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*KEYNOTE ADDRESS*

**Robust Hope:  
Finding a home for early childhood intervention in the new early years  
landscape.**

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Throughout its history early childhood intervention has sought to balance two seemingly contradictory aims: to differentiate itself as a separate system to mainstream early childhood services and to work towards the inclusion of its client group (young children with disabilities and their families) within their local communities.

The first has been necessary to ensure both a clear funding base for service delivery and recognition of the professional expertise needed for effective intervention. A separate, specialised system does, however, have its disadvantages. Issues related to identification, referral, effective collaboration with generic services and, not least, establishing the efficacy of early childhood intervention remain problematic. Furthermore, a name change from *early intervention* to *early childhood intervention* has not brought the level of public awareness and recognition it was intended to achieve. Indeed, it may be that the attempts to differentiate have resulted in early childhood intervention being marginalised within a landscape which seeks to assist all families deemed to be vulnerable. In this view the needs of families who have young children with disabilities may not be well-served. A redefinition of the boundaries of the field and a rethinking of its relationship to mainstream services is needed.

The current dialogue on the primacy of the early years therefore presents both a challenge and an opportunity for those concerned with meeting the needs of young children with disabilities and their families. This paper will analyse the philosophies and policies underlying current notions of vulnerability and their implications for service provision to argue for a synthesis that acknowledges the uniqueness of the role of early childhood intervention whilst placing it firmly within the early years landscape.

## **Introduction**

My aim in this paper, is to look briefly at the journey we have all been on in early childhood intervention in Australia, to explore the current early years landscape, and to put forward some ideas about where we might find a home for our field, our families and ourselves in this new environment. Let me start by stating that I am still thinking this through and that I do not have any solutions. What I have are some questions and some tentative ideas about how they might be addressed.

## ***Where have we come from?***

It seems to me that, throughout its history, early childhood intervention in Australia has sought to balance two seemingly contradictory aims. It has sought to:

1. differentiate itself as a separate system to mainstream early childhood services and to
2. work towards the inclusion of its client group (young children with disabilities and their families) within their local communities.

I believe that the time has come to consider whether they are indeed contradictory and what solutions can be found.

We engaged in the first aim because we saw it as necessary to have a separate service system to ensure both a clear funding base for service delivery and to secure recognition of the professional expertise needed for effective intervention with young children with disabilities. I have no doubts that the second part of that notion still holds true: those working in early childhood intervention are specialists with particular skills and expertise related to the nature of our client group. That expertise needs to be recognised. And, it is a point to which I will return. What I am now less convinced about is the first half of the proposition. Did we really need to differentiate ourselves to the extent that we have tried to do, to achieve adequate funding? If we did, we have failed. I do not think that anyone with a young child with a disability or a professional working in the field would argue that we have the resources we need. My first question, then, is: did we get it wrong? Did we make a tactical error in pursuing the course we did?

Our belief in the need to distinguish ourselves from the multitude of social issues where “intervening early” was seen as critical (from drug and alcohol abuse to domestic violence to dementia), also led to our changing our name from *early intervention* to *early **childhood** intervention*. The hope that this would result in a greater level of public awareness and recognition of the needs of young children with disabilities and their families has not been realised. I doubt that the general public is any more aware of the role of the field as a consequence. Indeed, we now find ourselves with an added complication. The early years’ movement (if I can call it that) has gained momentum and, in many ways, taken not only the name but the ground that we had held previously.

Interestingly, this push to differentiate the field is not one in which our American colleagues have engaged to the same extent. They have, for example, remained with the term *early intervention*. In America, the provision of services to young children with disabilities and their families has occurred alongside programs such as Head Start with disability being seen consistently as one form of disadvantage. Thus, Blackman (2003, p.2) states that the goal of early intervention is to:

“prevent or minimise the physical, cognitive, emotional, and resource limitations of young children with biological or environmental risk factors.”

No distinction is being made here between children whose vulnerability is due to disability and those whose vulnerability is due to social or economic factors. The reality is also that, as we know, the two frequently overlap. Many have dual or multiple sources of disadvantage. What is achieved, then, by working to make such a clear distinction? If our answer is “not much”, then we may want to rethink our position in the early years’ landscape.

There are, of course, some real differences between our two countries in how early intervention is seen and dealt with. Firstly, the United States has a legislative base for the provision of services: we do not. However, there has now been an important development at the Federal level in Australia: the Disability Standards for Education (2005) arising from the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) have been promulgated. The Education Standards clarify and elaborate the legal obligations, rights and responsibilities in relation to education and training that are already implied in the Act. Whilst they are a pleasing addition to our armoury when pushing for inclusion, they do not come without concerns for their implications. Chief among these is that although the Standards apply to preschools, including kindergartens they do not apply to child-care providers. This is an anomaly that warrants some consideration. Why do child-care providers not have to meet the Standards? On my more cynical days, I think that it may be because so many childcare facilities are run by for-profit organisations who, it must be said, form a powerful lobby group and that they have successfully worked for their exemption from the legislation. When feeling a little less cynical I think it may be further proof that childcare settings are not seen as educational and that they have not been included because they are still seen as “child-minding”. Whatever the reason, the exclusion of childcare from the Standards may not bode well for the inclusion of young children with disabilities in those settings. If this proves so, it is something which we must fight strongly. Not to do so places yet another burden on families and parents who wish to return to work after the birth of their child.

How successfully have we then achieved our first aim of differentiating our field from the mainstream early childhood system? I would maintain that the answer is that not only have we been unsuccessful but that maybe it was something that, in hindsight, we should never have attempted.

What then of the second aim of early childhood intervention which, as I suggested above, has been to work towards the inclusion of its client group (young children with disabilities and their families) within their local communities? It is here that some of the inherent contradictions in our position are most apparent. Looked at objectively, what we are attempting to do is to work largely from outside the system to bring about change. Essentially, we have the status of consultants (but not their pay and conditions!) who come into the situation for a brief period of time either to fix a particular problem or to ensure that it does not become one. In this respect it is informative to compare the approaches taken in the different states and territories throughout Australia. For example, from my understanding, in Tasmania and Queensland early childhood intervention has been an integral part of the education and school system. It might be expected that, in these circumstances, the transition to school might be less problematic than say in NSW where the involvement of the state department of education has been much more circumscribed. Although I doubt that the differences among the systems are as clear as I have just suggested, the question is still worth asking: Is it easier to achieve our aims of inclusion if we are full members of the mainstream system rather than sitting outside it? Whilst inclusion encompasses much more than just schooling, research which compares the impact of the school system in each of the states and territories on inclusion and the policies and practices which surround it may prove highly instructive in assisting us to identify what might constitute best practice and what should be argued for. This second aim, too, has still to be realised.

There is another issue which bears attention. It is important for us to consider from what traditions we have derived our philosophical underpinnings and approach to intervention. How much of what we do comes from the Special Education tradition and how much from the early childhood?

We have learned a lot about how to work with children with disabilities from the special education field and we will continue to do so. There are, however, distinct differences between our field and theirs. My experience is that, as a teacher, researcher and (in a previous lifetime) a practitioner in early childhood intervention, I use the term *special education* very differently to my colleagues whose background is with school-aged children and particularly in special schools or schools for specific purposes. The mindset and the intention are different. For me, *special education* is a synonym for *additional needs* with no educational setting implied. For them it seems to be much more closely aligned with special education settings which are not inclusive. The difference may arise because our field is younger, because (paradoxically) preschool inclusion has been widely accepted for a relatively long period of time and because our focus is not just on the child but also on the family. These differences can make communication and collaboration more difficult as we work together to assist the child's transition to school and as parents negotiate their changing role as their child starts school and they, too, move away from an approach which is avowedly family-centred. It will be interesting to see how the two fields come together as inclusion is more widely implemented within our schools.

We also owe much to the early childhood field. From them we have derived our focus on the whole child and, to a considerable extent, our way of working as a collaborative team. This may be seen as indicating a critical difference between Primary and early childhood education. In a class on early childhood intervention, I set my undergraduate students the task of comparing Primary education, early childhood education and early childhood intervention on a range of constructs (e.g. underlying philosophy, view of the child, and approach to teamwork). Interestingly, one of the Primary students characterised the difference between Primary and early childhood teachers as the fact that "Primary teachers shut the door". This is a profound difference if it is true. And, of course, it is not true in all cases: it is a generalisation. But it is one with some credence. Licensing conditions being what they are, early childhood settings must have teachers, childcare workers and assistants working together and in full view of each other. They constantly observe each other's practice and they work with the same children. Equally importantly, parents have the opportunity to also see that practice on a regular basis. As a general rule, that is less likely to be the case with teachers working in mainstream, primary education settings. Some may team teach, some may have a teacher's aide or support teacher in their classroom on occasion and some may have parents assist with reading or other activities but, despite this, the growing emphasis on the academic curriculum and the architecture of most of our schools works against teamwork. It is also much less likely that all parents will regularly come into the classroom and observe practice. Teamwork is therefore a legacy of early childhood services.

Our field takes this one step further and centres its practices on partnerships with families and with other professionals. Being part of a team is central not just to practice but to the model of intervention we see as recommended practice. Where early childhood intervention has been unique is in its embracing of family-centred practice as an ideal and recommended way of working.

The influence of family systems theory, and notions of family empowerment have been major foci in the literature and over a considerable period of time; they have taken on the power of movements and in many respects define our field. It is this which we can offer to our colleagues both in the schools and in the early years' landscape. Given this, it is instructive that Woodruff and O'Brien (2005), in the context of working with vulnerable families, have called for children's and family's services to work more closely together. Surely this is what we already do in working with young children with disabilities and their families.

Greater communication of our approach is needed to ensure that our expertise is acknowledged and utilised and that resources are not put into developing what we have already achieved.

The journey that we have taken thus far has been well intentioned and, lest we become too depressed about the failures and disappointments along the way, we have succeeded in developing approaches to working with families which can result in true partnerships. The importance of this should not be understated: it is an impressive achievement. But where are we now? What then is our place in the landscape?

### ***The early years' landscape***

A Policy Alert recently released by the Queensland Government (February 2006) begins with this quote:

“Early childhood development programs are rarely portrayed as economic development initiatives, and we think that this is a mistake. Such programs, if they appear at all, are at the bottom of the economic development lists for state and local governments. They should be at the top.” (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003)

Rolnick and Grunewald are economists and the paper goes on to say that because of such comments and those of the traditional advocates of early childhood services, governments can no longer ignore the mounting evidence that investment in early years' programs reaps substantial financial and social rewards. Whilst I find the neo-liberal argument unappealing, it is likely that it will have the effect we have long worked for. Indeed, it is already having that effect with increasing funding being given over to projects aimed at supporting and assisting vulnerable families during the early years of their children's development.

However, there is another development which I, and many others, would see as much less welcome. The early years and the provision of childcare services are being seen, increasingly, as a business and one where private enterprise can reap substantial rewards. ABC Learning is, of course, the prime example of this. The Sydney Morning Herald reported on 28<sup>th</sup> February, 2006 that ABC Learning had announced an interim profit of \$88,000,000. Their statistics, as quoted by the Sydney Morning Herald, are of interest. ABC Learning:

- is the biggest publicly listed childcare provider in the world;
- has a net profit which has more than doubled since last year;
- has acquired the third largest child-care group in the USA (460 centres in 25 states) and
- expects to open 150 new centres in Australia and New Zealand by the end of June, 2006.

On 8<sup>th</sup> August, 2006, ABC Learning announced the acquisition of Children's Courtyard, a company based in Arlington, Texas and operating 74 centres for US\$66 million. They also acquired 23 franchised Tutor Time Child Care/learning Centres in June. They have also recently shown an interest in schools in Australia.

It is incumbent upon us to ensure that organisations such as these do meet the needs of young children with disabilities. Research is needed which is aimed at mapping their clientele, the quality of their services and the extent of their inclusive practices.

In this instance, it may be difficult to achieve. Would such research be welcomed? The greatly increased involvement of the business sector in a field which has traditionally been the stronghold of community and voluntary organisations and government is a reality in this new landscape and must be addressed proactively.

My argument, then, is that we can either be part of this landscape and work within it to ensure that the needs of young children with disabilities and their families are met, or we can stay outside. A major concern with the new early years impetus is how the needs of those with disabilities and their families will be met within a comprehensive, inclusive system without losing the expertise, focus and additional resources (both human and material) which we know to be necessary. The danger if we stay on the fringes is that the children with whom we work, their families and we ourselves will be further segregated and not have our voices heard. It may be that given the context in which we find ourselves we have little choice: we should join and become an important and visible part of that landscape.

### ***What we bring to the landscape***

As I have tried to argue throughout this paper, despite our disappointments, we do not come to this new landscape empty-handed. We bring our:

1. model for intervention: family-centred practice. This is a model rooted in research, evidence-based practice and clinical experience in working with young children with disabilities and their families. We may not always “get it right” but largely we know what good practice looks like, how it can be implemented and how it can be evaluated.
2. collaborative skills and our knowledge of transdisciplinary approaches to working with families and other professionals. We know from research and clinical practice how important it is not to overwhelm families with “experts”, to be driven by their needs and that of their family and not just by our perceptions of what the child needs at that time. Importantly, too, we are used to working with a range of other professionals. Teamwork is the essence of our practice.
3. understanding of child development and what constitutes atypical development. This skill should not be undervalued at a time when human growth and development is not seen as central to the education and training of childcare workers and early childhood teachers and where approaches such as the emergent curriculum are interpreted in ways that may be detrimental to our client group.
4. commitment to evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence. This conference provides ample proof of the way in which practitioners in our field are evaluating their own practice and sharing the results with others. Those in early childhood intervention are, indeed, reflecting both on and in their practice as Schon (1983) advocated.

Our contribution to the early years’ landscape is already substantial. It could be even greater. We often see ourselves as representing a minority; we do not. Our skills are relevant to all children and all families. This can, in fact, be seen in the way that many early childhood intervention services are now diversifying and working with families deemed vulnerable whether their child has a disability or not. If our field is to grow and strengthen we need to engage with others in the landscape, and share practices, approaches and ideas. That is only possible, I believe, if we are an integral part of the early years’ field.

Recognition of the universality of the skills and knowledge we bring has another potential benefit. It provides the career path for those working in early childhood intervention that has until now been somewhat limited. The professional skills of the early childhood intervention worker are such that they can work across the landscape. The subtext of this may well be that the model, values, visibility and significance of our field will be extended as they do so.

### ***Knowing where we want and ought to be***

Thus far, I have concentrated on our practice, what distinguishes our field from others and how we might become part of the broader landscape of the early years. There is, however, one final and very important task that I believe we need to undertake and that is to consider the philosophical underpinnings of our field.

This is another area where I believe that we can learn a lot from the early childhood field since they have been very willing to engage in a theoretical and philosophical analysis of the provision of early childhood services. This is not something that we have undertaken with any consistency. Would it be fair to say that early childhood intervention has been largely theory free? I would argue that the theories that we have in early childhood intervention primarily relate to process and to specific intervention techniques. We do theorise and analyse the best ways to deliver family-centred services. We do theorise about how best to address the needs of a child with, for example, autism spectrum disorder. What we have been much less likely to do is step back and conceptualise the field as a whole, the direction it should take and why.

The questions that I believe we should be asking are: Why do we take the approach we do? Who is and should be our client group? Where do we fit into the neo-liberal discourse around vulnerability and the economics of early childhood service provision? We have not regularly engaged in discourses of this kind. In many ways it is because we have been too busy doing the intervention, trying new ways of working with children and families to stop and think about the whys. If, however, we are to engage with the economists and with the neo-liberal approach generally, we need to be clear about whether our vision accords with theirs or whether we have an alternate view. Only when we are clear about our philosophy can we argue for it and for our field.

What I would like to put forward as the beginnings of a philosophical and theoretical base is the concept of *robust hope*. A group of us at the University of Western Sydney is working on the notion that one of the most important things to be achieved by public policy is the provision of hope. We are aiming, through the Robust Hope project, to build a conceptual tool for the analysis of public policy and related areas such as educational programs with respect to their provision of hope – a hope which can remain “robust” in the face of the structural pressures against social justice represented by neo-liberal ideology (Singh, Sawyer, Woodrow, Downes, Whitton & Johnston, unpublished).

We would argue that the key elements of Robust Hope are that:

- hope itself is manifested in the potential for policy to create resilience, happiness and the imagining of a better future and that
- the socio-cultural conditions of policy which create “robustness” are manifested in a futures orientation, sustainability and a version of democracy which privileges equality over the liberty of the market.

The notion of hope is one that is gaining attention across a number of fields. Its power, I think, lies in the fact that it can be seen as operating at both an individual and a societal level. Thus, Gropman (2004), in analysing the role of hope in the response of cancer patients to their disease states:

“Hope can arrive only when you recognise that there are real options and that you have genuine choices. Hope can flourish only when you believe that what you do can make a difference, that your actions can bring a future different from the present. To have hope, then, is to acquire a belief in your ability to have some control over your circumstances. You are no longer entirely at the mercy of forces outside yourself.” (p.26)

Positive psychology, too, is giving us another way of viewing and understanding the needs and responses of individuals without calling into play a deficit model (e.g. Seligman, 2002; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). We would do well, I think, to explore this approach rather more. It seems to me that this notion of the primacy of hope fits extremely well with our model of family-centred intervention. Giving families “real option” and “genuine choices” is central to the approach. Robust hope may serve to explain why the model works for some families and not for others. If the families do not have robust hope, they are unlikely to see that the choices they are being given are real or, indeed, worth making. Importantly, the construct also applies to us as workers in the field: what sense of hope do we have for the families and the children with whom we work and indeed for ourselves and our field? Critical, too, is the realisation that this hope has to be real and not based on denial or delusion. It arises from a clear view of the circumstances as interpreted within the individual’s worldview.

But, the construct has another benefit. Robust hope can inform and provide the underpinnings of policy. It can be used to counter a view which sees the provision of early childhood services as “economic development initiatives” as Rolnick and Grunewald (2003) have described them. Theories which flow from notions of investment come largely from a deficit model which sees the privileged as working to improve the lot of those less fortunate and, by so doing, benefiting (both figuratively and literally) the group which they represent. In this view children are seen as commodities. By enabling communities and individuals to have robust hope for their and their children’s futures control is in the hands of those most affected and most likely to benefit directly from any changes. Community capacity building is a more inclusive, longer lasting and potentially more powerful approach to engendering change than external investment. Understanding how robust hope might be manifested and operate at each of these levels is what our project is exploring.

What strategies can we then pursue? Singh (2006, unpublished) suggests four. He argues that we need to:

1. frame our arguments to allow us to present a clearly articulated, positive set of views. This is very similar to what Lakoff (2004, 2002) has suggested with respect to politics. Lakoff argues very convincingly that there is little to be gained (and much to be lost) in engaging with the conservative discourse. To do so just brings their point of view to the fore.
2. engage with real-world agenda. We cannot afford to only engage with those in our own field. Most importantly, we must engage with this “new” early years agenda.

3. declare our values and clarify them in a rational way. We need to know what our field stands for, what we are prepared to compromise and what not.
4. re-evaluate policies and pedagogies that drive and affect our field. Only by doing this can we develop new approaches and strategies which will be sustainable and allow us to engage with the broader field.

In reading and thinking about the concept of Robust Hope, I find myself in a strange place. In a sense I am going back to my undergraduate days when I was made to read Philosophy and when I avidly read books on educational reform by Reimer (1971), Postman and Weingartner (1972) and others. I find that as a university teacher and researcher I have become so caught up in the process of how we should deliver services and what skills my students need that I have forgotten to consistently ask “why?” In the same way that Bowles and Gintis (1976) looked at schooling in capitalist America, we need to look at what model best suits our clients in this time. We need to think about how much of what we do is rooted in the dominant neo-liberal discourse of the day. And we need to put forward our own discourse. The construct of Robust Hope may provide us with a starting point.

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