

# Australian College of Educators

## Submission to the Childcare and Early Childhood Learning: Productivity Commission Issues Paper

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The Australian College of Educators (ACE) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Childcare and Early Childhood Learning Issues Paper.

The College is a unique organisation in that it represents educators involved in the whole range of education: Early Childhood, School, University and Technical and Further Education. It brings together educators from the Government, Independent and Catholic sectors. It promotes professional standards of the highest order and seeks to ensure that all students achieve to the best of their ability, irrespective of their socio-economic background.

There is increasing evidence (see Box 1) for the crucial role that infant/adult interactions play in the first five years when the brain is developing. Therefore staff-child ratios and the presence of suitably trained staff is vital. It is therefore of great concern to The College that many suggestions in this issues paper actually question the small gains made in establishing the National Quality Framework and the College will also argue that the issues paper fails to confront or even mention, some of the serious deficiencies in our system which are highlighted when comparisons are made with how Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is approached in other major developed economies.

This submission recognises the important role that childcare plays, particularly in allowing those women who choose to do so, to participate more fully in the workforce but it maintains that in Australia the educational and developmental aspects of childcare are seriously overlooked.

The Issues Paper begins with reference in the opening sentence to a 'child care and early learning market' (our emphasis). This term establishes a 'market driven' approach to ECEC rather than establishing it as a government responsibility and as the basic requirements that should be met of all young Australian children.

In Australia commercial interests play a major role in the provision of childcare and while there is nothing inherently wrong in this, State and Federal Governments must accept overall responsibility for the quality of what is provided, just as they do for the quality of formal education. This is particularly so when the economy is so heavily dependent on the majority of parents being engaged in the workforce as producers, consumers and taxpayers. Participation in the workforce means that for many parents childcare is a necessity and not a choice.

Eva Cox (2014) outlines why Market Forces, relied on by successive Governments from the 1990s on have failed:

*... the rationale was that by offering commercial investors a profit, they would provide capital and expand to meet needs. By funding the parents, the government believed they would ensure the market would respond to their consumer needs for particular services. Competition would mean services would be affordable, and available where and when people wanted them. However this market-forces 101 assumption has failed in too many cases because supply rarely exceeds demand. Meeting parents' and children's complex needs are more than markets can manage.*

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BOX 1 Neuroscience: serve and return

At the heart of recent research into the development of the human brain is something that seems about as far away from hard science as it is possible to get. The way that most parents respond to babies – the baby-talk, the back-and-forth smiling and gurgling, the repeating of sounds, words, gestures, the besotted rejoicing over every small step in the infant's progress – all this does not lend itself easily to scientific analysis. Yet it is exactly this kind of intimate, loving one-to-one interaction that, along with adequate nutrition, constitutes the essential input to the child's emotional, physical and cognitive development.

In an attempt to describe this process in more scientific terms, researchers have developed terms such as 'maternal/paternal sensitivity/responsivity', 'mutuality' and 'reciprocity'. They also frequently employ analogies such as 'the dance of mutual responsiveness' or 'the serve and return process'. This last, for example, is described in *The Science of Early Childhood Development* by the Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University:

“ ‘Serve and return’ happens when young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling, facial expressions, words, gestures, and cries, and adults respond by getting in sync and doing the same kind of vocalising and gesturing back at them, and the process continues back and forth. Another important aspect of the ‘serve and return’ notion of interaction is that it works best when it is embedded in an ongoing relationship between a child and an adult who is responsive to the child's own unique individuality. Decades of research tell us that mutually rewarding interactions are essential prerequisites for the development of healthy brain circuits and increasingly complex skills.”<sup>1</sup>

A second core concept is the identification of ‘sensitive periods’ in the sequential development of the human brain. Each of these periods is associated with specific areas of neurological circuitry and with specific human abilities. And each builds on the circuits and skills laid down in the previous period. It is this process that sets the stage for all future cognitive and emotional development – a stage that is either sturdy or shaky depending on the kind and quality of interactions with primary caregivers in the earliest months and years of life.

Related to this is the finding that care and education are not separate processes. The close emotional interaction between parent and child is as essential for intellectual as for emotional development. Purely didactic efforts – aimed at developing a child's cognitive abilities – are likely to undermine what they

seek to promote if emotional needs are neglected. The study *Eager to Learn*,<sup>2</sup> for example, concludes that “Care and education cannot be thought of as separate entities in dealing with young children.

...Neither loving children nor teaching them is, in and of itself, sufficient for optimal development.”

Research has also drawn attention to the importance of stress levels in the early months and years of life.

According to Professor Jack Shonkoff, Director of Harvard University's Centre on the Developing Child, excessive levels of stress hormones “literally disrupt brain architecture.”

Too much or too prolonged stress at this time – and the lack of a familiar, trusted adult to provide the prompt, intimate reassurance that helps bring stress hormones back to baseline levels – can result in a mis-setting of the brain's stress levels. In particular, the persistent elevation of the stress hormone cortisol is known to be damaging to the delicate architecture of the developing brain, and is related to stress-related illness in later life. Mental health requires stress management systems that boost the level of the stress hormones in response to perceived threats and reduce them again when the challenge has passed.

Beginning even before birth, it is in early childhood that these chemical balances are set.

Finally, research has also drawn attention to the child's emerging sense of ‘agency’ – the feeling of being able to influence events and situations. If this is encouraged by adult responses, then motivation, confidence and competence will tend to flourish. If it is not reinforced, or if it is actively discouraged by negative reaction or punishment, then these essential aspects of psychological development are likely to be compromised.

For all of these reasons, the relationship between infants and parents or primary caregivers is critical to the child's emotional, psychological and cognitive development. Developmental and behavioural problems – often most commonly arise from disturbances in that relationship.<sup>3</sup>

All of this has clear implications for the care and upbringing of very young children. And in the transition towards early childhood education and care, it is essential that findings such as those described here should become part of political and public awareness.

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<sup>1</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *The Science of Early Childhood Development: Closing the gap between what we know and what we do*, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, Cambridge MA, 2007, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> National Research Council, *Eager to Learn: Educating our pre-schoolers*, Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, Bowman, B. T., M. S. Donovan and M. S. Burns (eds.), Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Academy Press, Washington, D. C., 2001, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*, Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, Shonkoff, J. P. and D. A. Phillips (eds.), Board on Children, Youth and Families, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Academy

## Changing views of childcare and International comparisons

Over the last thirty or so years there has been a marked transition in economically developed societies from a situation where most care for pre-school age children took place in the home to one where a significant amount of care is now provided externally.

Successive governments in Australia have failed to recognise that the transition from home care to external care for young children has serious implications for the intellectual and emotional development of children in these early years where patterns are set that will affect them for the rest of their lives and that staff looking after young children need specialised training and experience.

While cognitive abilities are one determinant of later success, it is the development of socio-emotional skills, physical and mental health, perseverance, motivation and self-confidence in a child's early years that are just as crucial. The challenge is how this crucial socio-emotional development can be developed in a world where pre-school age children are spending an increasing amount of time outside of the home, or where there is no suitable home environment to foster the development of these complex skills.

A UNICEF report *The child care transition* (UNICEF 2008 p 1) explained this changing situation:

A great change is coming over childhood in the world's richest countries.

- Today's rising generation is the first in which a majority are spending a large part of early childhood in some form of out-of-home child care.
- At the same time, neuroscientific research is demonstrating that loving, stable, secure, and stimulating relationships with caregivers in the earliest months and years of life are critical for every aspect of a child's development.
- Taken together, these two developments confront public and policymakers in OECD countries with urgent questions.
- Whether the child care transition will represent an advance or a setback – for today's children and tomorrow's world – will depend on the response.

The point being made here is that looking after the *physical* needs of the child alone is not sufficient; the preschool years are also crucial for their *emotional and intellectual development*, and to achieve this a qualified early childcare workforce is required.

### **Evidence on how poorly Australia performs**

#### *Innocenti report*

In order to ascertain how well childcare policies in economically developed countries achieved these goals, a UNICEF group identified ten benchmarks and then measured 25 countries against these. Australia was ranked 23<sup>rd</sup> out of these 25 countries, meeting only two of the ten benchmarks (see Figure 1).

Australia being ranked 23 out of 25 developed countries should be a cause of serious concern. The Canadian province of Ontario, which has already carried out a successful transformation of its Primary and Secondary education systems has responded to their low ranking by planning a similar transformation of its early childhood services and its report *With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario* provides an excellent model of what could be achieved. . This Issues Paper on the other hand is primarily concerned about 'efficiencies' in what is already a seriously under-resourced sector.

Benchmark		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Number of benchmarks achieved	Parental leave of 1 year at 50% salary	A national plan with priority for the disadvantaged	Subsidised and regulated childcare services for 25% of children under 3	Subsidised and accredited early education services for 80% of 4 year-olds	80% of all child care staff trained	50% of staff in accredited early education services tertiary educated with relevant qualifications	Minimum staff-to-children ratio of 1:15 in pre-school education	1:0% of GDP spent on early childhood services	Child poverty rate less than 10%	Near-universal outreach of essential child health services
Sweden	10										
Iceland	9										
Denmark	8										
Finland	8										
France	8										
Norway	8										
Belgium	6										
Hungary	6										
New Zealand	6										
Slovenia	6										
Austria	5										
Netherlands	5										
England	5										
Germany	4										
Italy	4										
Japan	4										
Portugal	4										
Republic of Korea	4										
Mexico	3										
Spain	3										
Switzerland	3										
United States	3										
Australia	2										
Canada	1										
Ireland	1										

Figure 1 Early Childhood services - a league table.

Source: The Child care transition p 2

### Ranking on International Tests

Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) provide comparisons of achievement for hundreds of thousands of students across the participating countries. A summary of results from these tests is shown in Figure 2..

The results from these reveal that at the Year 4 level Australian students are in the middle of 44 countries in Reading and just above the middle of 49 countries in Mathematics and Science.

	Year 4			Year 8	
	PIRLS	TIMSS		TIMMS	
	Reading	Mathematics	Science	Mathematics	Science
Significantly higher than Australia	21	17	18	6	9
At a similar level to Australia	6	5	8	8	6
Significantly lower than Australia	17	27	23	27	26
Total	44	49	49	41	41

Figure 2 Comparisons of Australia's results in PIRLS and TIMMS in 2011  
Source ACER

It is important to note that results in Mathematics and Science have improved significantly by Year 8 and in PISA results in English, Mathematics and Science literacy, (undertaken by Year 9 students in Australia) Australians are still in the top third on an international basis.

One can draw two conclusions from this. The first is recognition of the value added by primary and secondary teachers in bringing about this transformation in achievement levels. But the important conclusion to be drawn from this study in relation to early childhood education is that these results indicate that many other countries have already laid the groundwork for educational achievement **before** children begin their formal education.

### Evidence from Australian Research

A true economic rationale would look at the financial benefits of investment in early childhood education and the economic costs of not making this investment. For example, the 2012 report from the Council of Australian Government (COAG, 2012) reform council stresses the importance of improving early childhood education outcomes in order to improve Australian education overall:

*In international tests at Year 4, students who had attended early childhood education performed better in tests of reading, maths and science than students who had not attended. (p.8)*

In the current debates around the cost of childcare, the importance of qualified early childhood educators is also under scrutiny. There is now compelling evidence which shows children who receive early childhood education from highly qualified teachers then go on to achieve higher NAPLAN scores than those who are educated by less-qualified teachers (Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013). The effects of quality preschool have lasting effects on school achievement and therefore costs must always be considered against outcomes.

### ***The Economic Benefits of investment in Early Childhood Education***

Key research on the economic benefits of early intervention has been undertaken by the Nobel laureate Professor James Heckman, Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago. Two longitudinal studies among low-income families demonstrated ‘substantial positive effects of early environmental enrichment on a range of cognitive and non-cognitive skills, schooling achievement, job performance, and social behaviours, long after the interventions ended’ (Heckman (nd) p 52)

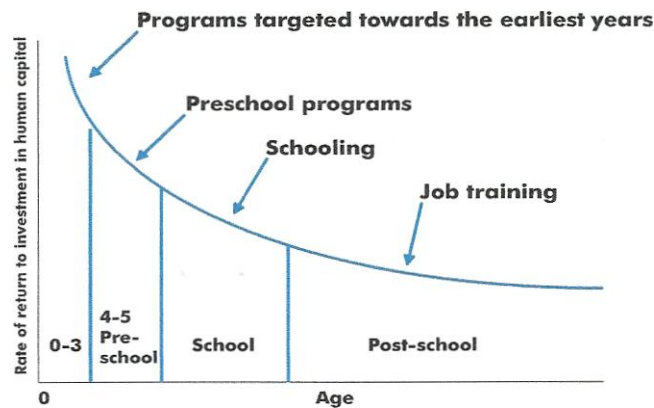


Figure 3 Return to a unit dollar invested at different ages from the perspective of The beginning of life, assuming one dollar invested at each age

The traditional role of the preschool parent was more than just child minding and to neglect the intellectual and emotional developmental aspects of these crucial years is to seriously limit an individual’s future possibilities.

### ***The Importance of maintaining and extending the National Quality Framework***

Prior to the introduction of the National Partnership Agreement between all Australian states and the federal government, each tier of government presented inconsistencies and confusion over the provision of early childcare.

Up until the government agreement, the Commonwealth government had been primarily concerned with childcare, while states were responsible for preschool provision. This arrangement resulted in a confusing variety of funding bodies, employment agreements, policies and lobby groups.

As part of the deal, the jointly governed National Quality Framework was established. Under the framework, Australia received a unified system for licencing and quality assurance processes in long day care, preschools, out of hours school care and family day care.

While the National Quality Framework is a step forward it still sets a standard that is far below most developed economies and even below that already existing in some states such as NSW and Victoria. The College would be particularly concerned if these minimal requirements were treated as a “regulatory burden”.

Upon the introduction of the framework, the for-profit early childhood sector warned that parents would bear the burden of increased costs through fee increases. Australia is one of the few developed countries in which this problem would arise. In many OECD countries, the costs are not automatically passed on to families but are absorbed in shared funding arrangements with government.

There have been claims that the NQF was so expensive that some childcare centres threatened to close. However industry body Early Childhood Australia released a statement early last year backing the backing the NQF, stating:

*Recent reports that centres are facing closure are a surprise to me. The clear trend here shows that far from closing, early childhood education and care services are booming.*

## **Recommendations**

- While an economic review must look at efficiencies it should also look beyond costs to assessing value. This involves taking into account the long term savings of investment. It should also recognise that while market forces can increase efficiency they are not necessarily a guarantee of quality; it is in this area that Governments must retain responsibility.
- The Inquiry should explore to what extent Australia's low ranking on the UNICEF Scale( Figure 2) as well as evidence from PIRLLS and TIMMS demonstrates evidence of failings and if so what steps should be taken to address the relevant areas of concern.
- The Inquiry must further support the implementation of the NQF by viewing child care and child development/education as one sector, ' Early Childhood Education and Care'. The education role is crucial and supports the necessity of increased funding to facilitate the training and appointment of tertiary qualified personnel.
- The Inquiry should begin with the assumption that the provision of qualified staff paid at professional wages is essential to ensuring that "all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation" (COAG 2009 Investing in the Early Years)
- The Inquiry needs to explore how to improve the integration between ECEC and school to ensure that all students are school ready. The integration of preschool programs with ECEC services and the school system could result in many cost efficiencies.

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## Contacts

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Catherine Pickett  
Chief Executive Officer

Professor Stephen Dinham OAM  
ACE President

Address PO Box 73, Carlton, VIC 3053

Submission prepared by Ian Keese, ACE Policy coordinator with contributions from

- Anne Champion, Associate Principal, Highgate Primary School, Perth Western Australia
- Assoc Professor Susan Krieg, Flinders University, South Australia
- Dr Ian Sloane, Principal, Mitcham Primary School, Melbourne, Victoria
- Denise Taylor, ex-school principal and CEO of the National Childcare Accreditation Council, current Chair of the Infants Home Child and Family Services, NSW