Introduc tion

The participation of infants in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings has long been conceptualised according to the childcare needs associated with mothers’ paid workforce participation. Surrounded by discourses of concern for very young children in non-familial care arrangements, this conceptualisation reinforced the notion of care—characterised by attention to physical safety and emotional attachment (Page, Clare & Nutbrown, 2013; Rockel, 2009; Trevarthen, 2011). The introduction of Australia’s National Quality Framework (NQF) heralded a shift to a more contemporary image of infants. Expanding on notions of infants’ care needs, there has been an increasing recognition of infants as competent, powerful learners (Expert Advisory Panel on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2009). The release of the Childcare and early childhood learning Draft Report of the Australian Government’s Productivity Commission (Productivity Commission, 2014) in July 2014, however, signalled the tenuous nature of images of infants as strong and capable learners, suggesting a possible return to images of infants as in need of little more than custodial care.

This article juxtaposes conceptualisations of infants reflected in current Australian early childhood policy against recommendations put forward in the Childcare and early childhood learning Draft Report (Productivity Commission, 2014). Focusing in particular on the nexus between images of infants and the flow-on to workforce policy recommendations for children under 36 months, we highlight disjunctions between images of infants reflected in current early childhood policy, especially in relation to the shaping of the workforce responsible for them.

Infants of the productivity agenda: Learning from birth or waiting to learn?

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THE AUSTRALIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD Reform Agenda, initiated in 2008 by the then Labor government, heralded a commitment to a focus on child outcomes in early childhood education and care policy in order to give Australia’s children the ‘best start in life’. A number of workforce policy initiatives aimed at achieving this ambition were announced, prioritising improvements in child-to-staff ratios and the qualifications of educators working with young children. More recently, the draft report of the Australian Productivity Commission Inquiry into child care and early learning has challenged these workforce reforms by reviving historic divisions between education and care and differentiating the learning needs of children over three from those under three. Claiming evidence that infants’ participation in early childhood education contributes to any long-term benefit is inconclusive, the Productivity Commission called for a substantial lowering of qualifications requirements for educators working with children under three years. A juxtaposition of the reform agenda and the Commission’s recommendations reveals a disjuncture in understandings of infants and consequently the type of workforce needed to support their wellbeing and learning. While contemporary Australian early childhood policy promotes images of infants as learners from birth, the Productivity Commission draft report portrays them as waiting to learn. In examining the pendulum of shifting ideas about infants, we highlight the vulnerability of infants in early childhood policy, especially in relation to the shaping of the workforce responsible for them.
While socially and culturally constructed images of infants can influence and shape policy, James and James (2004) note that these images can also be effectively re-shaped to suit a particular stance or political ideology. More recently, growing recognition of the importance of the early years has re-positioned infants beyond notions of ‘waiting to learn’ to that of ‘learners from birth’. Largely responding to widespread acceptance of neuroscience—recognising the plasticity of the brain of the newborn, along with a growing body of evidence linking educational outcomes with a nation’s productivity—the infant is now seen as a being full of potential that can be shaped by experience (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This reframing of images of infants, from those requiring custodial care while their mothers participated in the paid workforce to those of learners from birth, can be evidenced in part by enhanced expectations for their childcare experience. Beyond notions of purely care, the NQF reflects an expanded pedagogical responsibility for infants, framed by explicit learning and development outcomes. Reflecting this contemporary view of the importance of the early years in laying the foundations for future health, development, learning and wellbeing (COAG, 2009), infants were included in the general definition of children in both the NQF and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). This inclusion signalled a growing commitment to not only address infants’ needs for care and safety but to also recognise their learning potentials and rights to education. Described along with all children as ‘competent, powerful and valuable members of a community who co-construct knowledge and relationships’ (Expert Advisory Panel on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2009, p. 10), infants experienced a dramatic shift in their status. The NQF recognised not only the considerable evidence base for re-visioning their capacities but also their rights and agency within society.

A workforce for learners from birth

Following many years of ambivalence and relatively weak regulatory requirements for educators working with infants, the NQF acknowledged a more complex image of infants and consequently the need for a more skilled and professional workforce. According to the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC) (2012), ‘[t]here is increasing recognition that the work of caring for and educating young children is complex and requires enhanced qualifications and ongoing professional development’ (p. 4). Drawing on evidence from a range of international reports (see OECD, 2001, 2006, 2012) and research studies (see NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004), the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) declared that the ‘quality of the workforce is a key factor in achieving good outcomes for children’ (COAG, 2009, p. 8). Acknowledging the increasing
complexity of the work of early childhood educators, along with aspirations for stronger learning and development outcomes, a range of workforce reforms were initiated. Perhaps the most overt evidence of an increased policy commitment to infants can be seen in the changes to infant-to-educator ratios that were among the first of the reforms to be enacted following the 2009 launch of Australia’s NQF. The commitment to improve the infant-educator ratio was perhaps a key acknowledgement by government that the increasing phenomenon of infant child care and the importance of experience in the lives of infants deserved specific and immediate attention. Now embedded in national legislation, the 4:1 ratio for infants to educators is one of the few reforms where a truly nationally consistent agreement across all jurisdictions has been achieved.

Further to this change in infant-to-educator ratios, a raft of workforce initiatives were announced, broadly designed to promote nationally consistent standards and increased professionalism of the sector. Five key strategies frame the workforce reforms announced in 2012. These include:

- an increase in the size and retention of the early childhood workforce
- improvement to the capacity of the workforce to be responsive to the sector
- improvements to the qualifications requirements for educators
- increased professionalism and accountability for educators to demonstrate educational outcomes for all children
- enhanced capability of the workforce to work collaboratively across child health, education and welfare professional disciplines (SCSEEC, 2012).

Of particular significance for infants were commitments to improvement to the qualifications requirements for educators, along with increased professionalism and accountability for educators to demonstrate educational outcomes for all children. The inclusion of infants in these broad workforce reforms was a strong statement of commitment to invest in infants’ learning as well as their wellbeing. Moving on from images of simply requiring care, the reforms reflected the rights and entitlements of infants to specialist educators with ‘… deep knowledge of child development and the ability to form caring, trusting relationships’ (Expert Advisory Panel on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2009, p. 3). Such statements within the reform agenda demonstrate a shift in the way infants were imagined in the NQF and the consequent re-shaping of policy to suit this emerging image of infants as learners from birth. The introduction of a mandated minimum qualification of Certificate III for all educators, a commitment to a requirement that 50 per cent of educators hold a Diploma-level qualification or above, along with the requirement to employ a university-qualified teacher in all early childhood settings from 2014, was a significant improvement for infants in most jurisdictions. Infants appeared to make considerable gains in relation to the qualifications of educators. Prior to the reforms they were perhaps the group most likely to have a majority of minimally qualified or unqualified educators working directly with them (Rockel, 2009). An enhanced workforce with specialist knowledge and skills in early childhood education was considered essential to the aspiration of improved child outcomes.

A framework for learners from birth

Further acknowledgement of infants as learners from birth was evidenced in their inclusion in the EYLF. Heralding a strong commitment to ensuring that the experience of all children in early childhood programs would result in positive learning outcomes, the EYLF was developed to ensure that all children participating in early childhood education experienced quality teaching and learning. Described as assisting educators ‘… to provide young children with opportunities to maximise their potential and develop foundations for future success in learning’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5), the EYLF emphasises the importance of extending and enriching all children’s learning. The need for educators with specialist knowledge and skills was reflected in the expectations for planning and assessing infants’ learning and development against five broad learning outcomes. The decision to mandate for at least half of the educators to hold a Diploma-level qualification or higher reflected these higher expectations and suggested the importance of pedagogical leadership. More highly qualified educators would lead educator teams in using the EYLF as a curriculum guide and the increased professionalism and accountability required under the NQF.

As the recent Starting well report (Watson, 2012) notes:

* A country’s [approach to curriculum] is guided to some degree by the quality and training of its workforce. Those with highly educated teachers have far less need for a more detailed curriculum, but can simply set the overall principles and expectations … By contrast, those with a weaker workforce would likely benefit from closer guidance, especially in the form of prescriptive lesson plans (p. 28).

Described as a ‘hybrid-like’ curriculum (Sumson et al., 2009), the EYLF is essentially a framework, requiring substantial knowledge of early childhood learning and development as the foundation for translating the broad principles, practice and learning outcomes into meaningful and relevant learning experiences. It includes some elements of detail but leaves space for adaptation and interpreted possibilities to enable responsiveness to cultural, contextual and individual differences. Authors of the EYLF acknowledge that the diverse workforce of the Australian early childhood sector was a consideration in
The necessity for a knowledgeable and skilled workforce is further evidenced in examining the underpinning intent and contribution of the EYLF to the broad goals for child outcomes. Premised on an obligation to the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child, the EYLF is underpinned by the principle ‘that all children have the right to an education that lays the foundation for the rest of their lives, maximises their ability, and respects their family, culture and other identities and languages’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9). These ambitious expectations require educators to not only use considerable knowledge of children, their learning and development but also skills in working with families from a range of cultural and social backgrounds. Educators are required to be responsive to a range of children’s interests, abilities and ways of knowing and learning. They are asked to ‘engage children actively in learning, … identify children’s strengths and interests, choose appropriate teaching strategies and design the learning environment’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9). They are also asked to draw on a range of perspectives and theories to challenge traditional ways of seeing children, teaching and learning, and encourage educators, as individuals and with colleagues, to:

- investigate why they act in the ways that they do
- discuss and debate theories to identify strengths and limitations
- recognise how the theories and beliefs that they use to make sense of their work enable but also limit their actions and thoughts
- consider the consequences of their actions for children’s experiences
- find new ways of working fairly and justly (DEEWR, 2009, p. 11).

Suggesting relatively high order knowledges and skills, these are ambitious expectations of a workforce that holds variable levels of qualifications in early childhood learning and development. As Elliott (2006, p. 29) states:

... at the heart of appropriate pedagogies is the ability of practitioners to structure environments that promote optimum engagement for children. Key elements of this pedagogy are the richness and appropriateness of staff interactions with children and their scaffolding strategies, especially guiding, modelling and questioning. Other key factors linked to children’s developmental outcomes are staff knowledge of children’s development and learning needs, and their knowledge and understanding of curriculum.

The reform’s ambitions for child outcomes are reflective of the need for a highly educated workforce that has the capacity to interpret curricular expectations to suit local and cultural contexts, to not only base their work on theories of learning and development but to debate, critique and reflect on their practice (DEEWR, 2009). The need for strong leadership to support this work is reflected in a range of international and national research findings suggesting that this type of professional behaviour is more likely to occur where highly qualified educators are present. As Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell (2002) found, the presence of more highly qualified staff has a positive influence on the behaviour of other staff. Fenech, Harrison, Press and Sumsion (2010) found that a core group of university-qualified teachers is more likely to create a learning community and facilitate higher quality pedagogic practices which in turn enhance curriculum and outcomes for children. Recognising the variously qualified workforce in the Australian context, the need for a mix of qualified educators, including some with higher qualifications to act as pedagogical leaders, was fundamental to the aspiration of the EYLF (Sumsion et al., 2009). This policy commitment reflected a strong image of infants along with older children as learners, entitled to a suitably qualified workforce.

Flagging a return to infants waiting to learn

In stark contrast to this image of infants as learners from birth, along with ambitious expectations of those who work with them, the 2014 Draft Report of the Australian Productivity Commission Inquiry into child care and early learning (Productivity Commission, 2014) reinvigorated images of fragile and needy infants. The Draft Report reintroduced notions of child care as ‘detrimental’ (p. 5) and having ‘potential for negative effects’ (p. 13), along with a suggestion that child care for infants ‘... should focus on quality care and not be required to include a significant educational component’ (p. 277). Distanced from the active language of the NOF to support both ‘care and education’ (COAG, 2009, p. 10), the Productivity Commission Draft Report favoured the more passive terms of ‘growth, learning, welfare and development’ (p. v). These terms reinforced images of the naturally growing and developing child who, in most cases according to the Commission, ‘will likely continue to do so even without participation in formal ECEC at a very young age’ (p. 13).

Attention to the learning benefits and wellbeing of infants participating in early childhood education and care were negated in the Draft Report with a return to an emphasis on the childcare system and in particular ‘affordability, flexibility and access’ (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. v) for parents. Prioritising parents’ workforce participation, Assistant Minister Ley’s comments promoting the Productivity Commission inquiry demonstrated her influence and bias toward the economics and convenience of the system to meet family workforce pressures.
‘So, we need to fix [the system] and then we’ll have more work being done, we’ll have better employment, we’ll have better economic output, so it’ll be better for the nation as a whole’ (Fordham, 2014). This re-focusing of attention on the system enabled infants’ interests to be sidelined and promoted an emphasis on pragmatic, economic solutions to address a narrow agenda of systemic concerns. Given the limited terms of reference that the Productivity Commission had to work with, their recommendations unsurprisingly reflected the economic imperative to find solutions within the ‘… current funding parameters’ (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. vii).

With the Productivity Commission seeking cost-saving solutions, infants were re-framed as simply requiring care and protection—reducing any need for a highly qualified workforce. Proposing that minimally qualified nannies, au pairs and grandparents be recognised and eligible to access funding subsidies was symbolic of this reductionist framing of infants. Using persuasive arguments of concern for infants in child care, the Productivity Commission promoted the use of nannies, au pairs and grandparents over the more costly and highly regulated centre-based child care or family day care.

Higher fees for younger children should discourage long hours and encourage parental care for babies (less than 12 months). The Commission sees this as a desirable outcome as excessive time in childcare can be detrimental for young children, particularly babies (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 520).

Drawing on literature stressing the role of parenting and regular caregiving relationships, the Commission focused attention to infants on building social and emotional regulation as the key learning in the early years (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, cited in Productivity Commission, 2014). Infants were once again constructed as simply in need of regular caregiving—waiting to learn. Denying the agency, entitlement and learning capacities of infants, the draft recommendations negated the need for infant educators to have specialist expertise.

**A workforce for infants waiting to learn**

The assumptions underpinning the draft Productivity Commission’s view that infants will ‘likely (our emphasis) grow and develop naturally’ then frames their recommendation for a minimally credentialled workforce who will adequately respond to infants’ naturally occurring learning and development. Recommendation 7.2, that ‘all educators working with children aged birth to 36 months are only required to hold at least a certificate III, or equivalent’, along with the recommendation that ‘the number of children for which an early childhood teacher must be employed is assessed on the basis of the number of children in a service aged over 36 months’ (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 58) presented as a powerful contradiction to contemporary images of infants as learners reflected in the NQF. Revitalising the often contested education and care divide and recommending a substantially less qualified practitioner for children under 36 months, the Productivity Commission used a re-imagined infant as justification to substantially differentiate their learning needs from that of older children. Framed in this way, the Commission’s defence for a minimally qualified workforce was based on the claim that ‘… little compelling evidence that requiring a proportion of those caring for children aged birth to 36 months to hold certain higher level education qualifications is necessary’ (p. 58). Constructing infants’ learning as largely unnecessary conveniently removes any imperative to engage a more highly qualified workforce.

Claiming that a reduction in qualifications requirements for educators working with children under 36 months could be lowered ‘without compromising quality’ (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 35) raises questions about understandings of the relationship between notions of quality and the workforce. Such a claim appeared to overlook the growing body of evidence demonstrating that higher qualified staff engage in more positive caregiver interactions (Manlove, Vazquez & Vernon-Feagans, 2008) and demonstrate more complex levels of reasoning about infant development and behaviours (Degotardi, 2010). There was an implicit assumption that the Certificate III credential alone could fulfil the roles and responsibilities that the current more highly qualified workforce undertakes. This claim demands a critical examination of the Certificate III credential and its capacity to equip educators to contribute to all dimensions of infants’ childcare experience without compromising quality.

**Is Certificate III sufficient?**

Closer scrutiny of Certificate III suggests it does not equip educators to take full responsibility for the overall wellbeing of young children, nor does it enable them to deliver the enhanced learning outcomes expected under the current higher qualifications requirements. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) describes Certificate III as enabling ‘limited responsibility in known and stable contexts within established parameters’ (AQF, 2013, p. 32). Working with very young children cannot be considered a stable context. On the contrary, it is an inherently unpredictable and unstable working environment for educators, given that infants demonstrate considerable individual differences, respond at times unpredictably and cannot clearly articulate their needs and desires. With no pre-requisite entry requirement, Certificate III is designed for those with limited work experience and in many cases for those with relatively low levels of high school achievement. It emphasises foundational skills for those taking on a supporting role to work with more highly qualified educators.
The units of study within the Certificate III program cover children in the age range birth to five years and are heavily weighted to content covering physical health, development, welfare and care of children. Of the 18 units of study, only a single unit specifically addresses working with infants and toddlers. The ‘Provide care for infants and toddlers’ (p. 12) unit includes content covering physical care, feeding, responding to and communicating effectively with children aged birth to 24 months and prepares students to ‘ensure that the children’s physical and emotional wellbeing is maintained’ (Industry Skills Council, 2013a, p. 2). Similarly, the only unit dealing directly with children’s learning, ‘Use an approved learning framework to guide practice’, introduces students to the range of approved learning frameworks including the EYLF and assists them to understand the principles and practice that contribute to children’s learning generally.

Typically completed within a total nominal workload of 614 study hours (usually six months), the Certificate III program includes just 16 days of practical experience. Given the limited coverage of content and the very minimal amount of practical experience, the credential may equip educators to attend to the immediate health, development, welfare and care needs of infants, under the supervision of a more highly qualified educator. Any assumption however, that this credential can stand alone in preparing students to take responsibility for the learning, growth and development of infants without supervision is highly questionable. Indeed the largest provider of children’s services in Australia, Goodstart Early Learning, highlighted such concerns from a risk and governance perspective in their response to the Productivity Commission’s draft recommendations (Goodstart Early Learning, 2014). The Goodstart submission pointed to significant differences between the Certificate III credential and the Diploma qualification, indicating that there was insufficient recognition by the Commission of the differing levels of skill and knowledge between the two programs. Their submission highlights a lack of clarity within the current policy framework of the roles and responsibilities of variously qualified educators and the current ambiguity of the term ‘educator’.

The term educator—ambiguous and misleading?

Introduction of the term ‘educator’ within the NQF to refer to ‘early childhood practitioners who work directly with children in early childhood settings’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 45) was arguably an attempt to improve the professional status and standing of those working in the early childhood sector. Describing all practitioners, regardless of their qualifications or industrial classification, was perhaps a pragmatic attempt to not only streamline policy but to promote a more professional image for the early childhood sector. The term however can refer equally to those holding a six-month entry-level credential as well as those who hold a four- or five-year university Bachelor or Master’s degree. Veiled under the generic term ‘educator’, the precise qualifications and levels of expertise that individual educators hold can be shrouded. Parents and the broader community may assume a more highly qualified workforce than is actually the case.

Such an assumption perhaps obscures the full implications of the Productivity Commission’s recommendation for a minimally qualified workforce for infants ‘without compromising quality’. The expectation that the Certificate III program will adequately prepare educators to ‘provide children with opportunities to maximise their potential and develop a foundation for future success’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5) is a questionable ambition. In reality the Certificate III contains only minimal coverage of content involving children’s learning and development and cannot be considered a specialist qualification. It is not a qualification that the Productivity Commission considered appropriate to take responsibility for the learning of children over three years. Somewhat tellingly, the only qualification deemed appropriate for those responsible to deliver the educational program under Preschool Universal Access provisions is that of a Bachelor or Master’s Degree teacher. This recognition of the need for highly qualified teachers to take responsibility for learning programs for older pre-schoolers is silenced in regard to children under 36 months despite persistent evidence that learning begins at birth and that the first years are the most important (COAG, 2009; Expert Advisory Panel on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2009; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The Productivity Commission’s recommendations are evidence of the vulnerability of infants within the policy context. Conveniently partitioned from older children, their learning potential can be easily dismissed as trivial and replaced with persuasive arguments to protect them from danger.

Conclusion

As Moss and Petrie (2002) argue, ‘Our construction of childhood and our images of the child represent ethical and political choices, made within larger frameworks of ideas, values and rationalities’ (p. 55). The examples provided above from two prominent public discourses demonstrate how images of infants might be transformed and re-shaped in order to reflect particular political ideologies and achieve specific policy objectives. The images then become powerful levers for a logical flow through to related policy decisions. Extending workforce reforms to include all children from birth acknowledged a more complex image of infants as learners and a corresponding commitment to an appropriate workforce. However, the tenuous nature of this image was evidenced in the Productivity Commission’s Draft Report and recommendations to segregate children under 36 months, significantly undermining workforce initiatives and returning to historic images of infants as waiting to learn.
This analysis suggests a discrepancy between the ambition of current Australian early childhood policy and the recommendations that the Productivity Commission put forward. We question the veracity of a recommendation claiming that the Certificate III credential can ‘without compromising quality’ deliver the best start in life for Australia’s children. Despite the Commission’s claims that an educational program should not be the focus of the care program for children aged birth to 36 months, the available evidence (Hertzman & Boyce, 2010; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Sims, 2013) would suggest that this is a retrograde view of contemporary infants. Such a view takes insufficient account of the considerable body of evidence showing that the foundations for lifelong learning begin at birth. Contemporary images of infants—as learners from birth—demand a different workforce to that proposed by the Productivity Commission. Foundational to the aspiration of a ‘best start in life’ is a workforce that can act beyond custodial care to a deep understanding of infants, their development and learning. Indeed if the recommendations of the Productivity Commission Draft Report were to be implemented there is no doubt that Australian early childhood would return to an era of custodial care for infants with little scope for realising the powerful capacities of infants as learners. It is likely that more specific and immediate attention to the impact of workforce policies in the experiences of infants is needed if Australia is to hold on to and realise its ambition for the ‘best start in life’.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the support of the Australian Research Council, KU Children’s Services and Family Day Care Australia in funding the Infants’ Lives in Childcare project (LP0883913) that motivated, in part, the writing of this article. We also acknowledge the contribution of Sheila Degotardi to our considerations in relation to the Productivity Commission Inquiry. Thank you also to the anonymous reviewers who provided thoughtful feedback on this article.

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