

Getting Early Childhood onto the Reform Agenda: An Australian Case Study

Rachel Flottman Jane Page

The University of Melbourne
Australia

Many Governments around the world turned their attention to early childhood policy and service provision throughout the early 2000s, and the Victorian State Government within Australia was no different. Over the past six years, the Victorian Government has reformed the early childhood education and care system substantially. The factors leading to this emphasis on early childhood reform were not straight-forward. This article adapts Richmond's and Kotelchuck's (1983) model for examining the interacting forces shaping public policy to make sense of how early childhood so successfully found itself at the centre of the Victorian Government's reform agenda. It concludes that far from being random, it was a combination of political will, a rich, expanding and interdisciplinary knowledge base and a well-developed social strategy for the application of the knowledge base that led to early childhood being at the centre of the reform agenda. It concludes that much of the evidence by which the reform agenda was informed came from studies conducted internationally and that more Australian research is needed to investigate early childhood program effectiveness in our own local context if the momentum is to continue.

Key words: early childhood reform, agenda-setting, Australia, evidence-based early childhood policy

Introduction

In August 2007, after decades of

under investment and scant policy attention, the Premier of Victoria announced his government's commitment to 'a new era in the education and development of our children' (Office of the Premier, 2007). Recognising that "a child's learning starts from day one and that a child's early experiences have a direct impact on their future prospects" (Office of the Premier, 2007), the Government invested over \$1.5 billion over four years to its new early childhood reform

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rachel Flottman, Lecturer and Jane Page, Senior lecturer, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria. 3010, Australia. Electronic mail be sent to rachelf@unimelb.edu.au, j.page@unimelb.edu.au.

agenda (Department of Treasury and Finance, 2010). This scale of reform had not been seen in Victoria since the introduction of free, compulsory and secular primary education in the 1800s.

There was no single point in time at which early childhood found its way onto the agenda in Victoria. Nor was there one single event that caused its ultimate success in terms of policy reform. Rather, there was a series of interconnected events that took place over a couple of years that served as the catalyst for early childhood to become the subject of a substantial reform agenda. To appreciate the full extent of these reforms it is necessary to understand the history of early childhood education and care provision in Australia and the responsibilities of the various levels of government.

Early childhood provision in Australia is complex. There are three tiers of government: Commonwealth, State and Territory and Local. Each is responsible for different aspects of early childhood provision, which leads to an artificial separation of 'care' and 'education'-type services. The Commonwealth Government funds early childhood 'care' services that facilitate labour force participation. These include centre-based long day care, family day care, and outside school hours care services in all states and territories. Funding for these services is provided through a combination of subsidies that are paid directly to services and though tax rebates that are paid to families to help make child care more affordable (Commonwealth of

Australia, 2011). To be eligible for Commonwealth funding, services must meet a range of national quality areas, standards and elements concerned with quality care provision and improvement within the National Quality Standard (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2011). These services are offered by a range of providers including private enterprise, the community sector and Local Government.

The State and Territory Governments have constitutional responsibility for delivering education services (school and preschool/kindergarten). Early education services are delivered differently in each State and Territory, with some jurisdictions delivering preschool programs through the statutory school system (e.g. New South Wales and Western Australia) and others subsidizing the community sector to provide preschool programs (e.g. Victoria).

In addition to funding educational programs, relevant regulatory authorities in States and Territories are also responsible for assessing all children's services - both 'care' and 'education'-type services against the National Quality Standard and National Regulations (ACECQA, 2011).

The segregation of responsibility for 'care' and 'education' services means that far-reaching reform of the entire early childhood education and care system is not possible without substantial collaboration and co-operation between all tiers of Australian Governments (the Commonwealth Government, six State

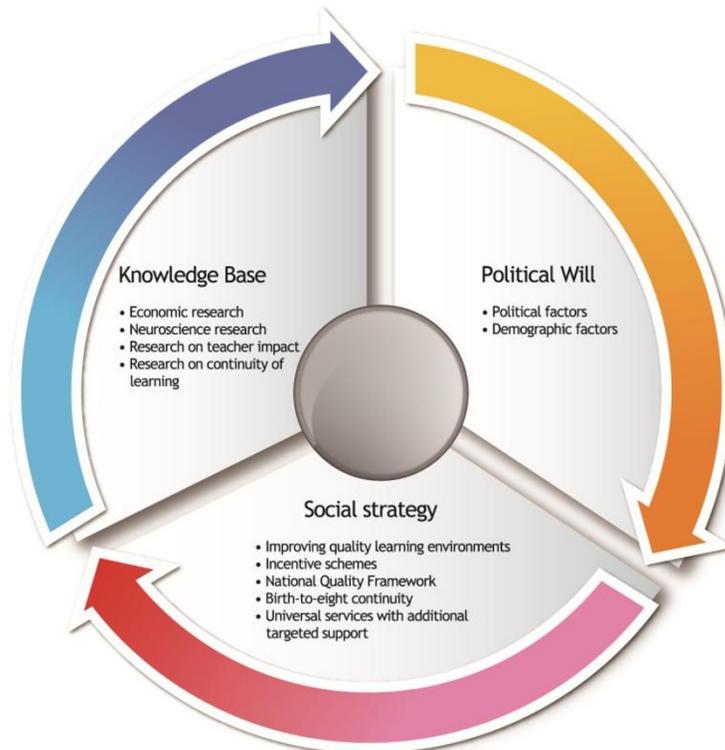


Figure 1. Interacting forces shaping the Victorian Government's reform agenda, adapted from Richmond & Kotelchuck (1983)

Governments, two Territory Governments and a representative of Local Government). Given the degree of collaboration required, multiple factors had to come into alignment for such a substantial reform agenda to occur.

This paper serves to make sense of the complex events that eventually gave rise to policy investment and effort being directed towards the early childhood reform agenda in Victoria. Rather than presenting these forces as disparate and unconnected, it uses a model developed by Richmond and Kotelchuck (1983) to provide some cohesion to the various forces that ended up substantially shaping early childhood education and care in Victoria.

A Model for Examining Interacting Forces Shaping Public Policy

The model for examining interacting forces shaping public policy was developed by Richmond and Kotelchuck in the 1980s to explain the impact of political processes on health policy. It is adapted here to elucidate the complexity of the ways in which early childhood succeeded in becoming the subject of substantial policy reform and investment in Victoria in the 2000s.

The model identifies three forces that are necessary for policy reform to occur. A rich and expanding evidence base, articulated social strategy for the application of the knowledge base and

the political will to implement the social strategy (Richmond & Kotelchuck, 1983). These forces are identified in Figure 1.

This paper presents the recent history of early childhood education and care reform in Victoria according to these three forces as a means of organising the complex circumstances over the past six years.

Force 1. The Rich and Expanding Evidence Base Underlying the Victorian Government's Reform Decision

A new evidence base in support of early childhood programs emerged in the 2000s through the convergence of economic and neuroscience research internationally. Economic research identified that investing in the early childhood programs yields higher social and cultural returns than alternative forms of government economic reforms (Bruner, Greenberg, Guy, Little, Schorr, & Weiss, 2002; Cunha, Heckman, & Masterov, 2006; Schweinhart, Montine, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield, & Nores, 2005). The argument was simple: "skills beget skills. They cross foster and promote each other. A perseverant child open to experience learns more. Early success fosters later success" (Heckman, 2011, p. 5). Heckman developed an economic rationale for investing in early childhood education and care programs because they improve educational and employment outcomes and reduce costs associated with higher rates of criminal activity, teenage pregnancy, poorer health outcomes, special education referrals and welfare dependency (Heckman, Grunewald, &

Reynolds, 2006; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). While this economic research was not new (see High Scope and Abecedarian) and is not the only reason to invest, it provided a robust case that treasuries could understand for investing in early childhood programs in the 2000s and fitted a broader political agenda to increase social and economic productivity within the Victorian State Labour party at this time.

Concurrently, advances in the medical sciences were providing the scientific explanation for why the early years was the unparalleled time to invest. Prominent neuroscientists Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) authored the report *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods: the science of early childhood development*. This report integrated knowledge about human development from a number of disciplines and concluded that the human brain grows more rapidly and is more open to learning during the early childhood period than at any other time of life. These findings were valuable in refocusing the argument for investing in the early years from a pure economic argument to a holistic rationale emphasising the benefits to children and the community today and in the future (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). They also resonated with the Victorian Government's political agenda at this time.

This growing, interdisciplinary evidence base served to provide momentum for early childhood reform in Victoria at this time. Importantly, this particular knowledge base was emerging at

precisely the time that the political will for reform was present. The intersection of these factors was significant in compelling the Victorian Government to invest in early childhood programs.

Force 2. The Political Will to Reform and Invest in Early Childhood Programs in Victoria

Informed by the new research evidence, the political will for the reform agenda was shaped by a number of factors: firstly by the political tension between the State and Commonwealth Governments; secondly by the change in Premier in the State of Victoria and thirdly by the demographic shifts occurring in Victoria at the same time.

In 2006, after seven years in government and a tense relationship with the conservative Commonwealth Government, the Premier of the Victorian State Government, Steve Bracks, began agitating for change. He was frustrated by the control the Commonwealth Government had through its funding power on policy and program delivery by the States and Territories. Until this time, due to the fiscal imbalance between the Commonwealth and the States and Territories, the Commonwealth Government used Specific Purpose Payments (SPPs) to fund policy and program objectives that were the constitutional responsibility of the State and Territory Governments (Allen Consulting Group, 2006). The Commonwealth Government used these SPPs strategically to fund policy objectives that were in its own political or ideological interest. Often the SPPs

would force the State or Territory Government to pursue a policy objective that did not fit within its own broader agenda. This commonly led to poor use of resources, substantial reporting burden through the myriad of reporting requirements and regular duplication of effort between the Commonwealth and the State. Commenting on this pattern, the Premier stated that:

“SPPs are focused too much on administration and red tape, and not enough on the outcomes that really matter. SPPs too often reflect a rigid, one size fits all approach. In a country as diverse and large as Australia, State and Territory Governments need more flexibility in policy development and service delivery if we are to respond to the varied needs of local communities and to adapt to a changing environment” (Allen Consulting Group, 2006, p. 3).

In response to this concern, Premier Bracks led the design of what was to be known as the National Reform Agenda (NRA). Through the NRA, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed on areas of national priority, and instead of the tied Specific Purpose Payments, the Commonwealth provided partnership funding to States and Territories to deliver improvements in outcomes in areas of national priority.

This model gave flexibility and some degree of autonomy to each jurisdiction about how it would deliver these improvements, without being told specifically by the Commonwealth how to go about it. In 2006, COAG agreed to this new arrangement, and agreed on

three key areas of national priority. These included human capital, competition and regulatory reform (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2006).

Running parallel to these negotiations, the Office for Children within government, together with the Royal Children's Hospital, hosted a visit to Victoria by Professor Jack Shonkoff to speak at a number of public fora as well as attending private meetings with Ministers and the Premier (Department of Human Services, 2006). His argument was compelling and his visit came at just the right time. Early childhood, due to the impact of research evidence generated by economic research and neuroscience was central to the human capital stream of the reform agenda.

In July 2007, Steve Bracks resigned from his position as Premier of Victoria, and from Parliament and John Brumby was elected as the new parliamentary leader of the Australian Labor Party and as the new Premier of Victoria. The new Premier was under pressure. Although an experienced and well-respected politician, Brumby had been the Treasurer, with Premier Bracks the figurehead of the State for almost a decade.

In 2007, the Victorian economy was tracking well (State of Victoria, 2007). However, it was facing an ageing population that was increasing demand for expensive services. Victoria was also facing a baby-boom not witnessed since the 1970s, and maternity, child and family services were struggling to keep up with demand (Minister for

Children and Early Childhood Development, 2007). At the same time women's participation in the workforce had increased by 20% from 1985 with an estimated 60% of mothers with dependent children in employment (DEECD, 2009). This saw a natural increase in demand for early childhood education and care services. In addition, women generally were returning to the workforce sooner than in previous generations. This led to further demand for services, in particular for children aged from birth to three years (COAG, 2009). The combination of these changing demographics led to both an increased number and an increased proportion of children participating in early childhood education and care services in Victoria.

The demographic pressure, as well as the economic and neuroscience research resonated for the new Victorian Premier, who needed to show decisive leadership following Bracks' resignation and develop a clear and popular agenda of his own. Early childhood was an obvious place for him to direct his government's attention. This research provided the evidence that investment in the early years of education yielded positive long-term social, educational and economic outcomes.

The combination of the growing knowledge and evidence base established by economics and neurosciences thus provided the rationale for change, as well as the political will for reform, and catalysed the Victorian State Government's effort and investment in early childhood. The final part of this paper examines how the Victorian Government drew on

diverse early childhood theories and research that intersected with the knowledge base established by economics and neurosciences to develop a cohesive social strategy to translate its vision for early childhood reform into action.

Force 3. Social Strategy: The Key Reform Directions, Decisions and Evidence

The Victorian Government had the political will to reform early childhood program delivery in Victoria and it articulated and funded a clear social strategy for doing so. The final section of this paper outlines the social strategy and the broad evidence base that it drew on in its development.

At its broadest level, the Victorian Government was motivated by a drive to improve learning outcomes for children. This drive was motivated by short-term factors: the immediate impact it would have to give 'all children the best start in life' (the neurosciences and demographic pressure); and long-term factors: the longer-term impact it would have on alleviating social disadvantage for individuals and society, and the benefits to the State's productivity and economy (the economics) (DEECD, 2008). To do this, it embarked on a substantial and ambitious reform agenda that can be categorised into three key themes: 1) those that improved the early childhood system through improving learning environments and providing greater levels of continuity between settings; 2) those that improved partnerships with families and communities through better place-based approaches in particular

for children with disabilities and developmental delays; and 3) those that improved the quality of the workforce (DEECD, 2008). This far-reaching policy reform agenda drew on diverse research to develop the social strategy to guide the Victorian Government's investment in early childhood programs between 2006 and 2010. As highlighted throughout the ensuing discussion, this research intersected with the knowledge base established by economics and neurosciences.

Improving Quality Learning Environments

The Victorian Government prioritised improving learning environments due to the compelling evidence provided in the neurosciences that the quality and reliability of young children's relationships can have a substantial impact on their brain development. This research highlighted that the quality of adult/child relationships both within and outside the family shapes children's developmental outcomes across multiple developmental domains including social, emotional, behavioural, physical and intellectual and contributes to children's long term learning, mental health and wellbeing (Centre on the Developing Child, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project further demonstrated the impact of quality learning environments on children's learning and development. It established that duration of attendance, along with an early starting age impacts

positively on children's intellectual development (Slyva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010).

A number of targeted international research studies concurrently highlighted the role of the early childhood teacher in improving the learning outcomes of young children. This research emphasised that the quality of early childhood teachers' relationships with children along with the quality of their pedagogical practices and the length of their qualifications lead to positive gains in children's learning and development (Centre on the Developing Child, 2007; Slyva et al., 2010).

These research studies collectively highlighted the importance of investing in the training, recruitment and retention of highly skilled teachers in the early years of education (Centre on the Developing Child, 2007). This was of particular importance and significance in the State of Victoria at this time. Data collected by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations showed that in 2007 there was a decrease in the numbers of teachers completing early childhood teaching qualifications as well as a downturn in the number of students enrolling in early childhood courses (Labour Economics Office Victoria, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). This data provided an added impetus for the Victorian Government to invest in the short and long-term training, recruitment and retention of the early childhood educators and

improve the quality of the early childhood education and care workforce.

The Victorian Government responded to these broader imperatives by implementing a range of strategies such as scholarships and incentive schemes to attract and retain a diverse and qualified early childhood workforce (DEECD, 2009b). It also provided a substantial amount of professional development and professional support resources and coaching programs to further increase the capacity of the early childhood educators to improve the quality of learning environments and work with families to support their children's health, learning and development (DEECD, 2009b). Alongside these initiatives it invested resources into raising the status of the early childhood profession within the Victorian community and developing clear pathways for professional developmental trajectories (DEECD, 2009b).

The Victorian Government further drew on this research evidence to direct its investment towards improving the quality of early learning environments. It did this through playing a lead role in developing the National Quality Framework. The National Quality Framework is the name given to the collection of reforms aimed to improve the quality of early childhood services across Australia, and includes the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009), new National Quality Standard for early childhood services and a new public rating system that makes transparent the quality of services to the community.

The Early Years Learning Framework was released in 2009 and, for the first time, provided a curriculum framework to guide educational programs for young children aged birth to five years. It identifies five learning outcomes: children have a strong sense of identity; children are connected with and contribute to their world; children have a strong sense of wellbeing; children are confident and involved learners; children are effective communicators and articulates a set of principles and practices to guide work with young children (DEEWR, 2009).

From 2012 the National Quality Standard replaces the existing state-based regulation and the Commonwealth-based accreditation system to create one integrated system of early childhood education and care quality improvement. It articulates seven standards that contribute to the quality of education and care programs for young children. The seven standards are: educational program and practice; children's health and safety; physical environment; staffing arrangements; relationships with children; collaborative partnerships with families and communities; leadership and service management (DEEWR, 2010). These standards provide an aspirational, rather than a minimum-standard approach to quality assurance, in order to support improvements in early childhood education and care quality.

To further incentivise services to improve their quality, the National Quality Framework also introduces a

system to assign a rating to each early childhood service. The new rating system takes into account each service's performance in each of the seven quality areas of the new National Quality Standard, and applies it to a five level rating scale (COAG, 2011). The rating is published so that families can make an informed choice about which early childhood education and care service best supports them and their children (COAG, 2011).

Birth- to-Eight Continuity

Evidence of the Victorian Government's commitment to continuity of educational experiences for children aged from birth to eight years is apparent in a number of its most significant policy reforms including the creation of a new, integrated Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD); the introduction of a curriculum framework for all children aged birth to eight (the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework); and the introduction of the Transition: A Positive Start to School initiative.

In developing policy initiatives that progress continuity of learning for children aged from birth to eight years, the Victorian Government integrated well-established theory that defined the period of 'early childhood' with research that argued the importance of continuity for learning. It adopted the international definition of early childhood as the period from birth (and sometimes conception) to

eight years of age that is recognised by key organisations such as the United Nations (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005), Organisation Mondiale pour l'Éducation Préscolaire (OMEP) and the World Bank.

The Victorian Government integrated research that argued the importance of continuity in children's learning and experiences into the definition of early childhood. That is, the evidence that suggests children's learning is more successful when their current and future learning builds on their past learning and past experiences (Petriwskyj, Thorpe, & Tayler, 2005; Margetts, 1999). In early childhood, this has two implications. The first is that children's learning is more successful when there is continuity between their experiences across any given week, for example, between their experiences at home and in their care environment. Secondly, it suggests that children's learning is more successful when there is pedagogical and content continuity across time, for example, between their preschool and school experiences. In a review of the international literature dealing with transition to school practices, Petriwskyj et al. (2005) found that continuity is achieved in three ways: through communication linkages; through coherence of experience and through system coherence.

There is support for all three types of continuity in the research literature. Margetts (1999) reported that communication linkages are essential for passing information between professionals working

with children between and across settings. Information about a child's learning that is transferred in a sensitive way from one setting to another can assist professionals in the new setting establish a positive learning environment for the child more quickly. Coherence of experience can be established through providing children with learning content and experiences (curriculum) and teaching styles (pedagogy) with which they are familiar. Irvine and colleagues (1982) found that efforts to increase the continuity of children's learning experiences between preschool and school experiences had a favourable impact on their learning outcomes. Finally, system coherence has been raised in response to concerns about different expectations, levels of quality, processes and policies between settings (Petriwskyj et al., 2005) as lack of coherence can make the service system confusing for families to navigate.

The Victorian Government responded to this evidence in a number of ways. Premier Brumby's first major policy announcement was to create the new Department of Education and Early Childhood Development by bringing early childhood services into the Department of Education (Office of the Premier, 2007). Brumby took a broad view of what constituted early childhood services. These included universal services that are available to all children and families such as preschool and childcare services, maternal and child health services as well as targeted services such as early childhood

intervention into the new Department. Likewise, the government's chief pediatrician also moved out of the Department of Human Services and into the new Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. This move reflected the Victorian Government's commitment to the evidence that indicated the significance of children's learning from birth and the inseparable nature of a person's health, development and learning. It meant that all services to support young children's health, learning and development from birth through to the completion of statutory schooling were brought under one government portfolio.

In addition to this machinery of government changes, the government also announced policy reform to shift the way early childhood professionals provided services to young children and their families in a way that was consistent with the research around early childhood and continuity for learning. The first initiative was for a new, integrated curriculum framework to guide the practice of all professionals who work with children aged from birth to eight years. Known as the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF), the framework was designed to apply to all early childhood professionals in Victoria from health, early intervention, early care and education and cultural organisations such as museums, zoos and libraries (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2009c).

The guiding rationale was that by providing a coherent curriculum framework with common practice principles, greater continuity would be achieved for children as they moved between service settings throughout the week and throughout their childhood. It did this by bringing together the five learning outcomes from the national Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) with the learning standards of the Victorian school curriculum – Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VCAA, 2007). It identified eight practice principles to guide the work of all early childhood professionals by linking the pedagogy from the Early Years Learning Framework and the Prep – 12 Principles of Learning and Teaching.

Despite having one integrated curriculum to work across service settings, including early childhood and schools, the government recognised that further work would be required in order for continuity between early childhood and school to occur. In response, it also announced the Transition: A Positive Start to School initiative. This initiative guided schools and early childhood services to support children make the transition to school (DEECD, 2009d). Its centerpiece was that all children moving from kindergarten to Prep would receive a Transition Learning and Development Statement that would facilitate key information about individual children to transfer to the school when they commence. The Transition Statement was to be completed by the child, family and

early childhood educator and describe their aspirations for school, the child's learning in each of the five outcomes identified in the VEYLDF, and outline suggested strategies that might help the child settle in to the new environment. This information was intended to assist the Prep teacher to plan a responsive curriculum for each child entering the classroom and facilitate a professional dialogue between kindergarten teachers and Prep teachers – a dialogue that had not been a strong feature of the Victorian education system in the past.

Universal Services with Additional Targeted Support

A further theme of reform that the Victorian Government embarked upon was to further strengthen the universal service system, but to supplement this with additional targeted support for children and families who needed it.

It did this because it recognised the research which highlights that participation in high quality early childhood settings from infancy has a positive impact on children's development and learning particularly young children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Centre on the Developing Child, 2007; Masse & Barnett, 2002; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2007; Sylva et al., 2010). While increasing the quality of all services and improving continuity between services provides substantial benefits for all children, the government recognised that some children – due to their abilities or family

circumstances - require additional support to access and participate in these services.

It also drew on research that highlighted the extent to which increased access to local early childhood education and care services in the early years of development can provide more systematic support to children and families. This access helps to connect families to maternal and child health services and allied health care professionals and facilitates identification and referral to targeted services. The effective assessment and intervention of young children with developmental delays and disabilities in the early years, for example, has been shown to increase their chances for healthy developmental and learning outcomes (Centre on the Developing Child, 2007). The benefits of effective assessment and intervention can also extend to parents who have the support of a wider pool of specialists. In these ways the integration of universal services with additional targeted support offers a flexible and seamless pathway for families and children to an interdisciplinary network of professionals who can support their particular needs within their local community.

By responding to this research in these ways, the Victorian Government articulated a clear policy direction that provided universal services for all children as well as strengthening targeted services for children and families who needed additional assistance to access the universal services. This clear policy direction can be seen in three key ways.

Firstly, the Victorian State Government remained committed to maintaining near-universal participation in the maternal and child health system and in preschool programs for four year olds; it provided additional assistance for children with disabilities and developmental delays to access universal services; and it provided additional assistance for children from vulnerable families to participate in universal services.

Victoria already had in place a strong universal service system. Central to this system was its maternal and child health services which were funded through a partnership arrangement between the State and Local Governments. Through the maternal and child health system, children aged between 1 week and three and a half years and their families attended ten visits with a highly trained maternal and child health nurse (DEECD, 2011). The maternal and child health system was effective in monitoring children's health and development, and in providing referrals and advice to families when necessary if additional support was required (DEECD, 2011).

In addition to these universal services, the Victorian Government also offered an enhanced maternal and child health system. The enhanced program was provided to children and families suffering multiple disadvantages who are at risk of poor health and development outcomes. It delivered additional visits to families as well as support groups and some peri-natal support. To support

children's learning, the Victorian Government subsidised an educational program for all four-year-old children to be delivered by a degree-trained early childhood educator for approximately 10 hours per week (which will be increased to 15 hours per week from 2013).

To further increase the proportion of four year olds participating in a preschool program, the Victorian Government also funded a range of services to support children with disabilities and developmental delays to participate in preschool programs. It also funded a preschool program for three-year-old children who are Aboriginal or are known to child protection. The implementation of this service model has seen increases in children's participation in universal services. In 2008 preschool participation in Victoria had reached around 96 per cent (Harrington, 2008).

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that over the past six years the State of Victoria has undergone a substantial reform agenda in early childhood education, care policy and program provision. It has applied Richmond's and Kotelchuck's model (1983) for examining the interacting forces shaping public policy to make sense of the complex circumstances surrounding the reform agenda. It has demonstrated that the convergence of the economic and neurosciences research renewed the evidence base for investment in early

childhood; that this knowledge base was emerging right at the time that there was political will for change and that this in turn provided the impetus to develop a coherent social strategy to enact key reforms.

The Victorian Government's action in early childhood between 2006 and 2010 highlights how reform agendas can be shaped by a number of complex and intersecting factors. It highlights how a rich, expanding and interdisciplinary knowledge base, in connection with demographic factors can and does create the political will to develop evidence-based early childhood social strategy that has the potential to have a substantial impact on children, families and early childhood professionals. It also highlights how this combination of factors can assist government to develop a cohesive policy framework for reform, and to clearly articulate why and in what ways changes need to occur.

Finally, it is worth noting that the Victorian Government drew most substantially on international economic and neuroscience research to inform its early childhood policies and strategies. While this provides some evidence of what works in diverse settings, it does not provide evidence of what works locally. There continues to be a relative lack of quality evidence about early childhood program and policy efficacy in Victoria and Australia. For the reforms to continue, there is a real need for government to continue to invest in multi-disciplinary research and to monitor and evaluate the impact of new initiatives

within diverse Victorian contexts in order to fully understand their impact and refine future iterations to further improve outcomes for children and families.

References

- Allen Consulting Group. (2006). *Government's working together? Assessing specific purpose payment arrangements*. Melbourne: Department of Premier and Cabinet.
- Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. (2011). *Guide to the national quality standard*. ACECQA: Sydney.
- Bruner, C., Greenberg, M., Guy, C., Little, M., Schorr, L., & Weiss, H. (2002). *Funding what works: Exploring the role of research on effective programs and practices in government decision-making* [Monograph]. Des Moines, IA: National Center for Service Integration Clearinghouse and the Center for Schools and Communities.
- Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2007). *A science-based framework for early childhood policy: Using evidence to improve outcomes in learning, behavior, and health for vulnerable children*. Retrieved from <http://www.Developingchild.harvard.edu>
- Commonwealth of Australia. (2011). *Child care rebate*. Retrieved from www.mychild.gov.au/childcarerebate/default.aspx
- Council of Australian Governments. (2006). *Council of Australian government's meeting 10 February 2006 communique*. Retrieved from <http://www.coag.gov.au>

- gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2006-02-10/index.cfm
- Council of Australian Governments. (2009). *Investing in the early years – A national early childhood development strategy. An initiative of the Council of Australian Governments*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Council of Australian Governments. (2011). *National quality framework for early childhood education and care: The new rating system*. Retrieved from http://www.deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/Policy_Agenda/Quality/Documents/NewRatingSystem.pdf
- Cunha, F., Heckman, J. J., Lochner, L. J., & Masterov, D. V. (2006). Interpreting the evidence on life cycle skill formation. In E. A. Hanushek & F. Welch (Eds.), *Handbook of the Economics of Education* (chap. 12, pp. 697–812). Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2008). *Blueprint for education and early childhood development*. Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2009). *Growing, learning and thriving: Building on Victoria's achievements in early childhood development*. Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2009b). *Improving Victoria's early childhood workforce: Working to give Victoria's children the best start in life*. Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2009c). *Victorian early years learning and development framework*. Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2009d). *Transition: A positive start to school resource kit*. Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2011). *Maternal and child health service guidelines*. Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.
- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (2009). *Early years learning framework*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (2010). *Draft guide to the national quality standard education and care services: Centre-based and family day care*. Retrieved from http://www.deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/Policy_Agenda/Documents/GuideNationalQualityStandard.pdf
- Department of Human Services. (2006). *Expert to lead early childhood forum*. Retrieved from <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/archive/archive2010/humanservicesnews/feb06/forum.htm>
- Department of Treasury and Finance. (2010). *Budget paper 3: Service delivery*. Retrieved from <http://www.budget.vic.gov.au/CA25755B0004CE3B/pages/service-delivery>
- Harrington, M. (2008). *Preschool education in Australia*. Retrieved from Parliament of

- Australia, Parliamentary Library Web site:
<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/Pubs/BN/2007-08/PreschoolEdAustralia.htm>
- Heckman, J. J. (2011). *The American family in Black and White: A post-racial strategy for improving skills to promote equality* (National Bureau for Economic Research Working Paper No. 16841). Retrieved from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w16841>
- Heckman, J. J., Grunewald, R., & Reynolds, A. J. (2006). The dollars and cents of investing early: cost-benefit analysis in early care and education. *Zero to Three*, 26(6), 10-17.
- Heckman J. J. & Masterov, D. (2006, August). The productivity argument for investing in young children. *Early Childhood Research Collaborative, Discussion Paper 104*.
- Irvine, D. J., Horan, M. D., Flint, D. I., Kukuk, S. E., & Hick, T. L. (1982). Evidence supporting comprehensive early childhood education for disadvantaged children. *American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 471(1), 74-80.
- Labour Economics Office Victoria, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (2009). *Early childhood (pre-primary school) teacher Victoria*. Canberra: Labour Economics Office Victoria, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.
- Margetts, K. (1999). *Transition to school: Looking forward*. Retrieved from <http://extranet.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/LED/tec/pdf/margetts1.pdf>
- Masse, L. N., & Barnett, W. S. (2002). *A benefit-cost analysis of the abecedarian early childhood intervention*. New Brunswick: National Institute for Early Education Research.
- Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development. (2007, October 21). Baby boom mums and dads to get more support. *Media Release*.
- Office of the Premier. (2007). *New focus on early childhood education for all Victorian children*. Retrieved from <http://archive.premier.vic.gov.au/newsroom/1139.html>
- Petriwskyj, A., Thorpe, K. J., & Tayler, C. P. (2005). Trends in construction of transition to school in three western regions 1990-2004. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 13(1), 55-69.
- Richmond, J. B. & Kotelchuck, M. (1983). Political influences, rethinking national health policy. In C. Mcquire, R. Foley, A. Gorr, R. Richards, R (Eds.), *Handbook of health professions education* (pp. 386-404). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Rolnick, A. J. & Grunewald, R. (2007). *Achieving a high return on investment: Evidence, proposal and the Minnesota Project*. Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis: Minneapolis Organisation Mondiale pour l'Education Prescolaire. Retrieved from <http://www.omepaustralia.com.au/>
- Rimm-Kaufman, S. (2004, February 25). School transition and school readiness: An outcome of early childhood development. In R. E. Tremblay, R. G. Barr, R. Peters (Eds.), *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*. Retrieved from Web Site: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/Rimm-KaufmanANGxp.pdf>
- Schweinhart, L. J., Montine, J., Xiang, Z., Barnett, W. S., Belfield, C. R., & Nores,

- M. (2005). *Lifetime effects: The high/scope perry preschool study through age 40*. Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press.
- Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2010). *Early childhood matters: Evidence from the effective pre-school and primary education project*. New York: Routledge.
- Shonkoff, J. & Phillips, D. (2000). *From neurons to neighbourhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- State of Victoria. (2007). *Victorian budget overview 2007-08*. Retrieved from [http://www.dtf.vic.gov.au/CA25713E0002EF43/WebObj/200708BudgetOverview/\\$File/2007-08%20Budget%20Overview.pdf](http://www.dtf.vic.gov.au/CA25713E0002EF43/WebObj/200708BudgetOverview/$File/2007-08%20Budget%20Overview.pdf)
- UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2005). *Implementing child rights in early childhood* (General Comment No. 7). Geneva: Author.
- Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. (2007). *Victorian essential learning standards: Overview*. East Melbourne: Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority.