

Men's Business, Women's Work Part 1

***“My brain feels like I'm going to explode and I'm puffed out”*: How market forces in childcare compromise the emotional wellbeing of our children.**

In October 2009, the Federal Government released *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* which brought together children's development and learning in ways that were generally not seen with a strong emphasis on outcome-led play-based learning, quality environments and emotional regulation. In 2011, a second major reform followed, the National Quality Standard which outlined seven key areas that research indicated would create a quality environment for young children's learning and development including the importance of physical environments. Both reforms covered long day care, family day care, outside school hours care and kindergartens/preschools.

The new national regulations led to early childhood settings reviewing their programs and practices. To be fair, an enormous amount of professional learning, reflection and development initially took place, both formally and informally and there was genuine excitement that this was something wonderful in education akin to the high quality Nordic programs which had long been, and are still, recognised internationally as the gold standard, and that this would acknowledge the importance of brain development between 0 to 8 years. Unfortunately, many early childhood centres still viewed their single focus on 'childcare' as an accurate reflection of the service they really offered to working parents and the learning was more piecemeal. While the industry was supposedly to change to a 'profession' by including the introduction of qualified professional teachers and trained educators who could understand child development and use curriculum planning, the fact is that most teachers are undervalued in commercial long day care centres where their income falls dramatically short of their counterparts in government run preschools and where often educators and directors openly question their contribution. Evidence for this is the fact that it is educators who are given educational leader and senior administrative roles while teachers are relegated as glorified educators, spending valuable time changing nappies and cutting fruit whilst ticking the legislative requirement box but with little real regard for their actual profession. In fact, in some states, teachers in childcare are not even required to be registered which, again, falls short of creating a consistent set of standards for teachers in the early years space.

The result is centres with high turnover of teaching staff, children that are still not in “learning” focused centres, and parents who do not work collaboratively with teachers but rather dictate terms for 'babysitting.' This includes expecting teachers to toilet train their children, cater for behavioural issues not addressed at home, requesting children in full day care not to be allowed to sleep and issuing ultimatums including threatening to remove their children if a centre will not cater to their specific demands often contrary to the child's best interest. **At the end of the day when you allow a profit driven business model to dominate vulnerable areas, whether in aged care or in early years, the focus is on quantity and numbers not quality and wellbeing.** Most educators feel like a number; that they are only there to fulfil child educator ratios. Many are overwhelmed at the expectations placed on them.

Consequently “My brain feels like I'm about to explode and I'm puffed out” were the words of an articulate 3 year old after having to attend a full day preschool at which I worked. In private schools, full day 5 days a week preschools are currently being marketed as an attractive alternative to all day care centres. Increasingly younger children are expected to attend longer

hours and pay for the privilege. I have had children just over 2 and a half years old being 'enrolled'. Most, like this little girl, do not cope. Unfortunately, the benefits of these Full Day Kindergartens (FDK) have been shown to be short term and, in fact, back in 2010, Cooper et al. reported evidence that FDK may have negative effects on behaviour. Certainly, that was my experience. It has forced me as a teacher in what is meant to be a reflective practice to seriously reflect: "Am I doing harm as an Early Years Teacher?"

Ironically the two new reforms had at their core a vision of a healthy collaborative environment where everyone's emotional wellbeing would be considered – children, families and teachers. Unfortunately this is not the reality. Instead while there is an explicit promotion of social and emotional well-being it has led to a superficial view of what this consists of, and where children are expected to respond in particular ways and, if they do not, they are potentially labelled as 'difficult' rather than the fact that the environment is unsuitable.

To provide some background, I am a professional teacher whose speciality is emotional connection through nature play. I believe I have extensive knowledge and understanding of the early learning 'business' as one of a majority of women who work in this field (only 1-3% of males work in early years settings, Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021). I undertook my Masters in Early Childhood and went on to work as a teacher in schools, kindergartens (government and elite private) and privatised childcare centres. What I have concerningly witnessed are the clear disparities in an industry controlled by market forces and regulation that is poorly monitored. The potential harm resulting from this gross inconsistency across the different private, government and elite centres negates the very purpose of introducing teachers into the early learning space which was supposedly to create an equitable learning field by providing early intervention to those children and families in need and to support the emotional wellbeing of children.

For example, while we have clear legislation that children need outdoor space there are still private childcare centres that are allowed to function without meeting this requirement. Many are built around a play environment with artificial grass and rocks with no risk play equipment like bikes or swings that are also important for gross motor skill development and, where numbers in one small room can exceed 30 children. Mostly children are just randomly thrown together with no planning or consideration of their individual needs or the fact that they are in a group setting for which there are social expectations for which they may not be emotionally equipped. Where there is one-on-one support, for example, where a child has been identified as needing assistance and has access to NDIS funding, the reality is that the staff are rarely trained to meet those specific needs. Whether there are any behavioural interventions will depend on the parent. Most parents do not want their child 'labelled' and, consequently teachers are dealing with often highly emotionally deregulated children, many of whom have been placed in some form of institutionalised care well before their first birthday and consequently are emotionally disconnected. Contrast this to an early years learning centre connected to an elite school which has extensive funding and where children are exposed to art studios, science laboratories and incredible nature and play spaces! These children have so much privilege that it creates other issues. Clearly in these situations, parents are being marketed to see the early years space as something that will give their child an academic advantage, which was not the intention of the childcare reforms.

I initially entered the early learning space in 2016, just after the introduction of nature play in South Australia. Nature Play began as an initiative of the Western Australian Department of Sport and Recreation and was inspired by the ideas of American social commentator, Richard

Louv. In February 2014, Nature Play expanded to include Queensland and South Australia followed in 2016 by Canberra. The benefits of nature play properly implemented cannot be underestimated. For a period I had been involved on the management committee and as a snorkelling instructor for not for profit that worked with communities and families to help develop confidence in their local marine environment. It followed inadvertently the Louv philosophy that before you can advocate for the environment you need to develop an emotional connection with the environment. Initially this was my focus. But it was during one particular snorkelling outing with a traumatised family that I first realised the potential huge benefit that nature play had on the emotional regulation of children. I had already witnessed as an ecologist the healing power being on country had on Aboriginal families and was privileged to be part of programs that reintroduced extinct species back on country and the powerful effect this had on communities traumatised by their own sense of loss.

Furthermore a focus by our committee on curriculum in an attempt to enter the school space found that the themes we wanted to explore and achieve were similar to those underlying the Early Years Learning Framework - children's happiness and emotional wellbeing in a community setting - were what generations have wanted and sought for themselves. What I realised is why we have failed out children consistently begins with our failure to provide environments where they can flourish and have a sense of belonging. If what we really want is for our children to have self agency to experience the world and take risks in their learning but also to help them develop empathy and healthy identity (self esteem is tied to this) then we need to radically change how we teach.

In my re-education to become an early childhood teacher I came across profound influencers Foucault, Dewey, Rogoff, Butler to name a few, but the reality when I entered the world of teaching is that I am part of a well-oiled institutionalised machine that has conditioned education to be a workforce driver for centuries. My own practice attempts to disrupt this but working in private childcare has made me realise that it can actually be worse. These centres often espouse to be pedagogically based, for example, Reggio. The focus of Reggio is to encourage children to question and explore learning in deep and meaningful ways. Originating in Italy it honours the process of a child's learning. But the reality is that these centres use pedagogy as a marketing tool which is not only unethical but when educators are untrained in these pedagogical practice it potentially can cause harm to developing young minds and their neurological connections. I have been at centres where children as young as 15 months were mistakenly given pencils to draw with!

Failing to meet the developmental learning needs is one issue but more importantly children need to feel that their families and communities, including early learning centres are places of belonging. This makes serious sense. If the two reforms were aimed primarily at children's wellbeing why would it make sense that disengaging children from their families and communities would actually work by putting children into institutionalised settlings owned by corporations often operated interstate or even internationally, certainly not locally. COVID 19 reinforced this disconnect. Everyone realised that their work did not care about their well being and certainly parents did not care about the wellbeing of educators put at risk while childcare corporations ruthlessly laid off staff or cut their hours so significantly while offering interest free loans while others underpaid staff their entitled hours (The Australian 2020). The reality of how far we have detached from what matters suddenly hit everyone. People started to reprioritise their lives. Many of us began to validly question what our new reality is going to look like given that climate change was also now intruding into our lives. The sad fact is that

during home isolation many families were suddenly forced to spend time together again and it was clear that parents did not feel confident in the same space as their children.

As early as 1986 an academic cited a warning that childcare could be causing more harm to children. Belsky's story is an interesting example of the politicised and inflammatory nature of any discussion about childcare for the under-tuos. But beneath the contradictory headlines there is a solid base of evidence that suggests that putting a child under two in full-time childcare may have adverse emotional and behavioural effects in the long term. While the research is still "very chequered" and the issue still open to debate, the fact is that increasingly more parents are putting their babies into care. And while there are no concerns whatsoever connected with putting a child into childcare above the age of three; between two and three, the research is mixed; and below the age of two, there are some "serious and valid concerns". A Dutch study in 2006, concluded: "Our main finding was that at daycare, children display higher cortisol levels compared with the home setting ...Cortisol of course as we now know is correlated to stress levels. "It was shown that the effect of daycare attendance on cortisol excretion was especially notable in children younger than 36 months. We speculate that children in centre daycare show elevated cortisol levels because of their stressful interactions in a group setting" (Vermeer, H. and van IJzendoorn, 2006).

'*How not to Fuck them Up*' by Oliver James asks us to imagine a reception class of 30 children in which two-thirds of them have small effects that make them a little bit more aggressive and disobedient ... compared to another class where only 10% have behavioural issues. Are those teachers in the elevated class going to be doing more time managing and less time teaching? Are those playgrounds going to be less friendly? Are those neighbourhoods going to be affected? From my experience the answer is a resounding "yes". This lack of emotional connection and sense of self will carry through into their school years and affect their sense of self identity and worth as adults.

The fact is that if the learning care environment is of low quality there is considerable evidence that it increases the risk of dysregulated cortisol levels, increasing the risk of behavioural problems like aggression, fearfulness, hyperactivity and emotional insecurity. The fact is that there are so many poorly monitored childcare centres that are not safe for children on not just a physical level but on an emotional level. I have witnessed children at the age of 3 years self harming and children observing the same behaviour at a childcare were reported by their parents to be copying the behaviour at home.

While non-maternal childcare has been a fundamental part of modern society this does not mean it is right or that it acts in the interests of the child. Sue Gerhardt, the author of '*Why Love Matters*' and '*The Selfish Society*', sees childcare centres favoured by parents mainly for their convenience, reliability and cost, but not geared towards the needs of children. Gerhardt maintains that the trajectory of work and wealth acquisition in increasingly isolated, hyper-autonomous lifestyles has profound negative implications for our cognitive and emotional functioning, and, by association, for the broader society. Penelope Leach, considered a child development expert by parents for decades, notes that the arguments about socialising the child, giving it stimulation, a head-start educationally, are simply misplaced: "If a child is not able to understand the difference between morning and afternoon, what people are saying to it, and that 'daddy' will come back later – that's the tipping point," she says (cited in Gentleman, 2010). The fact is that at these corporate run centres, it is not the needs of the child that is put first but the client namely, the parent. Consequently, parents do not treat staff with professional respect in these centres, perceiving them more as glorified babysitters; far removed from the collaborative environment advocated by the National Quality Standards.

The emotional wellbeing debate has been going on since the 1950s when John Bowlby first developed the attachment theory. Within psychology, attachment theory has been very widely used to help explain, in part, patterns of emotional response and behaviour, especially in young children; but this has been used much less in education. One reason may be a suspicion of theory, as such. Bowlby was viewed as a radical and latter Bowlby's colleague, Mary Ainsworth, was criticised for simplifying the attachment theory being able to explain everything. Second, an emphasis on conscious control and regulating one's own behaviour means that underlying explanatory theories may be seen as an excuse. Third, 'attachment behaviour' is usually associated primarily with very young children and/or vulnerable children. Fourthly as I note it has been unfairly targeted at mothers. But noting these criticisms does not take away from the fact that understanding models of attachment can be valuable in helping adults interpret children's responses and behaviour and knowing how to respond appropriately. Marris (1991, 88) suggests that 'attachment ... is at once the primary relationship through which personality develops and the relationship through which we create sense out of order'. And while arguably there are also other factors such as genetic disposition ie via temperament, prior experience, and the immediate environment which also influence a child's emotional wellbeing, certainly attachment influences how emotion is processed.

Thus the consensus is that all children develop conscious mechanisms to regulate emotion, by having these modelled, by practising these and by having success reinforced early on in their development prior the age of two years. This helps them more easily to access a secure base which enables the risk and challenge implicit in developing the attributes associated with mental health. Such conscious mechanisms help to regulate emotional responses, but a high level of anxiety disables these. When vulnerable, children require more support, and their anxiety needs to be contained if conscious mechanisms to regulate emotion are to work. However, all children are vulnerable at times, and many especially so, because of external circumstances. This is especially important for those with insecure models of attachment. As Grossman and Grossman (1991, 108) suggest 'under pressure or stress insecure attachment strategies may turn out to make a person more vulnerable in terms of psychological health'. So adults must encourage mechanisms which enable the conscious self regulation of emotion by children, but recognise how anxiety can stop these from working, to support children rather than attempting to externally 'control' the child's behaviour without resolving the disconnect. **Thus healthy emotional connection to primary people in their lives is fundamental to children being able to model mechanisms to regulate emotion.** Indigenous families traditionally have put a strong emphasis on using modelling to teach their children. The family is perceived as the child's first teacher. Unfortunately, the challenges of the landscape of family life in today's economically driven world is one where many parents have had their confidence eroded and often do not know how to impart healthy values and self esteem to their children as they try to financially stay afloat. They hope to unsuccessfully transfer this responsibility to childcare educators which is not their role.

Thus while one theme that surprised nature play specialist Louv was this sense that something profound was changing in the relationship between children and nature, what I have observed is that **something primarily is changing between parents and their children making the ability to emotionally attach even more unstable and hence affecting other relationships later in life.** I believe this trend has been festering over a long period from when government started using childcare to create a profit driven economy to the detriment of our overall social wellbeing as a community and society. The fact is that a child needs a family that meets their emotional needs first and foremost. Without this there can be no successful learning. Hence why there is real concern about families using childcare indiscriminately prior to the age of three.

When COVID happened, families were suddenly forced to be with each other. Children too were caught by surprise because they also assumed that this is the way the world works. Parents go to work while you go to childcare or school and then go home. Suddenly children saw their parents frightened and feeling vulnerable. The importance of adults being emotionally attuned to children to help build up the attributes associated with good mental health cannot be emphasised enough. For happiness and emotional well-being to be explicit ends in themselves, parents need to promote introspection and a sense of vulnerability. While parents found themselves out of their depth in how to teach their children and started questioning the future there was an opportunity to reconnect and rethink their relationship with their children. And while the child's physical and social space in effect shrank they too were given an opportunity to start exploring their world in new ways and to reinvent their families as well.

Palmer (1993, 71–75) suggests that an authentic learning space has three essential dimensions: 'openness, boundaries and an air of hospitality'. While it is tempting to equate hospitable space with children being happy, this is not enough. They have also to make sense of what is difficult and painful. As discussed in Eade (2009, 186), what the Ancient Greeks called *eudaimonia*, often translated as happiness, has a 'strong, active connotation ... as well-doing and wellbeing, as living flourishingly' and is usually achieved indirectly through service to others and caring relationships, rather than by searching directly for happiness or self and quick gratification which is the consumer driven post liberal world most children and families were inhabiting before COVID19. In 2020 Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg spoke to the nation's children via a popular tv programme and said it was ok that they felt scared during the special days of the covid outbreak. Contrast this to how our children are treated in Australia and more recently our transgender children.

Unfortunately the Brave New World that could have been created post COVID was quickly stomped on by government protecting its post liberal values. Parents were hurriedly sent back to work by government reducing jobkeeper and childcare opened up en masse again. Currently the definition of close contact has changed and infected workers encouraged to return to work even earlier.

But the sting of what had occurred during COVID has remained with many poorly paid workers including educators and aged care workers refusing to work again after realising how little they were actually valued. However, there are other reasons why we cannot afford to go back to where families do not have to engage in their children's early learning or are perceived as less than the child's first and most important trustworthy relationship and their first teachers. Learning especially emotional wellbeing should be seen as by-products of children flourishing as a result of sensitive caring relationships and in a space through which children's resilience and sense of agency is reinforced, not undermined.

It is clear in 2021 that the current childcare model based on consumerism and profit is not sustainable and, in fact, could be causing harm and undermining the very core of what we should, as a healthy society, be focused on. It is not about keeping the workforce going at all costs, a workforce that is unsustainable as we saw under Covid. We should be focused on creating a healthy society that respects families and puts the wellbeing of children especially their emotional wellbeing first and foremost and provide children with meaningful opportunities to learn to become confident adults well equipped to navigate this Brave New World.

It is time for the Government to undertake an investigation into the real cost of childcare on the emotional wellbeing of children and enforce the two reforms we desperately needed to

have and still do not have rather than spruiking childcare rebates yet again in a bid to win election votes!

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OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development EDU/EDPC(2018)45/ANN2 As Andreas Schleicher, Director of the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills,commented in 2019, “Education is no longer about teaching students something alone; it is more important to be teaching them to develop a reliable compass and the navigation tools to find their own way in a world that is increasingly complex, volatile and uncertain. Our imagination, awareness, knowledge, skills and, most important, our common values, intellectual and moral maturity, and sense of responsibility is what will guide us for the world to become a better place”.

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Men's Business, Women's Work Part 2

“Great news she has finally learned to internalise her unhappiness like the rest of us.”¹: The real cost of childcare.

In the second paper in this series it is relevant to note how at the height of their ABC Childcare empire, child care mogul, Eddy Groves, drove flashy Ferraris and mixed it with the basketball teams he owned while politicians and policy makers turned a blind eye to what was happening. It took years for a small number of academics to painstakingly piece together damning forensic evidence about ABC Learning's legally and ethically dubious operations and eventual collapse (Brennan and Newberry, 2010, Press 2008, Press and Woodrow, 2009). The endemic lack of transparency surrounding ABC Learning suggests that answers to many of the questions arising from the catastrophic collapse and the full extent of the real costs incurred, will probably never be known. Explanations for why there was, seemingly, so little political and policy attention to ABC Learning throughout its ascendancy conceivably lie in a combination of factors, including ideological blindness about market operations (Sumsion 2012), inertia arising from a sense of inevitability concerning ABC Learning's increasing market concentration, a reluctance to take political risks associated with disrupting the status quo (Althaus, 2008) and the Australian Public Service's reported weakness in producing “*informed and forward looking advice*” (Rudd, 2010). But has the situation really changed or have the players merely swapped names?

What is also interesting is how ‘childcare’ has crossed the public private domain. No longer do mothers provide care at home; the rearing of children is no longer a private matter. Children are readily put into ‘care’ separate from the family unit and communities, entrenched with patriarchal and white values. And it begins with the fact that childcare was founded on a man's business model that is driven by underpaid women. Yes, there may be the odd female CEO but the model inherently began with men at the helm aimed at politically building up multi-million dollar corporations as part of the elite boys club. On 2 September 2015, in a farewell speech to the National Press Club by Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick factually noted "There are fewer big Australian companies that are run by women than by men named Peter!" Hence the emergence and development of the private early childhood sector in Australia is one of division and entrenched status quo power structures.

From the start the Federal government propped up the private sector. The *Child Care Act 1972* provided funding (\$6.5 million for the first year) only to non-profit organisations to operate “day care facilities for children of working and sick parents.” In 1974, the Australian Government extended funding to support all children and not just children from families under financial or medical stress. In the 1970s and 1980s the Commonwealth extended funding to outside school hours care (OSHC) and, particularly, family day care (FDC) as those sectors established themselves and grew. But it was in the 1990s that there was a clear shift to marketised childcare whereby successive Labor and Liberal governments opened the doors to private sector involvement in early childhood services. These providers ranged from

the unsustainable giant noted above, ABC Learning, to the still-strong not-for-profit sector, to small businesses created by ‘mum-and-dad’ owners, often inexperienced Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) and Diploma qualified educators who saw an opportunity to set up their own services. During this period, the Childcare Cash Rebate (CCR) was created in 1994 and paid directly to families as another way of encouraging a supply and demand market.

The collapse of ABC Learning in 2008 and the introduction of the National Quality Framework (NQF) in 2012 are perhaps the low and the high points for the sector. ABC Learning as noted above is a symbol of the excesses and preceded the financial crises, as opposed to a victim of the financial crises itself. It had grown rapidly, from 43 centres in 2001 to more than 1,000 in Australia alone (2,000 globally), largely through acquisition. These acquisitions were financed through increasing debt rather than through profits. In contrast, the educationally driven national quality standards were to apply to all services where the NQF made it a priority for every credible operator to invest in and be accountable for the quality of the Early Learning Centres they deliver. Unfortunately, private childcare providers from my experience as a casual educator working across numerous centres, continue to provide low quality services that are not being appropriately monitored.

The fact is that what appears to be families spoilt for choice with so many service providers especially in urban environments, is actually very little real choice. Most of these companies are, in effect, the same company. For example, G8 one of the most competitively aggressive market player runs its childcare centres under 23 brands that include *Headstart, Greenwood, Buggles, Jellybeans, Bambinos, Great Beginnings, Sandcastles, Penguin Childcare* and *Pelican Childcare*. Think Childcare purchased 11 early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres from childcare ‘incubator’ Edhod Pty Ltd (Edhod) in 2019. *These companies are clearly cashing in.* Goodstart Early Learning, supposedly not-for-profit which took over ABC Learning's centres has now a 7.2 per cent market. G8 Education reported a profit of \$88.6 million in 2015-16 while Goodstart registered in 2018 a 1 billion dollar profit. I was shocked to learn from the Fair Work Ombudsman that it is the norm not to know who runs these companies or who their shareholders are which again raises serious ethical questions. The fact is that the gap between private childcares run for profit and, government and community preschools, is incompatible.

The funding of private childcare has been shown to place little, if any, emphasis on quality. Giving money to parents, as announced with the recent ‘budget’ and the recent knee jerk campaign by Labour of a 90% subsidy for childcare, will not improve the sector. Most teachers will eventually go elsewhere as they are already significantly underpaid compared to their peers at school-based services and disadvantaged by their work conditions including limited professional development opportunities, significant longer work hours and a hostile work environment that devalues their role. Regulation of childcare varies across states but is far from rigorous or consistent. Most centres do not meet the standards (ie The Advertiser, 2020). In fact, standards are at further risk of slipping as many of the diploma courses being fast tracked to fulfil the NQF standards are highly variable and problematic. Some companies like Goodstart offer their staff support to obtain their teaching degrees to meet the teacher shortfall but again expect them to repay the loan in working years and if they forfeit on it would mean a huge repayment of that loan. Again this raises further ethical questions.

In addition, ACECQA’s attempts to provide information about childcare to parents continues to be *ad hoc*. *Most families* lack critical information about what quality care looks like and how to locate such care. Childcare advocates regularly denounce childcare centres as not providing the standards they were supposed to have delivered and studies compellingly

demonstrate the correlation between poor-quality childcare and long-term behavioural and emotional issues as we noted in Part 1. The facts are that existing state policies are, at best, marginally responsive to the new realities of children in early learning non-government profit driven centres. As both a theoretical and practical matter, there is a sharp disconnect between the Early Learning vision in 2009 and private childcare realities in 2021. Perhaps governments should return to the original intention of the National Quality Improvement Plan which was not about increasing the representation of working mothers but about quality learning for our future minds.

While it is true that most parents leave their children at childcare and work and this has been the norm since the opening decades of the twentieth century, it is also true that that norm is showing strains. Children are growing up unprepared for the world they are being asked to navigate including climate change and pandemics. At no point does the childcare model consider and ensure the rights of the child at the forefront of the NQS. I have worked at many centres where children have come in clearly unwell when they should be at home. I have sadly also observed autistic children being neglected at centres where there is no appropriate support. While many parents are reasonable, increasingly parents are becoming more demanding with educators at private centres being touted as providing a nanny type service where in reality they must cater to over 30 babies! I have personally observed parents swearing at staff when being asked to pick up their sick babies or simply not picking up their phones. It is not a secret that Directors receive huge bonuses to meet targets that aim at increasing children numbers and reducing budget constraints. This means that the parents are seen as the target not the children. There is little emphasis on the developmental needs of the child with children being “managed” according to their age to ratio numbers although some of the newer players like Guardian are attempting to create more aesthetically pleasing centres but again this is more about marketing to the parents.

In terms of government, private school and community run childcares the NQS changed a lot of practices in in very deep ways. **In effect it turned childcare into a model for education with a caring element.** This is a fundamental change that most private centres still do not practice. ‘Early Learning Centres’ are supposedly extensions of learning with properly trained educators and teachers where children can gain timely intervention if there are issues and where the socialisation and emotional regulation of children is paramount. Many Early Childhood Teachers are also trained in specialised pedagogical practices and can validate that they are ‘Reggio Emilio’ ‘nature play’ ‘Montessori’ following from their European innovative counterparts who have succeeded in attaining wonderful evidence based educational outcomes for children.

Therefore quality of early learning is key in these centres in contrast to private childcare business. Although views differ as to what constitutes quality childcare, for experts, the definition is straightforward and uncontroversial: quality childcare should, at a minimum, meet children's social, cognitive, physical, and emotional needs and is characterised as providing "safe and healthful care, developmentally appropriate stimulation, positive interactions with adults, encouragement of the child's individual emotional growth, and promotion of positive relationships with other children." Sadly, many in the industry feel the NQS have been forced to reduce quality to a number of colour codes or standards whereas early learning in care settings is, in reality, more complex and intrinsic.

Childcare versus Quality Care Learning

In early 2018, the Fair Work Commission put an end to a five year battle by unions for a 35% pay increase for childcare educators. The unions had been arguing that gender inequality is seeing the work these women do as undervalued. In dismissing the unions' application, the Commission claimed they had failed to provide "any evidence whatsoever" that gender inequality was behind childcare work being undervalued. That's despite the fact 97% of childcare educators are female and earning significantly less than the rest of the population. These workers take home an average \$21 an hour, about half the average hourly wage in Australia. because they are often seen as an extension of the unpaid 'care' work mothers are already performing at home. Again, reiterating the stereotype that the home is primarily the domain of women.

It is time to defunct the 'soft' perception that the term 'care' gives to childcare settings and which allows these companies, with the blessing of Fair Work, to underpay predominantly women. While the Nordic model is not perfect in OECD/UNICEF analyses Scandinavian countries (Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark) consistently fared among the best internationally on all the indicators of children's wellbeing. Providing children with care is enunciated as an important *institutional function* of preschool in all the Scandinavian preschool curriculum guidelines: *In cooperation with parents, preschools should give children care which supports their comprehensive development and self-esteem and contributes to children's good and healthy childhood.* (Denmark: Ministry of Social Affairs, 2011, 2) *Care has an intrinsic value. Care is closely related to upbringing, health and security, and is also an important requisite for the development, learning of children.* (Norway: Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens, 2006/2011, 25)

Moreover, care is addressed as *an ethical and emotional relationship* between the child and other people within the community. According to the curriculum guidelines, it is the preschool educator's responsibility and obligation to provide the children with care, and it is one of the rights of children to experience care: *At an early age, children need an educator who is regularly nearby and knows their individual way of communicating. The educator reacts empathetically when the child initiates contact, thus encouraging the child to interact.* (Finland: National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland, 2003/2005, translation 2004, 17). The Icelandic and Swedish curricula also state: *In everyday preschool activities, the emphasis should be on caring, consideration and mutual assistance for everyone. When the occasion arises, solidarity and compassion for other people should be discussed. Respect for uniqueness and the opinions of every individual should be respected and children encouraged in their daily relations.* (Iceland: National Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool, 2011, translation 2012, 35) *Preschool should aim to develop the child's sense of empathy and concern for others, as well as an openness and respect for differences in people's views and ways of life.* (Sweden: *Curriculum for preschool* [1998] 2011, 3). This equates to teachers being available to the same cohort of children for at least 2 if not 3 years of their early education.

Social competence is also highly valued and prioritised, and sociality is frequently mentioned in all the Scandinavian curricula. Social competence is about interacting and cooperating with others, participating in the community and understanding social situations and processes. Furthermore, it is about solidarity, empathy and being able to appreciate and understand the perspectives of others. Understanding social situations and processes and acquiring social competence require experience of and, participation in, the community. Social competence is constantly developed through actions and experiences. (Norway: Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens, 2006/2011, 30)

Although the curricula put the community and the group in the forefront, they do not lose sight of the development of *self-concept* in the individual child. Socio-emotional factors related to the individual, such as development of self-esteem, self-image and self-confidence, are also mentioned. *The preschool should give children support to develop a positive picture of themselves as learning and creative individuals.* (Sweden: Curriculum for preschool [1998] 2011, 6) *Learning areas* or *content areas* of the preschool are described in the curriculum texts, and an emphasis is placed on integration and meeting the interests of individual children. In addition to social competences and developing self-concept, the curricula also list the following:

- Language, literacy and communication competence
- Health, physical and emotional well-being
- Nature, environment and science
- Mathematical concepts: numbers, signs, patterns, etc.
- Culture
- Creativity and the arts

Even the content of the religious-philosophical orientation is agreed on with each child's parents in drawing up the individual ECEC plan. (Finland: National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland, 2003/2005, translation 2004, 26)

The knowledge formation strived for in the curricula is described in the curricula not only as content areas (the 'what' aspect) but also as *children's learning processes* (the 'how' aspect). Words such as play, creativity and expression are more frequently mentioned in all of the curricula than words expressing so-called academic learning (literacy, letters, mathematical concepts and numbers). Learning through play is emphasised in all the curriculum guidelines. Play is described as inseparable from childhood and natural to children. The Swedish curriculum states, for instance: *Play is important for the child's development and learning. Conscious use of play to promote the development and learning of each individual child should always be present in preschool activities.* (Sweden: Curriculum for preschool [1998] 2011, 6) The Icelandic curriculum similarly states that through play children learn from each other and from the adults who support their play: *In play, children can develop and experiment with its ideas and gain new understanding and knowledge. In play questions arise and children solve problems on their own terms. In play cognitive and artistic factors are strengthened. Play requires varied use of language, movement, social communication and emotional relations. Play may stimulate children's creativity and their desire to learn and acquire knowledge* (Iceland: National Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool, 2011, translation 2012, 37).

Children's learning through interaction with peers and the preschool staff are also described in the other curricula: *Children are naturally curious, wanting to learn new things, to redo and repeat. They learn in a holistic way. They practice and learn various skills, and when encountering new things, they make use of all their senses in the process of learning. Interacting with the environment and people, children combine things and situations with their own experiences, feelings and conceptual structures. They learn best when active and interested. When they act in a meaningful and relevant way, they can experience the joy of learning and feelings of success.* (Finland: National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland, 2003/2005, translation 2004, 17).

Hence a holistic view of children's learning is presented, and learning is understood as an active process characterised by children's own activities, exploration and initiatives. All the curricula are open and give much leeway to the preschool professionals to decide on the

methods they choose to utilise in order to achieve the curricular goals. **This is the primary role of teachers.** Teachers who are specialist trained in the Early Years.

The Scandinavian Early Childhood curricula reveal different dimensions and meanings of three key value fields namely democracy as being and/or becoming; care as fulfilment of basic needs and an ethical relationship; and competence values as learning for sociality and academic skills. In the Early Year Learning Framework we can see these embodied within the aspirations of the Belonging and Being and Becoming which see teachers and educators working together to support, lead and challenge children's learning, in which they are co-constructors and where learning happens through spontaneous experiences and play, but where there is also an intrinsic care element.

The fact is that there is something distasteful in thinking about children, families, and caring in market terms. And there is deep dispute about whether a market for childcare should even exist, accompanied by concerns that treating childcare as a commodity will "crowd out" feelings of love, altruism, and care which is a genuine issue. Many feminist scholars are critical of economic theory, some going so far as to intimate that it is "eutrophic," colonising and overshadowing. While economists have long acknowledged that assumptions suggesting a strictly hands-off approach to markets simply do not hold in the real world. Real-world economics recognises that state intervention is permissible, even desirable to enhance efficiency. The fact is that privatised childcare is not working. It is just marketing to make a profit. There is a some 'education' gain but not to the extent that needs to happen and certainly there is a huge disconnect between the private versus government-run or private school-based kindergartens or community centres that fall more under an 'education' model. The fact is that government has an important and legitimate role to play to ensure that this serious discrepancy is addressed.

Values in early childhood education are mentioned in other international policy documents, which endorse democratic values. *Starting Strong 2* (OECD 2006) alerted educators about a purely market system which 'moves away from the principle of universality in education, that is, of providing equal opportunity for all children within a universal system in which values of citizenship are inculcated, and a democratic and multicultural mixing of children is practiced' (118). The report mentioned democratic values several times and explicitly framed the Nordic tradition focusing on democracy: '*Centre goals are to support child development and learning and provide experience of democratic values*' (143).

Democratic values are seen as directed towards children's rights and their possibilities to participate in and influence a community. Values of care are reflected by concern for the well-being of others. That is, the children are viewed as future decision-makers, and the goal is to teach children to act as competent empathetic members of democratic communities: Given that democratic preschool practices are based on equality, diversity, shared responsibility, solidarity, and acceptance of different views, how can we expect that a privatised childcare with no deep links to community and whose shareholders are often international and anonymous to support children to feel that they are part of a community where justice, respect and empathy characterise relations?

Timely Intervention

There are serious issues here at stake. One of the other key reasons advocated for teachers to enter the early learning space was to identify children at risk who would benefit from early intervention. For the purposes of these papers, I define 'child abuse' as comprising physical

abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, and emotional neglect. Child abuse is a critical social issue that affects the welfare of millions of children and families. Extensive interactions with vulnerable children give childcare providers a special “first responder” position among mandated reporters. But my vast experience is that it **does not work** in privatised childcare and there are issues in private school, community and government centres.

A study in the USA draws poignant analogies with my own situation. Because “reasonable suspicion” is a key factor for identifying and intervening to protect children from abuse, how individual childcare providers interpret “reasonable suspicion” is likely to have critical influence on whether educators take action. Without an accepted standard interpretation, pre-existing biases (e.g., parents who seem nice would never hurt their child) and beliefs (e.g., there must be proof before reporting is warranted) can undermine a childcare provider’s role as a mandated reporter of suspected child abuse and neglect. 85.6 % of individuals’ responses on the two scales for measuring likelihood (EPS and ROS) were internally inconsistent, which suggests that individuals operationalise reasonable suspicion very differently depending on which interpretive framework they use. Unfortunately for all the training educators have undertaken they struggle with understanding their mandatory reporting rights. Rather than require knowledge or a justified belief of abuse, reasonable suspicion sets an intentionally low bar to maximize the detection rate for abuse. The prevailing thought is that it is better to cast a broader net rather than to miss catching a child at risk. What is at stake is not only the safety of children, but also significant consequences for entire families (Shield 2003) Unfortunately and critically, privatised childcare providers appear to face considerable obstacles in reporting child protection concerns, to the extent that educators in the USA have identified “reporting possible abuse” as their most pressing workplace-related ethical concern. I seriously believe that Australia is following suite and there is serious underreporting for a number of reasons that I believe needs to be investigated (Ayling et al 2019)

Press (2008) provides an overview of the sorts of childcare policy issues vexing the childcare community. These include concerns about changing conceptions of early childhood care and the children’s personal development; matters that inevitably have long term outcomes. OECD policy specialists, for example, advocate curriculum frameworks that are responsive to local conditions, respectful of teachers’ professional judgement, and have “the capacity to incorporate new ideas, perspectives and understandings” (Press, 2008, 14). It is valid to note here that it is now 2022 and Australia is far from where it should be.

Quality is key in early childhood education in Australia, but many early learning services are not meeting the standards required to have an impact. The main issue that I can see is that the role of teachers is devalued as glorified educators and their role to address early intervention is clearly non-existent. Privatised childcare sees itself as a service to parents so they can work. Depending on numbers, these centres according to ACECQA need to employ teachers to be licenced and in my experience this is the primary reason they employ teachers. I was paid less than a casual educator in places. This is untenable and most teachers cannot afford to work in a childcare with a HECS debt and become quickly disillusioned compared to their peers that work in government or private school settings. I believe it goes back to this archaic view of childcare as providing a female care role and not an early learning education model.

Quality is Key in Early Childhood Education looks at how Australia is tracking for process quality. This is the area that grows children’s early literacy, language development, reasoning and problem solving skills. Arguably the most important of the quality areas, process quality focuses on the interactions between staff and children, and teacher-directed learning

activities. What this paper has found is that disadvantaged children are more likely to miss out on high quality early learning. It also found that quality varies more for younger children. This is very apparent when you compare the different privatised centres with quality early learning centres run as education models.

Principles of Equity

The fact is that disadvantaged children are less likely to access high quality early childhood education.

Early education should benefit all children, especially those who experience disadvantage. We know that early education produces the greatest return when it is of high quality, but many early privatised childhood services in Australia are not meeting standards. Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds – the children who have the most need – are less likely to access high quality services than children from higher socio-economic families who can and do access more elite or private school learning centres as to provide their children with a learning edge. In the most disadvantaged areas, services were 10 per cent less likely to meet the key quality benchmark than more advantaged areas. From my experience this is a gross underestimation.

The NQF has provided a good structure for increasing the structural quality of early education in Australia. The focus now needs to shift to process quality. Early childhood education has the most impact when interactions between educators and children are consistent and of high quality. *“Process quality is the direct interactional experience of children in ECEC – the daily back-and-forth exchanges they have with educators, and their participation in learning activities.”* – (Mathers et al. 2012)

There is a large gap in the level of quality (instructional and emotional support) experienced by children from low and high socioeconomic families when they are aged 3-4 years. While arguably this gap improves as children get older, COVID has actually widened the social divide. The NQF ensures programs for 4 year olds are delivered by a teacher with a bachelor degree but as noted above there is no incentive for teachers to work in childcare kindergartens. Most will work in these centres until they can secure better employment. My experience talking to parents is that most of them do not equate ‘childcare kindy’ to that of ‘a proper kindy’. In fact, many of them move their children to a government kindy at the first opportunity. This is a fair assessment given what is accessible in a government kindy and the quality of the programs delivered by registered teachers.

Children in the bottom 25 per cent of services have been found to speak fewer than 11 words per minute. In contrast, children in the top 25 per cent of services speak over 40 words per minute. Language development is an essential component of quality early learning, unfortunately many children are missing out. Yet unlike the school sector, Australia has not invested in ongoing professional support and development of the early childhood workforce. A number of changes could be made to build educator capability and lift quality across the system. Which leads us to the obvious question.....

Childcare At what cost?

With many parents struggling to get a place especially in rural areas and others paying upwards of \$190 a day in inner-city areas, costs to the taxpayer of a staggering \$10 billion a year in parent subsidies, and childcare workers among the lowest paid in the country, exactly

who is winning from our childcare system? Clearly companies are cashing in but the real question is the how seriously is this market based system failing our children?

The commodification of care has been a point of contention for many who feel that the fundamental relational nature of care is compromised once it becomes a service for sale. Yet as Cox (2013: 494) asks in a special issue on commodified care, should we assume from the outset that the market is unsuitable or incompatible with the delivery of care? In posing this provocative question Cox invites us to re-engage with the spaces and practices of marketised care to consider what exactly is problematic in the expression of diverse paid care relationships. Certainly while some centres have the potential to be deeply caring spaces especially because they attract caring educators and, in spite of the fact, that they operate for profit, there are undoubtedly problems arising from the way care has been commodified within capitalist economies. (Gallagher, A. 2018) and the fact is that neoliberalism has found to have miserably failed in providing that ideal in aged care (Royal Commission). Are we going to risk the same with our children?

The fact is that our children deserve better. For any parent to think it is OK to acclimatise their child to an institutionalised setting where after many stressful months their child will learn to internalise their emotions (the title of this paper is founded on words used in a social media post), is foreign to everything early childhood should stand for. Children need emotional wellbeing first and foremost. Maginn and Cameron (2013) acknowledge that there are major issues with corporatised childcare and that good parenting and appropriate emotional support are key in promoting the successful emotional and only then academic development of children. **The fact is that parents should never relegate their responsibilities to childcare in these pivotal years.** The powerful influence of parents and key adults in shaping a child's emotional wellbeing is well documented. Delving into this further in the next paper clearly many parents do not understand how healthy development, social adjustment, academic achievement and self-esteem are interconnected rather focusing on whether their child can read and write their name as preparation for school readiness. Hence education around the psychological needs of children' and how parents should meet these needs, is something that parents need more education and support around. Covid has negatively impacted on parents being able to access support and many have been unable to attend playgroup or even just check in with educators and teachers.

Schools are not permitted to run on a for-profit basis, and many early childhood advocates argue privately that childcare should be the same. But unscrambling that egg is politically difficult.

Jo Briskey, from parent advocacy group 'The Parenthood', said the priority in the early learning sector should be kids getting access to quality care, parents getting the support they need and educators getting paid properly. **The *Lifting Our Game* report released on the 8 Jan 2021 found that Australia is investing much less in early education than our OECD counterparts.** That's despite study after study highlighting the value of early childhood education, particularly for those aged three to five and of having properly trained teachers.

To summarise Nordic Early Childhood Education and Care policies frame values education in preschools with a special focus on the values of democracy, caring and competence. In contrast, in Australia, while on the one hand is advocating that childhood education as vital, but then on the other hand, government is refusing to invest and ensure it is quality care within a learning framework preferring to expose the vulnerability of children, as with aged care, to profit and marketing forces.

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“What weather?”: Creating the Languages Our Children Need to Thrive

We often refer to languages as encompassing different ways of thinking and this seems a fit analogy to explore alternate solutions to the current childcare dilemma. The fact is that now is the time to acknowledge that private businesses operating as early learning centres is not a “fit for purpose” model and potentially puts children at risk.

The main aim of these papers is to demonstrate that the government should lead and facilitate a systemic change and we should not consider childcare a servant of global multinational corporations within a neoliberalism agenda. In this context of moving forward any suggestion of snapping back to the childcare subsidy method is political nonsense. It should not be a system that profits business. Recent comments that parents were outsourcing the care of their children to big corporations was disturbing (Nationals MP George *Christensen* 22 June 2021) but unfortunately, there is an ugly truth here, in spite of its poor wording, that needs to be addressed.

Parents *are* outsourcing their children to the care of a business if they choose a private childcare without understanding fully its implications. To be fair, ACECQA, the body responsible for licensing these operators does very little to help educate parents or provide robust and honest details about centres. Do parents seriously believe when they leave their children in a room of over 20 babies with a 1 to 4 staff ratio that their 6 week, 6 month or 1 year old baby is going to thrive? The first year of a child’s life is critical not only to ensure the child’s emotional wellbeing but also that of its families. Parents need to think about this before they decide to have children. It is not just a financial investment. It is an emotional investment for life. It is awful to observe a room full of screaming babies not having their emotional needs met. There is no such thing as socialisation of babies. It is an absurdity.

Children need emotional security and they need to bond with their primary caregivers. Most educators at privatised childcares however are working for little money and are stressed doing a multitude of tasks including and not limited to 5 minute checks, bottles, feeding, nappy changes and programming **for not one child but up to 20!** Some staff have told me that they cannot even ring in sick and this during COVID! I have personally observed parents swearing at staff at being asked to pick up their sick children, behaving in intimidating and disrespectful manner and demanding that staff ensure that their needs and not the welfare of the child be executed. Childcare operators, like Goodstart, are mandating not only that their staff be COVID vaccinated but also mandating other vaccines at the educator’s own cost in spite of there being no such national mandate in education. Mandating what people do with their bodies is a divisive subject but when it is clearly not about health but about ensuring that staff are well enough to support ratios and as a marketing strategy, this becomes a serious ethical issue. Most staff in childcare will openly acknowledge that they do not understand why parents even have children especially when they observe children being dropped off for long 8 hour sometimes even longer days. What I am saying is harsh but it is the reality of many children and it arguably constitutes emotional neglect. Look at the number of privatised childcares springing around with potentially 60 to 100 children per centre and do the maths! We need to ensure that we provide families with a choice to stay at home especially arguably for the first year to two years of their child’s life. The suggestion by Senator Matt Canavan asking that the legislation include additional support for those who look after their own children should be supported (12 August 21). Ideally families should be given 18months with 80% pay to be with their children (Swedish system). Everyone’s emotional wellbeing would be then met including the parents. And Government needs to start being serious about the

high level of children who fall through the system often ending in the criminal justice system (Krasnostein, 2022) as their families continue the intergenerational cycle of trauma with little housing mental health or financial support. We need as a society to take responsibility for a system that is clearly failing and is seriously dysfunctional. There is some serious need for reflection and change.

A Different Language: A Different Model

There is a popular adage that it takes a village to raise a child. But if we have learnt anything about the pandemic it is how socially disconnected we have become from our communities. Recently during the severe lockdowns, families in the poorer suburbs of NSW and Victoria, where they can afford cheaper housing, were at greater risk because of the fact that they could not work from home often having to work within unstable gig economies far distances from home and from their support network of families. This problem goes beyond childcare. Government needs to step up and ensure both job and housing security. Instead there is a clear income disparity between the wealthy and the poor unsurpassed before in Australia and that COVID, in many ways, has aggravated. The middle class we once took for granted is no longer the lived reality for many families.

Critics of our so-called 'American' model point out that public services, such as education and government-run programs are also struggling. My experience is that government-run centres are much better and offer many services that private run centres do not. However the disparity between elite preschools and schools compared with many privatised childcare centres begs disbelief. Early learning has become the new equity problem with the children who actually the system was designed to support by ensuring early intervention with highly trained teachers, now being left far behind as many childcare centres do not have access to proper teaching staff or trained support staff or to resources that support these children adequately. Recently the Fair Work Commission improved the wages of teachers in privatised childcare to align with their school or government kindy counterparts. This took place on 1 January 2022 after a protracted 10 year battle! Meanwhile, early learning has become an attractive marketing tool for private schools to boost their numbers with the promise of giving children an early competitive 'advantage'. This is part of a neo liberal model that values competition. In the interim however the damage has been done with many disillusioned Early Childhood Teachers having left the profession.

In contrast, the Nordic model is more conducive to the ideal notion of a village raising a child. Fortunately for their citizens, the Nordic nations have willingly chosen a path of greater equality for all citizens and have demonstrated an ability to work through their political differences for the greater good of all and, yes, this may mean that people are limited in the amount of money available for personal spending and consumption, and more reliant on government-subsidised programs. Many people in countries operating under the called 'American model', including Australia, see the Nordic model as an attractive alternative to the winner-take-all brand of capitalism that has resulted in poverty and income disparity including gender income disparity that has again reared its head during the pandemic; including a lack of affordable quality health care and education, a deteriorating social safety net, a lack of retirement security, massive scandals in the financial markets, including fraudulent government breaches of taxpayer monies.

Hence the real problem lies in the demeaning work model we have created and how people are forced to work in insecure work conditions with poor rates of pay all to benefit the boys club culture of big business. It is no accident that during the pandemic companies recorded

outstanding profit margins. And it is disgusting that many companies did not return the millions in Jobkeeper monies that could have been redirected into society such as into education and mental health. At the same time the government were pursuing families for often inflated childcare overpayments; the same families who during the pandemic had lost their jobs. Many of these families never even saw these monies because it went straight to the childcare franchises!

In effect, we need to be re-evaluating the Federal Government's responsibility for childcare on more equitable grounds. Childcare needs to align with early learning as a model of education that extends on the school system rather than as a model to drive workforce economic outcomes that does not put the needs to children first and certainly does not address their emotional or social wellbeing. Labour Early Childhood spokesperson Kate Ellis many times advocated her concern about privatisation and the profits generated by the sector urging a radical overhaul of the childcare sector in 2016 (Karp, 2016). According to the Productivity Commission, childcare is big business, with about half of all childcare services (including out of school hours care and family daycare operations) provided by for-profit businesses (Munro, 2016) Jo Briskey, from parent advocacy group The Parenthood rightly noted "*[i]f we treated early learning like we do our school system, we wouldn't see ever increasing fees for families, we wouldn't see huge waiting lists, we wouldn't see high turnover in educators because they'd be being paid properly like teachers and we'd see a more effective and efficient use of government funds seen as an investment in education.*" (Munro, 2016). And I would add early intervention for the increasing children I have seen at risk from substance abuse, domestic violence, and trauma. During the pandemic lockdown did not discriminate between unsafe and safe home environments for children.

The fact is that many parents treat education as a service provider. Thus the whole premise of education and early learning needs to be completely reset to ensure that parental and teacher roles and responsibilities are clearly re-established. Increasingly educators and teachers are dealing with violent behaviours of children which stem, I believe, from the emotional neglect of children being disconnected from their families and communities. Most early learning spaces, including government, are overwhelmed as a result and often do not know how to manage the escalation in child behavioural issues that present a real risk of injury, physical and psychological, to staff and to other children. Some staff have told me that while they are provided with 'trauma' training they believe this is more about shifting the risk management onto them which places an unreasonable burden on already stretched staff.

Unfortunately, we are stuck with what we have until we change our narrative as a society and move forward as caring communities so we can secure a stable and sustainable future for ourselves and our families. So let us examine some alternate models within an Australian context that we can currently reconstruct using innovative symbols of thinking and language.

The Language of the Physical Space: Community and Nature

Nowadays schools are no longer the centre of their community with the exception of those within some rural settings. In particular, the design of the numerous privatised childcare centres springing up randomly, is particularly problematic. In his book 'School and Society' John Dewey one of the 20th century's key educational pioneers emphasised how children read meanings about themselves and the wider world from their learning environment. Back in 1970, policy makers in the USA profoundly noted that "[h]istorically the school building has influenced not only what might be learned **but also what might not be learned.**" (cited in

Dudek, 2005). Both quantitatively and qualitatively the physical environment has exercised over time a peculiar power often repressive in the educator's world. Yet today this repressive environment characterises many privatised childcares where one room captures sometimes over 30 children in a boxlike setting. Movement is rigidly controlled and monitored with surveillance that is akin to a prison system. While there is outside play, often it is with limited access to high risk play such as swings and bikes resulting in children's vestibular development being compromised as a result.

But more importantly, what are we conveying to children when we put them in such controlled settings? Clearly it is not about their competency but about making sure they are seen at all times. Children should be seen and not heard is something that has as its core a Victorian antiquated attitude towards children which I believe is still prevalent in Australia. What then becomes the reality of the child's experience learning in a world where children are so tightly jammed together that psychological escape much less physical separation is impossible and where their voices and rights are silenced? I laughed at the absurdity at one Guardian Centre where over 20 babies were crammed together in one small room being informed that they did not approve of rhythmic patting of children because it violates the child's rights.

A model home is warm, loving, aesthetically beautiful; a community fair cooperative, collaborative, respectful; nature without limit, full of potential, challenging; and democratic principles require justice, commitment, inclusion (Dudek 2005). None of this resonates with many of the privatised childcares most of which claim a Reggio or Montessori marketing label but, in reality, whose educators are not trained in these highly specialised teaching pedagogical practices. Often in childcare the educator lead role is not even given to a teacher but to less qualified diploma trained educator who has not undergone extensive studies in child development or pedagogical studies compared to a teacher (four to five years) and therefore does not have the same knowledge about the importance of supporting sensory perceptions in early learning or how to support the holistic development of the child within a meaningful context and ensure that each child's needs are properly assessed and met. For childcare settings it is about cost cutting and profits not about early learning. Poorly trained staff become overworked and stressed with undertaking programs that in reality they are not trained to undertake as well as provide basic care. I cannot count how many times a Director who often themselves were not teachers, questioned why they needed Early Childhood trained teachers when diploma trained educators could do the role and why teachers did not want to change a nappy? There is serious confusion about the role of teachers in these centres that has led to teachers being undervalued underpaid and I would argue from my own experience being relegated into a glorified educator role which is why teachers are leaving the industry in droves. There is no way that ACECQA's target of two teachers per 60 children per centre will ever be reached. They have already watered it down by opening it up to primary trained teachers which again presents a logistical problem. Why even train to become an Early Childhood Teacher if your expertise is so misunderstood even by the National Body who should be the first to advocate proper pay and conditions for early childhood teachers as specialised teachers like in Nordic countries. My own pedagogical language focus as a teacher is nature play and emotional connection which I have taken years, on top of my Masters qualification, to develop as part of my practice.

In fact, nature was a major component of the original kindergarten. Starting in Germany in the mid-19th century, the kindergarten idea was imported to North America in the 1870s and 1880s. By the turn of the century, the movement was well-established. Imagine! Exemplary

curricula in kindergartens at that time in the 19th century included Nature Interests, along with Moral and Physical Training, Language, Number and Form, Music and Handwork! More specifically, Nature Interests included (Wiebe 1896 cited in Sobel, 2014): 1. Observations of the sun, the moon, the stars, the sky, the clouds, rain and snow, shadows indoors and out-of-doors,... the sunset 2. Care of living animals, as a kitten, a rabbit... Sounds of animals imitated. Observing life in the aquarium. 3. Care of the caterpillar, its cocoon, the butterfly or moth, ants, flies spiders, bees. 4. Planting flower and vegetable seeds in springtime; fall plants; watering plants. 5. Naming plants, flowers, fruits, grains, autumn leaves, dried grasses and grains used in decoration, pictures. 6. Sorting and arranging seeds, shells and pebbles. 7. Observing nests and other homes of animals. Learning names of natural objects as acorns, cones, chestnut burrs, milkweed pods. Note: The children handle and play with these natural objects, learning their names, colours and uses. 8. Walks and excursions if possible. I note all of this because the expectations were high of children and this is an important point. We need to set high expectations of all our children.

The nature preschools and forest kindergartens of today aspire to the same kind of nature immersion as in the children's gardens of the 19th century, arguably, they go even further, with some programs having the children outside for full days. Many of the more than 700 Waldkindergartens in Germany have no heated indoor facility. There's a tool shed, maybe an outhouse, sometimes a yurt, or an open-sided shelter with a fire pit, or a tepee—somewhere to get inside if it's raining hard or the weather is really atrocious. But mostly there's the forest—with trails, campfire circles, child-constructed forts, steppingstones across streams, brambly thickets, animal dens, sand banks—a smorgasbord of explore-able places. The Forest Kindergarten movement had its roots in Skogsmulle, an outdoor education program developed in Sweden in the 1950s and 60s. Seeing the success of this approach with young children, Siw Linde, a pharmacist turned early childhood educator, founded the first I Ur och Skur, Rain or Shine School, in 1985 with over 180 such schools by 2008 (Sobel, 2014). The pedagogical approach was simple: children's need of knowledge, activities and togetherness is fulfilled by being in nature. This resonates with Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* (2005) where it was noted that children had lost confidence in playing outdoors and lost their connection to the natural world.

Wendy Banning and Ginny Sullivan address the benefits of nature play in their book, 'Lens on Outdoor Learning' (2010). Extracting the commonalities from early childhood learning standards i.e., initiative, persistence, invention, problem-solving, social competence and readiness to learn - they show how children's self-directed outdoor play provides opportunities for developing these skills. They further contend that these skills are the foundations of academic success. The ability of young children to control their emotional and cognitive impulses, it turns out, is a remarkably strong indicator of both short-term and long-term success, academic and otherwise' (Tough 2012). Paul Doolan, a dad who sent his daughter to a Swiss forest kindergarten articulates well this difference between the adult and child's perspective on environmental conditions. "For two years my little girl went to kindergarten in the forest. One day she came home from a day of particularly vicious downpours, her feet inevitably soaked, her eyelashes caked in mud, her cheeks ruddy with the cold and her eyes sparkling with fire, and I said to her it must have been tough being outside all morning in such weather. She looked at me in genuine incomprehension, looked out the window: "*What weather?*" she asked (Doolan 2011).

But connection to nature goes further. During COVID when suddenly people were locked out of national parks and beaches, the outdoors, specifically, nature gained important momentum

as places of emotional reconnection and necessary for wellbeing. The recent ABC documentary 'Back to Nature' visually reminds us how lucky we are in Australia yet there is some reluctance to incorporate nature in children's learning treating it as a high risk venture that requires risk management in spite of the fact that nature play resonates with many exemplary practices such as Reggio; reiterating the importance of the environment as third teacher. Of course, there are wonderful community and government-run kindergartens that engage in nature play programs but they cannot cover the demand and they are limited to the extent that they can engage fully in nature play within a risk assessment matrix.

It is not just nature we should be valuing but also we need to extend our connection to families and communities. We need to take children out of the 'triangle trap' of institutions – home, school and out-of-school services – that circumscribe too many families and their children's lives and are not conducive to wellbeing. We need to learn to care for each other again and to connect with each other and understand the importance of caring for our environment and the responsibility is on us all to do so. If we learnt anything from COVID 19 it must be that we are social animals that live within an ecosystem made up of plants, animals water land AND, one another, which we rely on for our wellbeing. This is going to become even more critical when we factor in Climate Change. When we genuinely connect and care what happens is that we lift up the self esteem of our children. Suddenly they feel valued and a sense of belonging. Not surprising the anxiety levels of children are through the roof globally. Meanwhile mental health services are still inadequate.

Hence the importance of nature play. When you see nature as a big playground you see an infinity of possibilities..... But also, hope. emotional connection and valuing themselves which is what children really need.

The Cultural Languages of Identity

As noted, I undertake a reconciliatory and a healing approach using connection to country and nature as part of my pedagogical practice. It has been an interesting experience applying for positions where I have declared my experience working with Aboriginal community preschools and playgroup settings and being told that the standard for non-Indigenous children is higher. Such misconceptions unfortunately mask racist undertones that infiltrate as early as preschool and which we need to intentionally disrupt for the sake of our own national identity.

Anangu (APY Lands) love learning on country. The fact is that nature play through connection to country works so beautifully in the setting of the western desert where my children with their families climbed rockslides, chased lizards, took their shoes off and ran barefooted grounding with the scorched earth. Connection with purpose is a critical part of any education.

Nadia Wheatley's 'Playground' demonstrates how the Australian landscape is an important source of learning not just for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Peoples but for all Australians to embrace. She is not Indigenous but acknowledges the deep knowledge and oral histories of Aboriginal People. "*Playing listening learning helping sharing having fun showing respect caring for country*". Traditionally children learn within their extended families and learning is often through modelling. It is a collaborative not a competitive way of learning. Unfortunately and sadly during the twentieth century Aboriginal children were forcibly

removed from their families. Knowing family is linked to knowing country and this caused deep issues that continue today. To reconcile we need as a nation to embrace Aboriginal ways of learning as part of our Australian identity and reconcile beginning in early childhood with all children learning both Aboriginal and Western ways **with equal respect**.

This has to begin with again how we value educators and teachers. Why is it that a Certificate 3 white person can come and work on the APY Lands but when Anangu attain the same qualifications they can only work on the lands? We are still stuck squeezing Aboriginal ways into a white model rather than acknowledging Aboriginal ways of learning in their own right. Overall, we need to move away from structures and curriculum that reinforce any binary and racist structures. This includes gender.

We are still failing in spite of the National Quality Standards to nurture identity in Australia. Take away a child's social and cultural identity and their connection to family and community and you have nothing. The fact is that privatised childcare is a homogenous setting. It is not a space that reflects diversity. Again children that are from multicultural families often find childcare a space where they first must confront the disconnect between their identity at home and assimilating into a white space which only relates to symbols of language from a middle class, white perspective. This is why community centres are so valuable and government should be encouraging more such centres in areas where there is a high multicultural population. Community kindergarten centres actively seek out and engage with a child's home and community the child in meaningful ways. Recently, I spent some time in one such kindergarten in a rural town that had a large population of relocated Afghani families. Afghani staff were being trained as educators. Unfortunately many children were still waiting on being assessed; many of them came from a trauma background. While there was a danger of isolation for the families and children as much work still needed to be undertaken to support the Afghani community to feel part of the broader community, the kindergarten at the heart of the community, understood this well. There is no way this type of reflection would happen at a privatised childcare. Rarely do you observe children's identity being celebrated and valued and when it is, it is usually tokenistic.

To build socially capable children that have a sense of belonging and agency translates to more emotionally regulated socially capable children that have a strong sense of belonging and positive self esteem because they can see themselves as valued members of Australian society. Unfortunately, I do not have the time I need to dedicate here the importance of a child's self esteem to their future success as an adult. Many adults suffer from poor self esteem that begins from in the early years. Developing a strong sense of ourselves can only come from learning to value who we are and seeing that we are valued and we can relate to the world with meaning. Without meaning in a child's life, or any person's life for that matter, there is little motivation for learning.

The Language of Rights: Rights of the Child: Innovative Childcare Policies

In Article 18 of the 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' it is clear that parents have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. I stress this here because it is never acceptable for an educator to usurp these responsibilities from parents. However, there is a State obligation to *assist* parents when they are working. This does not mean delegating this obligation as a business opportunity to companies that clearly do not understand their mandatory or rights obligations or where it is about quantity and ratios not about quality of care and learning.

Regardless of what care, quality of care is critical as we learnt from the Royal Commission into Aged care. Subsidised and fully paid maternity is the norm for many countries in Europe. Early childhood education usually occurs from 2 years onwards. Instead in Australia many families are forced to use care, that is, if they can access care in rural areas, for example, that do not meet National Quality standards and certainly many privatised childcare centres have not even been assessed. **Then there is the issue of course of who is doing the assessment?** A topic I cannot even cover here it is so immense and thwart with issues. Most families do not even know what it is that they should be looking for in a 'quality' centre and often are fooled by the sterile and controlled settings that loudly spell safe controlled spaces but little else! The fact is some of the new Guardian and Paisley Park centres present well aesthetically but they are still run on a business, not an education, model.

Furthermore, teaching early years is a highly specialised area. A six month Diploma trained educator unfortunately does not equate to a 4 or 5 year (Masters) university trained teachers. I need to keep stressing this point. Teachers are trained to know how to scaffold a child and are trained to understand healthy child development through observations. The reason that teachers have been asked to enter the early years space is first and foremost as an intervention for children at risk. This includes children at risk of emotional, psychological physical and sexual abuse. I have observed families callously drop off children with injuries or clear neglect issues signaling red flags where Directors at centres actively discourage documenting the issues let alone reporting them, as is their mandated duty!

I think it relevant to recount here my own experience where I made a mandatory report for one sexually at risk fostered child and was fired. I need to note here a strategy that is commonly used in privatised childcares. I was not just fired. I was fired for misconduct. It is not the first time I had come across this type of strategy. I had to go to mediation to argue against the misconduct on the grounds that this was my mandated work right to report at risk children and that I did not need the permission of the Business to undertake this duty and could report anonymously. I filed a further complaint to the Educational Standards Board. While the ESB found that the centre had misrepresented the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017* the business was still allowed to operate albeit now under a different name! I cannot help but voice concern about how many other privatised childcares put their business interests before that of the child and where educators would not feel that they could make a CARL report without risk to their jobs and livelihood? It is relevant to note here I never found out who key stakeholders were of this million dollar plus company (apparently this is acceptable according to the Fair Work Ombudsman (Personal Comm 2021). My warning to potential teachers is that if you choose to work in these smaller privatised childcare centres make sure you find out who it is exactly you are working for and that your mandated duty to protect children is clear and uncompromised. But again where is ACECQA?. We have the statistics and the evidence that there are many substandardised centres that put children at risk.

Unfortunately, we have learnt with Aged Care that the private businesses will never deviate from their clear focus of producing profits for their shareholders. Suffice to say this does not align with the Rights of the Child and particularly the right of a child to be safe from harm.

The Language of Collaboration

Collaboration is defined when two or more people work to achieve the same thing (Cambridge dictionary 2004) synonymous with partnerships, networking and collectives. Differences in power orientations and interests can and does lead to conflict. Unfortunately, private enterprises are breeding grounds for power hierarchies and childcare centres are no

different with different corporations competing with each other for their share of the market through the use of incubator startups under a range of names. Meanwhile more children are being diagnosed with complex behavioural issues including autism as well as mental health issues from a very young age (3 years). This is a primary reason why the private sector cannot be trusted to be in these spaces because it is clear that there is no proper intervention even with extra funding and an NDIS plan. These children have support staff that are not trained in their particular needs and often parents choose not to provide their children with appropriate intervention resulting in privatised childcare centres having a disproportionate number of children self-harming biting, lashing out at children and staff with no regard to the trauma being done to the other children and who are not trained to deal with the complex behaviour in spite of the NQS saying that children should not be left distressed. It is an awful observing an autistic child be forced to have food they do not want or a child being forced to stay awake and eventually collapse distressed asleep under a table.

The fact is that we should be exploring different models for families with specific needs. For those families who have parenting issues it is important to place them with trained educators who can support them to learn how to be their child's first teacher, along with other support (discussed below) rather than diminishing their rights and responsibilities by taking care of the child and then returning the child to a home where the parents remain ineffective. Children are decoders. What they will learn from this is that there is clear inconsistency in their lives and they are still unsafe at home.

My own experience in privatised childcare setting was a lack of professionalism when often government and government-funded agencies dealt with privatised childcares differently compared to government centres and there was a clear lack of respect for educators in private centres by the government-led agency. This resulted in not only poor communication but when a centre called out for support for a child their concerns were not addressed in a timely way and often the amount of money the organisation wanted to support the child made it untenable from a business perspective. The fact is that in privatised childcare centres, the Director is given a significant financial bonus for not spending whether on food or on resources or on staff! So it is fair that government agencies already strapped for resources and funding focus on government centres. Multinational childcare corporations should not be entitled to free services but the trouble is that they are not spending money that should go into the centre on the children. They are about profit, including not-for-profit Goodstart who made a billion dollar profit in 2019! (Munro, 2016). **Unfortunately parents do not understand being heavily subsidised does not translate to services.** Adherence to structures that are not really working or supportive of the realities need to be re-examined. It is clear that children in need are missing out because they do not have properly trained support staff or where support staff are being unethically used to boost up children rations in other rooms. Centres should be audited and must provide evidence that they are putting government kindergarten funding into kindergarten resources and NDIS funding into the children that require NDIS support.

Thus if there is an additional message this paper highlights it is that the rating and assessment scale by ACECQA is not the answer. Many private centres use the ranking to tick off lists to get a higher ranking for business purposes and not to create a learning environment for children to thrive in. In fact, most centres do not even have a ranking because there is inability by state regulators to monitor the insurmountable centres springing up everywhere. In NSW nearly 40 per cent of private for-profit childcare services are failing to reach the national quality standard, compared to about 15 per cent of government run services. Just recently, the Herald Sun

uncovered shocking safety failures at Victorian childcare centres, with children exposed to harm. In South Australia, it was recently found that hundreds of centres have not met the standards. The fact is that children do die in childcare centres. One family whose child died at a privatised childcare centre said the regulator spent more time helping the centre to get back on its feet than undertaking a thorough investigation. v some have sadly resulted in the deaths of child and never should have been allowed to operate. This same centre received an improved quality rating following the death of a child in its care! Why is this?

We have now come full circle. It is because we have created an early learning model that is about propping up big business businesses and corporations. It is not an education model that focuses on the wellbeing of children and families and communities. It has become a numbers game and every educator, every teacher and every director in any childcare centre understands this irrefutably fact. Politicians are lying if they are saying anything different!

Our children deserve better! It goes to the very fabric and values we create as a society going forward.

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