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Abstract: Although the policy context in Australia is conducive to professional collaborations in early years services, understandings of collaboration are highly variable across the domains of research literature, policy and practice. Inconsistent and possibly incompatible approaches to working with children and families, as well as significant philosophical and professional differences, may be disguised by common terminology adopted under the rubric of collaborative practice. A potential blind spot concerns the positioning of the child, whose perspectives, needs and desires are easily subsumed by the intentions of the adults around them, either as professionals or family members. With reference to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and drawing on extant literature and data from two Australian research projects examining integrated and collaborative practices in early childhood programs, this article interrogates the positioning of the child in inter professional and trans professional collaborations, and examines the potential of the early childhood educator to sharpen the focus on children.


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ABSTRACT

Although the policy context in Australia is conducive to professional collaborations in early years’ services, understandings of collaboration are highly variable across the domains of research literature, policy and practice. Inconsistent and possibly incompatible approaches to working with children and families as well as significant philosophical and professional differences may be disguised by common terminology adopted under the rubric of collaborative practice. A potential blind-spot concerns the positioning of the child, whose perspectives, needs and desires are easily subsumed by the intentions of the adults around them, either as professionals or family members. With reference to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and drawing on extant literature and data from two Australian research projects examining integrated and collaborative practices in early childhood programmes, this article interrogates the positioning of the child in inter-professional and trans-professional collaborations and examines the potential of the early childhood educator to sharpen the focus on children.

Introduction

In recent years, a strong interest in early years’ collaborative practice, including integrated early childhood services, has been evident in the policies of Australian governments. The impetus for expanding and strengthening professional collaborations across and within early childhood programs primarily arises from a desire to better respond to the needs of families with young children, especially children living in challenging circumstances, and / or with developmental needs that increase their vulnerability. Grounded in a belief in the efficacy of
prevention and early intervention, early years collaborations are hoped to result in ‘multiple impacts on multifaceted problems’ (Hayes, 2006, p.66). Generally, the policy push toward such collaborations emanates from, or is located within, portfolios that have some explicit responsibility for children – primarily in areas such as health, education or social welfare – and undoubtedly children are the intended beneficiaries of such early years’ policy. However, the needs of children and their families are not always synchronous (Warin, 2007; Henricson & Bainham, 2005) and children’s positioning within the policy and practices of collaborative programmes warrants reflection. This paper explores possible tensions in the policy and professional framing of ‘the child’ in integrated and collaborative programmes, particularly from a child-rights perspective.

Commencing with a definition of key terms, we follow with an overview of the Australian policy context. Then, we provide a synopsis of the literature on early years’ collaborations. Next, with reference to data from two Australian research projects (Press, Sumson & Wong, 2010; Wong, Press, Sumson & Hard, under review) and drawing on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), we explore the place of the child in integrated and collaborative practice and discuss the positioning of early childhood education and care services and educators within inter-professional and trans-professional work. Finally we consider the potential of early childhood educators to contribute to a sharper focus on children’s rights and the development of more nuanced understandings of these rights.

Definitions

The terms ‘integration’ and ‘collaboration’ are referred to in many different ways in the early years’ literature. For example, Moore’s (2008) continuum model of inter-professional working relationships describes services’ working relationships: coexistence, cooperation, coordination, collaboration or integration. In this framework, ‘collaboration’ describes the mutual commitment of independently managed agencies to work together to provide a multi-agency service to families. ‘Integration’ denotes services coming together under a single governance structure to provide multiple supports to families. Winkworth and White (2011)
however, consider that ways of working such as networking, coordinating and integrating, are *forms* of collaboration.

In this paper both integrated services and early years’ collaborative practice are understood as aiming to provide:

> access to multiple services to children and families in a cohesive and holistic way... actively seeking to maximise the impact of different disciplinary expertise in a shared intent to respond to family and community contexts (adapted from Press, Sumsion & Wong, 2010, p.53)

Like Winkworth and White (2011), we understand *integration* to be one form of collaboration, albeit a form of collaboration that is characterised by high level mutual commitments to multi-agency, joint professional work which is often, but not always, formalised by a single governance structure (Press et.al, 2010). *Collaborative practice* is used to capture a broader range of inter-agency arrangements but nevertheless entails a commitment to shared goals and joint working; a sense of shared responsibility; and a preparedness to contribute to shared aims (Rose, 2009).

The Australian Policy Context

In Australia, policy at all levels of government (national, state/territory and local) supports collaborative practice across early years’ service sites and professional disciplines. The Australian Government’s Agenda for Early Childhood (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2010) refers to ‘integrated early childhood education and care’ and emphasises ‘connecting with schools to ensure all Australian children are fully prepared for learning and life’. It provides the following rationale:

> *Investing in the health, education, development and care of our children benefits children and their families, our communities and the economy, and is critical to lifting workforce participation and delivering the Government’s productivity agenda* (np).

Similarly, a number of State and Territory governments advocate integrated early years’ services and other forms of professional collaborations aimed at supporting families with young children. The Office for Early Childhood Education and Care in Queensland, for instance, states that ‘providing quality, integrated early years’ services results in better
outcomes for families, children and the community’ and refers to the development and implementation of

*a Queensland early years strategy to provide a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach to enhancing the health, development, learning, safety and wellbeing of young children and their families* (Department of Education and Training, 2009, p.39).

In Victoria, the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* (Department of Education and Early Child Development (DEECD) 2009) encompasses a diverse range of early childhood professionals (including educators in early childhood services and schools, maternal and child health nurses, and early intervention workers) and explicitly aims to generate professional collaboration.

At the municipal level, a number of local governments facilitate early years’ partnerships. For example, the Victorian Moonee Valley City Council has developed a Municipal Early Years Plan (MEYP) 2010-13 (Moonee Valley City Council, nd) which seeks to deliver integrated services to families and children and to support service coordination across all related programmes, including non-Council services; and in NSW, the Blue Mountains Council has actively developed cohesive child and family service delivery across a dispersed geographic area (Press et.al, 2010).

At the same time, there is considerable variation in how early years ‘integration’ is understood. In some government policies, ‘integration’ refers to the bringing together of sessional preschool education with the provision of childcare, either within the one programme or on the one site. In other cases it is used to denote the bringing together of a range of child and family related services (Press et.al, 2010). Not surprisingly therefore, the extent to which integration and collaboration are addressed systemically by governments is also highly variable (Press et.al, 2010). This is in part a result of Australia’s federated system of government which has led to considerable jurisdictional differences in the administration and delivery of social infrastructure such as health and early childhood education. There are pockets of inter-professional and trans-professional collaborations and integrated service development found in most states and territories and some, but by no means all, municipal governments support such initiatives. There are few examples of systems-wide,
programmatic approaches to building the cohesive and comprehensive early years programmes espoused by many government policies, although the state of Victoria, for example, has made significant inroads into the expansion of integrated services and the support of professional collaborations.

Where they do exist, integrated services and other early years’ collaborations in Australia are characterised by their diversity. This diversity represents responsiveness to community context and community need with many services evolving in innovative ways to, for example, overcome geographic realities such as remoteness or dispersed populations. Collaborative programs may be offered from a single site, or take the form of local or regional hubs. By and large, they involve a combination of formal early childhood education and care, family support, health, inclusive education and schools. Non-targeted programs, such as early childhood education and maternal child health, are supplemented by specialist targeted supports, for example, speech pathology or programs for mothers at risk of post-natal depression. Playgroups, toy libraries, parenting programs, cooking classes, budgeting classes and so forth may also be part of a suite of offerings depending on community circumstance (Press et.al, 2010; Wong et. al, under review).

Literature about Integrated Services and Inter-professional Practice: a synopsis

Much of the published literature on collaborative practice (variously described as collaborative, multi-disciplinary / inter-professional / multi-agency work, integration and ‘joined-up’ service delivery) emanates from the United Kingdom where it is primarily concerned with the work of children’s services developed under the Every Child Matters policy (for instance: Anning, 2005; Atkinson, Doherty, & Kinder, 2005; Hymans, 2006; Whalley, Riddell, John, & Hannon, 2010; Winkworth & White, 2011). This work is largely descriptive: focusing on barriers to, and facilitators of, integrated services and how to support such work (Edwards, Daniels, Gallagher, Leadbetter, & Warmington, 2009; Moore & Skinner, 2010). Particular foci are professional identity, professional development and leadership (for example: Booker, 2011; Daniels et al., 2007; Leadbetter, 2006; Rose, 2011; Warmington et al., 2004). Whilst demonstrating causal relationships between integration and positive outcomes for children is problematic (Carpenter, Brown, & Griffin, 2007; Horwath
& Morrison, 2007; Hughes, 2006), there is evidence and general consensus that integrated service delivery is an appropriate way of working to support families and children, particularly those in complex and challenging circumstances (Anning, 2005; Canavan, Coen, Dolan, & Whyte, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2009; Worrall-Davies & Cottrell, 2009). Some literature critiques policy related to integrated service provision, particularly, in relation to their role in addressing issues of social capital and social inclusion (Keevers, Treleaven, & Sykes, 2008; Milbourne, 2009; Paton, 2007).

By and large, there is limited consideration of integrated services from the perspectives of families and children. Whilst the importance of family-centred practice is accentuated in several papers (referenced above), on the whole, children tend to be constructed as somewhat needy recipients of services. The literature is largely silent regarding children’s experiences of integrated services and in particular, we could find only scant mention of children’s rights within integrated early years’ services (Darlington, Feeney, & Rixon, 2005; Payler, Flewitt, & Nind, 2008; Warin, 2007).

Australian Research into Integrated Services and Inter-professional Practice.
Here we turn to Australian research into integrated services and inter-professional practice. Significant contributions include Moore’s evaluation of Victorian Children’s Centres (2008) commissioned by the Victorian DEECD and Colmer’s (2008) exposition of leadership within an integrated service. In addition, evaluations have been undertaken of specific programs in which improved early years collaboration has been an aim (for instance, Aylward & O’Neill, 2009; Valentine & Katz, 2010). A number of agencies have produced booklets and guidelines to support early years programmes to become more integrated (UnitingCare Burnside, 2007; Moore & Skinner, 2010) and or to improve inter-professional collaborative work (for instance the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth’s Advancing collaboration practice series, nd).

Two empirical studies concerning early years’ collaborations - Study 1 (Press et. al, 2010) and Study 2 (Wong et. al, under review) - provide the impetus for this paper. The positioning of the child was not the explicit focus of either of the studies and the purpose of this paper is not to report on the findings of these studies per se. Nevertheless, from the studies’ literature reviews and data collected though surveys, interviews and researcher observations, were
signals that the actual experiences of children in integrated and collaborative programs constituted a potential ‘blind-spot’. In this article we take up the opportunity to explore this further by considering this data in conjunction with our reading of the literature, and the Australian policy context.

Here we provide an overview of the studies (Press et.al, 2010; Wong et. al, under review) to establish the context from which these data emerged, however, we do not provide a detailed methodological account (for full details of the research design and methods, see Press et.al, 2010; Wong et. al, under review). In the recruitment and selection of participating sites for the studies high quality collaborative practices were deemed to be characterised by: a shared philosophy or professional objectives; respectful professional exchange leading to congruent and compatible practice; and seamless or minimal referral processes for families.

Study 1 (Press et.al, 2010) was commissioned by Organisation 1, a coalition of non-government, non-profit providers of professional development and support to childcare services. Cognisant of the trend to integration, Organisation 1 sought to investigate the factors that contributed to successful integrated services and situated early childhood educators\(^1\) as equal partners and pedagogical leaders in multi-disciplinary teams. Study 2 (Wong et. al, under review) was commissioned by Organisation 2, as part of its early childhood workforce reform strategy which includes the goal of ‘supporting the workforce to collaborate across professions and work with families to meet children’s needs’ (Organisation 2, 2009, np). Study 1 had a national remit and a specific focus on integrated services in which early childhood education and care programmes played a significant part, while Study 2 focused on Victorian child and family service sites and embraced a wider range of professional collaborations.

Study 1 entailed a comprehensive literature review, the distribution of email surveys to services identified as integrated from a web-based search (21.5% response rate), and ten face-to-face case studies. Surveys aimed to unearth the various configurations of integrated services (including the types of programs in the service mix; governance structures; physical structures and location) as well as the drivers, supports and challenges for integration. The

\(^1\) In Australia, early childhood care and education programmes are staffed by a mix of personnel including staff with no or base level training, educators with a two year Diploma qualification or a 3 or 4 year university degree in early childhood education. National reforms now require early childhood qualified teachers in all education and care programmes (DEEWR, 2010).
case studies examined in some depth the complexities of successful integration in order to answer: ‘How and why is this service successful?’ (for further details see Press et.al, 2010).

**Study 2** (Wong et. al, under review) was initiated by Organisation 2 to document high-quality, integrated, collaborative and cross disciplinary practice in Victorian early childhood services. Ten Victorian early childhood service sites were selected for case studies. Collectively, these sites were involved in a wider range of collaborations than the sites involved in **Study 1**, incorporating collaborations occurring within and across a range of agency and professional configurations including, but not confined to, integrated services.

In both studies, selection of sites for case studies was made through a combination of factors including documentation provided by the site, funding agency or researcher prior knowledge of the site, and diversity of the sample. In each, an experienced early childhood researcher was attached to a particular case study site. Researchers liaised with personnel from ‘their’ site to gather site specific information (annual reports, evaluations and so forth) prior to their visits. They then spent time within each site (1.5 days in **Study 1** and 3 days in **Study 2**) interviewing key informants and observing programs. Each study involved an intensive two day data analysis meeting of the authors and on-site researchers to identify and discuss key themes.

As a research team, our attention was initially drawn to the positioning of children by some of the frank responses of participants about the difficulties they had faced in moving toward greater cohesion and researcher reported observations of some practices.

**Early years’ Collaborations in the Frame of Children’s Rights**

*The Convention requires that children, including the very youngest children, be respected as persons in their own right. Young children should be recognised as active members of families, communities and societies, with their own concerns, interests and points of view* (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 2006, p.3).

In the two decades since the widespread ratification of the UNCRC, there has been increasing interest in the application and enactment of the rights contained in the Convention to infants
and very young children. In 2006, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) released *General Comment No. 7: Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood*, stating that it wished to ‘encourage recognition that young children are holders of all rights enshrined in the Convention and that early childhood is a critical period for the realisation of these rights’ (CRC 2006, p.1).

Here we consider the positioning of children in the policy and practices of service integration and professional collaboration against the discourse of children’s rights. We draw on the UNCRC and the work of the CRC to reflect upon the policy framings of early years’ collaborations, the framing of early childhood education and care services within collaborations, and the framing of collaborative values by practitioners. In the final section we consider the positioning of early childhood educators within collaborations.

Framing Policy

Australia ratified UNCRC in 1990 and thus agreed to assess policies and laws affecting children against the Convention’s articles. Thomas (2011) highlights two recent Australian policy developments: the national *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF); and the *National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009-2020* as important initiatives which explicitly reference the Convention. Both are relevant to the work of early years’ collaborations. In our research, the referencing of children’s rights as a foundational principle was also evident in other levels of relevant government policy. For instance, the Victorian Early Years Development and Learning Framework (2009), the MEYP (2010), and the Blue Mountains Child and Family Plan (2010) all cite the UNCRC. References to rights within policy however, do not necessarily result in their recognition in practice. As Thomas (2011) points out, the challenge lies in mainstreaming children’s rights.

In previous writing we identified two discursive framings prominent in policy for integrated services: one of investment in human capital; the other of community (re)generation (Sumsion, Press & Wong, in press, 2012). Here we locate children, and their rights, within these frames. The discourse of human capital, exemplified by linking national early years’ investment in areas such as health and education with the Government’s productivity agenda, positions children as adults in the making, as (productive) future citizens. In shifting the gaze
to future horizons, the investment discourse risks overlooking the reality of children’s daily experiences of the programmes in which they participate. For example, a narrow view of early education as preparation for later school success (and thus presumed increased prospects for adult productivity) can hide from sight those skills and attributes that may not be so readily regarded as academic. Yet the Convention calls for children’s education to be directed to the holistic development of children’s ‘personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential’ (Article 29.1(a)). Importantly, it also enshrines in article 31 the child’s right to play. Thus government are urged to provide ‘opportunities for young children to meet, play and interact in child-centred, secure, supportive, stimulating and stress free environments’ (CRC 2006, p.15). Consistent with the Convention, and a countervailing force against a narrowing of early years’ pedagogy, is the EYLF, a key element of the Government’s early childhood reform agenda. This framework applies to all prior to school education and care services and provides a reference point for practice which embraces a holistic view of children and affirms their rights (DEEWR, 2009).

The discourse of community (re)generation frames the targeting of funding and support for inter-professional collaborations in areas where children are deemed vulnerable to poor developmental outcomes. This is part of a broad policy context which seeks to address the immediate and long term impacts of disadvantage through community based initiatives. In Victoria for instance, a number of service collaborations have arisen as a response to poor local outcomes on the Australian Early Development Index (Wong et. al, under review). These policy interventions can be considered coordinated, multisectoral actions of the type advocated by the CRC. They address children’s vulnerability ‘to poverty, discrimination, family breakdown and multiple other adversities that violate their rights and undermine their well-being’ and are consistent with the Committee’s call for the implementation of prevention and intervention strategies designed to improve ‘young children’s current well-being and future prospects’ (CRC 2006, pp.2-4). Targeting programs is a common strategy to direct social expenditure in an environment of fiscal constraint. However, targeting can be problematic, risking the stigmatisation of communities and the programs themselves, as well as leaving unaddressed the equally important needs of many children and families who live in communities that are untargeted yet have no or limited access to similar services. This raises thorny questions about the appropriate balance between addressing children and families’
right of access to social infrastructure through universal provision and more directly mitigating the complex impacts of economic and social disadvantage and marginalisation through specific programs.

Framing education and care

Early childhood education and care is frequently put forward as an important component of integrated services and of early years’ collaborations more generally (Bertram, Cranston, Formosinho, Frangos, Gammage, Hebenstreit-Muller et al. 2003; Press et.al, 2010). The positioning of children’s education and care within such collaborations has an impact upon the nature of children’s experiences and how these are recognised and attended to. Because they offer a non-stigmatised entry point, education and care services (especially childcare and playgroups) can be positioned as conduits for making other supports available to parents (Press et.al, 2010; Wong et. al, under review). There is a risk however, that when early childhood education and care programs are constructed primarily as adjuncts to programs for parents, the experiences of children and the quality of their programmes can fall out of the line of vision. This blind-spot might result from the assumption that children automatically benefit from support given to parents (Warin, 2006) or because the pedagogical experiences of children are not given the same priority (Cheeseman 2007; Cumming & Wong, in press). For instance, in our studies (Press et.al, 2010; Wong et. al, under review), members of the research team observed instances where playgroups were established as a means of bringing parents together but were not sufficiently organised or resourced to meaningfully engage children or to enable children to develop strong, supportive relationships with peers and caring adults outside the family. Further, in both studies there were examples of embedded institutional practices requiring children to move from one setting to another (usually from childcare to preschool) in the course of a week, or even within the one day. This practice appeared anomalous for a service delivery model designed to foster continuity and minimise children’s and families transitions and in a policy context conducive to the integration of education and care, for example through the EYLF.

A recurring theme in the data (but by no means true of all research sites) was the underutilization, if not undervaluing, of the skills and disciplinary knowledge of early childhood educators. In Study 1, a survey respondent referred to ‘embedded beliefs within individual disciplines about the value of each discipline’ in which there was a palpable
hierarchy between health and education, with the expertise of health professionals given precedence. In a number of sites this hierarchy was reinforced by significant differences in wages and conditions between professionals from different disciplines (Press et. al, 2010), a concern illuminated by a case study interviewee who commented that their organisation’s human resources unit needed to ‘understand “poorer” working conditions of childcare staff and stress of direct service delivery.’ (Study 1 case study interview). Still other responses positioned early childhood educators as the recipients of the expertise of others rather than as equal partners in a mutual professional exchange. In another Study 1 case study, many of the professionals working with families were unaware if the children were attending education and care programmes. Such trends are contrary to the direction advocated by the CRC which states that ‘work with young children should be socially valued and properly paid’ utilising ‘staff that have theoretical and practical understanding about children’s rights and development; that .. adopt appropriate child centred care practices, curricula and pedagogies.’ (2006, p.11). Arguably, positioning the early childhood educator as an adjunct to the work of other professionals undermines the potential for a child’s rights approach to be fully realised in integrated and collaborative programmes.

Framing Values
Effective inter-professional and trans-professional work requires the establishment of common values, the appreciation of different practices based on discipline specific knowledge and skills and the capacity to negotiate differences in priorities. Thus robust, honest and respectful inter-professional discourse is pivotal (Edwards, 2009). When asked to describe the theoretical underpinning of their collaborative work participants in both studies used phrases such as ‘family-centred’, ‘child-centred’ and ‘strengths-based’. However, researchers noted that these phrases were frequently used interchangeably and that the same terminology was sometimes applied to quite different approaches to practice. In this way, the adoption of common professional language could serve to mask disciplinary differences. In a similar vein, descriptions of collaborations invoked the complementarity of the work of different professional groups, yet a small number of responses indicated that insufficient interrogation of the fundamental beliefs underpinning professional practices led to disjunctures in service provision. For instance, a Study 1 survey respondent noted that ‘different images of childhood between disciplines and different beliefs about child-rearing and motherhood in particular’ acted as a barrier to effective collaboration. In a Study 1 case study...
study, the introduction of a single set of professional case notes for families was instrumental in illuminating potentially divergent professional approaches arising from differing foci, for example, the child or the family. The resulting transparency triggered joint professional reflection and discussion facilitative of more cohesive responses (Press et.al, 2010).

From her UK research on joined-up programmes in the United Kingdom, Warin (2006) cautions against assuming the ‘family can be serviced as an unproblematic unit of coherent needs’ (p.21). In a review of literature relating to policy and practice regarding children’s agency in communities, Bessell, Fox, Hoffman-Ekstein, Mason, Michaux and Watson (2008) found that parents’ experiences of such interventions were used ‘as proxies for those of the children’ (p.1) and that children are ‘largely articulated as being passive recipients of services’ (p.3). These observations, coupled with some of the patterns of service provision identified in our studies (Press et.al, 2010; Wong et. al, under review), indicates that the positioning and experience of children in collaborative programs risks being overlooked. This risk was not evident in all research sites and identifying its presence should in no way detract from the very good, transformative programmes evident. Nevertheless, we argue there is scope to more explicitly consider the nature of children’s experiences.

Educators as Advocates

How can the recognition that children have an existence and rights both linked and separate to the significant adults in their lives become more explicit in early years’ collaborations? Here we argue that early childhood educators can be positioned more effectively within such programmes in ways that draw attention to the needs and interests of children.

Rights for very young children are especially mediated by adults and, as such, especially susceptible to being unrecognised. Under the UNCRC, all decisions concerning children’s care must heed the principle of children’s best interests (Article 3.1) yet the identification and determination of children’s best interests is complex. Both child-centred and family-centred practices may be invoked in determining and responding to such rights. Equitable and respectful inter-professional reflection and dialogue is needed to de-centre entrenched
positions, to draw into the line of vision the positioning of children and to re-imagine ways of working.

Considerations of children’s rights in early childhood education already have some traction. Significant theoretical and practical contributions to understanding the rights and agency of very young children are emerging from the field in Australia and internationally (see for instance, Alderson, 2000; MacNaughton & Smith, 2009; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Smith, 2007). As previously noted, resources such as Australia’s early childhood curriculum framework (EYLF) are grounded in a commitment to children’s rights.

Early childhood educators can bring to collaborative work disciplinary knowledge relevant to understanding, relating to and planning for children individually and in groups. They have skills in observing and interpreting children’s behaviour and development, developing responsive and trusting relationships with children, and providing stimulating and enriching environments. In relation to collaborative programs, education and care services are able to offer child-focused community spaces for children. They can at once incorporate children into a universal program and be the site for additional specialist support if needed (Press et.al, 2010).

Two of the highly integrated case study sites in Study 1 (EFG in Western Australia, and HIJ in South Australia) reported in Press et. al (2010) actively engaged early childhood educators in governance, leadership and professional development structures. The philosophical foundations developed for each service drew on the expertise of early childhood professionals in a way that helped generate meaningful reflection upon what it meant to engage in child-centred practice, and to consider the child within the family context. HIJ for instance, spent many months examining the image of the child informing professional work within the centre and actively questioned previously taken-for-granted practices by examining them against the impact upon children and their daily experiences.

Our intention is not to simplistically position early childhood educators as the holders of all knowledge relevant to children’s rights. Indeed, in one integrated services case study a leading staff member noted that ‘many staff in child care are very young and less experienced…some of the emotional challenges can be hard around some of the complexities of families’ (Study 1 case study interview). In addition, some respondents in the same
research felt that many early childhood professionals did not readily articulate their knowledge base and explain their professional decision-making and practice (Wong, Sumson & Press, in press, 2012). Nor do we mean to infer that rights are easily identified and their nature uncontested. Nevertheless, in collaborative work an explicit focus on children’s rights can be a reference point for the consideration and development of common values and priorities and can trigger deep reflection on the nature of programmes provided for children, the image of the child informing these programmes and recognition of children’s agency. We believe that early childhood educators have an important role to play in contributing to these understandings, building dialogue and exchange and the ‘opening up to wider ideas’ that results in collaborations in which all are ‘influenced by and enriched by other disciplines..’ (Study 1 case study interview). Further, the education and care services (including supported playgroups) that sit in the mix of collaborative practice should be envisaged as infrastructure for children, centred on building respectful and responsive children’s communities.

Conclusion

Bertram et al. (2003) observe that ‘integrated services, which are about the transformation of the way that services have been offered traditionally, are fundamentally value based organisations concerned with inclusion and social justice’ (p.19). The raison d’etre for such programmes is to make life better for children and families, particularly those living in difficult circumstances. It is not too big a leap to infer that such programs have, at the very least, an implicit commitment to the rights of young children.

Sites of inter-professional and trans-professional early years’ collaboration, by their nature, are sites of multiple discourses. A key question for collaborative programmes, therefore, is how to ensure children’s perspectives, needs and desires are not unintentionally subsumed by the intentions of professionals and family members. If such work is to avoid being blind to the needs and interests of young children as a discrete (yet connected) social group, there are policy and practice tensions that are important foci for reflection and dialogue. These include the tensions between focusing on children as an ‘adults in the making’ and recognising their present – as individuals, family members and members of communities; and recognising children’s embeddedness in their families while honouring their individual agency, and their
important relationships outside the family. It requires attention to ‘the ways in which children contribute to, and benefit from, the social connections that underlie social capital’ (Bessell et al., 2008 p.2) and making explicit, implicit constructions of children and how they are positioned within each discourse. We believe there is an important role for early childhood educators in actively contributing their professional knowledge in exploring the implications of such constructions for collaborative work and realising the rights of young children.

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