Insider perspectives on developing Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia

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IN JULY 2009, THE COUNCIL of Australian Governments approved for immediate implementation, 'Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia' (EYLF), Australia's first national framework for guiding curriculum and pedagogy in all early childhood settings. In this article, several core members of the Charles Sturt University-led Consortium contracted to develop and trial the EYLF outline the political and policy context that has shaped its development; the intent and approach of the Consortium; and some of the many 'decision points and dilemmas' (Westbury, 2007) they encountered. The article concludes with reflections on lessons learned and implications for early childhood curriculum development.

Introduction

IN AUSTRALIA AND INTERNATIONALLY, the last 15 years has seen the proliferation of curriculum and learning frameworks for early childhood education and care (ECEC). According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), such frameworks are most effective when underpinned by a vision; when there is widespread agreement on the values on which they are based; and when key goals are defined with a broad range of stakeholders (OECD, 2006). Yet visions, values and goals are inevitably contested as stakeholders endeavour to articulate and negotiate them (Nuttall, 2003). Consequently, curriculum development requires many complex conversations and collaborations (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995).

In this article, we reflect on some of these conversations and collaborations with respect to the development of *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, Australia's first national framework for guiding early childhood curriculum and pedagogy (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2008). An explicit aim of the EYLF is to 'extend and enrich children's learning from birth to five years and through the transition to school' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5). A key component of the National Quality Framework for early childhood settings, the EYLF is a document of considerable significance for contemporary early childhood policy and practice. It also seems likely to become a historically significant marker of a particular point in time in Australian ECEC policy development, in part because of its status as Australia's first national early childhood curriculum framework. Consequently, it warrants careful scrutiny, analysis and debate by early childhood practitioners, researchers and policy-makers, not least to identify refinements and changes in emphases for future iterations.

Detailed accounts of the EYLF's development and implementation and, later, of its evaluation, are needed to inform scrutiny, analysis and debate. Documents available on the website of DEEWR's Office of Early Childhood Education and Care provide a useful start. The purpose of this article is to provide a reading from the perspective of several core members of the Charles Sturt University-led Consortium (the Consortium) that won the contract to develop and trial the EYLF. Our intent is to offer insights into the contexts and constraints that shaped the EYLF's development and its final form. We anticipate that an 'insider' perspective may be useful to those working with the EYLF, as well as those intending to undertake critical policy analyses of the EYLF and current Australian ECEC reforms.

Figure 1. Structure of COAG Working Groups

Adapted from Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations (2008).
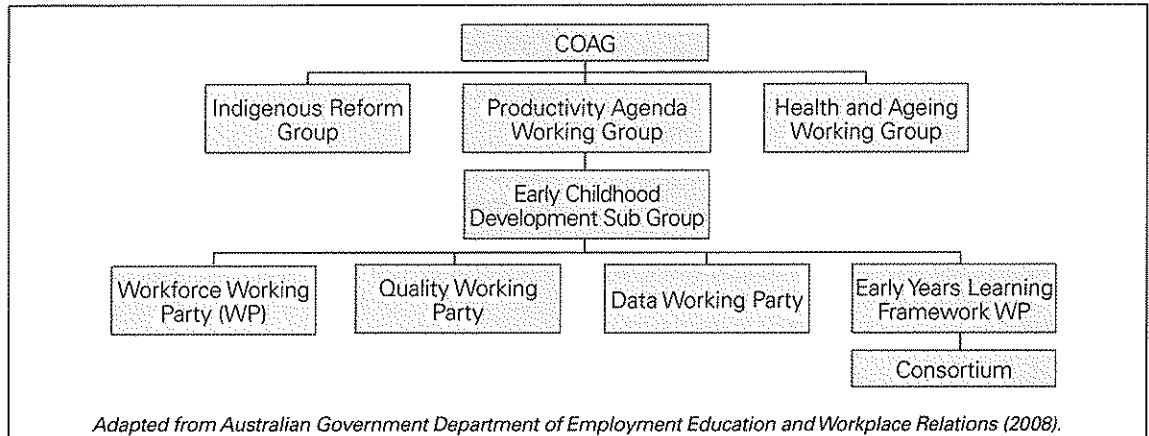
The article begins by outlining the political and policy context in which the EYLF was developed. The intent, understandings and approach of the Consortium are then explained, and some of the difficult 'decision points and dilemmas' (Westbury, 2008, p. 59) described. We conclude by reflecting on what we have learnt from our involvement in the development of the EYLF and how we and others might make productive use of this learning in future.

Political and policy contexts

Internationally, and in Australia, it has become commonplace for governments to see ECEC as a prescription for ameliorating social and educational problems (Swadener, Cannella, & Bloch, 2006). The Rudd Federal Labor government was elected in November 2007 with a 'productivity agenda' for strengthening Australia's economy through increased investment in social and human capital. Central to its productivity agenda is the 'education revolution' (Australian Government, 2008). A key component of the 'education revolution' is a commitment to improving the quality of ECEC through a range of reforms, including a proposed National Quality Framework. The EYLF will be an integral part of the National Quality Framework (Productivity Agenda Working Group – Early Childhood Development Sub Group, 2008).

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has responsibility for implementing the productivity agenda and reforms, including those associated with ECEC. To this end, a complex structure of COAG working groups and parties comprising representatives from the federal government and all state and territory governments has been established (see Figure 1).

This structure reflects the emphasis in the productivity agenda on securing cooperation and collaboration between the federal, state and territory governments through linking funding to intergovernmental

agreements on policy initiatives and directions (Australian Government, 2008). The emphasis on joint decision–making, responsibility and accountability represents an attempt to diffuse the 'partisan rivalries' that have long characterised 'the vigorous set of political communities' constituting the Australian federation (Moon & Sharman, 2003, p. 11).

Within the COAG structure, oversight of each initiative is delegated to a designated state or territory, which takes a leadership role in working collaboratively with other states and territories as well as the federal government. The ultimate aim is to obtain approval of the initiative (in this case, the EYLF, led by Victoria) by all relevant federal, state and territory Ministers, so that the initiative can be implemented nationally. If the approval of all Ministers is not obtained, the initiative is at risk of not proceeding. In some states, responsibilities for ECEC remain distributed across education, health and community services. Consequently, Ministerial approval for the EYLF was required from at least 12 jurisdictions.

To maximise the likelihood that all relevant Ministers would indeed approve the EYLF, the successful tenderer for the development of the EYLF was required to meet regularly with the Early Years Learning Framework Working Party (DEEWR, 2008). The EYLF Working Party comprised of representatives from all relevant federal, state and territory government departments. As illustrated in Figure 1, it reported in turn to the Early Childhood Development Sub Group of COAG's Productivity Agenda Working Group. This structure meant that there were many layers of decision-makers between the successful tenderers for the development and trial of the EYLF and the dozen or so Ministers whose approval was required.

An additional complexity was the extremely ambitious timeline for the development of the EYLF, which was undertaken in four stages through a series of contracts awarded by competitive tender. *Stage one* (Wilks,

Nyland, Chancellor, & Elliot, 2008) involved a literature review of early childhood curriculum and learning frameworks. *Stage two* (Edwards, Fleer, & Nuttall, 2008) involved a commissioned background research paper outlining possible directions for the EYLF. Following *stage two*, a discussion paper produced by the Early Childhood Development Sub Group (Productivity Agenda Working Group - Early Childhood Development Sub Group, 2008) that focused in part on the EYLF was released for national consultation. Stages *three* and *four*, which are the focus of this article, involved the actual development and trial of the EYLF and support documents for early childhood professionals and families. A requirement of the tender was that *stage three* adhere to and build on the parameters outlined in the discussion paper developed by the Early Childhood Development Sub Group.

The timeline for the successful tenderer for the undertaking of stages *three* and *four* was compressed into less than nine months. Tenders were called for in August 2008. The successful tenderer was notified in September with a requirement that it submit its recommended version to DEEWR in early May 2009. Consultation took place from October 2008 to April 2009 and involved focus group discussions in most states and territories, a national symposium for invited key stakeholders, capital city consultations supplemented by regional consultations in Victoria, online submissions, and an online forum established and managed by DEEWR. From February to April 2009, 28 ECEC settings from around Australia took part in a six-week trial. The COAG-approved version was launched in early July 2009 for immediate national implementation.

In comparison, New Zealand's highly acclaimed Te Whāriki early childhood curriculum, was developed over a six year period from 1991 to 1996 (Carr & May, 2006) with a 14 month consultation period for the first draft. As Smith and May (2000, p. 101) note, the development of Te Whāriki was a process the New Zealand government 'wisely did not rush'. The speed with which the Rudd government proceeded may have reflected its determination to deliver on election promises and to counter criticisms in some sections of the media that it focused more on symbolic gestures at the expense of setting and achieving policy priorities (Gittins, 2008; Shanahan, 2008).

The combination of the multi-jurisdictional context, with its embedded historical legacy of often strained state, territory and federal relations, the multilayered decision–making structure, and the compressed timeline characterising the development of the EYLF made it a far more complex undertaking than the earlier development of ECEC learning or curriculum frameworks by individual Australian states and territories. International comparisons (see, for example, the OECD,

2006; Wilks et al., 2008) indicate that the great majority of frameworks elsewhere have also been for single jurisdictions, and further attest to the complexities associated with the development of the EYLF.

The Consortium: Intent, understandings, approach

A Charles Sturt University-led consortium (the 'Consortium') was contracted to undertake stages *three* and *four* of the development of the EYLF. The 29-member Consortium comprised academics from seven Australian universities, as well as service providers, representatives from peak early childhood organisations, practitioners and consultants, drawn from all states and the Northern Territory. According to one former senior bureaucrat, it was the largest, most diverse geographically dispersed consortium to undertake a project of national significance in the history of Australian ECEC (Wangmann, 2009).

Intent

The diversity and size of the Consortium was deliberate for several reasons. First and most significantly, it represented both a symbolic and pragmatic statement of confidence in the capacity of the early childhood sector to work collaboratively and constructively across state and territory borders and other divides. Second, the diversity of perspectives, professional backgrounds, expertise and insights of Consortium members mirrored the diversity of the early childhood sector generally. It provided a rich range of knowledge and experiential bases from which the Consortium could draw from and stimulated thought-provoking and often challenging discussions; the kind in which we hoped that practitioners working with the EYLF would themselves engage. Our diverse perspectives also provided an inbuilt mechanism for testing and refining our ideas and proposed directions and an invaluable 'litmus' test of likely responses from the early childhood sector. Third, in keeping with our commitment to the generational renewal of leadership in ECEC, the size of the Consortium enabled a rich generational mix of experienced and emerging leaders. Finally, the size and geographical reach of the Consortium enabled work tasks to be distributed, thus rendering the extremely tight time frame just manageable. It also enabled us to activate networks across Australia at short notice as the need arose. Effective communication mechanisms, as well as a great deal of professional trust, were crucial to the success of this model, given the size and diversity of the Consortium, a limited budget and time constraints.

Understandings of curriculum

Many Consortium members had prior experience in the development of state or territory curriculum frameworks and therefore need some understanding of the challenges likely to be involved in the development of the EYLF. We knew, for example, that curriculum is always political, in part because it shapes what is seen as (im)possible (Popkewitz, 2009). We also understood that it reflects the political and social terrain in which it is developed, and as the terrain shifts, so will emphases in curriculum. We recognised that, in essence, curriculum is about 'what matters'—to politicians, policy makers, the media, academics, educators, communities, families and children—and about how 'what matters' should be framed (Yates, 2009). 'What matters' is conveyed through multiple and competing discourses and narratives. Especially salient in the development of the EYLF, in our view, were narratives of hope, salvation and political risk. Because of their significance in shaping the EYLF, we briefly elaborate on them here.

Narratives of hope

Curriculum is not only a reflection of what a society values, but also of what it hopes to become (Reid, 2008). The early childhood sector's hopes that the EYLF would build on Prime Minister Rudd's formal apology to the Stolen Generation in February 2008 and actively contribute to reconciliation between Indigenous and non–Indigenous Australians were evident throughout the consultation process. So too, were hopes that the EYLF will lead to increased valuing by society of the important role of early childhood settings and enhanced professional status for early childhood practitioners through public recognition of the complexity of their work. For the most part, these hopes were embedded in a transformative vision for ECEC and for a more socially just society, as well as optimism about the contribution the ECEC sector and the EYLF could make to that transformation.

Narratives of salvation

Narratives of salvation, on the other hand, focus on strengthening society by saving or rescuing its (potentially) valuable assets. These narratives are exemplified in COAG's goals for the productivity reform agenda:

> The agreed aspiration is that children are born healthy and have access, throughout early childhood, to the support, care and education that will equip them for life and learning ... This is critical to achieving long-term participation and productivity gains for Australia. Schooling and skills development must be improved now, and must start early as children are the nation's future (Productivity Agenda Working Group – Early Childhood Development Sub Group, 2008, p. 2).

Narratives of salvation emphasise the production of future citizens with 'desirable' qualities by addressing deficits (Popkewitz, 2009), whereas narratives of hope seek to address inequities through transforming social structures that perpetuate those inequities. In effect, they are frequently interwoven, as illustrated in the emphasis on 'closing the gap' between the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and those of other children. Their respective weighting, however, has profound implications for ECEC curriculum and the roles of ECEC practitioners.

Narratives of political risk

The development of a curriculum or learning framework inevitably involves risks. During the development of Te Whāiki, for example, the early childhood sector in New Zealand was acutely aware of the potential risk of the 'schoolification' effect of a national curriculum and worked hard to counter that risk (Carr & May, 2000). The EYLF consultation processes revealed similar concerns.

The EYLF also posed risks, both internal and external, for politicians and bureaucrats with responsibilities for ensuring government initiatives are presented in a positive light. Internal political risks arose from the multi-jurisdictional nature of COAG processes and the potentially competing priorities, parochialism and gamesmanship that have traditionally constrained attempts at national collaboration in Australia (Moon & Sharman, 2003). External political risks were exemplified in media attention critical of the two publicly released drafts of the EYLF (e.g. Bita, 2008, 2009). As Althaus (2008) explains, managing political risks requires careful calculation of and attention to those risks. Government sensitivity to and management of the risks associated with the EYLF was evidenced in the substantial and cumulative 'toning down' of potentially controversial ideas in each of the two publicly released drafts and the final COAG-approved version. The toning down was arguably most noticeable with respect to children's participatory rights as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) to which Australia is a signatory. For example, the November 2008 draft referred to children's 'civic participation and contribution to the future' as a learning outcome. By February 2009, the wording had been softened to children 'actively participate in relationships and communities', while the final version merely stated rather vacuously that children are 'connected with and contribute to their world'. For the Consortium, the challenges of balancing narratives of hope, (e.g. that the EYLF would explicitly position Australian ECEC settings as sites of democratic practice), salvation (e.g. consistent with the COAG's perspectives on social inclusion) and political risk (given that the notion of children's participatory can be politically unpalatable) were ongoing.

Approach

Consortium members brought to the development of the EYLF a longstanding commitment to working collaboratively, valuing diversity and difference, and foregrounding equity considerations. We were also committed to proceeding in ways that recognised children as capable and entitled to rights, and that conveyed respect for early childhood practitioners and an appreciation of the complexities of their work. We were keen to act on early feedback from the early childhood sector that the EYLF should be 'bold and brave'. What constitutes 'bold and brave', however, is open to interpretation, and in a climate of sensitivity to political risk, the focus of considerable contestation.

To us, 'bold and brave' evoked transformational possibilities. While it was important that the EYLF affirm existing good practice, we also wanted it to open up new spaces for conversations about ECEC pedagogy, curriculum and the discourses that underpin them. More broadly, we argued, the EYLF should articulate a stance on what knowledge, values and ideas 'matter' and what constitutes good citizens and a good society (Yates, 2009).

Like the early childhood sector more broadly, we welcomed the COAG stipulation that the EYLF be sufficiently flexible to enable it to be interpreted in contextually and culturally relevant ways (Productivity Agenda Working Group – Early Childhood Development Sub Group, 2008). We considered it important that this flexibility extend to enabling practitioners the option of working with a diversity of ideas and theories, including those perceived by government to be politically risky if explicitly articulated in the EYLF. To that end, we endeavoured to deliberately weave in words that can cross borders and divides, resonate with diverse audiences, and be taken up differently within different discourses and narratives. Wherever possible, we used words that we thought would appear innocuous to political risk detectors, while speaking powerfully 'in code' to practitioners seeking legitimate ways to push boundaries of what might currently be considered possible.

The partial success of these strategies explains, in part, the hybrid-like nature of the EYLF. To our 'insider' eyes, it contains signs of the many negotiated settlements that characterised its development. Hybrids can lack the seemingly effortless coherence of a unified narrative. On the other hand, through their dissonance, and by implicitly acknowledging that true consensus is not readily achievable, they leave open spaces for ongoing conversations, destabilisation, and new articulations and narratives. The following section, framed around decision points and dilemmas, identifies what seem to us to be generative spaces for further development of the EYLF.

Decision points and dilemmas

Curriculum 'brings together, assembles and connects different principles' about who children, families and practitioners should be (Popkewitz, 2009, p. 304). Consequently, deliberations about curriculum inevitably involve difficult 'decision points and dilemmas' (Kirst & Bird, 1997, cited by Westbury, 2008, p. 59). In this section, we identify some of the many difficult decision points and dilemmas we encountered in developing the EYLF. In our view, they provide a potentially useful frame for scrutinising emphases, silences, strengths and limitations of the EYLF, and a generative starting point for discussions about future refinements and new directions.

Audience

Given the diverse workforce in ECEC settings, who should be the primary intended audience for the EYLF? How should differences in understanding, nature and depth of professional knowledge be approached? Who should take leadership in making curriculum decisions and where does that leave often traditionally marginalised groups like family day carers?

It was resolved by the EYLF Working Party that the primary audience for EYLF would be all degree- and diploma-qualified ECEC practitioners and that all practitioners would be referred to as educators. Accordingly, we worked from the assumption that all educators are united in a shared goal of facilitating children's learning and wellbeing and that they take seriously their professional and ethical responsibilities to children, families, colleagues and the communities in which they work. Conscious of educators' diverse educational backgrounds, qualifications and English proficiency, we aimed to convey complex ideas clearly and in a straightforward manner, without shying away from words that we were told might be unfamiliar and unnecessarily challenging. These words included, among others, *pedagogy, agency* and *civic participation.* We wanted the EYLF to retain sufficient depth to interest and ideally extend to, highly qualified educators with masters and doctoral degrees, while remaining inviting and accessible to educators with diploma-level qualifications and those without formal qualifications. This enormous span reinforced the importance of educators with early childhood qualifications, including coordination unit staff in family day care schemes, taking a pedagogical leadership role in working with colleagues to interpret and implement the EYLF in locally relevant ways. We took the view that with appropriate support, all educators could and should be entrusted to make wise professional judgements.

Children

Where is the focus on infants and toddlers? How to portray children with disabilities and special needs? What is the nature of genuine inclusion?

When is it best to identify the particular needs of individuals or groups and when is it best not to? How can we balance views of children as capable and vulnerable, and avoid over- or underestimating the support they might need? How can we counter the dominant but limited human capital policy focus on children primarily as learners in order that they become successful and productive workers and contributors to society?

Many equivalent frameworks distinguish between children aged from birth to three years and three- to five-year-olds. We deliberately avoided that distinction because of its potential to position infants and toddlers as 'other' in ways that focus on their vulnerabilities, not their capabilities. Similarly, except in specific circumstances, we referred to 'all children' to reflect our commitment to being inclusive and respectful of children and of their capabilities. This wording can convey universalist assumptions but assists in countering deficit, naïve, or romanticised views of children and childhood. At the same time, we recognised that some educators and families find it difficult to accept terms such as 'successful' and 'active contributors' in relation to infants and children with disabilities and additional needs. One of the attractions of the theme 'belonging, being and becoming' was that it focuses attention on the importance of valuing children as active citizens in the present. We hoped it would begin to redress the sometimes unrelenting focus in government discourses on children as investments in the future. Similarly, by focusing on children within the context of their families and communities, we hoped to avoid positioning the individual child as an object 'of scrutiny and intervention' (Bloch, Holmlund, Moqvist, & Popkewitz, 2003, p. 4).

Distinctiveness

What constitutes a distinctively Australian framework? What does it mean to be an educator in a post–apology Australia? What are the roles and responsibilities of early childhood educators and early learning settings in contributing to reconciliation?

To make the EYLF distinctively Australian, we intended to highlight the cultural and linguistic diversity that has been a feature of Australian society for at least 40,000 years, and the strengths of diverse ways of knowing. We wanted to emphasise the richness that this diversity has brought, and continues to bring, to our society, and explicitly recognise, incorporate and build on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's ways of knowing and being. To us, a 'fair go' for all Australian children meant taking seriously the challenges faced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and giving serious consideration to the values, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and understandings essential for all children as citizens of a post–apology Australia.

We envisaged the EYLF an act of reconciliation; one that, through its vision, values and goals for children's learning, could make a distinctive contribution to the development of a post–apology Australian society. To this end, we sought to emphasise respect for diversity and a commitment to equity as guiding principles for pedagogical practice.

Diversity

How can the EYLF make a constructive contribution that is not superficial or tokenistic?

We anticipated building on the anti-bias curriculum (Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989) and the influence it has had on educators' understandings of diversity and difference over the past two decades. In other words, we wanted to emphasise that respecting diversity and difference involves recognising that there are many ways of living and being in the world; that some of these ways are normalised; and that discrimination can occur when some ways of being and living in the world do not match what is commonly perceived to be normal (Robinson & Diaz, 2006). We intended the EYLF to highlight children's active role in constructing their own social identities and shaping the identities of others. We also intended it to emphasise that all children have a right to develop a positive understanding of difference, and that learning to respect diversity and difference means learning about the dilemmas that can arise from these differences, developing the capacity to think critically about bias, and taking action with others to challenge bias (Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989). The media focus on these ideas in the two publicly released drafts and a series of critical press releases by the Federal Shadow Minister with responsibilities for ECEC (e.g. Mirabella, 2009) was a sobering reminder, however, that they can be perceived as politically risky for governments, even though they have long been articulated in many Australian early childhood documents.

Equity

How to convey a commitment to equity, without entering into the risks of naming marginalised groups for whom social structures have produced far from equitable opportunities and outcomes?

That the EYLF should engender commitment to ensuring equal opportunities was uncontested. There is little acknowledgement in the EYLF, however, that inequities arising from the way that society responds to diversity and difference can make it more difficult for some children to achieve the same educational outcomes as others, even with equal access to and participation in early childhood settings (Cannella, 1997). We had hoped that the EYLF would convey more explictly that a commitment to equity requires

educators to pay particular attention to the educational entitlements of those children whose circumstances have the potential to disadvantage them educationally. Similarly, we would have liked more emphasis on the need to consider ways in which some practices in early childhood education may inadvertently contribute to inequality and how those practices might be changed.

Pedagogy

> Why use the term pedagogy, when many find it alienating and associate it with 'academic pretentiousness'? (Yates, 2009, p. 19)

Although it caused considerable controversy, we used the term *pedagogy* to highlight that 'there is something bigger and more complex' to be understood than is typically conveyed through everyday terms like *learning* and *teaching* (Yates, 2009, p.19). It recognises that teaching in ECEC requires *professional artistry*—a blend of practical knowledge; skilful performance characterised by intuition, improvisation, imagination and going beyond the known; and an ability to make judgements based on professional knowledge and an understanding of the context (Fish, 1998). While the term *professional artistry* is noticeably absent from the EYLF, many of the understandings of professional practice it conveys are evident. *Pedagogy* also conveys the centrality and complexities of relationships, and the importance of intentional teaching and of being critically reflective. The explanations of some of these terms in the EYLF understate their significance but, for the most part, we think the EYLF has managed to avoid a technicist conceptualisation of professional practice in ECEC.

Play

> What can be said about play and what has to remain unspoken?

We did not want to underestimate the significance of play in children's learning, nor did we want to convey a romantic image of play. Given that play is infused with power (MacNaughton, 2001) and a site where identities are continuously navigated and negotiated (Richardson, 2009), we aimed to emphasise the need for educators to identify frequently overlooked political dimensions of play. We also considered it important that the EYLF assist educators to recognise the opportunities that complex understandings of play present for helping children explore different ways of being, and to challenge injustice and bias.

It was clear from the outset, however, that challenging perceptions of play as 'fun' and 'innocent' would be difficult. Criticism of the first publicly released draft of the EYLF in *The Australian* national daily newspaper described childhood as an 'age of innocence, imagination and curiosity' and labelled critical descriptions of play as 'gobbledygook' and 'political correctness' (Bita, 2008). Similar claims of political correctness were made with regard to a later draft, particularly in relation to children's awareness of difference. Attempting to challenge one of the most enduring myths of childhood—that of the innocent child—proved highly sensitive politically. It was no surprise, therefore, that the final version made no mention of play as a site of politics and power relations.

Theoretical underpinnings

> What are the risks and opportunities of theoretical eclecticism?

Many curriculum frameworks promote one particular version of early childhood education and of early childhood curriculum. They seem to imply that the role of early childhood practitioners is to unquestioningly accept and work within the parameters of that sanctioned version. In contrast, our aim was to create a framework that provided a catalyst for reflection, dialogue, critique, debate and discussion without advocating or assuming adherence to any one theoretical stance. Inviting an eclectic mix of theoretical perspectives, rather than identifying one preferred theoretical position could result in a lack of conceptual coherence (Fleer, 2003). As early childhood educators around Australia are drawing variously and successfully on developmental, sociocultural, critical, poststructural and other perspectives, we considered it inappropriate that the EYLF impose a single preferred theoretical position. We welcomed COAG endorsement of our stance.

Reflections

The intent of those involved in developing curriculum and learning frameworks is not always evident in the final authorised versions. To some extent, this article was motivated by the desire to make public our aspirations for the EYLF. We were also motivated by our belief in the need for as much transparency as possible in policy decision–making and the value of cross sector policy co-production, in this case, of curriculum. More importantly, in sharing our insider perspectives, to the extent that contractual obligations permit, our aim has been to offer insights to those responsible for implementing the EYLF to assist in seeing beyond some of the constraints to what was intended, if not actually said. For the EYLF to achieve its full potential, we believe that it must be a dynamic document that is subject to ongoing refinement. We have identified some areas where we think a more critical focus is warranted. We hope this account will inform critical scrutiny, analysis and debate to identify directions for future development.

Inevitably, we are disappointed by some aspects of the EYLF. In our view, it does not fully achieve a cogently articulated stance on the knowledge, values and ideas that we think 'matter' most in contemporary Australian ECEC, and at times, for reasons we have alluded to throughout this article, it seems far from bold and brave. Overall though, we see it as a significant development in Australia's ECEC policy and a respectable 'temporary settlement' (Woodrow & Brennan, 1999) from which to build. That the Federal Government and the relevant jurisdictions in states and territories have been able to agree on a national early years learning framework in many ways constitutes a remarkable achievement that augers well for the prospect of future national collaborations. We feel privileged to have been involved in co-producing the EYLF and have learned a great deal from the experience. As we reflect on what we have learned, several 'lessons', as well as broader implications for early childhood curriculum and policy development, stand out.

First, we recognise, in retrospect, that our expectations about the curriculum development process at a national level were possibly idealistic and in some ways left us open to criticisms, not necessarily warranted, that we were somewhat naïve. Although we knew our ideas would be contested, we assumed that what was politically acceptable to say about diversity and equity diversity in state and territory curriculum and other policy documents such as the National Childcare Accreditation Council's Quality Practices Guide (NCAC, 2005) would also be acceptable in a national framework. In doing so, we underestimated the political sensitivities involved in achieving multi-jurisdictional agreement and the power of a conservative national newspaper and its state–based subsidiaries. In hindsight, perhaps the EYLF would have been more 'cutting edge' had the language used in early drafts been more circumspect. On the other hand, taking a strong stance initially possibly provided more leeway in negotiating a reasonably progressive compromise, with a commitment to equity, respect for diversity, and to some extent, critically reflective practice, for example: remaining explicitly articulated principles of the EYLF.

Second, the early childhood research literature appears largely silent about how to negotiate these and other politically sensitive issues in curriculum and policy development. Some accounts of the development of Te Whāriki in New Zealand briefly mention advocacy strategies (e.g., Carr & May, 2000). In Australia, an investigation is underway into influences on politicians' decisions about ECEC policy (Bown, Sumsion & Press, 2009). Yet there remains a need for more narrative accounts, and empirical and conceptual investigations. Luke's (2006) insider narrative of policy making by bureaucrats in an Education Ministry in one Australian state paints a depressing picture of seemingly adhoc, arbitrary and ideologically grounded policy–making. Likewise, Althaus (2008) found many Australian politicians and policymakers were acutely concerned about political risks. Her findings enabled us to better understand the risk management context in which we found ourselves, but offered little specific guidance about how we might negotiate in that context more effectively.

Third, our most valuable lesson came from opportunities to discuss the vastly different expectations, imperatives, conventions, structures and constraints under which academics and bureaucrats work, and to experience a common sense of purpose and trust that can nevertheless develop across often deep divides. Future research could usefully explore how to foster generative working relationships more systematically among bureaucrats, academics and the early childhood sector to improve policy–making, preferably grounded in a commitment to policy co-production. A fruitful starting point could be to investigate the views and experiences of those who have 'crossed over' into the bureaucracy.

Finally, this article raises a number of questions that, in our opinion, need to be asked of early childhood curriculum and processes of curriculum development. Although the political constraints were substantial, they do not fully explain why the 'decision points and dilemmas' to which we have referred, appear to be reiterated so frequently in discussions of curriculum within the early childhood sector. Why does the early childhood field continue to struggle with the same issues and how might the field move beyond them? Would it be useful, for example, to develop a schema to enable systematic analysis of the issues that repeatedly emerge and to document positions taken on these issues and the reasons for taking these positions? Dillon (2009) contends that such a schema can serve a range of purposes. While many of the examples he gives seem somewhat instrumentalist, a mapping approach of the type he advocates could conceivably help to overcome continual re-visiting of the same issues and questions.

Conclusion

In this article, we have endeavoured to provide insights into the context in which the EYLF was developed, the intent and approach of the EYLF Consortium, and the decision points and dilemmas that arose. We hope this account will inform understandings of the EYLF, as well as critical analysis and debate about directions for its future development. Such accounts, we would like to think, can provide useful lessons about negotiating the politics of ECEC curriculum making.

Acknowledgements

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