Influences on Politicians’ Decision Making for Early Childhood Education and Care Policy: what do we know? What don’t we know?

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ABSTRACT Politicians play a key role in determining policy content and outcomes for early childhood education and care (ECEC). As a result, the quality of formal ECEC provisions for children rests considerably on the policy decisions of politicians. Despite direct and indirect effects of politicians’ policy decisions for the ECEC field, few studies explore influences on politicians’ policy decisions, and fewer still pertain to ECEC. In light of the significant gap in the research investigating how and why politicians make the decisions that they do, the authors present a case for a research agenda to investigate politicians’ policy decision-making processes in ECEC. A review of the literature pertaining to influences on political decision making reveals some possible influences on politicians’ decision making generally, but not for ECEC policy specifically. Using the policy sphere of ECEC to illustrate the complexities of social policy development and implementation in a democratic political system, the authors put forward a conceptualisation of policy that generates a wide range of questions to inform the development of a research agenda. They conclude with a discussion of the possible implications that a research agenda investigating politicians’ policy decisions in ECEC might have for the early childhood field.

Introduction
In April 2008 the Australian government held an event at Parliament House known as the 2020 Summit. The aim of this initiative was to draw on 1000 carefully selected people’s ‘big ideas’ for the future of Australia. In an interview transcript published as a media release, Julia Gillard, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Workplace Relations and Social Inclusion, discussed ‘new’ knowledge that had been referred to by a participant in the 2020 Summit:

The new thinking that I’m talking about and the new thinking the Prime Minister is responding to is the new scientific research about the way children’s brains develop. And a doctor in my session yesterday ... said, if you take a child, obviously their organs grow as they grow, your heart grows, your lungs grow, those organs grow, but the only way the brain grows is if it’s in an environment that is stimulating its growth. (Gillard, 2008a)

Paired with the federal government’s early childhood policies that repeatedly refer to early brain development (Rudd & Macklin, 2007a, b), Minister Gillard’s statement demonstrates how politicians can play a key role in framing and/or determining policy content and outcomes for ECEC (Brennan, 1998a). Crucially, the quality of formal ECEC provisions for children also rests, to a considerable extent, on the policy decisions of politicians.

Although Minister Gillard uses the phrases ‘new thinking’ and ‘new scientific research’, brain research as a field of enquiry has existed for over two decades (Bruer, 1999). During that period, it has been used by many early educationalists and ECEC advocates (e.g. McCain & Mustard, 1999) to advocate for increased investment in the early years. Furthermore, the Rudd government’s 2007
Influences on Politicians' Decision Making

New Directions for Early Childhood Education (Rudd & Macklin, 2007b) clearly references brain research, suggesting that the Rudd government was well aware of brain research prior to the summit.

In the media release, Ms Gillard’s interviewer questioned the source of the government’s new interest in brain research by alluding to different models of ECEC provision being implemented in the state of Victoria, as well as to Tony Blair’s policies in the UK, as being potentially influential. Minister Gillard dismissed the interviewer’s questioning about influence and attempted to redirect the focus back to the implications of brain research and the Australian government’s policy:

Look, I think around the world, whether it’s Tony Blair in the UK, Maxine Morand [Minister for Education in Victoria] ... Kevin Rudd on behalf of the Australian nation, politicians and decision makers around the world are looking at this new scientific research and saying, ‘Gee, we used to think about health being over here and education being over there and child care being somewhere else. Now we’re going to have to think about putting it together.’ (Gillard, 2008a)

The extracts from Minister Gillard’s interview typify the types of statements that have piqued our interest in the possible influences on politicians’ policy decisions. Many interesting questions worthy of consideration arise from the two excerpts - for example: Why did Minister Gillard cite a ‘doctor’ as the source of ‘new scientific thinking’ when educationalists have been promoting brain research for some twenty years? How did politicians become aware of this research, and why has it taken decades to inform the policy sphere? Are politicians aware of brain research critiques that highlight the potential dangers of relying too heavily on the findings (see e.g. Bruer, 1999; Bailey, 2002; MacNaughton, 2004b), and will the critiques contribute to future policy decision making in ECEC? What are the reasons for politicians choosing not to utilise alternative rationales, such as Children’s Rights (Smith, 1998), for investment in ECEC?

Many influences potentially affect how politicians make decisions for ECEC policy, yet few studies have provided insight into politicians’ decision making, and there are even fewer involving politicians as participants. By ‘influences’ we mean possible factors that contribute to a politician’s final decisions for ECEC policy. By ‘policy’ we mean not just a written document but a series of processes, negotiations and transformations (Taylor et al, 1997) that can be represented in a variety of textual formats, such as official policy documents, legislation, regulation, media releases, blueprints, speeches, photographs, websites, reports, memoranda and correspondence.

Current Australian ECEC policy does not adequately address significant policy problems facing the ECEC field.[1] Some of the more pressing concerns that warrant policy attention include: fragmentation across jurisdictions preventing common policy agreement (Press, 2007); poor working conditions and low remuneration for those employed in the field leading to problems with staff recruitment and retention (Pocock & Hill, 2007); difficulties in measuring and achieving quality (Sims, 2007); poor access to, and the unaffordable cost of, high-quality ECEC for many children and families (Pocock & Hill, 2007); and the impact of a high concentration of corporate ECEC services, given perceived tensions between maximising profits and providing high-quality education and care (Sumsion, 2006). In light of these current policy concerns, we argue the need to understand how politicians develop awareness of ECEC policy issues, how politicians make decisions for policy on these issues and what informs politicians’ decisions.

This article is a review of the literature pertaining to influences on political decision making. While it focuses on the Australian context, the issues raised are likely to have relevance elsewhere. Our review of the literature confirms the observation of Neal (1995) a decade earlier concerning the paucity of social science research conducted with ‘powerful’ individuals or groups that investigates policy development and implementation. Few studies have actually investigated the perceptions of politicians and their decision-making role in the policy process. Even fewer studies have investigated early childhood policy decision making.

A common weakness of many of the empirical studies reviewed in this article is the lack of a strong theoretical underpinning. A new wave of policy research has utilised theory to engage questions and possibilities rather than to determine practices for coping with and implementing policy (e.g. Ozga, 2000; Ball, 2006a). In this article, we aim to contribute to the new wave of policy literature utilising theory. To this end, we present a theoretical framework that has enabled us to ask complex questions about ECEC policy development. We weave into our literature review theorising about policy that has the potential to illuminate the complexities of social policy
development and implementation in a democratic political system. The metaphor of ‘bricolage’ enabled a threading of theories drawn from the work of Chantal Mouffe, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu to theorise potential influences on politicians’ policy decision making. We contend that their theories can generate insights when analysing politicians’ policy decision making in ECEC in local and international contexts, and prevent an overestimation of ‘our grasp on the social world’ and an underestimation of ‘our role in its management’ (Ball, 2006b, p. 9). The final section concludes with a discussion of the possible implications for the early childhood field. We begin, however, by defining and conceptualising what we mean by policy.

**Defining and Conceptualising Policy**

This article is premised on an understanding that policies are developed in response to the values and beliefs of particular people, politicians and communities at a particular point in history and reflect ideologies in their construction and implementation (Taylor et al, 1997). Establishing a social policy is a complicated process, usually administered and controlled by policy makers at senior government levels (Yeatman, 1998). While the policy process is described by some political scientists as a cycle involving rational decision making (Althaus et al, 2008), the cyclical model often fails to capture the complexity of how people in communities struggle over ideas (Stone, 2002). Ball (2006a) reiterates this critique, suggesting policies are:

> representations which are encoded in complex ways (via struggles, compromises, authoritative public interpretations and reinterpretations) and decoded in complex ways (via actor’s [sic] interpretations and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context). (p. 44)

Like Stone (2002), we contend that groups are a crucial component of the policy process, and that they draw on loyalty, cooperation and influence to assert their policy agendas. Through this struggle, groups ‘coalesce and divide over policy proposals’ (Stone, 2002, p. 27), resulting in a policy mix containing ‘cannibalised products of multiple (but circumscribed) influences and agendas’ (Ball, 2006a, p. 45). Determining how and why certain influences and agendas are inscribed into policy is the focus of this article, and we recognise the benefits of using theory to provide new insights into how politicians’ decision making is influenced in ECEC policy.

Therefore, drawing on these critical definitions of policy, we utilise Stone’s (2002) model of the polis to explore the complexities of policy in communities, and acknowledge that often policy is paradoxical in nature. While common policy goals require public interest followed by community consensus, interest and consensus are difficult to measure and represent fairly in policy (Stone, 2002). Public interests often conflict with personal interest; for example, families may agree with having qualified teachers employed in early childhood centres as a public interest and good, while also wanting to keep childcare fees low as a personal interest. Motivating people to sacrifice immediate personal benefits (such as low taxes) for longer-term social benefits (such as increasing the quality of early childhood education) is a challenging task. Likewise, motivating politicians to prioritise investment in ECEC over other budgetary spending is a difficult undertaking, complicated by the paradoxical nature of policy issues. For example, the metaphor of the ‘double-edged sword’ has been used to describe the liberating and constraining effects of mandatory state requirements and Australia’s national quality assurance system on teachers’ professional autonomy (Fenech et al, 2008). In this way, policy often has conflicting implications in practice. By conceptualising policy as paradoxical, we are able to then conceptualise influences on politicians’ policy decision making in a more complex way than simply one step in a policy cycle. For example, even if politicians are informed about research, such as that by Fenech et al (2008), would the findings deter or motivate politicians to make changes in ECEC policy? Given that multiple perspectives and agendas, including those of politicians, are inscribed into policy, how do politicians make decisions for policy when contending with personal views, public opinion, ‘evidence’ and ideology? How can those in the ECEC field work with politicians on the complexities inherent in policy in order to devise better outcomes for children? In the following section we discuss the concept of bricolage as the theoretical frame for the study.
Influences on Politicians’ Decision Making

Bricolage: a theoretical frame

Bricolage is an approach to research methodology that attempts to address the complexity of social science research (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). Initially described by Levi-Strauss (1962), the bricolage metaphor has been used widely to support research endeavours across a range of disciplines (for examples, see de Certeau, 1984; Hatton, 1988; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Kincheloe & Berry, 2004; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Schnelker, 2006; Horlick-Jones et al, 2007). Bricolage is a relevant theoretical framework for this article as it enables a cross-disciplinary examination of policy development and implementation. Inspired by Atkinson’s (2002) piecing together of the ‘kaleidoscope of shapes and colors into a coherent story’ (as cited in Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 718) along with the emergence of new forms of multidisciplinary research, the bricoleur is one who threads across disciplinary boundaries to sew together a collection of ideas or threads to form a ‘potpourri’ of theories, methods and analytical tools (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004).

Bricolage relies on rigorous processes that hold the bricoleur accountable to complexity in their positionality as a researcher; rely on the use of multiple frames of reference in the literature; assist the researcher to labour over several methods and data generation strategies; refer to a range of theoretical orientations to analyse the data; and subscribe to robust and rigorous ways to validate the research (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). The bricoleur is someone who is able to work with the tools at hand, in creative and dynamic ways, in ‘analysing, interpreting, and producing knowledge and value through multiple readings for social justice and inclusion’ (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004, p. 148).

We acknowledge that bricolage could be construed as permitting indiscriminate and unjustified theoretical grounding or a methodological hotchpotch, under the bricolage banner. While aware of these possible limitations, we would argue that bricolage acknowledges that there are multiple ways to interpret the world and that such interpretation requires dynamic, creative and flexible research. Endeavouring to ‘look and look again’, we draw on bricolage to reveal and celebrate complexity. Like layering overhead transparencies, bricolage works to build complexity over the research question (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004).

Using the bricolage as a theoretical frame, we have employed a mix of theoretical positions to understand the contexts of early childhood education and care, and politics. Like Ball (2006a), we value the role of theory in educational research to retain ‘some sense of the obduracy and complexity of the social’ (p. 9). These theoretical positions include: democracy and subjectivity (Mouffe, 2005); the notion of cultural fields in a multidisciplinary research site (Bourdieu & Eagleton, 1992); disciplinary power and discourse (Foucault, 1994); and context and time (Bourdieu, 1977), and were chosen because they enabled us to expand on the findings of the research in the literature review by asking more complex questions about decision-making processes for early childhood policy. Each of these theoretical positions has connections, overlaps and points of tension which create further possibilities for our research question. In the next section, we review the literature related to influences on politicians’ policy decision making. First we discuss empirical studies related to early childhood education and care and politics. Like Ball (2006a), we value the role of theory in educational research to retain ‘some sense of the obduracy and complexity of the social’ (p. 9). These theoretical positions include: democracy and subjectivity (Mouffe, 2005); the notion of cultural fields in a multidisciplinary research site (Bourdieu & Eagleton, 1992); disciplinary power and discourse (Foucault, 1994); and context and time (Bourdieu, 1977), and were chosen because they enabled us to expand on the findings of the research in the literature review by asking more complex questions about decision-making processes for early childhood policy. Each of these theoretical positions has connections, overlaps and points of tension which create further possibilities for our research question. In the next section, we review the literature related to influences on politicians’ policy decision making. First we discuss empirical studies related to early childhood education and the wider education field. Then we review the broader literature, both empirical studies and relevant literature, found when the search was widened. Woven into the literature review are the theoretical positions outlined above.

Reviewing the Literature: what do we know?

We acknowledge the broad range of literature related to studies in education policy locally and internationally. To set manageable parameters, however, our literature review was confined to empirical research that involved politicians, bureaucrats and/or policy advisors as participants. Initially, our literature search was limited to the field of early childhood education, which produced only two empirical studies.[2] We then widened the search by removing the ‘early childhood’ search term, also with limited results.
**Empirical Studies Involving Politicians and ECEC**

This section examines the two empirical studies identified initially, relating to ECEC and each involving politicians as participants. The two early childhood empirical studies sought to capture the perspectives of various groups on ECEC. One study was conducted in Ireland (Duignan, 2005) and the other in Sweden (Sandberg & Vuorinen, 2007). In both studies, politicians and policymakers participated along with other stakeholders in the ECEC field. Both studies sought to explore stakeholders’ perspectives and perceptions, in relation to quality (Duignan, 2005) and future directions for research in ECEC (Sandberg & Vuorinen, 2007).

Duignan (2005) conducted a total of six public consultations with 387 participants who were considered ‘stakeholders’ in the development of ECEC policy, including ‘parents/guardians and families, teachers and carers, policymakers and practitioners from a wide range of professions and disciplines’ (p. 212). Of the participants, 11 per cent identified as policy developers, although Duignan does not clarify the composition of the policymakers’ group. Similarly, Sandberg & Vuorinen (2007) used focus groups to investigate the perceptions and beliefs of 46 stakeholders, including politicians, managers, principals, lecturers, teachers, parents and children, about future directions for research endeavours in ECEC in Sweden. Four of the participants were politicians.

Neither early childhood study reported participant responses by stakeholder category. Duignan (2005) found that a majority of participants agreed on issues of quality of, assessment of and support for high-quality ECEC. She therefore argued for a stronger commitment to cross-sectorial collaboration. Sandberg & Vuorinen’s (2007) findings indicated that politicians did not seem to have distinctly different perceptions and beliefs to the other participants in the study. Neither study investigated the influences on, or reasons for, participants’ particular beliefs about quality or future directions for research endeavours in ECEC.

The Duignan (2005) and Sandberg & Vuorinen (2007) studies are the nearest equivalent of research related to our proposed research agenda in ECEC. Although they were early childhood focused and involved politicians, no conclusions can be drawn about influences on politicians’ policy decisions in ECEC. Hence, there is scope to investigate more closely influences on politicians’ decision making in ECEC policy by involving politicians as research participants.

**Influences on Politicians’ Policymaking Decisions**

This section presents the broader literature, both empirical studies and relevant literature, found when the search was widened beyond early childhood education. The literature is organised into three sections: political insiders, subjectivity and ‘the political’; political outsiders, media and discourse; and political context and time. For each area, we examine literature that illuminates influences on policy decision making. We then problematise the potential impact of each influence within the early childhood field. For a summary of empirical studies that involved politicians as participants, see Appendix 1. For a summary of additional relevant literature, see Appendix 2.

**Political insiders, subjectivity and ‘the political’**. The review of the literature found that many people on the inside of politics are influential in policy decision making. These people include policy advisors, bureaucrats and other politicians. Central to the political decision making of these people is the role their subjectivities play in influencing their thinking and conduct. We have drawn on the work of Chantal Mouffe to theorise democracy and subjectivity to better understand the influence of political insiders on policy processes.

Policy advisors and bureaucrats who work closely with policy, and often with politicians directly, are likely to have a substantial amount of influence in policy decision making (Weller & Fleming, 2003). An empirical study in Australia (Muller & Headey, 1996) and an article drawing on personal experience in the US political system (Niskanen, 1986) provide insights into how policy advisors and bureaucrats influence policy.

In Australia, Muller & Headey (1996) found that bureaucrats/public servants have the most influence over policy agenda setting compared with other ‘influentials’. Participants in the Muller & Headey study were asked to identify the most influential people in the state of Victoria in six policy areas: health, education, environment, economic, welfare and transport. Muller & Headey (1996) classified the ‘influentials’ in the six policy areas by their main jobs/roles: ministers and...
Influences on Politicians’ Decision Making

Politicians; bureaucrats and public servants; business and banking; trade unionists; community groups and lobbyists; academics and consultants; and journalists. Of particular interest is that politicians received just over 16 per cent of the nominations – significantly less than the category of bureaucrats/public servants. Their study suggests that policies in the fields of health and education are more likely to be influenced by policy advisors and bureaucrats than were policies in any of the four other areas. This finding may be significant for early childhood education, which tends to sit within the policy domains of both these fields.

Drawing from his experience as a policy advisor in the USA, Niskanen (1986) argues that policy advisors are in a potentially powerful position to ‘shape how those with direct political authority think about issues’ (p. 242). Niskanen explains that politicians expected him to provide five types of information on a policy area – namely: statistics to describe the conditions in the policy area; information on the implications of both static policy and changing policy; predictions of the impact of a particular policy instrument on the area of concern; other policy options with potentially superior outcomes to the policy changes proposed by others; and the views of other experts on each of the previous four points. While these five types of information could potentially enable rigorous analysis to inform decision making, Niskanen cautions that in his experience, politicians only value the advice if two conditions exist: first, that the politician is significantly committed to good policy outcomes for the area of concern; and second, that the politician does not have a clear sense of conviction based on personal beliefs or information available from other sources, in relation to the policy.

Niskanen (1986) also notes that the training and education of the policy advisor has implications for the analysis of the five above-mentioned types of information. How policy advisors source information, synthesise information and construct arguments for politicians, particularly when there are recognised gaps in research, is an important consideration for the research agenda proposed in this article. For example, in the early childhood field, there are significant gaps in research resulting from differences in how data are classified and gathered (Press & Hayes, 2000), making an accurate and thorough policy issue analysis difficult to achieve. Furthermore, if policies represent discourses about ‘what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority’ (Ball, 2006a, p. 48), the decisions made by the policy advisor when synthesising and framing the information play a significant part in shaping discourse. For example, while the pre-election ECEC policies of the current Australian government were authored by the then Leader of the Opposition, Kevin Rudd, and the Shadow Minister for ECEC, Jenny Macklin (Rudd & Macklin, 2007a, b), there were most likely many policy advisors who contributed to the construction of the policy documents. The people behind the scenes in developing the current Australian ECEC policies contributed to carving out the policy landscape for ECEC and determining the policy trajectory for the term of the government.

Politicians may ignore policy advisors’ advice for other reasons. Although politicians may respect their advisor’s wisdom, they may act against the advice if there is reason to suspect considerable opposition from other politicians (Niskanen, 1986). When policy issues are debated by senior ministers in the Cabinet, the end decision may not always be the favoured option of all Cabinet members. Although politicians may oppose a policy decision in Cabinet, they are obliged to show support for the policy decision in the public sphere (Weller & Fleming, 2003).

Although Niskanen (1986) acknowledges that policy advisors can play a significant role in influencing politicians’ policy decision making, he argues that politicians make policy decisions based on personal experiences, anecdotal information and/or personal beliefs in relation to the policy area of concern, irrespective of the advice of a policy advisor. Similarly, when investigating the key economic policy decision makers of the Hawke/Keating Labor governments in Australia, Goldfinch (1999) found that politicians relied more on their own strong policy ideals, even when counter advice was provided. Likewise, Muller & Headey (1996) found policy advisors were likely to be overruled if the politician held strong personal beliefs or attitudes about the policy decision in question. Goot (2005) points out that when politicians follow their own values or beliefs on policy agendas, despite the majority of public opinion, they are often lauded and even rewarded for their unwavering resolve by the electorate. That is, voters may initially disagree with a politician’s policy position, but if the politician shows an unwavering and committed resolve, voters may reverse their opinion and end up supporting the politician’s choice. The unpredictable nature of electoral
responses to politicians’ personal convictions was also explored by Lammintakanen & Kinnunen (2004), who investigated health-care policy agenda setting in Finland. They found that even when politicians maintained particular attitudes in their decision-making processes (often in direct opposition to the views of the public), their decisions were ‘interpreted differently at the operational level’ (Lammintakanen & Kinnunen, 2004, p. 75). This literature raises further questions regarding the potential for personal beliefs and experience to influence how politicians perceive, engage with and make decisions for ECEC policy. For example, do politicians’ personal experiences of ECEC, either in their own childhoods or in choices for their own children, contribute to influencing their political understanding of ECEC policy? Furthermore, do politicians perceive their own parenting experience to be of significance when making decisions for ECEC policy? Given the potential for early childhood to hold personal significance for politicians, these questions warrant attention.

A recent study in the United States investigated the use of information in the legislative process in higher education at the New York state level (Shakespeare, 2008). Shakespeare (2008) used two data sources: document analysis of policy texts; and semi-structured interviews with nearly 30 ‘higher education policy actors’: legislators, policy advisors, and analysts, higher education government administrators, higher education institution chancellors, presidents, and officials. The analysis of the data involved a framework in political science called the Advocacy Coalition Framework, which is based on a premise that actors form coalitions based on shared sets of beliefs and engage in coordinated activity. Coalitions are composed of ‘actors, such as journalists, researchers, policy analysts, and individuals at all levels of government involved in policy formulation and implementation’ (Shakespeare, 2008, pp. 877-878). While the study was concerned with the information mechanisms generally, the internal information policy mechanisms were of particular interest. The study found that although some of the policy ‘actors’ interviewed were not satisfied with how information systems were arranged in the policy process (i.e. dispensed, trusted, utilised, and deployed), the systems have not been changed over time. The arrangement actually ‘enabled the majority coalitions to pursue their agenda, keeping the actors outside the legislative process uninformed and ill equipped, and it allowed certain actors to find the information that maintained their policy bias’ (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 895). Furthermore, Shakespeare (2008) could not determine where New York consumers found information to make informed decisions about the quality of higher education, ‘much less to hold institutions and the elected officials accountable for higher education policy decisions’ (pp. 895-896).

Systems and processes for dealing with information are of particular interest to the research agenda proposed in this article. In early childhood education in Australia, both the previous and incumbent federal governments have conducted consultation forums with the early childhood field regarding proposed changes to the quality frameworks regulating the sector. Each government hired the services of professional consultants, who ran the forums and prepared subsequent reports to government. The degree to which the feedback gained from these forums has influenced politicians’ decision making is a relevant consideration. Likewise, the systems and processes individual politicians establish to organise and synthesise information about ECEC policy issues generally is a policy mechanism worthy of further investigation, having implications for access and equity in democratic political systems.

Chantal Mouffe (2005) offers some interesting theoretical insights into the studies by Muller & Headey (1996), Lammintakanen & Kinnunen (2004), and Shakespeare (2008), and into the experiences of Niskanen (1986) in the US political system. Mouffe (2005) explores the concept of multiple subjectivities in a democratic political system, which she suggests are characterised by conflict and dissent. Indeed, Mouffe (2005) describes ‘the political’ (the theoretical essence of politics) as a ‘space of power, conflict and antagonism’ (p. 9). Antagonisms are a result of the multiplicity of subject positions of politicians, the subject constituting a ‘decentred, detotalized agent, a subject constructed at the point of intersection of a multiplicity of subject-positions’ (Mouffe & Holdengraber, 1989, p. 35). That is, people identify with multiple subjectivities through which they enact their politics. Politicians’ subject positions might also comprise parent, citizen, colleague, voter, etc. Because policies are ‘cannabalised products of multiple (but circumscribed) influences and agendas’ (Ball, 2006a, p. 45), we argue that politicians’ multiple subjectivities increase the complexity of ‘the political’ for ECEC policy development. Not only is the Australian
ECEC field fragmented, but individuals within seemingly homogeneous groups may subscribe to multiple positions on ECEC policy. We contend that politicians’ multiple subjectivities may affect the way they conceptualise and understand the world, slipping and changing in and through subject positions.

**Political outsiders, media and discourse.** The review of the literature also indicated a wide range of other influences in policy decision-making processes, including public opinion and polling data, lobby groups, consultants and academics, media and gender discourses. We have drawn on Bourdieu’s concept of cultural fields to further explore the range of key stakeholder groups involved in early childhood policy, and on Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power to expand on the literature exploring gender discourses.

Public opinion and polling play a role in influencing politicians’ policy decisions. While Niskanen (1986), Muller & Headey (1996), and Goldfinch (1999) all argue that personal beliefs often influence politicians’ policy decisions, Goot (2005) is concerned with the intersection of politicians’ personal beliefs and their public stance, and explores how these two potentially conflicting positions are reconciled in the political climate. Reviewing mainstream media and anecdotal data from key policy advisors and speech writers of Australian politicians, Goot (2005) identified a range of potential influences on politicians’ decisions, such as institutional constraints, interest groups, pressures within the party, politicians’ personal beliefs, and public opinion and polling. In a democratic political system, re-election is a vital concern for politicians. Niskanen (1986) argues that re-election may rest on how the policy decisions are framed and presented to the public. Politicians are aware that they are more likely to be rewarded ‘if their actions are perceived to benefit their constituencies, whether or not they, in fact, do so’ (Niskanen, 1986, p. 236). For example, one of the current Australian government’s pre-election policies on ECEC (Rudd & Macklin, 2007a) seemed to be constructed to appeal to the wider ‘working family’ electorate, rather than the early childhood community. The policy took into account data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics which revealed that the most common reason families used formal childcare was for work-related needs. The policy was written in straightforward terms, repeatedly using phrases such as: ‘parents who need to be assured’ (p. 1); ‘parents’ expectations’ (p. 1); ‘understandable expectations of working parents’ (p. 6); ‘parents are entitled’ (p. 8); and ‘parents have a right to know’ (p. 10). The word ‘parents’ is used 24 times, ‘carers’ is used five times and ‘staff’ nine times, indicating a clear focus on parents and families. Language is also used to appeal to ‘working families’, as the policy acknowledges ‘[h]ousehold budgets are already being squeezed by rising petrol costs, grocery prices and mortgage repayments’ (Rudd & Macklin, 2007a, p. 3). The policy was written with a specific audience in mind – that of working families, which formed part of the current government’s productivity agenda. This is an example of how the needs of the electorate have a powerful influence on how governments construct their policies.

Politicians also use strategies to appeal to the emotions of the electorate. While these strategies differ from country to country depending on the political culture, harnessing strong imagery with media outlets is a common approach used by politicians. In US politics, Lichtman & Most (2007) have explored the political strategy referred to as ‘demagoguery’ in order to understand how this strategy is utilised, and explain that it is used to ‘strike the nerves of their viewers and listeners’ by using imagery to enhance messages (Lichtman & Most, 2007, p. 6). Lichtman & Most’s (2007) exploration of demagoguery as a campaign approach used by politicians highlights the potentially influential effect such tactics can have on policy framing, such as running negative television advertisement campaigns. Lichtman & Most (2007) suggest that politicians may be more inclined to conduct a demagogic media campaign in order to reflect a particular approach they are taking in policy. A related but less sensationalist strategy is the use of ‘spin’ to portray contentious policy decisions in a positive light. Using as an example an excerpt from Julia Gillard’s (2008a) media release referred to at the beginning of this article, we highlight the political spin being utilised to appeal to the public’s sentiments about critical periods in children’s development, despite brain research critiques illuminating the potentially sensationalist effects (MacNaughton, 2004b). Other media releases by Julia Gillard regarding ‘critical periods’ in the early years could potentially strike the nerves of people who are carers or teachers of young children: ‘if we don’t invest in those early years then tragically some kids do go off the rails and ... are headed to a
lifetime of welfare dependency or perhaps something even a bit worse’ (Gillard, 2008b). Julia Gillard’s reference to ‘something even a bit worse’ may indicate that politicians are motivated by emotional appeals in policy in order to capture the personal sentiments of voters.

Lobby groups aspire to influence politicians’ policy decisions. Muller & Headey (1996), whose study was described previously, found that lobbyists were the second most frequently nominated group of policy ‘influentials’, receiving 20.4 per cent of nominations. While Muller & Headey (1996) were unsurprised by this figure, it was interesting to note that the lobbyists were perceived to be the most active in two of the six policy areas: welfare and environmental policy. Education policy was dominated by academic and consultative ‘influentials’. Muller & Headey (1996) found that women had far more impact in the welfare sector than in the other five fields. Although lobby groups influenced welfare policy, Muller & Headey (1996) do not specify whether they positioned ECEC in the welfare or education policy area.

Itkonen (2009) reported on a study in the United States investigating effectiveness of special education interest group testimonies to Congress from 1975 to the present. The study used a mixed-methods approach, including interviews with politicians and public servants in Congress and the Department of Education. Itkonen found that the most effective way to frame an issue and affect policy change was by using a hope narrative. Interestingly, Itkonen found that civil rights issues presented using a hope frame were successful in 85 per cent of testimonies to Congress; educational issues presented using a hope frame were successful 89 per cent of the time; while hope stories ‘coupled with a civil rights frame and an educational construction resulted in victory in each instance’, or 100 per cent of the time (Itkonen, 2009, p. 51). Other predictors of lobby group success in order of statistical significance were: groups that received repeated invitations from members of Congress to testify, indicating status and legitimacy; the types of groups appearing before Congress – civil rights and family groups were more effective than professional educator and government groups; the age of the group or organisation – older groups or organisations often experienced increased access, visibility and recognition by government; the amount of organisational resources available to a group; and the groups that were willing and able to join coalitions and share resources experienced success more often. Itkonen surmised that one explanation for the success of hope frames in the study was the association of compassion with children with disabilities.

Itkonen’s (2009) study has relevant implications for early childhood education in the USA and beyond. Even though the study investigated policy mechanisms in the US political system, in Australia, Senate Standing Committees are a similar policy mechanism, and could potentially be analysed in the same way. Furthermore, given the significant influence of brain research and studies showing a correlation between early intervention and lifelong outcomes, we speculate that brain research may have been presented to Australian governments in narratives framed by hope (i.e. investment in early childhood education improves the short- and long-term outcomes for children ‘at risk’). Coupled with the ‘scientific evidence base’ that the brain research studies present, research framed by narratives of hope may be particularly influential in politics. Itkonen (2009) concludes that ‘[f]rames, constructions, and stories predict effectiveness’ where problem definition ‘is a complex strategic activity that allows organizations to engage in sophisticated political storytelling’ (p. 61).

Bourdieu & Eagleton’s (1992) notion of cultural fields is helpful in thinking about how a range of groups, including lobby groups, work to influence politicians. Bourdieu & Eagleton (1992) describe cultural fields as sites of struggle for domination where competition for different kinds of capital is played out within the parameters of particular rules, rituals, and discourses. ECEC could be considered one cultural field, and politics another. Within these two fields a further range of cultural fields can be identified. For example, Cheeseman (2007) contends that while early childhood pedagogical approaches realise the interrelation between areas of health, welfare and education in young children’s lives, ‘powerful policy agendas are dominating the discourses of early childhood education and care that favour health and welfare imperatives over more comprehensive and pedagogically driven possibilities’ (p. 244). Similarly, developmental psychology is subject to heavy critique in parts of the ECEC cultural field (Miller, 2006), while the political cultural field uses developmental psychology regularly in a variety of policy texts, seemingly unaware of, unconcerned with, or dismissive of the critique. The excerpt at the beginning of this article from Julia Gillard’s media release provides another example of two cultural
fields, politics and health/medicine, intersecting in the public sphere to conjure a political justification for investment in the early years. These three examples compel us to question how some groups become more influential, while others are not successful in influencing policy. In addition to that question, we must also consider the possibility that some in the early childhood community acquiesce to the more influential voice of health/medicine due to the increased profile ECEC has gained in the political sphere, as a result of brain research, for example. Overlaying Mouffe’s (2005) conceptualisation of democracy as characterised by conflict and dissent, the cultural field is understood then as not necessarily homogeneous, but as a continual negotiation of rules, rituals and discourses. The concept of ‘cultural fields’ provides a valuable tool to question what ‘truths’ result from the intersection of ECEC and politics. We are also interested in how the political cultural field chooses from which ECEC stakeholders to source information.

Besides lobby groups, academics and consultants often actively attempt to influence politicians’ decision making. Two studies, one conducted in the UK and the other in Australia over a decade apart, explore the influence of consultants and academics in education policy in different contexts. Gunter & Forrester (2008) separated the roles of consultants and academics in influencing politicians’ policy decisions in educational leadership, while Muller & Headey (1996) conflated the categories of academics and consultants as the one group.

There are some differences in the findings reported by Muller & Heady (1996) and Gunter & Forrester (2008). Muller & Heady (1996) found academics – particularly vice-chancellors and individuals – and consultants to be the most influential in education policy, while other identified ‘influentials’ dominated the other five fields (health, environment, economic, welfare and transport). Gunter & Forrester (2008) explored the construction and implementation of school leadership knowledge in education policy in England, and distinguished between consultants and academics in their study. They defined consultants as persons who were employed in private companies or who were self-employed, and who had ‘advised on strategy at the highest levels of government, undertaken research and produced policy advice reports’ (p. 146). They found that consultants were often considered apolitical by politicians. Consultants regarded themselves and were regarded by others as translators of research, capable of interpreting and translating research into practical solutions and evaluating practical implementation of research recommendations. Furthermore, consultants were considered connected and current, while universities and local governments were considered ‘unmodern’ and ‘positioned as disconnected from practice’ (Gunter & Forrester, 2008, p. 159).

In a critical examination of the National Research Council’s report on educational research in the United States, Bloch (2004) argued that the report presented a narrow definition of what constituted high-quality educational research. Bloch stated that the purpose of the report seemed to be ‘to make educational researchers and research more acceptable at the federal level’ and ‘more user friendly and believable for federal funding agencies’ (p. 100). Bloch’s critique highlights the pressure for educational research to be presented in a palatable fashion to government, which seemed to resonate with the findings of Gunter & Forrester (2008) discussed earlier. The media release that began this article may also be an indication that ‘evidence-based’ research carries more political clout than research that does not produce ‘scientific evidence’. Brain research is presented in a ‘scientific’ fashion by presenting images of brain cross-sections and laboratory statistics showing how different forms of deprivation in the early years have long-term effects on kittens and other animals (MacNaughton, 2004b). Longitudinal studies on children ‘at risk’ also present ‘hard evidence’ that spending on early childhood intervention in the short term will save on inflated spending on crime and welfare in the long term (e.g. Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997), which has been used extensively in the current Australian government policies. Yet, research that spans a similar amount of time as brain research, such as that of MacNaughton (1995, 1997, 2000, 2004a, b), who has a long career researching equity practices in early childhood education and their relationship to better quality outcomes for children, has not been cited in government policies. Nor are the critiques of brain research acknowledged in government policies. Like Bloch’s analysis, there seems to be an assumption in Australian ECEC policy that ‘science and rigor are acultural, apolitical, and asocial’ (Bloch, 2004, p. 100). The research by Gunter & Forrester (2008), the critical evaluation by Bloch (2004), and the emerging trends in current Australian policy raise relevant questions for research investigating influences on politicians’ ECEC policy decision making in
Australia and beyond. For example, how do politicians determine currency of knowledge and experience when choosing consultants and academics for key policy issues? How do politicians perceive the ECEC academy and what role does the academy/research play in influencing ECEC policy? Assuming the academy represents a broad range of views and perspectives, as is the case with respect to brain research, how do politicians decide which views and perspectives will influence policy? What expectations does the early childhood community hold for politicians’ capacity, willingness and commitment to engage with different types of educational research?

Linked closely with public opinion and polling is the role the media plays in influencing politicians’ policy decision making. In a study of mainstream media coverage of Australian politicians’ private lives, Muir (2005) found that male politicians have more freedom to promote their private family lives in political campaigning than female politicians, who are more constrained in public debates about work and family balance due to the ‘continuing deployment of traditional signifiers of femininity in political reporting of women’s performance in politics’ (p. 78). Muir (2005) argues that ‘[w]omen politicians are attacked variously for being too feminine, for being insufficiently feminine and/or not performing motherhood in a way that fits conventional idealised images of mothering in the white suburban nuclear family’ (p. 84). While some media practitioners are able to recognise the ‘complex and contradictory pattern of reporting women politicians’ (p. 86), Muir (2005) suggests that the stereotypes persist for both male and female politicians, and are likely to increase with ‘the personal’ becoming of greater interest in media reporting.

Muir’s (2005) research suggests that the sex of the politician responsible for the ECEC portfolio may have implications for ECEC policy. If male politicians are able to show sensitivity and emotion for family responsibilities more freely, and be rewarded for it, does this also affect how they are able to speak publicly on ECEC issues, a traditionally feminine vocation? Conversely, are female politicians constrained in the way they feel they are able to speak publicly on ECEC issues, particularly if there is a threat of misrepresentation in the media? Do these gendered ‘rules of engagement’ in the public sphere affect policy decision making? Dominant discourses operating in mainstream media around parenting responsibilities, gender norms, family structure and career commitment might affect the policy approaches taken by male and female politicians. Hence, gender stereotypes and prejudices portrayed and reinforced in media could potentially influence the policy approaches of politicians.

In the new age of digital technology and online communication, social marketing campaigns are increasing their presence and attracting wide-ranging interest. In the United States, an organisation over 10 years old called MoveOn boasts membership of 4.2 million people (MoveOn, 2009), while in Australia, GetUp! claims a wide range of lobbying successes, with over 300,000 members registered online. A more recently established online organisation, Avaaz.org, aims to tackle activism on a world stage, with a growing membership of 3.2 million people after only one year in operation (Avaaz.org, 2009). With the growing use of web-based technologies, the above-mentioned groups may have more appeal to current and upcoming generations who are familiar and comfortable with online interaction and organisation. The previous director of GetUp! acknowledged that the Internet and other web technologies have enabled networking and information access, and provide a ‘convenient and practical means for political activism’ (Solomon,
as cited in Dubecki, 2007). The use of Internet technologies to mobilise people around a common cause is of growing interest in research, particularly the methods and strategies groups have utilised (e.g. Pickerill, 2002; Kahn & Kellner, 2004). In early childhood education in Australia, the web-based capacities of organisations are increasing. Several activist groups make use of social networking tools to enable dissemination of information among members, such as the Social Justice in Early Childhood Group, the National Investment for the Early Years, and the NSW Preschools Campaign, each of which utilise group e-lists to mobilise members. Such groups may find new channels to engage with and influence policy.

Muir (2005) highlighted that gender discourses upheld in the media and also by politicians potentially influence the way politicians discuss and debate policy issues. She contends that conservative voices often agitate issues such as family breakdown, childcare, maternity leave and domestic violence into moral panics, where feminist perspectives are blamed for exacerbating social problems. The potential of conservative gender discourses to influence the way politicians make policy decisions has relevance to the investigation proposed in this article, as the decisions made by male politicians that publicly relate to children and women are ‘examples of performing particular, strategic masculinities that suit the requirements of media-influenced politics at given points in time’ (Muir, 2005, p. 82). As the provision of ECEC has long been associated with women’s right to enter and remain in paid labour, conservative associations with particular social agendas may be deterrents or attractions for politicians to pursue publicly, depending on how the media will position them.

While gender discourses in the media may be one such influence on politicians’ decision making, potentially a wide range of discourses affect the way politicians engage with social policy issues. Linked closely with the notion of discourse is the construct of power (Foucault, 1994). Foucault (1994) theorises power as not necessarily a negative or positive force, but as productive in nature, in that it ‘produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse’ (p. 120). Following Ball (2006a), therefore, we contend that policies, either individually or collectively, ‘exercise power through a production of “truth” and “knowledge”, as discourses ... are about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority’ (p. 48). Multiple discourses operate within the cultural fields of early childhood, health/medicine and politics, sometimes competing with the other, sometimes dominating or being dominated, and other discourses operating in compatible ways. The excerpt from the media release at the beginning of this article may demonstrate the dominance of health discourses (represented in the perspective of the doctor) over education discourses. Similarly, the discourses of medicine, health, brain research and ‘investing in human capital’ (Rudd & Macklin, 2007b, p. 2) are seemingly more powerful than discourses of transformative curriculum approaches or the children’s rights movement. We argue, therefore, that disciplinary power relies on access to the ‘bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes, and modes of everyday behaviour’ (Foucault, 1994, p. 125). When Minister Gillard explained in the media release referred to at the beginning of the article that previously the government saw ‘health being over here and education being over there and child care being somewhere else’ but is now thinking about ‘putting it together’ (Gillard, 2008a), we can see that the government has built up an argument to fuse the cultural fields of health, education and ‘child care’ into a new state apparatus that increases disciplinary access to individuals’ bodies. Foucault argues that the state apparatus is a function of technology that oversees ‘the government of individuals, the government of souls, the government of the self by the self, the government of families, the government of children’ (Foucault, 1994, p. 364). In theorising the policy directions of the Australian government’s productivity agenda, we assert that the state apparatus has clinched a tighter hold on the individual by positioning the child under the gaze of health, education and early childhood discourses. By theorising policy as a form of discourse, we are able to ask questions that seek to explore which discourses are dominant and which are silenced in the ECEC field, in health/medicine and in ECEC policy.

Returning to Bourdieu’s construct of cultural fields, we have found it also relevant to considerations of discourse. Given that cultural fields are sites of struggle for domination where competition for different kinds of capital is played out within the parameters of particular rules, rituals, and discourses (Bourdieu & Eagleton, 1992), we question what discourses and truths are produced in the overlapping of cultural fields. Understanding the rules, rituals and discourses of
each cultural field will provide greater insight into policy processes and perhaps give a sense as to what is promoted or silenced in a policy agenda. By exposing the discourses appropriated and championed by politicians in their decisions for ECEC policies, we are interested in exploring how and why politicians take up particular discourses in their policies in the first place. For example, in the previous section, we have shown how the Rudd & Macklin (2007a) pre-election ECEC policy drew significantly on the discourse of working families to appeal to the wider electorate. The policy firmly established the rights and entitlements of parents to be able to access childcare and know about the quality of childcare their children attended. In establishing these rights for parents, however, the policy also silences the rights of children. The policy repeatedly acknowledged the importance of high-quality care for children, but never framed the rights and entitlements of children in the way parents’ rights were framed and promoted. While this example is specific to the Australian context, the promoting and silencing of discourses in ECEC policy has international relevance.

Political context and time. The third and final grouping of the literature review refers to the influence of contextual factors in politicians’ policy decision making. Contextual factors identified in the literature include the position of the politicians in the parliament and the economic policy of the day. We conclude this section by theorising Bourdieu’s notion of time as it relates to context.

Politicians’ policy decisions may be affected by whether they are in or out of government - in other words, by their position in Parliament. In a cross-national study, Bowler et al (2006) used surveys to investigate the motivations of national-level Members of Parliament and candidates for Parliament, when assessing proposals to change the electoral institutions in four countries: Australia, Germany, the Netherlands and New Zealand. In particular they explored the influences of self-interest, values and ideology as important motivations for politicians’ decision making. Bowler et al (2006) found that in Australia overall, ‘personal electoral self-interest is a powerful determinant of politicians’ attitudes towards institutions’ (p. 444). Although Bowler et al’s (2006) focus was on reforming electoral institutions and rules, their research provokes some considerations for the research agenda proposed in this article. If a correlation between being elected to government and subsequent reluctance to implement dramatic changes is relevant to reforming electoral institutions, will it also be relevant to other policy areas, such as ECEC policy? The current Australian political climate might suggest otherwise, as a raft of ECEC policy changes have been promised by the newly elected Australian government, indicating that there can be a relationship between occupying government and introducing significant change in policy.

Economic policy has been found to have a significant impact on government policy models and investment in other portfolios (Goldfänch, 1999). Of the 16 types of economic policy identified by respondents as influential in Australia during the Hawke/Keating period (1983-1996), Goldfänch (1999) found that neo-classical economics received the top nomination of 19 votes, with Accord/Labourism in second place receiving nine votes and the free market receiving eight votes. Economic policy during the 1980s and 1990s is of particular importance to ECEC, due to the emergence of neo-liberalism on the world economic sphere. Free-market, consumer choice ideology had far-reaching ramifications, and the early childhood sector was heavily impacted by the economic policies. It was neo-liberal discourses that, Brennan (1998b) argues, influenced the Hawke government to shrink public expenditure, reduce the size of government and promote small business. The flow-on effect in the early childhood sector was a shift from supply-side subsidies to demand-side subsidies, particularly when the Hawke government reduced operational assistance for centres by around 50 per cent in a dramatic ECEC policy shift, extending demand-side subsidies to the private sector (Brennan, 1998a). Goldfänch’s (1999) findings are an important reminder that economic policy has far-reaching ramifications, which is also evident in the current positioning of ECEC in the productivity agenda of the current Australian government, an agenda which is situated in discourses of human capital.

Understandings of the influence of context, such as position in Parliament or the economic policy of the day, can be usefully developed by turning to Bourdieu’s notion of time. Bourdieu (1977) argues that there is significant power in the act of delaying a message in order to keep ‘others in the dark’. In Australia, the current federal Labor government released the National Quality Framework (NQF), a discussion paper that flags a range of policy mechanisms to improve
the overall quality of early childhood education and care across the country. Some of the mechanisms in the NQF include the development of: the first national Early Years Learning Framework for early childhood; a set of national quality standards to address fragmentation across state and territory jurisdictions; an A to E quality rating system to address concerns regarding the current process for quality improvement in early childhood settings; and a workforce strategy to improve recruitment and qualification attainment (Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008). The NQF states that ‘[f]ollowing national endorsement, the final framework is expected to be introduced from 1 July 2009’ (p. 6). There seems to be a delay, however, in the release of two of the draft documents. At the time this article was submitted (April 2009), the draft national quality standards and the draft A to E quality rating system had not been released for consultation. No clear indication has been made public regarding further directions for the focus of the NQF or the decisions being made by politicians. Given the proposed implementation date of 1 July 2009, the delay of the release of draft documents for consultation could constitute an example of strategies used by politicians to keep the ECEC field ‘in the dark’ (Bourdieu, 1977).

Bourdieu (1977) describes manipulation of time as ‘strategies intended simply to neutralize the action of time and ensure the continuity of interpersonal relations ... the “little presents” said to “keep friendship going”’ (p. 7). Similarly, Foucault argues that the state aims to permanently increase the ‘production of something new, which is supposed to foster the citizens’ life and the state’s strength’ (Foucault, 1994). Bourdieu’s and Foucault’s concepts of ‘the gift’ and ‘the production of something new’ can be used to analyse the excerpt that began this article. The successful timing of a political ‘gift’ from a politician to the public, such as the announcement of ‘new thinking’ and ‘new scientific research’ (Gillard, 2008a) at a nationally publicised policy event, may be a strategy utilised by politicians. The language used by Gillard to describe ‘new scientific research’, conceptualised as a ‘gift’ from politicians to the ECEC field and wider community, may constitute an example of how politicians use ‘science’ and ‘evidence’ to justify social policy interventions during economic rationalist times in the twenty-first century. Time is understood, then, as an important aspect through which power circulates in and between cultural fields.

Politically, timing is crucial to success and can be observed in the daily conduct of politicians. For example, through careful analysis of context and timing, political risk may be minimised or avoided (Althaus, 2008). From the release of policy documents and the rolling-out of election campaigns, to the prediction of ‘bad publicity’ issues and responses to another blunder by a politician or a political party, timing is potentially an important influence on politicians’ conduct.

What Don’t We Know? Discussion and Conclusion

In this article we have argued that there is a strong case for a research agenda to investigate politicians’ policy decision making in ECEC. The literature existing provides some insights into influences on politicians’ policy decision making, although caution is needed when generalising from the studies. The gaps in the literature suggest an investigation of influences on politicians’ policy decisions specifically focused on ECEC is needed. We speculate that there are other potential influences that, to our knowledge, have not yet been explored or uncovered in the literature. Furthermore, we cannot draw accurate conclusions about the early childhood field from the literature available – very little research investigates political influence involving politicians as participants, and an even smaller pool of research has involved politicians as participants on early childhood policy issues specifically, locally or internationally. By connecting concepts such as subjectivity, discourse, power, cultural fields, context and time to the literature using the bricolage framework, we have shown how these conceptualisations offer another layer of complexity to the research question. Like layering overhead transparencies (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004), bricolage created the theoretical space to show how each concept connected with and built on the other. In the section Political insiders, subjectivity and ‘the political’, we have shown how the notion of multiple subjectivities allows us to consider that politicians, policy advisors and people within the early childhood community may not permanently subscribe to one position or perspective, and often take on many roles within society. For example, politicians and policy advisors can also be parents, citizens, colleagues and voters, which potentially affects how they engage with and make decisions for early childhood policy. This leads us to question how politicians’ personal beliefs, gender,
upbringing and values influence their decisions for ECEC policy, or what politicians’ understandings and beliefs are around the role of early childhood education and care in contemporary Australian society. We can also consider how early childhood professionals negotiate their own and politicians’ multiple subject positions when attempting to influence policy.

In the section Political outsiders, media and discourse, we utilised Foucault’s notions of power and discourse to consider how power relations affect the way politicians work within and between the contexts or cultural fields of politics and early childhood. Drawing on a Foucauldian notion of power, we have recognised how relations of power occur between politicians, between politicians and the early childhood community, and between those in the early childhood community, circulating through the medium of discourse. With these conceptualisations in mind, future research would explore in more detail which groups have greater access to policy decision-making processes and which do not and for what reasons, and who the most influential people are in ECEC policy processes. Bourdieu’s notion of cultural fields allows us to investigate whether those who are able to traverse cultural fields are more or less effective in influencing early childhood policy. Dominant discourses that determine what can be said and by whom are an important consideration, raising issues such as why some discourses or constructs are taken up by politicians to inform policy in ECEC while others are not. Examining official political media (media releases, speeches, official photographs, websites, commissioned biographies, etc.) may give us an indication of how politicians are influenced in early childhood policy, and reveal the discourses operating that inform their decision-making processes. In the section Political context and time, we discussed how context and time add further layers of complexity to considerations of influence. Over time, politicians’ understandings may shift and change, affected by subjectivity and discourse. Using time and context as influential factors, we can question how politicians came to particular understandings of, for example, quality, curriculum, teacher qualifications, and teacher and staff pay and working conditions, and how these understandings potentially shift and change over time.

In each of the three literature groupings, we have shown that subjectivity, discourse, power, cultural fields, context and time may play an important role in influencing politicians’ policy decision making. Using examples from current Australian policy, we argue that these conceptualisations are important considerations for future studies on decision making in early childhood policy. While this article has focused on the Australian context, the case for such a research agenda has international relevance. Moreover, we anticipate that such a research agenda will enable early childhood activists and advocates to see with more clarity the complexity of political processes affecting their everyday lives, and how they can intervene more effectively in these processes to achieve their aspirations for ECEC. In the words of Mickelson (1994), we envisage such a research agenda will ‘[d]emystify powerful people and reveal their feet of clay, and... put the knowledge [we] extract about the powerful into the hands of the less powerful’ (p. 149). The need for empowerment of ECEC professionals is reiterated by Press & Skattebol (2007), who urge ECEC advocates to ‘be aware of how policy is played out in their communities, and collectively build the alliances and knowledge bases that allow them to locate that knowledge in a broader social and political context’ (p. 189). We foresee that such a research agenda will contribute to policy dialogue between ECEC advocates and between ECEC advocates and politicians. By bringing increased clarity to the policy process and the influences responsible for particular policy agendas in ECEC, we envisage this research agenda could facilitate increased participation of teachers and other early childhood professionals in setting policy agendas.

Gilliam & Bales (2004) discuss the need to ‘reframe’ current understandings of ECEC in the social and policy arenas. They advocate strategic communications when the early childhood field is attempting to present particular images and ideas around ECEC. Reframing public discourse has been an issue taken up in fields beyond early childhood and has been a popular tool to rethink strategies for influence. Linguist George Lakoff (2004) describes ‘frames’ as shapers of ‘social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies’ (p. xv). Lakoff’s conceptualisation of frames resonates with the conceptualisation of discourse discussed in this article. With similar intent, Gladwell (2000) explores how products or ideas become highly influential or popular, and suggests that a ‘tipping point’ occurs in each instance which is key to how products or ideas come to be highly influential or popular. Gladwell discusses a range of factors that contribute to a tipping point, including: the snowballing ripple effect that messages sometimes experience; significant
changes in demographics and contexts that affect the same situation differently and with dramatic consequences; particular people with certain characteristics or traits that become very influential at a given point, often relying on wide networks of associates that they have built and maintained over time; and the idea of 'stickiness', whereby effective messages have an element that stays with people. Gladwell’s conceptualisations have drawn particularly on the disciplines of psychology and cognitive science; however, some of the factors, such as those listed above, can be thought about using the notions of dominant discourses and subjectivity, as discussed in this article. By highlighting for politicians the dominant frames of reference in ECEC policy making and suggesting possible alternatives that have not traditionally informed policy, we anticipate that future research involving politicians as participants could be potentially informative and challenging for politicians too. Ideally, a welcomed outcome of future research endeavours would be politicians critiquing their own policy processes and considering alternative policy designs for ECEC in contemporary Australia and beyond.

State and federal policy in Australia has not adequately addressed entrenched issues such as: the fragmentation of the field; the ongoing achievement, measurement and evaluation of quality practices; difficulties in accessing and affording high-quality ECEC; the market-oriented focus of some ECEC providers; and the difficulties in recruiting and retaining ECEC professionals. Therefore, an exploration of how politicians are influenced when making decisions for ECEC policy is warranted. Understanding how and why ECEC policy has often impeded high-quality provision is essential in order to improve policy in the future. Investigating influences on politicians’ policy decision making could make a valuable contribution to the improvement of current policy strategies, and consequently, to improvement in the quality of ECEC provision. Minister Gillard poses an important question for the ECEC field: ‘So how do we join up Government so that we are delivering the best possible outcomes from children from nought to five? And it does require a new way of thinking’ (Gillard, 2008a). This is the challenge for ECEC – to work with politicians and decision makers in order to ensure early childhood issues are interpreted, understood and acted on, not just with the best intentions, but with the best possible outcomes for children, families and early childhood professionals. Developing a better understanding of how and why politicians are influenced on ECEC issues is one way forward.

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Notes
[1] In Australia, the early childhood field is characterised by a wide range of organisational structures, including community-based not-for-profit, private for-profit, and corporate chains. The services offered within these organisational structures include long day care, preschool, family day care, outside school hours care and occasional care (Press & Hayes, 2000). In addition to key early childhood-focused organisations such as Early Childhood Australia comprising the ECEC field, health and welfare agencies play a central role in early childhood service provision and policy development. Furthermore, many education faculties across Australian universities are active in policy development in the early childhood field. [2] The literature search utilised databases including Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, Academic Search Premier, Australian Education Index and the online search functionality of Google Scholar. Boolean operator terms were modified depending on the database search requirements, but generally the terms used were: ‘politician’ AND ‘policy’ AND ‘decision making’ AND ‘influences’ AND ‘early childhood’ (the search term ‘early childhood’ was removed when the search was widened to all fields).
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Influences on Politicians’ Decision Making


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### APPENDIX 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s) and country</th>
<th>Aim of study</th>
<th>Data source and methods</th>
<th>Methodological frameworks</th>
<th>Focus/findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bowler et al (2006), Australia, Germany, the Netherlands and New Zealand</td>
<td>To investigate the motivations of national level members of parliament and candidates for parliament, when assessing proposals to change the electoral institutions</td>
<td>Surveys were completed by national level politicians in the four countries over three years (1999-2002) with a response rate of between 51% and 58%.</td>
<td>Quantitative analysis of survey data.</td>
<td>In Australia ‘elected MPs were twice as likely as losing candidates to be satisfied with democracy’ (p. 440) and overall, ‘personal electoral self-interest is a powerful determinant of politicians’ attitudes towards institutions’ (p. 444).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldfinch (1999), Australia</td>
<td>To identify the key economic policy decision makers of the Hawke/Keating Labor governments</td>
<td>Interviews and questionnaires with 93 ‘institutional elites and officials’ who held the positions of public agents (18), public servants (25), PMO/ministerial officers (6), politicians (6), academics (12), business people (15), union delegates (5), media representatives (3) and other positions (1)</td>
<td>Qualitative study. Content analysis of data, no explicit theoretical underpinning.</td>
<td>Central agencies were nominated as playing a key role in economic policy decision making, including the OECD, the RBA, the ACTU, the Industry Commission, the Cabinet, and various interest groups and think-tanks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goot (2005), Australia</td>
<td>To explore the intersection of politicians’ personal beliefs and their public stance and the effect on decision making</td>
<td>A review of mainstream media as well as anecdotal data from key policy advisors and speech writers of Australian politicians.</td>
<td>Qualitative data and analysis. Content analysis of data, no explicit theoretical underpinning.</td>
<td>In addition to politicians’ decisions being influenced by polls, many other influences could be at play, including ‘pressures within the party, interest groups, institutional constraints, or even because it matched the personal beliefs of the politician involved; and they ignored every decision made despite the polls’ (p. 191).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gunter &amp; Forrester (2008), England</td>
<td>To investigate the construction and implementation of school leadership knowledge in policy</td>
<td>Critical analysis of policy texts (speeches, white and green papers, legislation) and 33 interviews with a selected sample from Parliament (Whitehall), universities, schools and private sector consultancies (three interviews with former Secretaries of State).</td>
<td>Qualitative study. Rejection of positivist reporting of research. The authors are reporting on one aspect of a larger study which, in this article, seems to be grounded in critical realism (Denzin &amp; Lincoln, 2005).</td>
<td>The model currently being utilised in education policy in England is the ‘single person as organisational leader’ (p.159). The policy developments are merely ‘old ideas’ of leadership re-packaged as systems and training.</td>
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</table>
Itkonen (2009) USA  To investigate the effectiveness of special education interest groups’ testimonies to Congress, 1975 to present

A mixed-method study involving statistical analysis of 139 transcripts of advocacy groups’ Congressional testimony in special education hearings; and a thematic analysis of 25 elite interviews with advocacy organisations’ leaders, members of Congress, Congressional staff, and staff at the US Department of Education.

Mixed-methods study, both qualitative and quantitative data were used to explore the research question.

The most effective way to frame an issue and affect policy change in Congress was by using a hope narrative. The most effective hope stories were ‘coupled with a civil rights frame and an educational construction’ and were successful 100 per cent of the time (Itkonen, 2009, p. 51). Itkonen also found that groups receiving repeated invitations from members of Congress to testify, indicating status and legitimacy, were more successful; and the types of groups appearing before Congress – civil rights and family groups – were more effective than professional educator and government groups.

Lammintakanen & Kinnunen (2004) Finland  To investigate whether elected politicians’ attitudes influence policymaking processes in terms of social and health-care resource allocation

A combination of empirical data of 1133 questionnaires from Finnish politicians (which included senior bureaucrats) and statistical data collected from the national social and health-care database.

Largely a quantitative study with statistical analysis of questionnaire data.

Spending on primary health care was not consistent with either the politicians’ attitudes in 1995 or the national guidelines on health policy. Local politicians may have made one decision during the policymaking process, but the decisions were interpreted differently at the operation levels, so that the attitudes of politicians and the reality are not consistent. The authors recommend that ‘analysing the actual decision-making processes rather than investigating attitudes to priority setting may prove more useful in gaining a better understanding of priority-setting processes’ (p. 69).

Muller & Headey (1996) Victoria, Australia  To analyse the dynamics of agenda-setting in a parliamentary system by identifying ‘Influentials’

‘Influentials’ were identified using a snowball/reputational method starting with journalists; 356 interviews were held.

Mixed-methods study.

Politicians sit amid a group of individuals who significantly influence policy across a range of disciplines. Politicians seemed to have the most
Influences on Politicians’ Decision Making

influentials’ impact on six policy areas: health, education, environment, economic, welfare, and transport.

with nominated ‘influentials’ (n=214) over a three-year period (1991-93). In all fields, there were five to twelve individuals who were nominated by nearly all their peers as influential.

influence in economic policy issues. Education was influenced heavily by academics and consultants, more so than the other fields. Specifically, in the education field, educational administrators dominated policy influence, particularly vice-chancellors and individual academics.

Shakespeare (2008) New York, USA

To understand the use of information in the legislative process in higher education at the New York state level

Two data sources: document analysis of policy texts; and semi-structured interviews with nearly 30 ‘higher education policy actors’ - legislators, policy advisors, and analysts; higher education government administrators; higher education institution chancellors; presidents; and officials

Case-study method. Used a framework in political science called the Advocacy Coalition Framework to analyse interview data. Content and thematic analysis of both documents and interviews.

The study found that although many of the policy ‘actors’ interviewed were not satisfied with how information systems were arranged (i.e. dispensed, trusted, utilised, and deployed) in the policy process, the systems have not been changed. The arrangement ‘enabled the majority coalitions to pursue their agenda, keeping the actors outside the legislative process uninformed and ill equipped, and it allowed certain actors to find the information that maintained their policy bias’ (p. 895). Shakespeare could not determine where NY consumers found information to make informed decisions about the quality of higher education, ‘much less to hold institutions and the elected officials accountable for higher education policy decisions’ (pp. 895-896).

Table AI. Empirical studies that investigated influences on politicians’ policy decision making and involved politicians and/or policy advisors as participants.
### APPENDIX 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors(s) and country</th>
<th>Aim of study</th>
<th>Data source and methods</th>
<th>Methodological/theoretical frameworks</th>
<th>Focus/findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barker (2005)</td>
<td>To identify which policy issues will be most affected and which least affected by media coverage</td>
<td>A review of the literature and media sources</td>
<td>Use of policy literature to conceptualise policy as complex and multifaceted.</td>
<td>The media's role in policy processes depends on the policy in question and whether the government has a confident stance on the policy concerned.</td>
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<td>Lichtman &amp; Most (2007)</td>
<td>To explore the role of emotional appeals and passionate politics as influences on how politicians conduct their campaigns and advertising, particularly during a pre-election period</td>
<td>Review of literature and media sources</td>
<td>Experimental cognitive science – cognitive psychology</td>
<td>Emotion is an important factor in the use of visual advertising and other visual media, and is 'integral to the decision making process' (p. 15). As a political strategy, politicians often use demagoguery to influence public perception during media campaigns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muir (2005)</td>
<td>To explore 'the reporting of family care in relation to Australian politicians' campaigning strategies and personal lives'.</td>
<td>Analysis of mainstream media coverage of Australian politicians</td>
<td>Discourse analysis</td>
<td>Male and female politicians are reported on differently in the media, specifically in relation to family care. Male politicians tend to be 'lauded for their enactment of fathering', while female politicians 'are still at risk of being reported in ways that diminish their skills and credibility when reported in relation to their family responsibilities'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niskanen (1986)</td>
<td>This article reports on the personal experience of the author, who was an American policy advisor</td>
<td>Personal account and reflections</td>
<td>Personal account with little referencing. Personal narrative. No explicit theoretical underpinning</td>
<td>Policy advisors can play an important role in how policy issues are researched, reported on and framed for politicians. However, if politicians have strong personal convictions about policy areas, the politicians' decision may be based more on their own personal views rather than on the advice of the policy advisor.</td>
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Table AII. Additional literature identifying influences on politicians' policy decision making.
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