

Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Australia: An Insight into Parent Perceptions Posted Online

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Abstract

Recently in Australia there has been a shift towards the increased use of formal early childhood education and care services. Federal, state and territory policy makers have responded with reform agendas designed to improve the quality of early childhood education and care. There are few studies that provide insights into community perceptions of current initiatives in early childhood education policy and their perceived effectiveness with families. This study begins to address this void by examining the perceptions of the community - identified as parents through textual inclusions - with regard to early childhood education and care policies. Data were 199 posts to an online forum in response to an opinion piece about early childhood education. The following key themes were identified in the forum posts: the importance of child care; brain research and early childhood; and, challenges balancing career and family. Findings provide an insight into current issues relevant to early childhood policies in Australia, from the perspective of a self-selected group of community members, in response to an issue related to care and early childhood.

Keywords : early childhood policy, perceptions, child care, family

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Introduction

In June 2011, 1.9 million (52%) of Australian children aged under 12 years of age usually attended one or more types of child care (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2012). This high level of use has created a significant area of focus for the Australian government in relation to access, cost and quality of early childhood education and care, and as more mothers return to the workforce, greater provision for early childhood services has arisen.

The importance the early years play in establishing the platform for children's learning and achievement outcomes long term has been acknowledged at national and international levels (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Recent Organisation for Economics Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports outline the commitment of 20 OECD countries, including Australia, to develop early childhood policy and assessment of quality in early childhood services (OECD, 2006).

Policy makers increasingly employ economic tools to highlight the value of educational investments in the early years that yield the highest return for each dollar invested (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003). Heckman, for instance, notes that those who:

... participate in enriched early childhood programs are more likely to complete school and much less likely to require welfare benefits, become teen parents, or participate in criminal activities (2000, p.5).

For the purposes of Heckman's commentary, this includes child care centres and other care services such as family day care, and programs whose primary purpose is early childhood education such as kindergartens and nursery schools. These programs are all intended to enhance child development and wellbeing and to support parents in a variety of ways, in and out of the paid workforce.

Over the past decade and a half, a rapid growth in early childhood education and care provisions has occurred in Australia, with a significant level of Commonwealth Government commitment evident since 2007 (DEEWR, 2009a) to improve quality and provision. Following are some key elements of the Australian reforms that are shaping the current and future of early childhood education in Australia. It is within this context that the current study

is framed as it is important to ensure that the services meet the needs of users, and that high quality of care is being achieved.

National Early Childhood Investment Strategy-Investing in the Early Years

A key initiative was the endorsement of the National Early Childhood Investment Strategy Investing in the Early Years in 2009 by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). The strategy is a collaborative effort between the Commonwealth and the state and territory governments to ensure that by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation (Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations (DEEWR), 2009a). The Strategy proposed six priority areas for reform to be further developed for COAG in 2010, recognising the different starting points of states and territories and as resources allow:

- strengthen universal maternal, child and family health services
- support for vulnerable children
- engaging parents and the community in understanding the importance of early childhood development
- improve early childhood infrastructure
- strengthen the workforce across early childhood and care and family support services, and
- build better information and a solid evidence base.

National Quality Framework

The COAG also agreed to a National Quality Framework (2009a). It put in place a National Quality Standard from 2012 to ensure high quality is consistent across all states and territories. The National Quality Standard aims to improve quality through:

- improved staff to child ratios to ensure each child gets more individual care and attention
- new staff qualification requirements to ensure staff have the skills to help children learn and develop
- a new quality rating system to ensure Australian families have access to transparent information relating to the quality of early childhood education and care services

- the establishment of a new National Body to ensure early childhood education and care is of a high quality (DEEWR, 2011).

A new rating system is being implemented as part of the National Quality Standard. Each early years service will be assessed on their performance across seven quality areas.

An important area of the early years reform has been raising the standards of qualifications of early childhood professionals. This was formalized in the National Quality Framework (2009a). The requirements are explicit, and require by 2014 that:

- half of all staff at every long day care centre or preschool must have (or be working towards) a diploma level early childhood qualification. The remaining staff will all be required to have (or be working towards) a Certificate III level early childhood education and care qualification.
- an early childhood teacher will be required in long day-care and preschool services for 25 children or more. Additional early childhood teachers will be required for larger services by 2020.
- family day care coordinators will need to have a diploma level early childhood education and care qualification and family day carers must have (or be working towards) a Certificate III.

A crucial component of the changes in the early years reform are the improved staff-to-child ratios, which are consistent nationally for the first time. Research has shown that improving staff-to-child ratios improves the quality of interactions with the child, improving the understanding of the child's learning and development.

Early Years Learning Framework

The Early Years Learning Framework (the Framework) (DEEWR, 2009b) is part of the COAG reform agenda for early childhood education and care and is a key component of the Australian Government's National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care. It underpins universal access to early childhood education and will be incorporated in the National Quality Standard. Universal access means all children.

The Framework describes the principles, practices and outcomes essential to support and

enhance young children's learning from birth to five years of age. It has a strong emphasis on play-based learning as the best vehicle for children's learning and development. The Framework also recognizes the importance of communication and language and social and emotional development.

Universal access ensures every child in Australia has access to a quality early childhood education program. The program is to be delivered by a four-year university-trained early childhood teacher, for 15 hours a week, 40 weeks a year, in the year before formal schooling (often referred to as 'preschool' or 'kindergarten'). The commitment is to be fully implemented by mid 2013m. Each state and territory has different arrangements for regulating, funding and delivering early childhood education services.

It is within this rapidly changing policy environment that this research was conducted. While formal policy is being established and enacted at state and national levels, of interest in this study are the perceptions of members of the community, and specifically parents, with respect to early childhood education policy in Australia.

Focus of this Study

There is little formal research that has explored community perceptions of the recent changes documented in this paper. While the little previous research has focussed on parental perceptions through formal instruments such as a survey, the current study, through the analysis of comments to an online article, has an advantage in that it is able to gauge community perceptions to the issue. This study makes a contribution to the research void by exploring perceptions of the community in response to an opinion piece on early childhood policy in Australia which highlighted some of the policy shifts and made connections with neuroscience initiatives and whether this has been integrated in to the policy environment in Australia. This is important to ensure that the services meet the needs of users, and that high quality of care is being achieved.

Method

In 2012, the article 'Early childhood education: It really is brain science' (Alberici, 2012)

appeared on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) website. The article was an opinion piece pointing to the limited impact of brain research findings on early childhood education policy in Australia. It is common for articles on the ABC website to allow readers to post their comments in response to the article, and to comments from others. This particular forum recorded 199 contributor posts from anonymous, self-selected readers from May 14, 2012 when the forum was first established until July 11, 2012, when the posts were downloaded for this study. Contributors were a self-selecting, convenience sample. As the posts were anonymous within the discussion forum beyond a selected username which was typically a pseudonym of their own making, the identity of individuals submitting posts is unknown. Since the group were self-selecting it is difficult to generalize beyond the sample presented. It became clear, however, that the majority of contributors had children attending early childhood services as their comments revealed this information. It is these contributions that were of interest in this study.

In the main, most contributors wrote three to four sentences. All posts were downloaded and screened for use in this study. All comments were considered suitable for inclusion as they were either explicitly or implicitly presented by 'parents'. Next, Leximancer was used to detect major themes that emerged in a form of content analysis. This process allowed newly identified themes to be compared with previously identified themes to ensure that the new theme added more understanding about the phenomenon under investigation.

Findings

The 199 comments in response to the article above were subjected to Leximancer analysis. Leximancer automates the process of meaning discovery (by identifying themes and concepts) in text using linguistic algorithms and Bayesian analysis. Exploratory analysis revealed a stable concept map after three iterations of randomisation and relearning. Once concepts are identified their relatedness to other concepts within the text, defined as how many times they co-occur with other concepts, is calculated and is presented visually in a concept map. This moves the analysis beyond a simple word count used by other automated systems. Concepts are clustered into themes and these are represented visually in the concept map. Concepts are

that co-occur more frequently are spatially closer in the concept map and lines connect concepts where a strong relationship is likely to exist (see Figure 1 below). Pathway analyses of concepts within a theme were then conducted to determine a better label for each theme and this process is described below.

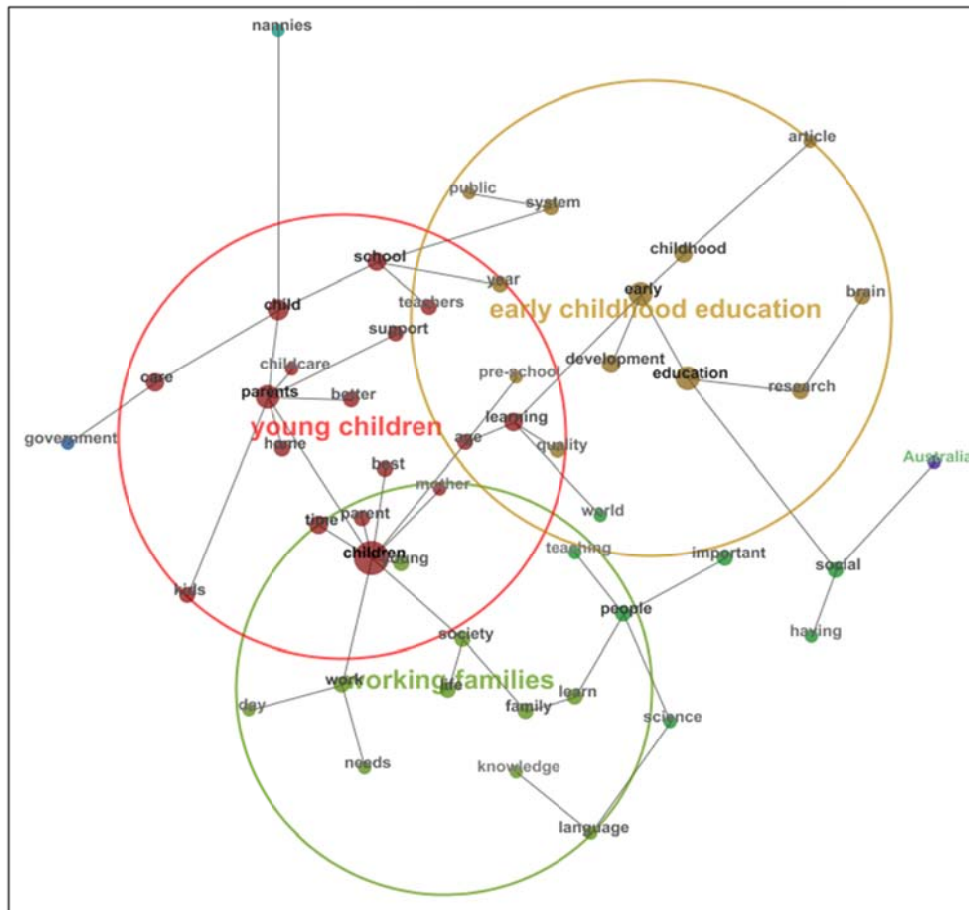


Figure 1. Concept Map with Concepts that Co-occur More Frequently

The concepts are then grouped into themes of likely related concepts. The process of theme creation is more subjective in that the user is able to manipulate more directly the size of the themes as is appropriate to the data. In this case, a total of seven themes were chosen with the three themes (i.e., nannies, government and Australia) being disregarded as their connectivity

was 2 percent each meaning the likelihood of those themes being significant in the text is very low. The three themes with the highest connectivities, 100 percent, 59 percent and 26 percent, were retained for further analysis. By default, Leximancer assigns the theme name as the most salient concept within that group. This is sometimes problematic as these automatically determined labels carry very little meaning and as such are often relabelled after an examination of the relationship of the concepts and the overall message of the text from which the concepts were extracted. As a result, the initial labels of children, early, people and work were relabelled as young children, early childhood education and working families, respectively. As a case in point, a pathway analysis for the concepts of young and children revealed the path young-best-parent-home-care-child-parents-children (.97). The relationship between the concepts will be discussed later.

Table 1. *Theme and Their related Concepts*

Theme	Connectivity (%)	Concepts
Young children	100	children, parents, child, school, time, learning, care, home, support, parent, age, better, teachers, mother, childcare
Early childhood education	59	early, education, childhood, development, quality, research, system, year, brain, pre-school, public, article
Working families	26	work, young, best, society, family, kids, needs, day

Concept maps are also heat mapped – red being the most salient (i.e., with the highest connectivity) concept through the colour spectrum to purple. Table I above shows the themes in decreasing order of saliency. There are two things of interest to note during this analysis of themes. Firstly, the saliency of ‘young children’ is not surprising given the topic of the article was the impact of applying brain-based research to early childhood education. This relationship is shown clearly in the proximity of the themes of young children and early childhood education. Secondly, it is interesting to note is the appearance of the theme ‘working families’ as issue of family access to childcare facilities is intrinsically linked to employment situation and socio-economic status of the parents. Each theme will now be discussed below with parents’ comments given as evidence of the theme.

Young Children

The theme of ‘young children’ (originally children) was deemed as the most salient theme discussed in the comments. It is nestled between the themes of early childhood education and working families which are the other two main themes under discussion in the comments. Indeed, the term ‘children’ was mentioned in all 199 comments. Given the spatial relationship of the concepts of young and children in the concept map it would be expected that the two concepts are directly linked but a pathway analysis reveals the pathway of young-best-parent-home-care-child-parents-children (.97) (see Figure 2 below) and ‘young children’ only being mentioned a total of 20 times (5%).

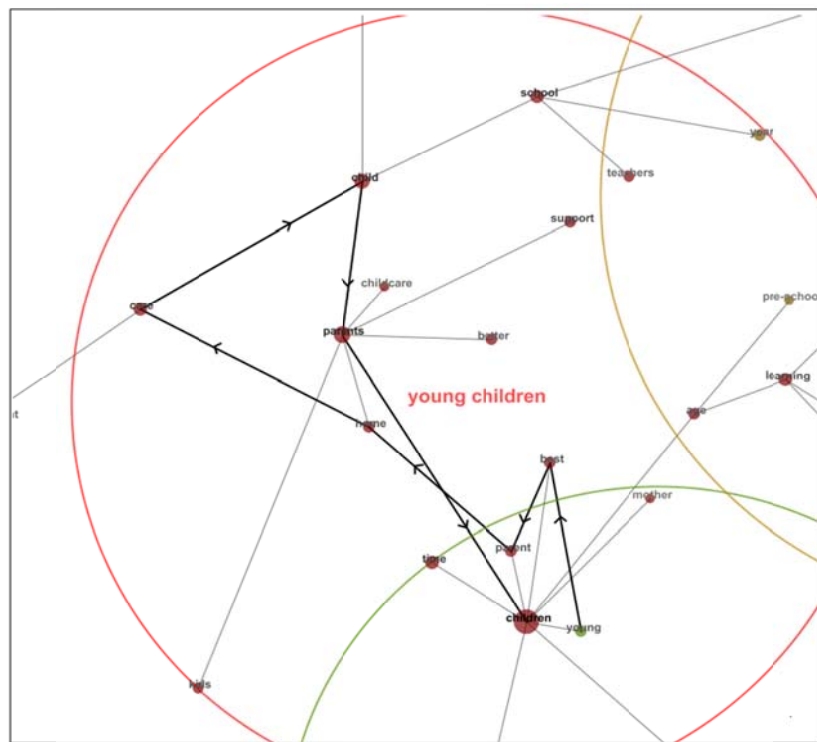


Figure 2. The Concept of Young Children

Examination of the relationship reveals the overwhelming concern expressed by contributors as being ‘what’s best for young children’ in terms of their social, emotional and cognitive development. Many of the comments pointed to their favoured option of parents as

care givers in a home setting. These comments covered a range of ideas, the first of which was the view that parents provide are the first teacher for their child. This is evidenced by comments such as:

... we must also acknowledge that parents are a child's first teacher - and maybe the best teacher a child can have (Comment 193);

and

Yes a mother is a child's first toy and parents are a child's first teachers. A small circle of loving carers in a safe environment is the optimum for early childhood. Not a passing parade of care providers in a facility. Brain development and patterning is laid down during this time and there is greater value in a strong well-grounded connection with a child's parents. I really think that to work with parents rather than investing in educators would produce better outcomes for children (not economic forecasters) (Comment 194);

Other contributors framed their advocacy for parents as carers around the financial responsibility of parents and the need for such pressures to be considered prior to having children, for example:

[T]he pressures of too much on the credit card is detrimental to children. Don't have children if you can't give them the best environment for at least 3.5 years. Their own parent, their own home, their own neighbourhood friends (Comment 160).

Other comments highlighted the potential complementarity of good parenting and child care, such as:

[G]ood early childhood education should support and complement parenting that is what it should be about, complementing parenting, not replacing or devaluing parenting (Comment 22).

Also in this theme were comments that argued for supporting parents to be carers through incentives, as revealed in the following comment:

[T]he best thing we can do for our kids is to improve incentive for parents to have one on one time with their kids. That is stay at home at look after your child not dump them at day-cares where the people staffing them have no personal interest in your child (Comment 164).

Also within this broad theme were comments which revealed a recognition that not all parents provide the best environment for their child. For example:

[O]bviously this is not the case for children from an abusive home. And there are many families where it is difficult for a parent to be at home due to financial and / or professional reasons (Comment 142);

and

Should we penalise children whose parents fail in their duty? (Comment 43);

Many comments argued the societal value of an early childhood education as a means of addressing social inequalities. These comments highlighted the view that the role of the state is to provide support to young children and families, as evident in the comment:

[W]e have to deal with reality as it is, and that means the state has a role in making sure all children are provided with the appropriate adult engagement for their developmental stages (Comment 117).

Brain Research

The next largest theme revealed in the analysis centred on early childhood education (relabelled from early) and brain research, with a connectivity of 55%. Given this was the main thrust of the stimulus article and headline, it might have been expected that the comments posted to the forum would be more focused around this theme. However, as the data reveals, the focus on the general relationship between care, parents and the young child was commented on more frequently by contributors. Much of the discussion in this second theme centred on arguments for and against the application of neuroscience to early childhood. By way of example, a comment that favoured quality early learning includes the following:

...there have been many longitudinal studies comparing the life and learning outcomes between children who received quality early learning from age 3 and those from the same socio-economic backgrounds who didn't. A US study which tracked disadvantaged children given access to pre-school from the age of three, found that by the time they were 40 they were more likely to have graduated from high school, have jobs and earn higher than average incomes, own their own home, and be less likely to be involved with crime. There have been more recent and larger studies in the UK and New Zealand which also show that children who receive early learning achieve better at school as well as socially (Comment 156).

On the other hand, challenge to the validity of neuroscience was also evident in the comments posted, such as evidenced in the following comment:

[I] have so many problems with this article that I don't know where to begin. However, let me say this – in the flurry of 'brain research is the answer articles' it is important to note that most brain research has not been done on children (because in fact it would be unethical to do so) but on rats, cats, monkeys and chickens. The often quoted notion of 'critical periods' is gleaned from a study done on healthy kittens. Scientists took those perfectly healthy, just born kittens and sewed their eyelids shut. When they unstitched their eyes a few months later, they found that although the architecture of the eye was fine, the kitten could not see. They then translated these findings to the child and concluded that unless certain things happened in early life, the child would never develop properly. But here's the rub – did we need to sew up a defenceless cat's eyes to find out something that most of us already knew? (Comment 22).

Further criticism of neuroscience was evident in comments which argued this was another way of creating uniformity, such as articulated in the following comment:

Brain research is yet another attempt to universalize our lives - to make everyone the same and to make them 'fit' a pre-determined service. Worse than that, it cements educators into practices that the research tells us contributes to inequality and disadvantage (Comment 21).

Working Families

Working families was the third most salient theme with a connectivity of 26%. Comments in this theme were centred on the economic pressures families face in the modern world

increasing the pressure for two incomes as well as the logistical issues of parents who work full time and the difficulty of finding childcare places. The challenges of finding a balance were highlighted in many comments, such as the following:

[A]s a parent I too find it difficult to balance the need to be in the workforce and be a great parent. However I do not want the children of my children pulled off the tit at the end of maternity leave and placed into an “Early Learning Facility” (Comment 192);

and

I was and still am under constant pressure to return to the workforce, as a degree qualified person. Apparently, society believes that I am wasting my time by being there for my children, by pursuing further studies and not earning a wage (Comment 159).

Several of the contributors commented on their experiences as workers employed outside of the traditional 9-5 work day and the limited access to child care that is available, for example:

[M]any hard working people of this nation work outside the traditional 9 to 5 and therefore cannot make use of child care centres. This includes people like medical professionals and law enforcement officers to name only a few. You seem intent on playing the class-warfare card by calling in home child care “nannies” and fail to recognise that many average Australians, in vital occupations, would benefit from in-home care (Comment 11).

Discussion

The current study continues the exploration of parental perceptions of the provision of early childhood education in Australia explored by Garvis, Pendergast and Kanasa (2012) in response to a newspaper article entitled ‘Queensland bottom of class for kindergarten attendance’ (Chilcott, MacDonald, & Dorfield, 2011). They found parents perceived the prohibitive cost, inconvenient operating times for some working families, that kindergarten is

unnecessary and limited places as barriers to access. It is interesting to note that within the theme of 'Working Families' the issues of cost and inconvenient operating times were identified in Garvis et al., (2012) as the main concerns for parents in accessing early childhood education. This finding has particular ramifications for policy makers in the provision of early childhood education in Australia.

The first theme centred on understanding the role of early childhood education and parenting with young children. Opinions in this category appeared polarised. Some contributors commented that the role of teaching and caring for a young child should be the number one priority. Early childhood education appeared to complement parenting but not act as a replacement. Comments were also made about parents not being reliant on the government for welfare for child care. Some contributors suggested modern families could cut back on their credit expenses to provide more time for child rearing.

On the other hand, some contributors suggested early childhood education could be good for children, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds. Some acknowledged that for personal and financial reasons, not all parents could stay home. These contributors also acknowledged that children should not be penalised based on circumstances of the parents. Early childhood education was therefore viewed as potentially providing equal opportunity to allow all children, regardless of background, to have a healthy start in life. Contributors in this group also stressed that it was the government's responsibility to provide a healthy start for all young children in Australia, regardless of background. Some contributors suggested that qualified staff were highly qualified to work with children's development, especially at risk children.

The second theme focused on brain research in early childhood education and how it has impacted on policy. Brain research was mentioned in the article as useful for informing early childhood policy. Some contributors challenged the validity of brain research as studies had been conducted on animals. Other comments revealed concerns that brain research in early childhood created a 'one size fits all' model for education that may not work for all children. On the other hand, some comments referred to other research findings that supported brain research. Comments included studies on the long-term societal benefits of taking part in a quality early childhood program, school readiness and learning potential.

The third theme to emerge was the perceived imbalance between working life and family

life for working families. A number of contributors commented on the challenge of sourcing child care outside of traditional work hours of 9am to 5pm. Comments referred to those who worked as medical professionals and law enforcers as being vulnerable. These contributors stressed the importance of in-home care to include nannies as there were currently no other options for child care. These participants also stressed that nannies are beyond the status of class, with parents in vital professions (e.g., police, nurses) being middle or low income earners. Currently there are limited child care opportunities beyond hiring a private nanny. The parents hiring the nanny for outside of business hours would not receive subsidies or rebates from the government. This could create a level of bias as parents who work traditional business hours (9am-5pm) having access to a range of early childhood services and receiving government subsidies and rebates.

A small number of contributors to the forum who identified themselves as mothers also spoke of the pressure they experienced from society that since they held university qualifications, they needed to return to the workforce after their child was born and that they were not valued as contributing to society by staying home and raising the child. It is interesting to note that many mothers spoke of the pressure of trying to balance employment and raise a child. The participants suggested there was always pressure to succeed at both, however with limited support mechanisms; it was difficult to balance both roles.

There are limitations within this study. The first is that the respondents who posted comments online may have been more actively involved or advocate for the issues of early childhood education. Another limitation is that this is a self-selecting sample so generalisations are limited beyond the comments posted. The study does however provide a snapshot of perceptions within the community and this is important to ensure that the services meet the needs of users, and that high quality of care is being achieved.

Conclusion

This study analysed comments posted to an online forum in response to a stimulus article highlighting early years policy and brain research. While it could be expected that comments posted in response would reflect this content and focus of the article, respondents used the

opportunity to open up about a range of factors currently impacting them with respect to early childhood policy in Australia, well beyond the narrow focus of the article. This could be considered a strength of the continued analysis of online comments to articles as a method for gauging community perceptions around a topic particularly when a survey designed to measure the same phenomenon might target a too narrow segment of the population (e.g., just parents) or focus too few issues (e.g., perceptions of the application of brain research to early childhood education). The free response nature of the online comments meant that issues that truly mattered to the individual could surface and be identified.

The comments posted to the forum reveal insights into the diversity of views that exist regarding the value and role of early childhood care and education, and the challenges facing parents as they strive to achieve a balance and to meet societal expectations. The comments also reveal divergent views with respect to the potential contribution of neuroscience for learning. The implications therefore for Australian policy makers is the community regard early childhood education provision as important and that what remains the core issue is what is best for the child, regardless of the philosophical underpinnings of the practices to be adopted, and that adequate access to all families is also important.

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