

Constructions of quality in Australian Early Childhood Education and Care policy

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Background

“Our perspective on the past alters. Looking back, immediately in front of us is dead ground. We don’t see it and because we don’t see it this means that there is no period so remote as the recent past” (Bennett, 2004, p. 74)

The recent past, conceptualised in this study as between 1972 and 2009, has been a time of rapid change and growing interest in the concept of quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Research points to the importance of high quality in ECEC as it enhances children’s well-being and development and has social and economic benefits (Galinsky, 2006). Indeed, the concept of quality gained such elevated status that it has become a key focus of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) reform agenda for ECEC (COAG, 2009a). This doctoral study investigates how and why quality, as a concept, has attained this status.

Located in broader policy debates, this doctoral study commences with the introduction of the Child Care Act (1972) that instigated large scale Commonwealth funding for child care and concludes with the introduction of national systemic reform for the ECEC sector. Bounded by important political and historical events, the study aims to generate new knowledge about how the evolution of quality has been constructed in Australian ECEC policy.

Methodology and methods

The study adopts a historical approach to policy analysis drawn from perspectives of policy history (Pierson, 2005) and genealogy (Foucault, 1977). Central to the methodology is an understanding that policy development is complex, multi-dimensional and constituted through discourses. Ball’s conceptualisation that policy is ‘both text and action, words and deeds ... what is enacted as well as what is intended’ (1994, p. 10) informs the study.

The methods utilise thematic analysis and a “What’s the problem represented to be? (WPR) approach (Bacchi, 2009). These two approaches enable the exploration of meaning making that occurs in the formation of policy, with an emphasis on the conditions that ‘shape’ the representations of ‘problems’ rather than on the problems themselves.

Research Questions

1. How has quality been constructed within centre-based long day care in Australia between 1972 and 2009?
2. How have constructions of quality been produced through discourses? Why?
3. Which discourses of quality are prevalent in key policy documents in Australian ECEC from 1972 to 2009? Why?
4. Are there discourses that are prominent, seemingly secondary or silenced? Why?

Research Design and data generation

This is a qualitative study that utilises a two pronged approach:

- (i) Analysis of key government policy documents
- (ii) Analysis of interview transcripts from individual interviews with policy actors



Key policy documents were selected for in-depth analysis where they identified historical and contemporary debates about constructions of quality in Australian ECEC between 1972 and 2009. The key policy documents were selected from the five time periods outlined in Table 1.

Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with policy actors. The policy actors were selected on the basis of references to them in policy documents, the research literature surrounding ECEC policy development, their active involvement in policy making circles and/or peak early childhood bodies between 1972 and 2009.

References

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Table 1

Time period	Key events	Relationship to quality
1972 – 1983	The Child Care Act (1972)	Quality is linked to funding the establishment of non-profit long day care centres and the employment of qualified staff in these centres.
	The Accord (1983)	Child care considered part of the social wage.
1984 - 1993	Section 11 of Child Care Act – repealed (1985)	Link between subsidies and qualified staff is removed leading to fears of an erosion of quality. Government policy emphasises the provision of child care places through the privatisation of the child care sector.
	Commonwealth government calls for a system of accreditation (1990) Government funding available to private sector (January, 1991) Establishment of INAC (end of 1991) and subsequently NCAC (July, 1993)	Attention shifts toward concerns about quality.
1994 - 2000	Introduction of QIAS (1994)	A level of quality is guaranteed through QIAS.
	Operational subsidies removed from non-profit long day care centres (1997)	Removal of operational subsidies from non-profit long day care centres renders these centres less able to afford qualified staff.
	OECD Background report for Australia (2000)	Calls for a national focus to address the provision of good quality child care.
2001 - 2007	OECD Country note for Australia (2000)	Unprecedented expansion of the corporate sector and concerns of low quality linked to corporate child care chains.
	Rapid expansion of corporate long day care	Calls for increased numbers of qualified staff and ways to ensure and improve quality regardless of service auspice.
2008 - 2009	Government spends \$22mil to ‘bail out’ ABC Learning	Financial collapse of Australia’s largest corporate child care chain (ABC Learning).
	Towards a national framework for early childhood education and care (2009)	A period of significant unified national reform for early childhood sector with an emphasis on quality.

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