Foreword

The importance of the early years to children's lives is now beyond question. A good beginning to life is well recognised as the foundation for future development, health and wellbeing, not only in the early years, but also throughout life. Despite this recognition, and the concerted advocacy efforts that have flowed from it, policy and practice in early education and care in Australia still lack focus and integration.

It is this divide between knowledge and action that lies at the heart of Alison Elliott's incisive review of early childhood education. If we so clearly recognise the importance of the early years, why is the field so fragmented, disjointed and lacking integration of research, policy and practice? Elliott tackles this question directly, in a well-documented, clearly argued and balanced treatise. Each section is well researched and referenced. I am confident that this Australian Education Review will become a very valuable resource for researchers, policy makers and practitioners.

Two metaphors are used to organise the discussion – patchworks and crossroads. The patchwork metaphor is the more prominent throughout the review so I will devote more of my comments to it. The crossroads metaphor is, however, especially significant as one reflects on the way forward. Elliott uses both to good effect.

The patchwork metaphor captures the confusing mix of types of provision, regulatory regimes and policy contexts that reflect the historical origins of the field and the contemporary realities of early childhood education in the Australian federation. The background to the patchwork is the divide between care and education that, here and elsewhere, has historically characterised the field, and still does. As Elliott points out, the divide stems from the emergence in the late 19th century, on the one hand, of the kindergarten movement with its focus on early learning and preparation for school and, on the other, the day nurseries with their charitable and welfare focus.

These divergent paths have resulted in very different systems for managing and regulating provision of early childhood services. When one adds the complex tapestry of the public, private, not-for-profit, charitable, church and community players, the patchwork becomes even more complex. The divide is further reinforced in many jurisdictions by vesting responsibility for policy, administration and regulation of preschools and child care in separate portfolios of education and community services, respectively.

Preschools and early learning centres were and have remained the province of educators, with a higher proportion of qualified teachers and a clear focus on curriculum and pedagogy. Increasingly, the mix of public and private provision has become more complex with many private schools establishing early learning centres providing preschool programs, often with extended hours. In contrast, public and community preschools typically offer sessional provision that creates its own set of issues, given the needs of the ever-increasing number of women in paid employment.

As such, preschool provision is itself a patchwork varying widely across the States and Territories in the extent of provision and equity of access. Rarely questioned, preschools are increasingly seen as the base for a concerted national effort to address the policy imperatives associated with the early years. The most recent example of this is the priority placed on preschool in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) human capital initiative.

Child care provision in Australia is similarly a patchwork. As Elliott shows, Australia has a complex mix of types of child care provision, conducted by a diverse range of providers operating in a confusing and increasingly complex administrative and regulatory environment. While examples of best practice can be identified in the care sector, examples of integration of care and education remain sparse, despite attempts to achieve a synthesis.

Another stark divide between early education and child care relates to staff, their qualifications and supply. The qualifications of staff in child care are diverse and generally lower than those in preschools and kindergartens. As Elliott illustrates, within the field there is considerable contention surrounding the issue of qualifications and professionalisation of the workforce. The push for standards-based teacher accreditation has had less impact in the child care arena than in the early education sector. As Elliott clearly shows, Australia continues to experience a shortage of both child care places and staff, despite considerable increases in government funding. It also faces considerable difficulty in raising the qualifications of staff and improving the conditions of employment for those employed in this sector.

Unlike preschool, however, child care is the subject of ongoing debate about its relative risks and benefits. It is more frequently portrayed as the problem, rather than a solution. Much of the heat in the debate has resulted from the ideological divides and biases of some influential researchers, policy makers, practitioners and advocates. The focus, at least in the first waves of research, on studies making simplistic comparisons between parental care and centre-based child care – mother versus other care – has left an indelible legacy. It is interesting that this dichotomous view has persisted, given that the extent to which children live in complex family, neighbourhood and wider social networks has been long recognised. Again, Elliott observes the changing complexity of the social worlds in which Australian children live and the challenges this presents for early education, given the complexity of the balances that families strive to achieve between the demands of caring and the responsibilities of paid employment.

Elliott provides a comprehensive overview of the evidence base supporting the early years and reviews the landmark studies. The review highlights the influence of international studies, often extrapolated beyond their context when applied to Australian early childhood education. She also identifies both the patchwork of research approaches and the spaces, the research gaps, between these.

Unlike the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom and parts of Europe, Australia lacks well-developed outcome data on the effects of early education. The data from the Australian Government funded Longitudinal Study of Australian Children is beginning to illustrate the connection between disadvantage and the outcomes for children. For the first time, we are accumulating on a large scale, national data on the experiences and outcomes of Australian children, from infancy onwards. For the first time, we are not solely dependent on longitudinal research from elsewhere. For the first time, we are building a national evidence base on the importance of the early years, as the base for policy and practice in this country.

As Elliott highlights, in parallel with renewing, strengthening and sustaining our national commitment to young children, we need to evaluate what works well in early childhood education. Much remains to be done. And we need to link the research data with the wealth of census, administrative and evaluation data that we comprehensively (some would say compulsively) collect.

An obvious gap in our knowledge is in the area of cost-benefit analysis. While the evidence of the benefits of intervention and prevention initiatives in the early years is considerable, our knowledge of the economic significance of investing in the early years, as opposed to other investment opportunities, is less well grounded. Australia lacks a framework for economic evaluation of the comparative costs and benefits of early education. A commitment to building the national database that will enable us to develop appropriate economic models that, in turn, will facilitate a discerning approach to our investments in the early years. In the absence of Australian economic data, we have had to rely on small-scale international examples that cannot adequately reflect our social, economic and policy contexts.

While Elliott acknowledges the importance of the social context, the implications in recent research for our understanding of the intersection of families and the systems of early education and care, requires closer attention from researchers and policy makers. Two of the studies that Elliott cites provide examples of the crucial nature of the intersection of family and early education. It is this intersection that seems a common ingredient in the success of initiatives to support and nurture development in early life, and beyond. More needs to be made in research, policy and practice of the partnership between home and early education.

The evidence from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) in the United States of America bears this out, as does the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project in the United Kingdom. Both studies demonstrate the contributions that high-quality child care and preschool education, respectively, can make to children's language and cognitive development during the early years. In both studies, parent and family characteristics are, however, stronger determinants than the early childhood programs, per se. The combination of family and community, working in synergy, powerfully determines outcomes. The effect of home and preschool, in combination, is greater than either alone. As Elliott's review of the research shows, while quality early life experiences are important for all children, they have been shown to be particularly vital to overcoming the effects of disadvantage.

This brings me at last to the crossroads metaphor. This review does more than describe the divide; it clearly sketches its implications for Australia and its children. The crossroads metaphor captures the sense of profound choice. It highlights the need for regaining momentum if we are to address the educational and developmental needs of young children. In the face of the overwhelming evidence of the importance of the early years, we now need to act.

We have been at the early education crossroads for a long time. When Frances Press and I wrote the Australian background report for the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy the phrase 'a nation at the crossroads?' was the note on which we ended (Press & Hayes, 2000). Six years on, Alison Elliott argues cogently that Australia remains