

To the Childcare and Early Childhood Learning Productivity Commission,

Below are my opinions, needs, comments and ideas put forward to support the public inquiry into future childcare and early childhood learning. I address the bulleted key points as an educator, as a parent of children under five years and within the childcare system, and as a community member. My qualifications encompass a Certificate III and a Diploma in Children's Services, a Bachelor of Teaching ([Early Childhood Education] to be completed 06/2014) and over 15 years' experience in the education and care of children.

- **The contribution of childcare to workforce participation and child development**

The number of centres and types of centres offering care to families has exploded. Many people are now viewing it as a business opportunity, some are succeeding and some are failing miserably. Hours of operation vary but they are generally open from 7am – 6pm Mon-Fri. The question is whether this is complimenting current working hours and the simple answer is 'no'. The current system does not allow for shift workers, night shifts worked by sectors such as Ambulance Officers and Police, and weekend workers. The obvious solution would be to provide a service available to these sectors of society, but then it presents the argument as to whether these are appropriate times for children to 'learn'. Is a child, or family, in need of an educational environment at 2am on a Wednesday? Clearly not, they require a babysitter. Is it fair on qualified staff to be babysitters? No. I think the policies implemented over the past few governments, has bred a belief that the care of children is only worthwhile when an educational element is provided. As an educator there are families out there with two distinct thoughts on childcare and child carers. We are either teachers or babysitters. It has been an ongoing issue since the introduction of childcare. This stigma is not going to go away no matter what policy is developed. What it does show is the needs of families vary. Some want help educating their children, some just want them to be cared for while away from the family. The government policy, at present the regulatory authorities such as NQF, are taking away responsibility from parents to educate their child and placing it on the childcare system, and this is why it is failing to meet the needs of families. Yes, the responsibility of education of children has shifted from a parent responsibility to the child care worker, and this is solely due to the disappearance of the 9-5 working day, but a child cannot learn, and shouldn't be expected to learn outside of the hours of 9am-3pm, for arguments sake. It is counter-productive to even place these two concepts in the same category. Childcare's ability to contribute to our workforce's participation has no bearing on a child's development. If workers need care outside of the hours that child care centres operate at present, then there is no need to even contemplate child development. What you are asking is for two tiers of child care; one that educates and develops, and one that, for use of a better word, babysits.

- **Current and future need for childcare in Australia, particularly given changes in work patterns, early learning needs, childcare affordability and government assistance**

This is a no-brainer. Our society needs childcare. Let's break this down because there are a number of questions here. The current needs are the future needs. Whatever the research is telling us is what we need now for our future. We have already addressed above that changes in work participation has placed a strain on the sector, and I have argued that we need to provide education to who requires it at appropriate times for the child, and babysitting for those who work unusual hours. In regard to early learning needs I believe children from the age of two and above need care and education and children from 0-2 just need care. That is to say that the education of 0-2 year old child does not require a 'teacher'. What I am trying to point out is that our current system is providing over-qualified educators for babies under two, unnecessarily. It is a waste of resources and a cost-ineffective exercise. It is ridiculous that some families are paying up to \$120 a day for someone to spoon feed their baby, change their nappy and keep them from harming themselves, all because of the need to provide qualified educators. This is something I feel needs to be addressed immediately. It instantly makes child care fees for this age bracket cheaper, when they are currently the most expensive due to ratio's (which is another issue) and it will also provide cash flow to educators of older children, which will then create the opportunity to reduce the cost to parents of these older age groups. Naturally this change will give the Federal Government opportunity to reduce assistance to families. One idea is that the government offer families/centres with children 0-2 more assistance with the money saved due to this change to encourage people back into the workforce. The bottom line is that if the government was to decrease or abolish assistance such as the child care benefit scheme, child care would become unaffordable, and I'm not sure whether they are aware of the backlash they would receive were they to reduce the CCB.

- **The capacity of the childcare system to ensure a satisfactory transition to schools, in particular for vulnerable or at risk children**

There are two questions posed here. Firstly, the child care system does ensure a satisfactory transition to schools. Educators inform parents of their child's readiness to start school, what might need addressing before they start, or whether their child would benefit from another year of childcare. Unfortunately, the unbelievable saving families would make by starting kindergarten pushes them to send their child when they may not be ready. Even if their child repeated a year during primary school, the family would still be better off financially than an extra year of childcare. Now we have families comprising their child's education because of money. The child gets left behind at primary school and is constantly playing catch up. It seems puzzling that the government makes policy on the compulsory ages of children that must attend school, but not on when a child is ready. My question is – Who makes the decision to hold a child back during their primary schooling? Is it the parent or is it the educational institution? So why then, is it the parent who decides when their child is ready to start school? This system does not make sense. Perhaps more funding should be offered to families in this position who require an extra year of preschool, to alleviate the strain on the primary school sector. I guess in a way this answers the next question of vulnerable or at risk children. The level of vulnerability should only reflect the child's ability to succeed in a primary schooling environment. In regard to other risks on children, for example abused or neglected

children, this is an issue that is the whole community's responsibility, not just an educator's. Yes, an educator has a system of steps and a policy to address children at risk, but the above question should only be relating to a child's capacity to progress to primary education and succeed.

- **Alternative models of care, including those overseas, which could be considered for trial in Australia**

Not too many suggestions here. Our present system, although it doesn't complement our changing workforce, it is serving the majority of our society. I have worked under the English model (EYFS) which is what our current EYLF is based upon and both are working well at improving standards and addressing each child individually. It is the best policy and curriculum to date, however, it lacks a skill based checklist that past curriculums used, and as ineffective as they proved to be, there should be something similar developed for a child's transition to school. The French system has children in the government schooling system earlier than us, as does many other countries. It would be better for everyone if children fell under the government schooling system from the age of three, rather than the current age of five. This presents the government with a multitude of issues mostly based around funding and structure, and it would take an entire department, but that's my opinion. As I said above, the ability to complement our workforce is juxtaposed to the development/learning for children 0-5.

- **Options – within existing funding parameters – for improving the accessibility, flexibility and affordability of childcare for families with diverse circumstances**

I feel I have answered this above. In regard to diverse circumstances, accessibility should refer to care and not education as we are talking about child care outside of current operating hours. Flexibility could refer to the current facilities offering care outside of operating hours, meaning changing regulations, and providing two tiers of child care. Some centres already do this by offering care from 7am-9am and again from 3pm-6pm and education from 9am-3pm, to mirror the school hours. This idea would just extend outside the hours of 7am-6pm. My thoughts on affordability have been addressed above. Regulation changes need to be made to further help the exploding cost to families. The recent NQF suggested a reduction in ratio's to be implemented over a number of years until 2016. This was an education and care based decision which seemed to overlook the impact it would have on families and child care centres. Ratios of staff to children need to be looked at again. The NQF and the EYLF have improved the education and care. The reduction in ratios is a good idea, but it is not financially viable. If I refer to the English model, after I left the UK I had colleagues complaining that they were about to increase child ratio's which would burden staff. What surprised me was that their impending increase was still a lower ratio than ours even after our reduction. Increasing ratio's for 0-2 years back to 1:5, increase 2-3 years back to 1:8 and when outside educational hours set it at 1:10 for 'babysitting', and finally, keep 3-5 years at 1:10 and increase to 1:12 outside educational hours. The regulatory authority also needs to address the rules on the number of children allowed in an educational environment. Most centres capacity to increase children in the centre is impeded by the number of children the centre is licenced for. These changes

would create so much more cash flow which can be used for wages, resources, reductions in fees, etc.

- **The impacts of regulatory changes, including the implementation of the National Quality Framework, on the childcare sector over the past decade**

I feel I have comprehensively answered this question above. There will always be a financial divide. There will always be those who can afford to simply babysit their children because they can educate their children using other funds. However, most families cannot afford to do this, and it is a government's ability to offer the same opportunities to all that makes them a successful government. The NQF and the EYLF offers a fairer education to all. There is an argument that suggests we need to go back to a framework that reflects care over education, and therefore reduce wages, reduce fees and consequently reduce standards. I believe to serve the entire community we need to offer two systems. One that provides education over care that complements the schooling system, and one that provides care over education to complement the changes in working participation.

I hope my letter is considered. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to add my ideas, to evaluate the current system and help to develop and implement a more relevant and valuable policy on childcare.

Kind regards

Nathan Quinlan

2nd February 2014

(Unable to sign)