‘Doing’ Social Justice in Early Childhood: the potential of leadership

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ABSTRACT Early childhood education has long been connected with objectives related to social justice. Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) has its roots in philanthropic and educational reform movements prevalent at the turn of the twentieth century. More recently, with the introduction of the National Early Childhood Reform Agenda, early childhood education has once more been linked to the achievement of aims associated with redressing inequality and disadvantage. The authors argue that educational leaders have an obligation to promote equity as they articulate the needs of marginalised students who are traditionally disadvantaged while they also work towards challenging the social order that affords this circumstance of inequity to exist. Drawing on extant literature, including data from two previously reported Australian studies in which leadership emerged as having a transformational impact on service delivery, this article examines the potential of early childhood leadership to generate ‘socially just’ educational communities. With reference to critical theory, the authors argue that critically informed, intentional and strategic organisational leadership can play a pivotal role in creating changed circumstances and opportunities for children and families. Such leadership includes positional and distributed elements, articulation of values and beliefs, and collective action that is mindful and informed.

Introduction

It is many years ago now, but the value of this story remains the same:

My son was a four-year-old at preschool and he was eager to attend to play with friends. One day I arrived to collect him and noticed that the children had spent the day making Humpty Dumpty pastings with pre-cut pieces. The pastings were egg-shaped with two eyes, legs dangling freely, a hat and a belt. I surveyed the walls of the room and could not see one with my boy’s name attached. I asked Jake where his was and he pulled it out of his bag, somewhat crumpled, and I could see why it was not on the wall for public exhibition. Humpty had eyes, legs, but the belt was clearly vertical, not horizontal, and I said, ‘Jake, tell me about your Humpty Dumpty?’ and he said, ‘Well, mum, those are the eyes and they are the legs and that [the belt] is the Band-Aid holding him all together’. (This vignette provided by author Hard)
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We include this vignette to illustrate that often what we see and how this is understood is defined by our frame of what is normal and desirable. In this case, according to the teacher, Humpty Dumpty’s belt was in the ‘wrong’ place. Through such an unquestioning acceptance of normalcy, we silence the perspectives of those who have their own stories but are not afforded the opportunity to share them – we miss the thinking of the child who uses the belt as a Band-Aid to fix the broken Humpty Dumpty. Such marginalisation of ‘difference’ stifles creativity, innovation and critical reflection.

Social transformation has long been associated with educational reform movements, including those in early childhood education and care (ECEC), and many contemporary advocates conceptualise the work of early childhood education as engagement with democratic practice (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Penn, 2011; Tayler, 2011). Given the substantial body of research that points to the potential efficacy of ECEC in redressing disadvantage (see, for example, NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2009), we contend that there is a social and political obligation for leaders of ECEC to be deeply concerned with, and not just cognisant of, issues of social justice.

In this article, we draw on a range of Australian literature and policy documents to provide a brief historical overview illustrating the interconnectedness of Australian kindergarten, day nursery and childcare movements with broader social reform throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and to examine social justice in the context of contemporary reform. Following this, we consider relevant literature, including data from two research studies (Press et al, 2010; Wong et al, 2012) on integrated child and family services, to reflect on the potential of educational leadership to support systems and services to be more capable of achieving socially just objectives. Using critical theory as a reference point, we argue that examining and challenging taken-for-granted and normalised practices and assumptions is a necessary characteristic for leadership for social justice. We conclude by discussing implications for ECEC leaders in terms of how these are played out both within individual services and through systems of care and education.

Social Justice within the Australian Policy Context

In 1993, after the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commission was created by the federal government, the inaugural Australian Social Justice Commissioner, Mick Dodson, described social justice in the following way:

Social justice is what faces you in the morning. It is awakening in a house with adequate water supply, cooking facilities and sanitation. It is the ability to nourish your children and send them to school where their education not only equips them for employment but reinforces their knowledge and understanding of their cultural inheritance. It is the prospect of genuine employment and good health: a life of choices and opportunity, free from discrimination (Dodson, cited in Lawrence, 2002).

Social justice has been evoked as part of Australian political discourse for some time, although it is not always prominent as a mainstream political ideal (Iverson, 2008). Nevertheless, contemporary references to social justice can be found in current policies concerning Indigenous Australia (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.) and multiculturalism (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, n.d.). Policies emanating from government tend to describe social justice in terms of fairness and equity in relation to the distribution of resources and access to essential services; the promotion and recognition of civil, legal and industrial rights; and the provision of opportunities for genuine participation in community life and decision making (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, n.d.; Division of Local Government, 2010). What is not explicit in such statements is the essentially transformative nature of social justice. Iverson (2008) observes that the provision of ‘genuine equal opportunity is actually extremely demanding’ and necessitates the redistribution of opportunities and outcomes. Lawrence (2002) asserts that: ‘Social Justice addresses the root cause of the problem and seeks to change the status quo. It is embedded in the transformative value of political action’. The aspiration of personal and social transformation through education is central to the writing of critical theorist Paulo Freire, a seminal influence in the area of education and social justice:
In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle of their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression, not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. (Freire, 1975, p. 26)

There are significant possibilities for ECEC educators to engage with principles of social justice and take up the demanding and complex task of transformation – of creating new possibilities and opportunities for children and families.

**Historical Antecedents**

Here, we provide a snapshot of two key periods in the history of Australian early childhood education: the commencement of the kindergarten and day nursery movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the movement for publicly funded childcare in the 1970s. These snapshots are not comprehensive historical accounts of these periods (for these see, for example, Brennan, 1998; Wong, 2006). Rather, they are included to highlight the nexus between early education and care movements and other areas of social and political reform.

Australian early childhood education has its roots in philanthropic, social and educational reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, Maybanke Wolstenholme (later Anderson), foundation president of the Kindergarten Union of New South Wales, was president of the Women’s Suffrage League (Brennan, 1998, p. 15). Huntsman writes that, in the latter years of the nineteenth century:

> a formidable network of women was working in support of feminist causes – divorce law reform, votes for women, equal pay for equal work – and for education for the poor, setting up ‘ragged Schools’ in the 1860s and the Kindergarten Union in the 1890s. (Huntsman, 2005, p. 10)

The Kindergarten Union of New South Wales was not only committed to opening free kindergartens in poor neighbourhoods, but also to the adoption of kindergarten principles into every school in New South Wales (Brennan, 1998). The ‘Statement of Aims and Objects’ of the Kindergarten Union of South Australia explicitly refuted the idea that kindergartens were a charity and positioned them instead as ‘an educational reform’ (Whitehead, 2010, p. 89). Lillian de Lissa, who was highly influential in the South Australian kindergarten movement, reportedly first approached her kindergarten work ‘with the attitude of a Lady Bountiful’, but soon came to regard it as important educational and social reform (Whitehead, 2010, p. 88). With an eye to alleviating the very real hardship faced by single mothers and their children, day nurseries were formed at the beginning of the twentieth century (the Sydney Day Nursery Association in 1905 and the Victorian Association of Day Nurseries in 1910) (Brennan, 1998) ‘by fellow women, who fully realise the difficulties that beset the paths of working mothers’ (Honorary Secretary, Sydney Day Nursery, cited in Huntsman, 2005, p. 10).

As Huntsman (2005) observes, these early activists agitated for reform in many areas. They had a shared commitment to alter the consequences of poverty and deep inequality through education and significant political reforms, such as women’s suffrage. They sought to transform school education, as well as develop care and education for very young children. Although a national system of kindergarten education did not eventuate in Australia, the legacy of these movements is directly evident today in many existing ECEC services run by various not-for-profit agencies throughout the nation.

The trigger for the widespread availability of ECEC services in Australia was the introduction of the Child Care Act 1972 (Brennan, 1998). This Act became the means by which the national government could develop and expand childcare services, predominantly to serve the needs of working mothers. This significant social reform was driven in part by the political agitation of the women’s liberation movement. The Women’s Electoral Lobby (formed in 1972) and other feminists argued that the provision of childcare was essential to alter inequalities in the division of labour and women’s capacity to earn an income (Brennan & O’Donnell, 1986). Again, we see a nexus between advocacy for programs for children and questions of broader social consequence.

As Rizvi (1998, p. 47) points out: ‘the idea of social justice is a highly contested one’ and ‘embedded within discourses that are historically constituted and that are sites of conflicting and divergent political endeavours’. Our discussion illustrates the social justice ideals associated with
Much advocacy for early childhood education, but it also glosses over the deep divisions between various groups as they vied for support for their particular visions of an early childhood system. For example, the day nursery movement was a direct response to the fact that the kindergarten movement was generally unsupportive of working mothers. The expansion of Australian childcare in the 1970s was marked by deep divisions between feminists, who regarded childcare as integral to women’s liberation by enabling women to enter the paid labour market, and preschool advocates, who sought to expand long-established models of preschool provision (Brennan, 1998).

Nevertheless, progressive developments in Australian ECEC have been made possible through mindful engagement with social, economic and political conditions. Active debate and activism have enabled change. In this article, we contend that ECEC leadership, at the site of the service and through community activism, can support the emergence of new opportunities for children and families.

The Contemporary Policy Context

We now turn to developments in contemporary ECEC policy, especially in the Australian context. As previously illustrated, early childhood policy has been conceptualised historically through a two-tiered system (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006) of education on the one hand and care on the other, reflecting differences in the origins of preschool (as education) and childcare (as care) (Osgood, 2012). While preschool programs are generally targeted to children aged three to six years (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006), childcare has been open to children from infancy. Preschool programs have traditionally focused on learning through play (Ailwood, 2003), and preschool education has often been constructed as early intervention, targeting children who are socially disadvantaged. By contrast, childcare policy has been closely linked to facilitating parental (particularly mothers’) workforce participation (Brennan, 1998; Wong, 2006). Until recently, Australian ECEC was beset by fragmentation, which was partially attributable to the historical origins of childcare and kindergarten/preschool; the range of purposes for which services were established; and complex policy arrangements involving federal and state education departments (kindergarten/preschool) and departments concerned with community, family and human services (childcare) (Brennan, 2007; Press, 2009).

In recent years, significant reforms have endeavoured to redress the previous complexity of Australian early childhood policy and to improve children’s access to higher-quality early childhood education. The introduction of these reforms was propelled in part by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (2006) report *Starting Strong II: early childhood education and care policy*, which ranked Australia last in the expenditure on pre-primary education (three- to six-year-olds). The same report highlighted the low rates of participation in early childhood programs, particularly for children aged three to five years. In response, a key platform of the 2007 Australian Labor Party was the promise of an ‘education revolution’, heralding a ‘new phase in national approaches to education policy’ (Reid, 2009, p. 3). This platform acknowledged that for ‘too long early childhood education and care have been viewed as separate activities’, and purported to resist a binary of ‘education or care’ (Rudd & Macklin, 2007, pp. 11, 10). The resultant National Early Childhood Reform Agenda heralded significant changes in early childhood. Whilst one aim of the reform agenda has been for the provision of universal access to a ‘preschool’ program for all children, there has also been targeted focus on ‘children from disadvantaged backgrounds’ (Rudd & Macklin, 2007, p. 10). Such policies are underpinned by rationales that frame expenditure in early childhood programs as an investment. Thus, it is anticipated that children who participate in quality early childhood programs will, as adults, have ‘increased productivity [and] greater social inclusion’ (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 6). The argument is that this will result in ‘reduced public expenditure in health, welfare and crime related disadvantage’ and reduce ‘high costs associated with entrenched intergenerational disadvantage’ (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 6).

Although open to critique, the intent of such policy reform has been to ‘change the status quo’ (Lawrence, 2002) and open opportunities for all children and families in ways that may not otherwise have been possible. Consideration of the values and beliefs about children and families that shape policy is useful for understanding policy development and intent. Mitchell (2010)
explores the links between assumptions and views of childhood and ECEC policy. She proposes that a frame for policy development that works with the rights of children at the forefront ‘could cater better for societal change and enhance ECE [early childhood education] services as participatory forums building social networks, support, and cohesion’ (Mitchell, 2010, p. 339). Such an orientation is congruent with the principles of social justice explored earlier in this article and, at the same time, challenges early childhood educators to work as advocates to influence policy development and contribute to changing the status quo. Here, we contend that intentional and strategic leadership, and a preparedness to critically engage with challenging questions are imperative in advancing social justice issues.

No Context Is Neutral

According to Litz (2011), educators increasingly face the challenges of globalisation, which are political, economic, social and technical in nature. Globalisation brings greater ‘interdependence and interconnectedness between various people, cultures, ethnic groups, government entities, and organizations from different locations into a wider global arena’ (Litz, 2011, p. 47). Hence, educators are preparing children for a culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse world in which national boundaries are becoming somewhat blurred (Jean-Marie et al, 2009). Such leadership requires addressing the local context and beyond, in order to challenge the existing social order which privilege the few over the many (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). This is demanding work, and yet educational leaders ‘are potentially the architects and builders of a new social order wherein traditionally disadvantaged peoples have the same educational opportunities, and by extension social opportunities, as traditionally advantaged people’ (Jean-Marie et al, 2009, p. 4).

Critical theory serves to stimulate conversations around the power of educational leaders as advocates for a more socially just world. According to Brookfield (2005, p. 1), critical theory ‘draws on Marxist scholarship to illuminate the ways in which people accept as normal a world characterised by massive inequities and the systematic exploitation of the many by the few’. By bringing a lens to hegemony, it illuminates how people ‘are convinced to embrace dominant ideologies as always being in their own best interests’ (Brookfield, 2005, p. 13). The provision of ECEC has long been advocated as a means for creating changed life opportunities. Education has a powerful potential to change life circumstances, and access to education can be a gatekeeper of social and economic advantage (Freire, 1975; Jean-Marie et al, 2009). In the changing global context, we believe that the challenge for leaders is to embrace diversity and actively confront inequality in order to change the traditional constructions of education and afford access and opportunity for many.

Leaders as the Bridge

We have contextualised the history and policy agendas of Australian ECEC to make a case for a relationship between ECEC and social justice. Goodwin et al (2008, p. 6) emphasise the relationship between diversity and issues of social justice when they state that: ‘What becomes apparent is that issues of social justice and diversity are inextricably linked, as patterns of social injustices fall along lines of race, ethnicity, culture, language, gender, class, ability, religion, and sexual orientation’. Critical theory makes an important contribution to our understandings of the role of social justice in education through attention to the relationship of educational ideas, practices and policies with broader oppressive political and ideological discourses in society (Wiedeman, 2002). According to Goodwin et al (2008, p. 6), it is time to rethink ‘our understandings of practices of diversity in the current climate of standardized test scores, and scientifically based research set against the backdrop of social inequities’. In a broad review of measures examining educators’ beliefs and their relationship to leadership choices and decisions, Brown (2004) concluded that there is clear and disturbing evidence that sections of the public school population in the USA experience inequitable and negative treatment on a daily basis. Accordingly, Brown (2004) conceives a critical social
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consciousness for educational leaders through which they have the capacity to identify power relations, oppression and privilege, and to believe these can be altered by active resistance. School leaders are the ‘moral stewards in a global, diverse, and complex society’, with responsibility to reconceptualise schooling and not reproduce it (Brown, 2004, p. 340). Preskill and Brookfield (2009) challenge positional leaders to confront the status quo rather than enact leadership which maintains the existing power relations.

If educational leaders accept the proposition that societies and educational communities are increasingly diverse and frequently inequitable, how can they become the agents of change for social justice at both the level of the service and in the wider community? Waniganayake et al (2012, p. 13) adopt the term ‘intentional leadership’ to describe leadership enacted in ‘positive, purposeful’ ways. They describe those engaged in intentional leadership as demonstrating ‘courage in their decision making’ and the capacity to ‘collaborate with others to achieve collective goals’ (p. 13). We extend this understanding of intentional leadership by arguing that, in order to achieve social justice, critical theory demands of leaders that courageous and purposeful leadership is directed to questioning and challenging practices of oppression and marginalisation. This description resonates with data related to leadership that has emerged from two Australian studies on establishing early years interprofessional collaborations (Press et al, 2010; Wong et al, 2012). In these studies, the beliefs and values of leaders emerged as pivotal to generating collective action in order to achieve organisational change in ways which enabled early childhood programs to be more responsive to the needs and aspirations of families and children in their communities, especially families likely to be on the margins of mainstream service delivery.

The Integrated Early Years Provision in Australia study sought to uncover the components of successful early years integration in the Australian context, with a particular focus on services that included an ECEC component (Press et al, 2010). The Collaborative Practices Project (Wong et al, 2012) examined early years professional collaborations in the state of Victoria. These collaborations, including the development of strongly integrated child and family services, seek to deliver a cohesive suite of supports and programs to children and families facing multiple challenges. Policy support for such ways of working is driven by the long-term goal of improving the life trajectory of young children through timely and appropriately tailored early interventions, including access to ECEC (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2009; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2012). Leadership was not the primary focus of either research project. It did, however, emerge as a key success factor (Press, 2012). The implications of these studies for the creation of successful integrated services and interprofessional collaborations have been discussed elsewhere (see, for example, Press, 2012; Wong, Sumsion & Press, 2012). Here, we focus on the characteristics of leadership that we consider closely link to the enactment of leadership for social justice – that is, those aspects of leadership which contribute to an outward-looking organisational culture concerned with ‘creating ... environments that accord political voice ... ; express cultural respect and esteem ... ; and provide the necessary material and human resources for schooling achievement’ (Keddie, 2012, p. 161).

Leadership Makes a Difference

The findings of the longitudinal Effective Provision of Preschool Education study, which was conducted in the United Kingdom, identified strong leadership as a key characteristic of higher-quality early childhood settings (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006). The capacity of positional leaders to generate positive organisational change was also evident in the data from the Australian studies through the comments of staff from different organisations, who noted the significant, positive impact that a change of leadership had on their organisations. In an integrated services case study interview, a staff member described a leadership change as making a ‘huge difference’, concluding that: ‘having the right leader in the right place is critical’ (cited in Press, 2012). A survey response for the same study described the impact of a new leader as resulting in ‘a deliberate move to action service integration as a powerful tool to utilise our physical and financial resources more effectively, and provide families with a more comprehensive service and support options’ (cited in Press, 2012, p. 39).
Leaders’ Values, Beliefs and Action

The personal beliefs, values and professional behaviours of leaders emerge as significant in advocacy for social justice (Brown, 2004; Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). Ho (2011, p. 58) links the actions of early childhood leaders to their morals and draws attention to the need for leaders to ‘become more self-knowledgeable and self-reflective about the relationships between their thoughts, practices, attitudes and values’. Two examples of how beliefs and values inform leaders’ enactment of advocacy for social justice come from educational leaders who have written about their own work. Sarra (2011, p. 105) describes the values underpinning his actions as an Indigenous principal in an Indigenous school: ‘My task, as I saw it, was to seek ways to help bring about a dialectic of liberation’. Hence, his focus as a leader has been on building student identity and addressing social disadvantage. As such, he articulates a strong commitment to creating high expectations, providing positive role models, confronting poor behaviour and fighting racism. Additionally, Sarra draws on building connections – with others and with the land – to strengthen Aboriginal identity and challenge negative constructions of Aboriginality. The second example turns to the early childhood context, where Giugni (cited in Waniganayake et al, 2012, p. 116) provides an account of the beliefs and values that underpin her advocacy. She draws attention to the Western discourses which shape regulatory frameworks and thus risk marginalising, or rendering invisible, perspectives outside this paradigm. Thus, she proffers an Australian Aboriginal world view in order to intentionally marginalise traditional colonial knowledges. This causes us to contemplate implications for everyday pedagogies and practices in ECEC. Both Sarra’s and Guigni’s work provide illustrations of how leaders engage with principles of social justice to challenge assumed knowledge, and in doing so bring about change.

In the Integrated Early Years Provision in Australia study and the Collaborative Practices Project, the leaders’ commitment to vision-building generated a sense of possibility about making a difference to children’s and families’ lives, and was identified by staff members as an important trait contributing to successful organisational change. This is evident in responses such as:

leadership in terms of creating a collective vision with shared understanding and commitment to reflection. (Cited in Press, 2012, p. 35)

inspired leadership, strong values, philosophies and shared visions ... It is a learning organisation in action, always striving towards best practice. (Cited in Press et al, 2010, p. 49)

Once formulated, the organisation’s vision becomes a reference point for the daily and strategic work of the organisation (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006; Press, 2012; Waniganayake et al, 2012), and thus staff members are supported to meet the aspirational objectives of the setting through their daily practice.

Collective Action for Social Justice

Various theoretical constructions have been developed to explore the notion of leadership, traversing a wide range of approaches from trait theories and contingency concepts to transformational and transactional leaders. While much leadership scholarship has attended to the individual, the concept of distribution of leadership offers greater potential for collective change (Spillane & Diamond, 2007). According to Preskill and Brookfield (2009, p. 3), leadership is ‘a relational and collective process in which collaboration and shared understanding are deemed axiomatic to getting things done’.

Genuine distributed leadership can engage children, staff, parents and community stakeholders in leadership activity in educational settings, but it needs to be supported and facilitated effectively by the positional leader (Litz, 2011; Press, 2012). Consolidating community through the individual freedom of members to contribute ideas and proposals affords collective strength and the potential to bring diverse ideas to a set of shared principles (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). In this way, a community might achieve unity through diversity (Freire, 1975). The disaggregation of leadership requires the subordination of individual objects to those agreed by the collective (Woods et al, 2004). However, it would be wise to be mindful of the potential shortcomings of distributed leadership for the ECEC field. Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2006) and Woods et al (2004) note the difficulties around the distribution of leadership to less qualified and
inexperienced staff, and the potential for the positional leader to delegate too much responsibility, particularly when there is limited training and development. Nevertheless, with consideration to these limitations, we believe that distributed leadership can facilitate collective action to view diversity not as deviant, but rather as unique and specific (Goodwin et al., 2008). In this way, leaders who seek to engage diverse views to form a collective objective have the powerful potential to advocate for greater social justice.

By actively seeking to broaden their own perspectives and those of each team member, leaders have the capacity to build trust and generate an organisational culture characterised by collaboration, openness to new ideas and risk. In addition, they are able to take the long-term view, seeking to build change over time. Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2006) and Woods et al. (2004) emphasise the role of leadership in creating a culture of collaborative dialogue and action research so that early childhood settings can engage in pedagogical practices which improve outcomes for children, particularly those children who are at risk of school failure.

In the Australian studies (Press et al., 2010; Wong et al., 2012), leadership was exercised in both positional (through specific management positions) and distributed forms (where various staff, or teams of staff, enacted leadership activities). Indeed, embedding change seemed to be the result of positional leaders actively developing models of distributed leadership (Press, 2012). This approach is consistent with Whalley’s (2006) model of ‘leaderful’ teams and our assertion that being in and leading through a community or a collective is important to the agenda of social justice.

At one service in the Collaborative Practices Project, a site coordinator described her behaviour in the following way:

The other thing I thought about was that always at the end, when the conductor takes a bow, it’s with the orchestra. I could stand and wave, but if I don’t have brilliant musicians, I’m just waving my hand around [laughing], and I’m like, ‘Oh, what’s she doing?’ But there’s that knowing that nothing exists without the musicians and how grateful that you are as a conductor that everyone is playing their part. (previously unreported interview, Collaborative Practices Project)

One parent in the Collaborative Practices Project described the collective responsibility evident in the service she used in the following way: ‘not one person makes a difference ... it is everyone. Everyone, even including the people in finance – they are all caring’ (previously unreported quote, Collaborative Practices Project). Another parent noted that: ‘there is a whole community and you are made to feel a part of it ... you feel like you have an extended family’ (Press et al., 2012, p. 8). The following two quotes illuminate the leader’s values in relation to collective action within the same service:

She lives and breathes it. She has an open-door policy and knows all the professionals and visits rooms most days. She is forward-thinking and uses people cleverly and makes good use of their talents. She cares about you as a person, although she has to be tough sometimes. This is a very caring organisation and because care emanates from the top, we feel it.

[The leader] puts deliberate processes in place ... to develop a framework to make clear the hidden procedures. When we advertise, we tend to recruit for a good fit. (previously unreported quotes, Collaborative Practices Project)

More generally in these studies, the participants referred to manifestations of the ethos of their services as making a difference. Terms such as the ‘feel’ of the organisation, ‘mutual purpose’, ‘philosophical commitment’, ‘attitudes’, ‘shared visions’ and ‘strong desires’ were used to describe collective commitments to making a difference to children’s and families’ lives.

Conclusion

ECEC in Australia, as in many other parts of the world, has antecedents in reform movements concerned with social justice. Contemporary conceptualisations of early childhood education as a site of democratic practice, coupled with research that points to the potential of ECEC to contribute to redressing educational disadvantage, compel us to argue that there is a moral obligation for leaders of ECEC to be deeply concerned with issues of social justice. The framework of critical theory and the skills and strategies of intentional leadership can be utilised to achieve a social justice agenda for early childhood education. Critical theory is a powerful lens through which
to examine whose interests are being served by dominant social constructions, and how these constructions afford some groups significant advantage over others. Intentional leadership can be deployed as a catalyst for creating change at the service level for children and families, and for engagement with policy to advocate for a more socially just society. In their everyday work, educators are faced with complex issues. Intentional, critical and strategic leadership calls for educators to uncover and question assumed knowledges, and to provide opportunities to engage with new understandings. The challenge for intentional leaders is to forge collective approaches which disrupt oppressive practices, and affirm and celebrate diversity.

As the director of a long day care centre, I was unsettled by comments I overheard in our centre as Australia Day approached. A child commented on ‘Australia’s birthday’; a parent talked of ‘celebrating our birthday as a nation’; another spoke of ‘the day Australia was discovered’. Australia Day is celebrated on 26 January – the day Captain James Cook arrived in 1788. The claim of ‘discovery’ was made despite Indigenous people being the inhabitants of Australia for centuries prior to this date. The 26 January is a deeply troubling day for many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people living in Australia. In the centre, staff were committed to addressing Indigenous issues and working with the local Reconciliation Australia group. After much discussion, the decision was made to make more visible the centre’s connections with Reconciliation Australia to create space for deeper conversations to challenge dominant assumptions about Australia Day. As well as displaying relevant resources, members of Reconciliation Australia visited the centre. Children, parents and staff participated in an activity designed to acknowledge the past, look to the future, and build respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. A banner was painted in the colours of the Aboriginal flag – red, yellow and black – with the words: ‘Reconciliation as a way forward; Indigenous Australians as landowners’. People were invited to add a handprint to the banner, which was then displayed (and celebrated) in the centre for years to come. (This vignette provided by author Gibson)

We have closed this article with a second vignette in order to illustrate the capacity of early childhood educators to enact principles for social justice. Using the lens of critical theory, the vignette illustrates the way in which leadership was used to directly address ‘taken-for-granted’, normalised oppressive practices and assumptions in order to create the space for marginalised voices to be heard.

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