



*Address
by*

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At the

Jean Ferguson OAM Memorial Lecture

at

Parliamentary Annexe

on

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[Opening slide 1]

After reading a 1997 draft Jean Ferguson's memoirs, I am sure she would appreciate the irony of my being invited to present a memorial lecture in her name, sponsored by the Brisbane Kindergarten Teachers College Graduates and Friends Association Incorporated – a chapter of the QUT Alumni.

I stand before you as a former secondary school history and English teacher – one for whom transmission and debate about knowledge and its interpretation was at the core of her philosophy of education.

While **my** draft memoirs could perhaps list seminal works about the history of Europe, Asia and Australia, **hers** list texts by Froebel and Piaget and those with titles such as "The Dawn of Character in the Mind of the Child", "Nursery Years" and "The Invisible Crisis or what does preschool mean?"

While she toiled as Principal of the Brisbane Kindergarten Teachers' College, I was doing a truncated training program (one year University, one year Teachers' College). In retrospect, this consisted mostly of smoking Black Russian Sobranie cigarettes in the refectory and considering ourselves slightly superior to students at (the then) Kelvin Grove Teachers' College, as well as her establishment across the road, as we had attended the University of Queensland (if only for a year).

However, my conversion to early childhood education began when, as a state high school Principal, I became aware that the most adept exponents of what was termed "individualised instruction" and "catering for individualised needs", were early childhood teachers.

Since my appointment as Commissioner for Children and Young People I have become a vocal advocate of the significance of the early years of children's lives in their current and future wellbeing.

I hope Jean Ferguson would appreciate that, although my commitment has come late in life, I accepted the honour of presenting this lecture tonight as a fervent convert.

I have also chosen a theme I feel would have resonated with her and those with an interest in this arena: "In whose interests? Advocacy for children and early childhood".

To more precisely define the concept of advocacy, I would like to quote from a New South Wales Standing Committee on Social Issues report: 'Inquiry into Children's Advocacy':

'Advocacy for children is about systems and individuals recognising the rights and needs of all children and young people and responding to those rights and needs.

It also involves allowing children and young people to have a say in decisions that are likely to affect them.

Children's advocacy is not about undermining the role of parents and families, nor is it about denying children the fact of childhood and their need for protection.

It is about taking a proactive approach to ensure that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential as human beings...'

The education and care of young children has experienced an enormous surge of political and social attention in recent years.

In 2001, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development released a report titled *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care*, which analyses policy and services for children across 12 industrialised countriesⁱⁱ. The findings of this report continue to resonate in public policy around the world.

The report states that quality early experiences promote children's short-term cognitive, social and emotional development, as well as their long-term success in school and later in life. It also supports the notion that investing in quality early childhood education and care is cost-effective in terms of preventing later costly interventions.ⁱⁱⁱ

I think we all recognise that our development is shaped by a continuous and lifelong interaction between biology and experience^{iv}. The experiences of early childhood have an acknowledged ability to influence later health and developmental outcomes.

The current emphasis on investing in the early years relates to a growing belief that if we don't 'get it right' in early childhood, there will be a financial and social price to pay as a society.

'Getting it right' is most often associated with ensuring that children have access to secure and loving relationships with parents and caregivers. But it also involves ensuring the conditions are right for families to thrive so these relationships have a greater chance of being maintained.

Responses to this emphasis on the early years and their ability to shape later growth and development can be seen throughout the world.

They include the *Surestart* program in Great Britain, initiatives stimulated by the *Early Years Study* in Canada, and the *National Children's Agenda* in Ireland.

[Refer slide 2 - Early Years Initiative Great Britain, and slide 3 Canada/Ireland]

In Australia, the federal government is currently developing a *National Agenda for Early Childhood*, and the Queensland government made "investing in children" a priority in its 2002 budget, increasing the funding for families by \$148 million dollars over the next three years.

[Refer slide 4: Australia]

However, I can't resist noting that while most OECD countries spend between 0.4 and 0.7% of their GDP on early childhood programs, a recent OECD report^v shows Australia spends only 0.03% - the third lowest of 24 countries surveyed.

[Refer slide 5: Pre-primary education]

I believe the Commission for Children and Young People has a role in responding to and helping shape national and state initiatives to support young children and their families.

To fulfil this role, the Commission has established an Early Years Advisory Group and Strategic Network specifically to advocate for the interests of children antenatally to eight years of age.

{Refer slide 6 – Early years Advisory Group and Strategic Network}

These groups will identify issues of concern about services to children in this age-group and their families. The Advisory Group will work to find solutions to problems which are identified by forming productive interagency partnerships.

In doing so, it is important we keep in mind another key understanding which has emerged from recent research which exerts a powerful influence over the work of the Commission – that is the understanding that children shape their environments as well as being shaped by them.^{viii}

Human relationships have a powerful impact on the development of young children, but the rich learning that occurs during interactions between adults and children is not 'one-way traffic'.

From their earliest days, children are active participants in their own learning and development, along with the significant adults in their lives.^{viii}

Refer slide 7 – Children as active participants]

Children are competent social actors in their own right. They are not merely individuals who are acted 'upon', but who act themselves, with others, to build their own futures.

The rights of children have been inscribed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child which has now been formally ratified by 191 countries.

[Refer slide 8: Convention on the Rights of the Child]

The Convention on the Rights of the Child:

- reinforces fundamental human dignity
- highlights and defends the family's role in children's lives
- seeks respect for children – but not at the expense of the human rights or responsibilities of others
- endorses the principle of **non**-discrimination
- establishes clear obligations through binding national commitments^{ix}

The principles of the Convention are enacted in government policy around the world.

For example, the Irish National Children's Strategy which I looked at earlier is titled "*Our Children – Their Lives*". It acknowledges that while building better futures for children benefits us all, each child retains ownership of his or her own life.

[Refer slide 9 –Ireland's National Childrens Strategy]

The Irish National Strategy talks about creating a country where

Children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by

family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential.^x

Respect for children and their role as active citizens is written into Queensland's *Commission for Children and Young People Act (2000)*.

This Act stresses that every child is a valued member of society and that the best interests of the children should be of paramount concern when decisions are being made which affect them.

It also states that children's views and wishes should be taken into account in a way that has regard to the child's age and maturity.

Both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children and *The Commission for Children and Young People Act* make it clear that children themselves have rights as citizens.

We need to acknowledge and respect children for who they are now, as well as who they will become.

Children exist as individuals in their own right, not just in relation to others. Their lives have intrinsic worth and they are entitled to the same respect and dignity as other members of our community.

Those who work in the field of early childhood have a special responsibility to be aware of and respect the rights of children, including their rights to participation and expression.

Demand for education and care services for young children shows continuous, significant growth, and more and more children will spend a significant part of their early years with paid early childhood workers.

In 2002, 64% of Australian children aged 0-4 years were in some type of formal or informal care. Use of formal care services has increased from 34% to 44% since 1993. During that same time use of a combination of formal and informal care arrangements increased by 2 per cent, from 15% to 17%. . . use of informal care arrangements decreased slightly from 41% to 37%^{xi}.

[Refer slide 10 – Early Childhood in Australia]

I now want to ask you to consider two questions. Are the rights of children respected in early childhood education and care settings? Are children's rights to participation and expression acknowledged in the practices of early childhood educators?

[Refer slide 11 – Consider...]

For many years, a belief in 'child-centred' practice dominated and was cited as proof of the profession's commitment to the interests and wellbeing of children. This was strongly associated with a reliance on developmental psychology.^{xii}

However, recently, the concept of 'child-centredness' has been challenged, as researchers investigate whose interests are really served by the practices associated with this philosophy.

Child-centred practice typically involved creating play settings in which children were free to explore and make their own choices. Children's development was expected

to unfold naturally when provided with the correct environment. The key elements in this philosophy were readiness, choice, needs, play and discovery.

The ideal learning experience was seen as voluntary, self-directed and enjoyable.^{xiii} Teachers in child-centred settings were placed in an almost untenable position.

They were responsible for their student's learning, but were not supposed to directly influence it^{xiv}. Children would learn when they were 'ready' provided there were suitable environmental conditions.

The position of unstructured play as central to early childhood learning, grounded in the Romantic Froebelian tradition, remained unchallenged – resulting in teachers being uncertain about playing an interactive role in children's learning.

When Jean Ferguson reminisced about her early days as an early childhood teacher, she said:

We graduated from College with high expectations about the part we might play in the improvement of mankind but a certain vagueness about our teaching role. In fact, we had a strong aversion to being called teachers.^{xv}

This aversion to being named as teachers was a product of a belief that children learned best when left to grow in their own space and time.

Early childhood specialists certainly knew what not to do. They were not to teach, but to 'facilitate', advise, or guide.^{xvi}

The top and bottom of it is, that it is a crime to teach a child anything at all, schoolwise.^{xvii} (D H Lawrence)

A child-centred philosophy placed children 'in charge' of their own learning, free to participate and express themselves as they chose.

But while the play and learning environments were supposed to operate democratically with children at the centre of decision-making, many of the decisions deeply affecting children, their spaces and relationships, were made without them.

The enforcement of rest periods and the open toileting facilities provided were frequently presented as non-negotiable. Certain areas in early childhood centres were off-limits to children, not because of workplace health and safety, but because of the power allocated to them. Teachers' offices, for example, frequently became places where parents and teachers talked things over, but remained mysterious and special to most children.

You may have noticed that in talking about child-centred practice I've been speaking in the past tense.

Although these practices have been replaced by more democratic practices in response to children's concerns, it would be inaccurate to say contemporary early childhood education and care settings are places where children consistently get a say in things that matter to them.

I would like to challenge you tonight to consider how broadly principles of democracy and respect for children's rights are applied in some of the common practices of current early childhood education and care.

For example, children might write imaginary appointments with a pretend doctor while busy in the home corner, but are they given *real* opportunities to make appointments to discuss their learning with their teacher?

An acknowledgment that children are the key stakeholders in their own learning requires teachers to conduct conferences with children as well as with parents. Ask yourselves: what areas of decision-making are 'off-limits' to children and why? Are children given a say in how budgets are spent? Are children consulted in menu planning at long day-care centres? Are structures in place so children can be consulted about decisions around behaviour management policies?

If the answers are no – why not? What do we believe about children that leads us to exclude them from these decisions? Are our actions consistent with the beliefs behind negotiated aspects of curriculum with children?

I pose the question: whose interests are genuinely served by many taken-for-granted beliefs, understandings and practices?

The emergence of the theoretical perspective known as the sociology of childhood has marked an increase in interest in the idea of child agency. This is a move away from 'the child' as a member of the category 'childhood', towards an understanding of children as particular people in their own right.^{xviii}

This theory has reconceptualised children as social actors, shaping their own experiences, as well as being shaped by them. It is consistent with the competent child presented in discourses related to the rights of the child, one which names them as citizens and gives children power as decision-makers.

According children status as young citizens in early childhood education, and in the wider community, means recognising them as significant stakeholders in common social enterprises. In other words, children should not be placed 'in charge' but should have a share in the power circulating in their diverse worlds.

In their book *From Children's Services to Children's Spaces*, Peter Moss and Pat Petrie addressed the idea of creating spaces for children and adults in which power is truly shared. They suggest an essential part of providing services to children involves

Fostering the visibility, inclusion and active participation of all children in society....^{xix}

They advocate for children's spaces to be ones where children and adults engage together on a variety of projects.

Acknowledging children as "experts in their own lives"^{xx} does not mean adults become passive listeners in interactions with children. Listening to children should be an active process, involving interpreting, responding, challenging, and extending.

Demonstrating respect for children and placing their interests at the heart of work in early childhood services means developing critical ways of viewing practice and policy. It means questioning our absolute acceptance of what is right and true, and examining the interests served in our work with young children. It also means looking closely at what we believe to be right and true about children, and what we do in the name of those beliefs.

I believe children are rich and competent individuals capable of engaging meaningfully in their worlds and participating in the construction of these worlds in a variety of ways. I view children as active members of diverse and changing communities. I believe children have rights – both as individuals and citizens.

I am heartened to see children consulted more and more, in innovative ways. For example, two London University researchers tackling the challenge of getting the views of children under five, gave children cameras and asked them to take pictures of 'important things.'

The children took the researchers on tours of their nursery and drew maps of their surroundings. Along with impressions supplied by parents and nursery staff, these formed a mosaic revealing each child's priorities and impressions of nursery life.

The children's priorities were:

- friends and changing friendships, including relationships with important adults and siblings
- favourite spaces including 'hidden' spaces outside
- conflict and how it is dealt with by adults
- memories of important people who have left, and
- aspirations about the future.

So, making sure children's interests are well represented, in theory **and** in practice, involves ensuring that children have a voice in decision-making.

As I mentioned earlier, early childhood teachers tend to be very good listeners. But listening to children, and even accommodating some of their wishes, can be just window-dressing unless you are prepared to honour what they are saying and are genuinely prepared to examine your world view in line with what has been said.

Another excellent example of what I am advocating was given by Felicity McArdle when she spoke at the Cassandra Weddell Memorial Oration during Under Eights' Week this year.

Felicity told how she had taken a group of 5 and 6 year old children to the Queensland Museum to view an exhibition of art by young Chinese children. One of the artworks was by a three-and-a-half year old boy.

[Refer slide 12 - Spring]

When parents saw the artwork, they asked why their children couldn't paint like that. Felicity said the answer is linked to our culture. **Our** culture is much more about self-expression and individuality. The Chinese painting was the result of training in technique and symbolism, whereas 'our' children's artworks are the result of their own creative expression.

Felicity was able to use theory when talking to these parents to justify her own practice. It was in her interests to believe that the current way was the 'right' way.

[Refer slide 13 – Mother and Child]

Things started to get more challenging when one of the children asked a similar question: "How come he can paint like that? I want to be able to paint like that." Felicity not only listened to this child, but allowed her world view to be challenged.

She decided to investigate how we view art education and development in our culture. His questions positioned him as a co-researcher and an inquirer. Felicity allowed the way she thought of children, and their development as artists, to be 'troubled' and in doing so, gave this boy a real role in influencing the way she and others think about art education.

Felicity's story reminds us that sometimes the ways we view and understand children are more about the way we'd like things to be, rather than the way they are. Or rather, the way we'd like **children** to be.

Other practices which reflect taken-for-granted ways of thinking about children include uniformly decorating children's spaces in bright colours, or using cartoonish graphics on products designed for children's use. This visual language defines the product as 'for children', and suggests that children can or should only be involved in playful, 'child-like' activities.

As more and more products use such visual language, it becomes increasingly powerful as an 'identifier' and narrows the preferences of children into one accepted set of 'kids' stuff'. This specific "children's" language can also act to separate their interests from those of the 'real', or adult, world.

Children are a diverse group made up of different individuals with distinctly different experiences and preferences, just like the rest of society.

Consulting children about what they would like for their spaces demonstrates an understanding of children's ability to take an active role in shaping their worlds and acknowledges that their choices may not be the same as those made on their behalf by adults.

As a young person recently commented when asked about what type of environments he had liked as a child:

Children like to watch cartoons. We don't want to live in them.

Giving children a role in making decisions on matters that affect them is central to the work of all advocates for children, and is integral to the work of the Commission for Children and Young People.

This is due to our belief that:

Children have the right to be listened to, to have their views taken into account and to express themselves on matters that concern them.^{xxi}

Wherever possible, programs 'for' children should also be conducted 'with' them.^{xxii} 'With' them implies negotiation - adults have priorities which need to be accommodated too.

For example, adults who are responsible for providing children's services are often responsible for supervising environments in which children work and play, even though children may prefer to have private spaces for these activities. While excessive regulation and surveillance is not compatible with understandings of children as competent, child protection is everybody's business.

The act of children and adults coming together to make clear and negotiate their perspectives and needs, constitutes genuine participation and engagement.

So listening to children is not enough. It is the quality and purpose of our listening that matters. We need to talk with them, explore and challenge their views, and provide them with skills and experiences that will help them become more adept as decision-makers. We also need to be ready to transform our own perspectives and practice.

Many Queensland teachers have taken up the challenge to view children as competent individuals and citizens, as “beings’ rather than “becomings”^{xxiii}

Drawing inspiration from models such as The Mosaic approach^{xxiv} mentioned earlier, and the practices of Reggio Emilia^{xxv} these teachers are developing programs where listening, observing, gathering documentation and interpretation are practised in new, more critical and reflexive ways.

This may involve explicit teaching, such as teaching students how to use a digital camera, or how to effectively participate in a group meeting.

Sometimes it involves learning together, such as working out how to get a design into three dimensions. At other times it may involve negotiating, as adults and children in a setting share and reflect on their own and each other’s priorities for the day’s program.

Enabling meaningful, not just tokenistic, participation and engagement of children in decision-making involves creating and maintaining structures which are understood by children and the adults who work with them.

There are many exemplary programs and practices I could use to illustrate my conviction that Queensland is fortunate in having many early childhood teachers who are challenging earlier dominant understandings of children and their worlds, and embracing a deeper understanding of children’s rights.

One I’d like to share with you today is the “Big Art, Small Viewer” project undertaken by the Campus Kindergarten at St Lucia in collaboration with the University of Queensland Art Museum.

[Refer slide 14 – Big Art, Small Viewer]

In April 2002, small groups of children from the Campus Kindergarten began visiting the University’s Art Museum with their teachers. During their visits, children reflected on artworks specially chosen for their consideration, and later created their own pieces.

At the Art Museum, children and teachers looked at and discussed the adult artwork. They learned about the different media used by the artists, talked about the designs, patterns and shapes and pondered the possible symbolism of the works.

[Refer slide 15 – Desert Experience]

The children could look at the artworks several times to study and think about them by using digital photographs taken during their visits to the Art Museum. Over time, the children created their own artworks, drawing on the inspiration they had received from their experiences. Some of these artworks were created at the Art Museum, and some at Campus Kindergarten.

[Refer slide 16 - Wallaby (and the whole catastrophe) and slide 17 – Response to Ruth Waller’s art]

The ‘Big Art, Small Viewer’ exhibition reflects the Campus Kindergarten staff’s commitment to empowering children, challenging restrictive images of childhood and providing opportunities for adults and children to learn together. It responds to a view that children have a legitimate right to participate in adult worlds, and that these worlds should include spaces for them.

In fact, it challenges the very idea of ‘adult worlds’ by reminding us that public spaces are for children too.

The publication of the ‘Big Art, Small Viewer’ book adds power to the voices of the children involved, who tell us with pride that they can paint “all the colours in the whole wide world”.^{xxvi}

Refer slide 18: Big Art, small viewer]

It is a fearsome responsibility to acknowledge that;

Our children’s lives are lived through childhoods constructed for them by adult understandings of childhood and what children are and should be^{xxvii}.

Today, more than at any other time in our social history, our lives and ways of being are being blurred. We blur time, place, and increasingly, function^{xxviii}. Blurred families, blurred days where children are shifted among people and settings, mean we need to consider what must be retained about early childhood education and care . . . what makes us unique and what must be altered to make room for new social constructions.

This is the challenge^{xxix} I place before you.

[Closing slide 19: CCYP contact info]

ⁱ Standing Committee on Social Issues (1996) *Inquiry Into Children’s Advocacy*, Report No. 10, Parliament of New South Wales Legislative Council, September, p.17

ⁱⁱ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2001). *Starting Strong: Early education and care*. Paris: OECD.

ⁱⁱⁱ Neuman, M.J. & Bennett, J. (2001). Starting strong: Policy implications for early childhood education and care in the U.S. *Phi Delta Kappan* 83 (3), 246-254.

^{iv} Moore, T. (2002). *Review of the research evidence on early child development*. Paper presented at National Meeting on Early Childhood Systems, Melbourne November 2002.

^v OECD, (2001) Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care; <http://www1.oecd.org/publications/e-book/9101011e.pdf>. p.76

^{vi} The National Children’s Strategy (2000). *Our children: Their lives*. Dublin, Ireland: The Stationery Office.

^{vii} Moore, T. (2002). *Review of the research evidence on early child development*. Paper presented at National Meeting on Early Childhood Systems, Melbourne, November 2002.

^{viii} Thompson, R. A. (2001). Development in the first years of life. *The Future of Children*, 11 (1), 21-33.

^{ix} UNICEF (2000). *Convention on the rights of the child*. Retrieved 30 May 2003 from <http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm>

^x The National Children’s Strategy. (2000). *Our Children - Their Lives*. Dublin: The Stationery Office, Government Publications.

^{xi} Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003). *Child Care Australia, June 2002*, cat. No. 4402.0. Canberra, Australia: Commonwealth of Australia.

^{xii} Burman, E. (1994). *Deconstructing developmental psychology*. London: Routledge.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} *Ibid.*

^{xv} Ferguson, J. K. (1997). *Some changes in early childhood education (kindergarten) and factors*

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- ^{xxii} *Ibid*
- ^{xxiii} Quortrup, J. (1987) Introduction: The sociology of childhood. *International Journal of Sociology*, 17 (3), 3-37.
- ^{xxiv} Clark, A. & Moss, P. (2001). *Listening to young children: The Mosaic Approach*. London: National Children's Bureau and Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- ^{xxv} Edwards, C., Gandini, L. & Forman, G. (1998). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education*. New Jersey, USA: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- ^{xxvi} Campus Kindergarten (2003). *Big art, small viewer: Celebrating children as artists*. Brisbane, Queensland: Campus Kindergarten.
- ^{xxvii} Mayall, B. (1996). *Children, Health and Social Order*, Buckingham: Open University Press. p. 1.
- ^{xxviii} Kagan, J. (2001) *Starting strong: Conundrums and opportunities of the OECD report*, Sharon L. Kagan, Ed. D. Teachers College, Columbia University Yale University, June, 2001 p. 2
- ^{xxix} Kagan, J. (2001) *Starting strong: Conundrums and opportunities of the OECD report*, Sharon L. Kagan, Ed. D. Teachers College, Columbia University Yale University, June, 2001 p. 2