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1 The reasons for looking to Nordic nations to change children’s chances in Australia
Andrew Scott

The proportion of children living in income poverty in Australia is nearly 12 per cent. In the four main Nordic nations – Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland – this figure is between 3 and 5 per cent.¹ These nations also have less inequality, and greater wellbeing, among children than do the US, Britain and Australia.²

Australia is by no means the worst in the English-speaking world for income inequalities among children. It has lower rates of child poverty than Canada, for instance, and substantially lower rates than the United States. There are some encouraging trends.³ However, population statistics continue to show a steep social gradient across a range of health and developmental outcomes in Australia which emerge early in life. To maximise Australia’s future potential and prosperity, lessons now need to be learned from the world’s leading nations in this field.

The introduction of some Paid Parental Leave (PPL) on a national basis to Australia in 2011, which followed the lead given by the Nordic nations, provides a crucial starting point for consideration of further Nordic policy options for Australia in the quest to better balance work and family responsibilities. Better balancing work and family responsibilities is one of the essential prerequisites to reduce inequalities and increase wellbeing among children.

In addition, the support by the national government and the Fair Work Australia industrial tribunal in February 2012 of wage rises for low-paid community services workers, who are mostly women, has provided a starting point for improved security, recognition and professional career paths to those involved in early childhood education and care. Such improvements are another essential prerequisite for reducing inequalities and increasing wellbeing among Australian children.

The introduction of the AEDI⁴, of which Dr Sharon Goldfeld has been the National Director, made Australia the first country to have nationwide data on the developmental health of all five-year-olds – covering their physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge – available for all local areas. These provide a new “type of social barometer, showing the outcomes of the first five years of children’s lives and providing a baseline for what might happen next”.⁵ There has also been valuable work done on indicators of child wellbeing, advantage and disadvantage in particular small areas.

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³ See e.g. Rebecca Cassells, Justine McNamara, Honge (Cathy) Gong and Sharon Bicknell, Unequal Opportunities: Life Chances for Children in the ‘Lucky Country’, NATSEM/The Smith Family, Melbourne, 2011.
⁴ See Australian Early Development Index website: www.aedi.org.au
⁵ Caroline Milburn, ‘Preschool Key to Happier Futures’, The Age, Melbourne, 8 November, 2010.
The Australian Government Early Childhood Agenda was then developed with support in the 2008 and subsequent Budgets. It recognises the critical importance of the early years and commits to creating a world class system of integrated early childhood learning and care.

This agenda, in addition to the AEDI, includes:

- establishment of 38 Early Learning and Care Centres;
- a National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development to halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade; halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade; and ensure all Indigenous four year olds have access to quality early childhood education within five years, including in remote areas;
- the Early Years Learning Framework, a curriculum guide to the principles, practice and outcomes for early childhood educators to develop consistent quality programs to support and enhance young children's learning from birth to five years; and their transition to school;
- an Early Years Workforce Strategy to improve the supply and quality of the early childhood education and care workforce;
- the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY), run by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, to help preschool children including in disadvantaged communities prepare for school and effectively build parental capacities in support of their children’s development with the focus on families and households who either experience, or are at risk of, deep social exclusion across the life course;
- a National Early Childhood Development Strategy endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), further details of which are below;
- a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care to operate from January 2012 to promote high quality and consistent early childhood education and care across Australia; and
- Universal Access to Early Childhood Education, a commitment to provide access to a high quality, early childhood education program for all children by 2013, delivered by a university-trained early childhood teacher, for 15 hours a week, 40 weeks a year, in the year before formal schooling (i.e. at preschool or kindergarten).6

COAG’s endorsement of a National Early Childhood Development Strategy in July 2009 included a priority to “strengthen the workforce across early childhood

6 Further details of the various programs can be seen at: http://www.deewr.gov.au/earlychildhood/policy_agenda/
development and family support services, particularly around leadership and interdisciplinary practice, to better support children with special needs, and to deliver culturally inclusive services. COAG thereby recognised the clear international evidence that investment in the early years of life delivers particularly strong returns for the community through successful outcomes and reduced need for costly interventions in later life.

COAG gave a preliminary update on this agenda in a Communiqué following its meeting of 7 December 2009 under the sub-heading ‘Productivity Agenda’, on ‘Early Childhood Reform’. More now needs to be done, however, to continue, strengthen and realise the full potential of the national government’s, and COAG’s, initiatives.

It is now timely to develop a clearer research base for state and national governments to inform their current and future policy directions. Though a more integrated policy approach to the ‘early years’ has developed in the last decade in Australia following overseas leads, in order to achieve the full potential of this approach it is crucial now to extend these leads beyond where they have been primarily limited to date, which is to the English-speaking countries. Therefore as an important next step this publication draws on the interactions of a leading Nordic expert, and several Australian experts and policy makers.

A central aim is to identify approaches and programs in the Nordic nations which can inform the introduction of similar programs in Australia, particularly in local areas which the AEDI and other data have identified as disadvantaged.

The landmark recent book by British researchers Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, The Spirit Level, shows that child wellbeing is starkly better in those rich countries which have greater income equality. It also highlights the Nordic nations’ achievements in early childhood development and shows how increases in socio-economic equality starting in the earliest years of life promote positive health outcomes for all members of society for many decades to come.

That book is part of a remarkable convergence occurring now in the conclusions reached by researchers in the traditionally very separate disciplines of health, education and political economy. Diverse epidemiologists and paediatricians are increasingly demonstrating the importance of reducing inequality and poverty in order to enhance children’s wellbeing. This publication brings together senior academics from the different disciplines of politics, medicine (specifically paediatrics and public health), social policy and economics to discuss and explore potential local applications of this approach by Australian governments.

It has been previously calculated that reducing joblessness among families towards the consistently low levels of the Nordic nations, through measures including increased workforce participation, could in itself cut income poverty among

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Australian children by as much as one third. This publication considers the extent to which reducing joblessness among families with children in Australia will reduce inequalities among Australian children; and ways of achieving this reduction of joblessness among particular cohorts of families based on the Nordic nations' experiences.

In a paper commissioned by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet's Social Inclusion Unit in 2009, Professor Peter Whiteford points out that critical to the low joblessness in the Nordic nations are “comprehensive childcare systems”. It is important to consider, from Nordic nations’ experience, whether the increased rapid provision of childcare in Australia as a for profit business in the private marketplace exacerbates inequalities between children: as is argued by Australian childcare expert Professor Deborah Brennan; and, if so, what alternative approaches to childcare provision are preferable. It is also valuable to consider the possible relevance of Nordic-style policy measures on parental leave and for workforce participation to help reduce high family joblessness rates in Australia.

On 4 September 2009 the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) conference issued a Communiqué stating that:

Australia must learn from cultures with a positive attitude to children and young people...[and] from public policies that achieve high levels of child wellbeing; adequate support for parents, carers and families; and low levels of child poverty...for example, policies in the Nordic countries.

The ARACY conference also outlined a major strategy "to set internationally comparable health and wellbeing targets for children and young people for the next 20 years" with “critical elements of this strategy” to include “raising Australia’s international standing to high levels of child and youth wellbeing, to match the levels achieved by the Nordic countries”.

It is important to recognise that changes are occurring within the Nordic nations. Their policy context is not static, as Australia’s Professor Gabrielle Meagher and colleagues have recently pointed out.

The position of the Nordic nations is regarded by many as culturally or historically particular. It is obvious that the specific historic context in which the Nordic policies

11 Peter Whiteford, Family Joblessness in Australia: A Paper commissioned by the Social Inclusion Unit of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, January 2009, p. 56.
13 Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, Communiqué from conference held in Melbourne on 2-4 September 2009.
14 ibid.
first came about i.e. the politically planned build-up of a substantial welfare state in Sweden from the 1930s to the 1970s, then the strong policy influence of feminism and children’s rights from the 1970s, needs to be acknowledged.

Yet the notion that national policy directions are ‘path dependent’, that seemingly minor decisions taken decades ago have so multiplied in importance by being enshrined into a set of patterns and routines that they are just too difficult to alter or to contemplate following in other nations should not be pushed so far as to mean that Australia is fated to forever suffer continued rates of child poverty far higher than those of Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. The notion of national ‘path dependence’ also contradicts the fact that we live in more fluid and ‘globalised’ times today.

The Nordic nations are not immune from the worldwide trend over recent decades towards rising inequalities. Nevertheless, the latest evidence indicates that in the four main Nordic nations, income inequalities remain much, much lower than in Australia and other English-speaking nations.16

Inequalities among children start even before birth. Australia has 6.4 per cent of infants of low birth weight, better than the OECD average of 6.6 per cent but not as positive as Sweden where the proportion of low birth weight infants is 4.2 per cent17. This underlines the importance of antenatal, as well as maternal and child health, measures.

Further, given that inequalities are substantially determined in the earliest years, before children even go to school, our goal must be to close the developmental gap as early as possible. Here, Finland’s arrangements to provide developmental support to a high proportion of children from a very early age are of particular interest and importance.

In Australia there are, of course, constituencies and influences arrayed against the policies pursued in the Nordic nations. However, there are also powerful constituencies and influences concerned about the high levels of inequalities and poverty among Australian children, which are keen for greater knowledge of the prospects for transfer of those policies, which can be shown to be applicable, here.

There is clear evidence that Australians are very worried about economic inequality.18 The findings of a major Ipsos Mackay qualitative report, titled Being Australian, released in June 2011 also identifies major “concern about overwork”:

"Being Australian, we want to do our eight hours a day and expect to go home to spend time with the family, our kids and that," said one focus group participant.
"Big business has made shops open longer and, even though we might be part-time, our week is stretched out a lot more because they can make the hours any

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time they like and we have to fit our lifestyle around it. So your whole weekend is wrecked".

The presentations and discussion which follow relate to two National Research Priorities in Australia which are often approached separately: ‘A healthy start to life’ (‘counteracting the impact of social and environmental factors which predispose infants and children to ill health and reduce their wellbeing and life potential’); and ‘Strengthening Australia’s social and economic fabric’ (‘understanding and strengthening key elements of Australia’s social and economic fabric to help families and individuals live healthy, productive, and fulfilling lives’).

It is time to consider how to apply lessons learned from the policies pursued in the world’s most successful nations at combating inequalities among children, to the problems of inequalities among children in Australia.

The publication focuses on comparative data and research findings and seeks to identify ‘intervention levers’ available in Australia. The ideas have been canvassed with some key Australian policy decision-makers on early childhood education and care and their input is incorporated in the following sections.

The Nordic nations’ policies examined are:

those nations’ arrangements for monitoring of children’s health and the training of those who do that monitoring – in order to answer the question to what extent does early and regular monitoring of children’s health, and substantial training and preparation of the workforce which carries out this monitoring, contribute to better child health outcomes;

the extent of those nations’ investment in public childcare – in order to answer the question whether a shift towards more publicly provided childcare in Australia will help achieve the government’s goals for greater quality, availability and affordability of early childhood education and care;

the extent of those nations’ provision of paid parental leave – in order to answer the question whether providing further parental leave in Australia will boost workforce participation and productivity as well as benefit businesses by increasing the return and retention to companies of experienced, valuable employees;

the extent of those nations’ regulation of working hours – in order to answer the question whether more ‘family-friendly’ working hours in Australia will boost women’s labour force participation;

the availability and nature of part-time jobs in those nations – in order to answer the question whether part-time jobs which have more security and better career prospects, will better enable work/family balance and would also help to boost labour force participation in Australia.

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These last two policy areas are particularly topical with the publication of major new research confirming the greatly increased prevalence of precarious employment in Australia.\textsuperscript{20}

This publication provides new material for Australian governments and other policy makers to consider as they further review policies and develop priorities for early childhood investments and initiatives. It will better inform the policy shift towards greater investment in early childhood in Australia to tackle inequalities by enquiring, from an Australian perspective, into detailed and relevant lessons from the most successful nations in this field.

This will assist in further developing and implementing Australian governmental policies for the early years and in ensuring that investment goes into where it will be most effective.

Investment in the early years is the most effective way to prevent inequalities. The COAG document from 2009 represented a fundamental shift in the policy approach in Australia, creating a real opportunity to consider children's wellbeing as essential to human including economic development. The authors of this publication are keen to bring momentum back to, and heighten the visibility of, the vital policy initiatives which have been taken in early childhood, through international comparative discussion. The visit of an eminent Nordic children's health and policy specialist has enabled a strong message to be given for more concerted government action, drawing on the policy experiences of the most successful nations in the world, according to the evidence, in reducing inequalities among children; in order to create a brighter and less divided future for the growing generations of Australians and for their children as well.