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I have always been interested in early childhood policy, particularly so towards the end of my undergraduate early childhood teaching degree. It was then that I decided to embark on the honours program, which involved conducting a small scale study to explore early childhood teachers' experiences with, and perceptions of, the NSW regulation for early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. The honours program fuelled my interest in theory, policy and research, so after graduating I taught in a long day care centre for two years and began my PhD during that time (and at the time of writing, it is still ongoing). My PhD research investigated influences on politicians' decision-making for ECEC policy in Australia. It seemed an important topic to me, given that I had first-hand experience with how policy affected the daily lives of the children, teachers, staff and families with whom I worked. I was also motivated to research in the area of policy and influences on politicians' understandings of ECEC because of my involvement in the activist organisation the Social Justice In Early Childhood group.

Even though the topic of influence in policy seemed extremely interesting to me, I realised that it was an area that had received little attention in research. I designed the study with three phases of data collection. The first phase was the collection and analysis of policy texts, using a critical discourse analysis approach. Policy texts included sources such as government documents; politicians' speeches and media releases; media; and government websites. The second phase of data collection involved interviews with Australian politicians (9) and senior public servants (3) who had been involved in ECEC policy in recent years. The final phase of the data collection was two case studies on two significant issues in the contemporary policy landscape. The first issue was the contention over the minimum regulated staff-to-child ratios for children birth to two years of age in New South Wales. The second issue was the national quality debate beginning with the Howard Government's 'quality assurance overhaul' and the Rudd Government's 'national quality agenda' for ECEC. Data for both these case studies was drawn from interviews with key early childhood stakeholders who had had significant involvement in one or both of the issues.

While the study is still ongoing, there are some emerging findings that can be shared. I found that during the interviews, a majority of the politicians drew on maternalist discourses when talking about their understandings of ECEC settings and policy. Maternalist discourses have been previously identified as influential in ECEC policy and practice (Ailwood, 2007; Wong, 2006). Indeed, my analysis found maternalist discourses to be 'normalising, and therefore frequently difficult to detect and disrupt' (Bown, Sumsion & Press, 2011, p. 3), such as the use of maternalist descriptors for personal qualities of ECEC staff, or the belief that female politicians were better able to understand and make decisions for ECEC policy than their male counterparts (Bown et al., 2011). There are potentially serious limiting implications for ECEC policy if maternalist discourses continue to shape politicians' understandings of the ECEC portfolio. For example, if ECEC is perceived by politicians to be a women's workforce issue 'policy on ECEC workforce strategies may also continue to be undermined and ECEC policy "solutions" will continue to focus on parents as consumers rather than being driven by concerns for quality and children's well-being' (Bown et al., 2011, p. 16).

I hope that ECEC activist organisations will benefit from my research to better understand politicians' perspectives, which may contribute to designing more strategic campaigns to effect change. If a greater understanding of politicians' decision-making processes can be achieved, it may entice more early childhood teachers and staff to become engaged in policy activism. This engagement in policy activism is a crucial part of

our teaching roles and pedagogical work, and should be encouraged and supported by the management of the organisations in which early childhood teachers and staff work. Having a cross-section of ECEC sector professionals involved in policy activism, with significant representation from face-to-face practitioners, will contribute to an empowered and dynamic space for policy discussion and critique. Finally, I would be delighted if my research contributed to politicians engaging in some critically reflexive work of their own.

Published 2012