**Inequality, social justice and the purpose of Early Childhood Education**

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**Introduction**

For several decades, policy institutions with global reach have advocated for the expansion of early childhood education and care (ECEC) as a means of addressing the impacts of inequality (see for example the OECD *Starting Strong Reports*; the World Bank, nd). The arguments for greater access are well rehearsed and well researched. Children’s access to high quality ECEC has a positive impact upon their development, later success at school, and a number of longitudinal studies show a positive impact throughout the life course (*NICHD* 2005; *Sylva et al*. 2010; *Tayler* 2016). The potential effectiveness of ECEC is predicated upon its capacity to provide a platform from which children can be provided with opportunities, support and specialist interventions early in the life course. Thus studies often point to the greatest positive impact being evident for children who face risks to their development. Risks to development may arise from physiological or cognitive causes, or the circumstances into which children are born and live. Mitigating the impacts of risk early can prevent the effects of adversity compounding, as well as provide a strong foundation for subsequent development (*Heckman/Masterov* 2007; *Shonkoff / Phillips*, 2000).

However, underneath this straight forward messaging lays a complex array of policy related issues that require disentangling if the hoped for outcomes of early childhood education are to be achieved. These issues and questions include: the nature of universal provision, the contestation about quality, and the purposes to which ECEC should be directed, all of which to some degree, affect what actually occurs within services; in other words, how and what children and families experience from children’s participation in ECEC.

An important caveat on any claim for the potential impact of early childhood education upon inequality is that it is but one component of social and economic policy. It cannot, of itself, create a more equal society. While accepting therefore that early childhood education is not a panacea, this paper is written from the perspective that early childhood education and care - like education more generally - should be a central plank of social policies designed to support more socially just societies. We argue that universal access to a high quality early childhood system can make a significant difference in the lives of children and families. However, access itself is not enough. What happens within early childhood programmes is key.

This paper draws upon reports from the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), and data from the Australian Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work Linkage project, to argue for attention to the quality of the early childhood system, by policy makers, providers and educators. In particular, we draw upon three doctoral studies nested within the Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work project, to consider the contribution that a *socially just* *purpose* makes to the quality of ECEC programmes and in turn, it is anticipated, positive experiences and outcomes for children and families. In using the term ‘quality’, we encompass attention to the nature of children’s and families’ experiences, rather than a narrow focus on prescriptive curriculum or academic outcomes.

Before discussing these reports and studies, the paper commences with rationale for a focus on quality, followed by a brief overview of the Australia early childhood context and variations in the quality of Australian ECEC.

**The focus on quality**

The use and pursuit of ‘quality’ in early childhood education has been subject to considerable critique, most notably since the publication of *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care* (*Dahlberg/Moss/ Pence* 2007. For examples within the Australian context, see also *Fenech* 2011; *Hunkin* 2018). Whilst not ignorant nor dismissive of these critiques, we argue that from a systems and policy perspective, quality needs to count. If ECEC is to be a platform for social justice, then it is important to attend to the nature of what happens for children and families within these services. This is especially important in systems such as Australia that rely upon on a mixed economy of government, non-government organisations, and commercial business for the provision of early childhood education. The potentially distorting impact of commercial interests on the supply of infrastructure such ECEC has been discussed elsewhere and includes unevenness in supply, as well as downward pressures upon the quality of children’s experiences (*Press /Woodrow* 2018; *Hunkin* 2018).

However, a plea for attention to quality, raises the question of what is meant by ‘quality’? Research pertaining to quality concerned with its relationship with concurrent and long-term outcomes for children, however it is equally important that understandings of quality are attuned to the daily experiences of children and families. In the Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work Study, the research team chose to use ACECQA quality ratings (explained in more detail in the following section) as an external reference point for the quality of early childhood services (*ACECQA* 2020). The establishment of a quality accreditation system for early childhood in Australia was instigated by advocacy from the early childhood field itself, arising from a concern about the experiences of and consequences for children of being in services that were of poor quality (*Press /Wong* 2013). Importantly, key elements of the current system, such as the Early Years Learning Framework , were developed in close consultation with the early childhood profession. Rather than a top-down exercise in standardisation, the current system enables flexible and locally responsive approaches to achieving quality and requires contextual responsiveness and the exercise of professional judgement. As *Hunkin* (2018) observes, the ACECQA standards support the ‘meaning making’ advocated by *Dahlberg/ Moss /Pence* (2007).

**The Australian ECEC Context**

Australian ECEC services are comprised of full day care services, usually referred to as long day care; sessional services (morning or afternoon, or short-day sessions), usually referred to as preschool; and home-based services, usually referred to as family day care. These are provided by both not for profit providers (non-government organisations, local government and education departments) and for profit providers (owner-operated single services, small chains and large corporations).

All early childhood services are required to be registered with the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) and participate in ACECQA’s National Quality Framework (NQF). The NQF is comprised of the National Regulations and the National Quality Standard (NQS); learning frameworks (most notably the Early Years Learning Framework); and a process for quality assessment and rating. The National Regulations establish baseline inputs in relation to factors such as staff qualifications, staff to child ratios and the physical environment, with which all services are required to comply. These are factors that are sometimes referred to as the *structural* or *contributing* components of quality. Such baseline inputs establish a common minimum standard upon which to build quality, but do not in themselves ensure good experiences and outcomes for children and families (*Wangmann* 1995). The National Quality Standard attends more closely to the *determining* or *process* components of quality. Through a process of internal and external evaluation, services are assessed against seven areas: educational program and practice; children's health and safety; physical environment; staffing arrangements; relationships with children; [collaborative partnerships with families and communities](https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-quality-standard/quality-area-6-collaborative-partnership-with-families-and-communities); [and](https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-quality-standard/quality-area-6-collaborative-partnership-with-families-and-communities) leadership and governance. Following assessment, services are awarded a quality rating for quality of either (from lowest to highest): Significant Improvement required; Working Towards National Quality Standard; Meeting National Quality Standard; Exceeding National Quality Standard; or Excellent (*ACECQA* 2020).

**Variations in quality ratings**

The quality rating for individual services is publicly available through ACECQA’s Starting Blocks website (<https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/>). In addition, ACECQA regularly releases analyses of aggregated data that identify and track variations in quality ratings. According to the *NQF Snapshot* (May 2020), approximately 18% of centred based services (long day care and preschool) are rated as Working Towards National Quality Standard (NQS); 51% are rated as Meeting NQS, 30% are rated as Exceeding the NQS. Only 7 centre-based services were rated as Significant Improvement required, and only 42 were rated as Excellent (to be awarded a rating of Excellent, services must make a specific application and not all services eligible to apply for a rating of excellent, do so) (*ACECQA*, May 2020). The majority of services ‘meet the standard’, nevertheless there is still considerable variation in quality according to type of provider and location. Services managed by for profit organisations were less likely to be rated as Exceeding the NQS or above (18%). The not for profit sector was more likely to achieve an Exceeding rating, ranging from 30% (for catholic schools) to 54% (for local government) (p.14).

Following the research that points to the impact of high quality ECEC on children disadvantage (including the consequences of inequality) high quality services should be available in of areas socio-economic disadvantage if the ECEC system is to successfully contribute to the reduction of inequality. Unfortunately, in relation to early childhood provision in Australia, the converse is true with 23% of services in the most disadvantaged areas (SEIFA[[1]](#footnote-1) quintile 1) rated as Working Towards NQS and only 26% rated as Exceeding the NQS. This compares to 18% of services in the most advantaged areas (SEIFA quintile 5) rated as Working Towards NQS and 36% rated as Exceeding NQS (ACECQA, June 2020).

Such findings underscore the argument that the provision of early childhood services in itself is not enough, in other words universal access is only part of the equation. In the light of research that indicates that mediocre or poor quality services may be harmful for children *(NICHD* 1996), it is important to provide levers that improve quality across the board, and do not leave access to high quality services to the vagaries of location or parental income. The quest for high quality programmes for children and families requires action on multiple levels – including the policy levers of government (for example funding and regulation), the governance arrangements of services and the daily work of the educators within programmes.

In the Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work study, the research team were keen to interrogate the daily work of early childhood educators and examine what supported the work and decision making of educators in services rated as being of very high quality. In the following section, we provide an overview of the project and of three doctoral studies nested within it to open up a discussion on the importance of purpose as an aspect of process quality.

**The studies**

Currently still in train, the Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work project is gathering empirical data on the work of early childhood educators in their everyday practice. It focuses on educators in services that are externally rated as being of very high quality, hypothesising that educator decision making and practices are a central element to the achievement of a high quality rating. The overarching Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work study is now in its third stage of data collection (an overview of the project can be found in *Press et al.* 2020). Attached to the overarching project are a number of doctoral studies, each focused on a particular area of educator conceptualisations and practices: children’s rights (Robbie Warren); educator risk-taking (Mandy Cooke) and leading and leadership (Leanne Gibbs). Each doctoral study involved in depth case studies conducted in high quality programmes and engaged both not for profit and for profit services.

Participants in both the overarching study and each doctoral study were educators working in centre-based services that had achieved an ‘exceeding’ rating in every rateable quality area. According to the ACECQA NQF Snapshot, only one third of those services with an overall rating of Exceeding NQS, had an exceeding rating in all seven areas (*ACECQA* May 2020, p.18). Hence, the tranche of services from which educators were invited was proportionately very small (an estimated 10%).

The aim of this article is not to report fully on each research project, but rather draw on insights from each, to highlight the contribution that purpose makes to the quality of children’s experiences. By using the term ‘purpose’ we are trying to capture the vision, philosophy or underlying motivations that drive educator actions and decisions, collectively and individually.

**The conceptual framework**

The primary conceptual and theoretical framework for each study is the Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA) (*Kemmis* 2018). The theory recognises that what educators do and decide in their work is affected by a range of factors including the discourses of their profession, the organisation in which they work, and socio-economic and political contexts – local, national and international. Importantly however, TPA does not position educators as the passive conduits of external influence, but rather recognises educators’ impact upon their profession and working environment and their capacities to make wise moral decisions.

TPA has a strong orientation to social justice. According to *Kemmis* (2018), one of the authors of TPA, education should serve the double purpose of:

‘enhancing individuals’ opportunities and capacities for self-expression, self-development, and self-determination, and, not only in our own nations but also across the globe, securing cultures based on reason, productive and sustainable economies, and just and democratic societies’ (p.9).

Rather than positioning education as the transfer of knowledge, TPA understands education as ‘an initiation into practices’ (p. 8), practices that are intended to be both ‘in the justified self-interests of that person’ and ‘in the justified collective interests of all’.

In the context of TPA, practices are socially established activities that are understood in terms of 'doings' (physical activities and work), 'sayings' (language and understandings) and 'relatings' (relationships with people and material things). The *architecture* of ‘practices architectures’ refers to the arrangements that prefigure practices. These arrangements fall into three, sometimes overlapping, categories: cultural-discursive arrangements (sayings), material-economic arrangements (doings), and social-political arrangements (relationships). Although practices are mediated by these conditions, but not determined by them; there is a dialectic between the practitioner and the practice architectures of the site (*Mahon* 2017). These three components of practices (sayings, doings and relatings) come together in the *project* of the practice, in other words the *purpose* (intention and aims) that motivates the practice (*Kemmis* 2018, p.6; *Mahon* 2017).

In the following discussion we consider how purpose can be evident at three different levels: the broader purpose of education; the philosophy of the service; and the motivations of educators.

**Education’s dual purpose**

TPA’s positioning of education as having a dual purpose of benefitting the individual and society, is highly congruent with historical and contemporary drivers of early childhood education. As in many parts of the world historically, advocacy for early childhood education in Australia arose out of a concern for young children, both in terms of children’s overall welfare and in relation to inappropriate and frequently harsh methods of schooling. Organisations such as the Kindergarten Union, Sydney Day Nursery, and the Creche and Kindergarten Association, founded in Australia at the turn of the twentieth century, focused upon the provision of free kindergartens and day nurseries for children living in abject poverty, children who experienced very real threats to their health and overall development. However, these early childhood advocates were not only intent on opening free kindergartens in poor neighbourhoods, they were also committed to educational reform. They sought the adoption of kindergarten principles into schools, motivated by a desire to provide all children with life affirming experiences, including learning through play (*Roberts,* 1993; *Press/Wong* 2013; *Wong* 2013).

The positioning of early childhood education as a buffer against inequality resonates in contemporary advocacy for ECEC, as is evident in the theme of this journal. A broader vision of ECEC as a site of, and contributor to, democratic practice and social justice is also evident in contemporary writing (*Dahlberg/Moss* 2007; *Wong 2013*). Although both these aims are, in some senses, future oriented (what kind of world do we want to live in), they are also firmly aware of children’s present.

**Purpose, the project of the practice**

The project of educators’ practices is the purpose or intention that motivates the practice (*Kemmis*, 2018; Mahon, 2017). The three doctoral studies not only observed and documented the practices of educators but sought to understand the underlying motivations for educators’ practices.

We propose that purpose is a crucial but obscured aspect of quality that is woven throughout the structural and process factors that are often the focus of quality research. Multiple purposes may be evident across educator practices, and are evident at different levels of practice, for example at the macro-level of the purpose of education; the philosophical orientation of each site of practice (the service itself); and the micro-level intentions behind educators actions. We now discuss the expressions of purpose identified through these studies that support practices that both contribute to high quality and support socially just outcomes for children and families.

Macro-level purpose

At the macro-level, the social justice orientation of early childhood education is a practice tradition, and forms part of the overall purpose (the project) of the high quality early childhood education and care programmes. We argue that a genuine social justice orientation is a necessary component of an early childhood system that contributes to redressing inequality and can be discerned in the rationale for educators’ practices.

Another expression of macro-level purpose, found to influence educator practices, is the nationally approved learning framework for early childhood services *Belonging, being and becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)*. The EYLF is an officially endorsed reference point for educator practices, and in the conceptual framework of TPA contributes to thecultural-discursive arrangements of ECEC as a site of practice.

The EYLF explicitly calls upon educators to ground their practices in an ethic of social justice. The introduction to the framework references the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC):

*Early childhood educators guided by the Framework will reinforce in their daily practice the principles laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention). The Convention states that all children have the right to an education that lays a foundation for the rest of their lives, maximises their ability, and respects their family, cultural and other identities and languages. The Convention also recognises children’s right to play and be active participants in all matters affecting their lives.* (p.5)

It subsequently exhorts educators to work in ways that address inequality, build social cohesion, and respect diversity. It call upon educators to:

*…. challenge practices that contribute to inequities and make curriculum decisions that promote inclusion and participation of all children.*

*…recognise that diversity contributes to the richness of our society and provides a valid evidence base about ways of knowing. For Australia it also includes promoting greater understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being.*

*….think critically about opportunities and dilemmas that can arise from diversity and take action to redress unfairness. [Educators] provide opportunities to learn about similarities and difference and about interdependence and how we can learn to live together* (p.14).

The influence of the EYLF is evident in the site based philosophies of services, and in the framing of educator decision-making.

The site of practice

Services within these studies had statements of philosophy or vision that informed and guided decision making and practices. Often these statements referred back to commitments to quality as expressed in the NQS, or drew directly from documents such as the EYLF. However, these references did not constrain the development or expressions of site-based objectives unique to each service and which shaped the particular practices of each site. For example, one service’s philosophy contained sections that directly echoed the sentiments and language of the EYLF.

*We recognise that that diversity contributes to the richness of our society and provides opportunities for different ways of knowing. We also believe that our curriculum should reflect and promote a better understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being. As a community of learners it is our responsibility to think critically about opportunities and dilemmas that can arise from diversity and take action to redress unfairness/antibias so that we live together in harmony.* (Wattle Kindergarten, Cooke)

This was not an unthinking repetition of official language, but an expression of intent that was reflected strongly in the culture and practices of the programme and extended upon in other aspects of the philosophy, for example with a commitment to

*Embedding the perspectives of First People’s on a daily basis in order to create a culturally safe environment.* (Wattle Kindergarten, Cooke).

Similarly, service in another part of the country reflected a similar commitment to be “guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives” (Service D, Gibbs)

References to children’s rights were contained in a number of philosophy statements. While a commitment to children’s rights is in keeping with an expressed aim of the EYLF, this common commitment was expressed and enacted in each service in different ways.

*We value children’s right to play as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). We believe that children are capable and confident and therefore we promote risk-taking dispositions.* (Banksia House, Cooke)

*We aim to lay solid foundations for caring, respectful and tolerant citizens of the future. We believe that children’s voices should be heard in a socially just environment, and that they should be able to take risks within our interest based learning program. Children’s rights and agency are important to us.* (Service C, Warren).

These excerpts show an interrelationship between the broad objectives expressed through the EYLF, and the commitments of these services. In acknowledging this relationship, we are not positioning services as passive recipients and enactors of external objectives – the EYLF is a little over a decade old and many services had strong commitments in their philosophies before its introduction. However, such shared language and commitments are perhaps strengthened by this mutuality.

Micro-level purpose - educator motivations and intent

*It’s become engrained in me; this idea of social justice, this idea of equity, this idea of …actually we owe it to these children and these families.* (Theresa, cited in Gibbs, in press)

*There are these little sparks in the way I manage or lead that always drive my practice or my principles as well. They are very much a values orientation, which is around equity and social justice.* (Isla, cited in *Gibbs* in press)

There is no doubt that the stated philosophies or commitments of services are not always reflected in the practices found within them (see for example, *Press/Woodrow* 2018). However, in the high quality services in which these studies were based, the connections between philosophy and practice were strongly evident in educators’ discussions about what motivated them.

For example, the service with the philosophy that proclaimed ‘every child has a right to education and to feel safe and supported’ (Service E, Gibbs) had leaders who worked very hard to ensure inclusive practices, making full use of existing resources and their knowledge of funding options and regulatory requirements.

*We were at full capacity and we had a parent come and her child had a disability. We were full but she was vulnerable. She was sitting at that table crying and of course that child started the very next week… we made the phone calls (to the regulatory authority) and we went over numbers.* (Theresa, cited in *Gibbs* in press)

Educators that worked in service that worked ‘within a philosophical framework of a sustainable future’ (Service D, Gibbs) were observed to embark on a long term child led project about environmental sustainability after children expressed their concerns about the amount of plastic waste they could see when they went on excursions.

Cooke’s study on risk-taking in high quality services, took place in services that placed a high value on risk-taking, often through their written philosophy statements (as previously illustrated), as well as their pedagogical approaches. Through Cooke’s study of educators’ conceptualisation of risk, risk-taking was evident in two main domains: the appropriate risk-taking that educators supported children in taking (*Cooke/Wong /Press* 2019); and the risk taking of educators themselves (*Cooke/Press/Wong* under review). No matter in which domain risk lay, educators were motivated by a view of children as competent and empowered, and a desire to provide opportunities to further develop these traits. In turn, educators saw the development of children’s competence and empowerment as contributing to the betterment of society.

*I think they’re very much part of the world and I’ve worked with children who have changed things. Children who have done stuff, who have stood up and spoken and felt very, very, empowered by that. I think it’s really empowering to say it’s not what you do in the future it’s what you can do now.**(*Lucy, Teatree Children’s Centre*)*

*..if we produce human beings that are thinkers and problem solvers who have an understanding of big concepts, they can take that knowledge with them.* (Caz, Teatree Children’s Centre)

Educators’ own risk taking was also motivated advocacy. This advocacy was related to standing up for the perceived needs and aspirations of individual children ‘…it is about being a voice for the child sometimes and that can be risky**’** (Mary, Wattle Kindergarten) and about a collective vision linked possible futures:

*The risks could be of benefit not just to the organisation, but to the community. Those choices you make can change the political thought pattern of people, change the actions of people and we become more politically aware of what’s going on around us. (*Prisha, Teatree Children’s Centre).

Similarly, in discussing their commitments to and enactment of children’s rights, educators in Warren’s study on children’s rights were motivated by wanting to make a difference in the lives of individual children, and vision for a better, more just society.

*I think for the community it makes much better human beings… I think it empowers them to feel a sense of themselves ..…if you feel like you're powerless, you don't feel like you can contribute, then, you don't have a lot of self-worth. So, I think when children are respected to make a contribution, then that actually empowers them in their own right as a human being* (Deanne)

*“Well I feel very positive about these children because I think they’re learning how to get along with other people. I think they are going to be able to work together to bring really good outcomes and I just feel like they’re just going to grow up to be, to be able to look into someone else’s world, to be able to have empathy for someone because that’s a big thing…”* (Dale)

Purpose, as expressed at multiple levels (policy, site philosophy and educator intent) infiltrated the practices of educators, at each of these high quality services. Importantly, these enactments of purpose, as expressed, were imbued with a social justice orientation.

**Early childhood education and inequality**

‘[W]e educate people not so they may *know things*, but so they can *live well* – so they can live good lives’ (*Kemmis*, 2018, p.1).

At the commencement of the paper, we articulated our position that early childhood education and care (ECEC) - like education more generally - should be a central plank of a coherent suite of social and economic policies designed to create more socially just societies. We reiterate our caveat that ECEC on its own cannot result in an equal society, but we do believe its capacity to addresses inequalities can be enhanced. *Wong* (2013) identifies ECEC’s potential contribution to social justice as occurring in the following ways: “facilitating greater equity in the distribution of resources, challenging oppressive practices, supporting moral development and enacting children’s rights” (p.313).

Strengthening ECEC’s impact upon inequality requires policy levers that ensure universal access and attention to quality. However, attention to quality, at the level of government, organisation, and educators’ practice, must be directed to the achievement of socially just outcomes. These factors are enmeshed.

The Australian system of early childhood education faces challenges across these areas. In Australia, universal access to early childhood has not been achieved. Under reforms initiated in 2009, Australia now has a participation rate of 15 hours a week in early childhood education for 90% of children, but only in the year before school (*AIHW* 2020). Further, the quality of programmes that children are attending is highly variable. The work of ACECQA has been laudable in underscoring the centrality of the quality of children’s and families’ experiences as a goal for both government policy and the early childhood services. Though not without its challenges, the quality rating system does call for contextual relevance. The pedagogical guidance provided by the EYLF is not narrowly prescriptive (a criticism often levelled at government policies designed to address quality) and requires the application of professional judgement. These are strengths. However, the unevenness in the quality of ECEC and the skewing of poorer quality services in areas of greater economic disadvantage undermines the capacity of the Australian ECEC to address inequality at a systems level.

Nevertheless, our focus on high quality early childhood centres illuminated a very clear focus on outcomes related to social justice for these programmes.

We concur with *Kemmis*’ (2018) observation that educational research might help us understand the conditions and practices that enable and constrain the achievement of education’s double purpose ‘to live well in a world worth living in’. Collectively, these studies illuminate the importance of purpose in the quality story and the way in which purpose is evident across multiple levels.

Further, we discern an interrelationship between the broad objectives expressed through a resource related to national policy, such as the EYLF, and the shared commitments of these services, as expressed in their philosophies and the intentions of educators. In making this connection, we are not positioning organisations or educators as passive recipients and enactors of externally imposed objectives. The EYLF is a little over a decade old and many services had strong commitments in their philosophies before its introduction. However, the shared language and commitments to different forms of social justice are perhaps strengthened by this mutuality. In turn, educators influence the nature of each service’s philosophy and how it is expressed in what happens for children and families.

We conclude with the following quote that captures the passion and commitment of many the educators that took part in these studies:

*That’s what families and communities deserve. I will go that extra mile for you,*

*and you don’t need to give me anything. I’m going to do it because that’s what you*

*deserve. That’s your right as a human isn’t it?* (Theresa) (*Gibbs* in press)

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1. The Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) is used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to rank areas according to relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage through 5 quintiles. SEIFA Quintile 1 pertains to the most disadvantaged through to SEIFA Quintile 5 being the most advantaged (ABS, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)