

**SOCIAL JUSTICE MINI-CONFERENCE**  
**5<sup>TH</sup> OF MAY 2014**  
**NEWCASTLE**

Co-organised by The University of Newcastle, Hunter Early Childhood Australia  
Group and Social Justice in Early Childhood Group

**SUMMARY NOTES\***

*\*Conference summary notes prepared by Zsuzsa Millei and accepted by  
presenters except Clayton Barr MP*

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**1. Zsuzsa Millei**

*Political activism in early childhood and social justice – setting the scene*

EYLF and current policies tie children's future to the nation, we are the miracle workers who raise the next generation for a productive economy and budget surplus. A hard job for 'nice ladies', do you feel the weight!

At the same time ECEC is becoming more and more a private matter and is commodified (becoming goods for sale) in at least 4 ways:

1. It is often heard from the different politicians and the lay taxpayer that ECEC is a private matter because it is the family's responsibility to raise children, thus it is the private matter of the family. In other words, how families look after their children and how they pay for it is their business and it should be that way. This lends itself to arguments against the public funding of ECEC.
2. ECEC is privatised again with the aggressive expansion of G8 education [www.g8education.edu.au](http://www.g8education.edu.au) . It is a for-profit large provider with shares on the stock market – ABC style.
3. In order to provide efficiency and to run businesses properly – as with other companies, such as Australia Post, Telstra, there are arguments to privatize ECEC. The transfer of ownership will ensure the most cost effective running of the centre and therefore affordable service to families, since processes need to be accountable for the owner.
4. Care and education is thought about as an investment for future economic security in which children are considered as human capital. Children this way become economic resources.

*Consequently, instead of being a public good to bring about a more just, equal, democratic and happy society, Australian policy making focus on narrow economic benefits.*

*What can we do and how we advocate for change???*

We do lots of moral reasoning, and argue that education can't be left for the market; children are not commodities; quality cannot be measured on economic grounds; how can "children [be] current burdens and future investments?"; "individual's life chances are important" (see Vox pop article in Autumn 2014 issue of *Rattler*).

But what weight do all these moral arguments have against austerity measures? The issue of ECEC is seen on economic terms and therefore economic issues justify economic solutions? One of the most obvious solutions is the transfer of the ownership –the ownership of ECEC itself. So the ownership of ECEC is either pushed down to become state or council responsibility, or the issue is pushed to the private – to stay with the families (so they themselves hire nice lady miracle makers J) or to the for-profit sector of ECEC.

I think we should constitute a different - perhaps more powerful activist arguments - by advocating for more participation in decision making over what affects us. In other word, to demand more participation in those circles where decisions are made. It is not enough to write submissions, it is not enough to sign petitions, **we need to demand more democratic and participatory decision making structures about issues considering ECEC.** Changing ownership of ECEC is not beneficial for a 'good society' democratic participation is.

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## **2. Marianne Fenech**

### ***Systems advocacy in the professional practice of early childhood teachers: How do we get there?***

Systems advocacy happens for the improvement of the systematic provision of ECEC in Australia e.g., government policy and provisions, legislation, and industrial relations. Since 1972 when the Australian Government introduced the Child Care Act, changes in some policy areas and a lack of change in others have meant that we still do not have an equitable system of high-quality education for young children and a system that affords early childhood teachers with high professional status. Marianne listed the changes and what still needs to be changed (look at slides).

While many argue that systems advocacy is hard and time consuming, Marianne explained that systems advocacy can happen in the day-to-day, at multiple levels. For example, through dinner chats with friends and family (in the private), or in the centre with staff and parents, at the local community level by inviting your local MP to your centre to see quality ECE in action, or at the systems level by writing submissions, attending rallies, or signing a petition. All of these strategies are considered to be systems advocacy because educators are advocating for systemic change. I have found this idea very empowering as anyone could participate in this kind of advocacy. Probably everybody does already in her or his way and should continue to do so at their level of choice that they feel comfortable with but

perhaps now with more conscious efforts and with a view to empowering others (staff, parents, children) to do the same.

There were plenty of great ideas in Marianne's talk but let me just list here what stood out for me and you can read the rest in her slides. One idea was about 'secret teachers' business', which means that we advocate too much inside the field rather than talking to the outside, to parents, the community, politicians, and the media etc. The second idea is that while we are thinking about children as competent and advocate for them to be seen as powerful actors in their lives, we construct ourselves and our clients as somewhat less powerful. **So we need to apply a 'strengths based approach' when we think about ourselves too and stop once and forever seeing ourselves and acting as 'nice ladies'. We must consider ourselves and our families as powerful actors in decisions about the things that they consider important and participate in!!!**

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### 3. Janelle Gallagher

#### *The rights of all children, staff and families in a community based preschool*

Janelle also explored some connecting ideas with people who talked before her. For example, she talked about the need to advocate about children's rights - that they have all different kinds of rights enshrined in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)* and **that children themselves and their families and the community need to know about their rights and act on as the EYLF calls for it!**

Janelle also called to consider children and form relationships with them as individuals with rights who are active agents in their lives, basically who know what they want. By enabling children we can see how powerfully and with how much knowledge and passion they participate in the everyday life in centre and community.

She also talked about her realisation that her community, while portrayed historically in a negative light, is a resilient and progressive community. This spirit is demonstrated with the will and commitment of those people who built the preschool in Kurri Kurri when only a couple of dozens existed in the whole of NSW during the 1960s.

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### 4. Kathryn Bown

#### *Policy vision in the early years: Politicians, influence and decision making*

Kathryn defined visionary thinking as not being only abstract but including a consideration of utility or practicality. One way that visionary thinking can be pursued and translated in practical terms is through visionary policy. **Visionary policy requires the involvement of groups of people with the purpose of imagining futures for groups of people** [Zsuzsa: I think her ideas connect well with my call for more participatory ways to decide and act on

ECEC]. To imagine futures collectively, a particular kind of space is needed. But what could that space be like?

Belgian political scientist Chantal Mouffe proposes we envisage a 'radical democracy' in order to successfully confront and contest hegemony (the dominant way of thinking and doing). In early childhood policy in Australia, the human capital agenda is the dominant justification for investment in the early years which argues ECEC is good for the economy, women's workforce participation, productivity and future workers. This justification eclipses other kinds of justifications for investment in ECEC, particularly those that place the child at the centre of policy. The human capital agenda is a powerful discourse and difficult to contest and dislodge, particularly given the persuasive economic studies indicating investment in the early years has long-term economic pay-off.

In Mouffe's radical democracy however, the human capital agenda might be challenged more successfully. First, Mouffe contends that we must acknowledge that all political relations (in politics or in society's systems etc) have an *antagonistic* element – the potential for disagreement and conflict. One way of approaching *antagonism* is to believe that through rational negotiation and discussion, a point of consensus can be achieved. However, Mouffe argues that this is an impossibility – that 'consensus' is a façade for suppressed, silenced or excluded worldviews. But while we must acknowledge the potential for *antagonisms*, these kinds of relations are not helpful because they construct the we/they relationship as friend/enemy or good/evil. Therefore, antagonism works to eradicate the enemy. Ironically, by challenging hegemony through an *antagonistic* approach, you are enabling and enforcing another kind of hegemony.

So instead, Mouffe says we need to turn *antagonism* into *agonism*. Agonism, in Mouffe's radical democracy, instead suggests we think of the we/they relation in terms of 'worthy adversaries'. Worthy adversaries are able to contest and challenge each other without the need to reconcile and compromise. Sometimes points of agreement might be reached – a 'temporary settlement', but ultimately, it is a space for disagreement and dissent and permanent provocation. Agonism pursues continuous change rather than stagnation.

Agonism is a particularly useful tool for rethinking and reconfiguring the common characterization of ECEC as 'fragmented'. This characterization is often used to describe both the system/policy and ECEC sector organisations/individuals, who are often positioned as passionate but with conflicting worldviews. It is argued in the literature and in the data of Kathryn's study that passionate politics are not enough. For example, Simon a politician participant in her PhD study argued:

"You need passion, you absolutely need advocacy, you need advocates to make government feel uncomfortable...But it would be more effective if it was sometimes **more grounded, more strategic** policy instead of a wish-list with passion attached to it". (P10 Simon, interview transcript)

Kathryn argued that passionate politics sits in a vacuum in an antagonistic political sphere that discredits and immobilises [Zsuzsa: here her ideas are related to my assessment about

the weakness of moral reasoning against austerity measures]. The characterization 'fragmented' is used by policy makers to disempower the sector, and often, that characterization is taken up by the field which further erodes our political strategizing. However, in an *agonistic* radical democracy, fragmentation does not necessarily foreclose visionary policy but rather, fragmentation can be transfigured into diversity and difference, suspended and always moving in tension. Let's create this space for ECEC!!!!

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## **5. Robyn Buttsworth**

### ***Advocacy on behalf of children with special needs***

Robyn gave a very personal account of her fight for her son's right to be provided with the same education as others besides not fitting the norm. She also examined the Abbott government's new plans to cut funding or slow the existing initiatives designed for people with special needs. She explicated her teaching philosophy and what she will do when she finished her studies and can advocate for all children and families to have the same right for quality education and care.

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## **6. Clayton Barr**

### ***Labor Member for Cessnock***

Clayton provided lots of great insights and advice for us. His first advice was about the particular type of politicians we need to and can productively approach. He said that career politicians will not listen to us but those (like himself) who are doing this work for a period of time and doing it because they are interested to listen to different points of views and act in favour of strong demands, they will listen and are interested to hear us.

Clayton suggested to write opinion pieces in newspapers, run roundtable discussions, invite local members and show them the centres and raise issues (he was basically 'bought' to the cause by Jannelle's sausages while he attended a couple of events including a BBQ at the preschool) and to have 'digestible' information ready for the member's consumption and free use in his part of advocacy on behalf of the centre / field. He also advised to freely ask for appointment and visit MPs. He suggested to do the visit in groups so it doesn't waste the MPs time, to always bring and give simple but powerful information supporting claims and demands, to suggest the MP what to do, to nail the MP to that decision, and ask when s/he will do that. It is also good to remind or account the MP for that promise.

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## **7. Group discussion**

The evening finished with a group discussion and reflection on what we had heard. The discussion led to some firm decisions / actions forward.

We decided to hold a series of round table discussions titled '**Hunter social justice alliance round table**' during which we discuss common points for advocacy in the current climate. The structure and processes for these sessions are vital therefore we will figure out the best way to go about holding these roundtable discussions. Clayton Barr MP asked to be part of these discussions, thanks. We also agreed to invite cognate professions, such as Family Action Centre, and also see how other related professions lobby or do advocacy. We also firmly agreed to invite parents to these tables. We are much stronger united in our demands!!!

It was asked that I provide some readings for these roundtable discussions with some international examples and comparisons so we know what is possible and what demands we can make and on what grounds / evidence. People will arrive to these roundtable discussions with previously distributed materials read and ready to discuss.

We decided to cease to be nice ladies (assertiveness does not mean being mean!) and to even go on strike if needed. Imagine the trickle-down effect – doctors not being able to do surgeries and the kind!

Meetings should be run with the notion of 'worthy adversaries' in mind, where difference (historically developed fragmentation in the field) will not mean to discredit or exclude the view but to take it as productive for change.

**The Productivity Commission's review is out soon so we need to take action!!!**