Looking Back and Moving Forward: historicising the social construction of early childhood education and care as national work

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ABSTRACT Whilst it is possible to construct early childhood education and care (ECEC) in multiple ways, this article focuses on constructions of ECEC that have emerged within nationalist discourses privileged in advanced Western countries today, that is, ECEC as ‘national work’. Although these constructs are problematic and thus subject to criticism, the author shows that, historically, positioning ECEC as being of national benefit proved a powerful strategy for the early advocates of ECEC in New South Wales, Australia. The author argues that, despite their problematic nature, contemporary advocates of universal ECEC should strategically use nationalist and economic discourses.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has the potential to contribute to social justice. It is both an important way of ameliorating the effects of disadvantage (National Institute of Child Health and Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2000) and a way of actively changing or reforming society by working against inequitable practices (Cannella, 1997). However, in order to contribute to social justice and equity, high-quality ECEC must first be available to all children and families. This is not the case in Australia.

In Australia, whilst education for children aged six to fifteen years is provided by governments, no such universal provision exists for younger children. Although both federal and state governments do support children’s access to ECEC to varying degrees, availability is limited and, for reasons discussed further on, its purchase is, by and large, constructed as a parental responsibility. Proponents of universal ECEC in Australia have to constantly struggle to construct ECEC in ways that engender public and government support. Arguments for ECEC based on social justice and children’s rights to early childhood education abound within the early childhood field, but they tend to fall on deaf ears outside that community. One powerful way to advocate universal provision is to construct ECEC within nationalist and economic discourses.

From a social-constructionist perspective, concepts of ECEC are socially constructed within historically, culturally and politically contingent discourses (Fairclough, 1992; Burr, 1995, 1998; Gergen, 1999). Here, the term ‘discourses’ means coherent systems of meaning, bodies of knowledge or ways of viewing the world that operate in a ‘field of discursivity’ to create a ‘superstructure’ through which society is articulated (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 111). Discourses categorise, define, produce, construct and bring meaning to objects or concepts (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Ball, 1990; Parker, 1992; Willig, 1999). As such, power operates through discourses as they constitute what is possible, knowable and sayable, and rule out other possibilities. Within these various discourses ECEC is constructed in multiple ways. It can be construed, for instance, as ‘services for children in need’ (Moss, in Lero, 2000) or as ‘women’s work’ (Cannella, 1997). This article focuses on constructs of ECEC as ‘national work’ that have emerged from within nationalist discourses dominant in Australia at present; notwithstanding that what constitutes national work depends largely on a broader conception of ‘nationhood’, or a ‘national imaginary’ (Nourry, 2005), which is itself open to interpretation.
Nationalist discourses have become dominant in Australia. Increasing globalisation has heightened fears about its capacity to compete in the global economy. And current global conflicts, threats of terrorism, and rapid social and cultural changes are interpreted as threats to an (imagined) ‘Australian way of life’ (Nourry, 2005). In the face of these global concerns, many economists argue that Australia needs a competent, innovative, flexible and highly skilled workforce, necessitating investment in the development of ‘human capital’ (Bryan, 1991; Argy, 1998; Bathala & Korukonda, 2003). Recently there have been calls for our education systems to uphold Anglo-Australian values (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005; Devereaux, 2006). These discourses are powerful; they underlie the construction of ECEC as work-related childcare. Work-related childcare is constructed as a ‘national good’ because it contributes to the pool of available labour on which the market might draw, as well as reducing families’ reliance on family welfare payments (Scarr, 1998). Nationalist and economic discourses have also focused attention on children and the services that support them in their early years. For instance, the Commonwealth Task Force on Child Development, Health and Wellbeing (2003) draws on nationalist discourses to focus attention on children when it asserts that:

> It is vital for our future national wellbeing that we do all that is possible to promote their [children’s] competence, quality and life skills ... supporting children in their early years can yield lasting benefits – for the children themselves, for their families and for society as a whole. (pp. 2-3)

Many in ECEC too have grasped the opportunity that the current focus on nationalism affords to call for investment in the early years. Elliott (2004), the editor of Every Child, a journal intended for ECEC practitioners, exemplifies the use of nationalist discourses in this way when she argues that:

> Investments in children’s early social, emotional and cognitive development have long-term benefits in improved behavioural and academic outcomes that promote success in schools and social environments. (p. 2)

Here, Elliott argues that investing in children’s early development has benefits for child outcomes. But the underlying message is clear: by promoting children’s development, their capacity can be enhanced and they are better able to operate successfully in their social world. This, in turn, has benefits, not just for the child but for the nation. The NSW Curriculum Framework for Children’s Services (Office of Childcare, 2002) upholds this position, stating that:

> Children’s services operate as microcosms of desirable larger communities, where children live with and are supported to adopt values, attitudes and ways of living that will enable them to be effective members of the broader communities in which they live now and will live in the future. (p. 17)

Whilst ideas about what values and attitudes children should adopt will vary depending upon one’s view of the world, in practice they are likely to be those that uphold dominant power structures.

The construction of ECEC within nationalist discourses as national work is an incredibly useful strategy for advocates of publicly funded, universally available ECEC. It is a language that those with power over the provision of ECEC, that is government, are familiar and comfortable with, and so is likely to be readily understood and accepted. By using these discourses, advocates of ECEC stand a greater chance of being listened to than if they used social justice arguments alone. And there is evidence that this tactic works, as politicians have begun to use the rhetoric to support the provision of ECEC. For instance, Brendan Nelson (2003), whilst Commonwealth Minister for Education, Science and Training, made the following statement:

> Early childhood programmes can have lasting positive effects by increasing children’s chances of continuing education through high school and beyond and being employed as adults and reducing the likelihood of later substance misuse, mental illness and suicide, domestic violence and crime. (p. 3)

Even if it is only by its supposed capacity to reduce antisocial and delinquent behaviour and thereby potentially save the future cost of a deviant population (National Crime Prevention, 1999) that ECEC is constructed as benefiting the nation, at least it is on the political agenda. And it is only when ECEC advocates are active in constructing ECEC within the political agenda that they will
have a role in shaping its future. It would be naïve, however, to suggest that the construction of ECEC within nationalist discourses is unproblematic.

Reconceptualist literature, in particular, has been valuable for highlighting how the constructs discussed above uphold inequitable practices (see, for instance, Goffin, 1996; Lubeck, 1996; Alloway, 1997; Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg et al, 1999; Cannella, 2000; De Lair & Erwin, 2000; Ailwood, 2003). For instance, several writers have problematised the investment construct of ECEC as viewing children as resources; objectifying them as economic entities, mere investments for the future, valued not for who they are but for their potential to become ‘productive citizens’ (Polakow, 1992; Cannella, 1997; Anijar, 1998; Hauser & Jipson, 1998). They argue that such a view of children threatens to lead to narrowly focused instrumental forms of ECEC which aim to discipline children to be compliant to authority, where only those children who are potentially productive or of material benefit to society are valued, and where only knowledge considered useful for children’s future contribution to society is thought worthwhile (Gammage, 1996; Cannella, 1997; Symes & Preston, 1997; Bailey, 1998; Apple, 2001). As well, the construction of children as resources reflects dominant Western liberal/progressive ideals of individuality and freedom, which place emphasis on individual responsibility and fail to acknowledge how oppressive external political, economic and societal factors, such as poverty and racist policies, affect children’s chances of success (Goffin, 1996; Alloway, 1997; Rose, 1999; Ollsen et al, 2004).

In addition, the construct of ECEC as assisting workforce participation is problematic as it puts the needs of the employment market above those of children. From this perspective, any care which is convenient, affordable and accessible might be considered appropriate and could lead to ad hoc childcare arrangements being made. Further, using economic arguments to advocate ECEC, although powerful, may be a flawed strategy: it could lead to an ethos of minimal input for maximum output. For instance, if it were found that to invest $1 saves $5 later, but to invest $2 yields no greater return, then why invest at the higher level? Furthermore, what happens if future research reveals that investment in ECEC has minimal or no economic benefits for society? On what basis do we then argue for ECEC?

Moreover, it could be argued that the construction of ECEC within nationalist discourses has not proven particularly successful. Despite a long history of constructing ECEC as national work, and the powerful nature of these constructs, ECEC continues not to be universally available. This paradox perhaps reflects a tension between the nationalist discourses within which ECEC is constructed as ‘national work’ and other discourses dominant in the Australian context, particularly economic discourses, which seem to operate against national investment in ECEC.

Just as within nationalist discourses ECEC is constructed as national work, other discourses operate to construct ECEC in somewhat contradictory ways. Gender and scientific discourses, for example, tend to construct the care and education of young children as primarily the responsibility of parents, and public provision of ECEC services can be seen as interfering with parent–child relationships (Cannella, 1997). But of particular significance here are contemporary economic discourses. In Australia, economic discourses are market orientated and suggest that the market should be given free reign to promote ‘competition, innovation, and economic wealth’ (Bathala & Korukonda, 2003, p. 854) that collectively benefits the nation. Within market-economy discourses, the provision of public services, including ECEC, has increasingly moved away from the state. In what Hayden (2000) refers to as a ‘shift towards market economy’ (p. 19), there has been an increasing tendency towards the commercialisation of ECEC services. Governments have encouraged private investment in ECEC and entrepreneurs have moved in to exploit the market, constructing ECEC as a commodity to be packaged, bought and sold (Brennan, 2004). Upholding market-economy discourses are neo-liberal discourses that privilege the individual (Rose, 1999; Ollsen et al, 2004). Within these discourses, children’s care is seen as ‘an essentially private concern, allocated to the private sphere of the family’ (Moss & Brannen, 2003, p. 17). ECEC has been particularly vulnerable to these discourses as, whereas education for older children is enshrined as a right in NSW, no such contingency exists for ECEC. Consequently, a tension exists between nationalist discourses, in which ECEC is constructed as national work, and market-economy and neo-liberal discourses, in which ECEC tends to be constructed as a private concern for purchase within a competitive market.
The entry of corporate providers into the ECEC field, with their focus on shareholder returns, has heralded a major change in the landscape of ECEC in Australia and is particularly troubling. In ways unprecedented, ECEC is now constructed as a commercial venture and there are numerous reports about the growth of ‘childcare’ in the financial pages of newspapers. The following statement in the Sun-Herald is typical of such reports:

If only profitable investing was as easy as child’s play. In fact, many analysts predict solid growth and returns could be as simple as ABC [ABC is the largest corporate provider of ECEC services in Australia] – by investing in the child-care sector ... child-care centre operators ... have a reputation for strong share price returns and good revenue growth ... ABC is the best option for the risk-averse ... the company has been an excellent performer, with good quality management and returns. (Barnes, 2005)

It is difficult to see where children fit into this discourse. Indeed, recently a number of writers have raised concerns with this rapidly increasing corporatisation, in particular, that it may compromise quality and equity of access to ECEC services as well as threaten educational principles (see, for instance, Keary, 2000; Apple, 2001; Cleveland & Krashinksy, 2005; Goodfellow, 2005; Press & Woodrow, 2005; Sumison, 2006). It is difficult to reconcile the construct of ECEC as a commodity with a social justice approach. Higher-quality services, those with a high staff to children ratio, more highly qualified staff, and necessary materials and resources, are the most likely to provide positive benefits for children (National Institute of Child Health and Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2000; Love et al, 2003). Such services are expensive to operate. As the commercialisation of ECEC is based on a ‘user pays’ model, it is likely that higher quality ECEC services will be available predominantly to those already advantaged by wealth. Conversely, children from backgrounds of socio-economic deprivation, whose parents are unable to afford the highest quality ECEC, may be doubly disadvantaged. As such, the construction of ECEC as a commercial venture not only undermines equity of access, but it also potentially undermines the construct of ECEC for the national good, as many of the ‘nation’s most vulnerable children’ miss out on the benefits of high-quality early care and education. It is therefore onerous on ECEC advocates to continue to construct the provision of high-quality ECEC as a right for all children, not just those who have the wherewithal for its purchase. Highlighting the potential benefits of high-quality ECEC, and the correspondingly negative repercussions of poor-quality ECEC, for the nation may be a valuable strategy for this advocacy.

Without meaning to dismiss the very real concerns that have been raised about the constructions of ECEC as national work, as discussed earlier, there is a danger that such critiques create a moral panic, paralysing advocates into inactivity (Carr, 1998). That is, for fear of doing or saying the ‘wrong thing’, or of constructing ECEC in potentially harmful ways, we do nothing at all. But if we want to be involved in the construction of our profession, silence and inactivity are not an option. If we want to be listened to and taken seriously, then we must first be heard: there is no option but to enter into dialogue with those who may construct ECEC in vastly different ways to those of us who view ECEC through social justice frameworks. This dialogue requires us not only to acknowledge our concerns but also to be positive about what we can achieve. In this regard, I have found examination of the history of ECEC to be a particularly valuable means of distancing myself from the current dilemmas and for enabling me to see our current situation in more optimistic ways. Looking at the work of early advocates of ECEC has led me to believe that whilst we must continue to use socially just arguments to advocate our work, we, like these early pioneers, must use all means at our disposal to advocate public investment in ECEC – including the strategic use of nationalist and economic discourse.

The history of which I speak is the ‘history of the present’, a term first coined by Foucault to refer to historical examination that is concerned with understanding and problematising contemporary concepts through historical analysis (Foucault, 1979, p. 31). History of the present contends that practices emerge as eruptions in the discursive field (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983). As discourses shift, ‘spaces’ are created within which new ways of operating may be constituted. Work that examines the emergence of these constructs is useful for shedding light on contemporary practices (Castel, 1994; Vandenbroek, 2003; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2005). In this article, the constitution of ECEC in NSW has been traced back to the turn of the twentieth century when the Kindergarten Union and the Sydney Day Nursery Association were established, two philanthropic
organisations that remain leading providers and peak bodies of ECEC in NSW. This event marked ‘a moment of discontinuity – a moment when something new emerge[d]’ (Kendall, 2001, p. 26): it heralded the beginning of ECEC in NSW as we know it today.

From a social-constructionist perspective, constructs of ECEC, the discourses within which they arose and the power they uphold are identified in texts through the process of discourse analysis. In the study on which this article is based, a range of contemporary and historical texts discussing ECEC was examined (Wong, 2006). These texts included: (i) ‘public’ texts, such as newspapers; (ii) government texts, such as parliamentary debates and government documents; and (iii) professional texts, such as annual reports of the Kindergarten Union and Sydney Day Nursery Association, and journals written for early childhood professionals. Critical discourse analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002) of these texts, whereby dominant themes were identified and interrogated for power relations, revealed multiple constructs of ECEC in both periods, each emerging from within one or more of a number of different discourses (Wong, 2006). Here, I focus on the construction of ECEC as national work. I show how, similar to today, ECEC in NSW at the turn of the twentieth century was constructed within nationalist and economic discourses, and highlight how the women who established Free Kindergartens and the Sydney Day Nursery Association negotiated these discourses to advocate ECEC.

**Historical Construction of ECEC within Nationalist and Economic Discourses as National Work**

Similarly to today, economic and nationalist discourses prevailed at the turn of the twentieth century in Australia. In the 1890s, the country was in the grip of a severe economic depression, and the mood was one of fiscal restraint and curtailing of government spending. At the same time, the economic situation heightened fears that Australia, being so far removed from ‘mother England’, was vulnerable to invasion. Those operating within nationalist and economic discourses argued successfully that the federation of the colonies was required in order to develop a strong economy and to ensure national stability. The tenor of the time was one of nation building. These dominant economic and nationalist discourses had consequences for the construction of ECEC.

The economic discourses of the time were instrumental in creating a separation between education for older and younger children. For the first century of NSW’s colonial history, many children as young as 18 months attended school with their older peers, first in charitable or private schools and later, after the introduction of the Public Instruction Act (1880), in public schools (Barcan, 1965; Snow, 1989). Indeed, in 1893, 27,879 children under 6 years of age attended public schools in NSW, constituting one-seventh of the total school population (Carruthers, 1893). In the 1890s, however, in debates surrounding the economic depression, education for children younger than 6 years was constructed as ‘a waste of public resources’ on children ‘too young to learn’ and a ‘danger to their health’ (Wong, 2006). And, in 1893, the Minister of Public Instruction, ‘[i]n looking round to see in what direction he might be forced ultimately to make a further saving ... saw that it would be in the direction of refusing to admit to the school, children under 6 years of age’ – and he excluded them from public education (Sydney Morning Herald, 1893, p. 3). It was the exclusion of these young children that created the exigency for separate educational spaces for young children. But advocates of ECEC had to overcome the negative images that had been created of young children and their education. In addition to using other arguments, including social justice discourses, a powerful way they advocated ECEC was by constructing it within the prevailing nationalist and economic discourses.

Nationalist discourses produced contradictory constructs of children that had repercussions for the construction of ECEC. On the one hand, children were seen as valuable assets and there was increased concern about their welfare. For instance, infant mortality, which had always been high, now became a focus of concern (Mackellar & Royal Commission, 1904). On the other hand, children were viewed as potentially dangerous, a threat to future national prosperity and in need of strict supervision. Together, these constructs not only raised the profile of children, but they also legitimated intervention into their lives. Advocates used these dominant discourses to counteract the economic discourses that had led to the exclusion of young children from public schools in the
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first place by constructing ECEC as national work in multiple ways: as (i) nation building; (ii) saving children; (iii) crime prevention; and (iv) saving money.

ECEC Constructed as Nation Building

In ways much like the contemporary constructs quoted earlier, those in the Kindergarten Union drew heavily on nationalist discourses to increase interest in children’s lives. Throughout the documents examined for this study, children were constructed as the future saviours of the nation:

But it is to the little children that every nation must give its best thought, its greatest care, if it would keep its integrity. (Newton, 1905, p. 13)

Children were also constructed as valuable ‘commodities’:

Children are more valuable now than ever before in the history of the world, and Free Kindergartens need your help. (Anderson, 1916, p. 6)

Advocates constructed Free Kindergartens as institutions that would add value to these valuable commodities and were therefore important contributors to the building of the Australian nation:

There was no Australian race or type of people; but no doubt there would be in course of time, and a great deal would depend upon the efforts of the present generation as to what class of people the future Australian race would become. They should endeavour to so mould it as to make it the very best type possible. The work of nation-building was a slow process. The kindergarten movement was an important factor in the work of the building up of a nation. (Sydney Morning Herald, 1910, p. 10)

Less positively, childhood was also considered a ‘period of latent possibilities’ for both ‘good or evil’ (Buckey, 1899, p. 15). As such, children had the potential to both ‘retard’ as well as contribute to the nation’s progress:

In recognizing the child, not only as the child of to-day, but as the citizen of to-morrow, who will either add to or take from the nation’s strength, forward or retard its progress, according to the way in which it is educated and trained from the beginning. (Newman, 1911, p. 6)

The Kindergarten Union, therefore, made the argument that the nation could ill afford to leave children to their own devices, but must instead ensure they were carefully watched, monitored and steered in the right direction. Free Kindergartens, they argued, were valuable in this regard:

In order to make these neglected ones valuable citizens, they must be developed by a system of education which will bring about organic results, and which will have a permanent effect upon the rising generation. (Buckey, 1899, p. 14)

The garden metaphor was a particularly useful device. However, it was a rather managed horticultural vision that was employed:

Our efforts are constantly aiming to ‘incline’ the twig into an upright, self-respecting tree. (Buckey, 1898, p. 20)

Indeed, Free Kindergartens were considered to be places of production that would yield a crop:

The work of that dauntless and indefatigable band of pioneer workers and organisers who had cleared the ground and sown the seeds, and from the fruit of whose labours they themselves were even now profiting so largely. (Anderson, c.1912, p. 2)

The production ideology was also evident in the way ‘industry’ was valorised in the Kindergarten Union texts:

Children are unconsciously taught that work is not a curse but a blessing. Nurtured in this atmosphere of loving thought for the first five or six years of life the impression can never be effaced and the children can never sink into the degradation possible for those who have been neglected. (The Dawn, 1898, p. 12)

In fact, the front cover of the Kindergarten Union of NSW Annual Report (1899-1900) proclaimed that:
Free Kindergarten work is political economy pure and simple, and National Prosperity is enhanced by it. It is a safe investment.  

Importantly, according to the Kindergarten Union, the benefits of Free Kindergartens would extend beyond their walls into the homes and communities in which the children lived:

> The introduction into the slum districts of far-reaching elevating influences which do not end with the children but are carried into the homes and brighten and purify the lives of the parents, thus affecting the whole community. The work of the Union might truly be said to be of national importance. (Davenport, 1899, p. 10)

These constructions are problematic. They evoke an image of the child as saviour, which, although optimistic, not only places a great burden on children’s shoulders, but may also inhibit systemic change (Steedman, 1990). For reasons already discussed, the commodification of children is also concerning, particularly as it tends to value only those children who are considered productive. Further, these constructs required children to be watched, monitored and shaped; the establishment of Free Kindergartens and the Sydney Day Nurseries therefore perhaps represents the beginning of institutionalised surveillance of young children, which is pervasive in contemporary society. These constructs can also be seen to uphold dominant-class power relations, whereby working-class practices are constructed as inferior and in need of redress, and their place at the bottom of the class hierarchy is maintained. Nevertheless, at a time when advocates of ECEC were struggling against negative images of education for young children, these arguments would have been useful in their fight for getting ECEC taken seriously. At the very least they raised an awareness of children’s needs.

**ECEC Constructed as Saving Children for the Nation**

In tune with the newly established idea that children were valuable for the nation, advocates also constructed ECEC as a means of ‘saving’ poor children:

> From the lanes and by-ways of the crowded city districts little ones are being gathered in, and for a few hours each day are surrounded by the sweet, pure, happy influences, which are, in many cases, only too sadly lacking in their home environment. (The Dawn, 1902, p. 3)

The Kindergarten Union, it seems, focused primarily on moral redemption and rescuing poor children from ‘their sordid surroundings’ (The Dawn, 1902, p. 3), rather than providing safe work-related childcare. Despite their awareness of mothers’ dire need of childcare, the Free Kindergartens’ short operating hours meant they were of limited benefit to working mothers, and children were dismissed back on to the ‘dangerous’ streets after only a few hours’ attendance.

The Sydney Day Nursery Association, on the other hand, was established explicitly as an institution that would ‘save’ very young children ‘abandoned’ by their working mothers, by offering work-related childcare:

> The Sydney Day Nursery Association came into existence to look after the poor little unprotected children of the working women who have to go out all day to earn a living, and have nobody to care for their babies in their absence. And many a little child it has saved from running about the streets from morning till night, while the mother – more often than not the breadwinner of the family – is away doing a day’s work! (Anon., 1911, p. 4)

Advocates were careful to tie the nursery’s work of saving children firmly to nationalistic concerns:

> The Nursery deserves the public support, because any institution that exists for the care and well-being of the children of the State is doing noble work. These children are the men and women of to-morrow, and during these times of wastage and ravage it is in the coming generation that the hope of the country lies. (Davenport, 1915, p. 5)

However, the work-related childcare was limited, as it was only available for ‘needy mothers’ who, because of family circumstances, were working to support themselves and their families.

Again, these constructs are not without problems. The construction of ECEC as saving children of poor working mothers not only reinforces the idea that children are weak and vulnerable, but it also reinforces the idea that the securement of work-related childcare is a
women’s concern. And yet, despite these problems, it is clear that these institutions were of great benefit and practical support to families, particularly mothers. For instance, they provided safe, reliable work-related care so that women could be self-sufficient; and they provided advice and assistance on childrearing that no doubt contributed to children’s well-being – services that contemporary ECEC continues to provide.

**ECEC Constructed as Crime Prevention**

In keeping with nationalistic and economic concerns, advocates constructed ECEC as a means of preventing crime. Supporters of universal education in NSW had long used the argument that education prevented crime; those who established ECEC argued that the earlier these children were ‘captured’ and intervention could begin to steer them away from vice, the better:

> If we want to become a race of great men and noble women, we must begin education of the right sort as soon as conscious life begins. (M.S.W. [sic], 1898, p. 4)

Free Kindergartens, in particular, were constructed as places where those children most likely to grow up to be criminals could be identified and interventions could be put in place:

> Dr Carroll spoke of the opportunities afforded to the kindergarten teacher for detecting criminal tendencies and devoting attention to the counteracting of such tendencies. (Sydney Morning Herald, 1898, p. 3)

Free Kindergartens were claimed to be ‘the surest preventative to lives of crime’ (Newton, 1904, pp. 10-11) – places where children would learn obedience through playing organised games, with the ultimate goal of children learning self-governance:

> So must we have an education for our nation that will teach each child to discipline itself. (De Lissa, 1914, p. 5)

The construction of ECEC as crime prevention tended to uphold the construct of children as dangerous, ‘unproductive citizens’ and a burden on society, as is evident in the following quote from Anderson (a leading figure within the Kindergarten Union):

> The physical injury a child may thus sustain reacts mainly on himself and his family; but the moral and mental bias which he receives from continual contact with the vicious habits and manners of the mean streets is not only an injury to himself. It may cause him to be all his life a troublesome disgrace to his fellow, and a burden to his country ... We are allowing our children to become idlers and wastrels, when we might easily make them good citizens. (Anderson, 1913, pp. 6-7)

Moreover, poor children were constructed as ‘centres of infection’ (*Formation not re-formation*, c.1910, n.p.), who might ‘contaminate’ other, more ‘innocent’ children:

> Small and apparently unimportant items in the population of a great city, cannot be neglected without danger to the body politic. They must enter the public schools in due course, and by imparting their corrupt knowledge to children from purer homes, must become centres for the dissemination of moral and social disease. (Anderson, c.1912, p. 13)

In this way, as Steedman (1990) suggests occurred in the United Kingdom, the working-class child came to ‘represent corruption’ and ‘danger and impurity’ (p. 67). Such constructs valorised compliance and possibly pathologised non-conformity, and would likely have led to a highly instrumental view of education.

Indeed, it is hard to think how these constructs could be beneficial for children. It is important to recognise, however, that advocates of ECEC were using these discourses not as an end in themselves, but as a means to an end. Similarly to contemporary advocates, they used crime prevention discourses to attract funding.
ECEC Constructed as Saving Money

One of the first to make a connection between ECEC and money saving, and to use this argument to lobby for government funds, was Ridie Lee Buckey, a shrewd advocate for Free Kindergartens:

One reason for asking for State assistance was that they were preparing the children for the public schools, and were preventing them from growing up into criminals, as many of them would otherwise do if left in the streets in their early years. Money spent by the State now in helping the movement would mean less money spent in the future in connection with the gaols. During 15 years 14,000 children had passed through the kindergarten schools of San Francisco, and only one of these had been recorded as having been subsequently put in prison. (Sydney Morning Herald, 1897, p. 3)

Buckey, recognising the value of using ‘statistical, nude, aggressive facts’ (Buckey, 1898, p. 20) as incontrovertible, rational, economic ‘proof’ of the financial benefits of Free Kindergartens, claimed:

In New York, one family of paupers, over a 75 year period, cost the State £280,000, whereas to support a Kindergarten for 60 children for a year would cost a mere £250. (Buckey, 1898, p. 20)

Employing the emotive vernacular of the era, she argued:

Every larrikin boy or girl reclaimed saves the colony many thousands of pounds ... We must endeavour to prevent crime, not cure it. (Buckey, 1898, p. 21; emphasis in original)

At a time when discourses about national prosperity were dominant, Buckey operated to construct Free Kindergartens in a way that upheld these dominant ideologies. And this money-saving aspect of ECEC became a dominant theme within Kindergarten Union documents for several years:

There is no doubt that in an ideal government, there would be a Free Kindergarten, within the reach of every child likely to be neglected. It is neither kind nor economical to allow children to become larrikins and criminals, for crime costs as much as an expensive luxury and ought to be a cause for shame. (Anderson, c.1912, p. 22)

Perhaps by constructing ECEC as saving money we have done ourselves a disservice. It could be argued that by constructing ECEC in this way, we detract from social justice arguments that ECEC should be a right for all children, regardless of any monetary promise. The fact that ECEC is still not freely available would support the idea that using these arguments is a flawed strategy. Indeed, Anderson’s frustration at the lack of financial support for ECEC in 1913, evident in the following quote, resonates soundly in the contemporary Australian context:

A kindergarten needs much less money than an asylum or a hospital, but many will give cheerfully for reformation of health and character, who will not give for formation of both at the time when such formation is easy ... We know that a stitch in time really and truly does save nine, but we want someone else to pay for the needle and thread. (Anderson, 1913, p. 12)

Eventually, after much lobbying, both the Kindergarten Union and the Sydney Day Nursery Association did get limited government funding (Wong, 2006). If these organisations had not used crime prevention and economic arguments to advocate their work, perhaps no support would have been forthcoming and we would not have ECEC in Australia today.

Here, I have argued that economic and nationalist discourses were significant for the establishment of ECEC in NSW – they created the spaces within which a separate form of education especially for children from birth to the age of six could emerge. ECEC advocates at the turn of the twentieth century used these dominant discourses to construct ECEC in ways that would be readily understood and accepted by the public and government of the day, and that are remarkably similar to the contemporary NSW context.

The Value of Employing Nationalist and Economic Discourses When Advocating ECEC

Despite the concerns raised in this article, given the dominance of nationalist and economic discourses at the turn of the twentieth century, the construction of ECEC as national work was a strategic way of focusing attention on the needs of children. Whilst it is impossible to say whether
or not advocates believed their own rhetoric – that ECEC saved children, contributed to the building of the nation, prevented crime or saved money – their construction of ECEC as national work does suggest a pragmatic streak in their nature. There is evidence to suggest that they were aware that they were playing a ‘political game’. For instance, they argued that constructing ECEC as a means of assisting the country would add to their legitimacy. Newton, for instance, admitted:

A high ideal, a common purpose, an unwavering faith, is always enough to make even a small body a power in the community; but, when added to this is the leverage which one may count upon: in finding in the average man and woman love of country, and love and pity for forlorn and helpless childhood, such a power will be invincible. (Newton, 1904, p. 11)

So, although their ultimate aim may have been to afford ‘every neglected little child the opportunity for at least a fair start in life’ (Newton, 1904, p. 15), they were cognisant that that advocacy had to be tied to dominant discourses of the day.

It would be all too easy to dismiss the work of these pioneering early childhood advocates as that of middle-class do-gooders upholding dominant power structures. But I believe this is disingenuous. These women seem to have had a genuine concern for young children. It must also be remembered that they were operating at a time when, as women, their power and sphere of influence would have been limited. They called on all the tools at their disposal to try to secure services for those who had even less power than they: working-class women and children.

In contemporary NSW, just as it was over a hundred years ago, nationalist and economic discourses dominate. Given their dominance, it is crucial that contemporary ECEC professionals understand how these discourses are productive and how to use them to their advantage to advocate services for the benefit of children, their families and the broader community (Bryan, 1991; Argy, 1998; Bathala & Korukonda, 2003). Traditionally, economic agendas have not been part of the ECEC practitioner’s professional preparation, so they are often ill prepared to talk with authority on such matters. This omission has been to the detriment of the field. If ECEC professionals want to remain relevant, it is imperative they have at their disposal the language required to enter into the economic debates in an informed and meaningful way to advocate their cause. Moreover, it is important to recognise that issues of social equity are not confined to those of us within the field of ECEC. We may have much to learn from, and could perhaps achieve greater success if we were to align with economists concerned with issues of social equity and fair distribution of wealth (Argy, 1998). Given their power, to ignore nationalist and economic discourses may be foolhardy indeed.

That is not to say that ECEC advocates should rely solely on economic and nationalist discourses, as ECEC is far more than simply national work. The early pioneers of ECEC drew not only on nationalist and economic discourses but also on scientific, gender and liberal/progressive discourses to advocate ECEC (Wong, 2006). Contemporary ECEC advocates need to continue to ensure other constructs of ECEC are clearly communicated. In particular, I would argue that we need to continually advocate ECEC on the basis of social justice and inclusion, especially given the concerns raised in this article regarding the commercialisation of ECEC. But, in order to get our voices heard, we must strategically use the dominant discourses of our time. Today, just as it was over a century ago, nationalist and economic discourses give advocates of universal ECEC a valuable opportunity to legitimate their work. The more comfortable and articulate we are within these discourses the more likely it is that we will be heard, and the more possible it will be to create our own visions of ECEC.

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