

Submission to the Productivity Commission into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning

I have worked in the field of early childhood education for nearly thirteen years, starting as an un-trained assistant and working my way through the Certificate III, Diploma and then completing my Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (Honours) in 2011, all whilst working full time. I have worked in a variety of privately owned and community run long-day-care centres, in both NSW and Victoria. I am passionate about early learning and dedicated to quality education and care for our youngest citizens. I currently work as a kindergarten (pre-school) teacher in a long-day-care setting in Melbourne's inner-North, and have also taken on the role of Educational Leader, as per the requirements of the National Quality Framework (NQF). Within this dual role I undertake a lot of professional reading, networking, research, and professional development, and utilise this to mentor and support my colleagues, and improve my own professional practice. For over a decade I have observed early education in Australia gradually improve, taking on more contemporary research and understandings about the importance of the first five years of a child's life, and the importance of high quality play based programs for human development. There are many examples of progressive and successful models of early childhood education and care in countries such as Italy, Finland, New Zealand, Sweden. While quality teachers and programs in the early years have been proven to have positive long-term benefits, the ESSENTIAL element to remember is that high quality teachers and programs improves the experience of young children *right now*: as some children may be in a care setting for ten hours a day, five days a week, this is a major factor to take into consideration.

Having worked at my current setting for over six years, I have had the pleasure of implementing the elements of the NQF with a passionate and committed team of educators, with the support and encouragement of a management team and committee who are dedicated to positive outcomes for all children. As a community run centre we are not driven by profit, but by a genuine desire to provide the highest quality educators, programs, experiences and services for our community of children and families. We were excited that the introduction of the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) re-enforced what we already believed and were striving to achieve. We felt especially encouraged that new regulations, such as improved ratios and requirements for qualifications, validated the importance of our work and would support the whole profession to provide high quality conditions and positive experiences for not only the children, but also the educators, families, and wider community.

It was conversely alarming, distressing and concerning to hear of the new government's plans to slow down or abandon some of these essential reforms, and I fear that if this goes ahead there will be immediate as well as long-term negative consequences for all stakeholders. It was especially disheartening to hear the profession described as a "market"

where the main agenda would be to improve affordability, flexibility and accessibility. To those of us that work with the actual children that this will impact, these words have connotations that are dangerous and threatening towards quality and improvement. Rather than seeing where we can cut-back on the NQF, we should be questioning whether it is going far enough on factors such as educator-to-child ratios, and the quality and quantity of our qualifications. Another essential element would be to address adequate remuneration for ALL educators working in this highly important field, which would be a positive step in recruiting and maintaining quality educators.

As a service we were already offering conditions for our staff, children and families that were above the minimum requirements, and began moving towards the improvements before the cut-off dates. Without a focus on profiting off the education and care of young children we have been able to absorb the cost of any changes with minimum impact on our families. We have also made efforts to ensure that we continue to provide a diversity of services (e.g. long and short day options) within a model that values and maintains positive experiences and outcomes for the children and educators. Whilst we understand that some families may desire longer hours or cheaper fees, we are unwilling to compromise on the best interests of the children – that is their right and our responsibility. The improved ratios throughout the service have increased our ability to provide warm, nurturing, dynamic, responsive programs, designed around positive interactions and relationships – proven to support learning and development. This has been particularly evident in our younger rooms, where the new ratios allow flexible and responsive routines and caring, un-hurried interactions with staff who are able to focus on the here and now, rather than being over worked, stressed and quickly burnt-out. It is essential that this is maintained for the health and wellbeing of our infants and toddlers. I would also like to see the ratios for children over three improved further and sooner than the proposed 1:11 in 2016, so that we could also provide these same positive experiences for the children without the current levels of stress placed on educators who give themselves tirelessly to balancing the needs of large groups of children. I find it outrageous that one educator is expected to be able to care for and educate up to fifteen children on their own, who could range from three to five years in age and have diverse and changing needs. Both the children and the adults deserve better.

As someone who has continually sought out professional growth and learning over my career, I can advocate strongly for the importance of qualifications for educators working within the early childhood sector. This process has increased my knowledge and skills and has enriched both my professional and personal life. Whilst there is a role for many different levels of education and qualification, it is essential that early childhood professionals are committed to on-going training and are supported to increase their professional knowledge and skill. Having access to degree trained mentors within each service is important in providing this support. It is through this dynamic of ongoing hands-on experience combined with formal training that early childhood educators are able to maintain knowledge of contemporary research and understandings, as well as network with others and sustain

their enthusiasm and commitment to the education and care of children. Some may argue that the expectations are too high for a profession that has traditionally been viewed as "unskilled women's work", but I believe we **should** have high expectations for our educators, and our education system, just as we have high expectations for our children. We **must** be accountable for the huge role we play in the lives of young children, and companies/individuals that are profiting off children, families and underpaid staff should be phased out, with a move towards a more standardised model, such as the public school system, where high quality early education and care is government funded and free for ALL Australian children.

Those of us lucky enough to work in pre-schools and long-day-care settings that value quality over profits will continue to do what we believe is best for the children we educate and care for, which requires low ratios with educators committed to on-going professional growth and improvement, as well as appropriate remuneration and time allocated for program planning and other non-teaching tasks. Centres such as ours have found that providing positive conditions not only facilitates positive outcomes for children and families, but also ensures a low turn-over rate of employees, with many of our large staff body having been employed for over five, ten, or even twenty years. Unfortunately, lowering the required minimum standards will mean that many children will be enrolled in services with conditions that will inevitably pose risks to their physical and emotional safety and wellbeing, and undermine their right to thrive in a dynamic and nurturing learning environment. Putting educators back in the position where they have to continually fight against minimum standards will also see a further decline in the sector's ability to retain quality staff. The NQF is a positive step for all stakeholders: families' financial concerns should be addressed in other ways! Let's move towards being an international role-model for care and education, rather than aligning ourselves with the lowest common denominator!