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The paradox of universal access: Alleviating or perpetuating inequity for children in NSW Australia

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Abstract:

In NSW, Australia, universal access met with a fragmented system that has high fees, low participation rates and a three prong model of service delivery, which includes government, community and private services. This system has struggled to accommodate universal access, which is 15 hours per week of quality early childhood education for all 4 and 5 years old children, especially targeting those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This chapter provides a place-based analysis of the implementation of universal access in a New South Wales preschool in Australia. By successfully grappling with re-targeted funding to support the implementation of universal access, the example preschool's demographic composition has profoundly changed. It had disproportionately larger number of children requiring additional support bringing significant shifts in everyday pedagogical work. In order to continue providing a high quality education, the preschool relied on an already underappreciated and underpaid workforce's resilience, unrecognized work and emotional labor. While the aim was primarily to give access to affordable and quality early education for disadvantaged children, through our analysis we demonstrate that universal access has a cunning ability to produce uneven progress across places and to continue reproducing inequality.

Introduction

During the last couple of decades, access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) has gained a significant importance on policy agendas of international organizations and national governments worldwide (Kagan, 2009; White, 2011; Moss, 2017). So much so that some observers argue that it became a panacea for social and economic ailments of societies, so governments put “immense effort and resources into this task, identifying and implementing conditions (‘quality’) to ensure the panacea of high returns” (Moss, 2017, p. 25). Joining this trend, in 2009, the Australian states and territories signed an agreement to provide 15 hours per week of universal access to quality early education to all children in Australia in the year before they enter school as part of the National Partnership Agreement¹ (CoAG, 2009) (Partnership hereafter). Most states and territories almost have

¹<https://www.education.gov.au/national-partnership-agreements>

reached the goal of enrolling 94% or more of children for 15 hours or more per week, but in New South Wales (NSW) universal access is still not a reality as we write this paper. In New South Wales (NSW), only 84% of children are enrolled for 15 hours or more per week (Australian Bureau of Statistics Preschool Education Australia)². Since children from disadvantaged backgrounds are the most likely to benefit from early childhood education according to research and international discourses, and they are the least likely to participate (Fox, 2016), the Partnership targeted this group as its priority. The Partnership had an explicit agenda with universal access of creating more equity through ECEC. This chapter focuses on NSW, and the state's universal access policy and its implementation from the perspective of a preschool. Our aim is to explore how universal access and its agenda was achieved, if at all, in a preschool located in one of the most disadvantaged towns.

Universal access in Australia aims to increase the enrollment of all 4 years old children specifically targeting those who experience disadvantage or come from Indigenous backgrounds to offset a range of poorer outcomes in the early school years by participation in a preschool program (Biddle, Crawford & Seth-Purdie, 2017). Providing affordable and quality early education to these special groups of children seeks to decrease the influence of home environment on a child's development and readiness for school. The participation of 4 year old children in 15 hours a week educational programs grew since 2008 from 28% to 85,1% in 2016³. This picture shows a significant progress in reaching universal access. However, from the perspective of our selected preschool, which is located in one of the most disadvantaged areas in regional NSW, the picture looks different. This preschool was a keen adopter of state policies and one of the first to take up the challenge of providing universal access to children within the local area. Due to the changes instituted in enrollment to provide for those who most needed and were supported according to the policy, the composition of groups in the preschool has strikingly changed. With the changed pattern of enrollment, educators' everyday work became much more challenging and demanding, so much so that the provision of high quality ECE has been jeopardized based on educators' perceptions and the authors' observations. Thus, in light of this we raise the following question: Does universal access help alleviate inequity or perpetuate it?

In our view, *first*, to tackle inequities between children by subsidizing the enrollment of targeted groups of children cannot sufficiently decrease inequalities especially if there are not enough places in high quality centers for every child needing ECEC, especially in disadvantaged areas. Without creating new places, and by only reorganizing the distribution of existing places, inevitably lead to issues and problems in services that potentially lower their quality of provision, thus cannot live up to their potential to create more equity. In order for the government to achieve universal access and to keep fees low and decrease inequities, a better solution would be to generally increase the number of places in high quality centers. This, however, would require substantially more investment from the government, than only pushing the responsibility to the already burdened ECEC system to solve huge social and economic problems. *Second*, ECEC alone, without other social services and other strategies that create economic opportunities and workplaces for residents, cannot solve long standing social and economic issues in disadvantaged areas.

In order to show how universal access meets with specific local conditions that have the power to change its intended outcomes, we perform here a place-based methodology to study universal access

² <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4240.0>

³ <https://education.nsw.gov.au/early-childhood-education/whats-happening-in-the-early-childhood-education-sector/sector-consultations/october-november-consultation/media/October-consultation-slides.pdf>

as a policy implementation. This methodology helps us to avoid scale based or linear policy analysis that moves from the global to national and then to the local in a seamless progression. This type of analysis assumes that through the policy implementation there is a unitary public who engages with the policy the same way and the policy reaches the same outcomes (Nguyễn, 2010). Place-based methodology is sensitive to differential socio-economic relations of places, such as differences in socio-economic and environmental circumstances with which policy intersects but also the different spaces, for example, smaller enclaves within an area children are enrolled from. In policy implementation research, the specific and fine grain differentiations between conditions of places and the particular circumstance of people who live in even small enclaves and with whom policies meet are less accounted for (Nguyễn, 2010). We explore the intersecting effects of global, national and state policy frames as they meet with the very local conditions of Kurri Kurri Preschool. This type analysis allows us to explore how universal access to ECEC met the social actors and conditions in Kurri Kurri and its preschool⁴. Through this type of analysis, it is possible to demonstrate how universal access can work almost in contradiction to the stated agenda of international, national and state universal access policies, to alleviate inequity, even though state indicators state otherwise. We hope that this exploration helps us to expose how international, national and state policies despite their stated intentions, have a cunning ability to produce uneven progress across space and scale and continue to reproduce inequality.

Together with this type of critical policy analysis approach, we also utilize an autoethnographic method to provide the needed details for us to develop a situated knowledge of place. Autoethnography entered mainstream education research at the end of the last century, and has brought its epistemological and methodological history of interpreting research “as a political, socially-just and socially conscious act” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, para. 9). As Ellis and colleagues continue, autoethnography adds a “person’s experience in the context of relationships, social categories, and cultural practices (or the violation of these relationships, categories and practices), the method revels in sharing insider knowledge about a phenomenon”. It lends the analysis an insider perspective from which the events Janelle, the preschool director and teacher, reports on work as “evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, para. 14). We thus create ‘conversations’ between placed-based information and Janelle’s stories, to see how local circumstances met with government policy implementation from a local perspective. Janelle’s autoethnographic stories are constructed from her everyday observations in the preschool, pedagogical observations documented in planning documents, reports prepared by the preschool and sent to different organizations, meetings, field notes, discussions with children, colleagues and families, and preschool policies. These stories are accounts of everyday life during the time when universal access in Kurri Kurri Preschool has been taking its effects. Janelle’s experiences are potentially shared by others in the sector but they cannot be generalized. Besides subjecting her stories to academic analysis, we also see them as productive in creating connections with others’ experiences and actions in the sector and may also stimulate other readers to reflect on them (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001).

We continue with describing the global and national interest in ECEC and related policies and their implementation towards helping to alleviate inequity. Then we briefly introduce Kurri Kurri, a regional town in NSW, its history and current social and economic conditions, and describe Kurri

⁴ The authors use the name of the Preschool first, because the analysis uses a place-based methodology in which local circumstances are elementary for the analysis and conclusions made. Second, one of the authors is the director of the Preschool and data analyzed is produced from her auto-ethnographic accounts. Third, agreement and permission to use the name of the Preschool has been gained from its Management Committee.

Kurri preschool's efforts and outcomes in implementing universal access policies. To finish, we draw some conclusions about universal access policy in NSW.

Universal access as a panacea of global capitalism: The implementation of universal access

Global universal access frames

ECEC policies worldwide carry a hope for expanding human potential, to address social problems and accelerate economic growth for nations (Levine, 2005). This hope for ECEC' effectiveness is anchored in human capital reasoning (Millei & Joronen, 2016). Human capital theory (HCT) enabled an economic theory to be systematically applied to social issues, such as to tackle issues of economic and social disadvantage or issues with workforce participation and unemployment. Currently, HCT underpins a whole host of education and ECEC policies, including universal access, as governments around the world tie economic issues with education closer together. It is then not surprising that investment in ECEC became part of the national Productivity Commission's economic agenda in Australia that sought to create a more productive workforce. The idea of universal access was defended on economic grounds, that it increases women's productivity and improves learning outcomes to reduce future costs associated with underachievement.

In 2008, Australia's proportion of GDP spent on pre-primary education was amongst the lowest in the developed world (OECD, EAG 2008, Table B2.2)⁵. In the systemic provision of ECEC, the Commonwealth Government of Australia took its first instrumental role with its *1972 Child Care Act* shifting responsibility for child care from the individual to the community (Logan, Sumsion & Press, 2013). In 2008 ECEC gained a renewed federal interest. In 2009, all States and Territories in Australia signed the National Partnership Agreement on ECEC (a Federal level agreement that unified states and territories' efforts), in which they committed to making 15-hour preschool education per week available to each child by 2013. The Partnership document also directly referenced international evidence on the economic benefits of providing access to quality ECEC. The investment was passed down directly to the states and territories who in turn were trusted to administer the implementation of universal access. The delivery of ECEC in Australia however is different across all jurisdictions making any changes complicated to implement in any cohesive manner⁶. The Partnership initially set a target for the achievement of universal access by 2013; however, this goal has yet to be reached partly due to the state of New South Wales (NSW) (CoAG, 2016).

Universal access policy in NSW

ECEC in NSW is constituted by a diverse field of state, community and privately run and relatively autonomous services often competing for enrolments and the government subsidies attached to them. The state's responsibility mostly involves regulation and licensing, and the provision of some subsidies. With the Partnership (universal access policy), NSW has received extra funding, which the state has spent but withheld the usual 35 million budget supposed to subsidize centers'

⁵ Please see more information on Australian ECEC here: <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2018/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care/rogs-2018-partb-chapter3.pdf>

⁶ <https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/rr24.pdf>

budgets⁷ (see more in Millei, Gobby & Gallagher, 2017). Funding to centers is vital to ensure their viability, as all services, ranging between single center units and large providers composed of large number of centers are responsible for all expenses, including salaries, professional development, maintenance costs and supplies⁸. Keeping the centers operating and providing affordable services to families thus is a central issue for ECEC in NSW. Operating already on very tight budgets and receiving the task of implementing the universal access policy without additional funding, posed a huge challenge to centers and also threatened their survival. Centers rely heavily on families to pay for early childhood educational programs to bridge the shortfall between government funding and the real cost of high quality service delivery. Fee payment immediately excludes many families from accessing early childhood education for their children if they are from a disadvantaged background or in financially vulnerable positions.

The Partnership pushed the NSW government to devise a plan, which the state has delayed arguing that the system and provisional patterns in NSW make the achievement of universal access very hard if not impossible (The Allen Consulting Group, 2011). Then in 2013, the state has released its first funding model, which was subsequently altered in 2015 in light of the Brennan Report (Brennan, 2012) to facilitate its implementation. In this funding model disadvantaged families gained a central attention. For the Partnership's implementation in NSW, disadvantaged families are defined as Indigenous families, families holding a low income health care card and families who receive maximum Child Care benefit. The Partnership also included some operational funding in order to enable the viability of services in small or vulnerable communities. It, however, did not make money available for the establishment of new places up until 2017.

According to the NSW government, the first stage of the implementation of the Partnership in NSW has achieved the goal that every child had "access to a quality early childhood education programme in the 12 months before full-time schooling by June 2013" (Department of Education and Training, 2015, p.11) (hereafter Strategy). However, the numbers showed a different story. Only 59% of children were enrolled to 15 hours of educational program in NSW, and only 82% of children were enrolled in general, some of whom only participated 1 hour per week in 2013. In addition, the number of children requiring a place in 15 hours of educational program was continuously increasing⁹. Moreover, children living in higher SEIFA (ranks areas in Australia according to relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage) areas participated in larger numbers in preschools (educational program is the focus of the service) than long day care (care for working families' children is the focus but often with an educational program for older children). Kurri Kurri Preschool is in SEIFA band 8, the highest level of disadvantage.

⁷ Withholding the usual budget could mean many things, including the state's lack of initiative to attend to its responsibility to provide universal access or to save on ECEC and put the money in some other budgetary areas.

⁸ Parents, whose children participate in long day care receive some subsidies from the Commonwealth government dependent on their salaries and the number of hours children are enrolled. These subsidies still only make up a small part of the daily fees and are capped. In 2008, fees ranged from around \$50 to \$70 a day, with average costs of around \$287 a week per child (or \$14,924 per year for full-time, year-round care). (Kalil, Haskins & Chesters, 2012). Parents who use preschools are not eligible for this subsidy. (Office of Early Childhood Education and Child Care, State of Child Care in Australia - Australian Government Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations, 2010) www.mychild.gov.au/documents/docs/StateChildCareAus.pdf .

⁹ Universal Access to Early Childhood Education, 2015 NSW, Implementation Plan. Schedule B. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/media/eccec/pdf-documents/2017/ECE-May-Consultation-Final-Slidepack.PDF>

The *Preschool Funding Model* was introduced in 2014 following some of the recommendations of the Brennan Report. Preschools have received additional funding if they enrolled children coming from disadvantage and from Indigenous families for 15 hours. Maximum state subsidy per enrolment came after 4-year old children who participated for at least 15 hours per week and were from disadvantaged backgrounds. Additional funding received had to be channeled towards reducing fees. If preschools were strategic in their enrollment, they were able to fill up all places with 4 year olds and for 15 hours, consequently balance their budget and still reduce fees that ensured also their long-term viability as independent businesses. In NSW, only 1 in every 5 children from disadvantaged background were enrolled into preschool before the NSW government released the new funding subsidies that facilitated their enrollment. Thus by maintaining the number of places available, and facilitating the enrolment of more and more children from lower SEIFA areas, it was inevitable that the balance in preschool classes have changed in disadvantaged areas.

Implementation of universal access in Kurri Kurri Preschool

We have discussed in another article the kinds of calculations preschools have made to reach a strong financial position, offer low cost services to families, and also enable universal access with the new subsidies after 2014 (see Millei, Gobby & Gallagher, 2017). Here, we provide only a short summary of the issues and concerns preschools had to negotiate during the implementation. Prioritizing 4-year old's and disadvantaged children decreased the number of available places for 3-year old children in the preschool, since their enrollment did not attract subsidies from the government. Due to the requirement to enroll children into 15 hours of education program, the provision pattern was re-organized and children were encouraged to enroll for the whole 15 hours, which was now provided in two days. Previously the preschool offered flexible delivery, thus some children were enrolled for 2 or 4 days, now children were encouraged to enroll only for two days, which increased the number of available places without the need for capital investment or the creation of new places in the sector. Prioritizing the enrolment of disadvantaged children increased their numbers in classes.

Children coming from disadvantaged environments experience more risk factors affecting their well-being, thus they often require more support from staff (Biddle et al., 2017). Recognizing this need and in order to support children's additional needs, the state has combined the Supporting Children with Additional Needs and Intervention Support Programs into a single program arguably making available more funding. Supporting Children with Additional Needs program and Intervention Support Program has been merged also as Preschool Disability Support Program¹⁰. Both of these programs were also tied in with the Partnership and children's enrollment in the 600 hours (15 hours per week) educational program. However, this funding was only provided for children with a diagnosis. Additional professional development for educators to cater for the increased number of children coming with multiple and often more serious needs in many areas did not compose a part of the state's Strategy.

Local conditions and universal access

Thinking about Kurri Kurri as a very disadvantaged area based on official statistics (SEIFA), not only gives a glib picture of the town but also obscure the realities of everyday life, marks negatively inhabitants and diminishes differences between places that are characterized with this label. Therefore,

¹⁰ Which again changed to become Disability and Inclusion Program (DIP).

such a representation of place needs to be coupled with a more ethnographic perspective to be able to understand what it means to live in the community and to create a better picture of local circumstances.

Agendas for policy often rely on the conventional or statistical presentation of the context and the population in question. Policy analysis also often relies on similar tools. This kind of representation of communities privileges legitimated governing bodies' views, such as statistical offices or organizations working and collecting larger scale data in communities, to supply information for evidence-based policy making. This kind of agenda setting and policy-making takes an instrumentalist view that conceives of policy as a tool for regulating populations from the top down, with predetermined universal aims often measured in statistics (Nguyễn, 2010). To set against this view and focus more on how people live in Kurri Kurri and also show the diversity of place, the resilience, re-working of disadvantage and resistance prevalent in the community, we introduce some historical knowledge of the town combined with some auto-ethnographic notes of the preschool director teacher, Janelle (and mark those sections in *Italics* to differentiate). Her view juxtaposes the dominant view about Kurri Kurri and provides a bottom up view about the families utilizing education and care at the preschool and about educators providing those.

Kurri Kurri, the town

Kurri Kurri is a regional town located on the Eastern seaboard of Australia that is outside of the reach of the metropolitan satellite of Newcastle. It has three early learning centers, one of which is Kurri Kurri Preschool (please see more information about the preschool in Millei & Gallagher, 2017), beside numerous family day care facilities, where a person with a license provides care in their home. It is a historic town established on coal mining. Perhaps due to its history, the place and its people even today carry negative images in people's mind. As Metcalfe (1993) explained based on his anthropological study conducted in the early 1990s in the Cessnock area to which Kurri Kurri also belongs: mining people were "once said to be bestial, or childish, or sick, they are now said to be fat. Whereas Methodism was once prescribed as the solution, doctors now order a rational and maximizing attitude to life" (Metcalfe, 1993, p. 31). The cultural imperial attitude with which people in Kurri Kurri were approached seems to be continuing today, they are still being viewed through a class based lens.

Kurri Kurri's population was just about 10,000 in 1996 while it was characterized with high manufacturing due to the operation of the aluminum smelter (Beer and Clower, 2009). While bringing relative stability to town, the smelter also released tetrafluoromethane (CF₄), the most potent greenhouse gas into the atmosphere. Due to its density, CF₄ can displace air, creating an asphyxiation hazard in inadequately ventilated areas. In Kurri Kurri a study in 2009 has found significantly higher level of CF₄ in the air than the Australian average (Fraser et al, 2013). With the closure of the smelter, unemployment significantly grew and the population also experienced the long term health effects of living with the smelter, though there is no hard evidence to this fact. Despite belonging to one of the most disadvantaged areas of NSW today according to statistics, the population still is quite mixed as the Hunter Valley Vineyards are located quite near, that has brought some more affluent people and lots of visitors in the community. The Vineyards and Kurri Kurri now is directly connected with Sydney due to the construction of the expressway. Thus, from the perspective of town dwellers, the town has potentials and is mixed rather than homogenous as the statistics show. Janelle describes the place the following way.

Kurri Kurri from an inhabitant's perspective

I am a teacher /director of a not for profit community-based preschool, who has forged relationships and connections through the diversity of my roles within the community. Through my lived experiences, I have gained insights into my community and the people who call this town home. Each role provides a new lens, and an opportunity to explore further the impact of social and economic disadvantage and the important role our preschool has in mitigating the effects of persistent and entrenched disadvantage on some of our children.

Our town is located in a small regional area which has been identified in several reports as socially and economically disadvantaged¹¹. Despite this view, it is the collective efficacy of the residents within this community that build resilience. For example, the preschool is responsive to everyday circumstances of families, and tries to implement innovative initiatives which assist families to continue to access a high quality early childhood program for their children. In our preschool, most families try to provide the best childhood experiences to their children, however we also see the effects of unemployment and financial stress upon families. Due to limited employment opportunities in Kurri Kurri exacerbated by the closure of the aluminum smelter and some coal mines, some families have experienced financial hardship. Unemployment is a recurring event and has been the case for many families. While we see the consequences of unemployment in poorer diet, ill health and so on, the parents /carers are also unable to afford their child's preschool fees and drop out. As the number of families experiencing this adversity increased, the Management Committee of the preschool (composed of parents, educators and community members and is constitutionally responsible for the operation of the preschool) accepted a proposal to establish a hardship fund which had been trialed earlier with great success for the family and the child. Small initiatives such as this has a positive impact on the children's lives. They continue attending preschool with their peers and accessing a high quality early childhood educational program.

Judged from the historical and current economic and social contexts, and living conditions of Kurri Kurri, another kind of universal access, the one for example provided in Nordic welfare states based on children's subjective right to education and almost entirely funded by the state / municipalities (Karila, 2012), would greatly overcome families' hardship in providing care and education for their children. For some families in Kurri Kurri grappling with recurring unemployment and financial strain, needing to pay for ECEC to engage in paid work or studies, further exacerbates their problems.

Implementation of universal access in Kurri Kurri Preschool: an autoethnographic story

Kurri Kurri Preschool was a key implementer of the Partnership as its educators and Management Committee understood the potential benefits it has brought for delivering affordable and quality early education to all children in the area. The subsidies attached to the enrollment of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and the new provision pattern of two day preschool providing 15 hours of education enabled the enrollment of a large number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This had positive effects on the budget and the viability of the preschool, and also gave the preschool a chance to lower fees and allow those children to receive quality education who have been previously unable to attend due to financial reasons. Universal access seemed like a helpful change in policy.

The implementation, however, also meant higher wages bill due to increased hours of provision. Primary contact staff (staff working directly with the children) were employed for longer hours, increasing their work hours per day from 7 hours to 8.5 hours to embrace the 15 hour universal access policy provided in 2 times 2 days shifts. The ripple effect of the 600 hours per year spanned across the entire service including increases in length of meal breaks for staff, leading to relief and administration staff being employed longer. It also impacted upon full time primary contact staff who could

¹¹ Besides SEIFA it is also Dropping Off The Edge report 2015 <https://dote.org.au/>

now only work 4 of the 5 days due to increased hours exceeding 38 hour working week. This resulted in the employment of more staff. Being mindful of the key ingredients of a high quality early childhood education program, we were determined to ensure continuity of care for the children, which meant that the same person looks after the same children when they are in preschool for the most possible time.

While staff grappled with the implementation of the extended hours preschool program to ensure its success, an unexpected consequence of the new subsidies began to emerge. We had high numbers of children with complex, often volatile and aggressive behaviors and perceived needs, coupled with families who also required referrals and support in accessing services which best met the needs of both the child and the family.

The composition of groups changed at the beginning of 2017, when the implementation of universal access took full effect. We have traditionally had a 25% of our enrolled children requiring additional support but in 2017 this percentage had increased to 36%. Many more children coming from families with multiple risk factors arrived who did not have diagnosis (thus not included in the above counts) and therefore basis to request support for, but exhibited behaviors associated with living in families who suffer great hardship. We engaged in an internal struggle of grappling with the unprecedented situation: How do we work with the children who were unpredictable, who struggle with trust? Some staff believed consequences for naughty behavior were the answer: “there has to be consequences for their behavior” they argued. Others supported the child and continued working through issues as they arose as best they could until they had built a strong relationship with the children and families. Bringing all staff to embrace the one philosophy was difficult and time consuming. Especially when intervention services recommended outdated methods of controlling children’s behavior, such as giving time out or using reward charts and so on. These methods were in direct contradiction to our philosophical views of a guidance approach. Families demanded that misbehaving children be expelled from preschool. It took more time to maintain meaningful relationships with children and families while supporting all children’s perceived needs.

The staff spent countless hours critically reflecting and reviewing program delivery to support the needs of all children and their families. Ratios of staff to children were revised to maximize the availability of staff to support all children and ensure educators’ wellbeing, as some children presented hostile behavior towards staff (which a couple of occasions culminated in physical aggression towards educators). Organizing and paying for these needs stretched the budget. It was almost impossible to employ highly skilled and suitably trained educators or intervention teachers¹².

While this situation was not totally unexpected, critical reflection at the end of 2016 informed my decision to apply for a social work student to complete their placement in the preschool for terms 1 and 2 of 2017. What took me by surprise and caught me off guard was the concentrated volume and complexity of needs some children and their families presented with. This proved to be a steep learning curve for myself, staff and student and her highly experienced field placement supervisor. The social work student worked directly within the classroom with staff. Staff utilized this student’s research skills and forged connections with relevant organizations discovered by the student as a register was developed of services currently available in our area.

Many visitors who had worked directly with our preschool in previous years noted the limited capacity to contribute to and participate in sustained conversations. High numbers of children needed help with the pronunciation of words. A general level of verbal or physical aggression were also noted by visitors. In their view, children were exhibiting limited capacity to restrain their aggression against other children and staff. These views aligned with other experts perspectives, since a high proportion of children across the preschool were later diagnosed with severe language and speech delays through private therapy services (if families could afford this) or alternatively, through a speech and language

¹² Note that this system has changed while writing this chapter and the disability funding system is now paying \$23.00 per hour. However, this sum only covers the wages of an inexperienced and untrained educator.

intervention program provided by the local university Speech Pathology Department called Speech Pathology in Schools Program (SPinS)¹³. However, this was only available to children attending during the second part of the week (Thursday and Friday). This situation left staff working at the beginning of the week to provide enrichment programs to stimulate communication and language skills for children. ¹⁴ Staff were worried that children who have difficulties with language and expression could easily disengage from learning.

My role within the preschool has three main elements: first, as a teacher working face to face in my own classroom for 2 days per week; second, a director working on administration for 2 days, (though the office days are rarely taken and I bring work home usually); and third, educational leader where my presence is needed in the classrooms and playground working directly with the children and facilitating staff's pedagogical work. While this latter area of responsibility served a dual purpose of mentoring and upskilling staff and sharing my knowledge and expertise, which was highly needed in this situation, it has also provided a window of opportunity to observe progress (or otherwise) of every child throughout the year. While I witnessed some significant changes due to partnerships formed with families, other professionals and the diligence and commitment of the staff working directly with the children, other children seemed to be slipping through the cracks. What became painfully obvious was, as the year drew to a close, that the multiple level of disadvantage did not only affect the children but also the wellbeing of staff¹⁵.

With over 35 years of teaching experience working with children with complex needs and supporting families, I had been fortunate to gather a specific skill set and a 'toolbox' of approaches and strategies which guided my practices and informed the work of my coworkers (whom I hold in the highest of esteem). What must be highlighted here is that my skill acquisition was a gradual and long-term process. But, we have found ourselves within the preschool in a situation which can be likened to a tsunami pushing ashore with great force multiple challenges, complex needs, diverse behaviors and ongoing change in ECEC provision structures. We felt like we were drowning. One important fact which must be mentioned here is the level of collegiality and teamwork which has emerged with all staff reporting feelings of gratitude for their co-workers. Even the most highly trained, committed and resilient staff members questioned the effectiveness of their own pedagogical practices, and we all questioned how effective we had been in delivering a high quality early childhood program for all children. These reflections will inform how we move forward with optimism and hope. 2018 brings new beginnings, newly acquired knowledge and skills, which will be honed and refined in the coming months and years with targeted ongoing training in social work prioritised.

This auto-ethnographic story provides insights into the difficult negotiations that took place at the local level while a state policy was implemented. These negotiations, ethical dilemmas and hard decisions often remain invisible for policy-makers but are important factors that actually make policies succeed or fail. They also highlight the diverse realities of places where policy initiatives might play out in unexpected ways. While the state policy aimed the enrollment of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, abiding by this initiative and implementing it the best they could, the preschool ended up with significant dilemmas, issues and problems. First of all, while more children were enrolled and subsidies increased, the extra financial resources still needed to be found in the re-balancing of the

¹³ <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/about-uon/governance-and-leadership/faculties-and-schools/faculty-of-education-and-arts/school-of-humanities-and-social-science/speech-pathology-clinics/speech-pathology-in-schools-spins-program>

¹⁴ The SPinS program states on its website that "children with moderate to severe language delays struggle to keep pace with literacy instruction. They are at risk becoming disengaged with learning".

¹⁵ In January 2018 the Australian Federal Government announced that the 'beyondblue' program will receive up to \$46 million for its integrated school-based Mental Health in Education initiative. The report recognizes that "residents in these communities aren't just dealing with one form of disadvantage but multiple and complex barriers to individual wellbeing and community participation".

[http://www.health.gov.au/internet/ministers/publishing.nsf/Content/8961B95A81EC4706CA25820E0013479F/\\$File/BM003.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/ministers/publishing.nsf/Content/8961B95A81EC4706CA25820E0013479F/$File/BM003.pdf)

budget of the preschool. This required lots of work and great accounting knowledge that not all preschools can do. This preschool has managed so far keeping fees low for families despite the viability of the preschool being in constant danger. The labor, that often occurred without salary, needed to achieve this success was motivated by the philosophy of the preschool that states that providing access to affordable and quality early education is a priority. The possibilities created by universal access and the preschool philosophy was easily aligned and staff saw the implementation of the policy as a great platform to achieve their aims as well.

The autoethnographic story also describes some of the unintended consequences of the implementation of universal access policy. Even with the best of intentions from the government and the creative and generous implementation performed by the teachers, educators and management, the financial and professional resources provided to the preschool were not enough to ensure the ongoing and timely support needed for the children, families or staff. They could not keep up the highest quality of education they have been used to. The staff responded with great resourcefulness and through reflection identified gaps in learning and accessing funding, and requested training providers to impart current and researched based best practice information. However, the preschool was still ill-prepared for the reception of the high number of children with multiple special needs. At more occasions than they had been used to, they applied ad-hoc solutions that did not fit their pedagogical aspirations fulfilling the requirements of a high quality education. They experienced situations when they needed expert support that was rarely available or was unreachable due to financial limitations. The preschool staff embraced changes with enviable hope. However, this story demonstrates well the unexpected and ambiguous consequences and hard ethical dilemmas and professional negotiations that universal access has brought at the very local level.

Discussion

Universal access' strategic aim internationally is to reap the economic benefits of investments in young children's learning. However, as we have exposed in this chapter, universal access in NSW, Australia besides seeking to give the possibility for every 4 year old child to benefit from 15 hours of quality ECEC and therefore reduce inequalities, also have an effect of reproducing it, which perhaps at present remains invisible to policy makers and some analysts. To highlight this effect and the dilemmas it produced in the field of ECEC, was the aim of this chapter.

In states and territories within Australia, universal access policies aimed to support parental choice and to foster quality, to lift the participation of children from Aboriginal and low socio-economic backgrounds, and children with additional needs, and to continue improving teaching¹⁶. To mitigate the effects of their circumstances, high-quality ECEC for disadvantaged children in particular was a priority focus of the Partnership (Biddle et al., 2017, p. 49). High quality environments, as research evidence shows, lead to more emotionally supportive teacher-child interactions, thus increase the social competence of children and lower behavioral problems (Broekhuizen et al, 2016). However, if the policy priority leads to the unintended situation that has developed in Kurri Kurri Preschool, universal access can create classrooms where children's multiple special needs overwhelm educators and other children. Educators, as a consequence, can no longer provide high quality learning environments and supportive peer relationships (or the lack of those) fail to help getting through difficult social and emotional relations at home or in preschool. Educators experience greater stress

¹⁶ <https://education.nsw.gov.au/early-childhood-education/whats-happening-in-the-early-childhood-education-sector/sector-consultations/october-november-consultation/media/October-consultation-slides.pdf>

due to children's misbehavior and they find that their professional knowledge needs extension to be able to address the needs of children and their families and to make quality education available for all children attending.

Kurri Kurri Preschool saw the opportunity in the extra subsidies to continue providing even more affordable and high quality preschool program to more children in need of it. They enthusiastically implemented universal access. However, the results of their efforts created a paradox. The usual situation, when a small number of children requiring special attention was balanced with a large number of children who benefited from regular high quality learning environments, remarkably changed. The high number of children with additional needs unsettled the preschool's highly regarded pedagogical approach. Evidently, the financial support provided by the state did little to ameliorate the need for highly trained professionals working with the numerous children who needed specialized support. Left to their own devices, such as creative solutions and resilience, educators' efforts still made some changes in children's learning and their and their families' lives, but perhaps much less than it was hoped from universal access.

As revealed by our more bottom up type of policy analysis, if viewed from the local and situated experience, the implementation of universal access in a highly disadvantaged area have seriously threatened the provision of a quality learning environment. While universal access fulfilled the agenda of enabling parental choice and the participation of disadvantaged children, it also resulted in hidden and masked costs for the educators. Educators worked longer and more irregular hours and have suffered high emotional strain and under increased administrative loads due to higher number of mandatory reporting to government bodies. Thus, again and as shown in the cases of previous policy reforms in ECEC (Campbell, Barr, 2009; Osgood, 2009), to gain the value from ECEC that large scale and longitudinal research studies demonstrate (see Sylva et al, 2008 in UK; Tayler et al, 2016 in Australia), that "educational attainment and productivity (human capital) but also social outcomes that include dimensions of health and social well-being (social capital)" (Tayler et al, 2016, p. 11) increase, is only possible through the unrecognized work and emotional labor of an already underappreciated and underpaid workforce. Our place-based analysis demonstrated that universal access can work almost in contradiction to the stated aims of international, national and state universal access policies and rather than alleviating, it contributes to growing inequity in educational experiences between locales.

The commitment of the federal and state governments to ensure universal access enabled only the re-organization of provision patterns by prioritizing 4 and 5 years old children's access and those children who live with disadvantage. Other children, such as those of three years of age or even those younger, who live with disadvantage, and for whom ECEC can really be beneficial, were denied access. In other words, without the creation of new places in disadvantaged areas where all children can participate in and benefit from quality ECEC, universal access will potentially fail to alleviate increasing social stratification and disadvantage. *Start Strong* in 2017 has provided \$10 Million in its Capital Works Grants program to create up to 700 new preschool places in the whole of NSW (relatively small number to the extent of the need), with priority given to outer regional, remote and very remote, and Aboriginal communities¹⁷. This extra funding, however, will not solve the issue of Kurri Kurri and other centers in the same situation, as they fall outside the priority areas. Moreover, the provision of capital funds might help little in locales where disadvantage and children's needs are high and where

¹⁷ <https://education.nsw.gov.au/early-childhood-education/operating-an-early-childhood-education-service/grants-and-funded-programs/start-strong-pathways>

well-trained staff is in shortage or is under-paid thus leave the profession. Reports show that especially in these priority areas, trained ECEC staff is in high demand¹⁸. New places for disadvantaged children will create the need for additional professionals, such as speech therapists, social workers and so on, that *Starting Strong* does not fund. Fulfilling these extra needs again will fall back on the staff present at these centers and the resilience and resourcefulness of these communities, such as the case in Kurri Kurri Preschool.

The participation numbers in NSW show improvement, which gives hope for the sector that fought for every child's opportunity to participate in ECEC. These numbers also benefit the image of the governments, who can demonstrate that great improvement happened, and they can be seen as bringing economic benefits and stability for their nation in voters' eyes. However, if looked from the perspective of a preschool that is located in a disadvantaged area, universal access policies so far were unsuccessful in giving similar life chances, that is equality of opportunity, to those living there. Moreover, universal access can only 'cure' disadvantage if it is part of a broader economic and social strategies that aim to provide equal opportunities for families living in these areas. As a magic bullet, universal access can only give a glimpse into what would be possible with ECEC if children who need it the most were enrolled earlier into quality learning environments before the door to a good life completely closes in front of them. Partly addressing our concerns, and as we completed writing this chapter, the Leader of the Federal Opposition announced that, if elected in 2019, Labor will extend universal provision to 15 hours per week access for 3-year-olds¹⁹. The NSW government also promised in an initiative to become the first Australian state to provide universal access to community preschool for three years old under a \$197.8 million program²⁰.

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