‘Educare’ in Australia: analysing policy mobility and transformation

Ian McShane

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‘Educare’ in Australia: analysing policy mobility and transformation

Ian McShane
Centre for Urban Research, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT
Background: Early childhood education and care has been an area of significant policy attention, public investment and private market activity in Australia over the past three decades. Australian educationists and policy-makers have looked to international examples for evidence, policy design and institutional models. However, this area is under-researched in Australia, with regard to how these knowledge flows are theorised, and how policy is implemented on the ground.

Purpose: The paper’s purpose was to contribute new Australian-focused conceptual and empirical insights on the trajectories, development and implementation of evidence-based policy in the field of early childhood education and care.

Sources of evidence: The paper is based on three main sources of evidence:

- the critical literature on policy transfer and policy mobility
- policy statements, reports and planning documents produced by national- and state-level governments
- data from fieldwork analysis of new capital works and programmes in the early childhood field.

Main argument: International research and evidence on the benefits of investment in early learning has had a significant impact on the framing of Australian policy. So too has a move in several countries to align early childhood institutions with schools. However, a dominant paradigm of policy transfer, reliant on pluralist and rationalist frameworks of policy-making, fails to account for the dynamics of policy development and implementation across and within jurisdictions and geographical space. Conceptualising a new alignment in Australia between children’s centres and schools as ‘educare’, this article employs the theoretical lens of policy mobility to account for the circulation and transformation of educare policy in Australian settings. Through an empirical analysis of a new educare centre in the growth corridor of western Melbourne, the article demonstrates the extent to which neoliberal policy settings outside the educational sphere, around public finance, partnership, place and infrastructure provision, influence the implementation of ‘educare’ policy.

Conclusions: The educare discourse in Australia addresses a complex and multiscalar set of policy problems that associate child development with concerns around human capital formation, economic efficiency...
and productivity, place making and community building, and the role of the public sector in neoliberal democracies. International circuits of knowledge, policy design and institutional models in the educare field have been significant in shaping recent Australian policy, despite well-publicised views expressed in Australia on the disconnection between academic research and policy. The strength of policy mobility as a theoretical lens to assist our understanding of these influences lies in its critique of formalism in policy-making and in its attention to fluidity and transformation. The mobility lens encourages new empirical research that focuses on spatial and institutional dynamics, assisting our reading of on-the-ground developments in Australia’s fastest growing city.

Introduction

This article examines the development of school-based children’s centres in Australia to illustrate international flows of knowledge, ideology, policy and institutions in the sphere of early childhood education and care, or ‘educare’ as this article terms it. In doing this, the article shines a critical light on the paradigmatic concept of policy transfer, arguing that the empirical study offered here supports Jamie Peck’s (2011, 773) call to re-theorise policy borrowing and lending, shifting the conceptual frame from ‘transfer-diffusion’ to ‘mobility-mutation’.

Early childhood education and care has been an area of significant policy reform in recent years in Australia. While not quite suffering from ‘hyperactivism’, a charge that Ball (2008, 2) levelled at the relentless reform of the UK compulsory schooling sector during the Labour government years of Tony Blair, a sharpening focus on early childhood in Australian social and economic policy has brought an intensification of policy activity matched in few other areas of government.

Former Australian Prime Minister John Howard (1996–2007) famously described the topic of balancing work and childcare arrangements in vernacular terms as a ‘barbecue stopper’ (Onselen and Errington 2008, 336). This article argues that Australian educare policy has not developed in quite such idiomatic terms. International influences have strongly shaped the discourse of early childhood in Australia. The language, policy settings, institutions and pedagogies that frame early childhood in Australia are highly congruent with those of other Western liberal democracies. In particular, Australian reforms in recent decades evidence increasing international attention to two objectives: early intervention and quality of care (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2007). As with comparable countries, childcare demand has grown in Australia as more women participate in the paid workforce (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). Increased uptake of out-of-home childcare has provided a locus for governments to engage children and parents with a service system especially focussed on disadvantaged or at-risk children, and with a curriculum that maximises the benefits of early learning for school preparation and achievement in later life. While ‘early intervention settings’ are identified as a discrete part of the early childhood landscape (DEEWR 2009, 8), Australian policy language has generally conferred greater agency to children and their carers by referring to their ‘engagement’ with early learning.

The assemblage of ideology, evidence, policy, institutions, actors and spatial settings in the early childhood field is described in this article as educare. The term has been attributed to Molly Harrison, a UK architect, describing the post-World War 2 British welfare state’s conception of
education as nurturing rather than scholastic (Kozlovsky 2010). More recently, the term has been used to describe the growth of non-parental care, and its conflation with early years education (Nuttbrown 2006). The term is used in this article in the second sense, as an apt summary of the discourse of early childhood education and care. This should not be taken to mean that the policy instrumentalisation of early learning is a new development. Charges of the educationalisation of social problems have been regularly made from (at least) the Pestalozzian reforms in early learning in the late eighteenth century (Smeyers and Depaepe 2009; Trohler 2013). This article argues that educare, in the setting under review, addresses a complex and multiscalar set of policy problems that associate child development with concerns around human capital formation, economic efficiency and productivity, place making and community building, and the role of the public sector in neoliberal democracies.

The case study illustrating these arguments is the development of a childcare centre and community ‘hub’ co-located with a public primary (elementary) school in Derrimut, a new suburb in the rapidly growing, socio-economically disadvantaged region of western Melbourne. As I argue, the conceptual, institutional, spatial and programming elements of this complex development are clearly influenced by a body of international research evidence on the value of investment in early learning and service coordination and engagement for parents, as well as international models that co-locate educare facilities with schools. While there has been a sometimes fractious debate in Australia around evidence-based policy, detailed below, there can be little dispute over the influence of the evidence, and of policy active researchers and practitioners, in shaping educare policy. However, I argue that the policy dynamics of Australian educare are not captured by simply examining education or early childhood policy texts, and tracing their trajectory of ‘borrowing’ or their own ‘lending’ record. Broader neoliberal policy influences in areas such as public finance, governance, service provision and infrastructure have significantly shaped the institutional and physical forms of educare in Australia. To demonstrate the reach and effect of these influences, we need to examine how educare policy is mobilised, transformed and operationalised on the ground.

The article is structured as follows: the next section provides a brief conceptual history of policy transfer and makes the case for policy mobility as a preferred theoretical lens. The article then outlines developments in educare policy and practice in Australia, focusing on an inter-governmental early years learning framework (EYLF) (DEEWR 2009) as a clear example of evidence-based policy. I then analyse how the broad educare policy framework is operationalised by analysing the Derrimut Community Centre. This section draws on fieldwork conducted at Derrimut during 2012–2014, and qualitative data obtained from interviews with centre staff and staff from organisations involved in the development.

**Mobilising policy**

The late twentieth century saw burgeoning scholarly interest in what Dolowitz and Marsh (1996) called ‘policy transfer’. This interest was initially focused on policy innovation and diffusion within government jurisdictions. Dolowitz and Marsh (1996) criticised the state-centric focus and rationalist assumptions of innovation diffusion, highlighting influences on policy formation and adoption of supranational institutions such as the European Union, the rise of non-government agencies and policy entrepreneurs, the structural and ideological contexts that shaped and constrained policy ‘choices’ and the impact of new communication
technologies on the circulation of policy knowledge. These authors urged deployment of new theoretical and analytical tools in a field dominated by a descriptive approach. Policy transfer, they posited, was

[a] process in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political setting (past and present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political setting. (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, 343)

Subsequently, Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) developed a much-cited policy transfer framework, mapping onto the framework examples such as work-for-welfare and child support policies, to highlight the valencies of choice-imposition and success–failure that were in play.

In charting the rapid growth of policy transfer research across disciplinary fields and geographical locations, Benson and Jordan (2011) instanced only one example of work in ‘public education’. However, the concept has had a powerful impact on education studies, (e.g. Phillips and Ochs 2004; Ozga and Jones 2006; Crossley and Watson 2009; Lingard 2010; Rizvi and Lingard 2010; Rappeleye 2010; Welshman 2010; Ramila 2014). Beyond the discipline, analysts have discussed the rising profile of educational investment, particularly in early years settings, in international circuits of social policy (Hulme 2005). While the semantics of this analysis have varied, with terms such as transfer, travelling, borrowing and lending, and simply internationalisation and globalisation commonly deployed, the broad thrust of the literature has sought to map and explain the morphology of choice-based reform, standards and testing technologies and educational partnerships and programmes within and across national polities.

Peck (2011) is equally critical of the rationalist and pluralist foundations of the policy innovation diffusion construct, arguing that it rested on conceptions of the policy-maker as ‘an optimising, rational actor, scanning the “market” for potential policy products … albeit in terms of varying degrees of knowledge and uncertainty’ (Peck 2011, 776). However, he argued that while the policy transfer literature has been successful in putting the concept on the map, the work is still impeded by an underlying choice-based rationality:

[T]he analytical gaze is fixed, in effect, on policies in transit, willed into motion by searching and learning subjects. What is more, these searching and learning practices tend to be evaluated in terms of universalistic models of rational or satisficing behavior, abstracted from their respective social and institutional contexts. Policy transfers, the objects of analysis, are likewise typically visualized in disembedded and asocial terms, floating in abstract analytical spaces, or boxed inside descriptive taxonomies. (Peck 2011, 780)

Alternatively, Peck (2011, 774) calls attention to the constitutive socio-spatial contexts of policy-making, explored in an emerging literature on policy mobilities:

If the orthodox policy transfer literature tends to be preoccupied with accounts of rationally selected best (or better) practices moving between jurisdictional spaces, the new generation of social constructivist work is much more attentive to the constitutive sociospatial context of policy-making activities, and to the hybrid mutations of policy-making techniques and practices across dynamized institutional landscapes.

The concept of policy mobilities is useful for this article in three ways. The concept’s grounding in critical policy studies encourages us to turn away from a formalist approach to policy-making (evident in Dolowitz and Marsh’s [2000] use of the ‘policy cycle’), to play closer attention to the discursive techniques through which policy ‘stories’, or narratives of government, are told and sold (Ball 2007). Second, the concept of mobility recognises that
policies are not simply transferred, but transformed by their journeys (Peck 2011). Third, the space–time correlation directs attention to policy mobility through time. Peck (2011) argues that we are in an era of ‘fast policy’ regimes characterised by intense cross-jurisdictional exchanges, short policy development cycles, pressures to adopt ‘policies that work’ and ‘best practice’, supported by the widening role of intermediaries or ‘pushers’ of policy routines and technologies. However, as I argue below, recent childcare reforms in Australia call up concerns over professionalisation that were central to nineteenth-century interventions. The process of policy mobility, argues Peck, does not result in a ‘flat earth’ produced by policy convergence, but a variegated landscape of policy mutations operationalised in new context-specific locations and new institutional and regulatory settings.

Mapping the policy coordinates of educare in Australia

While current Australian education reform reflects international patterns in many areas, these are conditioned by distinctive constitutional and federal arrangements that require brief mapping and analysis.

Public school education systems, established on principles of universality and equity, were well established when the Australian colonies federated in 1901 and were retained as a state-level responsibility. The provision of preschool education and childcare, however, has a more complex history. In the late nineteenth century, philanthropists and social reformers took an interest in the social formation of working-class children, establishing the kindergarten movement in Australia (Spearritt 1979). The early twentieth century saw direct state intervention in the field, with the medicalisation and professionalisation of preschool education evident in the funding of kindergarten facilities by the national Department of Health (Nichols and Goad 2010). Until the late twentieth century, though, preschool education and childcare were largely separate domains, with local, non-profit and community-based childcare arrangements the dominant form of the latter. National government funding support for community-based childcare began in the 1970s, a development that was credited as an outcome of Australian feminists’ skilful use of state policy mechanisms (Brennan 1998). The local government sector was an increasingly important player from the mid-twentieth century, with links between kindergartens and the sector’s maternal and child health services indicating the persistence of a medicalised paradigm of child development.

In 1991, the national government extended subsidies to the for-profit childcare sector, a move described by Brennan as a profound shift in government policy. By the late 1990s, the private sector had emerged as the dominant provider of long-day childcare services, with the transformation from a community-based model to what Brennan (1998) describes as a workforce-oriented, market approach. The emergence of this model saw a break from the health paradigm in favour of the meshing of the childcare and early years education domains, as Australian governments sought to regulate the childcare market and harmonise educational policies across jurisdictions. The principal policy influence was a report by the Australian Government’s Economic Planning and Advisory Commission, which recommended replacement of a raft of existing childcare subsidies with a single means-tested benefit that could be used to purchase any form of non-parental childcare (Brennan 1998).

This shift to a public choice policy stance on childcare provision paved the way for the massive growth of the private childcare industry. The expansion was demand-driven by
increasing participation of women in the workforce and by Australia’s status as one of the few OECD countries without statutory nationwide provision for paid maternity leave (Scott 2014). Expansion was supply driven by a direct subsidy to private childcare providers brought in by John Howard’s Liberal–National coalition government soon after taking office in 1996 (Productivity Commission 2014). By 2000, total outlays on childcare had increased but the amount spent on most individual children had been cut, with costs transferred to families (Brennan 2004).

The national government’s 1991 decision to extend subsidies to the for-profit childcare sector also shone a light on the industrial conditions of the early childhood workforce. The commercial childcare sector was shown by the government’s research to have a lesser-qualified workforce than its community-based counterpart, and a propensity for employing junior employees, dismissing them when adult wages were due (Brennan 2004). The subsequent introduction by the national government of a quality improvement and assurance scheme, covering the entire industry, introduced the ‘quality’ debate in its current iteration.

Propelling these initiatives was a wider framework of neoliberal governance that exerted a strong influence on Australian jurisdictions, and across Western liberal democracies, in the late twentieth century. Neoliberal policy objectives in Australia aimed to introduce market competition into public services, reduce government outlays and achieve productivity and efficiency measures by reducing regulatory barriers and coordinating government activities. The chief mechanism for steering this agenda was the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), formed in 1992 with representatives of the three levels of Australian government (Hollander 2006). Boosting Australia’s stocks of human capital was an important focus of COAG reform (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2005). COAG produced a series of national educational policy frameworks and partnership agreements between the jurisdictions, aimed at introducing uniform curricula and testing regimes. In the early childhood setting, COAG agreed on an EYLF (DEEWR 2009). Covering the period of birth to five years, EYLF set national standards, actions and outcomes for the public, community and private providers active in Australia’s mixed educare economy. EYLF served to consolidate the link between early years learning and childcare in Australian policy, while putting forward an argument for industry reform in calling for the greater professionalisation and remuneration of childcare workers. EYLF re-established a nexus between educational qualifications and childcare work that was a foundation of the nineteenth-century reform movement (Spearritt 1979).

Recent Australian social policy has been strongly influenced by evidence of the spatial determinants of disadvantage, overlaying a spatial grid on individual and family-level policy interventions, particularly through partnerships with not-for-profit community providers of employment, training and community services. This combination of case and place management (Gallop 2007) is an important contextual influence on the educare discourse. As I detail elsewhere (McShane 2012), the ‘return of the local’ in social policy across the Western world in the late twentieth century was a refinement of neoliberal policy settings that responded to concerns about the social and economic costs of public disinvestment or under-provision of services and infrastructure and the inability of functionally organised bureaucracies to deliver community services effectively. Urban regeneration or place making, and ‘joined up’ service partnerships, often involving new combinations of state, market and not-for-profit institutions, were emblematic features of this reform, underpinned by active international exchanges on ‘third way’ politics and policy between Western world social democrats (Latham 1998).
Institutional solutions focused on schools, particularly primary (elementary) schools. Australian primary schools, and international counterparts, are increasingly depicted as community hubs, and new school design and construction has focused on the physical co-location and coordination of educational, early childhood and community services. Emulating the early kindergarten movement, the initial focus of these new institutional configurations was on working-class areas, with concerns for area regeneration chiming with policy interventions around parenting, employment and child development. Applying international models to Australian settings, though, required attention to outer-urban growth areas as much as established pockets of disadvantage. In Australia, the policy challenge has included not only service integration, but the timely provision of the physical layer of social infrastructure on greenfield sites.

An evidence-policy gap?

Recent years have seen growing Australian debate over the uses of research evidence in public policy (Head 2008; Bammer, Michaux, and Sanson 2010; Productivity Commission 2012; Cherney et al. 2013). In 2011, Terry Moran, secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet commented that he had 'long since given up commissioning academic research … [i]t's always late, and it's always in a form that then has to be further translated before it can be used within government … it’s lost without translation rather than lost in translation' (Ross 2011). This polemic could not be more wrong with regard to educare policy formation. Indeed, it is difficult to identify an area of social policy in Australia that has been more strongly influenced by research evidence. Space permits merely a gesture to significant epistemological, institutional and political factors rather than full analysis. Familiarity with the work of academics such as Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Shonkoff and Phillips (2000), bolstered Australian research on the social, spatial and biological determinants of child health and development (Whiteside et al. 2013), emphasising the significance of the 0- to 3-year period. Indeed, the case-place nexus could hardly have been better summarised than in the title chosen for Shonkoff and Phillips's meta-analysis From Neurons to Neighbourhoods. The formation in 2001 of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), a knowledge intermediary that championed an evidence-based approach to policy and practice and circulated a range of international research, was an important institutional development (Sanson and Stanley 2010). Early childhood advocates showed political and communication skills in framing arguments in terms that appealed to core policy and treasury departments and spoke to the benefits of cross-portfolio coordination. Research findings from well-known early intervention studies in the US, namely Head Start (Garces, Thomas and Currie 2000) and the High/Scope Perry Preschool study (Schweinhart et al. 1993), were widely promoted in Australia as demonstrating that investment in educare resulted in considerable public savings due to the increased employment chances and lower levels of engagement with health and criminal justice systems during the life course of programme participants. Policy-makers easily grasped the quasi-experimental nature of such research, and its synthesis in the calculus of US economist James Heckman (2006), who visited Australia in 2006 (Katz and Redmond 2009). Canada’s early development index, developed in the 1990s (Janus et al. 2007) influenced the inauguration of a longitudinal study of Australian children and the construction of the Australian Early Development Index (Australian Early Development Census 2015).
Australian governments were also becoming increasingly sensitised to international benchmarks and comparisons, especially the OECD’s (2001) series of reports Starting Strong. This comparative analysis of early childhood policy and practices in twelve member states showed Australia lagging behind other OECD member countries in the provision and quality of early childhood services. The OECD’s framing of educare in terms of human capital investment and economic productivity, particularly in boosting female workforce participation, provided underpinning arguments for Australian policy.

The role played by academic researchers in framing EYLF rebuts Moran’s polemic. A background paper commissioned from a group of academic specialists summarising relevant international research in early years learning, drew on longitudinal studies cited above to make a compelling case for investment in this area, but also translated the evidence into a set of learning principles and practices for all early years educators, imagined as a continuum encompassing home-based and out-home care, and formal preschool programmes (Edwards, Fleer, and Nuttall 2008). The extent to which international influences framed EYLF can also be discerned, ironically, by concerns to establish the framework’s distinct Australian characteristics. The authors opened by arguing that Australia’s Indigenous heritage and multicultural population contributed to a distinctly Australian identity, and acknowledgement of this spoke to values of social inclusion and social cohesion that should underpin EYLF. Educationists who are not familiar with Australia could recognise connections between this argument and the paper’s social-ecological theoretical underpinnings, which emphasises the historical and cultural contexts of perception, communication and learning. However, the argument can also be read in the context of a politics of race and identity that was continued with by a conservative Federal government that was in power for much of the decade before EYLF’s release. In this light, John Howard’s statement that Australia was ‘all over that identity stuff’ (Throsby 2006) challenged the constructivist pedagogy underpinning the EYLF process. The formal policy document adopted by the COAG closely mirrored the background paper, reflecting not only the persuasive case mounted by its authors, but perhaps also a change of government from conservative to social democratic party (Australian Labour) with a strong interest in public education.

This interest encompassed, especially at state government level, a focus on school infrastructure and school-based services as a focal point for whole-of-community engagement in education (DEECD 2006).

**Educare policy and school-based centres**

In looking for policy leads on school-based educare programmes, Australian early childhood experts turned to Canada and the United Kingdom. Canada’s similarity to Australia has invited frequent comparison across a range of research and policy fields, including educare (Prochner 2004). Canadian innovations on the use of schools as settings for early childhood programmes attracted significant Australian interest. Most prominent was the Toronto First Duty (TFD) programme, a partnership-based (government–philanthropic) programme that aimed to promote healthy development from conception to Grade 1. Commencing in 2002, TFD was staged to move from the integration of early childhood services to the development of curricula. Evaluation of TFD found that participation in the programme produced modest but significant improvements in the cognitive and social development of children (Corter, Janmohamed, and Pelletier 2012). TFD’s strategies of co-location, service coordination and
engagement of parents as co-educators resonated in Australia, and the programme’s evaluation provided an evidence base for Australian policy (Wong, Sumsion, and Press 2012).

Equally influential was the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) programme developed by the UK’s Labour government under the leadership of Tony Blair (Katz and Valentine 2009; Wong, Sumsion, and Press 2012). Consistent with Australia’s experience, institutional childcare in the UK at the end of the twentieth century was provided by a patchwork of institutions, had inconsistent standards of care and instruction, and limited capacity. Upon assuming government in 1997, the Labour government set about expanding early care and preschool services, principally as a measure to counter disadvantage in education and workforce participation. Lacking data on the developmental impact of early years learning, the government commissioned the EPPE longitudinal study, later extending its remit to track children in the study sample through to post-school destinations. The project also researched participants’ home educational environment. The study found that participation in preschool education positively impacted on intellectual and social/behavioural development and ameliorated the effects of social disadvantage. The study made recommendations around training and pedagogy in early childhood settings and reinforced the importance of the ‘home learning environment’ on children (Sylva et al. 2010).

Significantly, EPPE project researchers argued for the real-time impact of the study on policy evolution. In a UK policy climate that was receptive to research, EPPE’s progressive findings were quickly translated into policy measures to ‘narrow the gap’ between the life chances of the rich and the poor. One relevant outcome was the UK Labour government’s establishment in 2004 of Children’s Centres (CC), an evolution of the Sure Start programme, which, beginning in 1998, established childcare and early learning centres in disadvantaged areas. Like TFD, Sure Start was a venture in ‘joined up’ or coordinated service provision. The programme was designed to be locally responsive and had significant regional variation. The menu of services was wide, including outreach and home visits, drop-in parenting sessions, advice on play, learning and childcare, support for children with special needs, primary and community health care, and advice on housing and benefits. The transition to CCs involved a more concerted focus on early learning rather than area-based labour market participation. Where Sure Start programmes took a variety of physical forms, CCs were often established in association with primary schools (Lewis, Roberts, and Finnegan 2011).

Situating educare policy – the Derrimut community centre

This section illustrates the transformation and implementation of educare policy in Australia by analysing a specific institutional development – the Derrimut community centre. This section draws on wider research examining shared and extended use of schools, with fieldwork at three new or regenerated school sites that demonstrated the diverse range of shared or extended school configurations (see McShane, Watkins and Meredyth 2012). The research involved analysis of three facets that Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) see as constituent elements of policy work in the educational sphere: texts (policy and project-related documents, written and digital communications of the organisation), actors (30 interviews with educational bureaucrats, school staff, local government officials and staff involved in on-site partnerships with the school) and material objects (sites, buildings and their uses).

The research project’s ethical protocols were approved by the RMIT University Human Research Ethics Committee (CHEAN A-2000759-07-12) and the Department of Education...
The three field sites (an urban senior high school conceptualised as a ‘multiversity’ for the local community, a rural high school with a shared school-community library and the Derrimut complex) were framed and connected in policy discourse by a language of partnership. The perceived capacity of partnerships to mobilise policy and achieve a wide range of objectives has seen it become a favoured policy term internationally (Robertson et al. 2012). In Derrimut’s case, the partnership rubric described a new conviction at Victorian government level that timely infrastructure provision, attention to mundane matters such as facility management (freeing school staff to focus on pedagogy), programme delivery in the early childhood area and community building in a new suburb could all be packaged in a well-designed public–private partnership (PPP) (state government official).

In recent years, Australian national and state governments have experimented with school-focused or school-based early years programmes, influenced by international models such as Sure Start. These include programmes under the nationally sponsored *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy* (Sorin and Markotsis 2008) and the New South Wales’ *Schools as Community Centres* programme (Singh and Woodrow 2010). However, nowhere has policy been as heavily influenced by spatial and planning dynamics as Melbourne. Australia’s fastest growing city, Melbourne shows characteristics of an inversion effect that Ehrenhalt (2012) observed in many US cities, where socio-economic disadvantage – formerly associated with inner city neighbourhoods – is now most apparent on the urban fringe. The provision of social infrastructure to match the outward March of new housing construction has been a significant challenge for local and state authorities.

Situated 25 kilometres from central Melbourne, Derrimut is a culturally diverse suburb of around 8000 residents, with a mixture of public and privately owned dwellings and a high proportion of young families. The suburb is poorly served by public transport and has few local employment options or retail facilities. The Derrimut Primary School (which has some out-of-school public use) and the adjacent Derrimut Community Centre are the suburb’s major public facilities and provide a good example of how the educare discourse is operationalised in new Melbourne communities.

The international mobility of educare policy discussed above provides context for this development. In 2003, the state of Victoria’s health department invested in ‘children’s centres’ in a number of disadvantaged communities across the state, gaining further funding in 2005 for the construction of centres in Melbourne’s outer suburban growth areas. The programme’s location in the health portfolio reflected the tradition of preschool education in Australia, based on medical oversight and expert guidance of child development. The centres were broadly modelled on the UK Sure Start programme, especially in their aims to facilitate service engagement and coordination. Consistent with Sure Start, design of the Victorian children’s centres also included an active parenting programme, including support for ‘parenting roles’ and support to ‘manage work and family balance’. Centre aims extended to participatory management of parents in centre governance (Moore 2008, 59).

Bureaucratic oversight of early childhood in Victoria, though, was shifting from health to education, through the 2006 transformation of the Department of Education and Training to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). In new growth areas such as Derrimut, the portfolio realignment facilitated the construction of children’s
centres on school sites, achieving infrastructural efficiencies and providing opportunities for coordinated service and educational planning and engagement of ‘hard-to-reach’ parents with services.

The new bureaucratic environment also brought into view wider policy goals of neoliberal government. The Victorian public school system was under significant pressure to modernise its infrastructure and pedagogy, aspiring for a technology-rich, team-based approach to teaching and learning encapsulated in rhetoric about schools of the twenty-first century (DEECD 2009a). School regeneration, and timely provision of new educational and community facilities in outer urban growth areas, was in tension with the Victorian government dislike of public debt, an aversion shared by recent Australian governments of social democratic and conservative stripe alike. This opened the door for PPPs in both infrastructure and service provision.

Each of these policy strands was woven into the Derrimut community centre project. The centre was the largest element of a pioneering PPP in the state education sector that brought together government, financial, construction, property management and community service organisations. Global capital flow was illustrated by the Royal Bank of Scotland’s (RBS) presence as the project’s principal financier. The contract for early childhood services – long-day care and preschool – was awarded to the YMCA, which is Australia’s largest recreation services provider but at this time was new to children’s services.

Derrimut’s need for childcare was quickly demonstrated as the centre reached maximum capacity one year after its opening in 2009. However, the partnership’s sustainability, and the community hub concept, was tested by the changing economic, regulatory, social and spatial environments in which it operated. As the service provider, the YMCA bore the brunt of these changes. The policy focus on the quality of childcare and the difficulty of attracting industry workers led to regulatory pressure across Australia to upgrade minimum staff qualifications and remuneration, increase staff-child ratios and extend minimum preschool contact hours. As a participant commented:

Highly regulated so higher risk … that’s what we found … moving into this greenfield sites area … The change in regulations came post our decision to sign … [Our] mission base [is] really strong, but we had a really challenging business model … getting into that space, building a site up from scratch to being financially sustainable. [YMCA official]

Competing jurisdictional priorities brought tensions to the partnership. The project was an example of ‘fast’ policy at work, where state-level plans outpaced local decision-making and budgeting cycles. The state government offered lengthy contract terms to consortium members to increase their return on investment, but this lock in (the YMCA’s contract is 15 years) was in tension with the local government authority’s (LGA) desire to end the contracting-out of childcare services to better manage political and service risks (LGA official). The LGA ‘didn’t necessarily have a good feel’ about the partnership, but the opportunity for the ‘born poor’ council to leverage state government funding to build a new community centre in an under-serviced area was highly attractive (LGA official).

While the co-location of primary schools and educare sites is well-established, and multi-use community facilities commonly incorporate childcare functions to enable carers to participate in recreation activities, conflict between the ethos of accessibility for the community facilities and activities, and the security of children, can be difficult to resolve in such hybrid settings. In Derrimut’s case, while the site is badged as a ‘community centre’, the childcare facilities dominate, both at the physical site, and in its media representation (YMCA
Children’s Services 2015). The gendered nature of the childcare industry – all thirty or so Derrimut centre staff during the study period were women - gave concern during incidents when male ex-partners engaged in threatening behaviour (community centre official). Concerns over the perceived exclusiveness of the precinct also surfaced, with some residents taking the view that the facilities were only available to childcare clients (community centre official). The precinct’s flagship status as a pioneering PPP, promoted in site signage, created further concerns over accessibility for some residents. As a school official commented

They worry that we’re a private school and the fees. I’ve said no, no we’re a public school. We’re a government school.

This may help explain why aspirations for community participation in the governance of the centre were also slow to be realised.

The clustering of services around educational facilities has been criticised as representing ‘a Walmart of human service delivery’ (Clandfield 2010, 44). While achieving economic and service efficiencies through co-location is a prime policy goal of sites such as Derrimut, this criticism seems harsh. Lagging (or non-) provision of social infrastructure has been a significant problem for residents of new housing estates in Australian cities, and Clandfield’s comment underplays the value of proximity for both service providers and consumers. ‘[I]t’s nice being part of the bigger community rather than just working in a childhood centre’ commented a staff member. The co-location of early learning and primary schooling has afforded opportunities to establish a shared educational vision and manage practical issues such as school readiness and transition, and cooperation on traffic management at the busy site (school official). The community centre is used for after school hours care, although space constraints mean the programme is conducted in the ‘community’ section of the building, requiring a high level of staff vigilance over safety and food allergy issues (community centre staff), underscoring tensions arising from the hybrid setting. The maternal and child health service in the centre was quickly and heavily utilised (community centre official), and the YMCA’s experience in community recreation has encouraged experimentation with diverse recreation programmes in a suburb with relatively few recreation options. Other plans were less successful. A room equipped with computers had little use due to lack of staff resources (community centre staff), suggesting the prioritisation of early learning over adult or informal learning opportunities. Similarly, funding constraints prevented the centre from opening at weekends, a paradoxical situation for a ‘community centre’ that frustrated organisations involved in the enterprise (LGA official, YMCA official, community centre staff).

Some of the concerns discussed above are implementation and resourcing issues, while some relate to larger structural challenges of the educare industry. The strains associated with addressing a cluster of policy objectives through the educare model are evident at Derrimut. It is not my purpose here to formally evaluate the Derrimut centre, but to describe through it the complex political and policy environment and institutional settings in which the educare discourse is situated in Australia. The relatively recent roll-out of school-based children’s centres in Australia means there has been limited evaluation of how the model works in practice – a charge that Schmachtel (2015) levels against educational partnerships more broadly. Further work in this area is needed to build empirical evidence through which educare policy mobility, mutation and operationalisation can be more fully mapped and analysed.
Conclusion

In a recent exchange in the Australian Parliament, Prime Minister Tony Abbott jested that the Leader of the Australian Labour Party, the main parliamentary opposition, held the view that children started school as soon as they left the delivery room (Commonwealth Parliamentary Hansard 2015, 67). This article has argued that the underlying premise of ‘educare’ policy in Australia, along with the institutions through which that policy is instrumentalised, assume just what Abbott satirised. In essence, educare policy can be presented as an argument for the careful investment in human capital from the moment of birth. The rhetoric of parents as the child’s first teacher, and the expansion of the Victorian state department of education’s jurisdiction to encompass ‘birth to 8 years’ (DEECD 2009b) points firmly in this direction. As I have argued, a shift from a medicalised paradigm concerned with the biological and psychological development of the child, to a focus on the human capital potential of even the youngest individuals, forms the basis of policy calculations to most effectively realise this potential.

International circuits of knowledge, policy design and institutional models in the educare field have been significant in shaping recent Australian policy. The outcomes of knowledge sharing have ranged from lesson-learning (Hertzman 2002) through to the wholesale replication of programmes (Prochner 2004; Phillips and Ochs 2003). More provocatively, Johnson (1999) suggested that international interest in following the Reggio Emilia preschool programme amounted to a form of hegemony. The strength of policy mobility as a theoretical lens lies in its critique of assumptions about policy-making that underpins much of this field, and second, and in its attention to fluidity and transformation. The mobility lens encourages a return to the descriptive tradition of policy transfer, but in this case, calls for new empirical research on the outcomes of policy mobility and mutation. Analysis of the Derrimut community centre in this article has attempted to do this.

In keeping with the concept of mobility, international policy influences on Australia have not been unidirectional, particularly where researchers and policy-makers in other countries are seeking evidence of long-term outcomes of investment in early years education and care (Wien 2014). It is clear that there is active international research dialogue and ‘distributed expertise’ (Wong, Sumson, and Press 2012) in this field.

I have argued in this article that the educare discourse neatly summarises the policy focus on investment in early years care and education in Australia, while demonstrating how a continuum between ‘care’ and ‘education’ is established in a particular spatial and institutional setting. In its Victorian variant, the discourse underpins a new approach to social infrastructure provision in the outer suburban growth areas of Melbourne. The Derrimut example, though, shows that the multiple policy objectives addressed through this form of neoliberal partnership present practical challenges, particularly in aligning school, early childhood and community settings.

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