

Doing state policy at preschool: An autoethnographic tale of universal access to ECEC in Australia

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Abstract: In 2009, the Australian states and territories signed an agreement to provide 15 hours per week of universal access to quality early education to all children in Australia in the year before they enter school. Taking on board the international evidence about the importance of early education, the Commonwealth government made a considerable investment to make universal access possible by 2013. We explore the ongoing processes that seek to make universal access a reality in New South Wales by attending to the complex agential relationships between multiple actors. While we describe the state government and policy makers' actions in devising funding models to drive changes, we prioritise our gaze on the engagement of a preschool and its director with the state government's initiatives that saw them develop various funding and provision models in response. To offer accounts of their participation in policy making and doing at the preschool, we use the director's auto-biographical notes. We argue that the state's commitment to ECEC remained a form of political manoeuvring where responsibility for policy making was pushed onto early childhood actors. This manoeuvring helped to silence and further fragment the sector, but these new processes also created spaces where the sector can further struggle for recognition through the very accountability measures that the government has introduced.

Keywords: policy analysis, provisional numbers, resistance, local policy making, funding for ECEC.

Introduction

Janelle's autoethnographic note: "The demands and expectations placed on a Director of an early childhood education service in Australia and in particular NSW place enormous responsibility and, potentially, power at the feet of these people. How well are we prepared to make recommendations, formulate plans and implement decisions with parents, management teams, the community and families? How do early childhood professionals at the forefront of service delivery, bridge the chasm which often exists between government policy and professional, philosophical and ethical values?"

In 2009, all states and territories in Australia signed the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education (Commonwealth Government, 2009), in which they committed to making 15 hours preschool education per week available to each child by 2013. The Partnership referenced international evidence of the economic benefits of providing access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). Investment in ECEC was part of the national Productivity Commission's economic agenda that sought to create a more productive workforce, and it was defended on economic grounds, such as increasing women's productivity and improving learning outcomes to reduce future costs associated with underachievement. The Commonwealth government, which had not been involved in this sector for more than three decades, decided to directly invest in early education. The investment was passed down directly to the states and territories who in turn were trusted to administer the implementation of universal access to quality ECEC. The Partnership initially set a target for the achievement of universal access by 2013; however, this has yet to be reached partly due to the state of New South Wales (NSW) (CoAG, 2016).

We are interested in exploring the ongoing processes that are taking place to secure universal access, but not from the perspective of the government and policymakers, although their actions will be described. Rather, we are interested in exploring the perspective of a preschool, and principally its director, that has been involved in universal access. This is a bottom-up view of policy that enables us to obtain insights into the dynamic, emergent and often *ad hoc* nature of doing policy (Gorur, 2011). It might be easy to suggest, based on the policy of universal access and the increased national investments made to ECEC, that the growing international importance of ECEC has had an effect on the status of the field in NSW. However, by exploring universal access from the preschool perspective, and by accounting for the dynamics of doing policy at the local level, different conclusions can

be drawn. Our question then is: Have the international discourses and evidence sought to enhance the importance of ECEC in societies – its positive effects on national economies, its potentials to tackle inequalities and enhance children’s lifelong learning – increased the status of the ECEC sector in NSW?

We answer this question by combining policy analysis with the selected autoethnographic notes of a preschool director (co-author Janelle). Since the release of the Partnership document, Janelle has been interested in universal access. As part of her Masters program, she started to document changes that occurred both at policy and practice levels in her preschool. Although seldom found in policy analysis, autobiographical narratives are increasingly used in education research. Such research affords an insider perspective: “Because autoethnography presents a person’s experience in the context of relationships, social categories, and cultural practices (or the violation of these relationships, categories and practices), the method revels in sharing insider knowledge about a phenomenon” (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2016, p. 34). Janelle wrote her stories as a cultural insider. The events she reports on work as “evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, no p.). Her stories are constructed from her field notes, discussions and documents and available policies. These stories are accounts of how she and her colleagues have worked through government policies. We have analysed her notes and experiences, which portray an instance of ‘doing policy’ (Gorur, 2011), and are experiences potentially shared by others in the sector (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Janelle also belongs to different egroups and a directors’ group that discusses issues that matter to them. While she does not quote these discussions, her summaries of what was discussed and how, provide us with some insights as to the perspectives and processes found in the sector. All the authors of this paper have engaged with these stories by using analytical concepts within the general frame of ‘doing policy’ (Gorur, 2011) to shed some light on the negotiations on universal access and some of their effects. Besides subjecting these stories to academic analysis, we also see them as productive, since they create connections with others’ actions in the sector and may stimulate readers to reflect on them (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001).

In the next section we introduce some background to universal access using the autoethnographic notes and a brief historical review of developments. We then introduce the notion of ‘doing policy’ to conceptually frame our analysis of the universal access policy. The paper then uses autobiographical notes to explore policy from the perspective of a preschool. We

conclude with a discussion to answer the question we raised and also to add to the current literature on doing policy in ECEC.

Universal Access: International Discourses and State ECEC Policies

In Australia over the past 7 years the early childhood landscape has changed dramatically, requiring staff, management committees, children and the community to work together to deliver universal access to high quality early childhood education that is responsive to communities' needs and wishes. Previously, in New South Wales, each centre operated within its local context often in geographic isolation. Community based preschools were generally cash strapped leaving little money to finance conferences or trainings for staff, which were an invaluable opportunity to network and cross pollinate ideas. Innovative practices emerged and generally slipped under the radar. The dreaded surprise spot visits from the regulatory authority (children's services advisor) sent services into a state of panic. In reality, I believe services enjoyed the autonomy of going about their daily business, but they also felt isolated. We accepted what was imposed upon us from the government. Then things began to change with the internet and social media. We have realised that other centres shared the issues we were concerned about. We pushed back and engaged in activist work to get more funding to make ECEC more accessible for families. We wrote various submissions to governments raising awareness of the importance of ECEC, fought for pay parity with school teachers and to uplift the status of the sector, and to bring the importance of children and their voices into communities and to the government.

The Partnership's (CoAG, 2008) goal of universal access to 15 hours per week (for 40 weeks per year) of early learning programs for children in the year before they enter school is relatively minimal in comparison to other nations' provisions. For example, in Finland "children aged 0-6 years have a right to early childhood education" (Karila, 2012, p. 585), which means access to five days full-time quality institutional education and care per week. Australia's provision of ECEC, in comparison, can be characterised historically and at present in the following way:

- general underinvestment in ECEC at federal and state levels;
- highly varied, complex and state specific provisions that are funded mostly by fees paid by families;
- low prestige of the sector;

- the lack of value placed on young children's institutional care and education; and
- the continued marketisation, privatisation and corporatisation of the sector (Woodrow & Brennan, 2000; Press & Woodrow, 2005; Dowling & O-Malley, 2009; Naumann, 2011; Brennan, 2012).

During the 2000s, discourses of the economic benefits of ECEC, universal access, quality education, professionalisation and neuroscience evidence quickly gained a foothold among professionals and policymakers (Urban, 2008). These global policy discourses framed reforms in Australia initiated by the Rudd Federal Government that in 2009 led to states and territories signing the Partnership Agreement (CoAG, 2009). While universal access seemingly represents a smart economic choice for the nation, the systematisation needed to pursue universal access did not progress through large economic investments in NSW. As the Brennan (2012) review shows, the NSW State government maintained its funding of 177, 6 million Australian dollars and the Commonwealth government added to this \$27,4 million in 2010/11, 82,5 million in 2011/212 and \$142 million in 2012/2013. This funding is especially low in comparison to other states' spending on ECEC per child in 2010/2011: New South Wales \$190, \$266 Victoria, \$489 Australian Capital Territory, \$499 South Australia, \$556 Western Australia and \$1,033 Northern Territory (Brennan, 2012). The extra funding provided by the National Partnership was not sufficient to bring NSW to a par with other states without considerable additional investment from the state government. To achieve this a significant change, beyond increased financial investment, was needed along with a strong commitment to and increased value being placed on ECEC.

Up until 2011, NSW offered numerous reasons explaining why the introduction of universal access would be difficult within the state (The Allen Consulting Group, 2011). Other states, such as those with a larger previous financial commitment to ECEC and with provision that could be readily altered to the 15 hours per week pattern, were well advanced by this time. By 2013, they had reached the goal of offering access to 600 hours of quality early childhood education programmes to children of pre-school age. When the national Early Childhood Minister, Peter Garreth, in 2011 expressed the Gillard government's concerns about NSW progress towards the achievement of the Partnership's goals, the state responded with a number of initiatives, such as a call for preschools and long day care centres to trial implementation; commissioning the Brennan Review and subsequently releasing a Preschool Funding Model and the Long Day Care Grants Program

to support the enrolment of children specifically targeted for universal access (4 year olds before starting school and 3 year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds, also called 'equity children'). (See subsequent universal access policies and reviews in Table 1.)

Table 1 Universal Access policies, reviews and initiatives

2009	2011	2012	2012	2013	2014	2014 Sept.	2015 Dec.	2016 Jan.	2016 Sept.
National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education ¹	The Allen Consulting Group report	Brennan Review of NSW government funding ²	Tenders for 15 hours of preschool trial that remained non-responded to by NSW gov.	Release of new funding models: Preschool Funding Model and Long Day Care Grants Program	Review of the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education ³	Commonwealth extends National Partnership funding till the end of 2015 ⁴	Community Preschools 600 hours Incentive ⁵	Commonwealth extends National Partnership funding till 30 June 2015 ⁶	Start Strong Initiative ⁷

¹<https://www.education.gov.au/national-partnership-agreements>

²https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/about-us/statistics-and-research/public-reviews-and-enquiries/review-of-nsw-government-funding-for-early-childhood-education/review_nsw_gov_funding_ece.pdf

³https://www.scsec.edu.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/Reports%20and%20publications/EC%20Publications/NP_UAECE%20Review-220415.pdf

⁴<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-05/federal-government-to-commit-millions-to-preschool-extension/5722836>

⁵<https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/what-we-offer/regulation-and-accreditation/early-childhood-education-care/useful-links/20117-Guidelines-for-Preschools-600-hours-incentive.pdf>

⁶https://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/education/national-partnership/2016_2017_universal_access_NP.pdf

⁷<https://cccns.org.au/wp-content/uploads/broadside-09-10-16.pdf>

The major policy implementation platforms are the funding models. Being independently organised units, budget calculations were and still are crucial to ensuring the viability of preschools and long day care. Running the policy reform on new funding models engaged with this critical aspect of provisioning. ECEC units survive on family paid fees and targeted subsidies paid by the state and are responsible for staff salaries and all other costs associated with the running of programs, including the maintenance of buildings or rental payments, and resources. In this context, and in order to enable participation in 15 hour per week educational programs, preschools engaged in modelling and calculative practices to achieve optimal enrolment and funding, which then became integral to policy enactment and formation. This also resulted in preschool directors in NSW having to negotiate a range of financial and professional rationalities. This paper examines this 'doing of policy' from the point of view of the Director of a preschool. The next section offers an explanation of our framing of the Director's activities as 'doing policy'.

'Doing Policy': Framing the Analysis

While policymaking is often approached analytically as a rational and linear process involving definite actors in a policymaking domain coalesced around specific problems, we take a different approach. We draw upon the

notion of ‘policy assemblage’ (Clarke et al., 2015; Gorur, 2011) and the argument that we need to “understand the untidy and apparently chaotic and complex processes involved in the ‘doing’ of policy” (Gorur, 2011, p. 613). Gorur prefers the term ‘doing policy’ over ‘policymaking’ because it challenges traditional approaches to policy analysis that paper over the ad hoc and provisional conditions of policy with rational-realist accounts. ‘Doing policy’ dispels the notion that policy making involves one group of policy making agents and another group of policy users who implement policy. Gorur claims that the artificial distinctions between policy makers, policy users, policy making, policy implementation and policy context do not do justice to policy work which is in fact “dynamic, emergent and uncertain” (Gorur, 2011, p. 613).

This is consonant with Ball’s (1994) earlier work into the incompleteness and ad hocery of local practices of educational policymaking. Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) invoke the term ‘policy enactments’ in their study and characterisation of education policy. In their account, social actors do not fit into the neat distinction between policymakers located in political and bureaucratic institutions and policy implementers in the social field. Moreover, “few policies arrive fully formed and the process of policy enactment also involve ad-hockery, borrowing, re-ordering, displacing, making do and reinvention. Policies are sometimes poorly thought-out and/or poorly written and become ‘rewritten’ or ‘retro-fitted’ as government objectives change or ministers move on” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 8). Policy analysis must therefore attend to the variegated, non-deterministic and context-specific practices of policy interpretation, translation and enactments across global, national and local sites (Clarke et al., 2015; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Local agents, rather than being merely policy users, engage in practices of association, interpretation, translation and policy creation in negotiating the complex discursive, social and organisational field that political and governmental authorities seek to instrumentalise and govern. This perspective recognises that governing through policy is a congenitally failing enterprise, where ideas and plans and the values underpinning them, struggle to accommodate the messy actualities of life, and where governing relies not on dictates, but on practices of influence, persuasion, coalition building and the translation across space of interests and rationalities (Rose & Miller, 1992).

For Gorur (2011), “phrasing the question in terms of ‘doing policy’ makes room to explore the many sites, processes, practices and actors that might be involved in policy being ‘done’. It leaves open the question of how agency is mobilised” (2011, p. 614). This question of agency is pertinent, especially

to our current study. Education bureaucracies were once treated as centres of policy formation, and schools as sites of policy administration, however, policy work is being devolved away from centres of authority that once marked the welfare state (Ozga, 2014). Increasingly, a network ontology is disrupting the established networks of expertise, and knowledge production and use are opening up opportunities for a range of social actors to influence policy (Ball, 2009; Ball & Junemann, 2012). As such, policy analysis must attend to the complex agential relationships between multiple actors to grasp “how multiple actors are drawn in, how the relations between them are formed, and how they interact with each other” (Gorur, 2011, p. 617). The autobiographical notes used in this research are useful here because they provide a textual account of the local experiences of policymaking and doing. The following sections examine the engagement of the preschool and its director in the state government’s initiatives.

‘Number Crunching’: Meeting Targets but Maintaining Values

The state government was productive in coming up with explanations about why it will be difficult to implement universal access in NSW (The Allen Consulting Group, 2011). Our model of provision of 6 hours per day did not work well with the 15 hours. After the Brennan Review (2012) the state released a tender asking for preschools to provide some models through which 15 hours of preschool provision could be secured. I was interested to get my head around it and selected this issue as my assignment in my Masters program. Our preschool submitted a couple of possible models but there was no response to any submission model from the government. In 2013 preschool directors and parent management committees in NSW were advised that a new funding model would replace the existing Resource Allocation Model (RAM.) Following some of the recommendations of the Brennan report (2012), a new funding model was born, titled the Preschool Funding Model (PFM). There were many in-house conversations with committee members, parents, educators and teachers all trying to understand how to implement the new model with integrity.

The federal government’s commitment to ECEC with the National Partnership made the sector feel more appreciated. Experiencing long term neglect from both Commonwealth and state governments, the sector willingly came to the party to achieve universal access since this also cut to the heart of their hopes for ECEC: providing quality ECEC to each child (Macfarlaine &

Lewis, 2012). Pursuing this goal, however, required professionals to engage in extra work and approach the issues at hand with creativity, initiative, and a readiness for new structures, practices, and new models and calculations. The 15 hour requirement has shifted the focus on to 4-year olds, children from disadvantaged backgrounds and from Indigenous families. Universal access presented considerable challenges for several reasons: 1) the changed focus on only 4-year olds disadvantages 3-year olds' enrolment, 2) change in the weekly provision pattern allows less children to access preschool education overall, 3) change in number of teachers with four years' training on staff to allow for a new pattern of program provision and educators to be rostered in with them, 4) availability of families willing to enrol their children for 15 hours since it meant increased weekly fees and changed attendance patterns, 5) focus on enrolment of children whose education required special professional knowledge and staff, 6) changes in budget due to increased payment for teachers (compared to educators paid at lower salaries) and extra professional staff and 7) decreased subsidies for 3-year olds. These structural and staff appointment issues were further complicated with the new subsidies delivered as the Preschool Funding Model (PMF) aimed to compel preschools to target particular children (See summary on Figure 1).

We had great empathy for the families of 'non-equity' 3 year olds and concerns that without them our services will be financially risky if not inoperable. It was common knowledge that every second year, most NSW preschools relied heavily on 3 year olds to ensure full utilization. We were entering our two-year cycle of requiring 3 year-olds and without them we would have an empty room. Consequently, there were less fees collected and no money for staff or operational costs. This was a threat to our preschool and one we were not prepared to entertain. Even with aggressive advertising campaigns, letter box drops and marketing, 3 year olds were needed every year to fill up numbers. 3 year olds in our preschool were "our life blood" and we needed to honour this. But since government funding was not provided for three years olds (except if they came from the targeted groups) we also were obligated to ensure funding was maximized in order to reduce fees, thus had to enrol the targeted children enrolling with the largest subsidies. We knew all too well that affordability was the key to accessibility for all children. Thus, having more subsidies mean cheaper fees for others too.

Committee members and staff attended information sessions funded by the Department of Education and delivered by peak bodies, such as Community Child Care. These training sessions have left the participants confused and angry. Many directors voiced their concerns about the number of changes

which had occurred in NSW. There was little time to waste. The parent committee members and staff unpacked the new model at monthly management meetings and informal gatherings.

How does the model work? AT A GLANCE

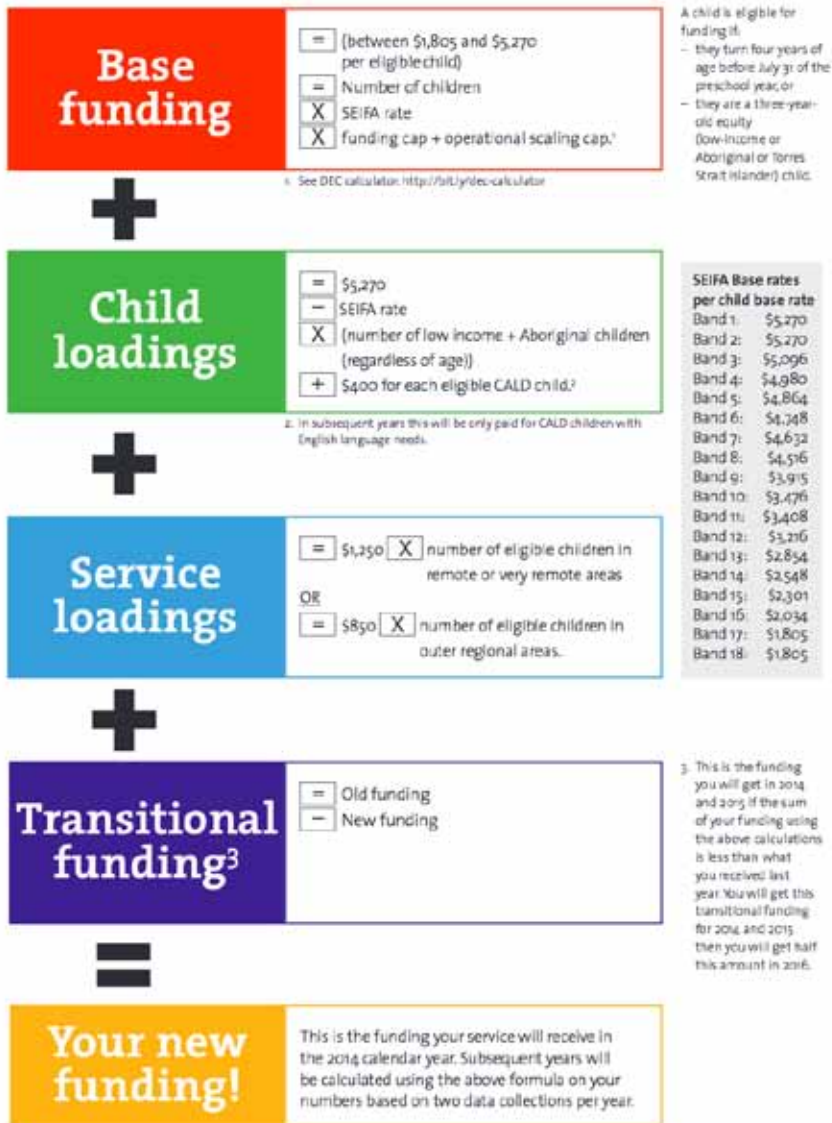


Figure 1: Schematic view of PMF by Community Childcare briefing paper¹

¹ http://cccnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/broadsidebriefing_2013-07.pdf

New terminology demanded our attention as well. What was a SEIFA band? How would we know our SEIFA² band funding amount? As these terminologies and types of subsidies were unpacked, our understanding has developed. 'Funding caps'³ become an important component of the model. It has required us to recalculate operation schedules, enrolments and subsidies under the 15 hour model, such as 2.5 days per week in order to enable the fulfilment of the National Partnership aims. As the Community Childcare Co-operative (Broadside Briefing Paper, 2013⁴) further explains:

"Preschools can maximise their funding under the new model by ensuring they enrol to their funding cap, children who are in the year before school (who will have turned four years of age by 31 July that year) and children who are economically disadvantaged and/or Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in the two years before school. Services should also ensure they are open for at least six hours per day and for at least 40 weeks per year."

While we were familiar with the earlier term 'operational scaling cap' we needed to rethink this under this new model. The Department of Education offered the following calculation to help our work:

"Preschools that operate for the standard school session can typically offer for each licensed place 30 hours of preschool access per week (6 hours x 5 days = 30 hours) and 1,200 hours of preschool access a year (30 hours per week x 40 weeks per year = 1,200 hours). So for every licensed place, a typical preschool can offer two children 15 hours per week of preschool. This is what the funding cap aims to calculate." (NSW Department of Education, 2013⁵)

This calculation did not consider the general enrolment or staffing patterns, nor the enrolment of 3 years old children, which complicated centres to just simply reorganize their enrolments to fit this expectation. Some children at-

² "Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) is a product developed by the ABS that ranks areas in Australia according to relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage. The indexes are based on information from the five-yearly Census" (Australian Bureau of Statistics)

³ Funding caps are calculated by multiplying licensed preschool places per day, by days open per week, and then dividing this figure by 2.5 to reach the number of how many 15 hours place per week available for children.

⁴ <http://cccns.w.org.au/wp-content/uploads/broadside-briefing-7.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/what-we-offer/regulation-and-accreditation/early-childhood-education-care/funding/community-preschool-funding/providers-preschool-funding/providers-calculate-allocations>

tended only one day per week and families did not wish or could not afford to enrol the children for longer periods. Other parents wanted their 3 years old enrolled for two days (12 hours). In order to ensure continuity of care and education as per quality standards, the same educators had to be at work for the 15 hours period which complicated work schedules. The Minister was confident that the sector not only can achieve the targets the National Partnership set out but to also make the system more equitable:

“I am confident that the changes will result in a fairer distribution of preschool funding across NSW, which will help to ensure that more children, including the most disadvantaged, can benefit from accessing preschool”. (Piccoli, 2013⁶)

The funding model released in 2013 did address equity by allocating extra funding to families that needed financial support so they could afford preschool for their 4-year olds, a provision that supported the goal of universal access. However, equalising access to preschool education for children with disadvantaged and indigenous background and prioritising 4-year olds also diminished the places and opportunities for 3-year olds. While considerations of equity remained important, both from the state and the preschool’s perspectives, it was really the numbers – 15 hours, subsidies, budget balances etc. – that started to drive not only NSW policy but also the reorganisation of provisions, employment patterns and children’s enrolments. Given the central position in policy that numbers have gained, we find the concept of ‘provisional numbers’ (Lampland, 2010) productive for our understanding of how these numbers operate in state policy and through the preschool’s calculations. Lampland defines provisional numbers as those numbers used in specific situations like planning and strategising, which “assist groups in setting the parameters for tasks at hand and debating their relative merit” (Lampland, 2010, p. 378). In policy documents and business plans such numbers may “parade as stable and fixed indicators” (Lampland, 2010, p. 378) but they are actually temporary or conditional devices that enable rationalisation, and bring into motion activities that are themselves conditional and ephemeral but which also lead to transformation in institutional activities, processes and cultures (Lampland, 2010).

Focusing on the role of provisional numbers thus enables us to critique numbers not in terms of being false or lacking credibility or being inad-

⁶ <http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/about-us/news-at-det/media-releases1/more-funding-and-a-new-funding-model-for-preschools>

equate, but in terms of their use, what numbers perform and the political, social and cultural projects they enact. In the case of ECEC policy, instead of providing explicit directions, models or mechanisms that could have facilitated universal access, the state government released numbers that became highly productive in further strengthening calculative practices (Callon, 1998; Miller & Napier, 1993). Changes to policy and the funding formula required the director and staff to acquire the knowledge, vocabulary and expertise of finance and modelling. The practices they instituted made the preschool a 'centre of calculation' (Callon, 1998) with the objective of maximising the financial gains from the quantity and demographics of the intake. Clarke et al. (2015) observe that policy constructs and disseminates certain representations and senses of the world because "policy is inscribed through language and cannot exist outside of language" (2015, p. 37). In the case of Kurri Kurri, learning the policy language and practising the calculations effectively translated policy objectives and meanings into the preschool. The numbers provided by the government set the parameters for preschools to model. The focus on funding models to reach desired changes assumed the value of optimising funding and enrolments, as well as the value placed on certain groups of children. Importantly, these newly forming calculative regimes provoked preschool staff and committee to negotiate and ponder ethical issues as the calculations around who gets enrolled produced dilemmas related to equity, access and the preschool's educational philosophy (Millei & Gallagher, 2017).

We were driven by the belief that if we could make the enrolment patterns work for everyone, we could all win. Funding boosts from the government was intended to be passed on to families of 4- or 5-year old children in decreased fees (DEC, 2013). This would have meant more affordable services for all families and also that the preschool budget would be less constrained. Our work began, numbers were crunched and we "robbed Peter to pay Paul", so to speak. I also felt the burden of knowing that without increased access to a 600 hour preschool program, our funding would be cut which could have led to a loss of extremely qualified, passionate educators and teachers due to not being able to pay for their labour. Several budgets were prepared with one finally approved. Fees were slightly higher for 3 year-olds but families valued our service and were prepared to pay the additional cost. From discussions with the management committee and as our understanding of the model increased, a motion was put to the committee suggesting a two-year budget cycle model be adopted. This gave us the opportunity to average the funding over the two years, effectively reducing the fluctuations in fees. This proposal was accepted at the next committee meeting.

The funding formula associated with the objective of universal access elicited vigorous calculative practices at some preschools, while others went on with their business as usual. In the case of Kurri Kurri, the funding formula threatened the viability of the preschool enterprise by reducing the fees collected, and by imposing new constraints or difficulties related to intake and staffing. The policy and its resulting calculative practices upset the established value system in the preschool that placed importance on 3-year olds' enrolment. Specifically, the preschool was committed to the enrolment of 3-year olds as the educators believed in access to early learning and because it served the needs and wishes of families, and their enrolment made the preschool viable. The new funding arrangements disrupted this practice because it affected access for 3-year olds. This introduced ethical dilemmas for the preschool's educators who were compelled to make tough decisions in light of their philosophies shaped by the weight of international evidence on the importance of ECEC, as well as every child's rights to education, enshrined in the Australian curriculum framework and global discourses as well. Kurri Kurri maintained its commitment to enrolling 3-year olds in the face of a funding formula that punished them for it. Here, policy was mediated by the local context and re-worked to meet the values and reasoning of the preschool community.

Hierarchies and Power Relations

The early childhood community were divided about the model. It has long been a ploy to keep the sector fragmented and the new model certainly continued this process. Additional hours spent trolling through websites accessing research which informed our decisions. This research was conducted outside of preschool and working hours, in addition to juggling a full teaching load and 'negotiating' the changes to supporting children with additional needs funding (SCAN – will be discussed later).

What also became clear in these conversations, that preschool staff still suffered a general lack of respect from the government. They were undervalued as professionals. Their education and care work they so expertly provided, and often with the same qualifications as teachers, received more critique than recognition. If lack of recognition was not the case, then why would we be asked to increase the hours of provision for young children when at school they are attending for 6 hours only (9am-3pm)? Would school teachers change their hours to accommodate the government whims? Would they be asked to do so and would not their advocacy organisations be heard and listened to? Would they ask them to prioritise the education of some children over the

others? In addition, we often thought, what will happen when the National Partnership expires in June 2018? How can we plan in a longer term to ensure our viability and stability in this rapidly changing and unsecure environment? Why is school funding ensured for each year and spent without government interference and why does our funding need to be constantly negotiated, monitored and accounted for in minute details, if we receive any at all?

In August 2016 the media broke what we had all suspected: the NSW Government had underspent on early childhood education over the last 5 years by \$365 million⁷. This caused a great deal of angst across the sector, communicated on the online forum in passionate words. We knew this underspending was occurring but as alluded to earlier, we were unable to prove it despite our advocacy. With wage parity⁸ always put on hold due to lack of funds for early childhood teachers and educators, the sector was less than happy. Staff in centres knew that ultimately families would bear the cost of any wage increases. Therefore, they bore the loss in wages and superannuation squarely on their shoulders. Many teachers, who have now retired, dedicated their time and sacrificed their own financial security to prop up early childhood education in NSW, while the state governments grew their coffers.

In November 2015, NSW preschools failed to reach the government's target of 95% of children attending 600 hours of preschool education again. This provoked the NSW Government to dangle another carrot; the launch of the 'Community Preschools 600 hour's Incentive'⁹. If services increased their participation rates of 4-year olds attending 600 hours by 5%-15%, they would attract an equal percentage rate on their base funding.

Those centres known as 'early up takers' were encouraged to tell their stories to promote their success of budgeting (together with streamlined enrolments) to other early childhood centres through professional videos. After completing our data input online, I was contacted by the Department of Education. I was questioned about our increased participation levels in 600 hours

⁷ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-14/nsw-government-preschools-to-get-115m-dollar-funding-boost/7843506>

⁸ Wage parity means that early childhood and primary teachers earn a salary that reflects their level of training. Currently early childhood teachers earn about \$30,000 less than their primary counterparts. <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/early-childhood-teachers-push-for-pay-parity-with-primary-school-teachers/news-story/38ffedb1c9055b7437ed54b17d8e7f4e>

⁹ <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/what-we-offer/regulation-and-accreditation/early-childhood-education-care/useful-links/20117-Guidelines-for-Preschools-600-hours-incentive.pdf>

of early childhood education. Later there was a follow-up call asking me to clarify and elaborate on points of interest to the Department, including our increased participation of Aboriginal children. Again a few days later a third call requested that our centre participate in a video clip supporting the implementation. We agreed but were unsure of when this would occur. However, this happened very expediently and without hesitation we complied, mindful of promoting the great work we do at the preschool as well beyond what they expected us to report on.

In September 2016, as if to deflect the negative publicity, the Minister for Early Childhood Education and Aboriginal affairs, Leslie Williams, and the Premier Mike Baird held a press conference to announce the Start Strong initiative¹⁰ that aimed to support the state government. The timing of the announcement was poorly planned with most preschools already completing their enrolments. Many preschools were offering 1 day preschool for children before school, which effectively meant no base funding. The Government has promised “85 million for community preschools, targeted at increasing 600 hour enrolments and reducing fees”¹¹. The sector responded: ‘Where is the rest of the 365 million Mr Baird?’ The demand was to have an opportunity for an open discussion about this underspending. This demand was overshadowed by the issue of the government banning grey hound racing.

The sector once again became divided. On top, leadership changes in peak bodies unsettled the sector. Our online forum set up in 2006 to reduce the fragmentation and isolation of early childhood professionals, provided great support and confidence to directors. It was a safe place to discuss the changing situations in the early childhood sector among professionals. To help make, maintain and create connections between directors and staff working in preschools, but perhaps also to break the safe circle of the online group and get some insights into staff thinking and attitudes, the government set up a new forum called the Start Strong Ehub. The Government have also invested in a parent awareness campaign called ‘It makes you think’¹² to help preschools to promote the importance of preschool for families.

These autoethnographic notes reveal frustration towards the government and its lack of recognition for the sector. Passing on the responsibility for

¹⁰ <http://cccnew.org.au/wp-content/uploads/broadside-09-10-16.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/what-we-offer/regulation-and-accreditation/early-childhood-education-care/funding/start-strongref>

¹² <http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/what-we-offer/regulation-and-accreditation/early-childhood-education-care/funding/start-strong/info-for-parents>

the interpretation and implementation of universal access to the sector, demanding that they change their operating hours, structure of provision, staff contracts and funding arrangements, all represented in their view the continued undervaluing of the work they do. 'Consultation' manifested as a one-way process where the government has sought and incorporated the results and insights gained through modelling attempts at at preschools, such 600 hours provision models, financial models, creation of discussion groups and family communication platforms etc., making the sector policy informing and forming (Grek & Ozga, 2010). While their significance in doing policy has been greatly elevated, this importance only partly translated in to the recognition of the sector. The allocated state funding for ECEC was withheld, the sector was expected to continue doing their work and securing the extra hours needed to fulfil the requirements of universal access in their spare time, and issues that were so crucial to the sector were overshadowed by more 'popular' issues in the political sphere. With the ball in the sector's court, the government avoided any obligation to provide extra financial support or professional training for centres to learn financial and general management and to support changes. Building on the success of some models developed in centres, the government decided to put up these cases as examples for others to follow. These videos were not promoted to express recognition for the tremendous work and effort some players put in to realise government initiatives, rather they were used for the government's own promotional purposes, to make the sector learn by example.

Lacked of recognition from the state government is an emblematic approach to a sector that is historically built on exploiting the willingness of colleagues to do the best for children and families without due financial and professional recognition (Macfarlane & Lewis, 2012). In this case, the government assumed that staff will continue with irregular and unpaid hours in teaching, administration and in campaigning for more enrolments, to work for longer days than their counterparts in schools. To add insult to injury, the government announced it would spend \$80 million on the Start Strong initiative while withholding the balance the sector was long due.

The processes and practices that formalised in preschools often countered the sector's advocacy efforts to improve their work conditions and every child's right to quality early education (even if included in the Early Years Learning Framework (ADGEEWR, 2009)). This revealed a gulf between the sector and the government. Instead of supporting advocacy efforts for children's early education, the government created new communication channels, such as the new forum called the Start Strong Ehub, with an agenda

to help make, maintain and create connections between directors and staff working in preschools. This initiative was again only something that the government had done to mirror an already existing egroup. Directors often felt that with this new ehub, the government was attempting to not only break up the sector's unifying and strengthening voice on an established forum, but to also co-opt to its own ends the sector's networks.

However, gaining the role of forming policy, calculation and modelling created also spaces for the hopes of the sectors to be expressed. For example, Jannelle has started to enter into the online reporting system hours that she and her staff worked over time, especially those hours spent filling out the universal access forms. The bureaucracy responded that these are invalid numbers but the preschool keeps inputting them, since as Jannelle says "if there is enough 'squeak' in the system the government might start to oil it". They also put one day professional development events down as working hours and staffing to ensure they are seen by the government, since as Jannelle argues: "this is what it costs to run a quality service. We do not want to run the service as the government runs the policy – so we must include this in our budget and let the government know". We argue that the openings that were created in putting the policy of universal access in practice, while often seen as an additional burden on preschool staff, also allowed new forms of activism to develop.

Concluding Discussion

ECEC in NSW is constituted by a diverse field of state, community and privately run and relatively autonomous centres often competing for enrolments and the government subsidies attached to them. Other than licensing, regulating and subsidising ECEC, since 2009 the state has needed to exert more initiative and effort to achieve universal access. The strategies and mechanisms used by the state in its universal access policy included setting and promoting strategic goals for the sector; setting funding parameters to achieve these goals; providing financial incentives to hasten the accomplishment of the goals; and educating through examples using the internet and videos. Here, decisions and ways of working were not imposed by the state. Rather, decisions and responsibility for reaching universal access were devolved to preschools and long day care centres who were expected to find ways to work within the new parameters. Unfortunately for the sector, the state government made no serious financial commitment to enable affordable access to quality early childhood education for all beyond what the Commonwealth government has provided. Instead, it relied mostly on the

sector to be creative in accommodating the new funding formulas to achieve 'universal access'. Moreover, no professional development resources were provided that might have prepared preschools to shoulder these financial and management responsibilities. Thus, the government's approach mainly relied on utilising the initiative, creativity, agency and resources of preschools, which poses a potential for (and continuation of) staff exploitation in small centres seeking to remain viable and to provide ECEC to families (see Osgood 2009, Macfarlane & Lewis, 2012).

The financial precariousness of the sector and the director and staff's beliefs in affordable and universal access to ECEC meant that the preschool had little choice but to respond to changes in government policy and funding. The universal access goals and the funding changes used to achieve these goals both threatened and offered opportunities for its financial viability. Kurri Kurri used a series of calculations with 'provisional numbers' provided by the state to model a number of possibilities for optimising their income and enrolment. Provisional numbers in this way became productive and "set the rules, schema and frameworks that constrain[ed] and contain[ed] the social world" and became the rules of the game: universal access (Beer, 2015, p. 10). In the calculative spaces, as Callon and Muniesa (2005) explain, entities - children, professionals, balances, philosophies - gained new value by calculation and judgement in a continuous game of value assignment and optimisation. Thus, numbers were productive in shaping how the children, professionals, and ECEC itself is valued and evaluated, in other words, in shaping the culture of and cultural views on ECEC and its actors, and on what, who and what work is to be valued and how.

The practices formed and strengthened through provisional numbers also re-inscribed particular notions of professionalism for ECEC workers. The question of professionalism in the sector has been largely oriented to the effects of the regulatory apparatus, the argument being that the gaze over the sector resulting from regulatory frameworks and accountability requirements diminishes their autonomy and judgment (Osgood, 2009). This research points to how the situated ways in which ECEC workers do policy re-inscribes professionalism within the discourses of corporate managerialism, according to the logics of rationality, measurability and competition (Osgood, 2004). The calculative practices engaged in by the director and staff at Kurri Kurri around the objectives of maximising finances and enrolments positions ECEC leaders - whose positioning is also maintained by the government - as commercial operators, which often runs counter to the beliefs and practices of many in the sector (Osgood, 2006; Macfarlane & Lewis,

2012). But despite this discursive positioning, opportunities for resistance also arise because of the openness and agency of policy-making and policy doing (Gorur, 2011; Ball et al., 2012).

For example, the calculative processes enabled the solidifying of Kurri Kurri's philosophical positions, which risk being eschewed by the technocratic emphasis of managerialism. The competing priorities of the government and the preschool were brought into stark relief as preschool staff and the committee sought to recognise every child's right to education (i.e. 3-year olds) and parents' wishes for this. The preschool staff were not compliant with the wishes of government, as if they were mere ciphers of externally-produced policy. Being part of the hierarchical power relations and instead of overtly resisting them, they mobilised power in alternative ways to resist. As Foucault famously explained: "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1979, p. 95). The preschool staff brought other rationalities to bear onto the universal access policy, in what might be described as the exercise of an 'activist professionalism' whereby educators:

cultivate trust within their setting and beyond with other stakeholders such as parents and policy makers; demonstrate active trust where philosophical approaches, values and approaches are collaboratively and openly debated and owned; and critically reflect on the 'state of play' so as to generate options where they can act rather than be acted on. (Fenech et al., 2010, p. 91-92).

'Doing policy' at Kurri Kurri involved engaging in calculative practices and stakeholder discussions in order to arrive at a suitable compromise – one that optimised enrolments and income, while also keeping the philosophical commitment to the enrolment of 3-year olds. In this policy enactment, the preschool practised an 'ethic of resistance' (Lenz-Taguchi, 2006, p. 270). The conceptual understanding of 'doing policy' highlights the importance of preferences expressed in the needs and desires of actors, provisional numbers and calculative regimes that help channel the formalisation of practices and the formation and enactment of policy. It also makes visible the opportunities that local actors take to influence policy and to advocate for their interests.

In sum, while the move to universal access in NSW was in some respect supported by the state government, a more particularistic analysis of the

policy and its enactments reveal a variegated picture, in which the government showed quite a removed position. In this way, we could argue that the state maintained its minimal involvement and investment in the sector, despite international discourses and attempts to raise the social standing and funding of ECEC and the hope that is invested in ECEC in terms of its equalising role for young children and its economic benefits for societies. The government hesitated to get involved in the 'visionary policy making' that would have allowed universal access to be achieved by raising the prestige of the profession and the importance of young children's education in NSW communities (Brown & Sumsion, 2016). Instead, it waited for the sector to develop models and strategies, and visions, in response to provisional numbers produced by them. Thus, instead of a real commitment to improving the state of ECEC in NSW, the state's commitment to ECEC is a form of political manoeuvring where first, responsibility for policy making is pushed to early childhood actors further removing the state's administrative responsibility, and second, where state initiatives silence and fragment the sector, and thwart advocacy for better recognition. However, as the autobiographical notes illustrate, new practices of resistance also emerged that the sector might utilise to continue advocacy for young children's right to quality early education and a well-recognised ECEC workforce.

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