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Inequality, social justice and the purpose of Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) – as with education more generally – should be a central plank of a suite of social policies designed to support more socially just societies. However, universal access to ECEC in itself, will not redress inequalities. This paper draws upon reports from the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), and data from three doctoral studies nested within the Australian Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work research project, to argue for attention to the quality of the early childhood system and to consider the contribution that a deeply embedded *socially just purpose* makes to quality.

Keywords: early childhood education, social justice, quality, inequality

Ungleichheit, soziale Gerechtigkeit und Bestimmung frühkindlicher Bildung

Zusammenfassung

Frühkindliche Bildung und Betreuung (FBBE) sollte – wie Bildung im Allgemeinen – ein zentraler Bestandteil einer Reihe von sozialpolitischen Maßnahmen sein, die darauf abzielen, eine sozial gerechtere Gesellschaft zu unterstützen. Allerdings wird ein allgemeiner Zugang zu frühkindlicher Bildung und Betreuung an sich keine Ungleichheiten beseitigen. Dieser Beitrag stützt sich auf Berichte der Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) sowie auf Daten aus drei Promotionsstudien, die im Rahmen des australischen Forschungsprojekts Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work durchgeführt wurden. Die Ergebnisse sind ein Plädoyer dafür, der Qualität des frühkindlichen Systems mehr Aufmerksamkeit zu schenken und den Beitrag zu würdigen, den eine tief *verankerte Orientierung an sozialer Gerechtigkeit* im Hinblick auf Qualität leistet.

Schlagwörter: frühkindliche Bildung, soziale Gerechtigkeit, Qualität, Ungleichheit

1 Introduction

Drawing upon policy and research located within the context of Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC), this paper argues that universal provision is a necessary but, of itself, insufficient policy to address inequalities in childhood. We examine 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 (ARCLP 160100532), to argue that attention to the quality of the early childhood system is necessary if the promise of universal access in mitigating inequality is to be achieved. 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* might make to the quality of ECEC programmes. We speculate that attention to both quality and purpose may be particularly relevant in policy contexts such as that of Australia; policy contexts in which the availability of ECEC relies upon commercial business as well as the state, and in which both the supply and quality of service provision is uneven. In Australia, the policy target of universal access is decoupled from the quality of the service provided. Although improving the quality of early childhood programmes is a policy objective, the subsidisation of families' access to such programmes is not tied to programme quality. In addition, reliance upon a mixed economy for the provision of ECEC means that there is not a shared or unifying narrative that underpins the objectives of supply.

2 The drive to universal provision

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 children's access to ECEC are well rehearsed and well researched. High quality ECEC has a positive impact upon children's development, later success at school, and a number of longitudinal studies show this impact endures 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. 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).

As the desirability of providing ECEC has gained traction, a number of policy institutions as well as the policy platforms of various national governments, espouse the universal provision of ECEC. In 2006 for example, Starting Strong 2 (OECD, 2006) advocated for a universal approach to access. In 2009, under major policy reform for the early childhood sector, Australia adopted a target of universal access to an early childhood education and care service for children in the year before school. At the same time, Australia revised and expanded the reach of its quality accreditation system for early childhood programmes. However, at no time has Australian policy explicitly tied support for children's access to early childhood education to programme quality. This is problematic, as quality, as it is measured in Australia, is highly variable.

This paper draws on published data from Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), and extant literature to argue that the quality of ECEC should be taken into account, if inequality is to be addressed. Further, we draw on data from three doctoral studies conducted within centres assessed as being of high quality, to

consider the impact that a socially just ‘purpose’ may contribute to the quality of the programme delivered and in turn the programme’s capacity to address inequalities within the site of the programme.

The paper commences with an outline of the context of Australian ECEC provision to highlight its diverse and fragmented nature. Fragmentation is a contextual feature of supply that we believe underscores the need to consider both quality and purpose. We follow with a brief note about quality. We acknowledge that quality is a contested concept and explain our rationale for using the Australian early childhood quality rating system as administered by the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). This is followed by a review of ACECQA data highlighting the variability of ECEC quality especially in relation to socio-economic indices.

We then turn to the Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work Study, with a particular focus on its use of the theory of practice architectures and the findings related to ‘purpose’ that emerged across the doctoral studies attached to the project.

3 The Australian ECEC Context

Australian ECEC is 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). Services are provided and managed by a mixture of 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; and 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).

4 A note about 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 et al., 2007; for examples within the Australian context, see also Fenech, 2011; Hunkin, 2018). A plea for attention to quality inevitably raises the question of what is meant by ‘quality’ as constructions of quality are contested and contextually bound. Quality measurement systems are critiqued for imposing external benchmarks which might override professional judgement, responses to local conditions, or result in a narrowing of curriculum, if the outcomes measures are also narrow.

The potentially distorting impact of commercial interests on the supply of ECEC includes downward pressures upon the quality of children’s experiences (Press & Woodrow, 2018; Hunkin, 2018). As a result, impetus from the profession for a national system for accrediting the quality of early childhood programmes gained considerable momentum when government policy opened up the supply of early childhood programmes to commercial interests in the early 1990s (Logan et al., 2012). Thus, the introduction of a quality rating system has been an especially important policy lever in Australia, and one which has widespread professional support, because of Australia’s reliance upon on a mixed economy early childhood provision.

Conscious of the critique of quality, the Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work research team nevertheless chose to use ACECQA quality ratings as an external reference point for the quality of early childhood services (ACECQA, 2020) (the ratings are explained in more detail in the following section). We did so for several reasons. Firstly, ACECQA oversees a national system applicable to all early childhood programmes regardless of how, or to whom, they are provided. This was important as our study has national reach. Secondly, key elements of the current system such as the Early Years Learning Framework (Belonging, Being, Becoming), have been developed by, and in close consultation with, the early childhood field. A key principle of the EYLF is that educators engage ‘with questions of philosophy, ethics and practice’ (Department of Education and Training, p. 14). Thirdly, the ACECQA system combines both self-assessment and external assessment. As Hunkin (2018) observes, the ACECQA standards support the ‘meaning making’ advocated by Dahlberg et al. (2007). Contextual responsiveness and the exercise of professional judgement are encouraged in order for services to meet the standards.

5 Variations in quality ratings

We noted previously that the policy ambition of universal access in Australia is not explicitly linked to the quality of the service children have access to. However, ACECQA makes the quality rating for individual services publicly available through its 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 percent of centred based services (long day care and preschool) are rated as Working Towards National Quality Standard (NQS); 51 percent are rated as Meeting NQS, 30 percent are rated as Exceeding

the NQS. Only seven 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 private 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 percent (for catholic schools) to 54 percent (for local government) (p. 14).

Following the research that points to the impact of high quality ECEC on children facing 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 percent of services in the most disadvantaged areas (SEIFA¹ quintile 1) rated as Working Towards NQS and only 26 percent rated as Exceeding the NQS. This compares to 18 percent of services in the most advantaged areas (SEIFA quintile 5) rated as Working Towards NQS and 36 percent 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, 2005), it is important to implement strategies that improve quality across the board and do not leave access to high quality services to the vagaries of location or parental income. 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 the conditions that supported the work and decision making of educators in services rated as being of very high quality. Using the Theory of Practice Architectures, the research aims to gather information both on educators' practices, and also the arrangements that inform and support their practices.

6 The Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work Project

The Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work project is a three phase national study, gathering empirical data on the work of early childhood educators in their everyday practice. It focuses on educators in services that are externally rated by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) as being of very high quality.

The overarching study aims to gather data on the practices and decision making of educators in high quality services, hypothesising that educator decision making and practices are a central element to the achievement of a high quality rating (an overview of the project can be found in Press et al., 2020). Attached to the overarching project are three 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). The case studies for each doctoral study have taken place in different early childhood services which display a specialisation in the area of

study, as well as meet the criteria related to quality. The doctoral candidates have been an integral part of the larger study, meeting regularly with the team of Project Investigators, supporting and contributing to the analysis of the larger data set, as well as the data from their own studies.

An important impetus for the project is to gather empirical data to describe and assert the distinct nature of early childhood education in a context of two policy threats: the potential schoolification of early childhood curricula and provision; and the de-skilling of the work of early childhood education (Press et al., 2020). It is envisaged that the Study will help to explicate, at least in part, the knowledge, reflexivity and practices (both professionally and organisationally) that support high quality ECEC, and this in turn can inform the pre-service education and professional development of early childhood educators and the way in which services are managed.

This article specifically draws on the insights from the three doctoral studies, to highlight the contribution that a socially just purpose appears to make to the quality of the service. By using the term ‘purpose’ we are capturing the vision, philosophy or underlying motivations that drive educator actions and decisions, collectively and individually. An orientation to social justice emerged as a common theme across each doctoral study and we believe constitutes an important cultural-discursive arrangement that supports the quality of the programs in question. The cultural-discursive arrangements that prefigure and support educator practices are an important feature of the Theory of Practice Architectures, the conceptual framework for the study (explained subsequently).

6.1 Method and approach

The data cited in this paper is drawn from the three doctoral studies. Participants in both the overarching study and each doctoral study are educators working in centre-based services that have achieved an ‘exceeding’ rating in every rateable quality area as well as an overall rating of ‘Exceeding National Quality Standard’. The tranche of services from which educators were invited was proportionately very small (an estimated 10%) as 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). From the tranche of eligible services, each doctoral student selected a small number of services to conduct case studies relevant to their area of study. As well as the criteria explained above (the quality rating), each student applied additional criteria to identify services with a particular focus on their area of research.

Cooke’s study of educators’ conceptualisation of risk taking in exemplary services, was conducted in three services that expressly valued children’s risk-taking. Cooke scanned website materials of eligible services to identify those that appeared to value the role of children’s beneficial risk-taking. Indicators included, for example, descriptions such as ‘children are encouraged to take risks’; or images of such things as children climbing trees. Gibbs’ study of leading and leadership was conducted in three sites that expressly referenced governance, leadership and educator development on their websites and identified the development of leading and leadership within materials related or attached to their ACECQA quality assessment. Warren’s study of educators’ conceptualisation and enactment of children’s rights was conducted at four sites that expressed an explicit rights-based philosophical position on their service website or brochure. All services met the quality rating criteria explained above.

Each student conducted a form of case study in which they spent between 6-8 days within each service spread over a period of weeks. Methods of data collection common across the studies were observations, interviews, and field notes. In each study, observations were in supported observational tables, developed from existing research literature relevant to each focus area. These tables acted as a guide for researcher observations, but care was taken not to confine observations to practices noted on the table. One to one interviews and group interviews generally took between 45 minutes and one hour. Interview transcripts were returned to participants for member checking. To sense check their interpretations of data, doctoral students used reflective journals, discussions with supervisors, and follow-up interviews with participants.

6.2 Conceptual framework – The Theory of Practice Architectures

The primary conceptual and theoretical framework for the overall project and underpinning each doctoral study is the Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA) (Kemmis, 2018). The Theory of Practice Architectures 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' agency, their 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), a key proponent 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', practices that are intended to be both 'in the justified self-interests of that person' and 'in the justified collective interests of all' (Kemmis, 2018 p. 8.)

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). 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 et al., 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 et al., 2017).

Thus in relation to TPA, educators' practices will be mediated by the policy context of their work, the organisational context within which they work, the discourse and traditions of their profession, as well as their personal beliefs and dispositions.

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.

6.2.1 *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.

However, in the Australian system, the provision of services is fragmented. While a number of contemporary providers bring them a tradition of social justice, and commitment to public education, this is not true of the sector as a whole. There are a variety of motivations including those driven primarily by commercial opportunity (Press & Woodrow, 2018). In this context therefore, the emergence of a socially just purpose as a common theme across the doctoral studies within these high quality services struck us as worthy of attention.

6.2.2 *Purpose, the project of the practice*

The project of educators' practices is the purpose or intention that motivates the practice (Kemmis, 2018; Mahon et al., 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. However, this practice tradition is not necessarily evident in all ECEC. The expansion of ECEC services triggered by late twentieth century neo-liberal reforms, has often been driven by commercial objectives (Press et al., 2018) rather than a desire to address inequalities. Nonetheless, in both the not-for-profit and for-profit services that participated in each doctoral study, a social justice orientation was evident in their overall purpose (the project) of the high quality early childhood education and care programmes in the study. 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 the cultural-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 calls 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, 2020)

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. (Is-la, cited in Gibbs, 2020)

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, 2020)

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 et al., 2019); and the risk taking of educators themselves (Cooke et al., 2020). 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 a 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.

7 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 address 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 percent 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, 2020)

Note

- 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 five quintiles. SEIFA Quintile 1 pertains to the most disadvantaged through to SEIFA Quintile 5 being the most advantaged (ABS, 2018).

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