COMMUNITY CENTRED CHILD CARE: A NEW ANSWER TO 'WHO BENEFITS?'
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ABSTRACT
In this article the authors argue that early childhood services are well situated to adopt a new role which moves beyond support for female labor participation and beyond a child centred program focus. By transcending traditional parameters, early childhood services can be reformulated to assume the critical task of developing and facilitating social relationships, networks and interagency collaborations - and to take a central role in the building of community and civil society. In New South Wales some government supported projects are addressing this new role.

INTRODUCTION
The current landscape
Like many other Western, pluralistic nations, Australia has been subject to neo-liberal trends which support minimal government responsibility for social services (Hayden, 1997). Policies arising from neo-liberalism reflect economic rationalism, reduced government intervention, reduced government spending, market approaches to social services, deregulation, and privatisation. Here, as in other nations, choice theory has been used to rationalise an increasingly dichotomized system: services for the rich under user pays schemes; reduced options for the poor (Hayden, 2000c).

These trends have had a direct effect on early childhood services, especially in the child care system (Press, 1997). In the 1996/7 fiscal year, the budget of the Children Services Program of the Commonwealth Government was reduced by $800 million. Most of the cuts came from dollars which had been earmarked for non profit centres in the form of an operating allowance. The funding cuts resulted in increased fees for parents and in a reduction of services (such as lunch and diaper provision). Other outcomes from these cuts include reports by parents (women) that they are being forced to leave gainful employment because they can no longer afford to pay for child care; an increase in ‘backyard’, informal, unlicensed, unmonitored care arrangements; the development of a new phenomenon called ‘reluctant grannies’ - retired family members who are recruited into child care arrangements, but are not enthusiastic about this role; an increase in patchwork arrangements (children who make use of a variety of care arrangements because full time formal care has become too expensive); an increase in the use of ‘telecare’ (children who make use of the telephone (to check in with working parents) and the television in lieu of human caretakers. Meanwhile nearly all services report reductions in staffing and/or in special programs. Many child care services have closed (see Australian, 1998; 1998a; 1998b; Sydney Morning Herald 1998; 1998a; 1998b).

Perhaps the most disconcerting outcome is that these developments are accompanied by a growing apathy towards the system of government supported child care. This attitude is
reflected in a recent editorial in Sydney's mainstream newspaper. The sentiments of the editorial are summarised as follows:

The only role for government support to child care is to meet the needs of working parents... Too much money has been spent on the child care system... Child care is a residual service and government assistance should be targeted at only those needy (less able) families who might benefit from temporary assistance (Sydney Morning Herald, 1998c).

These sentiments are not new. Early childhood advocates were battling against similar attitudes twenty five years ago (see Brennan, 1998; Hayden, 1992, 2000a).

New approaches
Today's battle may look similar but it is calling for a different cry. It is no longer necessary to prove that an accessible system of child care benefits the employment market. And it is also no longer appropriate to talk in terms of benefits to the child. In this age of reduced government and user-pays philosophies, early childhood services will not garner support when they are defined as a personal good. Early childhood advocates need to articulate benefits which extend beyond these traditional target groups.

Beyond benefits associated with increased employment opportunities
Child care in Australia has always been linked to an increased employment pool of workers. In this vein government supported programs of early childhood education have been closely associated with the women's liberation movement. Indeed it was the women's electoral lobby (WEL) which is credited with propelling the child care issue onto the political arena during the 1972 Commonwealth election campaign. Significant concessions were won from the elected party. The WEL kept child care on the political agenda throughout 1970s and 1980s (Brennan, 1998). Recently the leader of the WEL at that time, Eva Cox, looked back with this comment:

Because we were having difficulties getting enough momentum for child care, we emphasised its relationship to the work needs of women and we were successful. We got the Labor party to put lots of money into child care and they actually started talking about it as an economic service but in the process we lost some of our capacity to argue about children from the point of view of the needs of the child - and of the community (Cox, 1998:23),

As Cox states, the employment rationale for early childhood services was useful in order to penetrate the economic/political agenda. But that is the past.

For the new millennium early childhood education services need to define themselves with goals which go beyond employment related outcomes; and indeed beyond a focus on narrow definitions of child-centred outcomes (Pence & Benner, 2000; Lero, 2000, Hayden, 1998).

Beyond benefits which focus on the child
When childcare services are defined as value added to home care - because of their contribution to social, emotional, cognitive and creative development for children - and when children are
seen as the main beneficiary of a child care system, then an argument can be made that parents can and should purchase this service as desired - just as they may choose to purchase ballet lessons or special coaching. In this sense early childhood services remain tied to a user- pays philosophy and become something that well off citizens can access at will and that disadvantaged groups - or those with special needs - can be given some (government) assistance to access. The rationale for a tax based, government supported service is lost and early childhood education becomes a private good - not a public (social) responsibility (See Hayden, 1997; 2000c).

Beyond traditional discourses
Analysts (notably Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999 and Lero, 2000) have conceptualised the field of early childhood education in terms of evolving discourses. These are:

The first discourse - child care as a support for working parents: This discourse describes child care as a tool to increase the pool of (female) employees and concomitantly to enhance tax revenues.

The second discourse - child care which provides compensatory programs for special needs (disadvantaged) children: This discourse describes early childhood education as a residual program, which provides services to compensate for deficits in families and/or individuals.

The third discourse - child care for school readiness: This discourse describes early childhood services as the means to the end of improved efficacy of the school system. They serve to support the system of formal, compulsory education.

All three discourses describe early childhood education as the 'other'. Services are developed and maintained in order to meet superordinate goals. They are funded (or not) by government departments to support employment programs, or to reduce welfare roles and/or to increase school attainment. Early childhood services are not seen as an end in themselves. Thus when unemployment rates are high (and incentives are not needed), when economic rationalism calls for reductions in bottom up support to special needs or impoverished groups and when school accountability is devolved to school level, then systemic government support for early childhood services are jeopardised. These conditions are part of the current Australian context.

Moving beyond the 'other': Creating new landscapes
There is reason to believe that the early childhood professionals can transcend the current landscape (both the attitudes and the policies) - and can reconstruct early childhood education into a system which does not depend upon politician's whims, economic trends, or on traditional roles.

A blue print for change comes from Simone de Beauvoir's 1956 work, The Second Sex. In this work de Beauvoir analysed the role of women in post war western cultures. She believed that women were socially constructed as the 'other' - their role was defined by its difference or sameness to the dominant sex - male. She believed that women needed to recreate themselves by breaking free of this 'otherness' and also of their own past self image. "Woman must", she proclaimed, "define herself not by her past but in respect to the future through which she projects her aims" (de Beauvoir, 1956: 76). While it is difficult to transcend the context in which one is located - de Beauvoir was convinced that women could do so and become self constructed. The progress of the women's movement has shown us that her conviction bore truth.
The field of early childhood education in Australia today may be in a situation similar to that of the 1950s de Beauvoir woman. Roles for early childhood education are defined by other programs: Early childhood education is seen as a substitute for home care; a prerequisite to education; or a supplement to health/welfare programs. Professionals in the field of early childhood education need to redefine themselves in a way that does not rely upon other programs or services (Rodd, 1997; Tayler, 2000). Like the 1950s woman, early childhood professionals may need to transcend both their past and their own self image as marginalised providers of support. They need to develop a new vision which situates early childhood services as a central and critical aspect of social functioning.

de Beauvoir insisted that women could re-create themselves - could wrench themselves from socially constructed roles and realities. Thus too is it possible to re-create early childhood education apart from the landscape – the (hostile) context in which it finds itself; and apart from its own past and traditional discourses.

The fourth discourse: Services for the community

In the quote above, Cox’s last three words - of the community - reflect the directions for a new discourse of early childhood education: one that focuses on wider needs. It is now known that the development of supportive environments and healthy communities are the most effective ways to benefit children, families and society (Putnam, 1995; McBride, 1999; McCain & Mustard, 1999; Hayden, Macdonald, Fraser, DeGioia & Elliott, 2000).

An alternative to the three discourses is to redefine child care as a service to the community. Here early childhood education extends beyond employment-centred and beyond child-centred approaches. It is recognised as an agent which helps to develop community. It does this by being the vehicle whereby links, relationships and opportunities for networking develop - both on a micro, personal level and between agencies and organisations.

The outcome – or the way by which early childhood programs measure their success - thus will not be based upon more women in workforce or more children advancing in school. The outcome or success will be seen in terms of fostering and nurturing social relationships: building community, enhancing civil society.

This new, fourth discourse incorporates a community oriented approach to service delivery. Within the fourth discourse early childhood settings become places where social relationships, networks and community are developed. They are the public place where young children and families are inducted into and construct civil society.

In their recent book, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence state

Early childhood institutions ..are forums located in civil society ..They can make important contributions to other projects of social, cultural and political significance ..Further early childhood institutions can play an important part as the primary means for constituting civil society... and for fostering the visibility, inclusion and active participation of the young child and its family in civil society (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999:7).
Strategies for moving into the 4th discourse

Some analysts have noted that policy outcomes can be categorised in two ways – distributional vs constitutional allotments. The terms have been defined as follows:

The distributional dimension of policy relates to the allotment of the tangible benefits across various interests in society. The constitutional dimension relates to the allocation of positions of influence in the making and implementation of policy (Creighton, 1994:249).

Distributions refer to policies or goods that are handed out by politicians and other decision makers. In the child care arena they usually take the form of funding or spaces Constitutional allotments, on the other hand, refer to policies or activities which serve to enhance infrastructure, to devolve decision making and to empower the field.

Over the years it has become clear that politicians have won votes and ‘kudos’ by the act of distributing child care ‘goods’, and that these distributions were precarious – as easily taken as given (See Brennan, 1998, Hayden, 1994, 2000a). More importantly, the distributions do not change the status of the taker. The taker remains the other. The group who sits and waits or cajoles for handouts.

Constitutional allotments are different. They are about creating the opportunities (structures) that allow groups to become decision makers. By focusing on constitutional issues early childhood advocates have been able to forward the field in a way that has long term and structural outcomes (see Hayden, 2000b).

New developments in early childhood education in New South Wales

Some constitutional developments are taking place in the state of New South Wales. One example is the Families First initiative which is coordinated through the New South Wales State Office of Children and Young People. The aim of this project is to promote collaboration between five government departments and agencies to address equity and best service issues for families with children under the age of eight years. Early childhood educators are collaborating with health, education, welfare, legal and immigration agencies and professionals to develop, implement and evaluate Families First programs.

The notion of the community – centred child care setting is also receiving support from the New South Wales Department of Community Services (DOCS) under the auspices of the Health Promoting Child Care Centre project. This DOCS funded project is attempting to re-create service delivery in 3500 child care settings throughout the state. The centres will be provided with training and supports to assist in moving towards a new role as health promoting settings – those which attend to the total health and well being of children, families and communities.

The Health Promoting Child Care Centre Project has identified three major goals and three beneficiaries for early childhood services. These are:

For children: To provide environments which cater to the total health and well being of children who use the service.
For families: To provide services to families with young children which support their decision making in all aspects of their child's health and wellbeing - and to empower them to seek out and develop services to meet family needs.

For communities: To gather and disseminate information about existing services for all families with young children and to support, liaison, linkages and networks which enable families and children to access existing community resources and to influence the development of new resources and services (Hayden & Macdonald, 2000; Hayden & Macdonald, 2000a).

CONCLUSION

Benefits to the community
Early childhood professionals are vital players in a society which is increasingly recognising the need for partnerships and collaborations (Macdonald, 1998). Early childhood services provide benefits beyond increasing employment opportunities and beyond facilitating development outcomes for any one child. They are the cornerstone from which effective and supportive communities can be developed and sustained.

When political activity is viewed in terms of constitutional goals rather than distributions, energies can be put into building and reinforcing infrastructures that move early childhood services into a central place in society. Early childhood services can be reformulated so that they focus upon the critical task of developing and facilitating social relationships, networks and interagency collaborations – and take a central role in the building of community and civil society.

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