A National Demonstration Project based in South Australia using the South Australian Health and Education systems as case studies

Roundtable No 1: October 24th 2008

“Building the resilience of child development systems”

FINAL REPORT

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Sponsor:
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The vital importance of child care, education, health and welfare systems and community services in contributing to healthy, well-adjusted, productively functioning and law abiding citizens who are able to contribute and participate optimally in community life is now widely accepted and increasingly well understood in Australia. So is the fact that early behavioral patterns greatly influence infants in the later years of life. Because the social and emotional well-being of young people in Australia are declining, urgent attention is now being paid to the systems which support and nurture Australian children from before birth to the age of 8 years. High priority has been accorded to this issue by all Australian governments, particularly through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).

A roundtable discussion was held in Adelaide on Friday 24th of October 2008, convened by Australia 21 as part of its program of work on the Resilience of Australia’s Health and Education Systems. The meeting took place following a recent review of early childhood development in South Australia by the 2007 Thinker in Residence, Dr. Fraser Mustard. In his report entitled “Investing in the early years: closing the gap between what we know and what we do”, Mustard developed a series of recommendations that have been supported by the South Australian Government and could transform quite radically, the quality of interactions between families and institutions not only in South Australia, but, in view of the Federal Government’s commitment to reform in this area, across the nation.

The roundtable sought answers to two questions:

- What are the key resilience issues impacting on the development of an Australian integrated early childhood system (incorporating education, parenting support, child care, child health and child development)?
- How can Resilience Theory assist in addressing systems issues such as funding, governance, workforce, community ownership, operation and quality assurance?

The 40 participants included national and international experts on resilience, representatives from both state and federal agencies who work in early childhood development; researchers, community/community services representatives and private practitioners. In preparation for the meeting participants received two discussion papers, the report by Fraser Mustard, an Australia 21 monograph on the question “How Resilient is Australia?” and a series of dot-points prepared by invitees in response to the roundtable questions. The roundtable discussion was structured around small group and plenary discussion of the two questions.

The meeting agreed that the resilience lens offers new insights into what is happening and what could happen in the reform agenda that is now under way. Because it informs issues such as adaptability and transformability, it forces answers to system questions such as

- What precisely is the current Australian child development system?
- What is it attempting to accomplish?
- What are its component parts?
- How do these systems interact with the child and the family?
- How universally accessible are they?
What is the role of the health system in ensuring early childhood development?

What are the factors which threaten their collapse in the face of external shocks, their adaptability and their capacity to transform to (a) more desirable system(s)?

The group recognized that in Australia there is now a once in a lifetime opportunity to evolve quickly towards a new, resilient and equitable national system that places the healthy development of children at the very top of the national agenda. Australia cannot afford to squander this opportunity and allow the reforms that are under way to implement incremental changes to the current vagaries and inconsistencies of terminology, legislation, political fragmentation, accountability and funding that are operating at present.

There are a number of innovative and exciting strategies and activities currently under development at both state and federal levels in areas related to early childhood, particularly education, health and child protection. These are being developed by governments, non-government organisations and the private sector, and they are building on lessons learned and new evidence becoming available both in Australia and internationally. It will be key for the future development of an effective and efficient system that an overarching framework which links and builds on these activities is developed, or the current fragmentation of services and systems will continue. It should be noted that it is the system that is required to change, not merely the services and bureaucracy which are parts of the system.

A newly structured, resilient Australian early childhood development system needs to be self organizing, comprehensive, and capable of adaptation and transformation as needs arise. It needs to have the child and ideally a loving family and socially inclusive community at its operational centre. It needs a comprehensive information system to support it and to monitor its impact. It should be integrated within the local community, incorporate mechanisms for accountability with and to that community, and be responsive to families’ need for, and right to choice.

Developing a system which is equitable, universal and integrated will require very substantial changes in current legislation, workforce, monitoring, and funding mechanisms. Design of the new system needs to build on growing understanding of the operation and resilience of complex adaptive systems. A successful early childhood development policy would increase Australia’s capacity to compete in the globalized knowledge based economies of the 21st-century.

Managing the transition towards the situation envisaged by Fraser Mustard where there could be a reduction by 50% in 20 years of the cost of mental health, addiction, crime and violence will require national leadership at the highest political level as well as in local communities. Champions for the new system will be needed and there is need for national conversations on the topic and its importance.

The group discussed systemic actions needed at federal, state and local levels to create the new national system from the many systems that currently contribute to early childhood development. It was agreed that this development will be as revolutionary and significant in its impact on Australian life as was the introduction of universal primary schooling for Australian children in the nineteenth century.
The new system should be seen as a continuum from the pre-birth period through birth to 8 years of age, without the current artificial divisions of antenatal, 0 - 4 years (currently comprising mainly child care), 4 – 5 years (with significant early childhood learning input) and 5 – 8 years of junior primary school.

The following strategies were identified as requiring broader discussion:

- A national summit to produce an overarching national statement/charter of commitment/intent regarding the importance of early childhood development and the philosophy which guides the national child development policy.

- The development of a set of nationally agreed outcomes for early childhood care and development, and the concurrent development of mechanisms for monitoring these and evaluating their outcomes.

- Elevation of early childhood care and development to full Cabinet status in each jurisdiction around Australia.

- Development of a semi-autonomous authority that will be responsible for monitoring progress and providing financial and information levers to assist in management of the system.

- Audit and rewrite large areas of legislation at both federal and state levels to meet the objectives of the new system.

- Integration into the new system, not only of child care and early learning principles and practice, but also mechanisms for the effective integration of child protection and child and family health systems.

- Development of linkages within local communities and business.

Australia 21 has developed an Early Childhood Learning and Development Advisory Committee to deal in more detail with the matters and questions raised in the Roundtable and to promote consideration of the proposed key strategies.
BACKGROUND

Focus on early childhood

Consensus about the central importance of the first few years in shaping children’s future potential is now being reflected in public policy around the world. The design of new, integrated health, parenting, care and educational services that is now underway for children under eight years in South Australia offers the opportunity for innovation and review of what is needed in 21st-century Australia. The recently released report by Dr. Fraser Mustard, who was Thinker in Residence in South Australia in 2007, has drawn together available information and proposed a way forward for closing the gap between what we know and what we currently do with respect to nurture of children in Australia. Mustard’s report draws from his Canadian and international experience.

The recently released Report Card on the Wellbeing of Young Australians from the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) noted that: despite our economic prosperity, Australian children do not perform as well as modern society would like to think and that the health and safety of Australian children compares unfavourably with the best international results. The Chair of ARACY, Dr Fiona Stanley, notes that addressing these issues is of vital importance, and any initiatives must begin in early childhood.

National and SA developments

The South Australian government has recently indicated its support for the 12 far-reaching recommendations in Dr Mustard’s report. At the same time, the Australian Government is developing new thinking that incorporates fresh ideas about the roles of childhood care and education and development of earlier preschool education and new “one shop stop” child care centres. The Australian Government has a number of other activities underway including:

- national quality standards in child care and preschool
- the Early Years Learning Framework
- universal Access to Early Childhood Education
- the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters
- the National Early Years Workforce Strategy
- the Australian Early Development Index

Australia 21

Australia 21, formed in 2001 is a nonprofit company whose core business is multidisciplinary research and development on issues of strategic importance to

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1 Mustard F (2008). Investing in the Early Years: closing the gap between what we know and what we do. Adelaide Thinker in Residence, Adelaide, Department of Premier and Cabinet
Australia in the 21st century. The organization seeks to bridge the gap between research and policy and to create new "frameworks for understanding" that can be applied to the development of public, corporate and community policy and action.

A major research theme for Australia 21 has been “Human Potential and Young People” and a recent report has identified that the social and emotional well-being of young people in Australia are declining. Eckersley notes that this has implications not only for how we deal with specific current concerns such as child abuse and neglect, obesity, media sexualisation of children, and binge drinking, but for national priorities and public policy more broadly.  

During 2008, Australia 21 has undertaken a number of preliminary activities aimed at the application of Resilience Theory to Australia's health and education systems. With support from the South Australian government and from the University of Adelaide, it established a roundtable of experts in October 2008 to explore the application of Resilience Theory and practice to the development of child development systems. This is seen as a national demonstration project based in South Australia and using the South Australian health and education systems as case studies.

Resilience

In an Australia 21 discussion paper entitled "How Resilient Is Australia?", Cork, Walker and Buckley drew attention to the range of shocks and stresses to which Australian society is likely to be exposed in coming decades. They pointed to the attributes which confer resilience on social and ecological systems and identified a number of recent trends which might be influencing resilience in general and the capacity to manage critical thresholds if and when they arrive. They also called for detailed assessment of social economic and environmental resilience in Australia at various scales and encouraged dialogue and research on these methods.

Resilience Theory can provide a different lens for looking at both the existing and new early childhood development systems. A system which comprehensively meets the needs of all Australian children from the prenatal period to 8 years of age requires flexibility and responsiveness and allows multidisciplinary and intersectoral collaboration, encourages innovation in ideas and alternatives and responds to the "shock" of the changes required to its core culture. By asking questions in a different way, using a resilience viewpoint, we can obtain different answers for issues which have long been identified as problems (eg integration of different organisations and cultures, how to address workforce challenges etc).

THE ADELAIDE ROUNDTABLE OVERVIEW

A roundtable discussion was held at the University of Adelaide on Friday 24th October 2008, convened by Australia 21 as part of its program of work on the Resilience of Australia’s Health and Education Systems.

Over one hundred people from the government, health, education, early childhood learning, childcare, community and research sectors were invited, forty seven people

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accepted the invitation and forty people were able to attend on the day. A full list of Attendees can be found in Appendix 1. The 40 participants included national and international experts on resilience, representatives from both state and federal agencies who work in early childhood development; researchers, private practitioners and community services representatives. In preparation for the meeting, participants received two discussion papers, the report by Fraser Mustard, an Australia 21 monograph on the question “How resilient is Australia?” and a series of dot-points prepared by invitees in response to the roundtable questions. The meeting included small group and plenary discussion seeking answers to two questions:

- What are the key resilience issues impacting on the development of an Australian integrated early childhood system (incorporating education, parenting support, child care, child health and child development)?
- How can Resilience theory assist in addressing systems issues such as funding, governance, workforce, community ownership, operation and quality assurance?

Initial Thoughts from Participants

Roundtable participants were asked to provide up to ten key points that they wished the roundtable to consider in discussing early childhood development and learning. Sixteen participants (including members of the A21 Project Team) responded and there were a number of consistent themes identified in the dot points:

- The need for new systems was emphasised, with the importance of avoiding the replication of old inflexible models being noted as important. It was also noted that whilst a new system is ideal, it may be possible to redirect and modify existing systems through he development of new frameworks and structures.

  The design of new integrated health, parenting, care and education services that is now under way for children under 8 years in South Australia offers the opportunity for innovation and review of what is needed in 21st Century Australia.

  We are clearly creating a new paradigm in relation to early childhood care, learning and development. It is one constructed from a deeper understanding about the link between early nurturing and learning and its lifetime impact that confirms much of what has been intuitively known by practitioners. New structures and new frameworks are necessary to carry new, integrated ways of working into the daily practices of the early childhood development workforce and services.

- Closely aligned with the above was the need to articulate a clear vision for a new system and to consider the various organisational cultures which would be required to work together. This would also require clear system objectives, which should place the children at the centre of the system. Strategies that support a resilience based approach to working in early childhood development might include engagement of staff in the development of a common language and vision (explicit messages).

  The change to the new culture for parents, workers, administrators and children will need to be carefully planned and managed in ways that empower all parties to feel good, develop new confidence in their own judgement and abilities and share in ownership of the new paradigm.
The most important outcome from this new system should be that children are not only physically and mentally strong and healthy, but also that they are resilient people who can absorb and adapt to shocks and perturbations in the environment in which they are developing.

- A number of respondents talked about the need for an integrated system, and the difficulties associated with this (eg professional boundaries, organisational structures, differing cultures, lack of resources silos etc). It was also noted that integrated centres had been developed in the past and it was important to consider the lessons already learned and to educate and resource the various workforces to be able to provide an integrated service.

There are a number of structural barriers, complexities and challenges to effective collaboration and integration in early childhood services. In some Children’s Centres a number of staff report to separate Department management structures. Partner agency staff can be required to follow a number of departmental policy directives and frameworks. The organisational structures essential for effective operational and management decision-making and accountability are not in place which can make integrated governance difficult at a local and program management level.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to integrating child and family services in Australia is the challenge of integrating traditionally ‘siloed’ professions that are also under-resourced, under-funded and have an associated low-status and low-remuneration, and high staff turnover (low worker resilience). Requiring professionals to work in a collaborative way with others requires many resources (training, time to develop relationships and collaborate etc).

However, in developing such an approach, there is a need to be drawing from the past in order to retain those aspects of policy and programs that have worked well.

- The importance of effective change management strategies was identified by some respondents, who emphasised the need to identify key variables, resistance to change, engaging staff, training, public awareness etc.

Old paradigm structures conspire to maintain the status quo. We can’t forget the significant role of the intangible human factor: the place of relationships which are grounded in beliefs and attitudes in translating frameworks into practice.

Strategies that support a resilience based approach to working in early childhood development might include:

- Engagement of staff in the development of a common language and vision (explicit messages)
- Development of processes and structures that support collaboration, coordination and integration i.e. governance models, regional networks, transparent and shared budgets and staffing resources, single entry points for registration and enrolments of children and families, minimal standards and expectations for staff
- Across discipline professional development and training
- Improved public awareness of early childhood development

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8 Specifically those working in child care and early childhood education
A number of respondents commented on the importance of the development of appropriate operational variables. A key variable was workforce, with respondents emphasising the importance of training, flexibility, productivity and sustainability. Frameworks such as governance, legislation and strategic planning were seen as core for the new paradigm, as were structures which ensure that services are engaged with communities, and particular consideration should be given to vulnerable families.

The critical operational variables on which the new systems depend will include staff trained and confident in the new paradigm, governance structures which are integrative and inclusive of each of the components that make up the suite of services that are offered, and are flexible to change as the new system is rolled out parents who value and understand the purposes and benefits of the new approach to caring for our young and are partners in the process resources that are adequate, predictable and responsive to changing circumstances.

Governments can influence a number of factors in child care centres that impact on the child care environment, such as requirement to provide trained staff, child / staff ratios, outside play areas, clean healthy environments.

Supporting an alternative approach to working with vulnerable families requires a change in the working relationships and practices of staff and in the cultures of organisations.

The importance of Resilience in early childhood systems was noted by a number of respondents, particularly in relation to the development of integrated systems. It was noted that building resilience in individuals is also important for building the resilience of systems. The importance of strategic planning and resilience was also noted.

For the Health and Education systems to function effectively together, they must become flexible and responsive systems which allow multidisciplinary and intersectoral collaboration, encourage innovation in ideas and alternatives and are able to respond to the “shock” of the changes to their core cultures.

Resilience theory can provide a framework for identifying the core elements which can contribute to, or impede the development of such systems.

Children’s resilience (from health threats or education threats) is strongly influenced by their families basic socio-economic characteristics.

Building resilience, the capacity of individuals and organisations to effectively manage and recover from adversity and better still, to thrive, is a critical component of early childhood development for both individuals and the sector. It is particularly the case for vulnerable children and families.

Resilience as a nation is reliant on the strength and resilience of individuals within that nation therefore in order for Australia to experience resilience in the future, resilience must be developed in our children now.

Resilience theory allows us to explore the development of integrated systems and how they might interact in the area of early childhood care and education.
• The final key theme arising from the Dot Point Summary was also the most common theme – the central importance of maintaining the health and wellbeing of children. This included some discussion of both child protection and the importance of addressing systemic inequities.

*Children learn readily in early years, but without care and a healthy life this learning can go astray. In early years children form the vision for their future, without this they have no means to stay afloat in difficult times.*

*There are systemic inequities in the current systems, including the funding of childcare, access to child care facilities, access to early intervention and developmental services and services for families at risk. Indigenous children in particular, in many areas, are poorly serviced by early childhood services.*

*The major predictor of childhood resilience is considered to be early relationships; “the single most deleterious risk is the sustained presence of neglect and abuse and conversely, committed, loving relationships have high protective potential.” Thus improving parent-child, caregiver-child, teacher-child or peer-peer relationships is paramount in improving resilience (or a good outcome) for children.*

*All current systems are failing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We must look to do things differently, and in doing so, by meeting the needs of the most vulnerable, we will achieve benefits for all Australians.*

*Welfare and child protection systems cannot be left out of this equation as at first glance they have been.*

**Introductory Papers**

• Professor Bob Douglas introduced the roundtable noting that it was part of a broader Australia 21 research program looking at resilience in the health and education systems in South Australia. He welcomed participants, noting the very broad range of expertise present, and outlined the questions to be addressed throughout the day.

• Two introductory papers were presented at the Roundtable.

1. Steve Cork provided some key points on resilience, highlighting five areas of research on the application of resilience thinking to complex systems including the ability of systems to absorb disturbance and to keep functioning in roughly the same way and to maintain roughly the same identity, the need to consider the whole system, the importance of considering the systems surrounding the system being examined, the need to distinguish between different types of resilience and a core principle of resilience being the need for the system to self organise.

2. Teresa Burgess discussed the issue of developing integrated systems, noting the importance of a shared understanding of both what constitutes the systems to be integrated, and what integration itself means. She noted that there were few such opportunities for reform as the one currently available, and that it was important to identify the core elements required for an integrated system, and to work together to establish this.
DISCUSSION OF KEY THEMES

As noted previously, the structure of the roundtable included small group sessions where participants were asked to discuss specific aspects of the questions for the day, and then each small group reported back key points from their discussion, and the discussion was opened to the whole group. Small group discussions were not recorded and transcribed, although small groups were asked to write the main outcomes of their discussions on butcher’s paper which was then placed on the wall for all participants to read. All the reports back from the small groups, and subsequent plenary discussions were recorded and transcribed, as was the final session of the day, which asked participants to describe the key messages they would like the roundtable to record. The themes recorded below were derived from the transcripts from these sessions. A draft transcript was returned to all participants for review and amendment if required, and once the transcript was finalised, thematic analysis was undertaken using the QSR NVivo 8 software package.

A number of key themes clearly arose from the discussions, and these fell into five main categories:

1. Developing an Overarching Goal and Philosophy
2. Legislation, Regulation and Leadership
3. The central importance of the family and community
4. Mapping the existing systems and defining the new system
5. Social Change and the role of the Media

It should be noted that, in discussing early childhood care and development and integration of systems, there was a difference in understanding of these terms amongst participants. Integrated services were sometimes referred to as meaning integration of childcare and early childhood education services, whilst at other times, integration referred to all systems related to early childhood including education, childcare, health and child protection. The issue of establishing shared meanings and terminology between different key stakeholders was highlighted in the discussion. There was also some confusion between developing a new, integrated system and developing new integrated services.

1. Developing an Overarching Philosophy, Goal, Outcomes and Principles of Effective Practice

- Two key themes arose under this topic – the need for an overarching philosophy to guide the development of a new system, and the development of shared understandings of the principles and objectives underlying this.
- It was noted that there was currently no conceptual statement of what the early childhood system is trying to do for our children in Australia and that, rather than having a statement on what young children need to flourish, the question seems to be what can my professional group do to meet the needs of children? It was further noted that, whilst there may be a philosophy articulated at a local service centre level, there is no overarching philosophy driving government policy making, and no national conversation driving the development of such a philosophy.
There were a number of suggestions about what the underlying driver of such a philosophy might be, and a clear articulation of what we wanted early childhood systems to achieve:

our response to this issue has got to be to raise the bar in terms of thinking about what children need.

In all of our thinking we have to ask “What is this system doing for children?”

But what I think we need to add to this discussion is to ask the question “What do we want the centres to do? Do we want them to be respite areas for parents where people are seen as experts and where parents are not seen as experts? Or do we see the services as something that is complementary and supplementary to what parents do in the home?

We’ve talked about love; we’ve talked about care; we’ve talked about education….. We’re all focused on care education and health because those are the things we can intervene in. And it seems to me that in those first five years when it is so critical for children to get love and to build their self-esteem it is not easy for us to intervene directly. It all depends upon things like workforce, lifestyles, and the other systems in which it is very difficult to intervene

In terms of developing a shared understanding, the key themes arising were the need for consistent and agreed terminology/language and agreed outcomes for what the system is trying to achieve.

… the need for a shared understanding of the principles and the objectives of the service we are delivering. When working together we must emphasize the need to develop this shared understanding

We certainly need to focus on the language and the terminology

[in the ALP’s 2007 Federal Election three main early childhood policies]…..there were over 180 terms with overlapping interpretations. We need some cohesion in the terminology and to whittle some of them back a bit.

You have to have the aims and objectives at the top and get down progressively to the programs and specific activities. We clearly start with these quite heady aims and develop below that an articulation the way the activities meet these objectives.

2. Legislation, Regulation, Policy and Leadership

The need for legislation to provide a framework for systems sustainability was discussed, and the UK Children’s Act 2004 was cited as a useful example. Legislation was also noted as important for mandating accountability, particularly if services are to be integrated. The need to review existing legislation, and alter it as required was noted as also important to allow integration of services.

The legislation is there in the UK and the point is absolutely correct that legislation is essential.

I want to come back to the point made earlier about the importance of having a legislative framework. If you don't have legislation that mandates accountability you don’t have anything to which local service development and providers, trying to work together can be accountable to
We identified a feature of those past experiences which could enable the future paradigm shift. While there were local grassroots initiatives supported often by individuals and communities, the people moved on. The initiative was not sustained. So we see an important issue in relation to systemic will and intent that will be illustrated through policy and legislative frameworks.

… there is an awful lot of legislation about that needs to either be altered or modified in an effort to create a more integrated system. It was suggested that we need a very careful audit of all of the legislation as it impacts on all of these issues. The legislation is both federal and state and impacts on what happens in the first eight years of life.

- The key theme arising around the issue of Regulation was the need to be very careful in implementing regulations, because of a real danger of increasing system inflexibilities, and developing a system of blame. It was also noted that rules and regulations can be developed with one intent, but can have significant unwanted consequences, and that if we develop a new system, existing regulations may no longer be valid.

There would be dangers in having a strict and mandated regime about how to take things forward. Fixed protocols will be the enemy of flexibility was that needed.

We also saw the accreditation processes as often being an inhibitor to good function. An over-regulated system can keep out some of the most important elements of the system such as grandparents.

Somehow though, we’ve been seduced by the Americans and others into an accountability system of blame. So when people make judgments that are wrong, we want to sue them or do nasty things to them. The whole business of bringing up children involves a series of judgments. The whole business about relating to people is a series of judgments.

….. But then when we intervene we get these secondary effects. And we might start to produce unintended secondary effects on families that are already moving well and positively. When we changed the elements of the system, the system changes in ways, some of which may be positive and some of which may be negative. We make all these regulations and rules with good intent. But often with a very small group in mind. What has been reinforced for me today is the need not to undo the good that is done within the family.

….. But the system needs to have flexibility and responsiveness about it. And when we commit ourselves to that we are cutting right across regulation and the legal issues.

- Clear and strong leadership was identified by a number of participants as vital for the development of any new system, particularly a leadership that had a vision for what the system could achieve. It was further noted that leadership was required at both a systems and an institutional level.

And this leads on directly to the need for clear and strong leadership. Breaking down the different silos in terms of the components of the various systems is going to require strong leadership before we can proceed to integrating these components.

The second point is that we cannot afford to forget that leadership is the absolute key to these institutions.
The other issue relates to leadership. …… Leadership is very important and if people have a community focus on engaging people then it will be a much more integrated outcome.

- One issue that was raised was the difficulty of finding and nurturing leaders, and how to develop leadership in our existing systems.

  How do we develop leadership in the systems that exist and how do we ensure that there is a return on investment?

  I am struck by the needs of leadership and the need to identify the leadership qualities that we need to promote. I have been thinking about things like creative entrepreneurship, visionary team building, and people in the community being able to plan and establish the centres that they need

- A closely related theme to leadership, was the need to develop high level support for a new system, at a ministerial level. There was discussion around whether there should be one specific Ministry devoted to early childhood, or whether all Ministries should have some level of responsibility for this, or whether a combination of these responsibilities was most appropriate. Another suggestion was that Early Childhood should be specifically represented at Cabinet level

  Eight [OECD] countries have moved to a single minister for this function. What we’ve done here is to split it back out into three. It seems rather sad in view of the fact that for years Education was in a strong position to handle this issue.

  I tend to agree but I also know that ministries have formed for all sorts of reasons. One of the things that happened in British Columbia is that ministers were required to report on elements of their ministry which bore on early childhood development.

  From my government experience, I think a lead minister having the authority to require other ministries and departments to report on their contribution would be a useful way to proceed.

  Doesn’t every minister have a link to children? Perhaps it is about children becoming a national priority. Under these circumstances, all ministers would be required to report progress in this priority.

  I was thinking about the comment about a single ministry. And I thought we don’t have a single ministry for the Air Force and one Army and one for the Navy. We have a Ministry for Defence. And we have branches that operate underneath it because it has to be an integrated defence system.

  It looks to me that the main task for the Ministers is relational and integrating. The ministers need somehow to transcend professional institutional and personal boundaries.

  ….. this issue is so important that it needs a full Cabinet Ministry at the federal level that takes the resources that are currently going into children 0-8 from health, education and child care and says this is a new system we are creating. If you are talking about a revolution that is the sort of process but I think you have to engage in.

  I love the suggestion about elevating Maxine McKew to the cabinet because I think one of the really critical things is to pull together the threads that exist in various departments.
It was agreed that it was vital to develop and promote the political will for change, and to create support from the community itself. The need for champions to help engender this support was endorsed.

we also need to capture the hearts and minds of our politicians

We really need the political will and when I see a system here where we have suddenly split education care and families back into three ministries I despair

We need to find ways of bringing government, industry and the whole community into a recognition of the importance of this field.

Champions are needed in key areas. They need to be able to impress powerful chief executives on boards and ministers. We need leaders who speak well and we need to find ways of working with the private professions.

…. and the need for high-level champions who will integrate across health, education welfare and child care

But we also saw the need to build leadership for this issue in government industry and institutions. We need to identify champions.

I think we have agreed on the need for leadership and champions.

One suggestion that engendered a significant amount of discussion was the establishment of an independent statutory body charged with overseeing early childhood development and learning. The Reserve Bank Board was the initial analogy, but it was agreed that perhaps this was not the most appropriate model, with other models such as Reconciliation Australia being cited. There was agreement however, that this body should have power, not just be advisory.

The discussion on our table began with the question “What would happen if there was a group like the Reserve Bank Board which had an overseeing role looking at some of the parameters of health and education?”

So it wouldn’t have a short-term political status, but would provide feedback to a whole range of services; would allow for flexibility, community ownership and would identify key operational parameters. These parameters will be changing and not fixed over time; they would be focusing on the improvements that are needed and the goals that are set.

Just to talk a little more about the Reserve Bank issue. What they do is set the economy at a little distance. They say we’ve got targets we want you to meet and we’ll give you some levers to pull. Turnbull and Rudd could do their damnedest yesterday but certain controls in the system are out of their reach. When you have long-term goals in mind, if you aim to achieve the sorts of changes that we have been talking about, we have to think about a five-year and a 10 year window and not many governments are thinking at that level.

I think the analogy with the Reserve Bank Board is an interesting one. The board takes control of one thing, interest rates. And they target one thing generally which is inflation. There’s a big debate about whether they should even take into account unemployment at all. And of course the fiscal side of the policy is controlled by the government. The difficult area here when we apply to early childhood development is what is the policy lever that the Board equivalent would control? Would it be expenditure, or would it be something around standards and accreditation? But I think the Reserve Bank analogy highlights the issue nicely.
3. The central importance of the family and community

- By far the most common themes arising throughout the day were around the importance of keeping children and families at the centre of the system. This was closely linked to ensuring the system supported parents in their parenting and involved them in their care, and that local community governance was key system element. It was further noted that that funding is core issue in ensuring the primacy of child and family and current mechanisms do not support this.

  The first point is to build up genuine partnerships with families so that they have a role in shaping and designing service delivery

  I think it is very important to start with the child. And build the system around the child as a starting point

  It looks like our recommendation firstly that the health and well-being of children, families and their communities should be the national priority and that finances, institutions and systems should be there to support them. We need not to undo the good things that families are doing

  Secondly, I would like to think we could move forward with local community governance as a flagship for what we do. And that the governance that develops is overseeing a community planned for children that is open to partnerships that are inclusive. They should be inclusive of families in every meaning of that word, business and cultural leaders and so on. And I would see the local area having the responsibility and the capacity for implementing the national agenda

  ....was to develop outcomes with communities driven by communities and second was to have services at the local level accountable to the community for those outcomes. So what we say we are going to do is to determine with families the services they need and report back to them on how well those services have done. So we're suggesting that systems need to individually determine at the local level the outcomes they are seeking

  We want to start from the family and focus on the child and family and hope that money will follow the child and family as it does in some countries.

  I think the response is first it is a system and secondly it is focused on the child and the benefits that flow to the child.

  We felt that the system must support the parents and enhance their parenting skills;

  The system must be culturally responsive and attractive to parents

- The other major theme arising in this area was the need for the system to empower both children and parents, and there was discussion around the role of the “child as citizen” and the implications this may have for the development of any new system

  I think the desirable outcome of all child programs is that they should empower children to become responsible citizens and also should empower parents to support their children. I have great concerns that we taking away from parents the capacity to be parents. I think we are also pampering children so that they don't know how to walk in a straight line anymore. And there is a danger that parents may feel that professionals can do things better than they can. If we are serious about the expectation that there will be a revolution in this area, we have to look at what is already out there and utilize that
If we start with the objective of creating a resilient child, that will in turn require a resilient system. That means a system that empowers children to achieve this. It's not just about rights but also a responsibility. It is about empowering children.

If we situate what we are doing within a child rights framework, we have to be looking at questions such as what does a child need to become a good citizen, what are society’s responsibilities to the child.

4. Mapping the existing systems and defining the new system

The majority of the Roundtable discussions were focussed around what an integrated system might look and what the core elements for its functioning might comprise. A number of themes arose from these discussions including:

- Existing services and lessons learned
- A Universal System and Integration
- Workforce issues
- Cost
- The role of resilience and the importance of flexibility
- Identifying and enlarging the evidence base

Existing services and lessons learned

- A recurring theme at the Roundtable was that the discussion about an integrated early childhood system has been ongoing for a number of years, and there were many examples of existing integrated services, which we should learn from:

  …in 2008 we are still talking about a number of things that many of us were talking about 20 years ago? In fact, we weren't just talking about it, we were doing it. We identified a feature of those past experiences which could enable the future paradigm shift.

  Overall we need to recall that we do have a system which while it has flaws has some very good features. We need to grab with both hands the opportunities that seem to be opening up.

  it is really important that we acknowledge that this issue has been around for a long time. And that good work has already been done. But we also need to acknowledge that the time is right to create a real shift in early childhood systems.

  there are examples operating in South Australia where integration is working well. Drawing on those experiences in the development of the overall system will be very important.

  There are many professionals in the system who have been working very effectively in this field for a very long time. They need to be acknowledged, consulted and allowed to share in the extended provision of services. And they need to be integrated into the new system rather than being made to feel that what they did is history and now we are going forward.

  In the childcare centre that I led, we had 120 children attending preschool. Some of them used childcare and some didn't. We had 100 children came for
occasional care each week though they were different children on most weeks. We had a community health service there where I could go and discuss issues. It was not a single entry point and they could come to me or I could go to them. …… It was about using what we had in the community and using those resources to make them work for the kids who walked through the door.

we need to recognize that there are some excellent examples of integrated care and it is proven that it can be done. But it has not yet been able to be translated more broadly. We have to ask the question why haven't they? What we have just heard sounds fantastic. But every service is not like that. Unless we can make them all like that we simply increasing the inequities of the system.

A Universal System

- There was considerable discussion about early learning systems, and it was evident that there were a number of different understandings of what system/s comprised the early childhood sector, and some blurring of the distinction between services and the systems in which they are embedded.

But we also need to acknowledge that the time is right to create a real shift in early childhood systems …….. I think it is very important to start with the child. And build the system around the child as a starting point. We are not talking here about bricks and mortar but about relationships. But the system needs to have flexibility and responsiveness about it.

….we should think about systems not a single system. If I was designing this process I think I would be saying something like “I want to achieve certain goals in local communities. They need to be realistic goals that you set for one year and then five years and for 10 years. They may be health education goals and then I want you to work within certain parameters. I want to see evidence that there is local governance going on. I want to see evidence that enrolment includes a broad cross-section not simply the middle class whatever it is that you setup. …….. None of us are in a position to assess at the present time whether our early childhood system is working or not. And I would also like to see us add an "s” to the word system

We agreed that services need to be able to provide a long-term commitment and connection, and that this should begin at the antenatal period. They need to be flexible and informal with diverse systems to meet diverse needs.

It seems to me that what is clearly needed is coherence in the system. It is not at present a system but a whole bunch of activities that are not being brought together. That doesn't mean that there aren't instances where there is a coherent system in place. There are apparently examples where it happens and can happen but it is apparently not happening in early childhood in Australia at present.

- Closely linked to the discussion about systems was the issue of integration. Again, it was clear there was no shared understanding of what an integrated system was, and what elements were to be integrated.

We thought that in South Australia already, there is real effort to get integration across governments departments
How the system works at any time depends on the rules - that is the rules that govern the way that system works. We agreed that as a first point the rules have to be embedded in a multi-scale distributed governance system. Not every rule is made at the top government level. It is made at the appropriate scale. There is a whole body of literature on distributed governance which needs to be considered. So what are the rules? They range from the Constitution at the very highest level through legislative rules and local government regulations. All the way down to behavioural norms. The dynamics and the direction of the system and ultimately the welfare of the child will change when the rules change. … But we need to see the system as something like this as a linked up dynamic system that is going to be functioning and changing as the rules change. You change the rules and you change the system.

To me, the early childhood agenda needs to consider above all the way the people working in the field can build relationships across sectors and disciplines

In the end I concluded that there are different levels of integration. I know we have had discussions today about what integration means. Whether it is the co-location of services or the way people work together; this is a conversation that is going to go on for a while…… And then I felt maybe the government doesn't know what integration is. Maybe the policies simply reflect the existing fragmentation of activities. . I don't think the government should get off the hook where integration is concerned I think it does need to be a shared responsibility and if we're going to do it well it has to be supported all the way down. Bricks and mortar is just the beginning and just like if we want health creation over wealth creation; we can work towards integration over co-location.

Integrated primary health care services may be desirable but not essential provided there is integrated access. We also discussed the issue of linking families to other families.

…there needs to be a bigger focus on how those health services interact or integrate with the early development initiative. We heard about ways in which that informal integration occurred in one integrated centre. That was terrific. How do we enable that to happen across the entire system?

Workforce

- A variety of workforce issues were raised throughout the Roundtable and there were some recurring themes, particularly around the under-valuing of the child care/early learning workforce, and what constituted appropriate training.

  But the message out there is that we do not value them and pay them garbage collector rates.

  There is a real problem of people currently working in this area feeling that they are not valued and certainly their pay rates would give them that message

  One of the things I think we do need to look at is career and learning pathways. We need more information about what happens to people trained and whether they staying in the industry. Work needs to be done on the way
workplaces are resourced and how you attract people into these new settings. It is about work environments and it comes back again to how society values the functions we are discussing. It is a little bit about women’s work and about awards and there are complex issues relating to the higher education system on this issue

We think that training in child care requires a major restructuring. …. We believe that within universities individuals hang on to their faculties and their turf. For us the workforce issues are really important and very expensive. We need imaginative ways of dealing with universities and in-service training bodies

- There was some discussion around the educational needs of the early childhood workforce, and the key requirements of the workforce. There were also some suggestions around whether a different type of training was required.

While we recognize that it must be staffed by educated people, those people must also reflect a passion for what they are doing. Qualification on its own is not necessarily a reflection of whether you have the right person working with children.

We also had some discussion about grandparents. They are an integral part of the family system

… do we need a new kind of workforce person? And what I’m wondering is whether we need a multi-focus broker who is expert in understanding the range of issues that parents and children need help for and knows how to access specialist help when it is needed. Is that a function that people are already filling? Is there a need for a new kind of multi-skilled person who understands the contributions that the various health professionals and educators and therapists can play in helping to promote child development. It seems to me that from a health perspective there are a whole range of issues such as neurology, vision, hearing, developmental delay, autistic tendencies and so on. Do we need a brokering kind of person in every unit of population? Is that what social workers do or do we need a new multipurpose child care worker

… looking at the workforce development for the early childhood centers, in view of developing strategy here: we have been exploring ways in which a whole range of professionals can operate from a community base. Such people need to be able to work in a team-based environment as well. When people with a specific discipline worked in an integrated service, they have to look holistically at the child and in a family sense. The primary healthcare setting requires that you do have a range of brokering skills. But everybody in that setting needs such brokering skills.

Do we need every person working in an early childhood care and education centre to be university trained? Is that what we want? And what does that then mean for the aims and objectives that we might be developing for the system? Perhaps we don’t need everybody to be university trained. I’m not certain about that. Perhaps it is a question of competency. Is there a way in which can look differently at the workforce requirements in these child care centers? Perhaps we could use a skills approach as a mechanism for change in these centers. Perhaps we should not be so careful about the idea of an educator
having to educate children and the doctor or nurse having to look after the health of the children. Is there some way at some level whereby some of these diverse services that can be provided by someone with broad functional capacity?

- Paid parental leave was also discussed as key issue both relating to workforce issues, and as a key component of a resilient early childhood development system, allowing parents to be with their children at a time when attachment is such a key issue.

*We are late with maternity leave. There are only two countries America and US left in the developed world which don't have it;*

*…families are the main component of the attachment network. What can we do to help parents to love their kids? The first thing would be giving them the time and place to do that.*

**Cost**

- It was recognised that any major change to systems will carry a significant cost, and that early childhood competes with other systems and imperatives for government funding

*Underlying all of this is more money. If we don’t have the money none of this will happen.*

*The next thing is the question of money. With the massive turnover of staff in child care centres and the fact that there is no in-service and very poor money, you are committed to fail.*

*People have talked about the money following the child but the money available at the moment is a drop in the ocean. We have now committed to very vast sums indeed. Don't forget that 70% of child care is private. And to go anywhere near matching the system that applies in Scandinavia, you would have to put in something like four times the current allowance to the child. That is a lot of money.*

*The other comment that was made was that when you have a government that has got to put money towards early childhood versus something else - there is a tendency to say what is not working in early childhood and a danger that the money will drift to other areas.*

- A key issue raised was that there is already a significant amount of government funding spent on early childhood via various taxation options, and it was queried whether this should be reviewed and revised.

*I want to draw attention to Australia’s taxation system and the benefits which go to families in the name of the children. If we are mapping legislation we should also be mapping the way tax dollars are spent and directed towards the well-being of children.*

*We spent some time in our group talking about the fact that there is a huge amount of money currently committed in the system of child welfare and development. We need to recognize that government is financially very committed in this area through issues such as the family benefit allowances. We pay money from the federal government to individuals to have children. The question was raised whether we are using tax dollars appropriately in the support area.*
We talked a little about what financial resources might be needed. There are a range of ways in which financial support could be provided including through the tax system child cash benefits and there may also be the possibility of some in-kind and free service provision. We also had some discussion about the value of vouchers in providing access.

The role of resilience and the importance of flexibility

- The importance of having an adaptable and flexible system was discussed throughout the day, particularly in relation to allowing the child and family to be at the centre of the system. The need for the system to be self-organising was also emphasised on a number of occasions.

  *It means we need to encourage self organization and adaptability within the parts of the system .... But we must also have different ways of looking at things and organizing that enable this diversity and adaptability we are saying that the child must be at the centre of the system ... And that the family and attachment system which includes grandparents and friends must be in a position to support the child. ... The institution and high level system must support and make input into these two elements instead of doing the job for them.*

  *Well functioning and adaptive systems (we do not want to use the word resilient) including the child and well functioning and adaptive families systems should be integrated, self organizing, flexible and adaptive.*

  *In talking about an integrated national scale system like this, it is proper for the top level of government to establish the strategic process. But it is also much more efficacious to have tactical implementation of that strategy at the low levels of the system. We have been talking quite a lot here about devolution. The more devolution you have, the more resilient the system will be. Where the rubber hits the road, we need to have changes taking place at the tactical and peripheral level.*

  *The rights context allows us to ask different questions. We also focused on the issue of rigidity and the need for flexible responses within systems.*

  *We saw as a mechanism for meeting this goal that we would need to develop an integrated and resilient system that promotes this goal at federal, state, local and family levels. And the objective would also be to integrate across disciplines and institutions resilient policy needs to be self organizing and adaptive.*

  *... developing a system with very good centres and services across the whole range is a huge challenge the size of which has been probably underestimated, but it is very important that the development is seen as a resilient one.*

Identifying and enlarging the evidence base

- The need to increase the evidence base on what constitutes effective early childhood systems in the Australian context was another key theme of the Roundtable. It was agreed that evaluation and monitoring should be a key consideration in system development.
....there needs to be much more evidence on which the systems decisions are made. This area has not had either the capacity or the funding to carry out this research in the past. In some ways we are running blind on this topic. We need to have information about outcomes, of the kinds of intervention that we are devising.

...here is the monitoring and evaluation which is crucial to all elements of the system. So the child models itself on and reports to families and families monitor children and report to the children. This group of officials monitors the community and the family and the child all of these out to why arrows and reporting structures as well.

...... whatever we do it must be grounded in an evidence-based framework. that builds on what we know about what children need to flourish at all stages. From conception to whatever age cut off we decide to use

The other thing that seemed to hold back government expenditure was the lack of good evidence. There was a need to assemble evidence that a return on investment in this area would be sizable.

We need more information about what happens to people trained and whether they staying in the industry. Work needs to be done on the way workplaces are resourced and how you attract people into these new settings.

5. Social Change and the role of the Media

- A series of themes were identified throughout the day that fell broadly into the category of social functioning and change. These encompassed the health and wellbeing of young people, changes to extended families and associated supports, social cohesion, the way systems are functioning and support for the role of parents

...... higher scale social changes that are impacting on the health and well-being of young people. These higher order changes are in turn putting pressure on the various components of the system and jeopardizing their resilience and their capacity to cope. These include historical and cultural shifts in the role of communities, extended families, and grandparents in raising children. This leads to a need for the state to become involved in helping to strengthening these roles.

...... issues of social cohesion and trust and while there is difficulty in determining exactly what government should do about this, it must be a central part of the system.

...... The fundamental cultural social and political directions of a society would seem to be detrimental to the health of young people. This seems to be true even of modern social democracies like Sweden even though the Scandinavians may be doing a lot better than those in the English-speaking world. Even though the evidence surrounding trends is very contentious, we have a situation where according to one major recent survey for example about 30 or 40% of young children in Australia are now scoring at low levels of social and emotional well-being. That represents a huge burden to the welfare system, the education system, the childcare system and this is one of the things that I think is impacting on the resilience and efficacy of the systems that are in place that forces us to make some changes.
There is a concern arising from the childcare sector that in some instances, parents appear to have lost trust in their own parenting abilities. In some places, we are finding childcare systems being seen not just as an alternative but more than an alternative and that there is a in some places a prevailing view that child care is essential for children to become more socialized.

When we are thinking about these systems, it is not just whether the bits are there, but whether there is enough in investment in the bits and whether they are interacting in informative ways.

- The increasing importance of the media in shaping the messages children receive about society and how it is impacting on child development were raised as major concerns, and it was also noted that the media could in fact be used to deliver positive messages, and to help lead a national discussion on these areas:

  While this is taking place, we are leaving the media to run rampant without any restriction on the messages that are getting to children. On the one hand there are regulations to protect and other areas that are completely let go.

  .. if we are talking about the efficacy of child development systems, why do we leave the mass media out of this? It is a system that has a profound impact on the system of child development ..... now the media are having independently a huge influence on kids. Their influence is not mediated through family or school. These have largely disappeared into the background. The media and TV in particular are now a powerful contributor to the systems that are impacting on the child's development.

  Thinking of the media and how to use it in a role that is a constructive leadership role in relation to the ideas we have been discussing today, it seems to me we should be working out how to use the media to strengthen rather than weaken those early years of experience. Perhaps we should be using the media to discuss these matters more fully.

QUESTIONS ARISING FROM THE ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

In reviewing the key themes that arose from the Roundtable, a number of questions were posed which have not yet been answered. It is suggested that the next step of the Roundtable process is to begin identifying answers to these questions, and given the emphasis in the Roundtable of the need for systems to be flexible and adaptable, and to consider their context and environment, using a resilience lens when considering these questions would seem to provide a very appropriate framework.

Key questions arising include:

1. What is the most appropriate framework to support the development of a comprehensive early childhood care and development system (which includes antenatal care, family support, parental leave, childcare, early leaning and transition to formal schooling) and which places the child and family at its centre?

   a. Given the vital role of role of parents in early childhood care and development, how can parental support (including universal paid parenting leave, which is a fundamental to building a resilient system for early childhood care and development in Australia) become an integral part of the system and its associated services?
b. How can this system ensure that there is equity of access for all Australian children to the system and its associated services— and encompass/integrate with industry, business and the wider community?

c. What mechanisms are required to ensure that local communities are involved in the early childhood care and development?

d. How can this system reflect a continuum of learning from before birth to 8 years, rather than a fragmented approach of antenatal, 0 – 4yrs, 4 – 5yrs and 5 -8 yrs as is often currently seen?

2. What framework can be used to develop an overarching philosophy to support the development of such a national system?

a. What are the short and long term outcomes Australians can expect of from a national system?

b. What is an appropriate accountability framework for such a philosophy and specified outcomes?

3. Is the establishment of an independent statutory authority with responsibility for early childhood care and development an appropriate and useful governance mechanism?

4. What is the role of informal carers (eg grandparents) in the workforce of a system that puts the child and family at its centre?

5. How can the four key systems most closely involved in early childhood care and development (Education, Childcare, Health and Child Protection) interact to produce such a system?

a. Should this be integrated system, and if so, what level of integration should be aimed for and indeed, what does integration mean in this context?

6. How can the lessons learned from past and current best practice in integrated early childhood care and development be incorporated into current processes?

a. Are policy and legislative mechanisms useful in ensuring the sustainability of lessons learned?

7. Can the current funding mechanisms related to early childhood (including taxation) be more effectively structured and utilised?

8. What are the key requirements of the workforce for a comprehensive early childhood care and development system?

a. Are new roles required to be developed?

b. Should skills in strategic planning and working in an integrated context be core competencies for this role?

c. What career development and learning pathways can be defined?

d. Should there be an investigation into the work value and pay equity of current early childhood development and care workers?

9. How can the role of the media in early childhood care and development be better utilised to promote a national discussion around an effective early childhood care and development system and to support early childhood care and development?
10. How can ongoing monitoring and evaluation processes be effectively incorporated into a comprehensive early childhood care and development system?

KEY STRATEGIES

A number of strategies have been identified which could assist in answering the questions arising from the Roundtable and contribute to the development of a required national framework for early childhood learning and development:

- A national summit to produce an overarching national statement/charter of commitment/intent regarding the importance of early childhood development and the philosophy which guides the national child development policy. It is suggested that a critical characteristic of the national statement would be a recognition of the centrality of the child and family in any early childhood care and development system. This could link with the current work on revising the National Goals for Schooling – indeed a complementary charter on early childhood learning and development could be written.

- The development of agreed outcomes for early childhood care and development, and the concurrent development of mechanisms for monitoring these and evaluating their outcomes

- Elevation of early childhood care and development to full Cabinet status in the federal, state and territory governments around Australia.

- Development of a semi-autonomous authority that will be responsible for monitoring progress and providing financial and information levers to assist in management of the system.

- Audit and rewrite of large areas of legislation at both federal and state levels to meet the objectives of the new system.

- Development of (a) system (s) which integrates not only child care and early learning principles and practice, but also develops mechanisms for the effective integration of child protection and child health systems, as well as linking this system closely to the community and business.

- Development of a comprehensive reform process to create and support an integrated, resilient early childhood development system

An Early Childhood Learning and Development Advisory Committee has been established to deal in more detail with the matters and questions raised in the Roundtable and to move forward the proposed key strategies.
# ROUNTABLE ATTENDANCES

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