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The interface of the national Australian curriculum and the pre-Year 1 class in school: Exploring tensions

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Keywords: Curriculum, stakeholders, ideologies, socio-political, positioning.

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Abstract

The Australian state-based educational system of a national school curriculum that includes a pre-Year 1 Foundation Year has raised questions about the purpose of this year of early education. A document analysis was undertaken across three Australian states, examining three constructions of the pre-Year

1 class and tensions arising from varied perspectives. Tensions have emerged over state-based adaptations of the national curriculum, scripted pedagogies for change management, differing ideological perspectives and positioning of stakeholders. The results indicate that since 2012 there has been a shift in constructions of the pre-Year 1 class towards school-based ideologies, especially in Queensland. Accordingly, positioning of children, parents and teachers has also changed. These results resonate with previous international indications of 'schooling' early education. The experiences of Australian early adopters of the curriculum offer insights for other jurisdictions in Australia and internationally, and raise questions about future development in early years education.

Introduction

While high-quality early education has been identified as a key means of advancing the educational progress of all young children, emphasis has been placed on its role in addressing disadvantage (Petriwskyj, 2010). Heckman (2011) argues that universal provision of high-quality early education avoids stigmatising disadvantaged groups while supporting the development of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills that are important determinants of success in school and later life. Early childhood preschool provision, coupled with high-quality education in the early years of school, enhances transition into school and supports the ongoing educational progress of children from a range of backgrounds and with a range of abilities (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Sammons et al., 2004; Thorpe et al., 2005). While this potential for smoothing transition to school and promoting children's ongoing learning is supported by evidence, early education is sometimes incorrectly identified as a way of ameliorating all social and educational problems (Sumsion et al., 2009). This assumption diverts attention from the role of sustained educational quality and transition processes within the early years of schools.

In Australia, each state jurisdiction has separate curriculum documents for school education, including the pre-Year 1 class for four- and five-year-old

children (called preparatory, pre-primary, transition, reception or kindergarten, depending on the jurisdiction), which is non-compulsory in most jurisdictions. The new national *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, 2011) is intended to reduce discrepancies between state-based education systems and enact the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEECDYA, 2008). It incorporates a pre-Year 1 curriculum as the Foundation Year of a joint primary and secondary school framework. This change raises questions about the purpose and focus of this pre-Year 1 class as it will mean significant change in some state jurisdictions. In this paper we consider the varying constructions of pre-Year 1 classes and the implementation of the *Australian Curriculum* of pre-Year 1 class in three states: Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria.

Constructions of the pre-Year 1 class

An Australian study found that stakeholders viewed a pre-Year 1 class as either a pedagogic opportunity to address individual patterns of development, provide a smooth transition to school, or accelerate or retain children with non-normative progress (Thorpe et al., 2005). These views reflect three international constructions of pre-Year 1 in the literature—an extension of early education, a transition process, or the commencement of formal schooling. Pre-Year 1 as an extension of early education is reflected in programs such as those in the Nordic countries, based in holistic objectives of development, learning and wellbeing and adoption of transactional rather than didactic pedagogies (OECD, 2006). Pre-Year 1 as a transition is evident in the re-conceptualisation of the reception class in South Australia and the UK as an opportunity for continuity and gradual change as children move into formal classroom settings (Aubrey, 2004; Dockett et al., 2007). The emphasis on academic instruction and formal testing in kindergartens in the USA reflect formal school constructions of the pre-Year 1 class, although there has been resistance based on the notion of developmentally appropriate practice (Jacobs & Crowley, 2010). Variations in constructions of the nature and purpose of early education have arisen from differing socio-political, ideological and stakeholder perspectives (Nuttall & Edwards, 2007).

Socio-political perspectives

The recent Australian socio-political emphasis on investment in human capital and a productivity agenda has supported a range of structural initiatives in early education, including curriculum development (Sumsion et al., 2009). The curricula in early childhood are tightly connected to national societal goals (Yoshikawa et al., 2007). An emphasis on efficiency and productivity is a common international trend and, as Wood (2004) has noted in the UK, the resulting pressure on teachers has changed the focus and practices in early years education. In Australia, school reforms including the introduction of a pre-Year 1 class have been linked to ensuring that children were not left behind academically during a period of global change (Hard & O’Gorman, 2007). This reflects different socio-political perspectives to those in the Nordic countries where concern for child agency and wellbeing supports continuity of early childhood social pedagogies in the pre-Year 1 class for six-year-olds in school (OECD, 2006).

The contexts Australian early childhood teachers work in (e.g. child care, preschool, preparatory class, early years of compulsory school) impose varying expectations related to the ages of children as well as to the socio-political pressures in each context. Political attention to improving outcomes for socially marginalised groups has prompted initiatives such as funding of universal part-time preschool education and the development of a national *Early Years Learning Framework* for early education and care prior to school. It has also framed the provision of pre-Year 1 classes in school systems where this was not previously offered or restructuring of such classes to meet emerging priorities (Dockett et al., 2007; Stamopoulos, 2003; Sumsion et al., 2009). Political criticism of Australia’s academic outcomes performance in international comparative studies such as the *Program for International Student Assessment* (PISA) and the *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMSS) has promoted greater national standardisation in school education without necessarily addressing broader priorities such as the intellectual quality of learning (Luke, 2010). In the early years of school in Australia, Luke has identified pressure to meet national statutory assessment

standards as a key factor in a narrowing of focus onto literacy and numeracy skills and didactic pedagogies. Bertram and Pascal (2002) have drawn attention to a similar trend in their international review of early years education in 20 countries, while Stephenson and Parsons (2007) noted that early years educators in England tended to emphasise literacy and numeracy.

Ideological perspectives

Educational ideologies reflect images and metaphors that influence conceptualisations of early education and its purposes (Nuttall & Edwards, 2007; Westbury, 2000). Common ideologies—learner-centred, social reconstruction, scholar academic and social efficiency—reflect differing views of children and of teaching and differing emphasis on process or product (McLachlan, Fler & Edwards, 2011). Curriculum documents arising from differing ideologies have been conceptualised as either a map of content and performance standards or an inquiry process for increasing competence (Tymms, 2010), reflecting scholar-academic/social efficiency and learner-centred/social reconstruction ideologies. The *Early Years Learning Framework* for early childhood programs and the *Australian Curriculum* for schools emerged from differing contexts and ideological bases to frame content as holistic learning or academic subjects respectively, although Connor (2011) has identified areas of alignment. The *Early Years Learning Framework* indicates social reconstruction and learner-centred ideologies. While these ideologies were also identified in drafts of the *Australian Curriculum*, recent critique (Arthur, 2010) indicates evidence of scholar-academic and social-efficiency ideologies. The latter can be understood as a discourse in which education aims to prepare children for the demands of the future; first for their forthcoming schooling and then becoming useful members of society (Turunen & Maatta, 2012), which differs from learner-centred ideologies of early education.

Varying ideological perspectives are evidenced not only in formal documents, but also in the enacted curriculum and classroom pedagogies that emerge as stakeholders negotiate tensions (Luke, 2010). In early childhood programs, enactment of play pedagogies incorporating intentional teaching directed

towards learning outcomes has required reduced reliance on developmental or learner-centred frames of reference (Grieshaber, 2008). In the early years of school, Luke (2010) has found that the enacted curriculum focused on didactic pedagogies, test preparation and basic academic skills, indicating scholar-academic and social-efficiency perspectives. While alignment between early education and care and schools offers continuity supporting transition to school, the introduction of didactic pedagogies and narrow academic content to younger children has been less successful and fails to attend to non-cognitive factors that influence outcomes (Heckman, 2011; Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2011). There is, however, not necessarily incompatibility between foundational academic curricula and playful pedagogies in achieving outcomes for young children (Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2011; Jacobs & Crowley, 2010). Focused, learning-oriented yet playful pedagogies drawing on children's interests and supporting sustained shared thinking have been found to have a positive impact on children's outcomes in the early years of school (Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2011; Sammons et al., 2004; Thorpe, et al., 2005).

Stakeholder perspectives

While socio-political and ideological contexts frame structural reforms such as pre-Year 1 classes, factors such as the involvement of key stakeholders are vital to reform implementation. The enactment of reforms in classrooms represents efforts by teachers to balance competing demands within the constraints of their professional knowledge (Luke, 2010). In schools where early childhood and primary teachers work across the early years classes, tensions arising from their differing ideological positions represent both a challenge and an opportunity to devise coherent solutions (Stamopoulos, 2003). Since teachers have an immediate role in implementing reforms, they need to understand the changes and be supported by principals in the implementation process (Kilgallon, Maloney & Lock, 2008). Principals have a key role in demonstrating leadership and involving staff in decision making as well as offering professional development and support, yet they often lack knowledge of early education (Kilgallon et al., 2008; Thorpe et al., 2005). Their role in engaging with families and communities has also been

identified as a success factor in the implementation of changes such as the introduction of a pre-Year 1 class (Stamopoulos, 2003; Thorpe et al., 2005). However, the perspectives of families on a pre-Year 1 class are diverse, with some expecting academic content and some anticipating play-based learning (O’Gorman, 2008). Since meeting family expectations affects utilisation of a non-compulsory program, effective partnership is a key consideration (Stamopoulos, 2003; Tayler, 2006).

The study

While tensions exist between the various perspectives on the nature and purposes of early education, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The introduction of the *Australian Curriculum* for schools incorporating the Foundation Year offers an opportunity to investigate the purpose and focus of the pre-Year 1 class in Australia. This study examines current constructions of pre-Year 1 in three Australian states, and explores the ways key stakeholders are positioned.

The questions framing this study are:

- 1) What are the constructions of the year before compulsory school in three states of Australia as stated in government documents?
 - Queensland: Preparatory
 - New South Wales: Kindergarten
 - Victoria: Prep.
- 2) How are teachers, families and communities positioned in the documents?

This study used document content analysis, based on primary sources such as government reports and policies, curriculum documents and government publications for teachers, families and communities (Prior, 2003). Prior identified document analysis as a process in which the researcher extracts data from documents that are judged to represent quality sources, and generates main themes from which recurring lines of argument are drawn alongside connections between concepts.

The documents analysed in this study included:

- Policy documents relevant to pre-Year 1 in three Australian states (Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria).
- Curriculum documents, including the *Australian Curriculum* and state curriculum documents for pre-Year 1 such as the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* in Queensland, *K–6 syllabus* in New South Wales and the *Early Years Learning and Development Framework* in Victoria.
- Accompanying government resources for teachers, families and communities.

While content may be analysed through word and phrase counts, or through discourse analysis, the method adopted for this study was thematic content analysis incorporating both what was identified in the documents, and what was missing (Rapley, 2008). Since documents were analysed across three state jurisdictions, analysis was framed by themes that have been identified *a priori* from the literature. This analysis was enhanced through a process of re-analysis, and through using more than one researcher.

Results

Policy document constructions of the pre-Year 1 class

In Queensland, the constructions of the Queensland pre-Year 1 class presented in the *Education and Training Reforms for the Future* white paper (State of Queensland, 2002) and the recent *Flying Start* white paper (DET, 2011a) indicate a shift in thinking about the purpose of this class. The 2002 white paper indicated the class was intended to give children 'better preparation before they enter school' (p. 7) and to 'enhance thinking skills, school performance and social adjustment' (p. 14). It was to be non-compulsory, use an early childhood curriculum and be delivered by an early childhood teacher. In contrast, by 2011 the program was identified as 'the first year of school' (DET, 2011, p. 1). There are references to the importance of attendance, to compulsory enrolment in this class before Year 1, and subject-specific academic learning outcomes. The uniform implementation in state government schools through the *Curriculum to Classroom (C2C)* and the use of terms such as 'students' (EQ, 2012, p. 7) reinforces this construction of the pre-Year 1 class as formal school.

Neither Victoria nor New South Wales had introduced the *Australian Curriculum* by the 2012 study period, as only English, mathematics and science subjects were available. While documents in both these jurisdictions contain an indication of pre-Year 1 (prep in Victoria and kindergarten in New South Wales) as a transition-to-school program, they differ in emphasis (BOS, 2012; DEECD, 2012). The New South Wales documents indicate a construction of the pre-Year 1 class as a transition year with an emphasis on schooling, evidenced through statements on 'starting school' meaning pre-Year 1 (DEC, 2012a) and a focus on subject content (BOS, 2012). The Victorian *Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform* discussion paper (DEECD, 2008) was directed towards educational provision for children aged birth to eight years. In Victoria, there is attention to transition processes and to linking content with later school outcomes, yet there is emphasis on pre-Year 1 as a continuation of early education. The role of programs for children aged birth to eight years is framed as supporting

sustained, high-quality early learning, partnership with families and transition to school (DEECD, 2008). The pre-Year 1 program supports transition by combining a welcoming environment with attention to both academic subject content and holistic outcomes such as problem solving, thinking and socialisation (DEECD, 2008). The links across birth to eight years, framing of holistic content and material on individual differentiation suggest an early childhood ideological emphasis across this entire phase.

Curriculum document constructions of the pre-Year 1 class

In Queensland, shifts in curriculum for the pre-Year 1 class during 2012 represent changes in focus. The previous *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* adopted a play-based approach with focused learning episodes directed towards holistic learning content (QSA, 2006). Initially, from early 2012, state schools were to teach, assess and report on English, mathematics and science using the C2C scripted version of the *Australian Curriculum* from pre-Year 1 onwards while continuing use of the pre-2012 school *Essential Learnings* for other subject areas (DET, 2011a). However, two months later, revised guidelines were released for pre-Year 1 classes in state schools (EQ, 2012). While the Foundation level of the *Australian Curriculum* was to be taught in English, mathematics and science, the remainder of the curriculum was now to be framed by the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* across 2012–13 (EQ, 2012; QSA, 2012). These revised guidelines indicate broader content, differentiation, and use of some play-based learning as well as focused teaching in the pre-Year 1 class.

Since New South Wales and Victoria had not adopted the *Australian Curriculum* in 2012, their current curriculum documents were considered. In New South Wales, the foundation statements for pre-Year 1 (kindergarten/early stage 1) were revised in 2005 with personal development incorporated with physical education (BOS, 2010). Consultations regarding the draft state-specific versions of the *Australian Curriculum* areas of English, mathematics and science were being undertaken in 2012, and teaching of the curriculum will commence in 2014 (BOS, 2010). There appears to be

substantial similarity between the academic outcomes in the current New South Wales and *Australian Curriculum*.

The *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* for pre-Year 1 (level 1/prep) considers both academic subjects and interpersonal development and includes attention to thinking and problem solving (DEECD, 2011). The Victorian curriculum is framed around holistic learning outcomes that are similar to the national *Early Years Learning Framework* and linked to the *Victorian Essential Learning for Levels 1 and 2* (DEECD, 2011). It provides explicit information on transition-to-school processes. The *Australian Curriculum* will be introduced into Victorian schools in 2013–14 following trials in some schools (DEECD, 2011). There are significant differences between the outcomes in these documents.

Positioning of teachers

In Queensland, government documents for teachers demonstrated a shift across 2011-12 through introduction of the *Curriculum to Classroom (C2C)* program available via a website restricted to state-employed teachers. From 2012, state schools were to teach, assess and report on English, mathematics and science across all year levels using C2C. Accordingly, assessment against academic criteria for these subject areas has been introduced for the pre-Year 1 class (DET, 2011a). The C2C program provided scripted unit and lesson sequences to implement the *Australian Curriculum* uniformly across the state. However, its use was subsequently modified through a directive regarding teachers' opportunities to make professional decisions about its application, differentiate to suit students and adjust the pre-Year 1 approach (DET, 2012c; EQ, 2012, p. 5). The Queensland Studies Authority (2012b, p. 5) developed resources for teachers to negotiate the curriculum change, and directed Foundation Year teachers to 'plan and lead learning that is rich with active learning, play exploration, experimentation and imagination' in line with the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* during the interim phase.

In New South Wales and Victoria, information for teachers was more widely available and covered a broader range. In New South Wales, the *Primary Curriculum Foundation Statements* for teachers indicate the range for content for the pre-Year 1 class presented as syllabus outcomes but with clarified expectations and identified priorities. The *K–6 Linkages* syllabus materials identified ways to integrate subject areas of the curriculum, including exemplars at various year levels, while *Primary Matters* offered updates on curricular change (BOS, 2012). In Victoria, introduction of the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* included matching implementation guides and a range of resources (DEECD, 2011). It included information on the pre-Year 1 entry assessment directed towards assisting teachers to understand children’s prior learning and to plan a relevant program (DEECD, 2011). Teacher resources included materials on teaching children with English as an additional language, research evidence papers, early years alerts, an early years exchange, and links to school outcomes for older students. Resources on transition to school were available as a kit that included pedagogic practices, family partnerships and catering for diversity (DEECD, 2010).

Positioning of families and communities

In Queensland, government resources regarding the pre-Year 1 class offered advice to parents. During the initial trialling and introduction of the pre-Year 1 class during 2003-07, materials for parents explained its non-compulsory nature and its role in gradually preparing children for school, although government advertising referred to school readiness and children potentially becoming rocket scientists (DETA, 2006; 2007). Initially parents were advised that early childhood teachers would be employed, yet this was subsequently broadened to include other teachers (Hard & O’Gorman, 2007). In 2012, the information for parents indicated that the pre-Year 1 class was the first year of school and was compulsory in policy although not in law, despite reported parent preferences to the contrary (DET, 2011b). Parents were encouraged to delay pre-Year 1 class enrolment if their child was ‘not ready’ (DET, 2011a, p. 1), and advised that if children commenced school without attending the pre-Year 1 class, they would be placed in that class rather than in Year 1.

In New South Wales, family and community information outlined education from preschool into pre-Year 1 (kindergarten) through to Year 6 and was translated into seven community languages (BOS, 2010). It explained content, and indicated that teachers would focus on that content while still giving attention to the individual needs of children (BOS, 2012; DEC, 2012a). Parents were advised that teachers are trained to work with children regardless of their age or development, and curriculum materials and policies on reporting to parents are readily available (DEC, 2012b). In Victoria, resources for families and communities covered a birth-to-eight years age range, with online, brochure and audio material for pre-Year 1 contained in the primary school information about levels 1 and 2 (pre-Year 1 to Year 2). Considerable information was available on the transition-to-school learning statement, on ways to assist children during transition, and in the welcome to school parents translated into five community languages (DEECD, 2011). Partnership with diverse families and communities formed an explicit component of the Victorian documents.

Discussion

According to the results of this study, the differing constructions of the pre-Year 1 class and positioning of children, teachers, families and communities in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria indicate the varying application of early education ideologies in each context. In Victoria and New South Wales, the pre-Year 1 class was constructed as a transition to school, although Victoria demonstrated an early education emphasis and an image of children as active contributors, while New South Wales demonstrated a school emphasis and an image of children as students, indicating variations in class purpose and positioning of children. Queensland's use of scripted approaches to guide uniform implementation of the *Australian Curriculum* reinforced a construction of pre-Year 1 as formal schooling, although subsequent revisions of the pre-Year 1 requirement indicated shifting perspectives on the implementation phase.

While the *Australian Curriculum* had been introduced in only one of the states under consideration, another had drafted a version similar to their previous curriculum, while in the third, the Foundation Year content represented a potential shift from a holistic to an academically oriented curriculum. The response of children to the shift from a transactional early childhood curriculum to a curriculum with fixed content and goals was a question that Arthur (2010) had raised prior to release of the *Australian Curriculum*. Alignment between levels of education provides a context for gradual change. This is represented in the Victorian documents that consider the entire age-range from birth to eight years and ongoing links to later school education. In contrast, misalignment between early childhood education and school curricula impacts negatively on transition to school through loss of learning continuity that can be detrimental to children experiencing difficulties (Petriwskyj, 2010). The discontinuity that emerged in early 2012 in Queensland reflected tensions similar to those experienced between preschool and Year 1 prior to the initial introduction of pre-Year 1 classes (Petriwskyj, 2005). Alignment is, however, evident in the studies authority resources for that state (QSA, 2012a, 2012b) offering strategies for management of discrepancies, for example in the maintenance of higher

levels of attention to oral language and social skills in pre-Year 1. This supports Connor's (2011) assertion that it is possible to negotiate alignment of the *Early Years Learning Framework* and the *Australian Curriculum* in order to enhance continuity and make transition more seamless, without compromising the ideologies and quality of early education.

Engagement of stakeholders with the pre-Year 1 provision varied across the three jurisdictions. In Queensland, the information for parents on change in the pre-Year 1 conditions contrasted with parent preferences. Initial positioning of teachers as technicians in Queensland's C2C has undergone later adjustment to reflect more professional agency as shown in documents for other states. The positioning of stakeholders was also reflected in the varied content, style and accessibility of resources for teachers, families and communities across the three jurisdictions. Since respectful engagement of key stakeholders has been identified as a success factor in implementing educational change (Thorpe et al., 2005), some jurisdictions appear better placed to respond to local expectations and to enact changes that are likely to be effective in a wide range of local communities.

Conclusion

Coherence of approaches across Australia in respect of constructions of the pre-Year 1 class may not necessarily be achieved through implementation of the new national curriculum. The differing perspectives evident in official documents indicate that each jurisdiction might adopt variants of the national curriculum relevant to their socio-political and ideological context. The experiences of Australian early adopters of change, as well as international evidence, offer other education authorities valuable insights to guide the planning of relevant and successful curriculum implementation processes that engage stakeholders. Curriculum styles familiar to compulsory education require reinterpretation for an early years context. Future development of early years education requires closer attention to clear articulation of early childhood ideologies for pre-Year 1 education, curricular strategies that retain

depth and breadth of learning, and provision for genuine stakeholder agency in change processes.

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