

'...children attending high quality out-of-home programmes demonstrate positive learning outcomes.'



# Early Childhood Professionals: Advocates for the Future of our World

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*Professor Margaret Sims has worked in the Australia university sector since 1992 with previous work experience in the community services sector. Here she shares her insights into the importance of advocacy in the work of early childhood professionals.*

For a number of years now early childhood professionals have argued that their work is extremely important because the fundamental learning opportunities they provide children shape those lives for many years in the future. There is strong evidence to support these claims. We know, for example, that high quality learning experiences in the early years impact on long term academic achievements (Sims, 2013). These learning opportunities can be provided both in children's homes and in a range of out of home early learning environments. Rodriguez and Tamis-LeMonda (2011) showed that children who came from homes with more literacy resources available to them demonstrated better levels of literacy and vocabulary at age 5. Melhuish, Belsky, and Barnes (2010) reinforced the importance of the learning environment provided in the home. They showed that mothers with higher education levels provided a more effective home learning environment which resulted in children achieving better results in English and Mathematics in school at age 11. Neighbourhood effects are also evident: children demonstrate better academic achievement levels when they live in more advantaged

neighbourhoods: these neighbourhoods provide resources to support parents in creating a rich home learning environment.

In addition to the impact of home and community, we know that children attending high quality out-of-home programmes demonstrate positive learning outcomes. High quality, particularly for children under three years of age, means the provision of nurturing, responsive care and education (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015; Sims & Hutchins, 2011). The benefits of attending out-of-home-care programmes is particularly marked for children who come from disadvantaged homes and/or communities (Côté, Doyle, Petittclerc, & Timmins, 2013; Engle et al., 2011; Hanson et al., 2017; Lombardi & Coley, 2017) however Australian research also shows that ALL children (from disadvantaged or advantaged backgrounds) demonstrate positive impacts from attendance at preschool before they begin school (Goldfeld et al., 2016). Whilst there are arguments in the literature about the value of early (ie before three years of age) attendance in out-of-home-care programmes with some researchers arguing early non-parental care has negative impacts on children (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, & DHHS, 2006; Yamauchi & Leigh, 2011) whilst others (Lee, 2016; Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2013) demonstrate the opposite, the consensus appears to hinge on the quality of both parental



and non-parental care. For example, those taking a cross-cultural perspective, argue that it is natural for children to build nurturing and responsive relationships with a range of different adults (Keller, 2016; Love et al., 2009), and that the provision of paid non-parental care can be compared to the provision of informal, relative-based community care evident in many non-industrialised societies (Gerhardt, 2004; Sims, 2009; Sims & Hutchins, 2011). In other words, it is not WHO delivers the care but the quality of children's experiences that matters.

The recognition that experiences in the early years have such a profound impact on lifelong outcomes is played out in the international arena, particularly by organisations such as the United Nations and this is recognised in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) where it is clear that holistic early childhood programmes underpin nations' ability to achieve their targets by the 2030 deadline (Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood, 2016; Black et al., 2017). Research demonstrates clearly that social gradients are evident across health, wellbeing and developmental domains (Berger & Houle, 2016; Eyre, Duncan, Birch, & Cox, 2014; Hertzman & Boyce, 2010; Kendall, van Eekelen, Mattes, & Li, 2009; Ryff et al., 2015; UNICEF Office of Research, 2016): this means that children from disadvantaged backgrounds and nations demonstrate poorer outcomes in all of these areas and that if we truly wish to work towards social equality (where ALL children, irrespective of their background can achieve) then we need to provide high quality, holistic early childhood services and as early childhood professionals we have a responsibility to continue to advocate for these.

The economic argument has been used for several decades now to persuade politicians and community members that our work in the early childhood sector is crucially important. This argument was initiated by the work of economist James Heckman (Heckman, 1998, 2006, 2011) and made popular by its translation into policy imperatives in Canada by Fraser Mustard (McCain, Mustard, & McCuaig, 2011; McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007; McCain & Mustard, 1999; Mustard, 2006, 2002). This work was based on a range of important longitudinal evaluations of the impact of early intervention including the Perry High/Scope (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993; Schweinhart

et al., 2005; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993, 1997) project and the nurse home visiting programme (Olds, Eckenrode, & Henderson, 1997; Olds, Henderson, & Kitzman, 1994; Olds, Hill, & Rumsey, 1998; Olds, Sadler, & Kitzman, 2007). Basically, applying financial measures to the outcome data from these programme evaluations, Heckman demonstrated that investing in early childhood produced a return on investment of up to 1:17: in other words, investing in young children today saves the nation in the future through reduced welfare, health and justice spending and increased tax revenue through increased employment and national productivity.

Despite all this evidence, and the advocacy activities in which early childhood professionals have engaged over the past few decades in sharing this evidence, the early childhood sector is still one characterised by low status, poor levels of recognition, poor pay and conditions. It is not surprising that those working in the sector are all part of a push to become more professionalised; the dream of recognition through professional status is one that is commonly shared both within Australia and internationally (Chalke, 2013; B. Clark, 2012; R. Clark, 2012; Oberhuemer, 2005; Sims & Pedey, 2015; Sims & Tausere-Tiko, 2016). However, this push towards professionalism is one that is occurring in a wider (and international) context of neoliberalism which has the effect of shaping (and constraining) the directions we take as we advocate for children, families and ourselves.

Neoliberalism has become such a pervasive ideology that for many, it is the ONLY way to think about the world and our place in it (Davies & Bansel, 2007; McCarthy & Prudham, 2004). Neoliberalism shapes the way in which we perceive ourselves and the kinds of learning experiences we offer children. Neoliberalism positions the role of education as crucial in shaping the population to create a pool of employable citizens whose aim in life is to earn and consume those earnings in pursuit of status. Henry Giroux (2015) suggests this occurs through a 'pedagogy of ignorance whose hidden curriculum is the teaching of political and intellectual conformity' (p15). Employers want employees who will do the job in exactly the way required, and employees quickly learn that maintaining employment means following the rules no matter what one might think of them

(Pucci, 2015). Thinking is no longer valued and students are taught to become 'job-ready zombies' (Hil, 2015, p. 5) who have been educated through a 'relentless emphasis on job readiness and career. Any sense of a broader, more civically engaged education, grounded in less instrumental values, is crowded out by a focus on industry-relevant skills or, in the current vernacular, 'graduate attributes' (ibid, p3).

This means that as early childhood educators we are increasingly being required to demonstrate how the learning opportunities we offer young children link to the employable skills they are expected to acquire by the end of their education. Numeracy and literacy, for example, are gaining increasing attention. Early childhood educators around the world are voicing their concerns about the push-down curriculum (Sims, 2014) – the insertion of school learning and school subjects into early childhood curricula (Bodrova, 2008; Save Childhood Movement, 2014). Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards NSW [BOSTES], 2011) for example, require early childhood educators to 'develop students' literacy and numeracy within their subject areas' (ibid, p5). This focus on literacy and numeracy is also played out in recent criticisms of Te Whāriki (McLachlan & Arrow, 2011; McLachlan, Nicholson, Fielding-Barnsley, Mercer, & Ohi, 2012).

Coupled with this is what is identified as an 'increasingly vocationalised' curriculum, (Rizvi & Lingard, 2011, p. 12) where children are viewed as human capital whose function is to gain skills that will lead to employment in their adult years. This vocational knowledge is standardised which makes it easier to measure (and engage in cross-national comparisons). We see this in the growth of measurement instruments such as the AEDI (Janus, Harrison, Goldfield, & Guhn, 2016), NAPLAN (Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013) and PISA (Thomson, De Bortoli, & Underwood, 2016). The risk associated with these standardised assessments is two-fold (Davies & Bansel, 2007): first that only knowledge assessed by the test is valued, and secondly that children's learning opportunities become increasingly limited to that which is assessed in the tests, resulting in a homogenisation of knowledge (Giroux, 2015). The long-term outcome of this is what Alvesson and Spicer (2016) call functional stupidity.

In Australia one might argue that the development of the national standards and the Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; Sims, Mulhearn, Grieshaber, & Sumsion, 2015) are part of a neoliberal movement to tie down understandings of quality (in this sense quality is encompassed by what children ought to learn and how they should be taught in order to achieve desired outcomes). Whilst there was no intention on behalf of the developers for the Early Years Framework to be a recipe prescribing what children ought to learn (Sumsion & Grieshaber, 2012), it appears that it is being used in such a manner (Waniganayake & Sims, in press). Such an approach may be associated with a lack of professional confidence in discretionary decision making and a consequent reliance on external standards to define our work (Cumming, Sumsion, & Wong, 2013; Sims, Waniganayake, & Hadley, 2017).

Early childhood educators working in this context, and dreaming of becoming recognised as professionals, are caught between two competing pressures; the pressure to conform to externally imposed standards that might be perceived as defining high quality, professional work, and the recognition that some of the work they value is not recognised nor respected in these external standards so they risk losing important elements of their work through compliance. The latter is clearly evident, for example, in the UK as well as in Australia, where adherence to professional discourses of accountability have led early childhood educators to feeling de-professionalised (Bradbury, 2012; Brooker, 2016; Harwood, Klopper, Osanyin, & Vanderlee, 2013; Jovanovic & Fane, 2016; Sims, Forrest, Semann, & Slattery, 2014). Valued professional practice becomes what is 'officially spoken about and recognised' (Skattebol, Adamson, & Woodrow, 2016, p. 119) and, in this process, valued elements of work (for example care – Sims, 2014) are lost (O'Connell, 2011). Education is becoming a technocratic profession, one in which technocrats enact prescribed recipes to achieve prescribed outcomes (Goodson, 2007).

It is in this context that advocacy becomes even more important. We are no longer advocating to those outside our profession attempting to persuade them about the importance of the early childhood years and our work in those years, rather we are advocating both within and outside our profession in order to shape its evolution. We have to ask ourselves: what is the purpose of early childhood education? Is it to create a work-ready population or is it to work towards social justice and inclusion? Is our search for recognition and status sufficient reason to continue to allow our profession to be guided and shaped by external forces aiming at de-professionalisation and compliance? What are our responsibilities to advocate for what our gut tells us is good practice versus our need to comply with standardised forms in order to achieve recognition? How should early childhood professionalisation evolve?

In thinking about these questions, I am reminded of the need for our voices to be heard. I am reminded of the poem written by German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller (1892–1984) about the rise of Nazi Germany as recorded in the US Holocaust Museum:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out –  
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out –  
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out –  
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me –  
and there was no one left to speak for me.

Who can speak for us but ourselves? We have a responsibility to do so. Early childhood professionals have a moral obligation to be advocates: for the children and families with whom we work who





deserve the best possible service, and for ourselves so that we can be free to deliver that service.

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