together around a common definition of what early childhood services should look like, that's been a bit thin. Those discussions have been slow and cumbersome and fraught, and that's what's holding up early childhood policy in Australia (#3)*

Other factors seen to constrain development of clear goals were a lack of statutory entitlement to early years services; clashes of professional traditions within the field; long-standing conflict around early childhood as a responsibility for education, social service or health bureaucracies; and within childcare, unresolved tensions around the role of the market and between the overarching policy goals

of supporting maternal workforce participation and supporting child development.

Interviewees thus gave general support for initiatives to establish a coherent, federally led reform agenda. Attempts to reframe early childhood as a matter for education portfolios were broadly welcomed<sup>5</sup>, on the basis this would best support the idea that like primary and secondary schooling, access to quality early years education and care was a right of citizenship; an area in which professionals should be properly valued and supported; an area unsuitable for poor quality, poorly regulated for-profit providers; and a priority for Treasury departments.

### **System design and coherence**

Without a coherent vision, early years systems remain highly fragmented, presenting fundamental challenges for the field. In terms of service delivery, interviewees focused on fragmentation in childcare:

*Because of years of neglect we've now got such a fragmented service system, fragmented understanding of its value, fragmented engagement at the political level, it's very hard, it's literally like herding cats... [It's] fragmented by funding models, it's fragmented by service systems, it's fragmented by industrial relations, it's fragmented by standards and it's fragmented by staffing. And that's our problem in early childhood. ... (#3)*

The spread of funding across large numbers of small, short term targeted projects, without central co-ordination or leadership, also raised problems:

*We're a nation of pilots, there's lots of initiatives, they're small scale and short term. We then say "great it's worked", but don't do the hard work in bringing them to scale and making them the basis of larger scale systems. Part of this is the problem that a lot of solutions can only lie with government and can only lie with government investment - you can't do it by the market. (#2)*

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<sup>5</sup> Those sceptical were concerned an education frame would privilege supports for academic over social and emotional development; and reinforce children as human capital reserves and 'becomings' rather than intrinsically valuable citizens in the present.



While government offers coherence in the midst of diverse sectors and groups, institutions and policies remain fragmented across jurisdictions and between agencies, posing problems for overall coherence and accountability:

*If you mapped all the services that are important for young children and families it's all over the place, it's a bewildering array of state government, local government, federal government... ...there are lots and lots of services, but they're all separate, they all function in silos, it's all process driven, bums on seats... ...I'd like to see some rationalisation of that, and much clearer lines of responsibility... (#5)*

Indeed, fragmentation inside government was a major source of frustration, with interviewees adamant that comprehensive solutions require co-ordination, sharing of resources, and involvement of the 'right' range of players:

*You've got a bureaucracy that manages the money, the budget, the resources. They're as siloed as they come. What's more in Australia you have ministers who are responsible for a budget and they're all happy to share things across with other ministers except they won't share the resources.... the structure of government is fairly archaic for what we're trying to do. (#8)*

*Every time I go to Canberra and sit around a table with bureaucrats and talk about the early childhood agenda and what's next, [the Department of] Health is never at the table, so that's a major challenge: how do we get all the players around the table, how do we get a single line of responsibility and accountability to make things happen, it's all over the place. (#5)*

Indeed, poor system design and fragmentation undermined attempts to collaborate. As one interviewee explained:

*It's easy for governments to think just about the bits that they have explicit control over, thinking that that means childcare, not thinking that it also means roads and transport and the location of services and parks and the whole caboodle.... [and] there's always pressure to go back to silos. Silos is comfortable and easy, that's the way funding comes (#1)*

It is thus no surprise that centralisation and administrative integration are proposed as directions for federal reform, including establishing single systems for regulating ECEC quality and child protection. Whereas these process reforms would make progress toward the 'whole of government' approach to the early years that most interviewees advocated, this maintains a focus on improving the

coherence of bureaucratic processes, rather than improving the design of service systems around children themselves:

*I prefer the term 'whole of child' to 'whole of government' approach. In order to [focus on] the whole of child you have to look at what they need instead of starting from the bureaucratic process which is always going to be difficult to negotiate. (#11)*

## **Resourcing and sustainability**

Further challenges related to system resourcing and sustainability. At the most basic level, resource problems arise from the lack of influence children have over either service funding or influencing policy processes:

*If you look at economic policy, business can fund think tanks and lobbyists and so on, children have zip capacity to fund independent think tanks, they're reliant on government to fund. (#12)*

Other resource problems interviewees identified were a failure to match the rhetoric of prevention by shifting resources, and a tradition of running programs without a solid evidence base and without an evaluation component, which made it difficult to secure further resources. Funding arrangements in children's services were key concerns in late 2008 and early 2009, given the collapse of Australia's largest private childcare provider, ABC Learning. This fuelled a building critique of corporatised, poorly regulated services (e.g. Sumsion, 2006), drawing unprecedented attention to problems of availability and affordability, and highlighting the need for more strategic, sustainable and equitable policy and funding arrangements. Despite the need to address the crisis in childcare, this issue, and the early years more broadly, was perceived as being susceptible to slip off the agenda during a time of economic downturn:

*My fear is the window will start to close after a while because it's complex and there's all these competing demands, particularly with this financial crisis... the first and biggest challenge is keeping the attention of politicians on early childhood, and politicians have a pretty short attention span. (#5)*

## **Workforce**

A final set of challenges relate to the workforce in the early years field and bureaucracy. Interviewees pointed to widespread staff shortages in early years

services (particularly in childcare). They considered early years workers' qualifications and training to be generally inadequate (although variable across states and sectors); and felt that a lack of professional identity constrained service quality and hindered a coherent reform program:

*This area is just a complete mish-mash of professionals working with children, the degree of preparation of adults working with very young children in this country is just massively underdone. At least 40% of direct contact workers with children in this country have no qualifications whatsoever. (#4)*

Fragmentation in the sector appeared to contribute to workforce instability, with skilled, experienced workers in long day care reportedly stripped from the sector by more favourable hours, pay and status in preschools. Further, interviewees perceived standards of worker quality to be determined by principles other than children's needs, including limitations in government funding.

Workforce challenges also arose relating to how practitioners work together across disciplines and organisations as per the vision of collaborative, joined up services.

*People from different disciplines who come from very different backgrounds, speak different languages, have different career paths, different awards, different salaries, for them to come together in a constructive way is not easy, and it takes time and we have to put in place the levers to encourage them to do that. (#5)*

The workforce within the bureaucracy was also seen to impede a coherent early years policy, with bureaucrats perceived as having inadequate knowledge of the field and research, and having high turnover, especially at the federal level.

*At the State level you've usually got bureaucrats who have got some content knowledge, and at the Commonwealth level there's not a lot of content knowledge in the bureaucracy, they're all about process... ... the Commonwealth people have got no passion because the content doesn't excite them, it's all about being dispassionate process administrators (#10)*

Bureaucrats' use of research evidence was seen as particularly limited, resulting from established practices of contracting out research and evaluation, and from the structure of government:

*There's been a dumbing down of the bureaucracy... ...I don't think they actually do their own research or ask of the data the kinds of questions that they need. (#13)*

*There's a lot of talk about being evidence driven and I think that that requires public servants to be open to evidence and not just filter the evidence through what they think are the ideological frames or political frames of Ministers or more senior bureaucrats. (#7)*

For those in advocacy and advisory roles, the perceived turnover of senior bureaucrats was a further frustration:

*... it's very hard [for a bureaucrat] to have a career path staying in the one area, you work for two or three years in early childhood then if you want a promotion you've got to almost certainly change areas, in some cases change portfolios completely. And I think that's hard... ...you develop good relationships with senior bureaucrats around a particular issue and they come to trust you and call you for advice, then next minute they're moved somewhere else and you start all over again with somebody that may not, usually doesn't, have an understanding of the area you're trying to promote, so that's frustrating... (#5)*

*The thing that frustrates me most about working with Commonwealth bureaucrats is they constantly move positions. When I was involved with [one initiative] there was nobody left at the end of the four years who had been there at the beginning. That doesn't happen so much at a State level, I think because people who have got the content knowledge also recognise that this has got to be worked out in a whole of government, cross agency way. (#10)*

## **Conclusions: Reform directions**

In identifying these four sets of challenges and highlighting why early years systems are so difficult to reform, interviewees also pointed to some broad principles to help develop early years systems, programs, and policy processes.

At the system level, overcoming fragmentation is clearly a priority, and it seems unsurprising that centralisation and administrative integration were welcomed as reform directions. Integrating early years issues within and across government departments were seen as core principles for reform, with several advocating that a single federal government department (as in Victoria) be given the lead role in forging a clearer policy focus on children and young people, and improving integration of areas like transport, childcare, community services and schools.

Some saw centralisation of vision, principles and practices would be best achieved if early years resources were transferred to a core national agency, such as the Productivity Commission or Treasury, but demands for a centralised approach were generally qualified, with many interviewees pointing out that any tightening national targets and goals should leave scope for local, creative responses.

In terms of the policy process, interviewees advocated the development of spaces to consult the full range of stakeholders, to incorporate parent, child, community and professional voices. One suggestion was, following the success of similar developments in the States, to establish an Australian Children's Commissioner, as a way to bring children into national policy deliberation and debate. Strategies to ensure research informs the policy process included reframing research in a way that resonates with the concerns of politicians and bureaucrats, especially Treasury, but without losing the practice wisdom which interviewees felt could too easily be subsumed by medical and economic frameworks. Secondment of senior people with specific content or research expertise to leadership positions in the public service would also help keep bureaucracies at the cutting edge. Ultimately however, changes to both the early years outcomes and the policy process within the early years fields were seen to require fundamental change in community values, in particular, elevating the way children are valued as citizens with rights, and as beings in the present.

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