

## Submission to the Productivity Commission

### Assessment and Rating

As an early years educator and owner of multiple centres, having been in the sector for decades, I wish to express my concern for the current process of assessment and ratings by the Department of Education.

I have always supported and advocated for a fair and equitable assessment process; defending it with pride. I am a passionate, warm, emotional and skilled early childhood teacher and wear many hats and honourable titles with passion and pride. Not only do I advocate for children and quality, but I am an experienced and dedicated provider, director and teacher of a family-owned centre that has stood the test of time.

It is important that I describe what it is like to be an educator working in early childhood at this current time. No longer are we seeing our valuable sector being lifted; instead, we are seeing centres, including my own, demoralised by what was once deemed the exceptional benchmark of standards and quality in early childhood.

I must emphasise that up until recently, I respected the assessment process as a necessity of quality assurance.

However, I see the pain and suffering of my peers as inspirational centres are not being rewarded with a rating that is a true reflection of their quality practice. I see teachers who put their heart and soul into what they do, only to be given one comment that can bring the whole process down. I have seen centres receive their report back after more than three months due to the assessor failing to view their evidence. I also see many first-tier reviews.

The assessment and rating process is inconsistent and does not lend itself to the children being the top priority. It is about paperwork and documentation to prove the worthiness of educators and their ability to complete it, rather than the care, nurture and education of the children.

I see those who were once hard-working, dedicated, caring teachers now lose their passion and drive to instead police a system of bureaucracy. I see that system neglecting to put children first. I hear officers unable to answer questions relating to their knowledge of quality practices.

It is difficult to respect a policy that underwrites our assessment and rating process when decisions are made without any forethought or evidence.

I see that policy and question the fairness of its ability to uphold the standards.

To give you some perspective, I have estimated that the cost of manpower to process this laborious task of justifying our early childhood practices to easily be the equivalent of a teacher and an office assistant's annual salary.

## **Of the Policy**

The Department of Education has recently changed its process to give centres 5 days' notice of when they will assess and review. This, and the many other decisions the Department make, are not in the best interests of children. As educators, at the forefront of our minds should be the children, not the stress and time taken away from them to focus on assessment and rating and everything associated with that.

Additionally, the Assessment and Rating Policy, 2021, states that there are no requirements relating to the selection of or how often a service must be reviewed. For example, we can be rated three times in one year, while the centre down the road has not been through the assessment and ratings process since 2017. The Department goes on to explain that its guiding principles are open-ended, leading to ambiguity and uncertainty. Page 5 offers the rationale for its logic is based on risk assessment and algorithms. However, how is this possible when they are not logical or timed consistently?

## **Of the Process**

The process of assessment and rating is multi-faceted and one that involves all stakeholders, occurring cyclically. This collaborative approach ensures that everyone can be involved in the self-reflection, quality improvement plan, policy updates, professional development, appraisals, reconciliation action plans and review of the overall principles.

I recently called ACEQA to ask what their definition of Assessment and Rating was, and they were unable to tell me.

My definition stems back to when "Accreditation" was run by NCAC. Life was simple and the ethos and integrity of the process were ethical. For me, Assessment and Rating is a process whereby an independent and suitably qualified person assesses you against a set of prescribed standards. You are awarded a specific rating based on a set of objective indicators. It is a collaborative process of continuous improvement where all stakeholders, including educators, families and the wider community, are consulted. It is an ongoing cycle of observation, planning and facilitating quality improvement.

Unfortunately, while this is what it should be in theory, in practice it is vastly different.

When there are such inconsistencies in the execution of the policy, it is impossible for the process to be fair. The difference between awarding an exceeding rating and working towards is the skill of the assessor to observe and sign evidence. It is, again, ambiguous and open to bias. From my own experience and knowledge, the disparities between the standards and what the assessors are actually looking for on the day of the visit are huge.

It seems to depend on which assessor you have and how they interpret the standards and their own personal expectations.

The process itself is consuming and quite literally eats away at the integrity and heart of the most respected and upstanding members of the education community. It erodes much of the goodness that we do each day. Just collating the documentation and writing an up-to-date report takes six weeks.

The previous system clearly stated the exact periods of time with certificates, including the next due date.

I am lucky enough to work for myself, so when this process occurs, my centre will close for five days to prepare for the process.

We require a clear and set timeline with specific measured dates of the rating period and adequate notice. Currently, there is no respect shown to our teams, with staff booking time off and the other responsibilities we have. A total overhaul and review of the process is needed. It is all about proving what we say with evidence and respect for the job that we do.

It troubles me to think about what the future holds in five years for our children. Will there be enough educators and centres to care for and educate children? This demoralisation of the sector needs to be urgently addressed because, without us, there will be no system and no centres.

In order for this process to be equitable, there must be an investigation into its integrity and the impact it has on the emotional wellbeing of our educators, the children and their families.

### **Conclusion**

As an approved provider of a high-quality early learning centre and as a passionate early childhood teacher and advocate for children, it is time to give the commission a practical and honest, heartfelt submission that tells the story of early childhood education from that professional perspective.

The whole process must be ethically addressed with care and consideration.

The erosion and disillusionment of a beautiful profession and once committed and skilled workforce is beyond awful. This, in my eyes is due to the over cumbersome workload of regulatory compliance.

It has taken skilled early childhood teachers off the floor to maintain the systems that underpin quality. I am sure that if trained teachers could return to the children and classroom with realistic workloads, it would reinvigorate the much-needed morale of the sector.

Early Childhood Teachers and early childhood personnel do not need to be micromanaged by an unrealistic set of standards that continues to drain us of our everyday morale and essence of who we are.

It would be an interesting exercise to investigate the statistics from 2012 to 2023 to really see the benefits of the NQS in terms of quality, of engagement in learning and learning difficulties to measure the real benefits of an expanded framework.

If we do not have educators and teachers to teach then what sort of future will our children have?

The complacency of the sector leads to its own demise.

## Submission to the Productivity Commission

In relation to “**developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school,**” I would like to make the following points.

There is no doubt that the role of early childhood services is to nurture, care and educate children. However, it is this element of education that appears to have some ambiguity around it.

The notion of learning through play is well established and a fundamental aspect of early years education and there appears to be a lack of connection between this pedagogy and how this transitions into primary education.

A 2019 study undertaken by Parker and Thomsen<sup>[1]</sup> reported that primary schools do not understand the significance of this pedagogy. As a result, they are “currently missing from the landscape of education research, policy, and practice,” and is the reason that primary schools do not use playful pedagogies.

Parker, Thomsen and Berry (2022)<sup>[2]</sup> describe a number of challenges that are barriers to primary school education. These include,

- The role of learning through play in a primary school setting is unclear since there is no precise definition. If teachers do not understand what quality play-based learning looks like, both their and their students’ outcomes will vary. As a result, if it cannot be effectively or reliably measured, then it is unlikely to have any emphasis placed upon it.
- Extending from this is the challenge that there is no agreement on the intended outcomes of playbased learning. Pyle et al., (2017)<sup>[3]</sup> states that the education sector relies on evidence-based practices to inform the academic outcomes, which can be difficult for learning through play. Literacy and numeracy developmental outcomes are favoured since they are easier to assess.
- If teachers cannot confidently work within play-based curriculums, then they may resist to utilise them, despite the evidence proving it as a successful means of learning. Parker et al suggests that while play is not necessarily deemed as being effective in marrying up learning outcomes, they suggest that there is a need for “stakeholders at all levels - research, policy, system and school - to contribute to the collective decision-making about the outcomes they are pursuing, how to best facilitate those outcomes within the different contexts of the education system and how to reliably measure those

outcomes.”

- There is disparity between how policies are made and how they are implemented. Parker and Thomsen (2019) refer to the OECD’s 2017 study, “Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education.” They note that “schools should be ready for children, not children ready for school,” insinuating that schools should accept children in any way they are ready to learn to expand learning goals that support quality play experiences.

Being school-ready often falls to the parents to choose whether they believe their child is ready. There are many factors that help determine this choice, including social and emotional maturity, age, and other socio-economic aspects. As early years educators we insist that school readiness is not about the ability to read or write, but to be emotionally ready. This means that they can cope with social situations, turn taking, sharing, care for their own belongings as well as conflict resolution. When there is a clear difference between the emotional regulation abilities of a 4.5 year old and an almost 6 year old, the starting age for school continues to be a contentious issue.

There is much evidence to support this and the notion that the starting school age should be raised to at least 5 years, create a more equitable playing field.

- At present parents and educators deem later starters to be “held back” for another year. This has the connotation that it is more socially acceptable for parents to send their children later.
- Parents who are finding themselves in lower socio-economic environments may choose to send their children to school “earlier” in order to save money on rising daycare costs. If childcare had more affordable options, this situation could be avoided and potentially putting their child in a situation that they may not be ready for.
- There are various studies as reported by Hanley (2019)<sup>[4]</sup> that state that holding children back a year has more positive academic and socio-behavioural outcomes compared to their younger peers. While other studies suggest that initial gaps between children of varying months may close over time, there are other results that conclude that younger children are less developed in their first year of school than their older counterparts.
- In NSW, because there is at least 18 months between the eldest and the youngest children in the year, not only does that make the youngest children the youngest to enter formal primary education in the world, but it has consequences for teachers, children and parents. The composition of these classes make it a challenge for teachers to provide opportunities for learning

that are age and stage appropriate across their whole class.

"Month on month, there are small differences in kids development across the age spectrum. When you're comparing an August and December-born child, the difference is pretty small. But when you start to add this up over six months or more, then you're really looking at increasing differences. Not surprisingly then, there's quite big differences developmentally between four-and-a-half-year-old children and six-year-old children." - Dr Falster<sup>[5]</sup>

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In order to appropriately prepare children for school, this evidence must be taken into consideration. The wide range of ages across one year group make it a challenge for students who are trying to compete or keep up with their older peers, despite being in the same year group.

Japan, New Zealand and in some areas of the UK all limit the enrolment ages for school to a twelve-month period, thus removing the element of choice for parents, by putting the impetus back on the education system to provide for a narrower age and stage group.

This is supported by Paul Mondo, president of the Australian Childcare Alliance who states that in order to fix the grand inequalities in the education system, the starting school age should be set.

"The range of concerns are relating to a broad developmental differences between a four-and-a-half-year-old and say a six-year-old child which could occur in that circumstance. Ultimately, a decision around a school starting age should not be impacted by whether a parent can afford to or not afford to make that decision for that child but rather on a child's developmental readiness."

Additionally, Dr Mark Hanly of UNSW Medicine's Centre for Big Data Research in Health<sup>[6]</sup> supports this by saying, "what the data really show us is that, on average, children who start school in the year they turn six are more likely to have developed the skills and competencies needed to thrive in a formal learning environment, compared with their younger peers who start school in the year they turn five."

Similarly, a study of more than 2,000 children in the UK undertaken by the University of Exeter Medical School found that children who are at the younger end of the spectrum when starting school are more likely to develop poorer mental health, as rated by their parents and teachers. While the effect was small, the researchers believe it is due to the stress of trying to keep up with their older peers<sup>[7]</sup>.

In relation to **“ECEC sector workforce requirements and the capacity to meet these requirements within the current Commonwealth, state and territory initiatives,”** I would like to make the following points.

Based on my experience as a mentor of university students over the last three years, I have noticed a significant reduction in the number of degrees that are specialised in early childhood. They now appear to be focussed on the birth to 12 years subject matter, with a general focus on primary education.

Early childhood is a specialised area with a distinct need for comprehension of the theories and practical elements of working with children in the zero to five years age group. In my experience running early childhood centres, I am finding that teachers do not have the training they need to suitably fulfil the role of an early childhood teacher.

Out of the last four student teachers who have focussed their degree in birth to five, not one of them has any knowledge and understanding of child development. This concept along with theories of education and learning are at the core of what we do and how we do it. It informs our practice and without them we would not be able to confidently support children to achieve the learning outcomes of the EYLF.

The content within these degrees must be designed to serve our children and give teachers the knowledge and content to do the job. They must include the core components of early childhood and a detailed look at the Early Years Learning Framework. Qualified early childhood teachers must be able to confidently plan and promote learning experiences, scaffold the learning to support each child’s development through a solid understanding of early childhood as a whole.

My recommendation is that we restore the Bachelor of Teaching Early Childhood as a separate course and not integrated within any other teaching degree or course.

In relation to the **“required regulatory settings, including to manage compliance and integrity risks for Commonwealth programs,”** I would like to make the following points.

In terms of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), must investigate its effectiveness. In my experience, children ten years ago, appeared to be more in tune and responsive to learning than those of today. I feel that the EYLF is so comprehensive that we are losing the simplicity of where we need to go and what we need to do in order to support the children in every aspect of their learning.

I believe that the notion that everything has to fit into the boxes of the EYLF and NQS results in overwhelmed teachers and that the basics are being forgotten. My personal feeling is that intentional teaching and curriculum should be at the core of all education.

At the same time, there has been a recent shift into the digital space where documentation and learning platforms are online. This change has resulted in

observational assessments giving teacher the ease of a tick and flick response to analysing children's development. Whilst convenient, it does not allow for educators to go through traditional thought processes that result in an interpretation of what the child has achieved.

The use of digitalised documentation platforms needs to be reviewed to encompass thought processes from the teacher's perspective. We need to train teachers to be able to anticipate the stages of development and incorporate them automatically into curriculum after observational studies.

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[1] Parker, R., and Thomsen, B. S. (2019). *Learning through play at school: A study of playful integrated pedagogies that foster children's holistic skills development in the primary school classroom*. Billund: LEGO Foundation.

[2] Parker, R., Thomsen, B.S. and Berry, A. (2022) *Learning through play at school – A framework for policy and Practice*, *Frontiers*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.751801> (Accessed: 19 May 2023).

[3] Pyle, A., DeLuca, C., Danniels, E., and Wickstrom, H. (2020). A Model for Assessment in Play-Based Kindergarten Education. *Am. Educ. Res. J.* 57, 2251–2292. doi: 10.3102/0002831220908800

[4] Hanly, M. *et al.* (2019) 'School starting age and child development in a state-wide, population-level cohort of children in their first year of school in New South Wales, Australia', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 48, pp. 325–340. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2019.01.008.

[5] *Starting school later is better for children, landmark study shows* (no date) SBS News. Available at: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/starting-school-later-is-better-for-children-landmark-study-shows/obxaibpwp> (Accessed: 19 May 2023).

[6] Henebery, B. (2019) *Kids Who Start School later perform better – study*, *The Educator K/12*. Available at: <https://www.theeducatoronline.com/k12/news/kids-who-start-school-later-perform-better--study/262033> (Accessed: 19 May 2023).

[7] *Starting school young can put child wellbeing at risk* (2017) *ScienceDaily*. Available at: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/06/170622110444.htm> (Accessed: 19 May 2023).