

Dear Australian Productivity Commission into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning,

As an Early Childhood Teacher and a future parent, I am concerned about the attitude with which the new government is taking towards the Early Childhood sector.

Recently, the government attempted to use emotional blackmail in an attempt to guilt centres into “giving back” the pay rise secured for them through the Early Years Funding scheme. This shows blatant disregard for the time, energy and qualifications of child care educators. Certificate III educators earn less on average than cleaners with no qualifications. First year out tertiary trained ECTs earn \$20, 000 less per year than Kindergarten teachers (the two groups have the same qualification and do similar work), when it could be argued that the foundations of schooling success are laid in ages 0-5 years. Pay is one of the largest barriers to retaining staff in the profession.

The government has nullified the funding for the EC profession’s primary professional development document, the National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program – a newsletter that explores how centres and educators can engage with and implement the National Quality Standards.

All of this paints a very grim picture of the value that the government places on the early childhood profession. At this moment, the child care industry has a petition before the Fair Work Commission – I know it is not within the scope of this Commission – however, I feel that the actions of the government show the need for strong guidance.

My concerns revolve primarily around the reduction of the National Quality Standards, which were drafted in 2009, based off best-practice, empirical evidence and research.

The aim of the NQS is to raise the quality of Australian early childhood care and education. According to the Australia Children’s Education & Care Authority:

“The two main influences on the quality of care are:

- caregiver qualifications, and
- lower staff to child ratios.”

See more at: <http://www.acecqa.gov.au/national-quality-framework/introducing-the-national-quality-framework#sthash.q9REduJF.dpuf>

During the past 2 years, the EC sector has worked hard to increase their care and education standards in line with the new Early Years Learning Framework and National Quality Standards. This is an ongoing process in many centres. To have the government, at this juncture, reduce the legislation for half Certificate III, half Diploma trained educators is frankly inequitable – we as an industry have done so much work towards aligning with the National Standards, and the government’s attempt to quash the creation of positions for more qualified educators because they do not want to commit budget money to reducing child care fees for families is utterly disappointing. Research also supports the drive towards more highly trained educators – educators with diploma and tertiary degrees radically improve EC teaching environments.

Research shows that the emotional, social and cognitive foundations created during years birth to five (supported by quality EC education!) are the most reliable predictors for success in future schooling (and thus workforce participation and positive social outcomes). For vulnerable children (with poor socioeconomic outcomes), EC education is integral to make sure these interventions and foundations are provided.

Research *also* proves that the more training and education EC educators receive in their field, the more their educational practice improves – for the government to reduce positions for more highly trained professionals in the industry is damaging to families and, eventually, to the social fabric of Australia, as more and more children who need a solid preschool foundation are left wanting, since more and more families rely on the EC industry because they need dual incomes to survive. It is *not* the place of the government to reduce highly trained positions in the sector to reduce fees for families – especially when research and reviews of the sector suggest and recommend more highly trained positions.

[Research demonstrates that higher levels of training improve service delivery (Campbell & Milbourne, 2005; Pianta & Hamre, 2009). Early childhood staff with more training engage in warmer and more responsive interactions with children, leading to improved child outcomes (Connor, Son, Hindman & Morrison, 2005). More training increases the likelihood that staff will be less authoritarian, less punishing, more sensitive and more able to demonstrate positive interaction styles (Abbott & Langston, 2005; Arnett, 1989; Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford & Howes, 2002; de Kruif, McWilliam & Ridley, 2000). When training is coupled with on-the-job support, such as mentoring (Fiene, 2002), significant improvements in children's outcomes are more likely to be demonstrated.] - excerpt from Sims, University of New England.

[See also: Elliott, 2006; Sheridan et al., 2009; Litjens and Taguma, 2010.]

Many centres would be vastly improved by the evidence based practices introduced by tertiary and Diploma trained educators. However, the government is recommending that the push for 50% Diploma trained staff and more tertiary trained staff per centre be squashed, in order to save money. As more and more families come to rely on the EC industry to provide a pre-school foundation in social and emotional skills for the future, and more and more focus is placed on "closing the gap" between vulnerable children and their peers, the EC industry needs support.

The current regulations are research-based (see: previous industry review linked at the bottom of this text). The costs are the monetary costs that it takes to implement these regulations – while child care and education costs money to implement, so does primary school education, mining subsidies, and many other purviews of the government. *Cost* associated for *what is proven to be best practice* must be borne – cutting quality to save money is never sustainable in the long term.

“What are the effects of increased staff ratios and qualifications for children?”

The effects are overwhelmingly positive, as research shows. In any regard, the “working towards” category allows centres to maintain current staff, so long as staff are enrolled in courses to meet the regulations.

“Are services OK with the pace of new ratios and what are cost impacts to services and families?”

Services seem to be coping with the increase of ratios. Since they are considered best practice, I would hope that the cost impacts to families would be assisted by the government. No one talks about increasing primary school classes to 30 students simply because it would have a “cost impact”.

Questions 24, 28 seem to focus on profitability and cost. Once again, I would like to re-enforce that high quality practices should not be curtailed because of cost!

“Would self-regulation work?”

Without oversight, regulations are not enforced. Schools do not self-regulate their curriculum, their enrolment or class sizes, or other areas. Does this work in any industry? It is worrying that this question is included.

Finally, with regard to government support and funding – parents receive tax benefits, supplements and incomes from the government to assist in child rearing. Unless the benefit assigned to parents was linked directly to seeking child care and education, I would be concerned that this money would be “lost in translation”, and not have an adequate impact. Centre-based funding to reduce fees also often gets “lost”, especially in for-profit ventures. I would support a direct-linked benefit for parents, or direct funding from the government based on non-for-profit situations.

I hope that you will consider what I have presented, and the recommendations of the previous review

[http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/early_childhood_news/november_2006_nationwide_review_of_early_childhood_education_services.html] that clearly explains what needs to be done to support the sector.

Sincerely,

Kimberley Horner