

# The shaping of Australian early childhood education and care: What can we learn from a critical juncture?

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**THIS ARTICLE IDENTIFIES AND** examines a critical juncture in Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy history in order to understand the contemporary Australian ECEC policy landscape, especially in relation to the way in which quality in child care is mandated and understood. In policy, critical junctures are path-breaking policy developments that have lasting impacts (Gal & Bargal, 2002; Pierson, 2004). This article illustrates how examining critical junctures can deepen understandings of processes that contribute to transformative policy shifts. In doing so, we illuminate ways in which contemporary contexts have been shaped by past policy.

## Introduction

In policy, critical junctures are path-breaking policy developments that have lasting impacts (Gal & Bargal, 2002; Pierson, 2004). Examining critical junctures can deepen understandings of processes that contribute to transformative policy shifts. Such examinations illuminate the way in which contemporary contexts have been shaped by past policy. Using Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) as an example, this article examines a critical juncture in early childhood policy and the discourses that rose to prominence with this key policy shift. Our examination assists in developing rich and nuanced understandings of the Australian contemporary ECEC policy landscape.

The critical juncture under examination in this article was foreshadowed by then Prime Minister Robert (Bob) Hawke, as part of his 1990 election campaign policy speech for the Labor government:

*And for the first time, we will extend fee-relief to low and middle income families using commercial child care centres.*

*Parents are entitled to be confident they are getting quality attention for their kids, whether they are using Government-funded or commercial centres. So we will work with all the key interests in child care to develop a system of accreditation (Hawke, 1990, p. 9).*

The 1990 Hawke policy speech (hereafter referred to as the Hawke speech), signalled two significant policy shifts: the creation of a mixed market for child care; and the establishment of a national childcare quality accreditation system, the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) (1994–2011). These policy developments transformed the provision of Australian ECEC and have had ongoing ramifications for how early childhood educators and policy-makers conceive and construct quality in early childhood programs. As a result, Australia now has a predominantly for-profit childcare sector with childcare funding linked to a system of accreditation that establishes and monitors standards related to quality in early childhood programs.

The analysis reported here was undertaken as part of a larger study that examined constructions of quality in Australian ECEC between 1972 and 2009. This article focuses on the period prior to and shortly after the Hawke speech and proceeds in four parts. First, we explain our methodology which draws loosely on Pierson's perspectives of policy history (2004, 2005) and a Foucauldian-influenced history of the present (Foucault, 1977). Second, we provide an overview of our data sources and data analysis methods. Third, we identify key elements of the 1990 Hawke speech and surrounding political events that signal a critical juncture for Australian child care. Fourth, we highlight the ongoing impact of this critical juncture, including the prominence of market discourses

in Australian ECEC and the long-term implications for how quality is understood in a mixed childcare market. Policy histories have been used to illuminate ECEC policy trajectories in international contexts (Scheiwe & Willekens, 2009) but, to date, have been less widely used in Australia. It is, therefore, important to illuminate the trajectory of Australian ECEC policy, particularly in relation to matters of quality.

## Key definitions

In endeavouring to illuminate the trajectory of Australian ECEC policy in relation to quality, we work from the premise that '[p]olicies are both systems of values and symbolic systems, ways of accounting for and legitimating political decisions' (Ball, 2008, p. 13). Path-breaking policy developments signalled by a critical juncture, 'place institutional arrangements on paths or trajectories, which are then very difficult to alter' (Pierson, 2004, p. 135). In a previous article (Logan, Sumsion & Press, 2013, p. 87), we drew on existing policy studies (see, for example, Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Gal & Bargal, 2002; Hogan & Doyle, 2007, 2009; Pierson, 2004; Scheiwe & Willekens, 2009) to conceptualise a critical juncture as: eventuating at brief times of political, social or economic crises; reflecting a 'major digression' from previous policy; and having 'lasting impact' on subsequent policy choices and arrangements. We apply these three key elements as identifying features of the critical juncture under examination in this article.

## Methodology, data sources and methods

In order to understand the 'systems of values' and 'symbolic systems' evident in contemporary Australian ECEC policy, we draw upon two methodological perspectives: policy history (Pierson, 2004, 2005) and a Foucauldian-influenced history of the present (Foucault, 1977). Both perspectives recognise the potential of historical material to shed light on contemporary contexts.

Policy history enables the exploration of broad temporal dimensions of policy processes, that is, the dynamics of policy developments over time. This exploration facilitates the tracing of macro-contextual factors and processes that can lead to major policy change, such as the ascendancy of neo-liberalism and micro-economic reforms during the years of the Hawke-Keating Government (1983-1996). Similarly, we highlight perspectives of early childhood professionals and advocacy groups to map conditions surrounding the formation of a critical juncture and its ongoing impact.

We also put to use our version of a history of the present to problematise contemporary practices by looking back at historical moments and exploring conditions for such practices to exist (Castel, 1994). This approach examines how discourses work in complex ways as 'practices that

systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972, p. 54). As such, discourses can be considered as exercising power through the construction of particular practices, meanings and language use in policy texts.

Using both approaches draws attention to discourses as 'socially produced forms of knowledge that set limits upon what it is possible to think, write or speak about a given social object' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 35), and processes associated with macro-contextual social, political or economic factors. Our identification of macro-contextual factors contributes to signalling a critical juncture and, in doing so, highlights the ascendancy of market discourses for Australian child care. In turn, we draw attention to the effects of market discourses for constructions of quality in ECEC.

Our analysis draws on a data set from the period immediately prior to, through to shortly after the Hawke speech. It includes two sources of data: policy documents and interviews with policy elites. The following Commonwealth government policy documents instrumental in the development of the childcare accreditation system were selected for in-depth analysis: the *Policy Launch* by then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, 8 March 1990 (Hawke, 1990); *National Accreditation System for Child Care Services*—a report prepared for the Minister for Aged, Family and Health Services (Committee of Child Care Industry Representatives, 1990); *Accreditation of Early Childhood Services in Australia*—a report prepared for the Department of Health, Housing and Community Services (Wangmann, 1991); and the *Interim Report to the Minister for Aged, Family and Health Services* (Interim National Childcare Accreditation Council, June, 1992)<sup>1</sup>.

Thirteen individual semi-structured interviews with policy elites were undertaken by the first author. Details of the interviews are reported in more detail elsewhere (Logan, Sumsion & Press, 2014). In order to gain an in-depth sense of issues contained within the interviews, eight interviews were transcribed by the first author while five interviews were professionally transcribed for reasons related to time constraints. By drawing on the perspectives of policy elites, we endeavoured to capture a sphere of influence of policy production, along with the form and content of selected government policy documents (Ball, 2008). All policy elites were either directly involved as policy-makers or as policy commentators. They comprised five senior bureaucrats, four academics and four key professionals. However, for the purposes of this article we have drawn upon the perspectives of four policy elites. Of these policy elites, three had direct involvement as policy-makers for the period of the development of the accreditation system, while one was influential as a policy commentator.

Data analysis of the policy texts involved two phases. First, extracts mentioning the term quality, and concepts implicitly connected to quality were identified. Examples

of implicit connections included references to quality as a guarantee and a set of standards. These extracts were read repeatedly to identify patterns and sub-themes. The sub-themes were then clustered into common themes. A similar process was adopted for the analysis of the interview transcripts. This early phase of analysis generated preliminary thoughts, questions and summary interpretations. A process of mapping connections between the policy texts, interview transcripts and broader corpus of research literature enabled us to make connections between and across the data sources. In doing so, we found diverse representations of quality in the data such as 'guarantee', 'aspiration', 'standards' and 'choice'.

Second, we adopted a 'What's the Problem Represented to be (WPR)?' approach (Bacchi, 2009). This approach uses six interrelated questions to examine implied problems and underlying assumptions contained within policies (Bacchi, 2009). By applying these questions to the data, we examined how conditions for policy problems, elaborated in discourse, shape the concept of quality. This level of analysis considered how issues and policy problems pertaining to quality were framed. Both phases of analysis contributed to addressing the primary research question for the larger study: how has quality been constructed in government policy concerning centre-based long day care in Australia between 1972 and 2009?

At a conceptual level, the notion of critical junctures (Pierson, 2004) enabled us to draw associations between possible influences of macro-contextual factors and policy developments concerning quality in child care. We applied the three key elements that we suggest indicate a critical juncture to the data set and relevant research literature to test whether policy developments in this period could be considered a critical juncture (see, for example, Brennan 1998, 2008; Brennan & Adamson 2012; Brennan & O'Donnell, 1986). In the next section, we identify and discuss the three key elements of a critical juncture evident in the Hawke speech and the period surrounding it. We then turn our attention to professional initiatives from that period that further contribute to explanations of policy change.

## **The 1990 Hawke policy speech**

The Hawke–Keating Government years (1983–1996) were a time of social and economic reform, particularly for women (Ryan & Bramston, 2003). The reforms were driven, in part, by concerns about the impact of a global economic recession of the 1980s and early 1990s on the Australian economy. Some key reforms included an agreement between the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the Government in 1983, known as the Accord, the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) and the *Affirmative Action Act 1986 (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women)* (Cth). Collectively, these reforms supported increased numbers of women in the workforce

and boosted a weakening economy. However, the reforms also emphasised a pressing need for child care as women's labour force participation rates escalated and demand for child care continued to outstrip supply (Logan, Press & Sumsion, 2012).

### **Political, social or economic crisis**

The 1990 election was a time of political crisis for the Hawke Government. High interest rates, an economic downturn and a swing against the Government raised concerns about their ability to win a successive fourth term in office (Ryan & Bramston, 2003). As the election drew near, other concerns about a shortage of childcare places were coupled with concerns about the quality of child care (Wangmann, 1994). Although these debates appeared secondary to broader debates about the economy, heated disputes centred on the role of government in funding child care (Brennan, 2008) and perceived inequities in access to publicly funded childcare places compared to non-subsidised for-profit centres. These perceived inequities loomed large as election issues, particularly in some marginal Labor electorates.

### **A major digression from previous policy**

The Hawke speech promised to extend Commonwealth Government funding to the private childcare sector and simultaneously announced the development of a national childcare accreditation system. Following the introduction of the *Child Care Act 1972* (Cth), Commonwealth policy had broadly supported the principle that child care was best provided through funding for public infrastructure (Logan et al., 2013). Private sector funding was therefore a major digression from previous childcare policy. It was, however, in keeping with the government's emphasis on micro-economic reform. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s the Commonwealth Government relied increasingly on the 'free' market for what had previously been government-owned or supported services (Pusey, 2003) in conjunction with standard settings through performance measures.

### **Lasting impact on subsequent policy choices and arrangements**

The policy directions instigated by the Hawke announcement have had lasting impacts on Australian child care in at least two key ways. First, the extension of government funding to the for-profit sector was a significant ideological shift that heralded the rapid expansion of child care as a business venture (rather than a community-based service). Private, for-profit child care became, and has remained, the predominant form of child care in Australia which now relies on mixed market childcare provision.

Second, the speech triggered the development of a compulsory national childcare accreditation system to address concerns that quality in child care would drop

if provision was primarily reliant on the private sector. This was significant for two reasons: it shifted the focus towards the quality of childcare services instead of primarily focusing on the quantity of childcare services; and it began to shape the way in which quality in programs was perceived. Accreditation, in one form or another, has existed since that time, most recently under the rubric of the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA).

Dramatic policy moments, such as critical junctures, often represent the final stage of processes that have gradually worn away previous policy stances (Pierson, 2005). While many junctures occur in policy-making processes, this critical juncture represented a transformative policy shift from an emphasis on government funding of service infrastructure towards reliance upon a mixed economy. However, focusing on macro-contextual factors alone can overlook processes that 'lend themselves to inquiries about the "moves" of particular "actors" at a moment in time' (Pierson 2005, p. 34). In the following section, we turn our attention to professional initiatives such as the moves of union officials, early childhood professionals, parents and advocacy groups about concerns for quality in child care. These initiatives illuminate complexities surrounding the Hawke speech and examine its ongoing impact upon constructions of quality in ECEC.

### **Professional initiatives**

Although matters of quality emerged in earlier policy debates, particularly through the advocacy efforts of professional organisations, 1990 was the first time concerns about quality featured so prominently in an election platform (Wangmann, 1994). These concerns stemmed broadly from government reports (ABS, 1988), union officials, parents, early childhood professional groups (Press & Wong, 2013) and advocacy groups (Brennan, 1998) in the years just prior to the 1990 election. For example, in 1988, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released a report on commercial child care that reported high numbers of young, inexperienced and untrained staff in privately owned childcare centres (ABS, 1988). Publicly funded childcare centres, usually referred to as community-based centres, received government funding and functioned as non-profit enterprises. This approach was conducive to the employment of well-qualified, experienced staff, whereas privately owned centres relied primarily on parent fees to cover expenses, including staffing costs. As a result, privately owned centres appeared more inclined to employ cheaper, less qualified and inexperienced staff in order to minimise expenses and maximise profit. While not all private operators were motivated by profit, Jane, a policy elite informant in the current study, explained her first-hand experience of quality in many privately owned childcare centres she visited:

*... I'd often go to a centre where, as you would probably know, the licensing requirements [in NSW] were that if you had 20 or 25 children or under you didn't need any [Jane's emphasis] qualified people and I would find young girls in charge of large groups of children, nobody around to help them ... like lawyers running the show as a tax write-off, owning the business ... [There was] a lot of problems with just meeting the bare standards around licensing (Jane, former union official).*

Reports from union officials (such as Jane), government reports (ABS, 1988) and other anecdotal comments from professionals (Brennan, 1998) contributed to growing concerns about the quality of many childcare centres. As these concerns escalated, other concerns about an acute shortage and uneven distribution of publicly funded childcare places also loomed large (Robertson & Cox, 1981). Jane described her experience of the shortage and inequitable distribution of publicly funded childcare places for many families:

*... you had a predominance of services [publicly funded child care] in wealthy areas [in the late 1980s] because those people had been in a position to write the submissions and so on. Now we'd moved to a system where it was more a needs-based planning approach but that didn't lead to the change overnight, so obviously in a lot of areas where you would have had traditional Labor constituents, the people were using private [Jane's emphasis] day care and they had no [Jane's emphasis] access to fee relief. So if you were in Mt Druitt [one of Sydney's lowest socioeconomic suburbs] and you happened to be going in to the community-based centre at Mt Druitt you were getting fee relief, and if you hadn't been able to get in there and you were going to the private one [child care centre], you were both on the same wage and you worked at the same bus company or whatever ... you didn't get any fee relief, you had to pay the full fee. So there was a huge, huge pressure politically across the trade union movement and within the Labor Party and the Labor Government, to equalise that (Jane, former union official).*

Jane's comments highlight her perception of growing unrest from union officials and parents about inequitable access to publicly funded non-profit child care and fee support. While limited Australian research is available about the benefits of non-profit provision, international research (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2009) suggests non-profit status is associated with higher quality child care than commercial centres. Therefore, concerns about inequitable access to publicly funded non-profit child care and related concerns about quality, fuelled pressure for policy change prior to the 1990 election.

Since the early 1980s, the focus of government policy had been on the cost and supply of child care rather than

the quality of the program (Wangmann, 1994). For some years prior to the 1990 announcement, members of the early childhood profession had endeavoured to have the issue of quality in child care addressed. According to Press and Wong (2013) early childhood professional groups had been actively raising the issue of quality in long day care since the 1980s. Such endeavours included research at the Brisbane Lady Gowrie Centre (Watts & Patterson, 1985), ministerial reports (Murray, 1986) and literature reviews (Lady Gowrie Child Centre [Melbourne], 1987). Importantly, the Australian Early Childhood Association<sup>2</sup> (AECA) supported trials of quality accreditation systems in the states of Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. The trials, based on the American system developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), aimed to develop understandings of how accreditation could be developed for the Australian context (Wangmann, 1994). The AECA initiatives were to prove useful as models for the later development of a national system.

According to Laura, a policy elite informant in the current study, the concerted advocacy efforts of the AECA and unions converged to put the quality of children's experiences in child care on the political agenda and influence the development of the national accreditation system.

*I was there as part of all of those debates [and] I can't underestimate the role they [the ACTU] played in getting quality into political rhetoric. It sounds ridiculous that the union did it, but they did. They were fortunate that AECA had been doing a lot of work around this [promoting the idea and trialling voluntary accreditation systems] (Laura, former senior bureaucrat, academic and policy advisor).*

Laura's comments, along with recommendations from key government reports (for example, Committee of Child Care Industry Representatives, 1990), highlight the cumulative impact of professional initiatives over many years. These initiatives enabled the advocacy efforts of early childhood and union groups to be attuned to the concerns of government at a time when the Government appeared receptive to policy change. While opening funding to the private sector was a devastating blow for proponents of publicly funded child care (Brennan, 1998), combined advocacy efforts were instrumental in creating new possibilities for the provision of high quality in child care. This resonates with Sumsion's (2006) assertion that powerful results can be achieved when professionals combine efforts to focus on politics as well as policy.

Our analysis highlights how macro-contextual factors and professional initiatives contribute to possible explanations for the change in direction indicated in the Hawke speech. This change assuaged a number of political tensions for the Government. First, providing funding to private providers alleviated the shortage of funded childcare

places by stimulating supply and appeased disgruntled childcare operators and parents who did not have access to government funding (Brennan & Adamson, 2012). Second, the speech announced the development of a system which would focus upon quality, regardless of service ownership. In doing so, this announcement was designed to allay concerns about poor quality in child care. However, the policy direction created by the speech gave rise to market discourses in Australian ECEC policy, reinforcing the notion that 'new policies create new politics' (Schattschneider, 1935, as cited in Pierson, 2005, p. 39). Next, we outline the effects of market discourses for constructions of quality in Australian ECEC policy.

## **Market discourses in child care**

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In this section we aim to highlight how constructions of quality in contemporary Australian ECEC policy texts are deeply embedded in market discourses that construct child care as a commodity that can be bought and sold (Brennan & Adamson, 2012; Lloyd & Penn, 2012). Opening up childcare provision to the market positioned parents as consumers in a mixed childcare market. Prime Minister Hawke's speech, referred to earlier, frames quality as assurance for consumers of child care. In other words, consumer confidence was to be assured by developing a system (accreditation) to set standards to measure and monitor the quality of child care. A closer look, however, identifies a number of questionable assumptions in this representation. First, framing quality only as an assurance for parents risks overshadowing an emphasis on quality for children. Second, standards alone are assumed to be sufficient to ensure quality. Third, quality is assumed to be unrelated to service ownership. Fourth, any service provider is assumed to be able to provide quality.

In the Hawke speech, the shift to a mixed childcare market was justified through concepts of choice, availability and affordability for women to increase their access to employment opportunities. For example, Prime Minister Hawke announced:

*We recognise that if women are to have a real choice, they need access to child care. That is why we have established what is already one of the best systems of child care in the world, and why we will make it even better—more places and more affordable access to them (1990, p. 9).*

Yet, constructing women as consumers of child care assumes that consumers (read parents) will be able to effectively choose and therefore determine the quality of child care through the choices they make. In brief, in child care the primary consumers of the service are the children. For this reason quality can be difficult to determine as young children have developing communication skills and may not easily be able to communicate the quality of the service they experience (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2009).

Moreover, when parents choose childcare services their choices are based on multiple factors, including location and cost as well as quality. Therefore, parents' ability to discern quality is limited by their knowledge, experience of childcare centres and awareness of less easily observable aspects of quality (Ishimine, 2011; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2009). Cleveland and Krashinsky note that in mixed markets, challenges associated with discerning quality can lead some commercial firms 'to provide superficial evidence of this costly quality but actually provide less than demanders want and quality that is lower than advertised' (2009, p. 441). Compounding these challenges are high-switching costs associated with child care, a point also highlighted by Avril, a policy elite informant in the current study. She commented:

*We've got this absurd idea that if we fund parents that they will be able to choose [Avril's emphasis] the child care and therefore affect the quality, which doesn't hold at all. We know bloody well with child care, you take what you can and most parents don't question it ... because the other thing and I know this as a researcher ... you cannot get parents to criticise the care of the kids they've got at the moment. It comes up again and again in surveys; parents will always say it's fine because if it's not fine they're doing a bad job as a parent (Avril, former policy advisor, researcher and current social commentator).*

Avril's comments highlight some of the complexities parents face in exerting pressure on the quality of child care in mixed markets. Even when offered higher quality or lower costs, parents' reluctance to move their child from one service provider to another limits the capacity of market mechanisms to ensure quality (Brennan, Cass, Himmelweit & Szebehely, 2012). A further challenge for parents is that childcare markets flourish primarily in profitable environments. Therefore some parents may face limited or no choice, particularly in regional or remote areas (Harris, 2008).

Challenges surrounding how to determine and account for quality in mixed markets was also evident in policy-making developments for the establishment of the accreditation system. These challenges led to considerable disagreement among key stakeholders. For example, in 1990 a committee of commercial and non-commercial childcare representatives was established to ensure 'a satisfactory and consistent level of quality across all sectors of the industry and across all States' (Committee of Child Care Industry Representatives, 1990, p. 3). The committee recommended the establishment of the Interim National Accreditation Council (INAC) (1991–1993) to oversee the development of the accreditation system. The final INAC report recommended a system with two stages (Wangmann, 1995). Stage one would provide fee relief and a minimum level of quality (Wangmann, 1991) while stage two was intended as a voluntary stage to provide staff with

incentives to achieve higher levels of quality and receive formal recognition of this achievement. However, towards the end of 1992 the final INAC report and a separately delivered dissenting minority report from representatives of the private childcare industry were delivered to the Minister for Aged, Family and Health Services (NCAC, 2009). The dissenting report raised concerns from many private childcare providers about the recommendations contained in the INAC report citing fears associated with increased costs, recruiting and retaining qualified staff and a lack of resources to implement accreditation procedures (Australian Federation of Child Care Associations, 1992).

While many of these fears were well-founded, the elimination of the second stage removed a system-based incentive for the pursuit of higher quality beyond minimum standards. Emma, a policy elite informant in the current study, explained the vision for the two-staged system as:

*... a kind of base level of quality that was mandated and then a kind of optional higher level of quality so that services that were already good could be supported to continue to improve with this belief that you never actually get there ... that you always need to be thinking and improving and changing and so there was great disappointment that wasn't there (Emma, former academic and policy advisor).*

Emma's comments reinforce a conceptualisation of quality that is closely aligned with broader definitions of quality. More recently, these aspirations have been supported by research that suggests going beyond minimum quality requirements improves children's developmental outcomes (Sylva et al., 2003). However, in an attempt to assuage differences between key stakeholders, the Commonwealth Government approved a compromise of only one stage, requiring services meet a minimum level of quality in order to be accredited and thereby receive fee relief (NCAC, 2009). Thus, system-based incentives for broadening constructions of quality were hampered by concerns associated with profit motives.

Nevertheless, the development of the original accreditation system was a major step forward for ensuring a level of quality in child care. Yet tensions associated with rationales of individual choice, the profit motive and narrowing definitions of quality are inherently embedded in mixed childcare markets. Seemingly, the motivation to increase profits by reducing costs, most notably staffing costs, can lead to incentives to employ minimum numbers of qualified staff. This motivation can be at odds with providing and sustaining high quality in child care (OECD, 2006).

## Conclusion

In order to shed light on the value of policy histories for illuminating the trajectory of Australian ECEC policy, and constructions of quality in that policy landscape, we have drawn upon two methodological perspectives: policy

history (Pierson, 2004, 2005) and a Foucauldian-influenced history of the present (Foucault, 1977). These perspectives have enabled us to identify a critical juncture in childcare policy and connections between this juncture and the effects of market discourses on constructions of quality in child care.

The Hawke speech and the childcare policy directions it flagged represented a major digression from previous policy and had impacts lasting to the present day. It changed the face of Australian child care through stimulating the provision of child care by the private sector, resulting in a shift from a reliance on publicly funded non-profit child care, to a mixed market in which the private sector predominates. The Hawke speech announced the creation of a national childcare quality accreditation system, the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS), which has had a profound impact on the ways in which the quality of child care is understood and enacted.

Debates about funding the private sector and creating a mixed market for childcare provision have been and continue to be contentious issues in international ECEC policy contexts (Penn, 2012). These debates were particularly contentious in the Australian ECEC policy context throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s (Brennan, 1998). Yet in contemporary times the market approach has become the widely accepted model of delivery in Australia, with the for-profit sector the dominant provider of long day care services (DEEWR, 2010). This acceptance remains largely unquestioned within policy circles and the community despite findings that question whether mixed markets can support and improve the quality of child care.

Our examination of a critical juncture highlights the establishment of the national childcare quality accreditation system, the QIAS, and the context in which quality emerged on the childcare policy agenda. Critiques of the implementation of the QIAS pointed to its potentially narrowing effect on the complexity of quality in child care (Grieshaber, 2002); however, attention to recent history also highlights accreditation's role in mediating market forces and placing the issue of childcare quality on the political agenda.

Most early childhood services in Australia today are encompassed by a newer version of an accreditation scheme, centred on the *National Quality Standard* (ACECQA, 2012). The need to further improve quality has become an intrinsic element of reform for the ECEC sector as evidenced by the former Rudd Labor Government's National Early Childhood Reform Agenda (2007–2013). Quality in child care, and the early childhood sector more broadly, has become a legitimate focus of mainstream political discourse and a focal point of service delivery. This focal point has triggered valuable discussions about the complexity of quality.

## Endnotes

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Ethical considerations have been met by addressing the requirements for interviewing human participants as outlined by the Charles Sturt University Ethics in Human Research Committee. Approval no: 302/2011/01.

<sup>1</sup> An exhaustive search for the Interim National Childcare Accreditation Council (June, 1992) *Quality, affordable, childcare, Australia-wide: Final report* was undertaken; however, this document was unable to be located.

<sup>2</sup> Now Early Childhood Australia (ECA).

## Legislation

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