

Response to the Productivity Commission. Childcare and Early Childhood Learning Public Inquiry.

This submission to the childcare and early childhood learning public inquiry intentionally focusses on issues concerning the participation of infants and toddlers in Australian childcare and in particular the way that matters relating to infant toddler childcare and early learning are addressed within the National Productivity Agenda and National Quality Framework.

The case for University qualified teachers to work directly with infants and toddlers.

Over the past 30 years the number of infants enrolled in formal childcare in Australia has steadily increased. Traditionally emphasising physical care, emotional development and the provision of safe and hygienic environments, there has historically been limited attention given to educational aims or learning outcomes of infants (Huntsman, 2005). The widespread acceptance of neuroscience, recognising the plasticity of the brain of infants and toddlers, along with a growing body of evidence linking education outcomes with a nations productivity - the infant is now considered a learner from birth - full of potential that can be shaped by experience (Kirp, 2007). This image of infants and toddlers beyond their physical and emotional development has extended expectations for their child care experience beyond care, to a pedagogical responsibility framed by explicit learning and development outcomes – see The Early Years Learning Framework (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Firmly situated in the discourses of a Productivity Agenda (Productivity Agenda Working Group – Early Childhood Development Sub Group, 2008), infants inclusion in Australia’s mandated Early Years Learning Framework is evidence of this contemporary view of the importance of the early years in laying the foundations for future health, development, learning and wellbeing (Council of Australian Governments, 2009).

Higher expectations for the learning and development outcomes for all Australian children demand higher expectations of the early childhood workforce. According to the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC) (2012), “[t]here is increasing recognition that the work of caring for and educating young children is complex and requires enhanced qualifications and ongoing professional development” (p.4). We applaud the Government’s decision in 2012 to introduce nationally consistent and enhanced ratios and minimum qualifications for those working with infants and toddlers as part of the National Quality Framework. Responding to key research highlighting the importance of educator/child interactions in responding sensitively to infants and toddlers as part of optimal learning and development, the improved ratios lay a sound foundation for quality experiences for young children participating in early childhood education and care.

The requirements for the qualifications of educators working with infants and toddlers has however received less attention. The NQF prioritises higher qualified staff to work with older preschool children as is evidenced by the requirement under Universal Access provisions to ensure that a University qualified teacher works with children in their year prior to compulsory schooling. There is no such requirement for highly qualified teachers to work with children under three years despite robust evidence of the foundational importance of high quality interactions and learning experiences in the first three years of life. Australia continues to differentiate the needs of infants and toddlers from older pre-schoolers with comparatively weak requirements for educators working with infants and toddlers to hold only minimal vocational qualifications. Mounting Australian and international research in the area of infant / toddler learning and development find that higher qualified educators working with infants and toddlers (Brownlee, Berthelsen, Irving, Boulton-Lewis & McCrindle, 2000; Manlove et al, 2008; Degotardi, 2010) are more likely than minimally qualified educators to provide the high quality interactions and experiences that these children need for optimal leaning and development. This is particularly the case for infants and toddlers from disadvantaged backgrounds (Phillips & Adams, 2001).

The need for mentoring and leadership in infant toddler settings.

The focus of attention to qualifications within the Australian reform agenda for educators working with infants and toddlers has been on the attainment of minimum qualifications and yet research indicates that more effective outcomes for children are achieved when attention is paid to more highly qualified educators who are able to offer mentoring and leadership to educator teams (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007). While acknowledging the requirement for at least one University qualified early childhood teacher in all settings and the introduction of the role of an Educational Leader to oversee the learning program as improvements to the focus on learning and pedagogy within the NQF, we question the capacity for these educators to effectively mentor and lead the large numbers of educators for whom they have responsibility. Given that in most cases the Educational Leader has no formal industrial recognition and no explicit requirement for dedicated time to undertake the activities of educational leadership, the impact of this role within an early childhood setting is likely to be dependent on the choices and priorities of the employer. In addition, the lack of a robust qualification requirement for the Educational Leader within the legislation provides little assurance that there will be direct benefit to children from such an appointment. This is particularly the case in infant toddler settings where it is more likely to have a majority of vocationally qualified educators whose competency based training has had only a minimal focus on curriculum theory. In these situations the role of pedagogical mentor and leader is most needed to ensure that the infant toddler program provides opportunities for high quality learning and development experiences based on recognised theory and research and most importantly is built on the principles of reflective practice.

The need for accurate data on who is working with infants and toddlers

Data collection designed to capture the workforce patterns of staff and their qualifications and experience is included in the National ECEC Workforce Census <http://deewr.gov.au/national-early-childhood-education-and-care-workforce-census-2010-results> Developed "...specifically to address information gaps in existing administrative data sources, with respect to the ECEC workforce, participation in and provision of preschool programs and children with additional needs in child care ..." it is claimed to "assist policy makers to better understand the challenges of providing quality education and child care, assess the capacity in the workforce to meet future demand and formulate strategies to support early childhood development policies".

The data collected includes information on the work patterns, years of experience and qualifications of educators working with children birth to five years. It aggregates information to provide a snapshot of the early childhood workforce profile from year to year. It collects data on specific target groups and while for example there is data collected about the profile of educators who work with children aged four – five years, there is no data collected on the qualifications of educators who work with infants or indeed any child under four years of age. Given the importance of the first three years in children's optimal learning and development, it is essential for Australia to know who is working directly with infants and toddlers and what qualifications they hold. While there is some assurance that all staff will hold vocational qualifications it is not fully understood how the varying qualifications of educators are distributed when no accurate data is available.

Conclusion and recommendations

In recognising that the intent of the review is to explore solutions to perceived weaknesses in the current arrangements for early childhood education and care provision within existing funding parameters, we urge the Productivity Commission to consider infants and toddlers as equally entitled to high quality education and care experiences as their preschool counterparts. While this does not imply that conditions for infants and toddlers should be the same as preschoolers, we urge the Commission to be mindful of the need for a greater focus on the qualifications of educators working with infants and toddlers.

We recommend

- a review of the current focus of workforce policy on minimal qualifications for all educators, to a recognition of the benefits and efficiencies that University qualified early childhood teachers can offer as mentors and pedagogical leaders in all infant toddler groups,
- The inclusion of specific data relating to the qualifications and experience of educators working directly with infants and toddlers in future National ECEC Workforce Census collections.

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