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### **Influences on politicians' decision making for early childhood education and care policy: What do we know? What don't we know?**

Kathryn Bown\*

Jennifer Sumsion

Frances Press

*Charles Sturt University*

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**\* Contact Author:**

[kbown@csu.edu.au](mailto:kbown@csu.edu.au)

School of Teacher Education

Charles Sturt University

Panorama Ave

Bathurst NSW 2795

## **Abstract**

Politicians play a key role in determining policy content and outcomes for early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Brennan, 1998a). As a result, the quality of formal ECEC provisions for children rests to a considerable extent on the policy decisions of politicians. Despite direct and indirect effects of politicians' policy decisions for the ECEC field, few studies explore influences on politicians' policy decisions, and fewer still pertain to ECEC. In light of the significant gap in the research investigating how and why politicians make the decisions that they do, we present a case for a research agenda to investigate politicians' policy decision making processes in ECEC. A review of the literature pertaining to influences on political decision making reveals some possible influences on politicians' decision making generally, but not for ECEC policy specifically. Using the policy sphere of ECEC to illustrate the complexities of social policy development and implementation in a democratic political system, we put forward a conceptualisation of policy that generates a wide range of questions to inform the development of a research agenda. We conclude with a discussion of the possible implications that a research agenda investigating politicians' policy decisions in ECEC might have for the early childhood field.

## **Introduction**

In April 2008 the Australian Government held an event at Parliament House known as the 2020 Summit. The aim of this initiative was to draw on 1000 carefully selected people's 'big ideas' for the future of Australia. In an interview transcript published as a media release, Julia Gillard, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Workplace Relations and Social Inclusion, discussed 'new' knowledge that had been referred to by a participant in the 2020 Summit:

*[t]he new thinking that I'm talking about and the new thinking the Prime Minister is responding to is the new scientific research about the way children's brains develop. And a doctor in my session yesterday...said, if you take a child, obviously their organs grow as they grow, your heart grows, your lungs grow, those organs grow, but the only way the brain grows is if it's in an environment that is stimulating its growth. (Media release, Julia Gillard, 2008a)*

In the above extract, Minister Gillard's statement about early brain development provides an example of how politicians can play a key role in framing and/or determining policy content and outcomes for ECEC (Brennan, 1998a). Crucially, the quality of formal ECEC provisions for children also rests, to a considerable extent, on the policy decisions of politicians.

Although Minister Gillard uses the phrases ‘new thinking’ and ‘new scientific research’, brain research as a field of enquiry has existed for over two decades (Bruer, 1999). During that period, it has been used by many early educationalists and ECEC advocates (for example, McCain & Mustard, 1999) to advocate for increased investment in the early years. Furthermore, the Rudd Government’s 2007 policy *New Directions for Early Childhood Education* (Rudd & Macklin, 2007), clearly references brain research, suggesting that the Rudd Government was well aware of brain research prior to the Summit.

In the media release, Ms Gillard’s interviewer questioned the source of the Government’s new interest in brain research by alluding to different models of ECEC provision being implemented in the state of Victoria as well as Tony Blair’s policies in the UK, as being potentially influential. Minister Gillard dismissed the interviewer’s questioning about influence and attempted to redirect the focus back to the implications of brain research and the Australian Government’s policy:

*Look, I think around the world, whether it's Tony Blair in the UK, Maxine Morand and in my home state of Victoria, Kevin Rudd on behalf of the Australian nation, politicians and decision makers around the world are looking at this new scientific research and saying, ‘Gee, we used to think about health being over here and education being over there and child care being somewhere else. Now we're going to have to think about putting it together.’ (Media release, Julia Gillard, 2008a)*

The extracts from Minister Gillard’s interview typify the types of statements that have piqued our interest in the possible influences on politicians’ policy decisions. Many interesting questions worthy of consideration arise from the two excerpts, for example: Why did Minister Gillard cite a ‘doctor’ as the source of ‘new scientific thinking’ when educationalists have been promoting brain research for some twenty years? How did politicians become aware of this research, and why has it taken decades to inform the policy sphere? Are politicians aware of brain research critiques that highlight the potential dangers of relying too heavily on the findings (see for examples Bailey, 2002; Bruer, 1999; Mac Naughton, 2004) and will the critiques contribute to future policy decision making in ECEC? What are the reasons for politicians choosing not to utilize alternative rationales, such as Children’s Rights (Smith, 1998), for investment in ECEC?

Many influences potentially affect how politicians make decisions for ECEC policy, yet few studies have provided insight into politicians’ decision making. By ‘influences’ we mean possible factors that contribute to a politician’s final decisions for ECEC policy. By ‘policy’, we mean not just a written document but a series of processes, negotiations and transformations (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997) that can be represented in a variety of textual formats, such as official policy documents, legislation, regulation, media releases, blueprints, speeches, photographs, websites, reports, memoranda and correspondence.

Current Australian ECEC policy does not adequately address significant policy problems facing the ECEC field. Some of the more pressing concerns that warrant policy attention include fragmentation across jurisdictions preventing common policy agreement (Press, 2007); poor working conditions and low remuneration for those employed in the field leading to problems with staff recruitment and retention (Pocock & Hill, 2007); difficulties in measuring and achieving quality (Sims, 2007); poor access to and the unaffordable cost of high quality ECEC for many children and families (Pocock & Hill, 2007); and the impact of a high concentration of corporate ECEC services, given perceived tensions between maximising profits and providing high quality education and care (Sumsion, 2006). In light of these current policy concerns, we argue the need to understand how politicians develop awareness of ECEC policy issues, how politicians make decisions for policy on these issues and what informs politicians’ decisions. While this article focuses on the Australian context, the issues raised in this article are likely to have relevance elsewhere.

The article consists of three main sections. In the first section, we review literature pertaining to influences on political decision making, generally, and note the lack of attention to early childhood policy specifically. In the second section, we conceptualise and theorise policy to illustrate the complexities of social policy development and implementation in a democratic political system. The last section concludes with a discussion of the possible implications such a research agenda could have for the early childhood field.

## **What do we know?**

Our review of the literature confirms the observation of Neal (1995) a decade earlier concerning the paucity of social science research conducted with ‘powerful’ individuals or groups that investigates policy development and implementation. Few studies have actually investigated the perceptions of politicians and their decision making role in the policy process. Even fewer studies have investigated early childhood policy. Initial searches for investigations of influences on politicians’ policy decision making in education or early childhood education in Australia and internationally, recovered only three empirical studies [1]. The search was subsequently widened to all fields, with limited results.

## **Empirical studies involving politicians and ECEC/education**

This section examines the three empirical studies, two relating to ECEC and one to education, identified initially. The two early childhood empirical studies sought to capture the perspectives of various groups on ECEC. One study was conducted in Ireland (Duignan, 2005) and the other in Sweden (Sandberg & Vuorinen, 2007). In both studies, politicians and policymakers participated along with other stakeholders in the ECEC field. Both studies sought to explore stakeholders’ perspectives and perceptions in relation to quality (Duignan, 2005) and future directions for research in ECEC (Sandberg & Vuorinen, 2007). The third study by Gunter and Forrester (2008), explored the construction and implementation of school leadership knowledge in education policy in England, which was one aspect of a large empirical study.

Duignan (2005) conducted a total of six public consultations with 387 participants who were considered ‘stakeholders’ in the development of ECEC policy, including “parents/guardians and families, teachers and carers, policymakers and practitioners from a wide range of professions and disciplines” (p.212). Of the participants, 11% identified as policy developers, although Duignan does not clarify the composition of the policymakers group. Similarly, Sandberg and Vuorinen (2007) used focus groups to investigate the perceptions and beliefs of 46 stakeholders including politicians, managers, principals, lecturers, teachers, parents and children, about future directions for research endeavours in ECEC in Sweden. Four of the participants were politicians. Gunter and Forrester (2008) also sought the perceptions of stakeholders but in education, rather than early education, and conducted 33 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders (including three former Secretaries of State for Education).

Neither early childhood study reported participant responses by stakeholder category. Duignan (2005) found that a majority of participants agreed on issues of quality, assessment and support for high quality ECEC. She therefore argued for a stronger commitment to cross-sectorial collaboration. Sandberg and Vuorinen’s (2007) findings indicated that politicians did not seem to have distinctly different perceptions and beliefs to the other participants in the study. Neither study investigated the influences on, or reasons for, participants’ particular beliefs about quality or future directions for research endeavours in ECEC. Gunter and Forrester (2008), in contrast, distinguished between the responses given by different categories of participants. Their insights into the role of consultants in the policy decision making process will be discussed later in the article. Forthcoming papers from Gunter and Forrester may provide greater clarity on politicians’ perceptions of influence on school leadership issues in education policy.

The Duignan (2005) and Sandberg and Vuorinen (2007) studies are the nearest equivalent of research related to our proposed research agenda in ECEC. Although they were early childhood focused and involved politicians, no conclusions can be drawn about influences on politicians’ policy decisions in ECEC. Hence, there is broad scope to investigate more closely influences on politicians’ decision making in ECEC policy.

## **Literature exploring influences on politicians’ policy making decisions**

Ten areas of influence were identified from the literature and are discussed below. The influences, presented in no particular order are: policy advisors and bureaucrats; politicians’ personal beliefs and convictions; other politicians; public opinion and polling; the media; the position of the politician (government/opposition); lobby groups; consultants and academics/research; gender discourses; and economic policy. For each area, we examine literature that illuminates influences on policy decision making. We then problematise the potential impact of each influence within the early

childhood field. For a summary of empirical studies, see Appendix 1. For a summary of additional relevant literature, see Appendix 2.

### ***Influence of policy advisors and bureaucrats***

Policy advisors and bureaucrats who work closely with policy and often with politicians directly, are likely to have a substantial amount of influence in policy decision making (Weller & Fleming, 2003). An empirical study in Australia (Muller & Headey, 1996) and a paper drawing on personal experience in the USA political system (Niskanen, 1986) provide insights into how policy advisors and bureaucrats influence policy.

In Australia, Muller and Heady (1996) found that bureaucrats and public servants have the most influence over policy agenda setting compared to other 'influentials'. Participants in the Muller and Heady study were asked to identify the most influential people in the state of Victoria in six policy areas: health, education, environment, economic, welfare and transport. Of particular interest is that politicians received just over 16 percent of the nominations – significantly less than bureaucrats and public servants. The findings possibly indicate that participants perceived either (a) policy agenda-setting decisions are often being made in the absence of politicians, or (b) politicians were highly influenced by the policy advisors or bureaucrats working for them. Interestingly, their study suggests that policies in the fields of health and education are more likely to be influenced by policy advisors and bureaucrats than were policies in any of the four other areas. This finding may be significant for early childhood education, which tends to sit within the policy domains of both these fields.

Drawing from his experience as a policy advisor in the USA, Niskanen (1986) argues that policy advisors are in a potentially powerful position to “shape how those with direct political authority think about issues” (p.242). Niskanen explains that politicians expected him to provide five types of information on a policy area, namely: statistics to describe the conditions in the policy area; information on the implications of both static policy and changing policy; predictions of the impact of a particular policy instrument on the area of concern; other policy options with potentially superior outcomes to the policy changes proposed by others; and the views of other experts on each of the previous four points. While these five types of information could potentially enable rigorous analysis to inform decision making, Niskanen cautions that in his experience, politicians only value the advice if two conditions exist: first, that the politician is significantly committed to good policy outcomes for the area of concern; second, that the politician does not have a clear sense of conviction based on personal beliefs or information available from other sources, in relation to the policy.

Niskanen (1986) also notes that the training and education of the policy advisor has implications for the analysis of the five abovementioned types of information. How policy advisors source information, synthesise information and construct arguments for politicians, particularly when there are recognised gaps in research, is an important consideration for the research agenda proposed in this article. For example, in the early childhood field, there are significant gaps in research resulting from differences in how data is classified and gathered (Press & Hayes, 2000), making an accurate and thorough policy issue analysis difficult to achieve. Furthermore, if policies represent discourses about “what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority” (Ball, 2006, p. 48), the decisions made by the policy advisor when synthesising and framing the information plays a significant part in shaping discourse.

### ***Influence of politicians' personal beliefs and convictions***

Although Niskanen (1986) acknowledges policy advisors can play a significant role in influencing politicians' policy decision making, he argues that politicians make policy decisions based on personal experiences, anecdotal information and/or personal beliefs in relation to the policy area of concern, irrespective of the advice of a policy advisor. Similarly, when investigating the key economic policy decision-makers of the Hawke/Keating Labor governments in Australia, Goldfinch (1999) found that politicians relied more on their own strong policy ideals, even when counter advice was provided. Likewise, Muller and Heady (1996) found policy advisors were likely to be overruled if the politician held strong personal beliefs or attitudes about the policy decision in question. Goot (2005) points out that when politicians follow their own values or beliefs on policy agendas, despite the majority of public opinion, they are often lauded and even rewarded for their unwavering resolve by the electorate. That is, voters may initially disagree with a politician's policy position, but if the politician shows an unwavering and committed resolve, voters may reverse their opinion and end up supporting the politician's choice. The unpredictable nature of electoral responses to politicians' personal

convictions was also explored by Lammintakanen and Kinnunen (2004) who investigated health care policy agenda setting in Finland. They found that even when politicians maintained particular attitudes in their decision making processes (often in direct opposition to the views of the public), their decisions were “interpreted differently at the operational level” (Lammintakanen & Kinnunen, 2004, p. 75).

### ***Influence of other politicians***

Politicians may ignore policy advisors’ advice for other reasons. Although politicians may respect their advisor’s wisdom, they may act against the advice if there is reason to suspect considerable opposition from other politicians (Niskanen, 1986). When policy issues are debated by senior ministers in the Cabinet, the end decision may not always be the favoured option of all Cabinet members. Although politicians may oppose a policy decision in Cabinet, they are obliged to show support for the policy decision in the public sphere (Weller & Fleming, 2003).

### ***Influence of public opinion and polling***

Public opinion and polling also play a role in influencing politicians’ policy decisions. While Niskanen (1986), Goldfinch (1999) and Muller and Heady (1996) all argue that personal beliefs often influence politicians’ policy decisions, Goot (2005) is concerned with the intersection of politicians’ personal beliefs and their public stance, and explored how these two potentially conflicting positions are reconciled in the political climate. Reviewing mainstream media and anecdotal data from key policy advisors and speech writers of Australian politicians, Goot (2005) identified a range of potential influences on politicians’ decisions such as institutional constraints, interest groups, pressures within the party, politicians’ personal beliefs, and public opinion and polling. In a democratic political system, re-election is a vital concern for politicians. Niskanen (1986) argues that re-election may rest on how the policy decisions are framed and presented to the public. Politicians are aware that they are more likely to be rewarded “if their actions are perceived to benefit their constituencies, whether or not they, in fact, do so” (Niskanen, 1986, p.236).

Demagoguery is a tactic used by politicians to “strike the nerves of their viewers and listeners” by using imagery to enhance messages (Lichtman & Most, 2007, p.6). Lichtman and Most’s (2007) exploration of demagoguery as a campaign approach used by politicians highlights the potentially influential effect such tactics can have on policy framing. Lichtman and Most (2007) suggest that politicians may be more inclined to conduct a demagogic media campaign in order to reflect a particular approach they are taking in policy. A related but less sensationalist strategy is the use of ‘spin’ to portray contentious policy decisions in a positive light. Using an excerpt from Julia Gillard’s (2008a) media release referred to at the beginning of this article as an example, we highlight the political spin being utilised to appeal to the public’s sentiments about critical periods in children’s development, despite brain research critiques illuminating the potentially sensationalist effects (Mac Naughton, 2004). Other media releases by Julia Gillard regarding ‘critical periods’ in the early years, could potentially ‘strike the nerves’ of people who are carers or teachers of young children: “if we don’t invest in those early years then tragically some kids do go off the rails and [...] are headed to a lifetime of welfare dependency or perhaps something even a bit worse” (Gillard, 2008b). Julia Gillard’s reference to ‘something even a bit worse’, may indicate that politicians are motivated by emotional appeals in policy in order to capture the personal sentiments of voters.

### ***Influence of media***

Linked closely with public opinion and polling is the role the media plays in influencing politicians’ policy decision making. In a study of mainstream media coverage of Australian politicians’ private lives, Muir (2005) found that male politicians have more freedom to promote their private family lives in political campaigning than female politicians, who are more constrained in public debates about work and family balance due to the “continuing deployment of traditional signifiers of femininity in political reporting of women’s performance in politics” (p.78). Muir argues that “[w]omen politicians are attacked variously for being too feminine, for being insufficiently feminine and/or not performing motherhood in a way that fits conventional idealised images of mothering in the white suburban nuclear family” (p.84). While some media practitioners are able to recognise the “complex and contradictory pattern of reporting women politicians” (p.86), Muir (2005) suggests that the stereotypes persist for both male and female politicians, and are likely to increase with ‘the personal’ becoming of greater interest in media reporting.

Muir’s research suggests that the sex of the politician responsible for the ECEC portfolio may have implications for ECEC policy. If male politicians are able to show sensitivity and emotion for family responsibilities more freely, and be rewarded for it, does this also affect how they are able to speak publicly on ECEC issues, a traditionally feminine

vocation? Conversely, are female politicians constrained in the way they feel they are able to speak publicly on ECEC issues, particularly if there is a threat of misrepresentation in the media? Do these gendered ‘rules of engagement’ in the public sphere affect policy decision making? Dominant discourses operating in mainstream media around parenting responsibilities, gender norms, family structure and career commitment, might affect the policy approaches taken by male and female politicians. Hence, gender stereotypes and prejudices portrayed and reinforced in media could potentially influence the policy approaches of politicians.

In contrast to Muir, in a review of the literature and media sources, Barker (2005) argues that the media’s role in policy processes depends on the policy in question and whether the government has a confident stance on the policy concern, a sentiment also voiced by Niskanen (1986). Barker (2005) suggests that often the media is used by policymakers to ‘test the waters’ of media and public sentiment in order to guide policy direction, if a policy stance is yet to be established. Headey and Muller (1996) however, found the media and journalists to be the least influential of all the policy ‘influentials’ identified in their study. Thus, investigations of the influence of media on policy have produced somewhat conflicting results.

### ***Influence of position in the parliament (government or opposition)***

Politicians’ policy decisions may be affected by whether they are in or out of government, in other words, their position in parliament. In a cross national study, Bowler, Donovan and Karp (2006) used surveys to investigate the motivations of national level members of parliament and candidates for parliament, when assessing proposals to change the electoral institutions in four countries: Australia, Germany, the Netherlands and New Zealand. In particular they explored the influences of self-interest, values and ideology as important motivations for politicians’ decision making. Bowler et al (2006) found that in Australia overall, “personal electoral self-interest is a powerful determinant of politicians’ attitudes towards institutions” (p.444). Although Bowler et al.’s (2006) focus was reforming electoral institutions and rules, their research provokes some considerations for the research agenda proposed in this article. If a correlation between being elected to Government and subsequent reluctance to implement dramatic changes is relevant to reforming electoral institutions, will it also be relevant to other policy areas, such as ECEC policy? The current Australian political climate might suggest otherwise, as a raft of ECEC policy changes have been promised by the newly elected Australian Government, indicating there can be a relationship between occupying government and introducing significant change in policy.

### ***Influence of lobby groups***

Lobby groups aspire to influence politicians’ policy decisions. Muller and Heady (1996), whose study was described previously, found that lobbyists were the second most frequently nominated group of policy ‘influentials’, receiving 20.4% of nominations. While Muller and Heady (1996) were unsurprised by this figure, it was interesting to note that the lobbyists were perceived to be the most active in two of the six policy areas: welfare and environmental policy. Education policy was dominated by academic and consultative ‘influentials’. Muller and Heady (1996) found that women had far more impact in the welfare sector, than in the other five fields. Although lobby groups influenced welfare policy, Muller and Heady (1996) do not specify whether they positioned ECEC in the welfare or education policy area – a distinction that might have provided an interesting insight into the effectiveness of Victorian ECEC lobby groups in the 1980s and 90s, when their study was conducted.

### ***Influence of consultants and academics/research***

Two studies, one conducted in the UK and the other in Australia over a decade apart, explore the influence of consultants and academics in education policy in different contexts. Gunter and Forrester (2008) separated the roles of consultants and academics in influencing politicians’ policy decisions in educational leadership, while Muller and Heady (1996) conflated the categories of academics and consultants as the one group.

There are some differences in the findings reported by Muller and Heady (1996) and Gunter and Forrester (2008). Muller and Heady (1996) found academics, particularly vice-chancellors and individuals, and consultants to be the most influential in education policy while other identified ‘influentials’ dominated the other five fields (health, environment, economic, welfare and transport). Gunter and Forrester (2008) however, distinguished between consultants and academics, defining consultants as persons who were employed in private companies or who were self-employed, and who had “advised on strategy at the highest levels of government, undertaken research and produced policy advice reports” (p. 146). They found that consultants were often considered apolitical by politicians. Consultants regarded

themselves and were regarded by others as translators of research, capable of interpreting and translating research into practical solutions and evaluating practical implementation of research recommendations. Furthermore, consultants were considered connected and current, while universities and local governments were considered ‘unmodern’ and “positioned as disconnected from practice” (Gunter & Forrester, 2008, p.159). Whilst no definitive conclusions can be drawn from these studies, they do raise relevant questions for investigations of influences on politicians’ policy decision making concerning ECEC in Australia. For example, how do politicians determine currency of knowledge and experience when choosing consultants and academics for key policy issues? How do politicians perceive the ECEC academy in Australia and what role does the academy/research play in influencing ECEC policy? Assuming the academy represents a broad range of views and perspectives, as is the case with respect to brain research, how do politicians decide which views and perspectives will influence policy?

### ***Influence of gender discourses***

Muir (2005) highlighted that gender discourses upheld in the media and also by politicians, potentially influence the way politicians discuss and debate policy issues. She contends that conservative voices often agitate issues such as family breakdown, childcare, maternity leave and domestic violence into moral panics, where feminist perspectives are blamed for exacerbating social problems. The potential of conservative gender discourses to influence the way politicians make policy decisions has relevance to the investigation proposed in this article, as the decisions made by male politicians to publicly relate to children and women are “examples of performing particular, strategic masculinities that suit the requirements of media-influenced politics at given points in time” (Muir, 2005, p.82). As the provision of ECEC has long been associated with women’s right to enter and remain in paid labour, conservative associations with particular social agendas may be deterrents or attractions for politicians to pursue publicly, depending on how the media will position them.

### ***Influence of economic policy***

Economic policy has been found to have a significant impact on government policy models and investment in other portfolios (Goldfinch, 1999). Of the 16 types of economic policy identified by respondents as influential in Australia during the Hawke/Keating period (1983-1996), Goldfinch (1999) found that neo-classical economics received the top nomination of 19 votes, with Accord/Labourism in second place receiving 9 votes and the Free Market receiving 8 votes. Economic policy during the 80’s and 90’s is of particular importance to ECEC. Brennan (1998b) argues that the Hawke government had “prevailing ideas about reducing public expenditure and the size of government and promoting small business” (p. 94). That is, a shift from supply-side subsidies to demand-side subsidies was evident, particularly when the Hawke Government reduced operational assistance for centres by around 50 percent in a dramatic ECEC policy shift, extending demand-side subsidies to the private sector (Brennan, 1998a). Goldfinch’s findings are an important reminder that economic policy has far reaching ramifications, which is also evident in the current positioning of ECEC in the productivity agenda of the current Australian Government.

To recap, in this section we have outlined ten areas of influence on politicians’ policy decision making, drawn from the literature, that are potentially relevant to the investigation proposed in this article. Although caution is needed when generalising from the studies, they offer pertinent considerations for a research agenda in ECEC. In the next section we provide an analysis of policy using theory and concepts that have not been raised in the studies in Appendix 1.

## **Conceptualising policy**

A common weakness of many of the empirical studies reviewed in this article is the lack of a strong theoretical underpinning. A new wave of policy research has utilized theory to engage questions and possibilities rather than to determine practices for coping with and implementing policy (for example, Ball, 2006; Ozga, 2000). In this section we discuss the complex and often paradoxical nature of policy processes, and begin by providing a brief framework for our definition of policy.

### **Defining policy**

This article is premised on an understanding that policies are developed in response to the values and beliefs of particular people, politicians and communities at a particular point in history and reflect ideologies in their construction and implementation (Taylor et al., 1997). Establishing a social policy is a complicated process, usually administered

and controlled by policy makers at senior government levels (Yeatman, 1998). While the policy process is described by some political scientists as a cycle involving rational decision making (Althaus, Bridgman, & Davis, 2008), the cyclical model often fails to capture the complexity of how people in communities struggle over ideas (Stone, 2002). Ball (2006) reiterates this critique, suggesting policies are:

*representations which are encoded in complex ways (via struggles, compromises, authoritative public interpretations and reinterpretations) and decoded in complex ways (via actor's interpretations and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context) (p.44).*

Like Stone (2002) we contend that groups are a crucial component of the policy process, and that they draw on loyalty, cooperation and influence to assert their policy agendas. Through this struggle, groups “coalesce and divide over policy proposals” (Stone, 2002, p.27) resulting in a policy mix containing “cannabalisised products of multiple (but circumscribed) influences and agendas” (Ball, 2006, p.45).

### **Conceptualising policy**

Drawing on these critical definitions of policy, we utilize Stone's (2002) model of the polis to explore the complexities of policy in communities, and acknowledge that often policy is paradoxical in nature. While common policy goals require public interest followed by community consensus, interest and consensus are difficult to measure and represent fairly in policy (Stone, 2002). Public interests often conflict with personal interest, for example, families may agree with having qualified teachers employed in early childhood centres as a public interest and good, while also wanting to keep childcare fees low as a personal interest. Motivating people to sacrifice immediate personal benefits (such as low taxes) for longer-term social benefits (such as increasing the quality of early childhood education) is a difficult task. Likewise, motivating politicians to prioritise investment in ECEC over other budgetary spending is a challenging task, complicated by the paradoxical nature of policy issues. For example, the metaphor of the ‘double-edged sword’ has been used to describe the liberating and constraining effects of mandatory state requirements and Australia's national quality assurance system on teachers' professional autonomy (Fenech, Robertson, Sumsion, & Goodfellow, 2008). In this way, policy often has conflicting implications in practice. By conceptualising policy as paradoxical, we are able to then conceptualise influences on politicians' policy decision making in a more complex way than simply one step in a policy cycle. For example, even if politicians are informed about research, such as that by Fenech et al (2008), would such findings be deterrents or motivations for politicians to make change in ECEC policy? Given that multiple perspectives and agendas are inscribed into policy, including those of politicians, how do politicians make decisions for policy when contending with personal views, public opinion, ‘evidence’ and ideology? How can ECEC work with politicians on the complexities inherent in policy in order to devise better outcomes for children?

### **Theorising policy**

In this section we explore the possibilities of using theory to analyse influences on politicians' decision making in ECEC. We have drawn on the work of Chantal Mouffe, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu to theorise potential influences of democracy, power, discourse, cultural fields and time on politicians' policy decision making. We contend that these theorisations have implications for an analysis of politicians' policy decision making in ECEC.

### **Democracy and ‘the political’**

Democracies are not free from conflict and dissent. Indeed, Mouffe (2005) describes ‘the political’ (the theoretical essence of politics) as a “space of power, conflict and antagonism” (p.9). Antagonisms are a result of the multiplicity of subject positions of politicians; the subject constituting a “decentred, detotalized agent, a subject constructed at the point of intersection of a multiplicity of subject-positions” (Mouffe & Holdengraber, 1989, p.35). That is, people identify with multiple subjectivities through which they enact their politics. Politicians' subject-positions might also comprise parent, citizen, colleague, voter etc. Because policies are “cannabalisised products of multiple (but circumscribed) influences and agendas” (Ball, 2006, p.45), we argue that politicians' multiple subjectivities increase the complexity of ‘the political’ for ECEC policy development. Not only is the Australian ECEC field fragmented, but individuals within seemingly homogenous groups may subscribe to multiple positions on ECEC policy. We contend that politicians' multiple-subjectivities may affect the way they conceptualise and understand the world, slipping and changing in and through subject-positions.

## Power and discourse

We theorise power as not necessarily a negative or positive force, but productive in nature, in that it “produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse” (Foucault, 1994, p.120). Following Ball (2006) therefore, we contend that policies, either individually or collectively, “exercise power through a *production* of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’, as discourses... are about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority” (p.48). The excerpt from the media release at the beginning of this article may demonstrate the dominance of health discourses (represented in the perspective of the doctor) over education discourses. Similarly, the discourses of medicine, health, brain research and “investing in human capital” (Rudd & Macklin, 2007, p.2), are seemingly more powerful than discourses of transformative curriculum approaches or the children’s rights movement. We argue, therefore, that disciplinary power relies on access to the “bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes, and modes of everyday behaviour” (Foucault, 1994, p.125). When Minister Gillard explained in the media release referred to at the beginning of the article, that previously the government saw “health being over here and education being over there and child care being somewhere else” but are now thinking about “putting it together” (Media release, Julia Gillard, 2008a), we can see that the government has built up an argument to fuse health, education and ‘child care’ into a new state apparatus that increases disciplinary access to individuals’ bodies. Foucault argues that the state apparatus is a function of technology that oversees “the government of individuals, the government of souls, the government of the self by the self, the government of families, the government of children” (Foucault, 1994, p. 364). In theorising the policy directions of the Australian Government’s productivity agenda, we assert that the state apparatus has clinched a tighter hold on the individual by positioning the child under the gaze of health, education and early childhood discourses. By theorising policy as a form of discourse, we are able to ask questions that seek to explore which discourses are dominant and which are silenced in ECEC policy.

## Cultural fields

The notion of ‘cultural fields’ is relevant to the example above in which Minister Gillard combines the agendas of education, early childhood and health in a powerful state apparatus. Bourdieu (1992) describes cultural fields as sites of struggle for domination where competition for different kinds of capital are played out within the parameters of particular rules, rituals, and discourses (Bourdieu & Eagleton, 1992). ECEC could be considered one cultural field and politics another. Within these two fields a further range of cultural fields can be identified. For example, although developmental psychology is subject to heavy critique in parts of the ECEC cultural field (Miller, 2006), the political cultural field uses developmental psychology regularly in a variety of policy texts, seemingly unaware of, unconcerned with or dismissive of the critique. The concept of ‘cultural fields’ provides a valuable tool to question what ‘truths’ result from the intersection of ECEC and politics. How does the political cultural field source information from a variety of ECEC stakeholders to inform policy? What are the interactions between institutions, rules and practices in the ECEC and political cultural fields? What discourses and truths are produced in the overlapping of cultural fields? Understanding the rules, rituals and discourses of each cultural field will provide greater insight into policy processes and perhaps give a sense as to what is promoted or silenced in a policy agenda. By exposing the discourses appropriated and championed by politicians in their decisions for ECEC, the question as to how and why politicians take up particular discourses in their policies warrants exploration.

## Time

Time is also a possible avenue for consideration when contemplating the influences on politicians’ policy making decisions, as Bourdieu (1977) argues that there is significant power in the act of delaying a message in order to keep ‘others in the dark’. Bourdieu (1977) describes manipulation of time and space as “strategies intended simply to neutralize the action of time and ensure the continuity of interpersonal relations...the ‘little presents’ said to ‘keep friendship going’” (p.7). Similarly, Foucault argues the state aims to permanently increase the “production of something new, which is supposed to foster the citizens’ life and the state’s strength” (Foucault, 1994). The successful timing of a political ‘gift’ from a politician to the public, such as the announcement of ‘new thinking’ and ‘new scientific research’ (Gillard, 2008a) at a nationally publicised policy event, may be a strategy utilized by politicians. Time is understood then, as an important aspect through which power circulates in and between cultural fields. Politically, timing is crucial to success and can be observed in the daily conduct of politicians. From the release of policy documents and the rolling-out of election campaigns, to the prediction of ‘bad publicity’ issues and responses to another politician’s or political party blunder, timing is potentially an important influence on politicians’ conduct.

In this section we have argued that policy development is a complex and often paradoxical process. By theorising policy, we have illustrated the productive nature of power in producing discourses or ‘truths’ in ECEC policy. We have also explored the possible influences of cultural fields and time on politicians’ policy decisions in a democratic political system. These theorisations have generated a wide range of questions to inform the research agenda proposed in this article.

## **What don’t we know? Discussion and Conclusion**

In this article we have argued that there is a strong case for a research agenda to investigate politicians’ policy decision making in ECEC. The literature existing provides some insights into influences on politicians’ policy decision making. Influences include policy advisors and bureaucrats; politicians’ personal beliefs and convictions; other politicians; public opinion and polling; the media; the position of the politician in parliament (government/opposition); lobby groups; consultants and academics; gender discourses; and economic policy. There are however, clear gaps in the literature that suggest an investigation of influences on politicians’ policy decisions specifically focused on ECEC is needed. We speculate that there are other potential influences that, to our knowledge, have not yet been explored or uncovered in the literature. Furthermore, we cannot draw accurate conclusions about the early childhood field from the literature available – there are no studies that provide information about how politicians are influenced on early childhood issues specifically, locally or internationally. A research agenda that investigated influences on politicians’ policy decision making in ECEC in Australia could explore questions such as:

- What are politicians’ understandings and beliefs around the role of early childhood education and care in contemporary Australian society?
- What are politicians’ understandings of quality, curriculum, teacher qualifications, and teacher and staff pay and working conditions, and how did they come to have these understandings?
- Do politicians’ personal beliefs, gender, upbringing and values influence their decisions for ECEC policy?
- Do official political media (media releases, speeches, official photographs, websites, commissioned biographies etc) give us an indication of how politicians are influenced for ECEC policy?
- Why are some discourses/ constructs taken up and some not taken up by politicians to inform policy in ECEC?
- Which groups have greater access to policy decision making processes and which do not? Why?
- What do key ECEC professionals believe to be the most influential people/circumstances in ECEC policy processes?

While this article has focused on the Australian context, the case for such a research agenda has international relevance. Moreover, we anticipate that such a research agenda will enable early childhood activists and advocates to see with more clarity the complexity of political processes affecting their everyday lives, and how they can intervene more effectively in these processes to achieve their aspirations for ECEC. In the words of Mickelson (1994), we envisage such a research agenda will “[d]emystify powerful people and reveal their feet of clay, and ... put the knowledge [we] extract about the powerful into the hands of the less powerful” (p.149). The need for empowerment of ECEC professionals is reiterated by Press and Skattebol (2007) who urge ECEC advocates to “be aware of how policy is played out in their communities, and collectively build the alliances and knowledge bases that allow them to locate that knowledge in a broader social and political context” (p.189). We foresee that such a research agenda will contribute to policy dialogue between ECEC advocates and between ECEC advocates and politicians. By bringing increased clarity to the policy process and the influences responsible for particular policy agendas in ECEC, we envisage this research agenda could facilitate increased participation of teachers and other early childhood professionals in setting policy agendas.

Gilliam and Bales (2004) discuss the need to ‘reframe’ current understandings of ECEC in the social and policy arenas. They advocate for strategic communications when the early childhood field is attempting to present particular images and ideas around ECEC. By highlighting for politicians, the dominant frames of reference in ECEC policy making and suggesting possible alternatives that have not traditionally informed policy, we anticipate the research agenda proposed in this article could be potentially informative and challenging for politicians too. Ideally, an outcome of this research would be politicians critiquing their own policy processes and considering alternative policy designs for ECEC in contemporary Australia.

In this article we have argued that because State and Federal policy in Australia has not adequately addressed entrenched issues such as the fragmentation of the field; the ongoing achievement, measurement and evaluation of quality practices; difficulties in accessing and affording high quality ECEC; the market oriented focus of some ECEC providers; and the difficulties in recruiting and retaining ECEC professionals, an exploration of how politicians are influenced when making decisions for ECEC policy is warranted. Understanding how and why ECEC policy has often impeded high quality provisions is essential in order to improve policy in the future. Investigating influences on politicians' policy decision making could make a valuable contribution to the improvement of current policy strategies, and consequently, for improvement in the quality of ECEC provisions. Minister Gillard proposes an important question for the ECEC field: "So how do we join up Government so that we are delivering the best possible outcomes from children from nought to five? And it does require a new way of thinking" (Gillard, 2008a). This is the challenge for ECEC – to work with politicians and decision makers in order to ensure early childhood issues are interpreted, understood and acted on, not just with the best intentions, but with the best possible outcomes for children, families and early childhood professionals. Developing a better understanding of how and why politicians are influenced on ECEC issues is one way forward.

## Notes

[1] The literature search utilized databases including Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, Academic Search Premier, Australian Education Index and the online search functionality of Google Scholar. Boolean operator terms were modified depending on the database search requirements, but generally the terms used were: politician\* AND policy AND "decision making" AND "influences" AND "early childhood" OR education (the search terms "education" or "early childhood" were removed when the search was widened to all fields).

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## Appendix 1 – Table of empirical studies identifying influences on politicians’ policy decision making

Authors(s) & Country	Aim of study	Data Source & Methods	Methodological Frameworks	Focus/Findings
Bowler, Donovan & Karp (2006) Australia, Germany, the Netherlands and New Zealand	To investigate the motivations of national level members of parliament and candidates for parliament, when assessing proposals to change the electoral institutions	Surveys were completed by national level politicians in the four countries over three years (1999-2002) with a response rate of between 51% and 58%.	Quantitative analysis of survey data.	In Australia “elected MPs were twice as likely as losing candidates to be satisfied with democracy” (p.440) and that overall, “personal electoral self-interest is a powerful determinant of politicians’ attitudes towards institutions” (p.444).
Goldfinch (1999) Australia	To identify the key economic policy decision-makers of the Hawke/Keating Labor governments	Interviews and questionnaires with 93 ‘institutional elites and officials’ who held the positions of Public Agents (18), Public Servants (25), PMO/Ministerial Officers (6), Politicians (6), Academics (12), Business People (15), Union delegates (5), Media representatives (3) and other positions (1)	Qualitative Study. Content analysis of data, no explicit theoretical underpinning.	Central agencies were nominated as playing a key role in economic policy decision making including the OECD, the RBA, the ACTU, the Industry Commission, Cabinet and various interest groups and think-tanks.
Goot (2005) Australia	To explore the intersection of politicians’ personal beliefs and their public stance and the effect on decision making	A review of mainstream media as well as anecdotal data from key policy advisors and speech writers of Australian politicians.	Qualitative data and analysis. Content analysis of data, no explicit theoretical underpinning.	In addition to politicians’ decisions being influenced by polls, many other influences could be at play, including “pressures within the party, interest groups, institutional constraints, or even because it matched the personal beliefs of the politician involved; and they ignored every decision made despite the polls” (p.191)
Gunter & Forrester (2008) England	To investigate the construction and implementation of school leadership knowledge in policy	Critical analysis of policy texts (speeches, white and green papers, legislation) and 33 interviews with a selected sample from parliament (Whitehall), universities, schools and private sector consultancies (3 interviews with former secretaries of state)	Qualitative Study. Rejection of positivist reporting of research. The authors are reporting on one aspect of a larger study which, in this paper, seems to be grounded in critical realism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).	The model currently being utilised in education policy in England is the “single person as organisational leader” (p.159). The policy developments are merely ‘old ideas’ of leadership repackaged as systems and training.
Lammintakanen & Kinnunen (2004) Finland	To investigate whether elected politicians’ attitudes influence policy-making processes in terms of social and health-care resource allocation	A combination of empirical data of 1,133 questionnaires from Finnish politicians (which included senior bureaucrats) and statistical data collected from the national social and health-care database.	Largely a quantitative study with statistical analysis of questionnaire data.	Spending on primary health care was not consistent with either the politicians’ attitudes in 1995 or the national guidelines on health policy. Local politicians may have made one decision during the policy making process, but the decisions were interpreted differently at the operation levels, so that the attitudes of politicians and the reality are not consistent. The authors recommend that “analysing the actual decision-

				making processes rather than investigating attitudes to priority setting may prove more useful in gaining a better understanding of priority-setting processes” (p.69).
Muir (2005) Australia	To explore ‘the reporting of family care in relation to Australian politicians’ campaigning strategies and personal lives’.	Analysis of mainstream media coverage of Australian politicians.	Discourse analysis.	Male and female politicians are reported on differently in the media, specifically in relation to family care. Male politicians tend to be ‘lauded for their enactment of fathering’, while female politicians ‘are still at risk of being reported in ways that diminish their skills and credibility when reported in relation to their family responsibilities’.
Muller & Heady (1996) Victoria, Australia	To analyse the dynamics of agenda-setting in a parliamentary system by identifying influentials’ impact on six policy areas: health, education, environment, economic, welfare and transport	‘Influentials’ were identified using a snowball/reputational method starting with journalists. 356 interviews were held with nominated ‘influentials’ (n=214) over a three year period (1991-3). In all fields, there were five to twelve individuals who were nominated by nearly all their peers as influential.	Mixed method study.	Politicians sit amidst a group of individuals who significantly influence policy across a range of disciplines. Politicians seemed to have the most influence in economic policy issues. Education was influenced heavily by academics and consultants, more so than the other fields. Specifically, in the education field, educational administrators dominated policy influence, particularly vice-chancellors and individual academics.

## Appendix 2 – Table of additional literature identifying influences on politicians’ policy decision making

Authors(s) & Country	Aim of study	Data Source & Methods	Methodological/Theoretical Frameworks	Focus/Findings
Barker (2005) Australia	To identify which policy issues will be most effected and which least effected by media coverage	A review of the literature and media sources	Use of policy literature to conceptualise policy as complex and multifaceted.	The media’s role in policy processes depends on the policy in question and whether the government has a confident stance on the policy concerned.
Lichtman and Most (2007) USA	To explore the role of emotional appeals and passionate politics as influences on how politicians conduct their campaigns and advertising, particularly during a pre-election period	Review of literature and media sources	Experimental cognitive science – cognitive psychology.	Emotion is an important factor in the use of visual advertising and other visual media, and is “integral to the decision making process” (p.15). As a political strategy, politicians often use demagoguery to influence public perception during media campaigns.
Niskanen (1986) USA	This paper reports on the personal experience of the author, who was an American policy advisor	Personal account and reflections	Personal account with little referencing. Personal narrative. No explicit theoretical underpinning.	Policy advisors can play an important role in how policy issues are researched, reported on and framed for politicians. However, if politicians have strong personal convictions about policy areas, the politicians’ decision may be based more on their own personal views rather than the advice of the policy advisor.