
Australian Research in Early Childhood Education: Contexts, Tensions, Challenges and Future Directions

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Introduction

This issue of the *Australian Educational Researcher* focuses on Australian research in early childhood education. As guest editors, we set ourselves a seemingly straightforward brief: to highlight the strength and diversity of the work of Australian researchers in early childhood education and to enhance their visibility within AARE. We soon realised that this would be a contentious undertaking that would inevitably raise more questions than it answered. Foremost among these were: What do we mean by 'research in early childhood education'? Who belongs in the category of 'early childhood researcher'? And who decides? We have no definitive answers. Nor does this overview pretend to offer 'the last word or only way of seeing what is happening' (Yates 2004, p. 7). Our hope is, however, that this special issue provokes critical consideration of the current state of Australian research in early childhood education; factors that have contributed to and hindered its development, particularly in the past decade and a half; the challenges it faces; and future directions and possibilities.

For the purposes of this issue, we have adopted the commonly accepted definition of early childhood as encompassing the age span from birth to eight years. Accordingly, by 'early childhood education', we mean the provision of formal care and education services for children under school age and in the early years of school, a definition consistent with the Australian Background Report to the OECD Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy (Press and Hayes 2000). While this definition allows this special issue to circumvent the historical dichotomy between

education and care, it does not negate the continuing emphasis on binary constructions of care and education in many policy contexts. These dichotomies are especially evident in the spread of responsibilities for early childhood education across departments of family and community services on the one hand and departments of education on the other. This fragmentation has also characterised research into the early childhood years and early childhood education.

Over several decades research into the early childhood years has been multidisciplinary. This continues to be the case today, with much overseas and Australian research conducted by health professionals, psychologists, sociologists, linguists and increasingly cultural theorists, amongst others. For example, some major players in Australian early childhood research are the Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales and the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Their work clearly has implications for early childhood education, although it is unlikely that the majority of researchers within these organisations would refer to themselves as 'early childhood' researchers.

In this issue, our focus is on research into early childhood education undertaken by those with a disciplinary background in early childhood or early years education and who identify themselves as early childhood researchers – which is where we situate ourselves. Typically, these researchers are early childhood teacher educators or, increasingly, practitioner researchers working in a range of early childhood contexts. For historical and ongoing structural reasons, early childhood educational researchers constitute arguably the least established, least visible and least powerful of all researchers with an interest in early childhood and early childhood education. Later, we examine some of the tensions, challenges and opportunities that arise from this 'subordinate' status in the early childhood research hierarchy. But, first, we briefly sketch the historical and contemporary contexts in which Australian early childhood educational research has evolved.

Historical and contemporary contexts

Following their comprehensive mapping of Australian educational research activity in 1997, Holbrook et al. (2000, p. 26) referred to research in early childhood education as a 'relatively minor (although growing) area of study'. Similarly, in a report to the then Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), Fler (2000, p. 45) described early childhood research culture within Australia as 'evolving', despite being relatively poorly served by infrastructure to support research activity. Several historical circumstances contributed to this lack of research infrastructure and capacity. Like Lingard, who cites the UK National Education Research Forum's

definition, we use capacity to mean 'those skills, motivations and opportunities necessary to conduct and use research ... and see it through to its impact on conceptual understanding and/or policy and practice' (2001, p. 15).

Prior to the dismantling of Australia's binary system of higher education in the late 1980s, early childhood teacher education was located almost exclusively within vocationally oriented Colleges of Advanced Education and, earlier still, in the Kindergarten Teachers' Colleges established within philanthropic traditions. Neither type of institution was funded to undertake research, and relatively few of their academic staff had higher degree research qualifications. The effects of this lack of research infrastructure were compounded by government policies that until relatively recently placed little value on early childhood education (Fleer 2000), especially when compared to primary, secondary and tertiary education.

Despite historical and structural limitations, the visibility of Australian research in early childhood education, and the capacity of early childhood educational researchers has increased markedly in recent years, according to several indicators. The first chair in early childhood education in an Australian university was established in the late 1980s; now there are at least five. Enrolments in doctoral programs in early childhood education and undergraduate honours programs continue to grow. Although the number of graduates from these programs remains small, clusters of postgraduate student research are emerging. Correspondingly, a doctoral qualification has increasingly become an entry level requirement for continuing employment in early childhood teacher education programs.

In the national arena, researchers in early childhood education have enjoyed increasing success in Australian Research Council competitive grant schemes and in projects funded by major organisations and agencies. Several early childhood educational researchers have secured prestigious DETYA research fellowships (Fleer 2000, Raban 2000, Yelland 2001). Moreover, there are now at least two annual national early childhood educational research conferences, each with an associated refereed journal.¹ These developments have assisted immeasurably in enhancing the visibility of research in early childhood education.

Australian research in early childhood education also has considerable impact on the early childhood education field. Using the methods of backtracking practice and policies to research employed by Figgis, Zubrick, Butorac and Alderson (2000) in their contribution to mapping the impact of Australian educational research more broadly, it would be possible to identify numerous instances where research has directly informed early childhood curriculum and pedagogy. Indeed, Figgis et al. document several such instances in relation to the early years of school. A further example

relates to the transition to school, where ongoing research is having an impact on the ways in which transition programs are planned and implemented (Dockett and Perry 2001). The contribution of research to practice within prior-to-school early childhood contexts is arguably even stronger, aided by the flexibility afforded by generally smaller systems and flatter organisational structures, the strong professional networks of early childhood practitioners, and the traditionally close links between practitioners and researchers of early childhood education.

Links between practitioners and researchers are particularly clear in relation to some areas of curriculum research. For example, research relating to early literacy and numeracy, and the curriculum implications of this research has been noticeable both in Australia and overseas. Australian early childhood researchers are regular contributors to international publications such as the *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*. The influential *Mathematics Education Research Journal* is about to produce a special issue highlighting research in early childhood mathematics. Early childhood research and early childhood researchers are also active, to varying degrees, in other curriculum focus areas, such as science and technology, arts and physical education and social science.

Australian early childhood education researchers make a significant international contribution in a number of ways. They have a prominent presence in the influential 'Reconceptualising early childhood theory, policy and practice' movement, which has its intellectual roots in the critical traditions of the Bermago Conferences on Curriculum Theorizing in the USA. Australians have also held leadership positions in the Critical Perspectives on Early Childhood Education Special Interest Group (SIG) within the American Educational Research Association (AERA). They are also active participants in many international curriculum-based organisations. In addition, Australian researchers edit *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, the first international early childhood journal to maintain a consistently critical perspective. Australian researchers in early childhood education are also increasingly disseminating their work in a wide range of high-profile refereed journals focusing on broader areas of education. In 2003–04, these have included *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *British Journal of Educational Research*, *Discourse, Gender and Education*, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* and *Teaching and Teacher Education* (by no means an exhaustive list).

Within AARE, researchers in early childhood education have also established a noticeably stronger presence at annual conferences. In 1994, only 3 per cent of papers presented had an early childhood focus. By 2003, the proportion of papers either nominated for the early childhood strand or with an identifiable early years focus had more than doubled to 7.3 per cent of all papers presented. Indeed, the Early

Childhood SIG is now one of the largest within AARE. This increased presence is perhaps becoming evident in the *Australian Educational Researcher*. While only six (2.4 per cent) of the 253 articles published between 1990 and 2003 have had a focus, broadly conceived, on education in the early childhood years, three of these articles have been published in the three years 2001–03.

It is probably fair to say, though, that early childhood researchers within AARE are not as influential as those in several equivalent organisations, despite an early childhood focus being featured in the first reciprocal session at AERA in 1994. At AERA in 2004, for example, the symposia sessions reserved for the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the New Zealand Educational Research Association (NZERA) both focused on research in early childhood education. Moreover, a recent BERA President (Anne Edwards) is a prominent early childhood researcher while NZARE selected a leading New Zealand early childhood researcher (Margaret Carr) as a keynote speaker at the joint NZARE-AARE conference in 2003. Given that the work of Australian early childhood researchers has tended not to attract equivalent recognition within AARE, this special issue seems timely. More significantly, it provides an opportunity to reflect on the state of research in early childhood education within Australia and associated tensions and challenges.

Tensions and challenges

In light of the diversity of research in early childhood education as evidenced by the backgrounds of researchers, theoretical orientations and areas of research, it is not surprising that there is a range of tensions and challenges. Our view is that tensions and challenges are not necessarily negative – they have the potential to enliven debate and to be constructive for early childhood education research overall.

Visibility of early childhood research

One of the first challenges of such a diversity of research is that it can be difficult to identify a specific body of early childhood education research. Much educational research in general has elements that reflect or relate to early childhood education, as does research from a range of other disciplines and areas, such as sociology, history, psychology, health and medicine. While it is important not to ignore such research, the wealth of research from a wide range of fields can reduce the visibility of educational research in early childhood.

A further challenge in this area is that early childhood education research has historically been dominated by a focus on children and development, rather than a focus on teaching and learning. Genishi, Ryan, Ochsner and Yarnell (2001, p. 1178)

suggest that 'in the early childhood field, children and childhood are focal, not teachers or teaching'. Consequently, what has been regarded as appropriate research within early childhood education has tended to focus on 'processes of human growth or change that we have traditionally thought of as relatively unaffected by direct teaching or instruction', rather than specific areas of teaching, pedagogy or curriculum. One implication is that much of the research in early childhood education follows a quite different focus or direction from educational research in other sectors.

Concern about maintaining visibility is perhaps one of the reasons that, until recently, many early childhood researchers may not have actively sought to develop research partnerships with educational researchers from other sectors. The different philosophical traditions underpinning early childhood (teacher) education and primary/secondary (teacher) education and the absorption of many early childhood teacher education programs into primary programs following the dismantling of the binary system of higher education have no doubt also played a role. Gender dynamics and concerns associated with moving from an almost entirely female context of the Kindergarten Teachers' College precursor of the CAEs into one in which men disproportionately filled senior leadership roles may have also been instrumental. But, for whatever reasons, efforts to enhance visibility by distancing early childhood educational research from educational research as a whole can have unintended limiting effects if they lead to isolation, or partial insulation from important theoretical and methodological debates.

The need to maintain visibility is perhaps more keenly felt by researchers in early childhood education than by their counterparts in other areas of educational research. According to Holbrook et al. (2000), approximately 90 per cent of educational research undertaken in Australia is conducted within universities, notably by postgraduate students. This circumstance puts non-early childhood educational researchers in a relatively powerful position in terms of visibility. They may not be well-funded, but at least for the most part they are not overshadowed by other higher status, better funded bodies also undertaking educational research. The situation for early childhood educational researchers is quite different, particularly given the interconnectedness of the care and education of young children. Early childhood researchers can struggle to maintain visibility not only in relation to the broader field of educational research but also in relation to researchers from generally better funded and higher status sectors such as medicine and psychology.

Credibility of early childhood research

While the work of Figgis et al. (2000) suggests that early childhood education research in Australia continues to have an impact on policy and practice, it remains a challenge for researchers to communicate research findings in ways that are acceptable to both

the academic community and practitioners. In general, practitioner publications are not regarded as academic priorities. As Burkhardt and Schoenfeld (2003, p. 4) note, however, 'translating research into practice is a decidedly non-trivial task', and one that needs to be supported strongly.

The credibility of research in early childhood education also presents challenges. For example, when considering appropriate contexts for young children, some people and organisations turn to medical research, rather than to early childhood education research. The area of brain research is a clear example, where over time similar messages have been conveyed by different groups of researchers – educational and medical – based on different approaches and methodologies. Yet it has been the medical model of evidence that has been most influential.

The greater credibility generally enjoyed by medical or 'scientific' research can create a temptation to emulate medical and scientific models, for example through an unquestioning allegiance to the dominant psychological and biological emphases of child development research. While this can be an effective means of establishing credibility within funding bodies and a basis for forging alliances with medical and related health researchers, critics have argued that, when taken to excess, this approach can have at least two major limitations. First, to borrow from Kuhn's (1996) observation about the limitations of any one paradigm, an unduly strong allegiance to child development theory can deter researchers from tackling vital social problems that are not amenable or reducible to the conceptual tools provided by the theory. Second, it can limit opportunities for engagement with other theoretical traditions.

Evidence-based research

Both in Australia and overseas, there has been a move to ensure that research is 'evidence-based'. In many situations, the term 'evidence-based' implies research based on the 'application of the scientific method and from the systematic collection and use of objective information in policy making' (US Department of Education Strategic Plan, cited in Burkhardt and Schoenfeld 2003, p. 3). Clearly, there are tensions around what constitutes evidence and how this is used to support conclusions and policy implications. Many Australian early childhood education researchers are uncomfortable with a narrow focus and definition of evidence-based research, and have sought to reflect the complexity of adults and children within early childhood contexts using a range of methodologies such as ethnography, teacher research, and research from critical and post-structural perspectives. A range of these perspectives is represented in the articles compiled for this special edition.

The major challenge in meeting the calls for evidence-based research seems to be that whatever approach or methodology is used, whatever theoretical orientation

underpins the research, it is important to emphasise the rigorous nature of research and to be explicit about the type(s) of evidence generated and its application to early childhood education. There is no one method that can lay claim to 'evidence'; all research involves evidence of some kind. How researchers articulate their research questions and methodologies will have an impact on the nature of evidence garnered and the conclusions that can be made. All researchers need to be clear about what it is they are seeking to investigate and to ascertain the most appropriate ways to achieve this. Nevertheless, as Woodrow and Brennan (2001, p. 41) warn, we need to guard against the need for credibility manifesting itself in 'outmoded methodologies' and 'derivative or trivial' studies and theorising that fail 'to address significant questions and issues'. The same can be said, of course, for all educational research.

Negotiating political agendas

Further tensions and challenges arise from the need to strategically negotiate political agendas – another commonality of all educational research. On one level, early childhood research, including educational research, is advantaged by current political agendas. There is much national debate in Australia about early childhood. In the current political context, we have commitments to longitudinal studies of children, a National Agenda for Early Childhood and political parties advocating the importance of the early years of life. Much of the focus in these is described as 'early intervention', with the aim of improving children's future life chances and making them better citizens of the future. These are admirable aims, but they contrast with much educational research that aims to improve the experiences and positions of children in the immediate present, rather than in the future. This reflects the philosophical tension between regarding children as in the process 'of becoming' as opposed to recognising their being in the present.

While there continues to be a great deal of research on early intervention and/or prevention of difficulties in later life, there is also greater awareness that children's current circumstances and experiences are important, not just for what they imply for the future. This is connected with changing views on childhood and about children generally. It remains a challenge to balance the research base and focus highlighting 'children at risk' and the pursuant focus on early intervention, with a recognition of children as competent and capable, demonstrating resilience in many and varied ways. These two views are not necessarily incompatible, but the tension that exists between two possible extremes can have an impact on the nature and direction of research.

Conceptualisations of children and childhood

Kilderry, Nolan and Noble suggest that one of the current strengths of early childhood education research lies in 'embracing new ways of viewing the child' (2004, p. 24). Application of critical and post-structuralist theory, as well as socio-cultural theory, for

example, has shifted the focus from individual children to a greater awareness of the broader contexts in which children exist and the influence of culture and context on children and those who interact with them. This has led to critiquing the traditional narrow knowledge base of the field that was heavily grounded in developmental psychology and an accompanying broadening of theoretical frameworks informing early childhood research. Such shifts, however, do not occur without tensions, challenges and sometimes conflicts.

Changing research agendas

Some decades ago, it would have been possible to characterise much of the Australian and overseas research in early childhood education under a developmentalist, or structuralist, paradigm. The current research context retains a strong focus on development. However, the understandings and perspectives of development used to underpin this research are often quite different from those used in the past. For example, there has been a substantial decrease in the research utilising Piagetian development sequences in early childhood education, and a significant increase in the focus on socio-cultural issues and approaches. Post-structuralist approaches now feature strongly in Australian early childhood education research.

Focusing on social and cultural contexts in early childhood education has added new and complex dimensions to research. The awareness that theories and approaches to education are themselves cultural constructions, and that education itself cannot be understood without understanding contexts, has opened up many avenues for research – including increased emphasis on families and communities.

As noted earlier, whenever different paradigms are used to interpret a range of phenomena, tensions and challenges arise. We regard these as healthy challenges, whereby diverse interpretations contribute to a sense that no one theoretical base is inextricably tied to early childhood education research. However, diversity is both a strength and a potential weakness. The strength comes from a robust and rigorous research culture that generates debate. The weakness comes from the perception that there is no common cohesive approach to early childhood education research that can be used to underpin policy development and implementation, or that can be translated into practice.

Productive consequences and directions

These tensions and challenges have been productive for early childhood educational researchers because they have highlighted the importance of grappling with fundamental questions, such as: What questions are worth addressing? What critical

ideas are worth exploring in attempting to address these questions? What methodologies are likely to prove fruitful? How can understandings that emerge be communicated to diverse audiences in ways that will ultimately lead to beneficial change? Engaging with questions such as these has added to the robustness of research in early childhood education by stretching what many contend were its once overly 'comfortable boundaries' (Kilderry et al. 2004, p. 24).

This stretching of boundaries is evident in many ways, which, in essence, coalesce around critiques of the narrow traditional knowledge base that had been strongly vested in developmental psychology and a subsequent broadening of theoretical perspectives and ways of conceptualising children and their contexts. These theoretical developments have been accompanied by a growing awareness of the need for increased and more effective engagement with policy makers. As Kilderry et al. (2004) point out, the changing nature and focus of our discussions and endeavours as early childhood educational researchers is also changing the ways in which our research is positioned, both within the academy and in policy-making arenas. We believe that increasingly early childhood educational research is being seen as vigorous, reflecting multiple, rich theoretical perspectives and discourses, willing and able to engage with key debates, concerns and agendas. This kind of positioning creates many intersections with other areas of education and disciplines not traditionally associated with early childhood educational research. These intersections offer exciting potential for cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary collaboration that we believe will further transform early childhood educational research.

Articles in this special issue

The selection of articles that follows gives some sense of the diversity – epistemologically, theoretically and methodologically – of Australian early childhood educational research. Represented amongst the studies reported are critical, postmodern and post-structuralist perspectives, interpretative qualitative research, as well as large-scale quantitative research grounded in 'scientific' traditions. As we have argued throughout, we see this diversity as a strength that enhances the standing of early childhood educational researchers within the academy. More importantly, this selection highlights the importance of adopting diverse theoretical and analytical frameworks if we are to engage effectively with the complexities, dilemmas and political agendas associated with the care and education of young children. Despite the different perspectives, knowledges and discourses represented, several themes are evident. These include a concern for the interests of children, the importance of engaging with political agendas, and reconceptualising traditional and taken-for-granted constructions of young children and the provisions we make for them.

The contributions to this special issue are also characterised by the diversity of institutional contexts in which the authors are working, their different career phases, and their geographic spread. We believe this diversity, along with the authors' common interest in setting new directions and breaking new ground, aptly reflects the increasing depth and capacity of Australian early childhood educational research and augurs well for its ongoing development.

The first study, by Jo Ailwood, was motivated by 'the knowledge that there are spaces and opportunities for thinking differently about early childhood education; and for thinking differently about how the teachers, children and parents who inhabit these spaces are constructed, regulated and governed' (p. 31). Influenced by Foucauldian perspectives, Ailwood uses a genealogical or 'history of the present' approach to deconstruct historical, political and social discourses surrounding policies determining the provision of preschool education in Queensland government schools. Focusing specifically on notions of governmentality, Ailwood argues that current constructions of preschool education position children as potential adult learners and earners of the kind required by advanced, knowledge-based economies.

Ann Farrell and Susan Danby are also concerned with the governance of young children, but within the contexts of the early years of school. The research they report in this paper is drawn in part from a larger study funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery grant to investigate children's participation and engagement in home, school and community contexts. Farrell and Danby focus our attention on some of the ethical considerations and challenges that arise when conducting research with children from sociology of childhood perspectives. These theoretical frameworks see children as competent participants in and interpreters of their social worlds, in contrast to developmental frameworks that position children as still developing, and therefore in many respects not yet able. The authors highlight the tensions inherent in the 'protective regulation' of children that can limit children's rights to participate in ways that enable their voices to be heard.

Marilyn Flear, likewise, addresses cultural constructions in her investigation of Indigenous Australians' perspectives about early childhood education. Drawing on socio-cultural perspectives, and particularly the work of Barbara Rogoff, Flear critiques dominant white, western constructions of taken-for-granted practices and argues convincingly for the need to hear the views of Indigenous families themselves. Flear's study highlights the importance of considering issues of voice, agency, researcher stance and representation in all research of this kind.

The next article, by Jennifer Bowes and colleagues, highlights the growing success of Australian early childhood educational researchers in developing relationships with

policy makers. It reports on benefits and challenges involved in undertaking a large-scale, quantitative, longitudinal, multidisciplinary, cross-institutional, team-based study initiated upon a request from a government office to examine the effects of multiple childcare arrangements on young children's development. Consistent with its theoretical framework grounded in developmental psychology, the study involves a large sample and complex statistical analysis that produces the generalisable findings preferred by policy makers. It exemplifies the increasing capacity of early childhood educational researchers to position themselves as legitimate, effective and increasingly powerful players in an arena traditionally dominated by medical and other health-related researchers.

Finally, from a post-structuralist perspective, Glenda MacNaughton problematises the uncritical acceptance of policy agendas. Urging the need for critical interrogation of 'truths' underpinning policy initiatives, she intertwines personal narrative with a critique of the current interest in 'brain research'. MacNaughton argues that the linear, cause-and-effect logic of this research is seductive but ultimately dangerous because it obscures the complexities surrounding the meaning and purpose of early childhood education and research into early childhood education. Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), she contends that rhizomatic analysis offers a productive alternative for exploring complexities, uncertainties and change and a way of making visible the 'politics of knowledge and multiple and shifting truths that govern all research endeavours' (this volume).

Some ongoing challenges

At a 1995 symposium of early childhood education researchers (Fleer 1995), papers were presented on the following topics:

- quantitative research methodologies
- conversations in teaching and research
- cross-cultural research
- ethics and methodologies
- research collaboration within and across universities
- contractual research
- new insights from diverse theories.

Many of the same topics recur in this special issue. We continue to debate appropriate methodologies, theories and approaches in early childhood education research, grapple with ethical implications of interactions with young children and the adults who work with them, and struggle with the practicalities as well as the importance of collaboration.

Perhaps it will always be this way as we recognise the changing nature and context of research in early childhood education.

Members of the British Educational Research Association Early Years Special Interest Group (2003) emphasise this in their conclusions about early childhood education research in the UK, when they note the need for ongoing research in early childhood education because:

- existing research has either not asked the questions to which we now seek answers, or ... there have been gaps in past research [and]
- contexts change over time and so past research cannot necessarily answer current questions. (2003, p. 42)

Clearly, there is a continuing need for research in early childhood education. In promoting this research, we offer some suggestions as to the future directions such research may take. We recognise that the selection of articles in this special issue is only a small proportion of current research and certainly do not claim that it is representative of all the interesting and important studies being undertaken. We recognise, for instance, that this collection of articles includes no examples of practitioner research or historical research: omissions are due purely to the constraints of space.

Compiling the special issue has led us to consider what we regard as for the most part missing from the broader early childhood educational research agenda in Australia. We offer the following as suggestions for future and continued directions in early childhood education research, confident that many of these may well be under investigation as we go to press:

- large-scale quantitative studies undertaken from critical perspectives;
- meta-analysis of the many small studies that have been undertaken that could provide useful guidance to policy makers and guide attempts to build on previous work;
- collaborative studies with other sectors in education that explore the same or similar issues as they are manifested across sectors (such as staff retention, quality and accountability agendas);
- genuine collaboration with researchers from a range of discipline backgrounds;
- involvement in comparative or cross-cultural international studies;
- national research networks of early childhood researchers;
- historical research; and
- teachers, teaching and teacher effects within early childhood education.

As well, within these and other areas of early childhood education research, there has been comparatively little focus on

- structural conditions impacting on early childhood educators' work; and
- Indigenous perspectives, issues and experiences.

Kilderry et al. (2004) note a renewed enthusiasm and vigour in early childhood education research. They cite 'new ways of perceiving early childhood – including how we view the child, teacher, families, community and the settings in which we work' as influential in opening up 'new spaces of intellectual engagement' (p. 27). The potential for continuing debate and discussion augers well for early childhood education research.

Alongside this enthusiasm are a number of strategies we believe will promote the visibility, credibility and accessibility of research in early childhood education. These include:

- engaging with researchers outside early childhood as a means of stimulating debate and extending the perspectives with which we view and interpret early childhood education;
- building a strong research culture within early childhood education;
- promoting and valuing interactions that consider the practical and policy implications of early childhood education research; and
- collaborating within the early childhood research sector, promoting the diversity of research as a strength, rather than a weakness.

Regardless of the methodology or the approach and ideology underpinning research we need to promote sound research. Burkhardt and Schoenfeld (2003, p. 4) note that, 'until educational research findings are (and are perceived as) much more robust and defensible, policymakers will be free to choose findings to support their pre-selected paths'. In our expectations, robust and defensible research is not just research that follows a specific paradigm. Rather, it is research that places at its core a genuine desire to improve the situation for young children and those who care for them and that supports this with a sound ethical and appropriate research plan, resulting in evidence that is both credible and reliable. Many research paradigms will be appropriate in different research contexts, answering different research questions. We need to balance large-scale studies with studies that provide a wealth of rich data about individuals and groups of individuals in a range of contexts. Lingard refers to the

postmodern condition of the replacement of the either/or binaries with hybrids and additions. We are not dealing simply with this *or* that but this *and* that, where this sometimes contains bits of that and vice versa. Multiple purposes, methodologies and agenda are thus required in contemporary educational research. (2001, p. 5)

We believe the early childhood educational research field in Australia is well on the way to achieving this goal.

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Note

- ¹ The annual Australian Research in Early Childhood Education conference publishes the *Journal of Australian Research in Early Childhood Education* and the Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood publishes the *International Journal for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood*.

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