



## Professor Deborah Brennan

Social Policy Research Centre,  
University of New South Wales, Sydney



### *Why are you interested in early childhood policy?*

I became interested in EC policy during the Whitlam years, when I was an undergraduate at the University of Sydney. As well as studying politics and philosophy, I spent a lot of time going to demonstrations and marches and debating issues in the student union. I stumbled across the issue of childcare through my involvement in women's liberation. The second wave of feminism was organised around a series of demands, including 'free childcare'. One of my lecturers suggested that I write an essay on this topic as part of a course on public policy, and I was quickly hooked! I really enjoyed being able to study an issue that was unfolding in the media and on campus, and a 'hot topic' in public debate. As part of the course, I had to explore the different ways that various actors framed the issue of childcare and how this opened up a range of contested policy solutions. A few years later I did a masters degree in Childhood Studies with Professor Jacqueline Goodnow at Macquarie University. Jackie was an incredibly inspiring teacher and instilled in me a lasting appreciation of the importance of the child's perspective in public policy. Later still, I undertook a PhD in political science (back at the University of Sydney) where I investigated the changing ways in which women had mobilised around the care and education of children since the late nineteenth century.

### *How does the broader policy context interact with/ affect ECE policy?*

EC connects with numerous other aspects of social policy— housing, income support, health and education, for example. That is part of its fascination for me. Even population ageing, for example— strange as it may seem— is connected to EC. How does this occur? As populations age, a shrinking proportion of the population is of workforce age and personal income tax revenue declines. At the same time, a growing proportion of the population is made up of older people who require expensive health care and income support. For many governments, the easy way to generate more tax revenue to pay for these measures is to encourage (or push) more working-age people into paid work. This can lead to a narrow, instrumentalist approach to EC, in which the promotion of labour force participation, rather than promoting children's well-being and development, becomes the guiding rationale.

### *What are other countries doing that contrasts with EC policy in Australia?*

Forward-thinking countries are doing three things that contrast with Australia's approach to ECE. They are:

- introducing child-based entitlements to early learning and care that are not based on whether or not parents have paid work
- investing in the skills of the workforce and paying educators properly
- ensuring that a fair proportion of services remain in the non-profit sector.

Many European countries take a holistic approach to family policy, enabling parents to move seamlessly from well-supported parental leave, to a guaranteed place for their child in an early learning and care service and then ensuring that they have access to reduced hours of employment, time off to care for sick family

members and other practical supports. Australia, by contrast, puts each of these issues into a separate box—and often pits one service or benefit against another.

*How have you attempted to inform EC policy directions through research and discussion papers?*

Throughout my career, I've tried to conduct research that will have an impact on policy and, at the same time, be accessible to a broad audience. My first book, co-authored with Carol O'Donnell, was called *Caring for Australia's Children: Political and Industrial Issues in Australian Child Care*. Carol and I tried to put the wages and working conditions of EC educators onto the agenda and to make connections with broader policy debates around the funding of EC. I developed this theme and also tried to provide a nuanced historical understanding of the politics of EC policy in my next book, *The Politics of Australian Child Care: From Philanthropy to Feminism*. Since then I've published numerous reports, papers and articles relating to gender and social policy and have made submissions to just about every Australian government inquiry into EC and related policy areas. I strongly believe in staying connected with a range of people, both inside and outside the sector, in order to avoid being caught in a single, narrow perspective. EC is a vital and wonderfully interesting area of public policy and of everyday life. I feel fortunate to have stumbled into this area all those years ago.

Published 2017