

## **Productivity Commission ECEC Review 2014**

Inclusive Directions (South Australia and Western Victoria) is an Inclusion Support Agency (ISA) under the Inclusion & Professional Support Program funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education. The role of the ISA is to support the ECEC sector to include children with high ongoing support needs including children with a disability, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, children from a refugee or humanitarian intervention background and children from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.

### **Government Involvement in Child Care and Early Learning**

Inclusive Directions promotes putting children and families first into quality ECEC environments supporting the best interests of the child. We advocate that the full National Quality Standards are implemented including; improved educator to child ratios and educators with higher skills and qualifications, better support for children's learning and development. These elements support consistency and a higher value on the role of an educator. It is also vital that to keep highly qualified staff in this profession there needs to be the recognition of an appropriate salary. This, we believe will promote high quality inclusion in the ECEC sector, job satisfaction and better outcomes for children and families.

As an ISA it has been noted more children with additional needs are accessing ECEC services with higher complexities including more children Under the Guardianship of the Minister. ECEC educators are asking Inclusion Support Facilitators (ISFs) to assist more with supporting families as they struggle with the child's behaviour as well as supporting the family.

Families have struggled with older children with additional needs once they access high school. There is little choice for parents to enrol their older child into an after school facility which is appropriate to their age. Only limited places and locations are available which may not suit parents or children who would experience longer days at the care environment.

Providing other models of care involving in-home support for parents would be ideal provided they had Government involvement and support. Educators often comment that the children who access busy ECEC environments for extended long periods of the day may display behaviours of anxiety due to being overwhelmed and over stimulated in the environment. Often these children have additional needs and educators ask the ISFs for advice on calming strategies and environmental restructure.

Many new Family Day Care schemes have been approved in SA in 2013. This has resulted in many new requests from that sector which is characterised by varying

degrees of skills, ECEC sector knowledge and understanding of high quality care and inclusion. How can we ensure that all services provide a high quality service for all families? This has to emanate from the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) which is already in place in each state and territory. This should include standards for each ECEC option ensuring the differences of environment, location and needs of community are taken into account.

It is anticipated that the trend will continue to increase with more vulnerable children and families accessing care (such as children Under the Guardianship of the Minister) and children with ongoing high complex needs. One of the issues faced as an ISA is including these children under the Inclusion Support Subsidy. If their care is for respite purposes they will not be able to receive funding to employ additional staffing to include the child in the service (Inclusion Support Subsidy and Respite Care information sheet, Department of Education, December 2013).

### Children's Developmental Needs

Children in a high quality education and care environment can benefit in many ways such as learning from their typically developing peers, learning social norms and social development, developing a sense of self identity and participation. The other children learn about diversity and equality, difference and sameness within the ECEC environment and then are able to transfer that information and respect to the wider community. Parents of a child with a disability can network and socialise with other parents and not be made to feel excluded. Other parents can befriend families with children with additional needs and engage in social experiences outside of the ECEC service. Educators can broaden their skills and knowledge through understanding and experience.

Many ECEC services are offering full days to families opposed to sessional hours. This encourages the parent to feel that the child needs to stay in care because they have paid for it. More flexible hours for families would be of benefit so that a child's home life and time in the ECEC service is balanced. The child needs to feel connected with their family and participate in normal household activities with their primary care provider. Children who may not have an optimum home environment need to be able to access high quality care to receive the nurturing and learning that they may not receive at home.

Children's brain function and attachment is known to develop in the first two years of a child's life and so the paid parenting leave provision to assist with this process is really important. Some children, including those with additional needs, require less time in ECEC services and more time in a quieter, calm environment. ECEC services can understandably be environments where there is much activity, busyness and noise. Some children, including those with a disability, find this type of environment difficult to participate in for extended periods of time and become agitated resulting in increased behaviour challenges, or overwhelmed and withdrawn, often needing a quiet area to retreat to. This will impact on the child's ability to learn. A longer day may

meet the needs of the parent's workforce participation but may not have good outcomes for the child.

### Availability of Childcare and Early Learning Services

As an ISA we receive, all too often, phone calls from parents explaining situations where they have tried to enrol their child with an additional need into an ECEC service and were discriminated against either overtly or covertly. The reasons for this discrimination include 'we are unable to meet your child's needs', 'another service or segregated environment may be a better option for your child', 'the service has no places when in fact they do', 'your child is not able to transition without a support person' or 'your child can only attend the hours when there is additional staffing provided (through the Inclusion Support Subsidy which has capped hours per day). Parents may not pursue this option at other ECEC services in fear of further rejection.

Educators who respond in this way often have a level of fear regarding the unknown about an individual child and their specific needs. We would regard highly, quality ECEC services with educators who have an attitude of support and are solution focused. Other ECEC services, we support, believe they are unable to include the child and therefore do not want the child at their service. These attitudes are often reflected through the director or owner/operator.

Previously in SA we were able to access a therapist for the child who required a prescription for specialised equipment through the block funded support agency. It is anticipated that the prescription for equipment will be included in the child's plan through the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA).

Many families from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander culture do not access mainstream ECEC services. From discussions with the community, families are fearful of what they perceive as institutions and environments of regulations and paperwork. The cost of ongoing access to ECEC services, especially for vulnerable groups such as 'new arrivals' and families on a low income who cannot afford to access mainstream ECEC services, is a concern. In some situations the children from these groups would benefit greatly from a high quality care environment.

In 2008 Inclusive Directions commissioned a student in her 4<sup>th</sup> year placement completing her degree in Applied Science Disability Studies. Her task was to survey parents whose child was a client of a disability service and were not accessing the ECEC sector. The aim of the research was to identify the perceived barriers families faced when accessing child care with their child with an additional need or disability. Over 1,000 surveys were distributed to five different disability agencies with a 16% response rate. Six questions were asked which gathered information regarding why parents had not enrolled their child into an ECEC service and how much information they had received regarding accessing an ECEC service.

The survey identified the following issues:

The cost of child care, staff training, staff ratios, staff attitudes and staff understanding the needs of the child and their family values. Many parents also thought it was essential their child receive one-to-one care but did not fully understand the benefits of inclusion. They were worried for their child's safety and wellbeing. Another aspect of the survey highlighted the lack of awareness that parents had about support services such as Inclusion Support Agencies and what they could provide to assist their child in the environment.

### Services for Additional Needs and Regional and Remote Areas

In 2012 Inclusive Directions collated data over a 12 month period to gauge best practice outcomes in ECEC services. Seven areas of practice were rated between 1 and 5 for high quality (5 being the highest). Each ECEC service was rated by the Inclusion Support Facilitator from; the goal being underdeveloped, to the goal being initiated by all the staff team. This was then collated into service type and region.

The results indicated that the trend for all of the services; long day care (LDC), family day care (FDC), out of school hours care (OSHC) and vacation care (VAC) had their highest percentage of initiating high quality education and care in January 2012. Then in April and October 2012 all the percentages went down between 4 and 9 percent. The percentages started picking up again in 2013 although they are not back to their original percentage score. In January 2012 the implementation of the National Quality Framework commenced in the ECEC sector and the ISFs found that they were required to provide an increased amount of support to services and many services struggled during that time. The fact that this trend happened in all 4 regions (North and South metro Adelaide, Riverland and Mount Gambier) over the same period of time may indicate that an external influence was the cause of educators scoring lower in high quality care as this was a time of change and confusion in the sector.

The referrals for Inclusive Directions support to include children into ECEC services continued to increase, between July 2012 and July 2013. We received 645 referrals. This was an increase from 564 in the previous financial year. This indicates the continuing need of services to receive support to include children with additional needs.

The top three requests from ECEC services are:

1. Advice and support.
2. Other funding, and
3. Bicultural support.

The other types of requests include support with service support plans, assistance to liaise with other agencies, access to specialised equipment, working with parents, access to professional development and assistance with inclusive programming.

Too many ECEC services believe they are including children with additional needs and do not realise what they do not know or understand. They often have a

presumption that if the child is accessing the service then they are included. This lack of knowledge can affect the child's quality of care and education in the environment. Other factors which can interfere with high quality care and education for children with additional needs include; transient educators, financial mismanagement, no allocation for professional development, young and inexperienced staff team, burn out and lack of information sharing internally and externally.

Service types need to be varied to meet the need of the community especially in remote and rural locations. These ECEC services are currently working particularly well and it would benefit the community to be funded to continue budget based funded services Indigenous and non-Indigenous, MAC services, mobile services and in home care.

### Government Regulation of Child Care and Early Learning

Feedback from the ECEC sector through the ISA has indicated ECEC educators are in favour of the National Quality Framework (NQF) and believe it has better outcomes for children and families. It is now profiling the sector as a profession nationally which has not been achieved before. It is important to support this move by Government to increase qualifications and wages for educators and teachers working within the ECEC sector. The impetus has been started and it is imperative that it maintains a momentum to ensure high quality care is provided for all children accessing an ECEC service. The ECEC needs to be seen as a profession that is highly regarded within society with the appropriate remuneration for qualifications and experience.

There is often quite a disparity between state funded pre-schools and long day care resources/environments which would be equalised if all ECEC services were working towards a national consistency of high quality care and educational environments. Our children are our future and we need to provide them with an optimum start in life. Funding should not be reduced at this time as this is counterproductive. When early intervention is not realised the child will often require more services as the child gets older and the gaps widen. This subsequently will require more tax payer dollars being spent because the foundations of learning were not achieved.

As an ISA we do deliver a range of professional development for educators in the ECEC sector. We have found the most effective training for sustainable change is to have a model which facilitates learning alongside the educator. This approach of coaching, mentoring and modelling has the most impact due to educator's personal involvement and practice. They will observe that the strategy does work in their environment and adapt it to everyday practice.

### Government Support for Child Care and Early Learning

Current research has demonstrated that for sustainable change in practices that support the successful inclusion of all children, educators require opportunities for professional development to assist in building confidence and skills, and follow up

mentoring and coaching for it to be implemented and sustainable. The ISF role, within the ISA program, provides this relationship based support to the ECEC sector; however increase in case loads due to more children with additional needs accessing ECEC services, as well as an increase in workloads related to ISS funding applications, limits the opportunity for this intensive inclusion support.

Increased funding to Inclusion Support agencies will allow ISFs to spend more time within care environments to work alongside educators in building team capacity. Inclusive Directions undertook a pilot program, Quality Inclusion Support Program (QISP), which provided an intensive mentoring/coaching role within the ECEC environment to identify and work on goals to support inclusive practices. The project demonstrated the ability for sustainable attitudinal change and practices within the service through this model.

The Inclusion Support Subsidy Funding available through the IPSP has been a well received and utilised program nationally that has assisted the successful inclusion of a high percentage of children with high support needs. The ability to increase staff ratios, in conjunction with provision of support and advice through an Inclusion Support Facilitator and access to a specialist equipment pool, has resulted in families feeling more confident in accessing their local ECEC services. This enables them to return to the workforce or access further training, as the service has a greater capacity to meet the needs of their child, and all the children in the care environment.

To summarise, as an ISA we are able to identify areas within the program guidelines that are limiting or supporting exclusion of particular children and families within the sector.

- The sector often provides feedback to Inclusive Directions asking for more funding to cover the entire cost of employing an additional staff member. The gap services are required to cover is impacting upon overall budgets. As a result some services are not willing to consider accessing ISS funding, although the need for increased staffing may have been identified. The services are then struggling to meet the complex needs of children within current staff ratios or becoming discriminatory by telling families that they are unable to meet the needs of their child and not accepting enrolments of children with high support needs.
- Inclusion Support Subsidy is a National Workplace strategy; however, within the eligibility requirements there are a high percentage of children with disabilities that do not fit the program. This includes children with high complex needs within alternative care or other care situations, parents of children with disabilities who are unable to work but access their local service. This access may support their parenting skills and connections with the community and other families accessing the service and parents using their local ECEC service for respite to support their own wellbeing and community inclusion. State funded respite programs are limited and under extreme pressure they are unobtainable for many families, as well many are within a 1:1 (adult:child) situation or within a program that only children with disabilities

attend. Most families seek their local ECEC service as they see it as a valuable opportunity for their child to be involved in an environment that not only supports child development and early intervention but also provides their children with, possibly, the only opportunity to attend an inclusive setting. This has a major impact on the development of children's social skills and enhances emotional wellbeing.

- Confusion continues within the sector and amongst families in relation to the purpose of the funding. Many families are under the impression that the ISS funding is approved specifically for their child, as they are required to provide a large amount of personal diagnosis information and Centrelink information (Health Care Cards) about their child during the application process. The ISA is then required to support the ECEC to ensure that the correct information is provided to the family about the purpose of the funding and how the extra staffing will support all children's inclusion. Due to long wait lists for assessments, many over 12 - 18 months, or the complexity of the families at the service, diagnosis information can also become very difficult to obtain which can either delay or prevent the ISS application process from occurring. The need for specific child information also builds the impression for many educators that the funding is needed to support that one child's inclusion. The ISA spends a lot of time working with educators to change long term attitudes around the need for 1:1 to that of an inclusive practice approach.
- Finally the ISS application process has become a substantial part of the ISFs' role as they support services to use the Portal application system and to understand and provide information within the application process that supports inclusive practice. They also reapply for changes in circumstances, such as new children or children moving care environments, which occur on a regular basis. ISFs report that the ISS application process, on average, consumes 2 - 3 hours of their working day. This impacts on their ability to work with teams, on the floor, to support long term inclusion practices which will assist with the inclusion of all children.