# Realising the Potential: Early Childhood Forum

## Unlocking the Potential in Early Childhood

## Session transcript

This podcast is one of a series of recordings made at Realising the Potential Early Childhood Forum, presented by the Department of Education and Training on Friday the 8th of June 2018 at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre.

We kick off the forum with our morning plenary session themed Unlocking the Potential in Early Childhood.

Following a Welcome to Country by Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin, AO, a senior Wurundjeri elder of the Kolun alliance and a forum welcome by Master of Ceremonies, George Megalogenis. Jenny Mikakos, Minister for Early Childhood Education will then provide the opening address.

The keynote address follows, delivered by Professor Sharon Lynn Kagan, who is the Co-Director of the National Centre for Children and Families at Columbia University. Professor Kagan will then sit down for an armchair discussion with MC George Megalogenis.

### George Megalogenis

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Aunty Joy Murphy.

### Aunty Joy Murphy

Thank you. Could I begin by saying that we meet on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people. This is a part of my father’s country and I’m very blessed to have been his oldest daughter, and still living on country today.

Could I also pay my respects to all ancestors, elders and communities on this great nation, and of course our neighbouring islands. And can I acknowledge anyone that may be in the audience with us today that’s come from far and near, and particularly those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin.

When we talk about early childhood it is important to realise where you come from. And for our community our children, our young people, young under 14s represent 45% of our total population. So indeed there’s such a journey ahead for our young ones, and also for those of us that are elders in the community, to ensure in every way possible, that our communities, our families, and our children have access and have opportunity to all things in life that might give them a better and successful outcome in the future. And in saying that, can I also say that the work that is done from my many, and including our Minister, our current Minister Jenny Mikakos, has been a strong advocate for Aboriginal and Islander communities for many years. It is important that when sitting as they do as ministers, that they do recognise and that is one thing that our Minister has done so well. And I just want to sincerely thank her.

Can I also thank our Aboriginal organisations and their staff for the wonderful job that they do, and indeed assisting our zero to three year olds.

There are about 23% that have attended formal childcare, and the zero to four years old who have now 46% attending childcare. And I’d have to say without the help of so many that would not have been possible probably 15 years ago.

So it is a great fortune opportunity for me to be here with you today, but also as an elder, it is my responsibility to ensure that I can manage to do what, you know, what is expected of me, but indeed what we need to do is ensure that all children are cared for in a culturally appropriate way.

Welcome to country by our communities is by our belonging. And we’re known as the Manna Gum people. These beautiful young leaves I picked this morning, and I might say as young and fresh as they are, it’s again a very opportune moment of have these growing at my house where I was born in an area where so many of our community were born in an area and not had the great fortune to live there. And indeed my father enabled us to have this wonderful opportunity to live in an area where we were born, and three, I’m a great-grandmother, generations beyond me are still able to do so.

This leaf is a gift from this land. This gift says to you accepting this means that you are welcome to everything, from the tops of the trees to the roots of the earth. It also means that by accepting this gift that you join with me to honour the spirits of our ancestors who have nurtured this land underneath this beautiful, amazing building for thousands and thousands of years. And in doing that also we come together and we share the responsibility that we’ve all been given as individuals, as mothers, as aunts, as grandmothers, whatever the case might be, uncles, fathers, grandfathers, to look after those that we’ve been given, and indeed nurture. And that applies of course to the things that grow on this earth.

I wish you every luck in everything that you do. And I do want to thank you for your support, especially for our children. My language is the Woiworung (aboriginal language) and you are most welcome to the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people.

### George Megalogenis

Thank you Aunty Joy for welcoming us all here today. And I too want to pay my respects to the traditional owners of the land on which we’re meeting today, and also to pay my respects to their elders past and present, and elders from other communities who may be here.

My name is George Megalogenis, and I’m here in a different capacity today, I’m your Master of Ceremonies. I won’t be speaking on the topics today, because there are much smarter people than me to address the topic of our discussion today which is Realising the Potential of our Children.

Today is about bringing Victorian early childhood sector together, and hearing the latest evidence from a range of international and national experts, on the best ways we can support all children to reach their potential. And it is also the opportunity to talk about the future of early childhood reform in Victoria.

Now I’ll just give you a quick run through on the day. The key themes we’ll be looking at at both the plenary session and the concurrent sessions include Improving Excellence in Early Learning; Supporting Positive Parenting; Promoting Language Development; and Making Early Childhood Services Accessible and Inclusive for all Children.

Towards the end of the day, once we’ve heard from a few of our speakers we might also start to wrap up the idea that in this room is the key, if we turn it properly, to the next big reform in Australian public policy.

Now before we hear from the Minister, who will be our first guest, not on stage we’ll have to take a video from the Minister ‘cause she’s had to rush back to Parliament where, as we speak, I think a hostage situation is underway. They don’t let politicians out anymore in the Victorian Parliament and she’s in the Upper House, so she is back at work.

Now obviously today we’re going to have many exciting conversations, lots of ideas thrown around, questions to be asked and for thoughts to be shared between us. I have to admit, because I’ve been doing a lot of reading up for this topic, I wish I’d covered this as a journalist back in the day when I was in Canberra, because I think this is one of the great untapped areas of public thought in Australia. In this room a lot of people are well aware of what they know, but I think we find a bit of a disconnect between this floor here and Canberra, and to a lesser extent other state governments.

Now our first guest who we’re going to hear via video link is the Minister Jenny Mikakos. She’s the Minister for Early Childhood Education, the Minister for Families and Children, and the Minister for Youth Affairs. Unfortunately as I’ve mentioned, she can’t be here in person, so we will be watching her on the screen.

Give it up for Jenny Mikakos.

### Minister Jenny Mikakos

Good morning and welcome to Realising the Potential, the Victorian Government’s Early Childhood Forum.

I’d like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which the forum is being held, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders both past and present and the elders from other communities who are with you there today.

Can I also acknowledge our international keynote speakers, Professor Sharon Lynn Kagan, Co-Director the National Centre for Children and Families at Columbia University; and Tove Mogstad Slinde, Senior Advisor at the Norwegian Government, and Chair of the Network on Early Childhood Education and Care at the OECD; as well as the many local experts presenting today.

It is my great pleasure to officially open this forum. And I’m very sorry that I can’t be with you there in person today due to an additional sitting day of the Victorian Parliament. But I want to pass on my deepest appreciation for the tireless work that you do to support the learning and development of Victoria’s children.

As early years professionals and leaders, you understand that the first years of life are critical to life-long learning, wellbeing and success. This forum is about taking some time out to reflect on the great work that you do, and learn together about how we can continue to improve and grow. Today will give you the opportunity to hear from a number of renowned international and Australian early childhood experts, about the latest research which builds on the recent Lifting Our Game report.

The forum is unique in that it brings together people from so many different parts of the sector, including our maternal and child health nurses, educators, playgroup facilitators, parenting professionals, primary school principals and other staff.

The Andrew’s Labor Government is committed to an ambitious and transformative reform agenda in the early years. Last year I announced the Education State Early Reform Plan. The plan sets out our long-term vision for the early childhood system in Victoria, one with high quality services that is equitable and inclusive and welcoming of all children.

We have invested $202.1 million in the reform plan, the largest investment in early childhood by a Victorian government ever.

This year’s state budget invests a further $135.9 million towards realising our early childhood vision. And this includes funding to grow the teacher workforce, to deliver an essential kindergarten infrastructure boost, and to roll out a specialist language program in up to 130 kindergartens across the state.

We’ve already achieved so much. We recently launched the free maternal child health app, a great source of trustworthy information for parents and a modelling into our MCH system. And we’ve expanded the support of playgroups across Victoria, with many having started for the first time in new local government areas. These are all vital in providing early support for families.

I was also thrilled to recently announce the rollout of school readiness funding to 25 local government areas next year, as well as to all our kinders operated by Aboriginal community controlled organisation. In this Australian first initiative, the Andrew’s Government has committed $58.1 million dollars over four years, to ensure that from 2021 all kindergartens can access the expertise their children need to stay on track for school.

Finally, I’d like to touch on the Child Information Sharing Scheme, which received $43.4 million in this year’s state budget. This reform will fundamentally improve how services work together by amending privacy laws and making information sharing between professionals much easier.

This is an exciting and ambitious reform agenda, and we need your help to realise its full potential. Today’s forum is a wonderful opportunity to address all of you at once, educators, maternal and child health nurses, and other delegates from across the early childhood sector. It’s an opportunity to highlight the importance of working together as a connected system, because this is how our families experience our services.

Because the best outcomes for Victoria’s children are achieved when supported playgroup facilitators are talking with their MCH colleagues, and MCH nurses are talking with kindergarten teachers, and when communication between early childhood professionals and school professionals is a matter of course. We have wonderful services across Victoria and we want to make the most of this by building a fantastic system. A system that both shares information, and delivers integrated services around the needs of children and families, and shares best practice to continually learn and apply the best evidence.

I hope that you enjoy the forum and leave energised, with fresh ideas about how to better work with families to improve children’s learning and wellbeing. I also hope that each of you comes away from today feeling empowered to make changes in your own service and community.

With such a dedicated and passionate workforce, I am confident that we can continue to reach for the highest standards of quality, and best learning and development outcomes for every child.

We all know that the investment that we make in children today will help us build a happier, healthier, and more prosperous community into the future.

Thank you. And, I hope you enjoy today.

### George Megalogenis

Now I know the Minister did want to be here this morning, she told me that she desperately wanted to be here but obviously couldn’t make it. It’s unfortunate that she couldn’t, but we much appreciate the thoughts to open the conference.

Now the first of the big treats we’ve got today is a presentation, it’s the keynote presentation for the morning from, probably the world expert, can we say that? Are you number one in the world? No. She wants to talk herself down. Okay.

I’m going to invite Professor Sharon Lynn Kagan to the stage. She’s the Virginia and Leonard Marx Professor of Early Childhood and Family Policy, Co-Director of the National Centre for Children and Families, and Associate Dean for Policy at Teachers College, Columbia University, and the Professor Adjunct at the Yale University’s Child Study Centre, scholar, pioneer, leader and advocate. She’s helped shape early childhood practice and policies in the United States and in countries throughout the world. A warm round of welcome for Lynn.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

Thank you. Good morning everyone. It is such a pleasure to be with you this morning. I want to acknowledge the Department of Education and Training for inviting me. I want to acknowledge the heritage of this land. And I would like to dedicate my remarks this morning to a dear colleague who introduced me to Australia, to the joys of this country and the treasures of this land over 40 years ago. My comments this morning are dedicated to the memory of Collette Tayler.

Thank you.

I’ve been asked this morning to talk with you about all that Victoria is doing, and some of the things that perhaps it could be doing, to improve the quality of services for young children. I’m going to do so in four sections, beginning with taking stock, then thinking about how we think fresh, how we act smart, and then how we really do create high quality systems.

You know, if I were a time traveller from afar, coming and looking at the early years in Australia, and Victoria in particular, I would think wonderful progress. There’s so much to build upon, world take note of what is going on here. But at the very same time I would also realise that we all are living in a totally new world, and that it’s time for us to think fresh and to act fresh.

What about our world is so new? Well first of all everyone in this room understands that there are five major trends that encase everything we do. The trend of globalisation, the trend of technology, that of all of the economic and social changes that we are experiencing, changes in the way we are understanding the roles of gender, and changes in our environment.

Beyond those worldly trends there are tremendous changes that are going on in science, in the laboratories around this world. We know from the neuroscience studies that children grow, their brains grow to 80% of their full size by the time of age three, and 90% at age five. We know from the evaluation science that high quality early childhood programs make a very big difference, short-term and long-term in the lives of children. From the kind of econometric sciences we understand that investing early makes a profound difference in the impacts that we have financially for children and for society. Two other sciences, the implementation science and system science, tell us a lot about how we go about implementing these services for very young children.

And then, if we looked at what is going on we would see that there are five other big things happening. Indeed, in Australia you have made increased investments, particularly in Victoria with the Reform Plan. You have growing public will to support these efforts. There are plentiful efforts from which to learn, and models from which we can teach one another.

But aha, in spite of all this there are tremendous challenges in our field. And I’d like to highlight five of them very quickly.

The first is the quality challenge. Arrayed before you is information from a number of countries around the world, and you can see where Australia sits. These indicators of quality, as measured by important things like student/teacher ratio, average teacher wages, curriculum guidelines and teacher training. Indeed, if we look a little bit more closely we see, in terms of meeting the national quality standards for which you as a country are known globally, we still have 25% of the services that do not.

Indeed, and perhaps most distressingly in light of this land’s commitment to all of its peoples, the equity and inclusion challenge puts Australia near the bottom range of the countries that indeed were surveyed.

If we talk about equity and inclusion you all, as a country, are doing very well in comparison to the OECD averages for four year olds, a little bit less well for three year olds, and I’m pleased in looking at your new reform plan that you indeed are addressing all of that.

If we look at issues related to efficiency and sustainability, and this actually is a very important slide, that Australia ranks 24th out of the 26 OECD countries, for their investment percentages of GDP that are put into education.

Victoria fairs well when compared to the rest of the states and territories in Australia, and it is a joy to be here and to share this slide with you, and to commend you, on all of the accomplishments that indeed have been made to date.

What I would submit, if we’re honest with each other, overall we need to look at these four kinds of trends and say, well what does all this mean for children and for our future? And this is where I’d like to turn to thinking fresh.

I would submit to you, that given all these trends, and given where we are, we need to think very differently, first about children and then about the policies that support their development. I would submit to you that there are three important changes in the way we are looking at young children.

First we know now that all children, not some children but all children, are really competent learners. And we understand this, not only from the neuroscience research but from our work with them.

And when we say that they are competent learners, we don’t just mean in academic areas, but we mean in all areas of social and emotional and cognitive development.

The second thing that we understand, and we do have the United Nations to thank for this, is that all children are equal rights bearers, again not some but all. This is the first time with the sustainable development goals that early childhood has been explicitly mentioned by the United Nations in one of its declarative policies. These entitlements include health, and safety, education, nutrition, equality, and the right to a safe environment.

And finally, we understand now more than ever from the sciences, that children live in complex contexts. They aren’t isolated away as they were in the Victorian era where they were miniature adults, not really to be seen or heard, but rather children are profoundly affected by their peers, by their families, by their communities, by their neighbourhoods, and by their government policies.

Well if you would share this belief with me, that we need to think fresh about children, each one of these has a ramification for how we need to think fresh about policies. And indeed, if we believe that all children are competent learners, we have got to create the learning environments that enable them to reach that potential. If we believe that all children are rights bearers, then we have got to create the services in all domains of development and distribute them equitably. And finally, if we believe that children live in very complex contexts, then we are obligated to make those contexts comprehensive and effective.

This means we’ve got to change our thinking a little bit. If we care about children as competent learners, we have got to begin to think not only about the quality of programs for kindergarteners, but we need to think about the quality of programs and services for children birth to age eight, and how they relate.

If we believe that children are equal rights bearers, not only must we focus on policy but we must shift that focus to one that looks at quality and equity as twin and entwined goals. And if we believe that children live in complex contexts, we can’t just focus on the quality of individual programs, we must look more broadly at the systems that encase those programs. Not a small order. How do we do it? How do we begin to act smart?

Let me try and say to you that there have to be three foci for our work, and I’d like to discuss each with you. Each is definitely related to one of these beliefs about children.

If we believe that all children are competent learners, and that our programs have to be high quality, we are obligated to produce quality programs and services in all domains of development, health, mental health, child protection for all children.

As an example, since most of you work in classrooms or with young children, I’d like to focus on the learning environments. We know that this adheres to all domains, that good learning environments occur when six conditions are met. When there are standards. When there is ongoing and careful observation of children. When there is a supportive pedagogy that honours children’s backgrounds, their interests and their inclinations. When we focus on the social and environmental aspects of learning, social and emotional development; when we attend to continuity across the years and across institutions; and when we have curriculum, albeit they are tailored to children’s interests, but that the curriculum stands as a guide, quality, early learning environments.

Second, if we believe that children are rights bearers, we need to provide an array of services for all children. When I say an array of all services, what indeed do I mean? These flowers represent them. I mean very high quality health programs; very high quality parenting education programs, high quality - notice high quality precedes all of this - early start, early kindergarten programs and childcare; a tremendous attention to transitions; and a focus on parental leave.

As I review what has going on in Victoria, indeed you all are paying important attention to all of these areas and are moving robustly in this arena.

The third area of focus, children living in a holistic context in complex contexts, what does that mean? It means creating a system and policies that support a system.

Now here’s the rub, everybody talks about system, but what indeed do we really mean by it? I’m going to try and define that for us.

Think with me about a beautiful garden where many magnificent flowers are planted. Often we plant a series of home visiting programs. We may plant another set of child and family programs. Another set of kindergarten programs. Another set of transition programs, and programs that work with the pre-primary and primary. And we keep planting and planting and planting these flowers, so much so that we have many flowers but like any good gardener who indeed honours the land, what happens if we don’t take care of the soil? What happens if we don’t have sun and water? Those flowers, no matter how magnificent they are, they die.

I would propose to you that around the world we have spent a lot of time building up lots of new programs for young children, but not a sufficient time looking at the infrastructure or the soil that supports them. What is that soil? And what is she talking about? Well I’d like you to play with me intellectually for just a minute and live with this metaphor. I would submit to you that there are eight things that make up that soil, that support the quality and the equitable distribution of those programs. And you have to excuse the very mixed metaphor, that indeed you’ve got beautiful flowers that are natural above the ground, and the somewhat mechanistic approach to gears below the ground. Someone once suggested to me that I should really make things worms because that’s what’s really in the soil. The truth is that worms don’t fit the metaphor because worms amble about at will, and we need systematic attention to all of these gears.

So let me talk for a moment about what these are and what makes a very high quality early childhood system. The first part is that we need pedagogy that honours children’s diversity, that builds on their strengths, and that supports those strengths. We all know this.

The second thing we need is that we need good standards, or expectations for what children should know and be able to do, and again I don’t just mean in the cognitive area, we need curriculum and we need means of assessing the degree to which children have achieved these standards. And by this assessment I don’t mean formal tests. I do mean very detailed, meticulous observation by teachers on a routine basis, so that they know intimately the challenges that each child is facing as well as each child’s capacity. Those data are collected and used for program improvement.

Third, we need to be sure that we have got equity driven and consistent program regulations and supports. And I’ll say a word about the incredible contribution that Australia has made to the world in this gear.

Fourth, we need equity driven professional development. Understandably the world changes our techniques about working with young children, and our knowledge about them changes. And our professional development strategies needs to keep up with that.

Fifth, we need equity driven financing mechanisms, money that supports indeed what we are doing, but not just more money, more money that is purposefully spent to ensure that the services are of high quality. We need governance mechanisms that link together all of the disparate programs that are serving young children. Clearly we need families and communities that are meaningfully engaged, and last we need transitions that help children move from one service to another, and from one year to another.

What is a system? I’d ask you to remember two formula, that a system is made up, not only of the flowers or services, but of those services combined with the infrastructure. And I would submit to you that for a very long time we’ve only been focusing on the flowers.

The second formula that I would ask you to remember, is that eight minus one equals zero. And I really do know how to add and subtract, but I think you get the meaning. If you take away only one of these gears, if you don’t have all of them in place, it is impossible to have an effective system that is going to render the kind of services that we want for all young children.

So that’s something to think about, how do we bring action to it? I’d like to say that there are really three strategies. Create a plan predicated on a theory of change, move strategically and learn from others and think big, think long, and think different. Let me talk about each of these.

If you take those systems that I’ve been talking about, really subsystems, the learning subsystem, the green; the services environment, the flowers or the array of services that we need; and the gears, all of those are necessary as a part of our long-term vision. We can’t focus just on one flower or one type of program, or on one of the gears. We’ve got to do it all together, and that’s the really hard trick.

I would submit to you that there are people in this room who spend a lot of their lives focusing on the green, or the learning environments for young children. And to you I would say congratulations. You are really doing everything to promote the quality of services for young children.

To those of you who focus on creating different sorts of programs, and working in different sorts of programs, I would say thank you, thank you, you are working on creating equity for young children.

And finally, to those of you who work in the area of all of these gears, deep appreciation, because you are focusing on the efficiency and the sustainability of these programs, making them last over time, not having the kind of programs we unfortunately do in my country, here today and gone tomorrow depending on who is politically in office.

None of us can do this alone. We all are in it together. That means we’ve got to create an integrated overall plan. I’ve spent time reading your Early Childhood Reform Plan, and I want to really congratulate you, because you have done a majestic job of creating a vision for early childhood that focuses on quality and on equity and on inclusivity. And that you are channelling programs to key services, maternal and child health, nursing, to kindergartens, and importantly to early intervention services.

That you have thought carefully, that you plan a long-term rollout, that there was a commitment of money, that financing gear, both in the last session and in this session, means that Victoria is well on its way.

Moving strategically, learning from others, let me focus here for a minute. Very recently I have been engaged in an international study that is looking at the top performing early childhood countries in the world, top performing defined by advances on PISA which is not exactly my criteria but one that our funder gave to me, and top performing in terms of providing high quality services. The countries in this study were Finland, and I apologise for not including Norway we could only include one. In Asia we are looking at Hong Kong, at Korea and Singapore. And in the Anglo approach we are looking at Australia, that’s where I was working so closely with Collette, and also in England.

The major lesson from this two-year multimillion study, is that our contexts are very, very different. And that those contexts permeate every policy in the ways in which families, as well as societies, think about children. Some of these countries believe heavily in public funding for young children, the Nordic countries. Asian countries in contrast, believe in a market system where families buy services in the market. The Anglo approach, yours like my country and like England, is somewhat next. These countries look very, very different in how they approach their monitoring, in how they approach accountability for young children. They are similar however, in that they all historically have accorded more attention to children’s health, and to public health, and to child protection over time, than they have to early childhood. In most of these countries the focus on young children, the educational focus, is somewhat recent.

The second thing that we’ve learned from these countries is that dispersed and plentiful services matter. I come from a country that is focusing on providing early childhood to four year old children, and thinks we’ve kind of done it when we do that. And indeed the data are quite clear, that there is a need for focus at the pre and perinatal period owned by lots of different kinds of programs including maternity and paternity leave, including ongoing health and developmental checks, and including home visiting programs.

Services for infants and toddlers turn out to be the hidden area where we as a world are focusing the least. And indeed these countries do do a better job than most, by providing different kinds of supports for infants and toddlers.

Pre-school services, an area where most countries are making good headway, take multiple forms and you all are carrying the torch in advance on that.

Finally the area of transitions is one where we have noted some very interesting things happening in these countries, but they’re not universally, and this is an area we want to sustain the gains that children make, then indeed we must invest in with much more care and attention.

We have found actually, that there are five ingredients. This report is going to be released in August, so you’re getting a little bit of a preview of it. The first thing we found is that in all of these countries there is a very strong, and stable, policy foundation. This just doesn’t happen automatically. There have to be really strong policies. There has to be durable funding. And there had to be constituencies of individuals who support our public officials in advancing a commitment to early childhood. All these countries demonstrate this to a greater or lesser extent.

The second key ingredient of successful early childhood policies is that we need knowledgeable and supportive teachers and families. Lots of countries are focusing on intensive professional development for those who work with young children in whatever capacities, but they often forget the inclusion of parents. In many of these countries we are seeing innovative models and approaches for parents and teachers working collaboratively together. And maybe in the Q&A we can talk a little bit about that.

The third thing that characterises all these countries is that there are comprehensive services that are coordinated, that there are coordinating mechanisms. Previously many of these countries provided supports to young children in as many as five disparate ministries or departments, and now in most of these countries these are being consolidated, often like Victoria, under the ministry, at least a majority of the services under the Ministry of Education and Training.

The fourth thing that we noticed was that these countries collect and use data to drive the improvement. They collect data on children. They collect it on teachers. They collect it on programs. And they are not afraid of collecting and using these data to make things better for young children.

England is perhaps the country that stands out most, because it does do periodic national assessments of young children, and reports child outcome data to families and to communities, not individually but aggregated. Each of these countries also is developing its very strong research tradition by supporting different kinds of research, longitudinal research, empirical research, but the use of data, and the organisation of data, they are putting money into creating effective data systems.

The last thing is that they really pay attention to their pedagogy for young children. That they want people to be informed about different pedagogical approaches, but they also want to be sure that the services to children are highly individualised, that indeed we are recognising children’s individual strengths. I am struck by Finland where an individual education plan is developed for each and every child, and is done in consort with parents and is reviewed twice a year. To the best of my knowledge no other country does it. In the United States we do it on children who have very special needs. But Finland has taken this notion and commitment to individualisation to a new level.

In addition, these countries focus on making sure that their pedagogy is continuous. They don’t have one curriculum for infants and toddlers, and another curriculum for four to five or six year olds, and then another curriculum for primary school. If there are those different curriculum they are aligned thematically, and they are aligned with content. It’s very important to build in that continuity in a permanent way.

These five content lessons lead to five process lessons that are equally important. Those strong, stable policy foundations, they didn’t happen overnight. They evolved over a long period of time. Government structures change, funding and financing can be accordion like, it gets bigger and smaller depending on the state of these economies. But everybody understands that this is a perpetual commitment that will improve step by step.

The second is that these countries really do focus on their personnel and on their families. I am struck by countries that are comparatively new, Singapore, by that I mean comparatively new in their current manifestations, and Korea, and they both have, after war-torn Korea, they both have felt the way to really improve their entire social capital and there economic capital, is to focus on individuals.

And so they put a lot of money, a lot of time, and a lot of resources in investing in individuals. Parent engagement is required in Korea as part of the governing structure of each and every childcare facility. Note I emphasise required.

For the data to drive improvement really tells us that this notion of focusing on the infrastructure, ends up being far more important than we thought. That indeed, in my country, we set aside 10% of our major services Head Start and Childcare to invest in the infrastructure, to invest in quality improvement. It turns out that some of these countries recognise that upfront some of these investments must be even more than that at least to get going. And they make no bones about that being as important as investing in direct services to young children.

And finally, in each and every one of these countries, they do focus on improving the pedagogy that is presented with, and that evokes - evolves with young children. In so doing, they respect the culture profoundly. When you walk in to a high quality early childhood program in Finland it looks different from a high quality early childhood program in Hong Kong or in Singapore or in the Unities States, because our cultures do inform how we approach services to very young children. So moving strategically means understanding who we are, understanding our context and building it.

And third, the third strategy for how we get to the systems approach is to think big, long and different. I really do believe that in early childhood globally, because for a long time we were very much the starved profession financially, we have been content to take small gains. And that’s probably smart, it’s probably necessary, but to be content with small gains in the absence of having a broad vision, a total plan, means that we are taking baby steps really on the road to nowhere. So I do believe that we need to think about the short-term steps and the long-term steps, because those long-term tomorrows get here really fast.

And we alone cannot do this by ourselves. We need to reach out, not only to families and to communities who are our constituents, who are those we serve, but to business leaders, to politicians, in a very, very strategic way. So I would say that thinking differently means thinking about the systems, think about those ovals, and thinking about the subsystems as much as it means thinking about the people who we engage.

As we create change for Victoria, I do want to congratulate you, because you are steps ahead, miles ahead, of where lots of other jurisdictions in this country, but also jurisdictions globally are. Clearly you are thinking differently. This is a favourite quote of mine from Albert Einstein, he says, “The world as we have created it, is really a process - and I would add a reflection - of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.” Clearly in America this is Apple, a company that influenced six major, major fields technology all tremendously, they have as their motto Think Different. Now grammatically this is not correct, right, it should be think differently, but they’ve gotten away with it. They do dare to think different.

And I would just end with this quote from the Steve Jobs book Walter Isaacson’s definitive biography of Steve Jobs, who says, “That the people who think they can change the world are actually the ones that do.” And I would ask that you, as pioneers in changing the world, join me on this trip that we are taking to make our countries more wonderful places for children and for families.

Thank you so very, very much. I hope this has been helpful.

### George Megalogenis

It’s a long walk, sorry.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

That’s fine.

### George Megalogenis

Thank you very much for that, that was a terrific presentation.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

Thank you.

### George Megalogenis

We’re going to grab a seat now and have a bit of a conversation.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

Welcome.

### George Megalogenis

And I am going to be responding to what you presented.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

Good.

### George Megalogenis

Because you’re going to give us an early - more detail I think on that report that you mentioned.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

You can tell he’s a journalist, right.

### George Megalogenis

Yes. No. So the journalist in me just says let’s get as much of that report as we can. But I want you to describe - I want you to describe what a good system looks like, and if you’ve come across the example, and then maybe we’ll work back a step or two and figure out what you might need to add to a system to bring it to viability.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

So I try to delineate that systems really need each one of those three ovals, and that without attending to the direct services and making them of high quality, without attending to an array of services, and without attending to the infrastructure, we can’t possibly have a system.

So the reality, this is kind of hard to do, right, because you’ve got a lot of things going on at one time, and it bespeaks why our field, perhaps more than other fields, really does need to focus on collaboration and on integrating our efforts.

### George Megalogenis

It strikes me that there’s been a big sort of an expediential leap in understanding of early childhood.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

Yeah.

### George Megalogenis

And all that brain development, all the data is in and it’s been in now for about 10 or 15 years, but the systems change needs to respond to that exponential leap in knowledge is the thing we’re looking for. So it’s - there’s no habit of practice that says, that’s now responded to some of these epiphanies in the research. So maybe I’ll just get you to walk through each of the examples, ‘cause I was taken by the cultural differences in the three areas of study. Maybe start off with each of them, and pull out the best thing in each of the three, and what part of it reflects culture, and what part of it - existing culture, and what part of it reflects new thinking, and just take it in segments from Nordic to Asian and then to Anglo.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

Okay. This is hard to do because it summarises two years of work in the - - -

### George Megalogenis

Yeah. No I understand.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

- - - entire book. So I’ll do my best. I’ll do my best.

### George Megalogenis

Essentially what we’re looking for is maybe a bit more of a freeform, step by step through each of them. I don’t want you to give the book away.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

No. No. I’m happy to give the book - - -

### George Megalogenis

Yeah. If you want to.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

- - - but it’s just am I going to remember it all.

### George Megalogenis

Yeah. That’s okay. That’s okay.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

So the striking issue is that our systems, although they all have those elements and each one of these successful systems does, it plays out very differently. And I’d like to give you an example.

The notion of committing to data, in many countries, England, collecting data on young children is normative, they do it all the time. And I don’t just mean formative assessment, but I also mean looking at children’s progress over time. When you talk about that in the Nordic context, at least in Finland, they look at you like you’re crazy. Why would we ever want to collect data on young children? The purpose of early childhood is for children to grow, to explore, to have fun, that simply is not part of our ethos, it is not part of our mantra. Yes, teachers may observe, they may record the development of young children, they may keep portfolios like we do in Reggio, but the idea of collecting outcome data on young children is really almost verboten. It’s almost an insult to consider it.

The Anglo countries are somewhere in the middle. We’ve got some people, at least in the United States, who think absolutely we should could collect data in young children. And then many of us in the early childhood field are a little bit more squeamish about it.

But if I took each one of the gears I could go through an example that shows how culture influences our attitudes towards these different components. Certainly toward funding, the Nordic countries believe that children are automatically entitled to many of these services. Whereas in Singapore for example, parents are asked to pay no matter what their income, a small portion, a portion according to their income, to show that they value the early childhood service. So this is a very different idea about the relationship between a society and its obligation to children and families.

### George Megalogenis

So if you were to construct - we’re obviously in an Anglo setting.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

Yeah.

### George Megalogenis

But we’re also in an Anglo setting in a very diverse population.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

Yes.

### George Megalogenis

Australia, certainly in the south east corner, our capital cities are more Eurasian I think than Angle/European in - - -

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

Right.

### George Megalogenis

- - - terms of the change in our population mix. So if you were to take something from the Nordic example and an Asian example, how would you adapt something which you know within an Anglo culture we’d pick up? Without going too specific, you know, in advice, what do you think we’re not doing right at the moment, that we can pick up from some of these other models?

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

I feel both overjoyed by the question, and somewhat handicapped in my ability to respond to it, because I am not from Australia, - - -

### George Megalogenis

Yeah.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

- - - although I’ve spent a lot of time. And if you really do believe in culture it really then would be presumptuous of me to respond totally. But let me give you a couple of examples.

I am very, very taken with Finland’s commitment to individualising services for young children. And I believe that that speaks whether you’re dealing with a homogeneous culture or a vastly heterogeneous culture. Children vary. They vary in part because of their culture, but also because just of the developmental characteristics they bring.

So I think some notion of a stronger attention to individualisation and to helping teachers really observe young children’s behaviour, helping actually all conditions not just people who are working in classrooms, but the entire medical field, to really understand behaviour and then to try to plan for it is a takeaway that we all might learn from.

### George Megalogenis

And could I just take - I was also taken by the Singapore and Korean examples.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

Sure.

### George Megalogenis

Now these are, especially in Korea’s case which has basically been rebuilt from scratch, South Korea.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

South Korea, yes.

### George Megalogenis

Obviously we’re not talking about North Korea here mind you.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

Great. Thank you.

### George Megalogenis

The idea that they were behind, that they had to catch up and get ahead may be a cultural driver. I wonder whether you observed that, especially at the quality end what they were doing reflected, you know, recent memory of devastation?

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

Well I would say that when you are dealing with many of the Asian countries which have much of their culture rooted in Confucianism.

There is a combination of that heritage, that belief system, driving the need to excel, and to have children excel very early, that is coupled with the policies of the country that are focusing on young children. So in the case of Korea and Singapore, in part it was Confucianism in my mind, and part it was the development of the country coming together to really fuse that complete commitment to very young children.

### George Megalogenis

And you think that probably would have happened anyway without the shock of the war?

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

I think the shock of the war propelled it dramatically, and that you wouldn’t have quite so much commitment to the entire social, the enterprise of social development for economic reasons in those countries.

Having said that, I think some of the variables that influence the nature of the pedagogy are not attributable necessarily to that, but are attributable in part to Confucian culture.

### George Megalogenis

And it’s almost a big takeout point that quality centre in each of these three areas you looked at, looks different because of culture. In fact what you’re actually observing is the culture at its best, as opposed to - - -

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

Exactly.

### George Megalogenis

- - - what the best model is.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

Exactly. That indeed there really is no one best model, and there is no one country, this is actually probably important to say if I might add, there is no one country that has the system that is completely evolved, where comparatively speaking early childhood is a very new field, and we’ve just come into our own in the past 50 years. You know, we were babysitters before that time. And we have to remember that. So we are about creating these structures and building them step by step by step.

### George Megalogenis

Now, look in the room of course, there’s probably a lot of original thought in this room. But you did mention in your presentation that up until this point the sector has been satisfied with little baby steps. And I must apologise, not so much for being, but because the job of caring for children is so important, you almost don’t want to do the other stuff which is getting the politics, or just rattle the cage. So, there needs to be a step change in their thinking. Maybe illustrate - did you see any examples in the report where other societies have gone we’re going to do it, and it’s a grass-roots thing rather than the top-down thing?

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

In most of the societies where there has been recent change, there have been grass-roots movements that have propelled it upward.

And I would think that is particularly true in the Anglo countries. It is embedded into the DNA of Finland, so perhaps less so. And it is individuals working on behalf, not only of their own children, but individuals joining in constituencies that are well mobilised with the intention of improving policy. So in many of these countries advocacy training for families is quite usual or it’s quite the norm, helping people become public advocates on behalf of young children is normative, engaging business and industry is also normative. That’s not really necessary in some of the other countries that have this commitment from the get-go.

### George Megalogenis

And, we’re almost out of time, but I do want to ask a question about parents. And most school principals will tell you, primary schools and certainly secondary school, that the parents are not so much in their faces, but a little more active in those years. But they’re not active at the start, and in fact maybe they’re a bit bamboozled by the responsibility of this new life. How would you get parents almost to bring forward the engagement, ‘cause that’s really what it’s doing? It’s not suggesting that parents aren’t engaged at any time at all, it’s just that they, and certainly in Australia, I think it’s fair to say that it sort of switches on once you handover a child to a primary school.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

I actually did my dissertation on this just a few years ago, no I’m kidding, many years ago.

### George Megalogenis

Thank you.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

But the real - - -

### George Megalogenis

It’s one of the reasons why, so you can freshen up.

*Sharon Lynn Kagan*

Yeah. That’s great. The reality is that, if we look at the developmental trajectory of a child, they are most dependent on parents in their earliest years, in the earliest months of life totally dependent, and then gradually that ebbs. So, some of the fading away of parent engagement, as children mature into primary school, must be regarded as normative, and as developmentally appropriate.

And indeed, how we consider parent engagement may change. It may not be being involved in the school or in the facility, and certainly given parent’s complex lives now that is much more challenged, but indeed it may be being involved in the dyadic educational support of relationship of an individual parent to his or her children.

So I do think it’s a complex question that needs a 21st century response, but housed within everything we’ve learned about development over history, that some of this is not inappropriate.

### George Megalogenis

Yeah. It’s almost a dozen takeout messages because it was such a terrific presentation, but the focus on the parent and maybe, say re-education, maybe bringing them into the story earlier is part of the, I think, the community engagement. We might need to look forward to building a better system.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

It is one of the gears. Just - - -

### George Megalogenis

It’s certainly one thing, yes.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

- - - an important one.

### George Megalogenis

Thank you very much. I just see all zeros now on the time clock which means we’re out of time.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

I guess we have to end. Thank you. Your questions were provocative and perfect. Thanks.

### George Megalogenis

I really appreciate your time.

### Sharon Lynn Kagan

Thanks everybody.

### George Megalogenis

I’ll have to go back and do some housekeeping.