EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION POLICY AND 2010:
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Critical policy analysis aims to understand "what governments do, why and with what effects" (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997, p. 35). The discourses of policy settlement in the field of early childhood education describe particular views of childhood, represent, construct and position groups and communities, and serve to frame issues now confronting the field. Government policies therefore have the potential to either enable or hinder the well being of young children (Goffin, Wilson, Hill & McAninch, 1997). This critical analysis of current Queensland public education policy attempts to confront and problematise the dominance of particular discourses and ideologies pertaining to the field of early childhood education.

Introduction

Public educational policies are intended to perform a number of functions, including provision of an account of desirable cultural norms, and a mechanism of accountability against which performance of students and teachers can be measured (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997). Although these functions remain, Taylor *et al* argue that policy construction in the educational arena can increasingly be seen as a way for governments to effectively manage public demands for change, in particular those coming from

persuasive interest groups. According to Kemmis (in Taylor *et al*, 1997, p. 3) 'the language of educational policy...is thus linked to political compromises between competing but unequal interests'. Kemmis goes on to argue that as bureaucracies react to public expectations, educational theory is progressively being replaced by policy as a guide for educational practice. A key aspect, therefore, of policy analysis involves an understanding of the nature and strategic role of the major discourses which currently frame educational policy. Policy analysis also means answering complex questions that involve interconnected examinations of text, context, consequences and ideology. Intertwined with this is the need to understand the particular public discourses of the early childhood field, which act as powerful forces to shape the cultural construction of childhood and guide social policies on behalf of children.

The policy document, the *Queensland State Education 2010 Strategy* (Education Queensland & Queensland Government, 2000b, hereafter *QSE-2010*) aims to offer a serious examination of significant issues facing the future of public education. In examining this policy, the following discussion seeks to account for the contexts of policy production, or the intertextual properties of texts and contexts, and in so doing,

acknowledges the basic premise of "policy as process" (Gale, 2000b, p. 11). Thus, surrounding texts and contexts are referred to, including the *Education Queensland Strategic Plan 2000-2004* (Education Queensland & Queensland Government, 2000a), which outlines departmental responsibilities and processes aligned with the objectives of QSE-2010, and the *Draft Policy for Core Curriculum for Years 1-10 in Education Queensland Schools* (Education Queensland, 2001). The scope of the discussion, however, is limited to an examination of the discourses and narratives which pertain to, or are perceived to have a relationship with, the early years of schooling.

Discourses shaping early childhood education

Delegates at an early childhood conference co-organised by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) this year in Stockholm heard that early childhood education has experienced a surge of policy attention over the past decade, both nationally and internationally, indicated by a shift towards greater responsibility by the state for early childhood education and care; growing political commitment to fund and integrate services; and a push to professionalise the early childhood field (OECD, 2001a). It was also reported that in Australia, the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments are currently involved in extending the provision of preschool education, in part as a response to the increasing recognition of the role of high quality early childhood programs in facilitating children's later success at school. Yet these developments sit uneasily in the current educational context of devolution, corporate managerialism and the marketisation of schooling, described by Taylor *et al* (1997).

The field of early childhood has long been a site of struggle involving the politics of representation, power relations and the playing out of this power (Kessler & Swadner, 1992). Homogenous discourses have traditionally dominated the early childhood field, notably a strong Anglo-American narrative located in liberal political and economic contexts, and dominated by certain disciplinary perspectives, in particular, psychology and economics (Moss, 2001). Such a narrative offers a particular construction of childhood and is inscribed by assumptions of objectivity, mastery and universality.

> *It is, if you will, a regime of truth about early childhood education and care as a technology for social stability and economic progress, the young child as a redemptive vehicle to be programmed to become a solution to certain problems. It is instrumental in rationality, universalist in ethics, technical in its approach. It produces a public policy which...emphasises control, regulation and surveillance.* (Moss, 2001, p. 13)

Discourses of economics

To take up one of Moss' points, economic progress is used across the document *QSE-2010* (both in literal and metaphoric terms) to describe the purposes and benefits of an effective school system. The message is made that Queensland must "access the benefits of the knowledge economy of the future" (p. 3), and that education "is an investment in the future" (p. 3). While social justice issues are discussed, far more space is given to writing about economic change, workforce skills and competitiveness, and the role of government in managing the economy. The language used is borrowed from the commercial world, with educational purposes, languages and practices "being subsumed by marketing purposes, languages and practices" (Kenway, Bigum, Fitzclarence & Collier, 1993, in Taylor *et al*, 1997, p. 91). With a focus on efficiency and effectiveness or outcome measures, the potential exists to dilute social justice concerns and "emphasise the easily quantifiable at the expense of the significant, a real danger in education systems" (Taylor *et al*, 1997, p. 84).

As an elaborative document, the *Education Queensland Strategic Plan 2000-2004* takes a similar perspective, noting that Education Queensland "places great emphasis on developing a skilled and adaptable workforce that will meet the current and future needs of Queensland" (p.4), while the foreword to the document goes as far as to highlight a numerical target for improving the retention rates for secondary school students. In these examples, policy represents the power of the specific dominant discourses and ideology of cooperate managerialism. Policy in this case aspires more closely to a traditional rational model of development, that is, using a positivist approach to enable the most cost-effective, supposedly value-neutral decisions to be made, and where the stress is in outputs and outcomes (Taylor *et al*, 1997). Human capital theory, warns Marginson

(1993, p. 5), assumes a certainty of connection between education, work and a profitable future, adding that 'there are also deep ethical problems in the conception of people as units of human capital, controlled by economic forces external to them, rather than determining members of society'.

Furthermore, as Beilharz (1987, in Yeatman, 1990, p. 158) argues, 'social policies...are not responses to social problems already formed and "out there". Social policies constitute the problems to which they seem to be responses. They are involved in problem-setting, the setting of agendas.' In the above examples, language is used in such a way as to make the 'problem' of education systems needing to be more responsive to the changing labour market seem natural and noncontestable.

Yeatman (1990, p. 160) explains Beilharz' concern:

...the central feature of the genre of policy texts is the use of language to make the problem which is to be tackled appear as self-evident, thereby rendering invisible the construction of the agenda by those who produce the policy and politics which informs this construction. As Beilharz (1987, p. 389), using Habermas' distinction, puts it: 'communicative action is collapsed into strategic action.'

The policy agendas of an international organisation such as the OECD are evident in discourses which employ linguistic strategies to reinforce the relationship between education and the economy (Apple, 1992, in Taylor *et al*, 1997). The recent OECD report, *Thematic Review on Early Childhood Education and Care: Report on Twelve Countries* (OECD, 2001b) identifies eight key elements of policy that are likely to promote equitable access to quality early childhood education and care internationally. These elements encapsulate efforts to, 'reduce child poverty, promote gender equity, improve education systems, value diversity, and increase the quality of life for parents and children' (OECD, 2001c, p. 5f). The OECD report, however, has to be read with and against other texts, in particular, the introductory presentation given by

the Director for the OECD Directorate for Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, at the conference to launch the report (Martin, 2001). In his presentation, Martin links the importance of early childhood education and care to *"human and social capital, sustained growth and development, and employment-oriented social policies"* (p. 2 [emphasis original]).

He explains why the OECD is particularly interested in early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy making: 'To strengthen short-and long-term educational, emotional and social outcomes for children – investment in ECEC may prevent more costly and less effective remediation later in children's lives' (p. 3); 'To foster equity and social integration objectives – quality early childhood services can offset some of the negative effects of poverty on children and form part of a long-term strategy to break the cycle of disadvantage' (p. 3); and, 'To promote equal opportunities for men and women to participate in the labour force – investing in ECEC (is) a prime way to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities' (p. 4). He concludes:

...though early childhood provision is often given an impetus by labour market needs, notably to raise the labour force participation rates of women, it fulfils a range of much broader social needs. (Martin, 2001, p. 4)

Here we see an example of Moss' earlier point about the child as "redemptive vehicle". It is also possible to see how Australia, as a member country, both contributes to and utilises OECD ideology to 'legitimate its own education policy agenda' (p. 72). Across the various organisations of the OECD '...the congruence of policy positions on educational issues is notable, particular around the recurring rhetoric of quality, diversity, flexibility, accountability and equity' (Taylor *et al*, 1997, p. 71), which carries with it the danger of limiting a range of different discourses in policy debate.

Accompanying the economic restructuring of Australian education over the past decade has been the adoption of an outcomes or competency-based education approach (Grieshaber, 2000), with continuing debate about its meaning for curriculum redefinition and implementation. Kagan (2001, p. 1) raises an important issue: '...at the very same time when there is a press for standardisation of outcomes or frameworks in many countries, the populations of these nations are becoming increasingly diverse'. The implications for my workplace are now being felt as we consider how to prepare teachers to recognise and embrace the diversity of children, families, values and needs, in light of increasing calls for standardisation.

Kagan (2001) also refers to the need to increase the professionalisation of the early childhood field, which involves problems of reconciling this need with a nation's ability and willingness to pay for it. The *QSE-2010* document outlines "(a)n increase in the ratio of significant adults to students" (p. 16) as a strategy to lay foundations for later school success, but does not include reference to Education Queensland's commitment to placing teachers who have a degree in early childhood education, or a similar specialisation, in Preschool to Year 3 settings. Policies have 'real' consequences and in the context of practice, carry particular material constraints and possibilities (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992, p. 15); as text, this policy carries 'both possibilities and constraints, contradictions and spaces'. In this case, other staffing considerations often make following such a commitment by Education Queensland not economically feasible.

Discourses of universality

An issue raised earlier by Moss concerns the universality of constructions of childhood. An analysis of the *QSE-2010, the Education Queensland Strategic Plan 2000-2004,* and the

document *Draft Policy for Core Curriculum for Years 1-10 in Education Queensland Schools* reveals that students are frequently positioned as people "in preparation for" the world of work and life. This positioning represents one particular social construction of childhood, which in this context is productive of policy, provision and practice. The universal term 'child', however, need not make us blind to the multiple constructions that represent diversity within the social group of children. Moss (2001, p. 3) advocates for an understanding of children as:

> *social actors, indeed as experts in their own lives...future work needs to make those lives visible through listening to young children...otherwise, we run the risk of producing an image of the child as a universal and passive object, to be shaped by early childhood services – to be developed, to be prepared, to be educated, to be cared for.*

In the discourses, construction and policies of early childhood education, theoretical perspectives and paradigms have traditionally been relatively homogenous (Moss, 2001). Bloch (1992, p. 3) refers to the 'century-long domination of psychological and child development perspectives in the field of early childhood education', and points to the 'growth of (educational) research using symbolic or interpretivist, critical and, most recently post-modern paradigms...while early childhood education (has) remained tied to psychology, child development, and largely positivist and empirical-analytic paradigms in theory and method'. In *QSE-2010*, the first objective under the heading "New foundations" (p. 16) states, in part, 'The preparation of Queensland children for school should be appropriate to the needs of children of that age'. The wording of this statement reveals prevailing assumptions about the universality of early child development principles, derived from a normative knowledge base of scientific theorising on child development, and articulated as developmentally appropriate practice. Moss (2001) contends that while psychological and child development perspectives

are neither invalid or wrong, they do, however, define what can be said and not said, what knowledge is good and valuable, and how one should construe or situate problems and actions, that is, they produce "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1980, in Moss, 2001, p. 10).

The validity of the pedagogical underpinnings of early childhood profession, once secure, are now increasingly being challenged by those who seek to use critical perspectives at the early childhood level. These challenges recognise that education may serve to reproduce race, class and gender inequities, rather than reduce them (Bloch, 1992). A focus on individual differences in development and on family and school influences on individual development, along with the perspective that social improvement is achieved when individuals try to 'do better', has been dominant. The cost of this is that attention is distracted from analyses of those structural (rather than individual or local) level problems which 'help to maintain oppression and inequities in achievement' (Bloch, 1992, p. 16).

The reference in *QSE-2010* to the need for "early intervention programs" (p. 16) continues to reinforce the mentality that problems are situated at the individual, family, or school level, with no attention given to the need for research into the complex ways groups of individuals are systematically constrained in their opportunities for development and success. Polokow (1992, p. 124) urges a re-examination of assumptions about childhood, the family, and the "monocultural and class-biased frames into which we attempt to mould economically disadvantaged and culturally diverse young children". The 'at-risk' discourse supports and is supported by economic frames: 'Poor children, it appears, are only deserving of public money if early intervention has demonstrable economic payoffs. They matter instrumentally, not existentially' (Polokow, 1992, p. 140).

Monocentric constructions of reality totalise their own terms of operating, and thus colonise, marginalise and silence other discourses (Yeatman, 1990, p. 166). The propositions in *QSE-2010* assume the features of fact, and although the policy admits to wide-ranging consultations as the basis of debate, the polyphony of these discussions is no longer referred to in the final version. Rather, the language used assumes a "voice of authority" (Yeatman, 1990, p. 167). For example, in *QSE-2010*, we read, 'There are different views about what the answers are. But one message was crystal clear...' (p. 3); and 'This strategy captures opinions, attitudes and contexts at a point in time – is not a static document. It is [however] a broad description of the future for Education Queensland' (p. 3). The Minister's foreword in the *Education Queensland Strategic Plan 2000-2004* states "Thousands of educators and community members across this State have worked together to create a positive and constructive vision for the future of education in Queensland...this vision is embodied in *Queensland State Education – 2010 (QSE –2010)*" (p. 4).

The first (and indeed only) specific reference to the early years of schooling as a specialist area in *QSE-2010* is in the *Objectives and Strategies* section, under the heading, *New foundations* (p. 16). It is worth comparing this section to the same section in the *Draft Strategy for Consultation: 2010 Queensland State Education* (Education Queensland, 1999), the document for consultation prior to the publication of *QSE-2010*. Although the draft is not a statement of policy, it nevertheless represents an example of "policy sediment" (Ball, 1994, p. 17) or build-up over time of the interpretational and representational history of *QSE-2010*. A comparison of the same sections in each text shows a notable difference – the first dot point in the draft document reads (p. 12):

- *There will be a transition over the next decade from the existing pre-school arrangements to a full-time preparatory year of schooling which is comparable to other states and*

> *appropriate to the needs of children of that age, flexible in*
> *meeting the requirements of families, (particularly families*
> *in which all care-givers work) and available through all*
> *primary schools.*

The 'ad hocery, negotiation and serendipity' (Ball, 1994, p. 16) of the policy formulation process is evidenced in the same section in *QSE-2010*, which presents an altogether different objective (p. 16):

- *The preparation of Queensland children for school should be*
  appropriate to the needs of children of that age, flexible in
  meeting the requirements of families (particularly families in
  which all care-givers work) and available where possible, in
  the local community. Education Queensland should work
  towards improving outcomes in pre-Year 1 education over
  the next ten years. Development of reforms in this area should
  be based on further quality research into the needs of pre-school
  children and recognise resourcing constraints.

Although initial consultations during 1999 drew responses which were favourable, albeit with many unanswered questions, to the notion of introducing a compulsory year of school prior to the existing Year 1 (favourable enough, at least, to include in specific terms in the draft document), the subsequent document only alludes to this initiative in terms of "reforms which should be based on further quality research".

In addition, the gap left behind opens up a space to be filled, in this case with a statement about improving outcomes in pre-Year 1 education. In discussing policy as text, Ball (1994, p. 16) notes that texts are "the product of compromises at various stages...they are typically the cannibalised products of multiple (but circumscribed) influences and agendas". The dominant discourses of outcomes-based education philosophy and economic restructuring effectively reframe the "problem" as one to do with pre-Year 1 education itself, and one which needs to be considered in a context of "resourcing constraints"

(Education Queensland & Queensland Government, 2000b, p.16). As Ball notes, the effect of policy here has altered the possibilities we have for thinking in other ways.

Discourses of power

Power is multiplicitous, overlain, interactive and complex, policy texts <u>enter</u> rather than simply change power relations: hence, again, the complexity of the relationship between policy intentions, texts, interpretations and reactions. Foucault (in Ball, 1994, p. 20)

Power is exercised as discourse, in practices which determine not only what can be said or thought, but also "who can speak, when, where and with what authority" (Ball, 1994, p. 21). As power relations are restructured, redistributed and disrupted, only certain voices will be heard as meaningful or authoritative.

Policy systems always involve a dual structure, one dimension of which is the developmental relationships the policy builds between actors. Participation is therefore viewed as a means to both "improve decision making, and a process of binding, improving and securing the group or system (Considine, 1994, p. 131). Considine further argues that effective policy making requires consultations which reach as wide an audience as possible in meaningful ways, and which involve key actors in all stages of policy development and implementation. Interrupting the discourses of the economic rationalist view, for example by promoting issues of social justice, requires participatory policy-making at the school level (Haynes, 1997). The participation of parents in particular is required to help make education systems aware of practices and frameworks which may be different to those assumed by teachers.

As education policy making becomes 'increasingly distanced from those who deliver it or are most affected by it...this less participatory mode of policy making is highly likely to result in negative consequences for implementation' (McLaughlin, 1987, in Lingard and Porter, 1997). Some

examples of these consequences are outlined by Ball (1994, p. 17), who describes how certain British education policy texts were "collectively undermined" or caused "mass confusion and demoralization".

QSE-2010, Education Queensland Strategic Plan 2000-2004, and *Draft Policy for Core Curriculum for Years 1-10 in Education Queensland Schools* together represent a 'substance of compromises held in tension (Gale, 2000c, p. 9), in that they demonstrate characteristics that span across binary definitions. For example, as a policy package, these texts represent characteristics that are both distributive and redistributive (while some resources at present target schools trialing aspects of the policies, this will change), conjunctural and procedural (these policies both respond to, and attempt to shape public demands), material and symbolic (there is a high level of commitment to resource provision through the development, for example, of syllabuses and mandated external and internal assessment requirements, yet many elements of *QSE-2010* are also intended as descriptors or discussion points to be used as guides for planning at local levels). *QSE-2010* could also be seen as a substantive policy, while its associated texts are more procedural in quality. The suite of documents, however, is more regulatory and top-down, acknowledging the significance of the state in policy making, and the position of those at the 'chalkface' who have to implement centrally imposed policies as well as cope with a myriad of work pressures (Taylor *et al,* 1997, p. 32).

Power can also be seen in the use of subtle strategies to restrict multiplicity of political discourse around public claims (Yeatman, 1990). One of the "New foundations" objectives in *QSE-2010* (p. 16) proposes the need for a more integrated approach to childcare services before the formal years of schooling, to be developed in partnership with the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care. Three processes are at work here – firstly, public claims for such an

integrated approach are contained by the state through a process of devolution, or, as Yeatman (1990, p. 172) argues, a 'discourse of decentralisation' whereby the 'management of reduced budgets is given over to the units closest to the workface'. Yeatman adds that in this way, claimants' energies are taken up with control modes of management, while the state continues to promise creative social justice developments by converting values like equity and choice into "ritual litanies" within "ornate forms of symbolic window dressing" (p. 173).

Secondly, and particularly with regard to the priveleging of outcomes as an underpinning philosophy, the document offers a "readerly" text (Bowe *et al*, 1992, p. 11) in that it presupposes a degree of innocence in those it is written for; in this case, that early childhood teachers will have little to offer in the way of an alternative to the suggestions made. 'Teachers may feel battered and coerced, they may have been softened up for change, but they are also suspicious and cynical and professionally committed in ways that hardly form the basis for innocence' (Bowe *et al*, 1992, p. 11).

Thirdly, this objective assumes not only that fragmentation of the early childhood education and care sector exists in reality, but that it is perceived as a problem to be fixed, and moreover, fixed in one particular way, that is through the creation of a united, integrated vision for the industry. Diagnosing the "problem" as "fragmentation" requires a prescription of "coordination" as the remedy, whereas fragmented services may alternatively be seen as autonomous (Schon, 1979, in Yeatman, 1990, p. 159). Indeed, the processes of globalisation have created a strong propensity for local control and diversity, with grass roots politics emerging based on local communities and proactive citizenship (Taylor *et al*, 1997). In this context, governments are increasingly mistrusted by citizenry and there is a growing recognition of the need for decentralizing services and governance (Kagan, 2001).

A more integrated approach to early childhood education and care services can also be seen as a call for increased investments by governments, yet such a call is coming precisely at a time when many nations, including Australia, are moving towards wide-scale privatisation of services (Kagan, 2001). Taylor *et al* (1997) argue that market ideologies, such as the consumerist notion of the right to choose, change the very focus of educational practices away from social concerns to economic and individualistic ones.

> *(The market conception) of devolution, then, has been rearticulated away from a social democratic construction to an individualistic one of self-interest and the right to make choices...In education, such a model has potentially dire consequences for equality.* (Taylor et al, 1997, p. 88)

When parents choose a particular service, they make choices that 'segregate or re-segregate children by ethnicity and income, and/or functionality. How do we reconcile the rights of the individual family with needs for justice and for social equity for society?' (Kagan, 2001). Furthermore, there are ever-present tensions between the need to enhance the availability of services versus the need to ensure all services offered are of the highest quality. Questions of consistency and quality are always asked in a context of limited resources, directed to governments increasingly hesitant to regulate on one hand, and determined to bring about greater coherence to policy practices on the other. The result stresses a narrowing of goals, or ends, set at a higher level (Considine, 1988, in Taylor *et al*, 1997), for which those lower down the line must determine the means of achievement.

Conclusion

Policies are complex sites of struggle, and responses to them are the outcome of contested interpretation (Bowe *et al*, 1992). With regards to the field of early childhood education, *QSE-2010* not only represents contested territories and discourses, but also an opportunity to confront and

problematise the dominance of such discourses. Rizvi and Kemmis (1987, in Bowe *et al*, 1992) point out that the processes of contestation should not be seen as unusual or undesirable, but rather, the means by which we may seek to understand, test and develop different ideas, practices, and forms of organisation.

The profound social and economic changes referred to as "forces for change" in *QSE-2010* provide a backdrop against which the universality of early childhood tenets are currently being challenged and in which many new approaches to early childhood education are emerging. As education policy is increasingly articulated through a predominantly economic framing, the consequences include 'an intensified commodification of education and a kind of cultural cynicism' (Taylor *et al*, 1997, p. 77). Taylor *et al* argue that conceptualising education as part of the cultural, rather than economic, domain may offer more prospects and possibilities for developing our critical understanding of issues such as citizenship and identity.

Framing a clear vision for children, as well as a framework for early childhood policy development, in predominantly cultural terms would assist in interrupting the dominant narrative, that is, the one which searches for universal truths and solutions, and which has a propensity to make the Other into the same (Moss, 2001). Cultural discourses that encourage ethical considerations of the Other and how we relate in ways which respect the 'irreducible alterity of the other' (Moss, 2001, p. 12) will become increasingly significant in the blurred landscapes of contemporary societies. Giddens (1994, in Taylor *et al*, 1997) refers to this blurring as simultaneous integration and disintegration; on one hand we become more unicultural as we assimilate globally, and on the other hand, the resulting ethnic diaspora opens us up to otherness, complexity and multiplicity.

There are many possibilities for ways in which societies and childhoods may be alternately theorised in order to surpass the 'given', to look at things as if they could be otherwise. Moss suggests that thinking about which theories are *not* being brought to the field of early childhood education, and what might be the implications in allowing such silences, could be an important starting point:

> *For example, what might a historian see? Or a political scientist? Or a sociologist of childhood? Or an anthropologist? Or a student of ethics? ...In short, I am suggesting that we must start treating children as a part of the world, in all its economic, political, social and cultural complexity.* (Moss, 2001, pp. 4-11)

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