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Hybridity: A Theory of Agency in Early Childhood Governance

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Abstract: Contemporary social science research concerning governance tends to take an institutional perspective that privileges structural analysis. The resulting body of literature has an emphasis on classification, typologies and regimes. This approach has been criticized on the basis that it neglects the role of agency and context when research concerns complex and heterogeneous community governance cases. An emerging literature on hybridity in social services aims to address the limitations of structural accounts by acknowledging that diverse logics, ideas, and norms influence the way community based social services resist or adapt in turbulent policy environments. This article considers the strengths and limitations of hybridity in development of a research framework incorporating structure, agency and ideas. The relevance of hybridity theory for the Kids in Communities study—an Australian research project investigating neighborhood influences on child development across multiple case study sites—is evaluated.

Keywords: governance; hybridity; early childhood; social services

1. Introduction

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recently released its fourth report into quality in early childhood education and care—Starting Strong IV—with the starting line that “Early childhood education and care (ECEC) remains high on the policy agenda in many OECD countries” ([1], p. 13). The interest in early childhood across liberal economies has been prompted by a comprehensive body of research about the impact of early childhood experiences for the life course [2–6]. In Australia, the early childhood sector involves a multitude of complex and often historical governance and service arrangements and is currently the subject of significant policy interest and reform. A key initiative has been delivery of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) in 2009, 2012 and 2015. The AEDC is a population measure of early child development, collected on school entry involving a teacher-completed checklist for all children in the first year of school. Results are reported at the neighborhood level across five developmental domains and are intended for use by all levels of government and community to inform policy and practice [1].

Overall, the AEDC data conform with expected patterns between neighborhood demographics and child development outcomes [7]. However, small area data facilitates identification of outlier communities where children are faring better or worse than expected compared with the population socio-demographic profile [8]. The Kids in Communities Study (KICS) aims to investigate these neighborhoods. *Governance* and *services* are two of the five socio-environmental factors (or domains) hypothesized as influencing child development for the purposes of the KICS research [9]. The governance domain considers contextual and local governance factors and the service domain considers quality, access and participation. The KICS research will ultimately be shared amongst

communities, local governments and policy makers to inform policy and for use in measuring and improving child development outcomes.

This paper focuses on the intersection of governance and service factors, aiming to draw together data “in order to investigate, or to identify, key factors that seem to have some bearing on an outcome of interest” ([10], p. 70). It is hypothesized that local governance is a factor influencing service quality and access in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and that this, in turn, has a bearing on child outcomes. A multi-case approach has been selected to consider the hypothesis. Cases have been selected on the basis that outliers may provide theoretical insights that are useful for policy in light of the large-*N* analysis of the population data [11,12].

This paper aims to describe the governance of ECEC services in Australia, specifically in the state of Victoria, and reflect on options for guiding the research approach in case communities. In order to provide insight on the intersection of the governance and service factors, a robust framework for research into community governance is required. The framework needs to accommodate the complexity and heterogeneity of the governance and service factors in the reform environment. The paper aims to consider the strengths and limitations of three waves of governance theory and the relevance of the alternative provided by the emerging hybridity approach when it comes to researching governance of ECEC services in a complex policy environment.

The paper concludes with a suggested framework for research that draws heavily on hybridity as a way of resolving tension between structural and agential accounts where there is dynamic interaction between markets, hierarchies, and networks, and the development of unique third sector arrangements to manage competing logics in social service delivery.

2. Policy Context: Early Childhood Education and Care in Victoria

In Victoria, ECEC is delivered in a range of formats, funded by federal, state and local levels of government and provided by a plurality of organizations involving cooperatives, associations, church groups, local government, private schools, public schools and small owner-operated and large corporate for-profit organizations. The sector is highly heterogeneous, involving a diverse range of service-based, advocacy, professional and member organizations. There are two key funding formats for early years: long day care with a focus on education and care that supports workforce participation; and kindergarten (also known as preschool) with a focus on educative programs in the year before school. The core funding for participation comes from federal and state government and is directed to accredited services through a family entitlement. Where other funding is provided (e.g., for capital works) this is often only available to not for profit cooperatives and associations.

There are over 1200 services in Victoria whose primary mode of service is long day care and a similar number with the primary mode of kindergarten, operators of these services vary in size from providing one service to 173 services [13]. Across Australia, the bulk of ECEC operators (83%) provide only one service [14]. Nearly all ECEC services receive the bulk of their total revenue from governments and this poses interesting questions for complexity and the levels of “public-ness” and “market-ness” across the for-profit and not-for-profit providers in the sector [15].

Kindergartens—particularly those in established urban areas—often have a history dating back many decades, are run by parent committees and benefit from cash or in-kind contributions from local government. Many services were formed in response to perceived welfare needs in the early part of the 20th century or post-war period, and the sector has a strong professional identity. Since the early 2000s, Kindergarten Cluster Management—where Victorian government funding is provided for group employment and management arrangements—is available in recognition of the complexity and resource constraints facing Kindergarten parent committees.

Long day care settings also have a strong tradition of community management, mainly dating from the 1970s when federal funding programs were available to not-for-profit services only. Commercial providers entered the long day care sector in large numbers from 1991 when federal arrangements shifted to demand based funding directed to services through family entitlements. The funding

model—which guarantees funding for well over 50% of service costs in advance of providing the service—proved attractive to commercial providers and the number of for-profit providers has grown rapidly since this time [16].

The early 2000s saw a significant expansion of services, dominated by a single corporate provider and this raised concerns about vertical fragmentation, quality, expenditure of public funds and equitable supply emerged [16,17]. These concerns were accompanied by a highly effective narrative about the importance of the early years for brain development and the economic benefit of investing in quality services [2]. In Australia, this was disseminated by influential medical professionals [18] and dovetailed with the government's focus on productivity and female workforce participation. Two key sets of reforms emerged as a result.

The first involved major place-based programs involving cross-sector collaboration and some devolved resource allocation responsibilities. The AEDC was piloted during this time and provided many communities with access to data to engage stakeholders and support decision-making [19]. The second set of reforms addressed fragmentation with legislative changes introducing consistent curriculum, professional, quality and regulatory standards across the range of ECEC settings and jurisdictions in Australia [20,21]. A key development of the reforms was the creation of the statutory Australian Children's Education and Care Authority (ACECQA) governed by a ministerial council appointed board tasked with implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF). The reforms have created tensions between those that privilege the social justice and child rights perspectives over the economic and productivity perspectives that have been attractive to governments [18,22,23] but are generally agreed to be "bold" and "ambitious" and to raise the bar on access and quality ([24], p. 223).

An outcome of the reforms has been a significant increase in participation and cost and in 2013, the newly appointed Abbott government commissioned a Productivity Commission inquiry into childcare and early learning. The Commission reported in 2015 and the government responded with a "families package". To be implemented from 2017, the package has been criticized for further eroding the idea of ECEC as a community service [25].

Recent reforms in early childhood policy in Australia bring together a range of political, economic and social influences and are the result of a complex interplay of events, relationships, influence and timing [18,26]. From a supra-national perspective, the path to service reform in Australia is unique, the focus has been on quality assurance and there has been a significant investment in measuring child outcomes with the AEDC, but Australia is one of only a handful of OECD nations where there is no statutory entitlement to either a place or free access to early care and education programs before school entry [1].

In communities, ECEC governance has often developed in distinct ways in order to meet specific local needs, and, where they exist, these local models have been both adaptive and resilient in the changing commercial, social and economic environment. The result is a sector that is a mix of interdependent state and non-state arrangements and multi-level governance incorporating membership, advocacy, special interest and professional organizations. Within the sector, there is great diversity, but independent private providers share many qualities with small not-for-profit and community-based providers [16], similarly large not for profit providers and cluster managers may have more in common with corporate providers. All of the organizations have experienced radical change in their operating environments over many years and have adapted in ways that make the traditional classifications of community, market, corporate and hierarchy inadequate. They are influenced by the hierarchical regulatory arrangements, by market arrangements and by their unique history and the communities that use them as well as by each other.

This brief summary of the governance environment for ECEC is intended to provide an introduction to the complexity of community level research given the complex multi-level environment and shifting policy arrangements. The next section considers the relevance of mainstream approaches to governance research in this environment.

3. Governance Research

Governance—a term that has been labeled “promiscuous” and “capacious” [27,28]—is used to describe a shift from centralized to more diffused forms of state power. As well as being loosely defined, a range of terms are related and often used in substitute for one another—for example networks, participation, collaboration, co-production, community decision making. Despite the muddy language, it is generally accepted that key characteristics of governance are “the interdependence of state and non-state actors and institutions in meeting contemporary public policy challenges” ([29], p. 162) and “the exercise of power and the practice of decision making in collective contexts” ([10], p. 68).

Instrumentally, the aim of network governance is to deliver effective decisions and efficient services that reflect the interests of those who participate, but verifying this is challenging with empirical evidence rarely distinguished from “a host of normative assumptions . . . embedded in accounts of the benefits of participation” ([30], p. 5).

In response to the complexity of governance research, three “governance schools” have emerged. The first and second of these “waves” focus on institutional–structural analysis regarding the relationship between the policy outcomes and network structures from two contrasting perspectives. The first, which proposed a fundamental shift from government to governance is focused on autonomy in network arrangements independent of markets and hierarchy. The second waves “brings the state back in” and challenges the assumption of a “hollowed out” state with a focus on the changing nature of the “state-society” relationships ([31], pp. 20–22). The third, interpretive perspective, aims to address the limited focus on agency [32].

The Anglo- or first wave governance school assumes a “radical shift from post new public management to network forms of governance” ([33], p. 276) as an alternative to markets and hierarchies. In this approach the focus is on a differentiated polity where the state is hollowed out—replaced by independent, self-organizing networks, with power and influence situated in markets, arm’s length agencies and international organizations [34]. The positivist orientation of this school views networks as fixed structures, blurs the distinction between state and society and see actors as rational and motivated by rewards and incentives. The focus of first wave research is on “macro-level questions about the changing role of the state and state-society relations” ([32], p. 196). The network governance approach that accompanies this school assumes “contemporary governance involves negotiations within and between networks, rather than the assertion of authority by government” ([35], p. 35). This shift is contested and “the lack of concern for agency is a well-known criticism of institutionalist approaches” ([33], p. 278) because, as with most institutionalist approaches, it takes a “highly constrained view of agency” based on a “determinist view about the extent to which institutions shape agents” ([36], p. 883).

The second wave of governance theory or the meta-governance school shifts the focus from institutions to structures or from the vertical to the horizontal, this school maintains that while the certainty of traditional hierarchical approaches is lost under governance, the state continues to access policy instruments and wield significant influence to maintain a steering role and dictate “the rules of the game” ([31], pp. 18–19). The focus of research is on concerns of democracy and accountability including the role of interest networks and inclusion and exclusion of actors in networks. In this school, “policy outputs...are the result of actors within structural locations making choices from a range of structurally determined options” ([32], p. 199).

The limitations of the policy network analysis approach that accompanies the second wave concern the lack of “an adequate theory of agency: it is not clear how we explain the role of actors when structures are given such dominance” ([37], p. 762), and “that it does not, and cannot, explain change” [34]. The significance of context may be lost and conclusions drawn without reference to political institutions and norms, for example, “conclusions from research in societies whose governmental norms are consensual is utilized in work on countries with more antagonistic cultures” ([38], p. 605). This approach emphasizes the instrumental contribution of governance,

builds patterns and orders that might be difficult to relate to from everyday experience, glosses over the differences between different state structures and struggles to explain change [36].

Emerging from the limitations of the first and second waves, the third wave of governance theory is associated with an “interpretive turn” that is “decentred” and “actor focused” ([34], pp. 1244, 1249). This wave proposes governance can be neither “achieved” nor “mastered” and is not characterized by essential or generalizable properties that transcend the environment in which they arise ([31], pp. 20–22). The third wave of research sees governance as consisting of “contingent practices emerging from different beliefs” ([32], p. 197) and shifts away from the state to focus on individuals, meaning, practices, ideas and games. This approach is associated with constructivist, qualitative and ethnographic approaches to research.

What Are the Problems with These Approaches?

The first and second wave approaches both share a stake in modern empiricism and positivist rational choice approaches, which have led research to “shoehorn” governance cases into categories, potentially confusing ideal types or regimes and the observable characteristics of governance, not to mention as Rhodes does, that these “typologies of networks have become deeply uninteresting” ([34], p. 1249). The critiques of these mainstream approaches tend to concern the inability to explain change; account for the complexity and dynamic permanence of arrangements that don’t fit within the hierarchy, network, market triptych; and accommodate questions of agency.

On the other end of the analytical spectrum is the critique that the alternative interpretive approaches rely on agency and discourse at the expense of structure [32,35]. Williams argues that the waves have falsely set structure and agency up as “oppositional” ([39], p. 24) and led to concerns of ontological inconsistencies when it comes to the treatment of social structure, tradition, power and inequality ([32], p. 198). Fawcett and Daujberg ([32], p. 196) suggest the potential for a critical realist approach to address criticisms about the analytical focus on structure.

Hybridity has emerged as an alternative to third wave governance theory. This approach rejects the anti-foundationalist view of the state as hollowed out but incorporates agency and a dynamic relationship between state and society. Associated with this approach is the idea that if “appropriate forms of governance evolve and are performed through the interaction between actors and their context” ([40], p. 125), then there is a need for approaches that: acknowledge the “relational politics of governance” ([41], p. 3); release us from the idea that governance arrangements fit into neat categorizations and universal descriptors [42]; provide a “process-oriented stream of research” ([43], p. 176); accommodate a dynamic and evolving view of the polity; and build on a “convergence between political science and organizational studies” ([34], p. 1258).

4. Conceptualizing Hybridity

In the social sciences, hybrids are arrangements that “mix elements from . . . ideal-typical domains” of communities, markets and hierarchies. They are “problematic” arrangements when it comes to research because it is their difference rather than their similarity that brings them together ([44], p. 750).

There are two broad categories of hybrids discussed in the literature, one has emerged as a direct result of the differentiated polity, fragmentation and hollowing out of the state associated with NPM. This includes the privatization of formerly nationalized industries and the creation of quasi-autonomous government organizations [33], operating at arm’s length from government, often according to market principles but with regulatory authority or a certain legitimacy regarding (perceived) ties with government. The other is described as a “novel steering mechanism” and involves the “third sector” in a “proliferation of multiple organization networks for delivering public and private goods and services” that challenge the “dichotomy of public/private” ([15], p. 217).

“Hybrid organizations are multifunctional entities combining different tasks, values and organizational forms. They are composite and compounded arrangements that are

combining partly inconsistent considerations producing difficult and unstable trade-offs and lasting tensions". ([45], p. 410)

Analytical approaches to hybrids have tended to view them as fixed structures [15] but more recent literature has shifted from the hybrid hierarchy/market form taken by quasi-government organizations to an interest in the third sector, not for profits and social services. A body of literature has emerged that considers the concept of hybridity to be "under-theorized" and advocates an approach that is more dynamic in acknowledging the plurality of rationalities facing the third sector [42,46]. More recent theory has a focus on social services characterized by interactions between government, business, civil society and not-for-profits. The resulting hybrids have been described as an "inevitable feature of the public sector" and more "chameleons" than "griffins" [44]—that is, their critical characteristic is that they are adaptive to their environment and this leads them to be further described as a "process" and a "kind of coping strategy" [47].

Hybridity in public administration refers to "heterogeneous arrangements, characterized by mixtures of pure and incongruous origins, (ideal) types, 'cultures', 'coordination mechanisms', 'rationalities', or 'action logics'" ([44], p. 750). The key to current thinking is an 'institutional logic perspective', a "meta-theoretical framework for analyzing interrelationships among institutions, individuals and organizations in social systems" ([48], p. 2). It is proposed that this framework has the potential to guide research in multi-level analysis by accommodating the dynamic relationship between individuals, professional groups, organizations and institutions [33,46,49,50].

Friedland and Alford (1991) are credited with initiating the institutional logic approach in response to the perceived limitations of theory regarding the influence of culture and symbols, and contextually parsimonious statements about institutions and institutional behavior. Friedland and Alford describe the "notion of institutional contradiction" as "vital" to meaningful social analysis and argue that institutional logic addresses concerns of theoretical blind spots and "unmapped territory" that appears in pluralist, managerialist and class-theory approaches ([50], p. 241).

Institutional logic nests individuals as agents within systems of organizations and institutions. This perspective—which has traces of Brofenbrenner's [51] ecological systems approach—theoretically constructs the "symbolic world" at the "institutional level" and reconceptualizes institutions as "simultaneously material and ideal, systems of signs and symbols, rational and transrational" ([50], pp. 242–43). Institutional logics—which are named as capitalism, the state, democracy, family, religion and science—are described as "symbolically grounded, organizationally structured, politically defended, technically and materially constrained" as well as being temporally bound ([50], pp. 248–49).

"Rejecting both individualistic, rational choice theories and macro structural perspectives, they [Friedland and Alford] hypothesized that each of the institutional orders has a central logic that guides its organizing principles and provides social actors with vocabularies of motive and a sense of self". ([49], p. 101)

The institutional logics perspective provides a foundation for three governance configurations: market, hierarchy, and hybrid as an intermediate form [52], although Brandsen, van de Donk and Putters [44] include the informal configuration of family and community in their conceptualization. In theoretical terms, hybrids trade off the price incentives and actor autonomy of market governance for the administrative control and coordination provided by hierarchy and are formal, in contrast to families and communities. Embedded in this understanding is that the hybrid category is capacious, involving a broad spectrum of formal arrangements that are not pure market or pure hierarchy [53].

Agency is fundamental to the hybridity framework because agency is the mechanism for organizational adaptation and resistance, subject to the alternative meanings provided by multiple institutional logics. The implication is that governance is developmental and iterative and comes about as a result of forces exerted by both individuals and institutions. This analytical understanding

enables organizations to “conform or deviate from established patterns” and addresses the limitations of governmentality by maintaining that individuals have the agency to “manipulate or reinterpret symbols and practices” ([50], pp. 244, 254) and therefore to internalize and conform to institutional power or to resist change and exert influence.

Hybridity is a useful way to understand social services such as ECEC because “hybridity typically refers to the complex organizational forms that arise as voluntary, charitable, and community organizations confront differentiated task, legitimacy, or resource environments” ([46], p. 433). As discussed above, ECEC services are a diverse and ambiguous mix of state, markets and civil society, this mix of services exerts dynamic influences on each other and distinctions between profit and not for profit providers can become blurred—a quality evident across fields such as health, education and housing [44,54]. Social services embedded in local communities challenge structural analytical approaches because they imply a “world of situated actors whose agency is enabled and constrained by the prevailing institutional logic and who creatively respond by adapting organizational forms to fit the complex environment” ([46], pp. 437, 439).

“The identification of distinct governance logics is one way of making analytical sense of this diversity whilst recognizing that evolving governance practices may form more context-specific configurations that blend elements of such logics.” ([43], p. 177)

How Can Hybridity Tackle Some of the Complexities of Social Services Such as ECEC?

In Australia, ECEC services are subject to distinct governance arrangements, and, despite the current policy interest, there is little social science literature regarding the unique governance environment and mix of provision [55]. The KICS project provides the opportunity to undertake community level research to make sense of local governance and service arrangements and the implications for current and emerging policy priorities. This may include tensions between perceptions of rights, productivity, and quality and child outcomes, particularly in light of contrasting policy approaches in other liberal economies such as New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom.

The logics or steering mechanisms of ECEC are described by Brennan *et al.* ([55], p. 378) as:

“the logic of market provision concerned with profit-seeking through competition; the logic of state provision to meet citizen’s social rights operating through formal/public institutions and state bureaucracies; the logic of associations working through formal/private/non-profit bodies whose rules originate in ethical norms and codes; and the logic of informal, private family provision whose rules and practices are embedded in moral/personal obligation and emotional/social relations.”

Recent reform in ECEC in Australia also raises the relevance of professional logics [56], particularly their dynamic influence as the sector becomes more highly professionalized as a result of the NQF reforms.

In building a research framework to accommodate change and difference rather than structure and similarity and the relative influence of diverse institutional logics in development of dynamic hybrid forms according to the environment, Denis, Ferlie and Van Gestel [33] offer four “theoretical prisms”. These encourage research to “move beyond structural hybridity” and incorporate a dynamic approach that balances micro-, meso- and macro-level approaches and incorporates an integrative multilevel and multi-actor perspective. This approach encourages examination of structures and governance forms and organizational design; institutional dynamics and context; and identities—roles, work practices; and agency and practices.

In addition to these four “theoretical prisms”, Skelcher and Smith [46] offer four contextual variables: normative strength; actor identity; value commitment; and environmental turbulence. These variables can help understand unique organizational responses and illuminate trade-offs, adaptations and blockages based on the internal or external environment. The result is that there may be unique expressions of hybridity—“the subjective appreciation of the normative strength of

plural institutional logics in a particular context is an important determinant of an organization’s response” ([46], p. 445). This understanding leads them to propose five types of organizational hybridity for non-profits—segmented, segregated, assimilated, blended, and blocked [46]. These typologies feel relevant to the mixed arrangements for ECEC and the need for an approach that can support qualitatively diverse governance arrangements across the selected cases for KICS research.

Given that the ECEC sector in Australia is characterized by a range of actors in a dynamic value laden environment which is subject to multiple logics and tensions that may be geographically and temporally specific, these contributions appear more attractive for community case research than the alternative structural approaches. The ethnographic and contextual research methodologies suggested by a hybridity approach are consistent with the selection of geographic cases for the KICS research on the basis of empirical data and acknowledgement that there may be fixed and variable governance factors across the cases.

In order to inform community multi-case research on governance in ECEC services in cases selected on the basis of early child development data, a framework based on the integrative multi-level and multi-actor perspective generated by Denis *et al.* [33] and incorporating the variables offered by Skelcher and Smith [46] is proposed. This framework is presented in Table 1 with suggested questions and methods.

Table 1. Theoretical perspectives, questions and methods to interrogate hybridity in kids in communities study (KICS) research.

Theoretical Perspective	Theory (and Level)	What Questions do We Need to Ask to Acquire Relevant Knowledge?	Suggested Methods for KICS Research
Structures or governance forms	Governance theory (Meso)	What are the modes of governance? Who is involved? What is their involvement? What is the mix of governance arrangements? What are the accountability and organisational patterns?	Policy analysis Sector profiles Local profiles Analysis of outcome and quality data
Institutional dynamics	New institutionalism (Macro)	What are the underpinning logics, values and ideology? Do some logics dominate? What are the dynamics of hybridity? Are there ongoing inconsistencies and tensions likely to lead to further change? Is there sedimentation and co-existence of diverse logics? Have archetypes or novel approaches emerged in response to uncertainty or “common enemies”? Are there ongoing cycles of temporary settlement?	Historical analysis Policy analysis Document analysis Elite interviews
Roles and identities	Identity perspective (Micro)	What norms and meaning are assigned to actors in the sector? Are there changing identities? Who is included/excluded? Are there common modes of perception? What are the different identities and narratives? Do professionals engage in active adaptation/ resistance? What language and metaphors are used? What stories are told?	Elite interviews Local document analysis Local stakeholder interviews
Agency and practice	Actor network theory (ANT) (Micro)	What are the norms and local stories—who is involved, what do they say, is history important? What is the role of ethical norms and codes? What values, beliefs and meanings are assigned to actors and guide local participation? Are values permanent or shifting, how are values employed in light of “environmental turbulence” How are contradictions overcome? Are “technologies” employed to hear local voices? Do local networks produce hybrids in action?	Local document analysis Local stakeholder interviews

Adapted from [33,46].

This table provides a framework for the approach to the research and an overview of possible questions and techniques to interrogate and analyze governance of ECEC services in the KICS case communities where difference and dynamic adaptation is an expected outcome. This framework spans

quantitative and qualitative data and accommodates questions of structure and agency as well as conflicting ideas, considerations, demands, structures and cultural elements.

It is anticipated that the framework would provide the basis for questions exploring reforms over the last decade and the complex negotiations that accompany reforms as well as the extent to which macro-narratives are acceptable and can be tailored to the local context. It would be expected that this approach would draw out historical and embedded norms and values, complex sedimentation or layering of structural and cultural features and the extent to which local culture, professional engagement and citizen participation are associated with stable or unstable, coherent or incoherent, shallow or deep hybrids.

Recently, literature on hybrids has shifted to address the question of how public administrators can “better engage with hybridity as a normal part of everyday practice, rather than to see it as a problem to be overcome” ([53], p. 22). However, this is a complex task, because while the “concept of institutional logics is intuitively attractive, it is arguably difficult to define and . . . apply in an analytically useful manner” ([48], p. 1) especially while the concept of “hybridity” within public administration scholarship remains undeveloped [33]. However, while there are some concerns that there is a gap between the theoretical approach and accepted functions of scholarship and policy advice [53], it provides a framework that supports the collection and analysis of nuanced and contextual data and accommodates mixed methods approaches.

“Hybridity as a transgression of institutional boundaries is thus also intimately connected with hybridity as the construction of a knowledge regime in which every-day, personal and experiential data is valued as much as that collected through quantitative surveys”. ([53], p. 19)

The approach to community case research suggested by the “theoretical prisms” and “variables” suggested by Denis, Ferlie and Van Gestel [33] and Skelcher and Smith [46] provides the potential to contribute to knowledge about the interaction of structure and agency in the development of policy, community action and examples of hybridity in practice in the complex and mixed market environment of ECEC governance and services in Australia and contribute to the goals of the KICS project.

5. Conclusions

This article briefly describes the Kids in Communities (KICS) project and the population level data from which case communities have been selected, on the basis that child outcomes deviate from expected patterns. Two of the five socio-environmental factors (or domains) hypothesized as influencing child development for the purposes of the KICS research are described as governance and services.

An outline of the environment in which ECEC governance and service factors interact establishes the complexity and changing shape of the ECEC sector and the historical background and competing logics that have influenced the temporal governance and service arrangements. When considered from a public policy perspective, the sector has followed pathways from benevolent welfare in the first half of the 20th century, centralized planning and funding for not-for-profits in 1970s and 1980s, a shift to demand based funding and market principles in the 1990s, continuing with more hierarchical levers to encourage equitable participation and address issues of fragmentation and accountability in the 21st century. Prospective policy changes and supra-national interest indicate turbulence in this environment is set to continue for some time.

A brief critical review of three waves of governance theory demonstrates that governance scholarship has shifted over time from a focus on structures and the empirical descriptors and typologies of positivist epistemology to decentred accounts with a focus on symbols, values and beliefs. The third wave approach and interpretive methodology provides a useful basis for capturing local knowledge and meaning, but this approach raises methodological concerns for KICS case study analysis. The KICS research aims to examine and identify both common and unique factors that have

a bearing on outcomes so they may be shared amongst communities, local governments and policy makers to inform policy and for use in measuring and improving child development outcomes.

The analytical approach provided by hybridity provides a framework that may overcome some of the limitations of structural and interpretive approaches by conceiving the ECEC sector as simultaneously embedded in local individuals, groups, organizations and networks and driven by macro-transformations, economic shifts, and institutional expectations. The framework and questions can accommodate unique and dynamic local governance in the ECEC sector. It enables the co-existence of hierarchical control exerted by the funding and regulatory environment, dynamic interaction between markets, networks and hierarchies and the influence of multiple competing logics that may be expressed in locally unique ways.

On this basis, a hybridity framework has the potential to be valuable for a community study where there is a balance to be struck between micro, meso and macro factors in a constantly shifting service and governance environment. This approach will inform qualitative approaches in the KICS research, and results will be analyzed to consider common factors in case communities and the relevance of the approach for future research, policy and child development outcomes. The KICS project will report on findings in 2016.

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