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Literature Review
What can we learn from the Childcare and Early Education Literature?

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Samantha McMahon is a final year Social Work student who has completed her studies at Deakin University and had the unusual final fieldwork experience of being in the office of the Federal Member for Bendigo, Lisa Chesters MP, where she was able to observe political processes at work, visit Canberra and conduct a research study to inform the Australian Labor Party's interest in early childhood care and education. Lisa Chesters MP is the co-chair of the Parliamentary Friendship of Early Childhood and the secretary of the ALP Social Policy Caucus committee. The following is a review of the literature based on the research Samantha conducted. This demonstrates that we have quite a long way to go in Australia if we are to gain the benefits other countries have had from their early childhood service system.

■ **Keywords:** Childcare, Early Childhood, Education, Social Policy

Introduction

As scientific research develops, so too does our understanding of the importance of a child's earliest years on brain development (Li, Farkas, Duncan, Burchinal, & Lowe Vandell, 2013; McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007). With much research in neurobiology now focusing on early brain development (McCain et al., 2007), there is much discussion on how to achieve the best outcomes for children. This has also generated debates about childcare programmes and the benefits, or shortcomings, of sending children to childcare and early learning centres. There is now considerable research indicating that childcare centres and kindergartens, with the appropriate staffing and programmes, can indeed have significant positive impacts for children and families (Brennan & Adamson, 2014; Li et al., 2013). However, it is also important to consider that, should the structure of programmes not be of a certain quality, this can actually have negative impacts on a child's development (Pascal, 2009). When performed with attention to quality, the benefits of childcare and early education are quite evident from a social and an economic perspective. Internationally, these benefits are well known and many countries are now beginning to invest more of their budgets in the implementation of high-quality programmes, resulting in positive outcomes for children, which, in turn, have positive outcomes for communities (Li et al., 2013; Lowe Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg, & Vandergrift, 2012). It is perhaps important, too, for policy makers to consider the positive impact that childcare can have on the economy; with increased workforce participation for women and reduced future welfare spending that has been linked to high-quality, accessible childcare (Pascal, 2009). These benefits are something that has been recognised in Australia in recent times, with some government action reflecting this. There have been numerous consultations and subsequent policy changes, as Australia attempts to improve childcare and early learning prospects. However, at this time, as one of the strongest economies in the world, Australia ranks relatively poorly for quality childcare, in comparison with many of the other developed nations of the world (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2012). Currently, a Productivity Commission Report into childcare and early childhood learning is being produced, which marks an opportune time for Australia to make changes to the system to further improve access to quality care and become a world leader in this domain.

Discussion

For a long time now there has been an understanding that the early years can have a significant impact on shaping the people who we become. In recent times, there has been an increased emphasis on just how important the early years

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are, particularly for brain development and setting the foundation for future outcomes (Li et al., 2013; McCain et al., 2007). Research now informs us that it is during these early years that the brain is developing rapidly, with pathways being formed that will determine future behaviours (McCain et al., 2007; Pascal, 2009). Therefore, the environment to which children are exposed, from infancy to the primary school years, and even prior to birth, can be vital in determining the trajectory of their future. Research results indicate that there are numerous benefits for children who engage in quality early childcare and education programmes (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; McCain et al., 2007). These include early recognition of developmental delays, improved cognitive functioning at the time of starting school, improved educational attainment, reduction in poverty, social inclusion, reduction in crime rates and improved health outcomes (Brennan & Adamson, 2014; McCuaig, Bertrand, & Shanker, 2012). This is also a key time in attachment outcomes for children. Interactions with primary and secondary carers are of particular importance, together with interactions with the environment around them (Li et al., 2013).

While there are many potential benefits of early childcare and learning, as previously mentioned, there is one key factor that must be present and that is quality (Li et al., 2013; McCuaig et al. 2012; Pascal, 2009; Pelletier, 2014). There are various ideas about what constitutes quality childcare; however, themes that remain constant are that it entails qualified staff, low child to staff ratios, responsive interaction from staff and a positive environment (Helburn & Howes, 1996; McCuaig et al., 2012; Pascal, 2009; Pelletier, 2014). Consistency of staff is another factor that impacts on quality. As stated earlier, this time of early childhood and healthy development, particularly of the brain, is affected by attachment and nurturing experiences (McCain et al., 2007; Pascal, 2009). The previously mentioned benefits would not be achievable without these quality measures in place, and, in fact, should the level of care be poor, then childcare can actually have a negative impact on the development of children and can contribute to behavioural issues (Brennan & Adamson, 2014). Examples of this include apathy, poor education skills and heightened aggression (Helburn & Howes, 1996). Poor care is identified largely by the absence of what has been discussed previously; for example, untrained or unqualified staff, poor staff to child ratios, unresponsive interactions between staff and children, an unstimulating environment and a high turnover of staff (Helburn & Howes, 1996). The current high turnover of staff is largely due to pay conditions, with low pay rates (Brennan & Adamson, 2104), this being a concern when considering that some of these staff hold diplomas and university degrees. Therefore, in order to reduce the risk of high staff turnover and the negative impact this may have, due consideration needs to be given to reviewing the wages of childcare workers.

There are many social and economic benefits to be derived from quality childcare, which have been recorded around the world, with one of the most consistent being reduced rates of poverty (Campbell et al., 2002). In many of the countries where low-cost, accessible childcare systems are operated, there is an equal chance offered to all children for the best possible start to life, regardless of family income. Some programmes have been a part of studies specifically targeting disadvantaged families, in particular the Chicago Child–Parent Centers, the Perry Preschool and the Abecedarian Project (Campbell et al., 2002), all of which showed significant returns on investment (Schweinhart et al., 2005). The Chicago Child–Parent Centers returned US$17 for every dollar invested, which was largely due to reduced crime rates; improved educational attainment, leading to higher incomes and also greater revenue for the government; plus a reduction in mental health issues, which provided savings in the health system (Doyle, Harmon, Heckman, & Tremblay, 2009). This was also the case for the Perry Preschool study, which showed that lifetime arrests for participants versus non-participants were 36% compared to 55% at age 40 (Schweinhart et al., 2005). High school graduation rates also varied significantly, from 77% for participants compared to 60% of the non-participant group, as did the employment rates at 76% versus 62% (Schweinhart et al., 2005).

In Canada, there has also been research showing that where quality and accessible childcare has been available, there has been a return on investment, with conservative estimates being put at C$1.70 return for every dollar invested (Brennan & Adamson, 2014; Pascal, 2009). This comes from the initial C$5 per day, and now C$7 per day, childcare investment that has been implemented in Quebec (Kohen, Dahinten, Khan, & Hertzman, 2008); with follow-up studies showing that the increased workforce participation from women, and subsequent taxation, results in programmes largely paying for themselves (McCuaig et al., 2012). These studies also showed a reduction in single-mother poverty rates, from 36% to 22% (Fortin, Godbout, & St Cerny, 2012), a positive social outcome. The Fortin et al. (2012) analysis also showed that the increase in female workforce participation increased Quebec's GDP by C$5.1 billion in 2008.

While Canada is certainly leading the way in childcare and early education reform, the Nordic countries of Europe, in particular, have recognised the importance of early childhood and have reflected this in their policies for a long time (Watson, 2012). They have done this by offering free, universal access to early education programmes for children from the age of three and, in some cases, even younger than this (Watson, 2012). This reflects an understanding in these countries of how vital these earliest years are in terms of development.

Australia has begun to make changes to its childcare and early learning policy, guided by experts, in particular some of those involved in the development of the successful Canadian programme. In 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) developed a national partnership,

out of which the Commonwealth, state and territory governments agreed to work together to improve childcare and early education in Australia (COAG, 2009). From this, Australia now has a National Quality Framework, which aims to put a framework in place at the national level, to demand the provision of quality services. These services are to be assessed and graded according to their compliance to certain guidelines set out in the National Quality Framework. This was implemented in 2012 and included the elements related to qualified staff, ratios, curriculum, etc., discussed earlier, as vital to meeting standards for assessment.

While this framework has only been in place for 2 years, there has already been both positive and negative feedback. There is currently a review of the framework, with the outcome of this to be released in late 2014 or early 2015. Some of the positive feedback suggests that a quality framework is useful for ensuring that ratios are improved and correspond to what is required according to the age of the children, and also that the expectation of more trained and qualified staff is met (Early Childhood Australia, 2014). Some of the criticisms, however, include that the services have to deal with more red tape, and that there is a lack of efficiency in the time it is taking for assessments to be completed (Early Childhood Australia, 2014). The development of the national partnership agreement and the subsequent development of the National Quality Framework are certainly steps in the right direction; however, Australia still has a way to go in order to reach the standard of European and fellow OECD countries. It was ranked 34th out of 38 OECD and partner countries regarding its early childhood education and childcare (OECD, 2012), and statistics show that 23% of children in Australia are developmentally vulnerable when they start school (Brennan & Adamson, 2014).

Along with this National Quality Framework as an instrument for providing quality childcare, there is also the issue of accessibility, which is of high importance (Pascal, 2009). As discussed earlier, Quebec in Canada offers childcare and early learning services for C$7 per day (Kohen et al., 2008) while, in Australia, the government has a payment scheme with two primary payments on offer for families – the Child Care Benefit (CCB) and the Child Care Rebate (CCR) (Brennan & Adamson, 2014). The CCB is generally targeted at lower-income families. It is paid out at an hourly rate to childcare services on behalf of the family and is a means-tested payment (Department of Human Services, 2014a). The CCR, on the other hand, is paid out to all families and covers up to 50% of all childcare costs with a cap of A$7500 per annum per child (Department of Human Services, 2014b). There are different ways that these payments are accessed by families, with options of either a direct payment to services, or through a rebate at the end of the financial year (Brennan & Anderson, 2014). Reports also suggest that while the CCB is designed to improve access for disadvantaged families, there is a capped hourly amount available which does not take account of the differing costs of various services (Brennan & Adamson, 2014). The CCR, on the other hand, is determined by the overall cost of the services being used, and does not have a limitation on the cost that is being reimbursed up until the cap of A$7500 (Department of Human Services (2014b).

There are many suggestions that the CCR actually benefits middle-class and wealthy families more than it does disadvantaged families, and the statistics on access of these payments reflects this (Brennan & Adamson, 2014). In addition, the Jobs, Education and Training Child Care Fee Assistance is a conditional extra payment that is available to support people who need to put their children in childcare in order to find jobs, or further their education and training (Department of Human Services, 2014c). This system is reported by many to be quite complex and confusing, especially for families who rely on subsidies to put their children in childcare. The Productivity Commission (2014), in its draft recommendations, suggests a single means-tested payment – a suggestion that certainly has merit and would benefit the families of Australia.

Another level of payment assistance offered by the Australian government is paid parental leave, and, in terms of development, the infancy period that the paid parental leave scheme covers is certainly a vital time for bonding and attachment between the parent and child (McCain et al., 2007). With this in mind, the funding allocated to this scheme is certainly warranted, as are proposed changes to increase the time period for paid leave from 3 months to 6 months. However, with these proposed changes coming from the current government, also comes a proposal of paying mothers their full wages of up to A$100,000, whereas this currently stands at the minimum wage. This money could be better invested in the childcare sector, with international experience suggesting that government support for childcare has double the impact of spending on parental leave (Daley, McGannon, & Ginnivan, 2012).

In Australia, when discussing disadvantaged families, it is also important to consider the Indigenous community as well as those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, because almost twice as many Indigenous children (42%), and 32% of those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, are considered vulnerable (Brennan & Adamson, 2014). With this in mind, one could argue that access for these communities to quality childcare is vital in reducing the number of vulnerable children entering the school system. When considering the international evidence on the role that access to quality childcare can play in reducing poverty rates, these two groups should be primary candidates for high-quality, low-cost childcare.

Another important consideration, particularly for Indigenous communities, is that they often reside in remote locations and therefore their access to services may be limited (Biddle, 2007). The government currently runs budget-based, funded programmes, many of which are directed at Indigenous communities, with 80% being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI)-focused services, and these are generally of very low cost, or free, for families. However, these services are not regulated by the National Quality Framework (Brennan & Adamson, 2014; Early Childhood

Australia, 2014). So while there may be merit in providing heavily subsidised childcare to these communities, there also needs to be some level of quality that is being adhered to in order to get the maximum benefits for the children attending these services. This should also be achieved in a culturally competent way, which includes community input where viable.

The international literature is united in the view that infancy to school age is a vital time in the development of children and, therefore, the interactions and environments children are exposed to during this time are key in predicting future outcomes. A consistent indicator of improved outcomes for children, from numerous studies around the world, is exposure to quality childcare. The improvements become even more marked for children who come from disadvantaged families, therefore much of the literature also suggests that government policy should provide affordable childcare. The evidence has reflected, time and time again, that quality care, involving trained, qualified and consistent staff, low staff to child ratios, responsive interaction from staff and a positive environment, is what produces the best outcomes for children. The conclusion from all of this evidence is simple: an investment in early childhood education and childcare is an investment in greater economic and social outcomes and an investment in a better future for all children.

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