

Australian Early Childhood Education and Care: The Fourth Discourse

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Since 1999 the Australian government has developed various initiatives in a search for a national model to address the well-being of children and youth. This article describes programs that emphasize the need for a holistic approach to child development inclusive of Aboriginal children and those with disabilities.

The Australian landscape of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is driven by discourses that emerged in the post-WWII years after women were required to leave the workforce (Hayden, 1998). As in many other countries, ECEC reemerged in the Australian sociopolitical arena during the 1970s women's movement, which created pressure on the government to the extent that it remained an important part of the election platform for the next two decades (Brennan, 1994). Child care in that decade rested in a philosophical political arena that supported stay-at-home parents by offering incentives such as tax rebates, payments for stay-at-home mothers, and other types of remuneration (Hayden). This type of support still exists today. Despite these regressive policies, Hayden argues, Australia continues to provide and increase services and spaces in the child care field.

In the late 1990s four diverse but related discourses emerged in Australia: (a) child care as a support for working parents; (b) child care as a residual service providing compensatory programs for special needs; (c) child care for school readiness; and (d) child care as a community-oriented approach to social services.

Scholars who support the second discourse of child care as a residual service propose that it should be seen as a social responsibility, not as a public good to which wealthy families have access and for which families in need must be subsidized. Those critical of the child care for school readiness position argue that child care must be redefined as a service to the community and not as a means to improve the efficacy of the school system. According to Hayden (1998), "to break away from being a second service ... [child care] needs to be recognized as an agent which creates social capital" (pp. 12-13). This fourth position proposes a community-oriented approach to social services that could function as an alternative for policymakers and practitioners to develop different methods toward establishing intersectoral collaboration in ECEC. In this discourse, "early

childhood settings [can] become places where social relationships, networks, and community are developed ... places where children and families are inducted into and construct civil society" (p. 13, drawing on Moss & Pence, 1994).

Despite challenges such as inadequate per-capita funding levels, inequity in subsidies, limited funding spaces, and an unbalanced service delivery for Aboriginal children among others, Australia has recently advanced its organizational and ECEC agenda by establishing a centralized office to deal with all children's issues and to address the fragmented service system. The central government has created a Child Care Advisory Committee, a National Council on Accreditation, and the *Families First* initiative, aimed at promoting collaboration between government and agencies that service children under 8 years of age in a multisectoral approach. Such collaborative efforts and the commitment to working with specialists from other fields have allowed ECEC in Australia to move toward an alternative approach that is multisectoral and multidisciplinary and is based on what Hayden (1998) calls "the fourth discourse." Perhaps the most important of such efforts has been the government's commitment to supporting Indigenous child care by considering the feasibility of an Indigenous quality assurance (QA) system through the funding of *Preparing the Ground for Partnership*, a study on early childhood initiatives and resources between 2004 and 2008 that "can be used to achieve better outcomes for children and their families" (Priest, 2005, p. 23). To understand better what this particular study seeks, it is necessary first to look at Australian ECEC in the context of Aboriginal children.

Aboriginal Children

In the late years of the 19th and the early years of the past century, Indigenous children in Australia were removed from their families and placed in mission schools in an attempt to assimilate them into mainstream culture (MacDonald, 1995, cited in Prochner, 2004). Instruction in these schools focused on English-language instruction, religion, basic academic skills, and immersion in mainstream culture and world view. The main purpose of these schools was to exert social control and to "blend" children from diverse cultural backgrounds by means of "cultural deprivation" (McConnochie & Russell, 1982, cited in Prochner). However, by the late 1960s a number of early childhood programs were established for Australian Aboriginal children following the example of programs in other countries. This trend has been called *cross-national borrowing* (Phillips & Ochs, 2003, cited in Prochner); it represents attempts of a country to transfer or replicate successful models or programs in settings removed from their own place of origin. Some examples of programs that have been transferred to Australia are Head Start, based on the United States model; Maori play centers, based on the Te Kohanga Reo language immersion programs; and the Aboriginal Family Education Centers, which hired

Maori personnel to work with Aboriginal Australians (Prochner). Because Australia, Canada, and New Zealand share a similar history of British colonization and oppression of their Aboriginal peoples, it is not surprising that Australia would make use of programs developed in these countries to begin to change such histories and to advance and promote care services for Aboriginal children. The 1960s represented a time of escalating interest in Aboriginal preprimary education as other forms of mainstream secondary and tertiary education had failed Aboriginal children (Prochner).

The 1980s resulted in the emergence of a variety of specific child care services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. These multifunctional services are designed for children aged 0-12 years and are managed by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; they aspire to function as respite places and provide safety for children, as well as to help them learn some activities that will prepare them for school. These multifunctional Aboriginal child care services also work as culturally appropriate mainstream centers (Priest, 2005). In the latter part of the 1990s, some Aboriginal communities near Alice Springs were favored with innovative children's services for remote communities using the licensed Long Day Care (LDC) center model (Warrki Jarrinjaku ACRS Project Team, 2002). The model was designed to deliver a variety of culturally appropriate services to families for whom English is a third or fourth language. According to Priest,

these communities often want their child care services to be:

- a safe place for women and children;
- a bicultural environment with an emphasis on strengthening their traditional culture(s);
- a place for young mothers to learn parenting skills from older women;
- a place where women can wash their clothes, have a shower, and bath the baby (few homes have running water and many people live in "humpies");
- a place for families to learn about health, well-being, and nutrition; and
- a place for children to be safe, have a healthy meal, learn some activities that will prepare them for school, play with toys, and keep their culture strong. (p. 31)

Although since 1994 the Australian government has implemented national QA systems for child care services, initially Indigenous services were not included as part of the mainstream QA. Because of the diversity among Indigenous children in Australia, these services were exempt from mainstream QA. However, through the funding of the study *Preparing the Ground for Partnership* (Priest, 2005), the Australian government is now considering the feasibility of an Indigenous QA system. In 2003 the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) put forward a proposal for developing quality assurance for Indigenous child care. After several meetings and workshops where adequate practice examples of Indigenous child care from Australia were discussed (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care and the Centre

for Community Child Health, 2004; Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi, 2001; Warrki Jarrinjaku ACRS Project Team, 2002), a feature that stood out from Indigenous child care services compared with mainstream practices was the dedication of Aboriginal parents and ECE providers to nurturing the child's cultural identity through childrearing principles and practices. These qualities have been recently recognized as important for the health, development, and well-being in childhood, adolescence, and adult life (Family Law Council, 2004; Terreni & McCallum, 2003). Additional research and resources (Center for Child and Family Studies, California Department of Education, <http://www.cde.ca.gov>) sensitive care strengthens children's emerging sense of self and connection with their family and broader community, and that through this gained knowledge children also acquire a sense of belonging and personal history that is reflected in the security they will feel in knowing who they are and where they come from.

Aboriginal women from central Australia (Warrki Jarrinjaku ACRS Project Team, 2002) share their viewpoint on the importance of culture in child care.

You learn about your culture, your values and beliefs from everything you do and everything around you. For non-Aboriginal people, mainstream child care and schools reflect Kardiya [non-Aboriginal] culture. The books, TV, the way people dress, the way people talk to each other—all these things help to keep Kardiya culture strong. Yapa [*people in Warlpiri*] culture is reflected in how Yapa live and what they do and their responsibilities and relationships. Yapa child care and schools need to be like Yapa camp and way of living if they are going to keep Yapa culture strong. (cited in Priest, 2005, p. 33).

The national consultation for the Indigenous QA project began in October 2005 as part of the Indigenous Child Care Plan, which aims to "identify the child needs and preferences of Indigenous families and children, and guide the development of new and existing child care services" (Priest, 2005, p. 23). A key concern raised in a number of studies is that although child care services aim to build a child's sense of self and belonging as cultural identity is not formally valued and recognized as a quality measure, a child's cultural identity may not be effectively addressed (Reck & Walker, 2003; Warrki Jarrinjaku ACRS Project Team, 2002). However, if the national consultation process validates the idea that there is a need to emphasize a child's cultural identity as an indicator to measure the support provided for cultural identity, this will represent an important challenge in the design and implementation of an Indigenous QA system. Lester (2004) says that Indigenous parents want their children's cultural identity as Indigenous persons to be as important as the skills they will develop in mainstream society to master life in contemporary environments. Because Australia comprises a diversity of Indigenous cultures, it is impossible to design a one-size-fits-all solution that can be implemented across the nation. Consequently, researchers from Australia are undertak-

ing more research to delve into the relationship between culture and quality care (Fasoli, 2004; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004).

More recently, investing in early childhood has been recognized as imperative to the health and well-being of children, and programs and initiatives have been created to support, advance, and promote the healthy development of Aboriginal children. These days Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families have access to a range of child care options, including mainstream and Indigenous-specific services depending on where they live and the availability of services in that region. To provide a truly Indigenous perspective, the principles of relationship and balance (Townsend-Cross, 2004), as reflected in the Australian Aboriginal world view and pedagogy, have been explored in recent studies conducted by Aboriginal women in a remote community near Alice Springs. The philosophical principles underpinning an Indigenous pedagogy propose that learning is a process of experiencing and a sharing of knowing from everything one does, from daily life events, and from those around oneself. From this standpoint Indigenous pedagogies and practices challenge dominant discourses and are proposed as a model for the development of services necessary for the betterment of ECEC policy, research, and practice (Townsend-Cross, 2004). It is hoped that the development of an Indigenous QA will challenge accepted realities, although such other narratives or voices may not be heard effectively. Vanstone (2005, cited in Priest, 2005) says, "genuinely giving Indigenous Australians a voice will take time and commitment, and using the available funding and resources differently will require doing things differently" (p. 16).

Various Perspectives and Initiatives

As part of their aspirations to design and promote cross-disciplinary research and praxis, the Australian government has engaged in diverse initiatives that explore these possibilities and present potential for developing a national model that will ensure the well-being of the Australian population, particularly its children and youth. The first three of these initiatives relate specifically to the Aboriginal population, whereas the others pertain to the Australian population in general.

The Department of Education and Children Services (DECS)

An attempt to move toward intersectoral collaboration is evident in the Department of Education and Children Services (DECS) in Southern Australia, where their recently launched strategic plan (DECS Aboriginal Strategy 2005-2010, Government of Southern Australia, 2005) defines success for a community as based on the quality of Aboriginal education and the achievements of Aboriginal students. The report outlines four key focus areas; the first, "more innovative and cohesive services," emphasizes the need for and importance of focusing special attention on the needs of

Aboriginal children, students, and communities while also coordinating intersectoral strategies to develop integrated care, education, health, and family support for children aged 0-8 years. Such collaborations are envisaged through the establishment of integrated child and family centers (cross-agency approach) in communities with large numbers of Aboriginal families by ensuring the creation of preschools, schools, and child health and family support services that will include services for Aboriginal children with other needs. In addition, DECS seeks to improve child care provision to Aboriginal families as well as to promote the engagement of communities in the processes of planning and delivering programs and services. One of the expected outcomes is to improve the capacity of the Early Years programs for effective delivery in Aboriginal families and communities.

To improve monitoring and reporting on children, the Australian government is considering using an instrument called the Early Development Instrument (EDI, Human Early Learning Partnership, 2006), which was developed by Dan Offord and Magdalena Janus from McMaster University in Ontario, Canada, and promoted in Australia by Clyde Hertzman, also from Canada. This tool is used to assess early child development before children start school, and it is considered useful to draw attention to any gaps that might exist in supporting child development in a given area.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)

The ARACY was established in 2002 as a consortium of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners working across disciplines to improve and advance the well-being of Australian children and youth. In its recently published report (September 2005) based on the work of a think tank organized by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, the umbrella question was "What do we need to do differently in Australia to achieve better outcomes for children and young people?" Six main themes had been identified before the consultation sessions: the child's world, transition, child poverty, child protection, school transition, and relationships for a child-friendly society. The latter three were chosen as the focus for the national think tank; they used Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological paradigm as a working frame to propose new ideas for collaboration, linked research and practice, and intersectoral efforts.

The National Agenda for Early Childhood

Acknowledging that early childhood is a crucial period in life, the Government of Australia (2004) developed a *National Agenda for Early Childhood* in recognition that "issues affecting young children are of national importance" (p. 2). The approach is a holistic, ecological stance that places children at the center of social and economic environments for working more efficiently and collaboratively among state and territory governments, service-providers, and stakeholders. The National Agenda seeks to

provide a framework “for action across Australia” (p. 8). This need was reflected in the feedback received from the consultations that took place in 2003, which recognized the need to correct the socioeconomic disadvantages that some groups experience (such as Aboriginal children, children in care, children exposed to violence, children from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and so forth). However, even when these efforts for collaboration exist, these programs have often been developed independently of one another and financed through various funders, levels of government, and other stakeholders. Because there is currently no national-level statement of commitment to young children, policy and delivery of care are fragmented, even though many states and territories are in the process of developing government strategies for a more integrated response to the needs of children and their families. Some of these strategies include the Early Years Strategy in Western Australia, Families First in New South Wales, the Putting Families First policy framework developed in Queensland, Every Chance for Every Child in South Australia, Our Kids Action Plan in Tasmania, A Vision for Territory Children and Children’s Policy Framework in the Northern Territory, and the Best Start Strategy in Victoria (Government of Australia). The outcomes of the national agenda are classified in four areas: healthy young families; early learning and care; supporting families and parents; and creating child-friendly communities. In addition, it is envisaged that the childhood system and all its parts—policy, law, service, program support, infrastructure, research, and related others—affect the lives of children.

The Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) and the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH)

A further effort to explore collaborative options based on the needs of Aboriginal people comes from the SNAICC (2004) and the CCCH. These agencies released a case study report in 2004 that provides examples of good practice that emphasize culturally appropriate ways to deliver the Early Years programs. These examples include programs on health and well-being, early intervention, multifunctional child care centers, remote community centers, play groups, and family support programs to name just a few. A number of programs are linked to policy and health; some examples include Head Start for Australia; National Mental Health Strategy and National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy; National Plan for Foster Children, Young People, and their Carers; Eat Well Strategy and complementary National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan; National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Strategic Framework; Draft National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People—Mental Health and Social and Emotional Well-being; and the developing National Child Public Health Strategy and Action Plan.

New Possibilities

Among these initiatives and strategies are priority areas concerned with early learning and care. This movement points toward Hayden's (1998) fourth discourse whereby early childhood services "do not merely survive" in the Australian ECEC landscape, but "pro-actively reconstruct it" (p. 14). One of these initiatives, the National Agenda for Early Childhood, focuses on quality early learning and care, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to child development that includes all children, including Aboriginal children and those with disabilities. The means to address these issues are diverse, but they center on specialized support, improved access for children with disabilities, higher rates of participation in early learning programs, child safety, successful transition to school for all children, earlier identification of and intervention for children at risk of developmental or behavioral problems, and greater choice for parents in early learning and care arrangements for their child (Government of Australia, 2004). Additional initiatives for cross-government cooperation include those to improve service cohesion in several new child care links projects and a parenting information and support project (Government of Australia), along with initiatives that support and advance Aboriginal child care services and practice. The degree to which these initiatives and collaborative efforts are met, social relationships are created, civil society is enhanced, and capacity building within communities is advanced will be the degree of success by which early childhood programs in Australia will prove to be useful, adequate, and valuable.

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