Constructions of Social Inclusion within Australian Early Childhood Education and Care Policy Documents

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ABSTRACT Social inclusion discourses have been powerful in informing early childhood policy contexts, both internationally and in Australia (the context of the current study) for the past decade or so. But little research has examined the productive aspects of social inclusion discourses particularly within early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy documents. This article reports on a content analysis of Australian ECEC policy documents. The analysis revealed that, despite the absence of the specific use of the term 'social inclusion' within these documents, multiple constructs of social inclusion were nevertheless evident. These constructs included social inclusion as 'poverty reduction', 'workforce participation', and 'normative' – constructs previously problematised and critiqued in the literature. More optimistically, however, the analysis also revealed constructs of social inclusion as 'a response to discrimination and inequality and a validation of diversity' and as 'participation in democratic decision-making'. We argue that the Australian ECEC policy context largely supports a concept of social inclusion that reflects social justice concerns and positions ECEC as an important contributor to a more socially just society. However, the absence of explicit social inclusion language within ECEC policy documents is a critical gap.

Social inclusion could potentially reconstitute the political order to create a more just and fair society (Dhamoon, 2005; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009). Discourses of social exclusion and social inclusion have been apparent in international social policy and political debates for over 30 years. Often used dichotomously, social exclusion is generally considered to be exclusion 'from the opportunities that promote wellbeing' (Hayes & Gray, 2008, p. 4), largely as a result of inequitable economic systems on specific individuals and groups. Social inclusion tends to be used to refer to the mobilisation of resources to resolve the problems that occur due to social exclusion (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003). In this article we primarily use the term 'social inclusion' as this is the preferred term in the Australian context – the site of this study.

To promote social inclusion, governments implement broad ranging policies in areas such as welfare, citizenship, rights, democratic participation and education – including early childhood education and care (ECEC).[1] Within education literature, the traditional and dominant use of the term 'inclusion' is in reference to the inclusion of children with disabilities in educational settings. Originating from the disability rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Bailey et al, 1998), the term 'inclusive education', is particularly evident in special education, and is a position that expounds the moral and legal rights of people with a disability to participate in the range of everyday activities that any other person would expect to experience (Bailey et al, 1998). As we discuss below, however, social inclusion is a contested concept with multiple meanings, assumptions and agendas. Given this diversity it is important to consider how these discourses are productive and constraining in ECEC policy development.

http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2014.15.1.54

The purpose of this article is to investigate the dominant constructs of 'social inclusion' evident within Australian ECEC policy documents. We begin by providing a brief history of how social inclusion discourses came to be prevalent in Australia and argue that ECEC policy is a central element of the Australian Social Inclusion Agenda. Next, we outline and problematise several constructs of social inclusion evident within the literature. We then present the findings of a content analysis of a range of Australian (Commonwealth) government ECEC policy documents, identifying dominant meanings of social inclusion within them. We argue that these documents support a concept of social inclusion that reflects social justice concerns – largely as a means of eliminating discrimination and inequality by providing 'access' to quality ECEC – and also as a way of supporting democratic and citizenship participation. However, the absence of the explicit use of social inclusion language within these policy documents is problematic.

The Rise of Social Inclusion Discourses Internationally and in Australia

The concept of 'social inclusion' arose in France in the 1970s where it was tied to ideas of civic participation and civic responsibility (Buckmaster & Thomas, 2009; Silver, 2010). The idea quickly took hold in the European Union where there were rising concerns about the increasingly fragmented nature of society, and the focus was on remedying social exclusion from services (e.g. health, housing and education), reducing discrimination, and increasing participation in social life (European Commission Green Paper on European Social Policy Options for the Union 1993, cited in Edwards et al, 2006, p. 7).

The concept of 'social exclusion' was especially embraced by Blair's New Labour government in the United Kingdom where reduction of social exclusion became a government priority and led to the development of The Children's Fund. Sure Start was one of the resulting initiatives (Edwards et al, 2006). Commencing in 1998, Sure Start Local Programmes were targeted at pre-school aged children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. They were designed to be responsive to local needs, aimed to enhance the health, well-being and life chances of pre-school aged children, and the 'chances that children would enter school ready to learn' (National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2010, p. iii). The Sure Start initiatives in particular have been highly influential in informing developments in Australian ECEC policy.

In the Australian context, the language of social inclusion obtained a foothold in the early 2000s where it was seen as a response to increasing levels of poverty, with a widening gap between the rich, who were becoming richer, and the working and not-working poor (Mitchell & Shillington, 2002; Harris & Williams, 2003; Omidvar & Richmond, 2003). According to Harris and Williams (2003), the incumbent Howard (Commonwealth) Liberal/National Coalition government adopted social inclusion 'to justify mutual obligation and community participation' (p. 206). It was not until 2007, however, that social inclusion emerged as a major Australian political discourse when the Australian Labor Party (ALP) unveiled its Australian Social Inclusion Agenda as part of the November federal election campaign. The ALP had been in opposition for more than 10 years. Economic rationalism and a strong emphasis on the market economy had been policy drivers of the incumbent Coalition government – playing out in the early childhood field through the rapid and exponential growth of for-profit ECEC services. But by the end of the Coalition's third term in government there was a sense among some of those witnessing the social impacts of economic rationalism that it was time for a new government that could bring transformative change, reshaping the relationship between the 'social' and the 'economic'. With the subsequent election of the ALP to office, the Social Inclusion Agenda became policy. Whilst there have been a number of iterations of the Social Inclusion Agenda, the government's current interpretation of social inclusion is a means to 'build a stronger, fairer Australia ... in which all Australians feel valued and have the opportunity to participate fully in the life of our society', privileging, in particular, learning and working (paid and unpaid), and engaging, participating and influencing decision-making in communities.[2] The document acknowledges that to achieve this end, 'complex and entrenched forms of disadvantage' need to be addressed.

The enactment of the ALP's Social Inclusion Agenda has had a number of broad reaching implications for ECEC policy that many advocates in Australia hoped would lead to ECEC provision being 'underpinned by social democratic principles of social justice' (Millei & Sumsion,

2011, p. 74). It has, for instance, informed the development of the Australian government's Early Childhood Agenda and other related early childhood initiatives, such as the development of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the National Quality Standards, which together provide a nationally consistent approach to early years curriculum and standards that aim to enrich and enhance the quality of ECEC services for all Australian children. It has also informed the establishment of Early Childhood Education National Partnerships, which aim to improve the accessibility to ECEC, and the funding of the Australian Early Development Index, a national collection of data on children's development that informs government policies relating to children. In addition, the ALP has continued to support the Inclusion Support and Professional Support Program, introduced by the previous Coalition government in 2005 as a means of supporting the inclusion of children from several priority groups (currently children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds including: children from a refugee or humanitarian intervention background; children with ongoing high support needs, including children with a disability; Indigenous children) in eligible child care services (i.e. services that receive government funding or are approved for Child Care Benefit).

Constructs of Social Inclusion

Although the terms social inclusion and exclusion are widely recognised and believed to be commonly understood (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009), the concept of social inclusion is contested (Long 2010; Silver 2010), with multiple meanings that can conceal embedded assumptions, diverse beliefs and hidden agendas (Mitchell & Shillington, 2002; Harris & Williams, 2003; Dhamoon, 2005; O'Reilly, 2005; Novick, 2008). Below we synthesise a number of constructs of social inclusion identified, critiqued and problematised in the literature and then relate these to the ECEC context. It was for evidence of these constructs and/or others that we searched when analysing the source documents.

Social Inclusion as Poverty Reduction

Social inclusion as poverty reduction is perhaps the most prevalent construct both in the literature and policy discussions (Levitas, 2003; Labonte, 2004; Porter & Craig, 2004). Policies aimed at poverty reduction are critical for promoting inclusion, supporting health and well-being, and enabling social and political participation. However, discourses expounding social inclusion as poverty reduction often have the effect of equating social inclusion with being 'not poor' (Labonte, 2004). This somewhat simplistic interpretation can suggest that once people are lifted over a poverty threshold, any remaining exclusion is the outcome of individual attributes and/or individual choice (Levitas, 2003). This construct places responsibility on the individual to produce effort in order to take advantage of the 'fair go' provided (Harris & Williams, 2003). It is supported by beliefs of offering fair treatment rather than equal outcomes (Novick, 2008), potentially contributing to a climate of blame of individuals living on the margins of poverty and the potential 'to moralise about the poor and further stigmatise the excluded' (Saunders, 2003, p. 17). Further, it can give licence for those who are not poor to evade responsibility for taking action to reduce inequities in the distribution of wealth, based on beliefs that poverty is an outcome of not working hard enough.

In regards to ECEC, the construct of social inclusion as a means of reducing poverty gives rise to governments investing in ECEC. The calls for 'investment' in ECEC as a way of reducing poverty and increasing future productivity and income were particularly dominant in the late 1990s (see World Bank documents, such as Young, 1996). Investing in ECEC to reduce poverty is a morally sound rationale for government funding of early childhood services. However, this construct has long been problematised as being instrumentalist. Symes and Preston (1997), for example, argue that such an instrumental view of education 'is deficient in normative terms because it promotes a narrow utilitarian approach to persons and human knowledge' (p. 68). Likewise, Gammage (2002) cautions that we should not view children as 'economic capital. Indeed, to view them solely as that demeans the notion of childhood, devalues any concept of human development, and dangerously plays into the hands of instrumental, "ends justify means"

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approaches to childhood' (p. 42). As these arguments suggest, viewing children as resources may result in narrowly focused ECEC.

Social Inclusion as Workforce Participation

Closely related to the construct of social inclusion as poverty reduction is its construct as participation, productivity and employment (Sennett, 1998; Levitas, 2003; Edwards, 2008; Hayes & Gray, 2008), with a particularly overwhelming emphasis on paid workforce participation and individual productivity (Harris & Williams, 2003; Levitas, 2003; Labonte, 2004; Edwards, 2008). Workforce participation – whether paid or unpaid – has a number of social and psychological benefits. It can, for instance, contribute to friendship formation and a positive sense of self-worth (Briner, 2000). Further, paid workforce participation contributes to financial independence and security. The construction of inclusion as paid workforce participation is a foundation of many government responses to inclusion and leads to policies such as job-training and assistance to enter the labour market (Sennet, 1998).

Levitas (1996) argues, however, that the conflation of social inclusion as workforce participation sends a message that those unable to work are less than full members of society and leads to stigmatising terms such as 'workless households' and 'jobless families'. Likewise, Edwards (2008) warns that limiting the concept of social inclusion to workforce participation not only leads to individuals being blamed for their exclusion, it can also lead to coercive strategies to promote workforce participation in the name of social inclusion. Further, the construction of social inclusion as paid workforce participation fails to acknowledge structural inequalities that exist within the paid workforce which continue to exclude people, nor the contributions made through unpaid work (Levitas, 1996, 2003). Moreover, when social inclusion is equated with workforce participation alone, debates about negative impacts of workforce participation on family and community life and about workforce inequalities can be silenced. Additionally, some commentators suggest that such arguments can lead to a discourse of moral danger where those not working, therefore not included, are labelled as dependent and dangerous, a threat to productivity and the economic well-being of all (Sennett, 1998; Labonte, 2004, 2004). Sennett (1998) goes so far as to suggest that social inclusion is used to represent autonomy, with its opposite exclusion being the social dishonour of dependency, a horror of which has been embedded in public thinking and works against social cohesion and interdependence between people and between institutions who share unequal power.

Much ECEC policy is directed at providing children with opportunities for learning the prerequisite skills, knowledge and understandings that enable success in schools and in turn facilitates later workforce participation. This preparatory function is a critical component of education, not only in a technocratic sense of meeting nationalistic goals, but also as a way of redressing social inequalities associated with differential access to resources. As described previously, however, this construct of early education has been widely criticised as instrumentalist, particularly by theorists broadly working from post-structuralist perspectives in the late 1990s. Writers such as Anijar (1998), Cannella (1997) and Woodrow and Brennan (2001), for example, drew attention to the ways such views of ECEC tend to designate children as resources, objectifying them as economic entities, mere investments for the future – or 'potential citizens' – rather than valuing them in the 'here and now'. Similarly, Apple (2001) argues that the construction of education as a way of supporting workforce participation suggests that only those children who are potentially productive or of material benefit to society are of value and that only knowledge considered useful for children's future contribution to society is worthwhile.

The role of ECEC in supporting parental workforce participation has long been recognised and is a major reason why governments invest in ECEC provision (Scarr, 1998). Indeed, in the current Australian economic climate, many families with young children require a dual income to survive, necessitating their access to some form of child care. Furthermore, child care has been a critical factor in supporting the rights of women to work, to support themselves and to manage a career. Work-related child care also has potential economic benefits for the nation (Wong, 2007). It not only increases the pool of available labour on which the market can draw, but also assists families to earn income, thereby reducing their reliance on welfare (Scarr, 1998). The construct of ECEC as assisting workforce participation, however, is problematic as it tends to put the needs of

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the employment market above those of children. From this perspective, any care which is convenient, affordable, and accessible might be considered appropriate without due regard to quality. Moreover, the dominance of the construct of ECEC as assisting workforce participation may limit the ways in which ECEC is constructed as principally 'care' for the children of working parents rather than as Moss advocates 'complex and inclusive institutions offering a wide range of possibilities for *all* children and parents (whether employed or not) (2003, p. 37, original emphasis).

Social Inclusion as Normative

Social inclusion is largely constructed as normative (Novick, 2008). That is, inclusion in the mainstream is deemed 'normal' and 'correct', whilst the converse – exclusion – is aberrant. Indeed, the concepts of social inclusion and exclusion do have strong emotional resonance. Respectively, they conjure up deeply held human desires to 'fit in' and fears of 'not belonging'. Consequently, the idea of social inclusion appears to be a morally just approach to social policy. It is often on the premise of the public good that initiatives leading to strategies for modifying behaviours and building bridges for those on the 'outside' to become participants on the 'inside' are based (Novick, 2008).

There are those, however, who believe that the normalising construct of social inclusion supports agendas that sustain hegemonic power (Harris & Williams, 2003; Dhamoon, 2005; O'Reilly, 2005; Novick, 2008). Dhaliwal (cited in Dhamoon, 2005, p. 8), for instance, suggests that the concept of inclusion 'assumes that there is a delimited core to be included into' and results in insiders and outsiders. Similarly, Dhamoon (2005) suggests that, while social inclusion is promoted as a way to include 'othered' people, the subtext of the social inclusion discourse is in itself othering those it purports to include. Likewise, O'Reilly (2005) suggests that social inclusion is often based on an identity of inclusion that is dependent on there being an excluded 'other', with a moral discourse that emphasises the 'rightness' of the established centre. Within this discourse the other, or the excluded, are constructed as victims, reinforcing their powerlessness (Silver, 2010).

Young (2000) argues that discourses of social inclusion are used to reinforce nation-state solidarity. Likewise, Harris and Williams (2003) contend that fear of not belonging affirms a desire to express core values and a sense of collective identity, with national identity establishing the 'qualities a person must have in order to be considered a real citizen' (pp. 211-212). They argue that national identity acts as a 'master- narrative in the field of social inclusion' (p. 212). A normative construct of inclusion also omits to account for those who chose to self-exclude for political reasons.

With regard to ECEC, we are now at a point in Australia where it is 'normative' for children to participate in some form of ECEC prior to starting compulsory schooling (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). The care and education of young children, which was once an essentially private concern, has now been brought into the public domain and 'potentially requires all families to enter into an active relationship with the state' (Nichols & Jurvansuu, 2008, p. 117). There is ample literature attesting to the benefits of children's participation in high quality ECEC, especially for the early detection and remediation of developmental concerns and ameliorating disadvantage (Pianta et al, 2009). Participation in ECEC also contributes to a collective experience. But is there perhaps a danger now that families who decide not to participate in ECEC will be seen as deviant and even a danger to the common social good?

Social Inclusion as a Response to Discrimination
and Inequality and as a Validation of Diversity

More positively, several writers argue that social inclusion can be constructed as a response to discrimination and inequality and as a validation of diversity. Omidvar and Richmond (2003), for instance, suggest that social inclusion could focus on the incorporation of access and equity principles, with the development of economic, political, social and cultural mechanisms that include everyone as full participants with new forms of citizen participation and engagement. Others go further, suggesting that social inclusion must include discussion of oppression, discrimination, inequality, exploitation and injustice, and the concomitant institutional policies and

practices (Levitas, 2003; Saloojee, 2003), and the recognition of commonalities of lived experiences and aspirations (Levitas, 2003). A social inclusion discourse could then expose the invisibility of a range of divisions, including the degree of inequality that exists amongst those people who are employed, including inequality of power and access to decision-making (Levitas, 2003). In short, social inclusion should be transformative (Harris & Williams, 2003; Levitas, 2003; Dhamoon, 2005).

For some considerable time, many advocates, particularly those working from post-structuralist perspectives, have argued that ECEC should be built on a foundation of social justice and work towards creating a more equitable society, not only by redressing inequities, but also by challenging socially oppressive practices (see for instance, Weiss et al, 1991; Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg et al, 1999. For more recent reviews see, Press & Skatterbol, 2007; Moss & Urban, 2010). This position is enacted though critical pedagogies that aim to address issues of race, gender, ethnicity and social class.

Social Inclusion as Participation in Democratic Decision-Making

Finally, a number of commentators argue that social inclusion can be constructed as citizenship and social and democratic participation (Sen, 1999; Mitchell & Shillington, 2002; Levitas, 2003; Buckmaster & Thomas, 2009). Young (2000, p. 36), for instance, suggests that inclusion can be 'a tool to break the cycle by which the political inequality produced by social and economic inequality reinforces those inequalities'. This understanding of social inclusion can transform what would otherwise be a hegemonic agenda. It takes the concept of social inclusion beyond income and deprivation, to the social relations, processes and institutions that underlie poverty and deprivation (Mitchell & Shillington, 2002). Thus, inclusion becomes broader than 'being included *into* mainstream society' (Dhamoon, 2005, p. 21, original emphasis) and opens opportunities for problemetising and even rejecting the mainstream, including mainstream education. It also creates space for discussion about interdependence as a contributor to individual well-being and social cohesion as opposed to a limited autonomy/dependence dichotomy (Sennett, 1998).

The possibility of early childhood services as democratic spaces has been canvassed and championed in early childhood literature for some time. Moss and Urban (2010) argue that contemporary social conditions 'call for a democratic and experimental education that fosters critical and creative thinking, responsibility and care, solidarity and social justice and a willingness to imagine practice differently and try out new ways of doing things' (p. 16). Through 'pedagogies of invention', they argue, the meaning of inclusion in early childhood settings creates 'places of renewal instead of replication' (p. 17). Indeed, a recent analysis of the Australian Early Years Learning Framework by Millei and Sumsion has identified that within that document 'it is possible to reclaim space for democratic politics for a more equitable society' (2011, p. 72).

To summarise so far, we have outlined a number of constructs of social inclusion evident in the literature and related these to the provision of ECEC. Whilst the critiques of these constructs highlight how social inclusion can, perhaps inadvertently, alienate and marginalise those it purports to include, social inclusion nevertheless can be mobilised to contribute to social participation and liberation.

Despite this scholarly debate about social inclusion, however, much of the literature remains conceptual and theoretical. There has been little examination of constructs of social inclusion in various political jurisdictions, and in particular little that examines the constructs of social inclusion inherent within ECEC policy documents.

Press and Skatterbol urge early childhood advocates to engage in '[p]roductive policy engagement' (2007, p. 183). However, like the concept 'social inclusion', 'policy' is 'a highly contested notion' (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 4). Here, informed by Rizvi and Lingard, our understanding of public ECEC policy documents is that of texts which variously communicate the position of the State, set agendas and steer the understandings, actions and behaviours of early childhood professionals in order to bring about State directed change. Representations of social inclusion within policy documents are highly productive (Harris & Williams, 2003). We contest that the ways social inclusion is constructed within ECEC policy documents will foster dominant understandings of what social inclusion 'is' and potentially limit what it 'can be' and how it is enacted. The aim of this article, therefore, is to identify what dominant constructs of social

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inclusion are evident in Australian government ECEC policy documents. The ECEC policy documents we draw on are all documents available from the website of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), the federal government department responsible for ECEC in Australia. The policy documents include a range of statements, reports, agendas and steering documents. Although public documents, they are primarily intended to inform and steer the work of ECEC professionals and aim to translate government directions – including those related to social inclusion – into practice.

Method

Source documents ($n = 33$) were all documents listed under 'Early Childhood – policy agenda' available in September 2011 from the DEEWR website.[3] Table I provides an annotated list of these documents. They ranged from single web pages to booklets of over 200 pages.

Title of Document	Purpose of Document
Policy Agenda	Briefly introduces the Australian government's agenda for early childhood education and care (ECEC).
Guide to the National Quality Standard	A guide to support ECEC services so they can successfully participate in the National Quality Standard process.
Progress of the National Quality Framework (NQF)	Provides an update on the progress of the NQF.
The Council of Australian Governments' Early Childhood Commitment	Outlines the Council of Australian Governments' commitment to making early childhood an area for national reform through the National Partnership.
National Partnership for Early Childhood Education	Summarises the activities and agreements in relation to ECEC to be reached by States and Territories by 2013.
National Partnership Agreement (NPA) on Early Childhood Education	Outlines the funding allocated by federal government to the States and Territories to enact the NPA.
Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)	A document that briefly explains the EYLF.
Belonging, Being and Becoming (2009)	The Australian Early Years Learning Framework.
Early Childhood Education – universal access	Explains the purpose and intent of the federal government's commitment to universal access to ECEC.
Universal Access to 15 hours of Pre-school Education. 2010 Annual Reports of the Governments of Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Northern Territory, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, Western Australia, Queensland	Eight reports on the State and Territories progress towards provision of 15 hours pre-school for all children in the year prior to primary school.
The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Universal Access Strategy	Outlines the federal government's strategy for universal access to ECEC for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
Early Childhood Workforce	Explains the federal government's commitment to and strategy for developing a 'well-trained workforce' for ECEC.
Innovative Early Childhood Workforce Projects (2009 & 2010)	These two documents provide summaries of several 'projects aimed at exploring best practice or innovative models for up-skilling and retaining those working in the early childhood and care profession'.

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Early Learning and Care Centres & Early Learning and Care Centre	These two documents provide details of the federal government's proposal to fund the development of 38 Early Learning and Care Centres across the country in areas of high need.
Community Support Programs	Provides an overview of and guidelines for the Community Support Program – a program that supports access to, and quality improvement in, ECEC services, particularly in disadvantaged areas.
The Future of the Inclusion and Professional Support Program for Child Care Services (2011)	A discussion paper related to the Inclusion and Professional Support Program.
Inclusion and Professional Support Program (2009)	Inclusion and Professional Support Program, program guidelines for: Inclusion Support Agencies, National Inclusion Support Subsidy Provider, Professional Support Coordinators, and Indigenous Professional Support Units.
Long Day Care National Quality Framework Transition Support	Outlines the federal government's commitment to fund services to undertake quality improvements in preparation for the implementation of the transition to the National Quality Framework.
National Early Childhood Development Strategy	Outlines the Council of Australian Governments' National Early Childhood Development Strategy – Investing in the Early Years.
Indigenous Early Childhood Development National Partnership	Provides an explanation of the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development.
Indigenous Early Childhood Development	Outlines the federal government's commitment to improving developmental outcomes for Indigenous children.
Roll Out of Australian Early Development Index	A brief description and explanation of the Australian Early Development Index.
Home Interaction Program for Parents & Youngsters	A brief explanation about the early intervention project, Home Interaction Program for Parents & Youngsters.

Table I. Annotated list of source documents.

Our analysis had two distinct components, one manual – to identify different constructs of social inclusion within the source documents – and the other automatic – used primarily to confirm the dominance of the construct. First, we manually searched the source documents for the term 'social inclusion', both by reading the texts closely, and using the Microsoft Word search tool. As this search yielded only a few incidences of the term 'social inclusion', we searched for any of three keywords – 'including', 'inclusion', and 'include' – using the same methods. This search yielded multiple incidences. We extracted the paragraphs in which these terms appeared, discarding references that used the terms as a grouping element only (e.g. 'children's services *including* family day care, long day care and after school hours care'). Additionally, because of limited evidence of the term 'social inclusion', we searched the documents for paragraphs that, although did not include the search terms, nevertheless reflected the concept of social inclusion. We then sorted this data (the extracted paragraphs) according to the construct of social inclusion (as discussed in the introduction of this article) that it most readily reflected – remaining alert for alternative constructs. We subsequently combined two of these categories and so ended up with four dominant constructs of social inclusion evident in the source documents: poverty reduction and workforce participation; a response to discrimination and inequality and as a validation of diversity; normative; and participation in democratic decision-making.

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Second, to provide an objective verification of our manual analysis, we analysed the source documents using the 'Leximancer' [4] software program. We loaded the 33 source documents into the program, ran a semantic and relational content analysis (Smith & Humphries, 2006), and generated a data map to display the findings. The Leximancer analysis (as shown in Figure 1) confirms the dominance of the concept 'including' within the source documents, and its close relationship with the concepts 'access' and 'children'. It also revealed other dominant concepts (e.g. performance) which are outside the scope of this article.
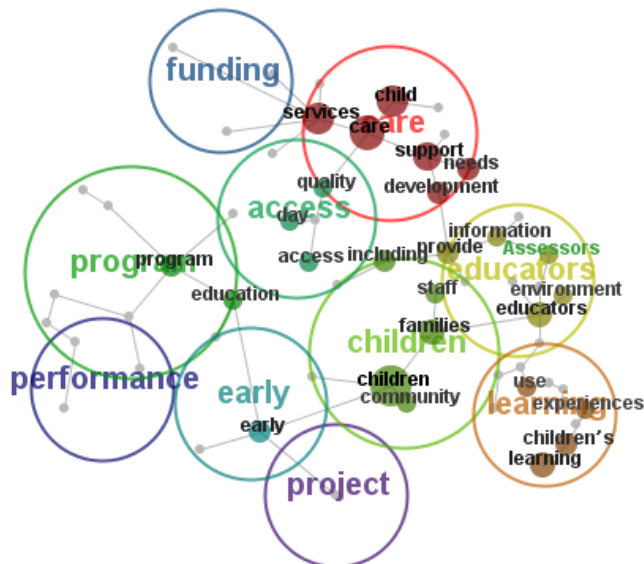

Figure 1. Leximancer analysis.

Findings and Discussion

As previously noted, the term 'social inclusion' appears only a very few times in the source documents. In some instances, the term is used in ways that clearly link the ECEC policy documents to the government's larger social inclusion policy. For instance, an Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP) discussion paper (2011a, p. 10), references social inclusion in the following way:

> New funding arrangements must support the goal of national consistency, address disadvantage
> and social inclusion and ensure the most efficient use of funds by reducing duplication.

However, the terms 'social inclusion' and 'inclusion' are used primarily in the document to refer to the inclusion of children in social groups in ECEC settings, rather than in a social policy sense, as shown in the following statement from the *Guide to the National Quality Standard* (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2011, p. 135):

> educators and co-ordinators acknowledge older children's complex relationships and sensitivity
> in ways that promote social inclusion.

Given the prevalence of social inclusion discourse in policy debates generally, and the implementation of the Australian Social Inclusion Agenda specifically, the limited reference to social inclusion within the Australian ECEC policy documents examined here is somewhat surprising. The lack of the explicit use of the term 'social inclusion' in the documents, and the limited reference to the larger social inclusion policy, may make it difficult for ECEC professionals – the intended audience of the documents – to understand the basis or enact the practices intended to bring about the changes necessary for social inclusion.

In the following section we discuss our findings in relation to the dominant constructs of social inclusion evident in the documents.

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Inclusion as Poverty Reduction and Workforce Participation

Again, somewhat surprisingly, we could find no direct reference in the source documents to the role of ECEC in reducing poverty, and only limited reference to its role in supporting workforce participation. There is acknowledgement of the need for ECEC to be 'affordable', and reference to the 'benefits' of ECEC for children and families, as evident in the quote below from an overview of the Quality Framework, (DEEWR, 2011b). There is also some limited reference to the importance of having a 'positive start' in the early years and the role of ECEC in 'improving children's educational and developmental outcomes' and helping them become 'fully prepared for learning and life', to reach their 'potential', and have the 'best possible future' – all important elements in increasing children's future employability and reducing their risk of poverty.

> The Australian Government's agenda for early childhood education and child care focuses on providing Australian families with high-quality, accessible and *affordable* integrated early childhood education and child care. The agenda has a strong emphasis on connecting with schools to ensure all Australian children are *fully prepared for learning and life*. Investing in the health, education, development and care of our children *benefits* children and their families, our communities and the economy, and is critical to lifting *workforce participation* and delivering the Government's *productivity* agenda. (DEEWR, 2011b, emphasis has been added)

Links between ECEC and workforce participation in the document are mostly related to parental workforce participation enabled by their child or children attending an ECEC setting. There is also some reference to the role of ECEC in supporting parents' participation in the community. For instance, several documents state that 'High quality, accessible and affordable child care also allows parents to participate in the workforce and the broader community' (DEEWR, 2011a). References within the documents to the government's productivity agenda and to the potential benefits to the economy when children attend ECEC do construct ECEC as part of a longer term investment strategy. As previously noted, such constructs that focus on the 'future child' and 'investment' have been critiqued as being instrumentalist. Whilst these constructs were certainly evident in the source documents, they were not, however, particularly dominant.

Social Inclusion as a Response to Discrimination and Inequality and as Validation of Diversity

The construct of social inclusion as a response to discrimination and inequality and as a validation of diversity was quite strongly evident within the source documents. The EYLF and IPSP Guidelines, for instance, are both said to be underpinned by the concepts of 'inclusion', which is described in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 24) as involving:

> taking into account all children's social, cultural and linguistic diversity (including learning styles, abilities, disabilities, gender, family circumstances and geographic location) in curriculum decision-making processes. The intent is to ensure that all children have equitable access to resources and participation, and opportunities to demonstrate their learning and value difference.

Further, the IPSP Guidelines (DEEWR, 2009b, p. 17) state that the IPSP 'aims to promote and maintain high quality care that is free from discrimination, segregation and prejudice' and to 'enable children with additional needs to participate in the activities available in child care services and have the same opportunities as others to participate belong, develop and succeed' (p. 19).

Notions of equity and fairness that suggest a critical approach to pedagogy are particularly evident in the EYLF Outcome 2: children are connected with and contribute to their world (DEEWR, 2009a), seen, for instance, in the statements 'children think critically about fair and unfair behaviour' and staff 'engage children in discussions about respectful and equal relations such as when a child dominates in the use of resources' (DEEWR, 2009a). Further, the EYLF outcome is supported by the National Quality Framework (NQF): 'Noticing and listening carefully to children's concerns and discussing diverse perspectives on issues of inclusion and exclusion and fair and unfair behaviour' (ACECQA, 2011, p. 34).

The NQF further explains how educators can exhibit socially just and anti-discriminatory behaviour. For example, by 'the ways in which the nominated supervisor, educators and co-

ordinators support inclusion of children from diverse backgrounds and capabilities in collaborative play, projects and experiences with others' (ACECQA, 2011, p. 137), and how 'educators recognise and respond to barriers to children achieving educational success. In response they challenge practices that contribute to inequities and make curriculum decisions that promote inclusion and participation by all children' (p. 165).

The construct of social inclusion as a response to discrimination and inequity, however, is most apparent in the source documents in discussion of 'access' to ECEC. As confirmed by the Leximancer analysis, 'access' is a dominant theme within the source documents, and refers both to access of ECEC services in general, and more specifically to universal access to pre-school in the year prior to school – to which all Australian governments are committed by 2013. For instance, the website of the Office of Early Childhood Education and Child Care (OECECC) states that the OECECC aims 'to achieve a nationally consistent, accessible, affordable and high quality early childhood education and child care system for all Australian children and families'.

The documents acknowledge that currently there are impediments to families' access of ECEC. The 'removal of barriers to access', particularly for groups known to be disadvantaged, such as children with disabilities, Indigenous children and those from disadvantaged areas, is a highly dominant theme in the source documents. In relation to Indigenous children, for instance, the IPSP discussion paper (DEEWR, 2011a, p. 27) states:

> Indigenous children and their families have a unique culture and the Australian Government is committed to improving access to integrated, inclusive services that are relevant to their lives. To support this commitment the Government provides funding for a range of early childhood initiatives to assist Indigenous families and give their children a good start in life. Access to high quality early childhood education and care programs also contributes to the achievement of the Closing the Gap targets, to improve outcomes for Indigenous people, especially children.

And, perhaps acknowledging the potential failure of the market orientated Australian system to provide ECEC services in certain areas, additional support is available through the Community Support Program to provide more equitable access:

> The Community Support Program is a part of the Child Care Services Support Program and includes a range of payments designed to deliver improved access to child care through support for establishment of new services and maintenance of services especially in areas where the market would otherwise fail to provide child care services. (DEEWR, 2009c, p. 3)

A danger with any universal service delivery, however, is that if it utilises a 'blanket' approach to the distribution of limited resources, it can potentially advantage the most advantaged and fail to target and provide adequate resources to those areas most 'in-need'. It seems from the source documents, however, that the distribution of funding aims to be equitably distributed by drawing on data from a range of sources to identify those geographical areas most 'in-need', such as the Socio-Economic for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage [5] based on the 2006 Census of Population and Housing and the Australian Early Development Index.[6] Whilst it would be naive to imagine that these tools are 'problem' free, they do nevertheless provide some basis for making informed decisions about the equitable distribution of funds.

Access and attendance of ECEC services would be hollow, however, without a concern with quality. Reference to the quality of service provision is highly evident in the documents, as confirmed by Leximancer analysis, and appears to be central to the inclusion agenda. For instance, throughout the source documents there is multiple reference to 'quality inclusive environments for children' (DEEWR, 2011a, p. 15) and the ways that quality is supported. The IPSP Guidelines (DEEWR, 2009b, p. 13), for example, state that the IPSP aims to:

> develop a shared vision for the delivery of inclusion and professional support for the child care sector ... promote nationally consistent and collaborative approaches ... provide national leadership on inclusion ... develop strategies for continuous improvement and share best practice approaches to inclusion.

Whilst these references perhaps could be interpreted as taking a deficit approach – as if staff in services do not possess these skills – the documents explain that the IPSP aims to build 'on existing

capacities of child care services and the successes that have already been achieved in delivering quality child care' (DEEWR, 2009b, p. 7).

Social Inclusion as Normative

The arguments for universal access to ECEC could perhaps be interpreted as serving a normative function. That is, it could be argued that as attendance of ECEC services is linked to 'all Australian children [being] fully prepared for learning and life' (DEEWR, 2011b, p. 2), that families could feel coerced into sending their child to ECEC services. Counter to this interpretation, however, the documents do refer to the importance of families making informed choices about their utilisation of ECEC. For instance, the documents purport that the government supports parental decision-making in regards to their choice of ECEC, in particular through the MyChild website.[7] Notwithstanding the problematic nature of the MyChild website, '[r]ecognising how critical the early years are for children', the intention of the site is to 'help give families the support they need to make informed choices that will lay the foundations for their child's future ... [and] assist families to access the support and services required to make important, and sometimes complex, child care decisions'. As the target for utilisation of ECEC is set at 95% attendance at pre-school, however, perhaps the 'choice' for families is not one of whether or not their child will attend ECEC services, but rather which service they will attend.

Statements referring to the inclusion of children with disabilities and Indigenous children in mainstream settings could also perhaps be interpreted as normative. It could be argued, for instance, that statements such as the following construct Indigenous children as 'other' and 'outside' the mainstream, whilst reinforcing and reifying the normalcy of mainstream settings:

> The inclusion of Indigenous children and families in mainstream early childhood education and care services is critical to efforts to meet the Closing the Gap early childhood targets particularly as many Indigenous families live in urban centres and regional centres. (DEEWR, 2011a, p. 28)

However, in our view this would be a disingenuous reading of the source documents as overall there is a strong emphasis on the need for mainstream services not to remain static, but to change in response to the diverse needs of children, families and communities.

Social Inclusion as Participation in Democratic Decision-Making

Finally, the construct of social inclusion as democratic decision-making is also evident in the source documents, especially the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009a) and IPSU Guidelines (DEEWR, 2009b). Democratic principles are particularly evident in Outcome 1 of the EYLF: children have a strong sense of identity; children learn to interact with in relation to others with care, empathy and respect (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 24), which states that this outcome can be observed, for instance, when children 'display awareness of and respect for others' perspectives' and when 'educators promote consideration of alternative perspectives and social inclusion'. In this regard, our analysis supports that of Millei and Sumsion (2011) and suggests that Australian ECEC settings are being constructed, at least to some extent, as spaces for democratic participation.

Conclusion

The concept of social inclusion has been dominant in policy debates in Europe and Australia for several decades. The concept has been critiqued as problematic especially when it is narrowly defined as poverty reduction and workforce participation, and when it serves a normative function. But social inclusion also has the potential to be transformative by contributing to more equitable access to resources, upholding the valuing of diversity, and facilitating democratic participation.

Much of the literature critiquing the provision of ECEC in the last twenty years or so has been highly critical, highlighting, for example, how constructs of ECEC can be hegemonic, power laden, and even contribute to disadvantage and stigmatisation (Press & Skatterbol, 2007). From our reading of the source documents, however, the Australian ECEC policy context supports a concept of social inclusion that reflects social justice concerns – largely as a means of eliminating

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discrimination and inequality by providing 'access' to quality ECEC, valuing diversity, and also as a way of supporting democratic and citizenship participation. Whilst we do not dismiss earlier critiques of ECEC, nor do we suggest a naive acceptance of these current constructs of ECEC in Australia, the policy documents reviewed here do suggest a movement towards socially just constructs of inclusion, and that there is much to be cautiously optimistic about in the Australian ECEC policy arena. Unfortunately, however, whilst the ECEC policies reviewed here appear to be grounded in the Australian government's focus on social inclusion, and they set an agenda and steer practices and behaviours intended to contribute to social inclusion, the absence of the explicit use of social inclusion language within the documents is a critical gap which may signal a failure to inform early childhood professionals, without whom the government's social inclusion agenda may not be realised.

Notes

[1] By 'ECEC', we mean all prior to school education and care services, excluding health and welfare.

[2] Please see http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au/about/what-social-inclusion

[3] http://www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Policy_Agenda/Pages/home.aspx (accessed August 4, 2011).

[4] Leximancer is both the name of the software and the owner's company name. The software was developed by Andrew Smith of University of Queensland in 2007 and is used internationally in a wide range of contexts (e.g. market research, political analysis) (https://www.leximancer.com).

[5] http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/seifa?opendocument&navpos=260

[6] http://www.rch.org.au/aedi/

[7] http://mychild.gov.au

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