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THE EDUCATION AND CARE OF OUR CHILDREN: GOOD BEGINNINGS

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My exploration of what is needed to give all of Australia's children a good start to their education has taken me to the springs of social disadvantage. No one should be left in doubt that in the absence of compensatory educational experiences a substantial number of today's socially disadvantaged small children are positioned to become tomorrow's frustrated and rejected adults. So I want to begin by sharing with you some scenes that I have encountered during my recent observations of twenty of New South Wales' preschools attached to public schools, and/or kindergartens in public schools. I must emphasise that by design, the majority of the schools in my sample were located in not-well-off communities and in some instances they served decidedly disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The scenes that I recount are fundamental reality tests for measures intended to provide all of our children with good beginnings to their education.

SCENES FROM OUR SCHOOLS

- One four year-old boy arrived at school possessing a vocabulary of two words – “bad boy”;
- At one country school I found some four year-olds confused about their gender identity. They don't know what to do when they hear ‘Boys go here, girls go there’. At a Sydney school serving a disadvantaged area a similar problem was evidenced when girls were asked to stand up and they looked blankly at the teacher and asked, “Am I a girl?”
- At another school a child whose speech was almost unintelligible became so frustrated that he hit himself while trying to communicate;
- One pre-school teacher in Western Sydney said: “When I place a pen, a paintbrush, a book in some children's hands all I get is a quizzical look as if to say ‘What is this? What do I do with it? Some of the four-year olds here can't form intelligible sounds. They need a lot of individualised help to hear and say words. Their parents have very limited language and can't help them much. Professional speech help would be good but in reality, it falls on the shoulders of the teachers. To start to help these children at five is too late – two would be good;”
- A teacher at another Sydney school said, “It makes learning a word more difficult if you have no experience or knowledge of what it denotes. Some of our children have never left their suburb let alone taken the train to the city. Their ‘news’ is predictable – “I went to the shops.” This theme was elaborated upon at another school where teachers said that the children lacked any phonic awareness. “Many of our children are not encouraged to speak. What is said to them is largely directive. What they utter consists largely of nouns and labels with few connecting words. There has been an absence of conversation in their lives; they have not seen a book and have no idea that it conveys meaning.” At which point another teacher commented: “That's why we put such an emphasis on excursions. From the bus windows the four and five year-olds see things for the first time – the airport, the harbour bridge, tall

buildings. As they go through Sydney they are in awe, in shock. Their wide-eyed expressions and open mouths tell you all you need to know about their reactions". At another school the principal said much the same thing: "We take them on excursions to extend their knowledge of the world. One girl on crossing the harbour bridge asked 'Are we in Lebanon yet?'" Another teacher added: "But the half of kindergarten that attended preschool and the half that didn't are like 'chalk and cheese'."

- Some children arrive at one metropolitan school not really knowing how to eat. They pull the food apart as if testing its pliability but they have never been shown how to eat effectively, let alone conventionally;
- At a number of Sydney suburban primary schools it is frequently the case that a child arrives possessing three or four words. One principal commented: We refer the parents and their child to a regional health centre but an eighteen months delay in providing treatment is common. The principal added: "We don't set out to be social workers but if we don't attend to the children's social needs little or no learning is going to take place. It is better that this occurs at four years of age rather than five;"
- Sometimes siblings display the same speech difficulties. Twins at one school could only grunt. It is often found that these children receive little oral or mental stimulation at home. The associated delays in phonic ability block reading development. In some extreme cases a form of selective mutism connected with school anxiety and other speech impediments, results in little interaction with teachers. The teachers are thrown back on their own resources in trying to overcome this problem in preschool and they model the enunciation of sounds that the child has not heard spoken correctly – vowels and 'h' sounds, medial sounds, pronouncing 'g' at the end of words, and the like. Success in these endeavours often requires imaginative ways of gaining parental and community participation – itinerant community readers, bridging school and home by using multilingual teachers, even blocking the streets of a country town (Bowraville) and celebrating the presence of a 'bikie' book devotee "born to read;"
- One non-metropolitan school that serves a disadvantaged area garners support from local food suppliers and a charitable organization to provide breakfast for one in four of its pupils. A teacher commented, "Families here are focused entirely on survival. The all-absorbing issue for many mothers is will they be able to put a meal on the table tonight."
- At another school a teacher commented: "Coming from stressful backgrounds our children are continually worried... The children are totally lacking in confidence, so much so that they can't take the kind of risks involved in learning. Asked to take a number of toys out of a box they withdraw from the task and hide their face in their hands;"
- Children's non-exposure to books conceals the enchantment that can follow when that encounter happens in an exciting way. One child recently experienced the opening of a larger-than-life book as something akin to the opening of a magic door. He touched the book and gazed in wonder at it;
- A requirement of effective learning is having the energy to participate. During my visits I met some children visibly lacking in energy – lying on a table, sitting half asleep, slumped in a corner. These children responded well to a simple mid-morning breakfast and, according to their teachers, it was possibly the only meal some of them would have that day.

The surest sign of whether our nation has a soul is whether it cherishes *all* of its children. Having a rising domestic product, the finest military hardware and millionaires to spare, tell only of other priorities un-connected to our most human values. Unless there is a serious commitment to uphold every child's birthright to acquire the educational and personal foundations for a full and satisfying life we fail the first test of any civilised community. That is, doing justice by the most vulnerable among us, our children, and especially socially disadvantaged children. But we live in an era that has seen the elevation of commerce to a position of pre-eminence among our social institutions and the inappropriate spread of commercial values to other areas of life. The renewal of our collective conscience needs to begin with an unreserved commitment to promote the wellbeing of all of our children.

This is the broad context in which the current provision of prior-to-school care and education needs to be considered. Expressions of respect for the preciousness of our children and the practical priorities that should flow from that commitment are sometimes declaratory rather than implemented. That this can happen is a tribute to our society's ability to 'block out' discomfoting facts. Those who have taken off the 'blinkers' talk of *the school to prison pipeline* to describe the concentrated flow of youth from some neighbourhoods to punishment institutions. There are, in fact, places where the planning of future prison accommodation is shaped by primary school test results. The neighbourhoods concerned are economically depressed and suffer from an accumulation of health, educational and social problems.

We are well advanced in accommodating ourselves to the same emu-like approach in New South Wales. Having recklessly quarried the most socially disadvantaged of our neighbourhoods to fill the ever-expanding penal estate, some now attempt to put a gloss upon the consequences. They declare pride in the ever-spiralling number of incarcerated women and men within a correctional system that itself bends uncritically to the punitive obsessions of the day. There is an alternative. It has scarcely begun to be used in our state but is somewhat more advanced in other parts of Australia. It involves taking pride in intercepting with positive and helpful means lives otherwise at risk of being stunted, unsatisfying and fodder for punitive regimes. As Victor Hugo says in *Les Misérables*, if the soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty ones are not those who commit the sin, but those who cause or permit the darkness.

In secular terms, what constitutes 'light' in the preschool lives of our children? This question encroaches upon many societal issues. However, my focus here is upon early childhood education. The starting point is the bolt of light of Damascus Road intensity that has issued from research into the benefits of early education. The common ground is children's readiness to learn in their earliest years and the disadvantageous consequences in educational and other terms of missing that opportunity. Other more refined analyses will follow but a recent article in *Business Week* put it baldly: "Children form basic cognitive abilities in their earliest years and those who don't get exposed to letters, numbers and social skills at home quickly lag behind those who do...That's why we have to get 'em while they're still tots."¹

¹ Starr, A., (2002) "The Importance of Teaching Tots," *Business Week*, August, p. 164

Sustaining its business-like theme, the article went on to say that the benefits to society of having all children experience preschool make the price tag well worth it.

These general claims, made from a business perspective, resonate with a recent RAND Corporation overview of *Early Childhood Interventions*.² A large scale Early Childhood Longitudinal Study indicates that disadvantaged children not only arrive at school less well prepared but early gaps persist and even widen as children progress through school. The children in question more frequently drop out of high school, and have more unemployment, welfare dependency, delinquency and crime. RAND concludes “Even if only a portion of these detrimental outcomes in childhood and adulthood can be averted, the benefits may be substantial” (p. xvi). More generally, the RAND assessment identifies 20 studies of early childhood intervention projects that have employed scientifically rigorous methods of evaluation. Statistically significant benefits were found in at least two-thirds of the programs reviewed. The magnitudes of the favourable effects were sometimes sizable and long lasting particularly with respect to educational progress, labour market outcomes, welfare dependency, and pro-social behaviours. RAND found the estimates of returns to society for each dollar invested extend from over one dollar to more than \$17. The available evidence indicates that the economic returns from investing in early intervention programs are larger when higher-risk populations are targeted but that universal programs can yield benefits two and a half times the cost.

Some of the demonstrable benefits of high-quality preschool programs increase in magnitude as longitudinal studies cover longer periods. A good example is the High/Scope Perry Preschool study. Three and four year olds were randomly allocated to a group receiving a high quality preschool program and a control group. By twenty-seven, only one fifth as many program group members as members of the no-program group had had multiple arrests and only one-third as many were ever arrested for drug dealing (Schweinhart, 2005).³ The earnings and general economic status and educational attainments of the program group were significantly higher and their relationships were more stable. The researchers have calculated a seven-fold benefits/cost ratio of the program investment returned to the public – a better investment than the stock market during the same period. A similar picture emerged for subjects who had reached forty-years of age.⁴

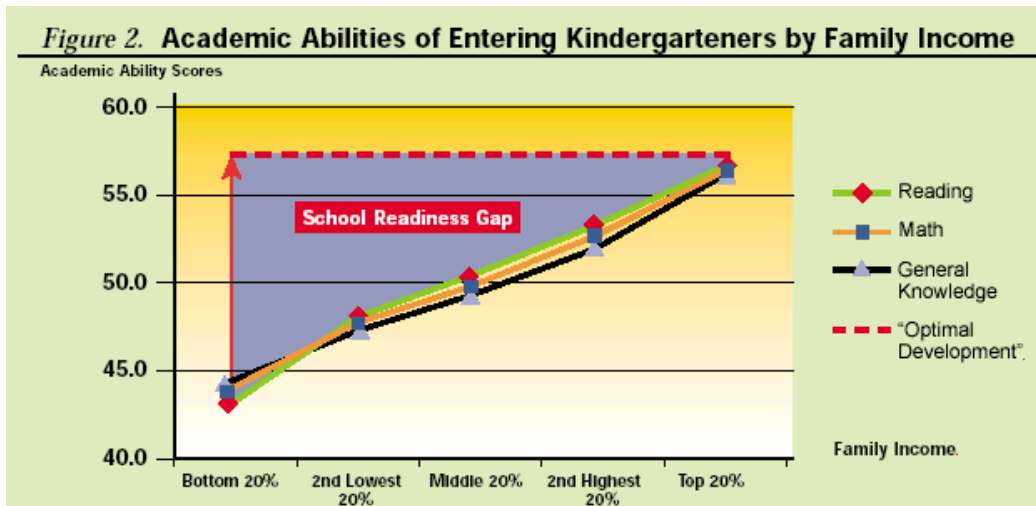
An overseas Institute for Early Education Research has found that children living in poverty are 18 months behind the average child when they start kindergarten.⁵ The same Institute has charted the degree of school readiness of children against their family incomes and the gradient is steep and continuous:

² Karoly, L., Kilburn, R., Cannon, J., (2005) *Early Childhood Interventions. Proven Results, Future Promise*, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, March

³ Schweinhart, L., (2005) “High Quality Preschool Program Found to Improve Adult Status,” High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, <http://www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/perryfact.htm>

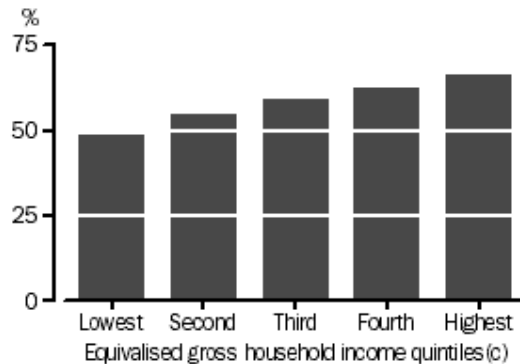
⁴ Schweinhart, L., (2005) “Summary, Conclusions, and Frequently Asked questions,” in *Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*, High/Scope Press

⁵ Barnett, S., Brown, K., Shore, R., (2004) “The Universal vs. Targeted Debate: Should the United States Have Preschool for All?” *Preschool Policy Matters*, Issue 6, April



Although subject to the uncertain definitions of ‘preschool,’ a similar gradient is apparent in the Australian Bureau of Statistics preschool participation rates for four-year-old children of varying household incomes.⁶ Children’s preschool participation tends to increase in line with household income, ranging from 49% of four year olds in households in the lowest income quintile to 66% of those from households in the highest income quintile:

PRESCHOOL PARTICIPATION RATE BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME - 2001



- (a) Children aged four years.
- (b) People who stated they attended school but did not indicate the type were excluded prior to calculation of percentages.
- (c) See *Australian Social Trends 2004*, Economic resources: definitions, pp. 135–136.

Source: ABS 2001 Census of Population and Housing.

Assuming for the moment ways of engaging their participation, how can education and care services be established that significantly improve the early education and life prospects of disadvantaged children? A starting point is to see whether we have distilled the insights of international best practice within our curriculum framework for early education and care services. New South Wales is well served in this regard. Our curriculum documents acknowledge play as the major medium of learning in early childhood. Our Curriculum Framework in particular, emphasises the notion of

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2004) “Australian Social Trends,” 15th June <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/30edac9d34afc189ca256e9e0028706f?OpenDocument>

the *child as citizen* and underlines the child's right to be respected as a full human being.⁷ The title of the key document, *The Practice of Relationships*, refers to the fact that "Relationships in children's services exist to promote the wellbeing of the child" including the growth of a positive self-identity and enjoyment of and learning from relationships. The preschools that I visited employ these relationship principles in their day-to-day work.

What is the kernel of these views and the research and experience upon which they are based? First, childhood education and care are interwoven and inseparable. Children's needs are interwoven – intellectual growth and the need for play and friendship, and social, physical and emotional development. This theme was of central importance to an important discussion paper prepared in 2005 by Uniting Care Burnside, SDN Children's Services and Uniting Care Children's Services.⁸ It is not only disadvantaged children who benefit from early childhood education and care services but as with reduced class sizes and other compensatory measures, they are especially beneficial for children experiencing developmental difficulties or who are socio-economically disadvantaged (Lynch, 2004).⁹

Second, more is involved in this field than ensuring the adoption of any well-implemented pre-school program, or simply moving forward to an earlier age the beginning of school instruction. Since the 1980s, leading early childhood practitioners have expressed concern about the wisdom of excessively didactic, formal instructional practices for young children.¹⁰ They fear that short-term academic gains will be offset by long-term stifling of children's motivation and self-initiated learning. Contemporary research confirms that these early concerns were warranted.¹¹ Pushing children too soon may actually backfire when children move into the later primary school grades and are required to think more independently. The foundation of critical thinking may be found in early childhood experiences that foster curiosity, initiative, independence, and effective choice.

READINESS

How do these desirable characteristics match-up with the approach to early schooling that I have observed? Without exception the attached preschools emphasised children's need to acquire those social skills and attributes of self-sufficiency that are needed to participate in the more formal learning that follows in kindergarten and later years. Learning to sit safely, give attention, feel comfortable with non-family

⁷ The Curriculum Framework acknowledges communalities among long day care centres, occasional care centres, family day care homes, multi-functional Aboriginal services and mobile services for children birth to school age as well as pre-schools. NSW Department of Community Services, (2002) *The Practice of Relationships. Essential Provisions for Children's Services*. Office of Childcare

⁸ Uniting Care Burnside, SDN Children's Services and Uniting Care Children's Services, (2005) *A Good Start for Children – Integrated Child and Family Services in Australia*, Sydney, Uniting Care Burnside (Report prepared by Jennifer Pannell)

⁹ Lynch, R., (2004) *Exceptional Returns: Economic, Fiscal and Social Benefits of Investment in Early Childhood Development*. Washington, Economic Policy Institute

¹⁰ Elkind, D.. (1986) "Formal education and early childhood education: An essential difference", *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 67, No.9

¹¹ Marcon, R., (2002) "Moving up the Grades: Relationship between Preschool Model and Later School Success," *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring

adults and children, operate in a group, take turns, socialise, sit with others at a table, respect and not interfere with the wellbeing of others, take directions, begin to be self-sufficient in small ways (like packing and unpacking their bag and choosing between their “little and big meal”), sit with others at a table, become accustomed to routine and gradually acquire or have reinforced rudimentary principles of considerate conduct - these are invariant features of the preschools that I have observed.

Accompanying these strands of social progress is careful assessment of the overall development of each child, usually employing formal professional tools and frameworks, and identifying specific abilities that need to be exercised and strengthened – such as fine motor skills, receptive and expressive language. This is where the varied impediments to development and learning included in the illustrative ‘scenes from our schools’ enter the picture. It is also where public school education can be seen at its finest. In displays of professionalism of the highest order the specialist early education trained teachers draw heavily upon their professional learning in making fine judgements about what needs to be done to assist children with special needs. As one preschool teacher put it “ We draw upon every bit of the academic knowledge that we covered in our tertiary studies.” They apply this knowledge while working barefooted in the sand pit, at the planning board carefully devising the preschool program and interviewing carers in the privacy of their office. ‘Readying’ in this context means seizing the opportunity afforded by the pre-school year to overcome problems before they are further consolidated and undermine later learning. In these endeavours the early-education teachers are ably supported by enthusiastic ancillary staff, school administrators and good, safe accommodation.

There is one catch - frequently the requisite specialised back-up services are not available at this opportune time and, so, resourceful teachers set about acquiring additional skills in an attempt to give every child a good beginning. Children’s language problems loom large in this picture and I will shortly say more about this issue.

As the year progresses readying the children for kindergarten involves greater involvement with the rest of the school. Participation in celebratory occasions (Easter hat, and book character parades, and the like), some assemblies, visits to kindergarten classrooms, familiarisation with kindergarten teachers (including the latter’s rostered playground duties), the transmission of pertinent information, including a portfolio of children’s work and progress, and teacher-to-teacher discussions are among the devices used. This integration of preschool and kindergarten within the public schools is of immense importance in the care and development of children of disadvantaged backgrounds. Similar exchanges can occur to some degree when the preschool is detached from the public school via means like *Transition Programs* and *Primary Connect*. Cooperative practices are especially evident between community-based preschools and public schools, especially in country areas. By year’s end, a child’s recognition of colours, some ability to count and apply numbers to *things* and do so on a small scale but in a fluent way, to recognise her or his name and begin to write it, to sound some letters, the capacity to handle and use the tools of learning – a brush, a pen, a book, scissors, a ‘mouse’ (in relation to a child’s special computer) – these were among the precursor educational goals in the preschools observed.

To claim that the system I have described is effective in providing “significant benefits” for disadvantaged children is not to claim magical powers for them of completely overriding the consequences of disadvantage. More subtle recent evaluations of the impact of programs intended to better prepare disadvantaged children for school have emphasised the major educational contribution of informal influences on learning. One study even found that the largest advance in some young children’s educational performance occurred during an annual holiday period. This means that the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children is extremely difficult to close but the gap can be significantly narrowed. However, that result is not produced willy-nilly: as Shonkoff and Phillips (2001) have stated, “the positive relation between childcare *quality* and virtually every facet of children’s development that has been studied is one of the most consistent findings in development science.”¹² ‘High quality’ early childhood care and education services employ staff who are educated for their work, have decent working conditions, work with groups of children of manageable size and provide activities that match the principles of our own state’s curriculum framework and similar international documents. That is to say, they require the provision of challenging but non-didactic, creative, enjoyable activities for children and ensure consistent adult and peer groups in stable social and physical environments (Friendly and Lero, 2002).

LINKS TO OTHER SERVICES, AGENCIES

There are variations in the linkages between preschools and other service providers. Typically the support network includes a Regional Health Centre, a local hospital, a non-government family or children’s service, and specialist district education officials of the Department of Education and Training. Almost all preschools make referrals to Regional Health Centres but complain of long delays, particularly in accessing speech therapy. There were repeated claims of delays of eighteen months in obtaining services. In almost all of the schools visited parents lack the funds needed to gain private services for their children. Some schools regard the problem as being so severe that they supplement funds from other sources with scarce operating funds believing that to not do so would undermine all of the other professional efforts to help the children. One school, tired of launching children burdened with a speech problem into formal schooling, has devoted scarce funds to securing the services of a language specialist one day per week. However, the part-time appointee commented, “I could not do justice to the children in this school with speech problems if I worked five days a week”. The area concerned is one of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in New South Wales. In a similarly ranked country area served by a community preschool, after careful consideration it was concluded that 19 of 43 students needed the services of a speech therapist.

PRESENT AMBITIONS

The present exercise has ambitions of intermediate scale. It is designed to encourage worthwhile progress with preschool for four-year olds while pointing to the need for additional comprehensive programs. Uniting Care Burnside and affiliate organizations are right to insist that education and care services should be universally

¹² Shonkoff, J., Phillips, D., (2001) *From neurons to neighbourhoods: The science of early childhood development*, Washington, Academy Press

available for all three and four-year-olds and that more vulnerable or disadvantaged children should have access to such services at an even earlier age depending on their circumstances. Those goals are not eccentric but mainstream policy in many countries. A recent OECD survey (*Starting Strong*, 2001)¹³ found a surge of policy attention to early childhood education and care in OECD countries over the preceding decade. Most of the countries studied declared an aim to give all children at least two years of free publicly funded provision before beginning compulsory schooling. Furthermore they reported developing strategies to include children in need of special support such as children from low-income families, those with special educational needs, and children from ethnic, cultural and linguistic minorities.

It is time for Australians to take a look at what is happening in this field in other industrialised countries. The contrast is dramatic. In most of these countries children are guaranteed a place in subsidised, decent quality early childhood education and care programs – at the age of one in Denmark, Finland and Sweden at two in France, at 2½ in Belgium, at three in Italy and Germany, and at four in Britain. In almost all of the twelve countries reviewed by the OECD, governments pay the largest share of costs, with parents covering about a quarter (and significantly less in some countries). The two or three years of care/education prior to compulsory schooling are often free.¹⁴

That the message is beginning to get through to Australian Governments is suggested by the references to early childhood care and education in the recent COAG Communiqué.¹⁵ COAG noted the importance of all children having a good start in life. It said, “High quality and integrated early childhood education and care services, encompassing the period from prenatal up to and including the transition to the first years of school, are critical to increasing the proportion of children entering school with the basic skills for life and learning.”(p.4) Those insights are to be welcomed even if somewhat overdue. But, as can be seen by examining the achievements of countries like New Zealand, Sweden and England, the fruits of better early childhood care and education policies depend on a substantial investment in their cultivation. The twin-barriers in the case of Australia have been lack of national leadership and the willingness to invest in our most precious national resource. In October, 2003, the Federal Government released the paper *Towards the Development of a National Agenda for Early Development*.¹⁶ The (then) Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Mr Anthony, whose personal commitment I do not question, described the development of a national agenda for early childhood as an unprecedented “major Australian Government initiative.”

¹³ OECD (2001) *Starting Strong – Early Childhood Education and Care*, (Executive summary), France <http://www.childcarecanada.org/pubs/pdf/startingstrong.pdf>

¹⁴ Sheila Kamerman, Director, Columbia University Institute for Child and Family Policy, cited in Issue Brief, (2001) “New 12 Country Study Reveals Substantial Gaps in US Early Childhood Education and Care Policies,” Columbia University, Summer, <http://www.childpolicyintl.org/issuebrief/issuebrief1.htm>

¹⁵ Council of Australian Governments’ Meeting, (2006) *Communique*, Canberra, 10th February [http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/CA256D800027B102/Lookup/COAGCommunique2006/\\$file/COMMUNI QUE2006.pdf](http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/CA256D800027B102/Lookup/COAGCommunique2006/$file/COMMUNI QUE2006.pdf)

¹⁶ Commonwealth of Australia, (2003) *Towards the development of a National Agenda for Early Childhood*, Canberra, Commonwealth Task Force on Child Development, Health and Wellbeing, October

The curious thing about the Agenda document and its sequel in April, 2004, is that the outline of what the Government was advised to do accorded with international good practice but what it actually proposes to do, does not. The illustration of that divergence best follows very brief consideration of three examples of national leadership designed to ensure that all children have a good start in life. The three countries have a self-interested eye for the resource benefits of putting down good personal and educational foundations in children's lives. But providing opportunities for their children is not entirely a matter of attracting future 'pay-offs.' The aim is to help create a good quality of life for children 'here-and-now.' Our aim should be to treat childhood as an important phase of life, not merely as a way station to adulthood, and the child as active and competent (Friendly and Lero, 2002)¹⁷. Let us begin with our neighbour across the Tasman.

New Zealand

In 1986 the New Zealand Government placed all early childhood services under the Department of Education. An assessment at the time showed that 73 per cent of families with pre-school aged children used early childhood services but that over a quarter of families – predominantly low-income households – were non-users.¹⁸ In 1988, a Cabinet-appointed Working Party produced a number of proposals resulting in the issuing in 1989 of a government policy statement, *Before Five*. Bulk grants to service-providing organizations replaced a multitude of previous forms of financial assistance with the goal of keeping childcare fees at a modest level (under \$20 per week) for low-income families. Throughout the 1990s enrolments increased but grant increases were minimal with the cost to families climbing as a consequence. Then followed discussion of quality assurance systems and site assessments by external evaluators. By 1996, nearly all four-year-olds and over 80 percent of three-year-olds were enrolled in some form of early childhood education (May, 2002).¹⁹ By the end of the century the watchword for early child services had become 'quality' with government encouraging and/or requiring centres to establish policies, systems and processes for achieving 'quality outcomes' for children.

The appointment of a new Labour-led Government in 1999 was followed by the appointment of a working party to develop a ten year Strategic Plan for Early Childhood. In the judgement of that Committee the well being of children and their families would follow improved dovetailing of the services of relevant government departments and agencies and transforming the role of government so that early child services are provided in partnership with government. The thrust and parry of early childhood educational reform goes on but New Zealand continues to enjoy its long-held reputation of being among the leaders in early childhood education and care (Vimpani, 2005).²⁰ The Government has made a decision to finance 20 hours per week free access to early childhood education for all three and four year-olds by 2007

¹⁷ Friendly, M., Lero, D., (2002) "Social Inclusion Through Wearly Childhood Education and Care," *Working Paper Series*, Toronto, Laidlaw Foundation

¹⁸ National Research Bureau Ltd., (1988) *Early childhood Services: Summary of key Findings*, Wellington, National Research Bureau

¹⁹ May, H., (2002) "Early Childhood Care and Education in Aotearoa – New Zealand: An overview of history, policy and curriculum" *McGill Journal of Education*, Winter

²⁰ Vimpani, G., (2005) "The Case for National Investment in Early Childhood," *New Matilda*, <http://www.newmatilda.com/policytoolkit/policydetail.asp?PolicyID=215>

in licensed, teacher-led services in order to give all “a more robust pedagogical start in life’ (OECD, 2005)²¹. The current situation is that 90% of 3-year-olds and 98% of 4-year-olds participate in early childhood education. In announcing the Government’s intentions Prime Minister Clark said that her government is committed to ensuring “every single child has the chance for the best possible start to (its) life” (Clark and Mallard, 2005).²²

Sweden

For more than three decades childcare has been a priority issue for public authorities in Sweden. I have personally observed the emphasis on quality childcare, which is financed out of the public purse. Providing for the well being of the young and the promotion of greater equality between the sexes have been driving forces. Reforms in the past few years have been promoted under national legislation and guided by the National Agency for Education but administered at the municipal level. Central government outlines the overall childcare objectives while the local authorities are responsible for implementing them. Today, the National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*) and the National Agency for School Improvement are the central supervisory authorities for childcare and schooling. There is a ceiling for the amount parents are required to pay (1-3% of the family income depending on the number of children). The reforms have seen a national pre-school curriculum developed and assured the availability of childcare to all with fees so low that no child is excluded.²³ The pre- and compulsory school curriculums cohere so that an important part of the early curriculum relates to basic democratic values and solidarity. This is not mere tokenism. Walking in the town of Malmö I was surprised to come across a group of very young children bearing placards parading up and down a street. When I later ‘phoned the school to express my interest in what was happening I was told that the children had decided to stage a demonstration against people driving fast past their school. They had informed the staff of their wish and the teachers were obliged to support their protest.

England

Since 1997 the UK government has made an unprecedented effort to increase investment in families and young children.²⁴ A national childcare strategy was announced in 1998 to be given practical effect by locally based *Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships* operating collaboratively with the local education and social services authorities. The aims of *Sure Start* are neatly encapsulated in this summary:

To work with parents-to-be, parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of babies and young children- particularly those who are disadvantaged – so that they can flourish at home and when

²³ Clark, H., Mallard, T., (2005) “Free early childhood education to be extended,” *Press Release: New Zealand Labour Party*, 22nd August

²⁴ ESTIA (2003) *Pre-School Education in Sweden*

http://www.estia.educ.goteborg.se/sv-estia/edu/edu_sys2.html

²⁴ OECD, (2001) “An Overview of ECEC Systems in the Participating Countries,” *OECD Country Note*, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/44/17/1942377.pdf>

they get to school, thereby breaking the cycle of disadvantage for the current generation of young children.

Assuring the best possible beginning for socially disadvantaged children was, in the first instance, covered by the allocation of special funding for disadvantaged areas through the *Sure Start* initiative. Similar in nature to our state's Curriculum Framework, England's *Curriculum Guidelines* for the Foundation Stage (3-5 years) bring coherence to teachers' endeavours without being overly prescriptive about content. The task of a National Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) is to formulate national child service standards. Although reliant in ways similar to the Swedish policies upon local initiatives, the national strategy still sets measurable objectives. One target is to achieve for children aged 0-3, a reduction of 5% in children with speech and language problems requiring specialist intervention.

Sure Start continues to be a strong example of a national strategy to make a reality of society's obligations to provide all children with a good start. Australia could learn much from it. Despite the "mainstreaming" of *Sure Start* from 2005²⁵ the national investment in young children is still an impressive £3 billion pounds program. A few months ago *The New York Times* saluted the magnitude of this national reversal in the following way:

American proponents of early childhood programs have long swooned over the support for families with young children offered in France, Belgium, Italy and the Scandinavian countries, but until recently, Britain had no place on their most admired list...(now) British efforts have whooshed past anything the United States has planned: a free part-time universal preschool program for 3- and 4-year-olds (that) is genuinely universal, with virtually all 4-year-olds and about 95 percent of 3-year-olds enrolled (Lewin, 2006)²⁶

Australia

Let us now review what has happened in Australia in the light of these examples. There has been little specific national policy focus on preschool education since the abolition of Commonwealth funding for preschool education in the mid 1980s. The earlier mentioned Australian Government paper *Towards the Development of a National Agenda for Early Development*, outlined a number of desiderata that need to be kept in mind in fashioning credible recommendations for improving the present situation. The paper acknowledged that the Agenda should reflect the value of children in the 'here and now' as well as into the future. It recognised that equity for children should be a core principle, both in terms of access to quality services and extra assistance for disadvantaged children and that culturally appropriate support should be available to Indigenous families and children. The document acknowledged strong support for a *nationally consistent* approach to early education and care including a national age-appropriate 'play based' learning curriculum, identifying and supporting best practice, and having ministerial and departmental responsibility for early learning and care brought together at the national and state

²⁵ National Literacy Trust, "Mainstreaming begins for *Sure Start*," *Building a Literate Nation*, Jan. 22, <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Database/early.html>

²⁶ Lewin, T., (2006) "The Need to Invest in Young Children," *The New York Times*, January, 11

level. The document also acknowledged advocacy for rigorous national accreditation and quality control systems for children's services and lifting the status and conditions of child-care workers. While recognising the importance of fostering quality early learning experiences for children from birth, the availability of a free, quality early learning program in the year before school was emphasised.²⁷

A *Framework* for progressing the development of the National Agenda was released in April 2004. It wasted no time in announcing that the Agenda the Government had in mind did not seek to be prescriptive or "alter traditional areas of Australian Government and state and territory government responsibility in early childhood."^{28 29} The *Framework* announced the intent to provide a guide to working together to achieve common goals. It really reads more like a guide to treading water, a comment that also applies to a subsidiary statement issued by COAG. The difficulties will only ever yield to strong leadership and real, planned financial investment as has occurred in other achieving nation.³⁰ As one major service provider said in a submission to the National Agenda project:³¹

To develop and maintain the National Agenda will need dedicated resources, it will not be effective if existing programs and services are simply re-badged and re-labelled with the National Agenda for Early Childhood logo.

Apart from the downgrading of ministerial responsibility for the Early Childhood Agenda following Mr Anthony's departure from Parliament, Vimpani (2005) also notes that the Treasury failed to include any reference to the importance of early childhood investment or care in its Inter-generational Report despite the Australian Government's substantial investment in supporting child care.³² Little wonder that this paediatrician is led to ask "Why doesn't Australia get it?" In making a similar point the president of the US Committee for Economic Development (Charles Kolb) stated in January of this year:

The British get it. The French get it. We're the largest economy in the world and it's outrageous that we don't get it yet. But I'm optimistic."³³

The alternative to investing in early childhood education and care is to live with the cruel hypocrisy of expecting and accepting early school departures followed by heavy investments in the state agencies that control the behaviour of people ill-equipped to face the challenges of contemporary society. What an improvement it would be – morally, economically – to do something serious about challenging the inter-

²⁷ *ibid.*, p.6

²⁸ Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous affairs, (2004) *The National Agenda for Early Childhood – A Framework*, Canberra, 6th August, [http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/via/early_childhood/\\$File/naec_aug04.pdf](http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/via/early_childhood/$File/naec_aug04.pdf)

²⁹ Judging by what has been achieved in Germany, a country with sixteen regional states each with autonomy in education policy, the stunted Australian ambitions cannot be explained in terms of the intricacies of a federal system. In the space of a few years a common framework to guide pedagogical work in early childhood centres has been developed in Germany (Oberhuemer, P., (2004) "International Perspectives on Early Childhood Curricula," München, State Institute of Early Childhood Education and Research

³⁰ *ibid.*, p.8

³¹ Catholic Welfare Australia, (2003) "A Response by Catholic Welfare Australia to the Consultation Paper: 'Towards the development of a national Agenda for Early Childhood,' " Canberra, May

³² Vimpani, (2005) *op. cit.*,

³³ Lewin, T., (2006) "The need to invest in young children," *The New York Times*, January 11

generational transmission of poverty and limited education that continue to help shape the destinies of significant numbers of our children.

Due to the varied nature of children's services throughout Australia and the absence of national standards and definitions, it is difficult to estimate the proportion of children who participate in formal learning programs. However, it is clear that as a nation Australia is out of step with the majority of other countries in the OECD regarding early childhood care and education. The 2005 OECD review *Education at a Glance* indicates that spending on pre-primary education as a proportion of GDP ranges from a low of 0.2% in Australia and Ireland to 0.7% or more in Denmark, France, Hungary and Norway (p.179). A further indication of limited government investment in early education is the share of government expenditure on pre-primary education. Of 32 countries for which data is available, Australia ranks 27th (OECD, 2005, p.197).³⁴ In 2002, an OECD comparison of the proportion of three- and four-year-olds enrolled in education placed Australia 23rd out of 28 OECD countries.³⁵ Gittens and Tiffin (2004, p.127)³⁶ have calculated that compared with 16 other 'rich nations' Australia devotes the least resources to early childhood education and care.

What of our state? The data is gathered in what is at times an unhelpful way but in June 2002, 59% of four year olds attended pre-schools and a further 25.1% attended long day care centres many of which offer educational pre-school programs for children of this age.³⁷ Other estimates of the combined preschool/long day care attendance figures converge on a figure of approximately 85% of NSW four-year-olds benefiting from one or the other – or both - of these services.³⁸ Participation rates for four-year-olds at pre-school in NSW are 10% or more below the rates for elsewhere in Australia. Also, while acknowledging that the available data permits only estimates of government spending, it is apparent that the NSW Government spends less *per capita* on children's services than the average across other Australian states and territories.³⁹

In ensuring a good start for all of our children, nothing could be more basic than parents being able to afford pre-school fees. In the state schools visited that fee usually ranged from a contribution of between two and five dollars a day but a family's capacity to pay was certainly the determining factor. The NSW Government financially supports some 800 community preschools through the Department of

³⁴ OECD, (2005) *Education at a Glance*, Paris

³⁵ Scottish Executive, (2005) "Statistics Publication Notice Education and Training Series: Preschool and Childcare Statistics 2005," Source: 'Education at a Glance,' OECD;
<http://scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/07/27131643/17082>

³⁶ Gittens, R., Tiffin, R., (2004) *How Australia Compares*: Melbourne, Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge

³⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2005) "Education and training. Early childhood education," *Year Book Australia*, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/b467cd2bff7a231aca256f7200832f7b?Op>

³⁸ Productivity Commission, *Review of Government Services Provision, 2005*, Canberra, Australian government; Rice, A., Press, F., (2003) *Early Childhood Education and Care in New South Wales*, Background paper prepared for Building blocks for life and learning: A Public Education Council forum on early childhood education, 9th July, 2003; NSW Legislative Council, (2003) *Realising Potential. Final Report of the Inquiry into Early Intervention for Children with Learning Difficulties*. Report 30, Parliamentary Paper No. 116, p.16

³⁹ . Ibid. p.25

Community Services. Many of these pre-schools face the same challenges as those that confront the public schools. Some three years ago the State Government gave a very modest increase in funding and promised to undertake a review of the Affordability Subsidy that assists families on low incomes with the costs of preschool fees. Nothing of substance came out of the review and the financial plight of the community sector has deepened. Of the greatest importance is the diminishing opportunity for children of not-well-off families to attend community preschools for the duration desired, or even to attend at all.

In mid-2005 the NSW Children's Services Forum representing community-based peak and state-wide children's services, conducted a survey of the financial viability of community pre-schools. Almost 60% of the 800 surveyed responded. In the interest of brevity here is an overview of the findings as summarised by NCOSS:

- A quarter of the organizations were running deficit budgets,
- Average fees in metropolitan areas were approximately \$30 per day and \$21 in rural areas and rising rapidly,
- Two out of every five preschools said they receive less than 35% of the cost of running their operation from DOCS,
- Most disturbingly, 70% of the preschools had been forced to make a number of changes that compromised the quality of their service including a 10% reduction in the number of early childhood trained teachers – earlier noted as being a vital element of the state school system – and reducing overall staffing.

So far as the pattern of children's attendance in the year prior to commencing school is concerned, three out of every five of the community preschools stated that children attended an average of two days per week. However, the preschools acknowledged that many families, ostensibly benefiting from a subsidy, are receiving only a small reduction in fees. Many of the preschools were fearful that if the only funding increase they received in the next few years is indexation, families will reduce the hours their children attend to less than the current average of two days per week. Just under a third of the organizations that responded believed that families would leave their service.

Complexities abound in this situation. Some should be acknowledged because they are the present reality, but none should deter us from pursuing more honourably our obligations to all of our children. Some states already approximate to the guarantee of a free or low cost participation in preschool, others do not; in NSW actions taken by the public school system to increase the availability of preschool to children in low socio-economic areas – an action that I can only applaud - are nevertheless said to undermine the financial viability of some community-based preschools; some forms of children's services other than community-based preschools attract Federal financial support either with operating costs or by way of fee subsidies; some state school preschools operate under conditions of excessive demand and generally they need to stretch their program to cover two groups of twenty, while some in markedly disadvantaged areas may have spare capacity.

Against this background I will attempt to chart the path to a more honourable set of arrangements for prior-to-school care and learning, with particular reference to the year preceding children's commencement of formal schooling. Any of the steps

outlined may require additional, subsequently mentioned steps, including financial provisions, in order to be effective. I will outline six steps or clusters of considerations.

Step 1

Acknowledge that the NSW Government has a responsibility for ensuring that areas of concentrated social disadvantage are served by a low cost, high quality pre-school. The Government has, in fact, in its recent additions to the preschools attached to public schools emphasised disadvantage in deciding where they should be located. I find that commendable. However, twenty of the top ranking 10% most disadvantaged postcode areas in the state (55 out of 587) are still without an ‘attached’ pre-school (see Appendix A for the list of areas and a comment on their degree of disadvantage).⁴⁰ That does not mean those areas should automatically qualify for such a preschool and most certainly any existing community-based preschools that could be affected should be consulted about future developments. However, the educational and social advantages of preschools that are structurally linked to primary schools in disadvantaged areas are so demonstrably beneficial to disadvantaged children as to place the onus on anyone proposing an alternative arrangement to demonstrate the advantage. The integration of preschool with kindergarten programs in the ways previously described should be a threshold requirement.

Currently under-utilised preschool capacity should not automatically be taken as a sign of lesser need. It is that last 15% of children who usually miss out on prior-to-school education and care opportunities in our state who are often most in need of preschool. Engaging the interest of those families requires greater emphasis on ‘outreach’ strategies and close collaboration with local family and children’s services that enjoy the trust of disadvantaged families. There are public schools whose networks include such non-government agencies (for example, Warrawong in Southern Wollongong).

Step 2

Governments must provide the funding required to preserve community-based preschools and to halt the slide in standards that will inevitably occur in the absence of appropriate funding. It is not a solution to increase fees. That will only have the effect of decreasing the participation of families already burdened by high fees or excluding their children altogether from the benefits of preschool. This latter probability will have the greatest effect on the very children most in need of that opportunity.

If we genuinely care about all of our children the community sector should not need to wait any longer for funding relief. The NSW Children’s Services Forum rightly points out that there is a place for both long day care and preschools. Approximately half of families with children under five do not require a service with extended hours. They take advantage of informal care (occasional care and play groups) when the children are younger progressing to preschool at ages three or four. The problem is that with an average daily fee in our state of over \$30 a day to attend community preschool, parents on low incomes can pay something between \$10 and \$20 or more depending on the capacity of services to offer appropriate fee subsidies. During my

⁴⁰ Vinson, T., (2004) *Community Disadvantage and Resilience*, Richmond, Jesuit Social Services

visits to public schools I found that a contribution of even a few dollars a day was beyond the ability of some parents. Furthermore, my re-analysis of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2002 Child Care Survey revealed just over one in five of the four and five year old children of parents earning less than \$300 per week, and only one in four of parents in the \$300 to \$600 range had been in formal childcare (preschool and long day care) in the past twelve months. This compared with almost one-in-three of those on a higher income.

Extra government funding may not be the whole solution but it is an indispensable starting point. An additional sum of the order of \$90 million per year for community-based preschool recurrent costs, over and beyond existing funding through DOCS, plus a refurbishment allocation to repair years of neglect, would help resolve the present crisis. This approximates to the recently announced policy of the NSW Liberal/National Parties "Assisting Families, Assisting Children" and on this matter the Coalition deserves the congratulations of NSW families. Basing its case on the evidence of a 2006 Productivity Commission Report⁴¹ that NSW has the highest fees for pre-schools and the lowest rate of participation, the Coalition has committed itself to spending \$362 million over four years to boost affordability and access. That includes \$217 million additional to existing funding for operating costs to around 800 community-based preschools that are currently funded through DOCS, \$115 million to enable more four-year-olds to attend preschool at least two days a week, to raise participation to near the level of other states (in excess of 95%), and \$30 million for capital upgrades.

An additional annual \$90 million allocation to NSW community-based preschools added to the present DOCS funding of \$76 million would enable an annual expenditure (\$166 million) that would greatly assist NSW families and their children. It would bring the NSW total expenditure on preschools to 30.2% of the national figure⁴², or fractionally below the 33% share derivable on a *per capita* basis. In other words, it would provide our children with that basic entitlement enjoyed by their counterparts elsewhere in Australia and in many other countries of two days per week of free or low cost quality preschool. To secure that entitlement there are additional things that need to be done and they are taken up in the sections that follow.

Step 3

There are potential major benefits in the Commonwealth's re-engagement in such an important part of early care and education as preschools. Continued exposure to the kinds of raw social and personal needs of many young children, like those I have encountered in our public schools, must surely help to drive home three lessons of national importance:

- 1) the need for support services in areas such as speech, hearing, vision, and behavioural difficulties, so that timely interventions can be made when problems are most open to correction,
- 2) the need for comprehensive standards to be set and monitored,
- 3) the need for the most vulnerable of children and their families to receive systematic help from the earliest stages of the children's lives.

⁴¹ Productivity Commission, (2006) *The Report on Government Services, Vol. 2, Community Services*, Canberra

⁴² Productivity Commission, (2006) Report on Government Services Table 14A. 5

For the Commonwealth to participate effectively in meeting any of these challenges would assume that degree of leverage that comes from being a substantial stakeholder-investor. Provided the states supply adequate funding for basic operational costs, there are four additional partnership contributions that the Commonwealth could make to this field to consolidate the quality of the preschool services extended to our children. I will continue to concentrate here on New South Wales believing that the logic of what is proposed could be extrapolated to other states in the light of their detailed circumstances:

- 1) Ensure that preschools have available to them an adequate supply of university-qualified early education teachers to lead preschool education in the exemplary fashion observed within the public school-attached programs. It is clear that many of the community sector preschools also have very capable graduate coordinators but it is a question of guaranteeing a supply from the universities that results in all of our pre-school children benefiting from such professional leadership. Since the precise level of demand will depend on the scale of funding and expansion of the state-funded system the determination of numbers cannot yet be calculated. However, once that is possible the Commonwealth has an important role to play in ensuring that our teacher education institutions provide the requisite number of early-education teachers;
- 2) It is currently claimed in political debates that there would be considerable added convenience to parents in pre-schools being located on primary school sites. There are equally important educational reasons for co-locating pre-and early formal education programs. They have to do with the enhanced opportunities for program integration much emphasised in earlier sections of this report. In the absence of compelling arguments to the contrary, new community-based preschools as well as state-run ones should be based at existing public school sites and the capital cost of their establishment should be born by the Commonwealth. Again the scale of that investment would depend on the number of new preschools so it is the principle rather than the tangible expenditure that can be stated at this stage;
- 3) While NSW should fulfil its obligation to provide preschool experience to four-year-olds on two days per week it is inequitable that preschool attendees should not attract the Commonwealth's Child Care Benefit available to participants in other childcare and education programs, including long day care. The Commonwealth should correct this anomaly by extending the Child Care Benefit to families whose children attend preschool on days *additional* to the state-provided two days per week.

Step 4

The quality of preschool services can be undermined by inadequate attention to the health needs of children. The present project has not afforded the opportunity to assess in any detail the health services support available to preschools. Sufficient was said about the issue to warrant further appraisal, particularly with respect to basic health screening. The DET and NSW Health should systematically review the situation. However, if there has been one consistent message from the pre-schools and kindergartens visited and observed it has been the difficulty, bordering on impossibility, of obtaining speech therapy services for children in need of such help. While the *assessment* of speech difficulties is sometimes manageable, an eighteen

months wait for therapeutic intervention negates the whole intent of laying down a good foundation for formal schooling. Many principals and teachers believe that the only sure way forward is to locate speech pathologists within clusters of schools so that they can provide necessary direct services to children in need of that help and work in a concentrated way as partners with early childhood educators. This happens in Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania and there are precedents for other specialist staff working across public and community-based schools in NSW. The employment of that approach in the area of speech pathology could encourage closer cooperation of the kinds that I earlier advocated.

According to the relevant professional body, Speech Pathology Australia, the numbers of practitioners have grown steadily to approximately 3,000 nationally and to 900 in NSW (a 19% increase between the 1996 and 2001 censuses).⁴³ Given the importance of remedying speech difficulties to the educational and social development of young children a minimum of 50 speech pathologists should be employed to serve the preschools (equal to a rate of approximately 1:1,000 community-based and public preschoolers).⁴⁴ A special recruitment drive might be necessary but with 200 graduates per year from the four NSW degree courses the recommended quota should be filled. The estimated salary cost of the initiative would be \$5 million per year (including on-costs).

Step 5

The Commonwealth, on the basis of such practical contributions as those outlined, should join with the state, or rather the states, in setting uniform standards for early education and childcare and monitoring their application. As earlier discussed, this is what has happened in other progressive overseas jurisdictions and responsibility for achieving that progress has been vested in education authorities, national and regional. NSW has competent officials working in this field within the Department of Community Services. However, a combination of international precedent, the fundamental educational basis of the endeavour, the resource-absorbing nature of DOCS' child protection responsibilities, and evidence that some of the public schools are already taking a broad communal approach to early care and education, indicate that the Department of Education and Training should take the lead role in this sphere.

Step 6

Since the setting of national standards is a federal task requiring a federal structure, it would be highly appropriate to involve the existing Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in the design of the relevant standard setting and monitoring body. The Council is supported by a number of taskforces and working groups convened for particular tasks and these operate within a structure that can take cognisance of State and Commonwealth concerns. The Council's areas of concern include pre-primary education and its functions include the development of national agreements on shared objectives and interests. It goes without saying that the States' willingness to countenance such a

⁴³ National Rural and Remote Allied health Advisory Service, (2004)
<http://www.sarrah.org.au/Download.asp?Filename=Australian+Allied+Health+Workforce++Introduction.pdf&ID=61>

⁴⁴ While this number of therapists exceeds recommended general child population levels, it is warranted on the grounds of the severity of the problems faced and the strategic importance of remedying speech difficulties at an early, critical stage.

shared responsibility would depend on the reality and scale of Commonwealth contributions to the preschool field.

Unless we are reconciled to a future in which some individuals have disadvantage piled upon disadvantage from the beginning of their lives and an ever-increasing number of human disposal institutions to contain the inevitable consequences, we will insist on a national, high quality, and adequately funded approach to the early education of all of our children. Our generation will not be remembered for the number of goals that we bequeath. It could be remembered for rescuing the souls of our most vulnerable children from the darkness that Victor Hugo lamented. Our sense of justice, our obligations to all of our children demand nothing less. Australia must follow the example of other enlightened countries in making early childhood education and care a national priority.

APPENDIX A

Twenty disadvantaged postcode areas in NSW with a population of approximately 2,000 or more and not served directly by a pre-school attached to a public school. Note: the areas are grouped into two categories and ranked alphabetically within each.

Overall Disadvantage Rank N=587	P'code	Identifying locality	Population	Rank on Early School leaving	Rank on Low work skills	Rank on Unemployment	Rank on Disability/support
1-25	2449	Bowraville	1935	70	164	3	43
1-25	2440	Kempsey	23165	68	125	26	69
1-25	2327	Kurri Kurri	6972	43	22	52	46
1-25	2834	Lightning Ridge	3354	101	28	8	16
1-25	2448	Nambucca Heads	8688	105	280	11	70
1-25	2546	Narooma	8136	192	275	75	71
1-25	2462	Ulmarra	2598	38	61	10	13
1-25	2455	Urunga	2944	47	331	25	31
1-25	2502	Warrawong	13000	6	10	23	33
26-55	2506	Berkley	6656	60	11	46	86
26-55	2404	Bingara	1841	12	128	156	37
26-55	2325	Cessnock	23165	141	62	113	105
26-55	2471	Coraki	2038	67	89	73	190
26-55	2551	Eden	3728	158	46	68	113
26-55	2473	Evans H'd	2615	27	94	34	20
26-55	2443	Laurieton	8093	41	225	29	24
26-55	2346	Manilla	3085	52	297	54	55
26-55	2452	Sawtell	13240	216	113	35	75
26-55	2163	Villawood	13316	104	17	20	109
26-55	2326	Weston	6633	34	23	40	50
RESERVES							
	2474	Kyogle	6614	118	156	42	80
	2537	Moruya	9001	269	316	66	52

The overwhelming majority (16/20) of the areas in question ranked in the most disadvantaged fifth or 20% on the 'early school leaving' variable. Half of them were in the most disadvantaged 10%, three making it to the top 5%. Limited formal education is usually accompanied by limited work skills. That is particularly true for the twelve postcode areas that ranked among the 20% least skilled in the state. Six of them were in the 5% of least skilled postcode populations. Unemployment is frequently a result of limited education and lack of work skills. Almost all (18/20) of the areas identified as priority claimants for preschools attached to public schools were ranked in the 15% of postcodes having the highest rates of unemployment. Nine of the areas were in the top 5%. Finally, sixteen of the 20 areas are among the top 15% of postcodes across the state most in receipt of disability support pensions and sickness allowances. Eleven of the 16 are in the top 10% of such localities.

APPENDIX B

PRESCHOOLS AND/OR KINDERGARTENS VISITED 2005*/2006**

Public Schools

Berkley**	Preschool
Birchgrove**	Preschool
Bowraville**	Community Preschool
Casino*	Preschool
Casino West**	Preschool
Cessnock**	Preschool
Claymore**	Preschool
Dubbo South*	Kindergarten
Hebersham**	Kindergarten
Kingswood Park**	Preschool
Kurri Kurri**	Kindergarten
Lethbridge Park**	Preschool
Lismore South**	Preschool
Manning Gardens (Taree)**	Preschool
Mt Druitt**	Preschool
St Johns Park**	Preschool
Ulmarra**	Kindergarten
Villawood East**	Preschool
Warrawong**	Kindergarten
Windale*	Preschool