

The leveraging influence of strategic alignment: What constitutes Early Childhood in current Australian policy debates?

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THIS PAPER ILLUSTRATES THE VALUE of strategic alignment as a model to navigate the current Australian education landscape, highlighting numerous changes to national overseeing bodies and their mandates. More importantly, it provides a critical review of recent government agency changes and policy agendas, making overt the existence of complex and incoherent ideas concerning the notion of early childhood. Based on the current analysis, it is concluded that no common conceptualisation exists at the national level of what constitutes early childhood and by default, early childhood education. This is a disturbing state of affairs, which makes the work of responsible statutory agencies, overseeing national bodies and state departments overseeing the implementation of new national policy directives very difficult.

Introduction

Sound policy is central to educational reform and the implementation of new directions. A major function of any government is to provide a vision and guidance for economic and social decision making. However, this process is hampered due to the complexity of factors influencing policy formulas, which range from unstable political ideologies to more pragmatic issues such as conceptual confusion or a lack of shared understandings. The issue of how education policy is generated in Australia and elsewhere remains largely unscrutinised and poorly understood among education professionals and the general public (Moses & Saenz, 2008). It can be expected that with the number of government and leadership changes that Australia has witnessed in recent times, ideological shifts and alliances occur that result in the alteration of their frames of reference with respect to policy goals and decisions. This paper is less concerned with reporting the impact of the ideological waves that have swept the national political landscape in recent years. Instead it is focused quite narrowly on the pertinent issue of the current conception of early childhood and early childhood education, taking a rather pragmatic stance. It is acknowledged, that, in an Australian context, the idea of education policy, practice and notably quality assurance is 'arousing strong opinions and producing strongly contested

empirical findings' (OECD, 2012, p. 8). Hence, focusing on 'hard facts' concerning the conceptual underpinnings of recent education policy papers may provide a workable foundation for future theoretical and empirical work that will tie together ideological complexities, conceptual misalignment and resulting idiosyncratic implementation practices in various states and territories. To this end, the paper will focus on the issue of strategic alignment as a core concept.

Strategic alignment, although a widely used term in the business literature (Velcu, 2010) and increasingly also in the education literature (Jurse & Mulej, 2011; Kirkwood & Price, 2011), is still an elusive concept. Strategic alignment (SA) is often explained as constructive alignment (CA) in the education literature (Biggs, 2003). This concept of SA or CA seems to shape up to be one of the more important contemporary knowledge management concepts not only in business and industry, but also increasingly for the education sector. Here, both of these terms are used interchangeably. Nevertheless, the paper begins by exploring the meaning and connection of SA and CA. It seems that the ideas behind these two similar concepts are important and are particularly useful in exemplifying the current conceptual confusion concerning the notion of early childhood. The significance of SA as an important knowledge management tool will be demonstrated, using

recent national education policy initiatives as an illustrative example. This discussion provides a natural backdrop for a critical look at the ways in which *Early Childhood* has become a shifting concept, making it problematic for practitioners to take current government initiatives and directives at face value. In particular, two competing conceptual models of early childhood will be introduced that seem to govern current policy announcements and directives. These will be illustrated and graphically represented, making overt the complexity of this situation. Finally, possible implications for practice of the conceptual misalignment among government agencies will be outlined.

Strategic alignment and an ever changing political landscape

Knowledge is increasingly seen as an important national resource in today's globalised, dynamic and technology-mediated world. Some scholars seem to imply that knowledge is becoming more important than other traditional assets, such as land and capital (Leydesdorff, 2011), because 'knowledge is the most powerful engine of production' (Kefela, 2010, p. 162). SA/CA is the idea of making possible a nation's, sector's or organisation's success through the implementation of new directions. The way in which the new ideas are able to convey the arrangement of key concepts, principles and strategies that will result in successful renewal and change practices is often referred to as strategic or constructive alignment (Simon, Hatch & Youell, 2012). Writing a white paper on the importance of strategic alignment in business, Simon et al., (2012) explain:

One of the greatest management challenges of the 21st Century is guiding large and complex organisations towards their goals. Value creation ... can only be assured if strategic intent flows uninterrupted from board room to shop floor. In this way individuals feel empowered to make decisions, confident in the knowledge that their actions are aligned with the overall goals of the organisation. Communication is at the heart of strategy delivery. A clearly articulated message, accompanied by succinct and relevant performance measures provides the baseline which nurtures and supports the desired management behaviours. (p. 12)

Similarly, Brabrand & Dahl (2007) note that CA in an education context is concerned with understanding 'the system' and what is needed is an in-depth investigation and understanding of the parts of the system and how they interact and influence each other.

SA may seem an abstract and elusive concept, removed from everyday practice. However, it is a useful concept in the quest for successful change implementation and renewal. A recent major change in the Australian early childhood education landscape has seen the establishment of Australia's first Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)

in 2011, the national statutory agency responsible for early childhood education and care, the subsequent introduction of the *National Quality Framework* (NQF) and *National Quality Standards* (NQS), the development and nation-wide implementation of the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) and the Australian Curriculum (AC), which is still ongoing (ACECQA, 2011). National innovative education policy directives require a deliberate plan, a common vision and language, but foremost conceptual clarity (Simpson & Flynn, 2007). The EYLF is a framework for early years learning targeting the education of children birth to age 5 and providing directions for child-centred pedagogy, focusing on children's learning and development that is contextually relevant. The AC is a curriculum for Australian school children attending foundation year (typically from age 5) to Year 10 (typically age 15). Although, it is important to note the EYLF was the outcome of a first national attempt to harmonise education provisions in early childhood, it cannot be classed as a national curriculum. The AC will need, therefore, be acknowledged as the first national curriculum in Australian's history, outlining subject areas and content to be learned by all Australian school children. It may appear that the arrangement is quite simple and straightforward and the integrated nature of the EYLF and the AC has been made explicit in numerous publications and presentations (ACARA, 2010, 2012; Connor, 2011). However, early childhood educators work across sectors and answer to a diverse number of governmental departments and agencies, making it extraordinarily difficult to understand political and policy relationships. One way to make overt, the complex nature of the latest initiatives for the Australian early childhood sector, is to acknowledge not only the antagonistic relationship between federal and state or territory governments, which is well documented (see Highfield & Bruns, 2012), but more importantly, to investigate the inconsistency of conceptions of what constitutes early childhood at a federal government level.

A short stroll down history lane

Over the past few years, various federal governments committed to pursuing an early childhood education and care agenda. For example, in 2000, Early Childhood Australia (ECA), the first national overseeing body was established by the Howard government under the auspice of the then Minister for Employment, Education and Youth Affairs, Hon. Dr. David Kemp. As an independent national organisation, ECA was charged 'to act in the interest of young children aged birth to eight years of age [and] as a knowledge-broker linking quality-assured early childhood knowledge and information to those who need it' (ECA, 2012, p. 1). This is not to deny the fact that a number of peak Australian early childhood bodies have existed for many decades. ECA was previously known as the Australian Early Childhood Association (AECA) and formerly the Australian Preschool Association (APA).

Eight years later, the Labor Rudd government was in power. In 2008, under the leadership of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), state and territory education ministers in collaboration with their federal counterparts released a landmark document, namely the *Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians*, which supersedes the 1999 Adelaide Declaration and the 1989 Hobart Declaration. This document makes explicit Australia's current education goals and includes planned 'commitment to action' (MCEETYA, 2008), which 'sets the directions for Australian schooling for the next ten years' (Connor, 2011, p. 12) or until 2018.

Unsurprisingly, the Melbourne Declaration is named as a key document for the development and implementation of the EYLF and the AC. However, it was crafted by a ministerial council, which no longer exists. Now, this begs the question: 'Why is this important?' The answer is as simple as it is disturbing: Each new council has a new or updated portfolio, a new or renewed vision, a new frame of reference and new members. It is imperative that stakeholders are aware of and commit to the new direction the council is taking. In other words, SA is vital for successful planning and implementation of the vision and mission of any new council, department or agency. Conceptual clarity and communication are key ingredients for this work, facilitating the process along the communication continuum described by the State of Queensland (2011).

As shown in Figure 1, the first step in any reform is the provision of clear and unambiguous facts. However, as will be illustrated below, proclamation by various ministerial councils of what constitutes early childhood and early childhood education and care are quite unclear. A key problem of the inconsistent ideas outlined in various policy documents over the past few years seems to be the continuous 'changing of the guards' at national ministerial council level.

In January 2012, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) announced the establishment of a new overseeing body, the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC). This council, which replaced another council, namely the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) was established on the 1 July 2009. Hence, this ministerial council survived for 30 months and was installed as a replacement for yet another council, namely MCEETYA,

which was established in 1994 (MECCEDYA, 2009). As noted above, this round-about of 'standing' or 'ministerial' councils is not helpful in providing clear policy directions for early childhood education providers and teacher training institutions.

Step one of the communication continuum: Awareness of facts

In a 2009 companion document to the Melbourne Declaration, outlining MCEETYA's four-year plan, it is stated that Australian state and territory governments have a key role in strengthening early childhood education.

Governments have important roles to play in ensuring that children receive quality early childhood education and care. The period from birth through to eight years, especially the first three years, sets the foundation for every child's social, physical, emotional and cognitive development. Early childhood education and care provides the basis for life and learning ... children who participate in quality early childhood education are more likely to make a successful transition to school, stay longer in school, continue to further education and fully participate in employment and community life as adults. (MCEETYA, 2009, p. 9)

It is a fact that close collaboration between state, territory and federal education ministers and agencies is imperative for success of any new Australian initiative. However, it is outside the scope of this paper to discuss this issue of federal and state relationships further. A simple fact is that commitment to, or buy-in for new policy directions on all levels of government, such as the successful implementation of the EYLF and the AC, is not possible unless there is conceptual clarity. Hence, it may be argued that the first step of the communication continuum outlined in Figure 1, may be the most critical for success.

The extract from the 2009 companion document, to the Melbourne Declaration provided above seems to indicate that conceptual alignment concerning the idea of what constitutes early childhood education has not been achieved. For example, the statement 'children who participate in quality early childhood education are more likely to make a successful transition to school' (MCEETYA, 2009, p. 9) undoubtedly implies that early childhood education (ECE) is different from 'school education' (SE). There is a stated boundary between ECE and SE, noting that ECE precedes SE (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Communication continuum

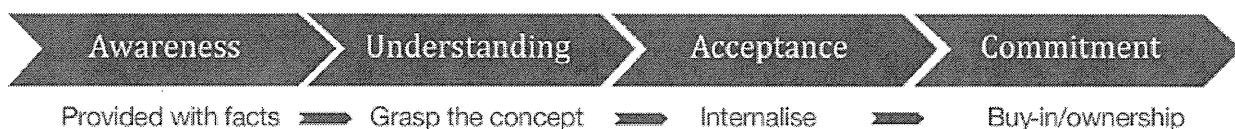
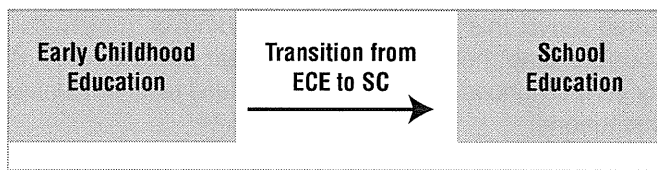
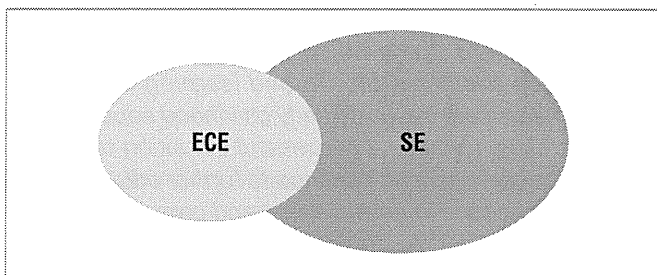


Figure 2. Conceptual model depicting early childhood



However, in the same document and on the same page, it is acknowledged that ECE is 'the period from birth through to eight years' (MCEETYA, 2009, p. 9), providing a view that ECE is part of SE and includes 'junior primary' (see Figure 3). This conceptualisation of early childhood education seems to align with the one noted on the ECA website, which represents the interests of 'young children aged birth to eight years of age' (ECA, 2012).

Figure 3. Conceptual model depicting early childhood education as part of school education



A key element in understanding the significance of the problem that this conceptual misalignment can cause is the delineation of boundaries between what constitutes early childhood and/or middle childhood and the importance attributed to different stages of childhood (i.e. school-aged child) and the education provision for each period. The conceptual confusion exemplified in the above quote (MCEETYA, 2009, p. 9) and illustrated in Figures 2–3 has the potential to have significant implications for the successful implementation of recent national early childhood education policy initiatives in general, such as the NQF and the NQS and the EYLF and the AC in particular.

Yet, MCEETYA no longer exists; hence, there is a need to clarify if the conflicting views concerning the definition of ECE expressed in the above document have been rectified by the ministerial council, which superseded it. The Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) was specifically tasked, until early 2012, when the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC) was launched, to provide guidance for Australian education, early childhood development and youth affairs.

In one of the commonly developed four-year plans, MCEECDYA (2010) outlines its portfolio responsibilities as follows:

Members of the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) have policy responsibilities associated with early

childhood development and schooling and for services to assist students to make successful transitions to training, further studies or employment. MCEECDYA wants all Australian children to have a high-quality, world-standard education to equip them for life in the 21st century. (p. 3)

A key report released by MCEECDYA (2010) which 'highlights for policy-makers the key findings of a national survey of parents with children birth to age eight' (p. 7) as part of COAG's National Early Childhood Development Strategy provides interesting insights concerning employed conceptual models of early childhood and early childhood education and care. First, there is a clear shift in language from early childhood *education* by MCEETYA to early childhood *development* by MCEECDYA. Second, despite the substitution of *education* with *development* there is a stated view that ECE is the period from birth to age eight. Hence, MCEECDYA seems to subscribe to an integrated model of early childhood belonging to non-formal, non-compulsory and formal and compulsory schooling provisions (see Figure 3).

However, now that MCEECDYA has been scrapped in favour of Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC), which met the first time on 20 April 2012 in Perth (SCSEEC, 2012), it is important to understand this council's frame of reference and view of early childhood and education provisions for this group of children. An extract from the terms of reference document (SCSEEC, 2012) provides some possible insight into how the members of the council view early childhood and the relationship between ECE and SE:

The Council provides a forum through which strategic policy on school education and early childhood development can be coordinated at the national level, and through which information can be shared and resources used collaboratively towards the achievement of agreed objectives and priorities. By connecting early childhood development and child care with school education, the Council aims to ensure all Australian children are fully prepared for learning and life. (SCSEEC, 2012, p. 1)

The conception expressed by SCSEEC of what constitutes early childhood seems to align more with Model 1 than Model 2 (see Figures 2 and 3). This view is reinforced by the change in terminology from 'early childhood education and care' by MCEETYA (2009) to early childhood development (ECD) by the former and current councils. Hence, ECD and SE are perceived in a relationship of linear succession in which only SE has been granted the symbolic role of formal education in its title.

The problems of misalignment of conceptions of what constitutes a young child, education, and/or development may become even more prominent when it comes to questions of implementation of key policy documents, such as the NQF, NQS, the EYLF and the AC, and issues of accountability and assessment of young children's learning.

Implications for practice

Referring back to the communication continuum (see Figure 1), it is imperative to commence with facts prior to speculating about possible implications. Hence, commonly known facts and those established in this paper concerning the conception of Australian early childhood and early childhood education are:

Fact 1.

Through COAG, all Australian governments have established early childhood education and development as a priority, committing in 2009 to a five-year National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education.

Fact 2.

Each new ministerial or standing council responsible for early childhood will have revised and/or new visions, values and frames of reference, which impact conceptualisations of what constitutes early childhood and early childhood education, development and care.

Fact 3.

There has been a clear shift in language from early childhood education as expressed by MEETYA in 2008 to early childhood development by MCEECDYA in 2010 and SCSEEC in 2012.

Fact 4.

Children from birth to eight years of age fit into pre-compulsory and compulsory education provisions, resulting in a mix of education offerings that cross political jurisdictions and government departments on the national and state levels.

Fact 5.

Implementation of the EYLF and the AC in early childhood settings will, most likely, be hampered not necessarily because of the fiscal tension between Australian federal and state or territory governments, but because of conceptual misalignment of what constitutes early childhood and early childhood education.

This paper has traced the birth and death of various ministerial councils over the years and documented their frames of reference. More importantly, it presented two competing conceptual models that have surfaced in the recent national policy documents released by these councils concerning early childhood education. Conceptual model 1 depicts early childhood as a period of life that precedes formal and compulsory education and conceptual model 2, which depicts early childhood as a period of life that ranges from 'birth to age eight' and spans both non-formal, pre-compulsory and formal and compulsory education provisions.

Future research

Future research will need to pick up the important issue of political ideology and its often destructive influence on policy-formulation and implementation. To this effect, a historical outline of how national and local early childhood education policy debates have been framed and rerouted over time, based on ideological positions and struggles, is needed to complement the current debate concerning conceptualisation and communication problems. Furthermore, future work should also pay close attention to current state-based curriculum frameworks and policy documents that underpin the work of the early childhood education and care sector in Australia to further highlight the complexity of the issues raised.

Conclusion

Based on the current analysis, it can be concluded that no common conceptualisation exists at the national level of what constitutes early childhood and by default, early childhood education. This is a disturbing state of affairs, which will make the work of the responsible statutory agencies (ACECOA and AITSL), overseeing national bodies (ECA) and state government departments overseeing the implementation of new national policy directives very difficult indeed. Too often there is the view that practitioners are unwilling to embrace new and innovative policy initiatives. However, buy-in and ownership of change is, so this paper has argued, virtually impossible in a policy environment that lacks conceptual clarity and thus strategic alignment.

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