



3 February 2014

Childcare Inquiry
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City ACT 2600
childcare@pc.gov.au

Dear Commissioners,

Please find attached a submission from Child Australia to the Productivity Commission Inquiry on Child Care and Early Childhood Learning.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this issue.

Yours faithfully,

Dawson Ruhl
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN AUSTRALIA

A submission to the Australian Government Productivity Commission Public Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

Child Australia is a diverse organisation with a long history of supporting the Early Childhood Education and Care sector. Since 2005 we have delivered professional support to the sector through the Department of Education funded Inclusion and Professional Support Program. Within that program, Child Australia fulfils the function of Professional Support Coordinator in Western Australia (PSCWA) and the Northern Territory (PSCNT) and manages 6 of the 8 Inclusion Support Agencies in Western Australia. The PSC and ISA programs are funded to support Australian Government Approved Child Care Services (AGACCS).

The Case for Change

Children need to be cared for and nurtured and the younger they are the higher the level of care and nurture required. Recent advances in our understanding of child development – particularly brain development* – have highlighted the importance of ensuring that all young children (0 - 5) are accessing experiences and stimuli that are appropriate to their age to ensure their full growth and development and consequently their ability to succeed in schooling and beyond into adulthood.

In our society parents are the primary carers of children and responsible for nurturing their growth and development. More and more parents however are seeking alternative forms of care for their children. One of the key findings of the Australian Government Childcare in Australia Report (August 2013) was that more than one million children were in 'approved child care' in September 2012, up 33.4 per cent since September

2004. Additionally there are many parents that use 'informal care' arrangements for their children.

Who makes sure that all young children are cared for and nurtured as they should be? 150 years ago, Australian society saw the need for every child to have access to school education and for every family to ensure that their children attended school and created a system of school education that is '*free, secular and compulsory*' (Victorian Education Act in 1872 followed by other States not long after). Just as happened 150 years ago with school education – we are realising that society has an obligation to ensure that every young child, in the years before compulsory schooling, is given the opportunity to grow and develop to their full capacity. This obligation is based both on the rights of the child and the Australia's future social and economic needs.

Australia has been working towards this with the implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework; the National Quality Framework and regulatory process; and Universal Access to Preschool however the challenge of ensuring that all Australian children have equal access remains. Children of this age in Australia are cared for in a

**Children cultivate 85% of their intellect, personality and skills by age five.*

range of contexts such as in the home by parents or extended family or friends; or in formal childcare settings. A homogeneous system such as schooling will not suffice to 'capture' every child - nor is it enough to assume that children cared for in the home are catered for in terms of their growth and development.

In summary, it is incumbent on the 'State' to ensure that every young child is supported through appropriate education and care to achieve their potential. The implementation of standards and regulation in some formal settings is a good beginning but what about the rest? Where are the standards, regulation and support for in home carers and informal or non-mainstream group care settings?

Education and care for all children 0 – 5 should be *‘free, secular and compulsory’* and take place in various settings including families and communities.

A New Paradigm

Quality early childhood education and care for all children provides the foundation for Australia’s future – establishing the basis for individual success in schooling and beyond into adult life which will translate into social and economic growth for the country.

Features:

- Publicly funded – both Federal and State/Territory – ensuring access to all.
- Responsiveness to changing family and society needs and local contexts.
- A National Quality Framework applied to, monitored and supported in all settings including the home.
- A multi-agency approach to regulation of child care and education and care services.
- Appropriately trained and remunerated workforce.

The Role of Government

The Federal Childcare Act in 1972 heralded a national growth in childcare services that can be attributed to the broad societal changes which were occurring at this time: a growing feminist movement; more women entering the workforce; better education levels and growing demands across the board for more government involvement, and funding in areas such as health, education and childcare. This trend has continued and there is no doubt that quality, affordable early childhood education and care is a key factor in workforce participation for parents of young children, particularly women.

Whilst formal Childcare developed primarily as a service to meet the employment needs of parents (primarily mothers), and whilst early childhood learning is about the creation of social environments and exchanges that secure the wellbeing of children and nurture their developmental futures, a child's care, education and upbringing are so connected and inter-related, that providing separate kinds of services and applying rules, standards and support to some settings and not others is inequitable in terms of the rights of the child and will not support Australia's development into the future.

Let us acknowledge that in the world today childcare and early childhood learning are not discrete concepts but rather deeply integrated activities and that for the benefit of children today and Australia tomorrow a system of quality early childhood education and care inclusive of all young children and their families in all contexts must be the goal of government.

Funding

Just like school education, early childhood education and care is in the public interest and should be publicly funded. Maintaining current funding parameters is unrealistic and unreasonable. In 2008–09 Federal and State/Territory Governments combined contributed \$30.8b in recurrent funding to government schools.

Australian public investment in early childhood education and care has increased significantly over time. For the 2013-14 to 2016-17 period the Australian Government's investment through the Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate will have reached more than \$22 billion, which is more than triple the investment (\$6.3 billion) in the four years covering 2003-04 to 2006-07. In addition, the Australian Government provides Budget Based Funding for around 340 early childhood education and care services. Despite this, by comparison with public investment in school education, it is a small amount.

State or Federal

Australia's constitutional arrangements allocate primary responsibility for school education to State and Territory governments and consequently State and Territory Governments contribute around 90% of the public expenditure on school education.

It is difficult to compare State/Territory expenditure in the two sectors with Federal expenditure due to factors such as the overlap in the preschool and out of school hours care areas; and the complication of capital expenditure however it is clear that State/Territory expenditure in the early childhood education and care sector is minimal and that the bulk of that is spent on preschool provision. More significant investment by State and Territory Governments in early childhood education and care is an area that needs to be considered.

Appropriately Trained and Remunerated Workforce

Historically, the trend is for increasingly longer training periods for early childhood educators and the provision of formal educational settings for children at an increasing younger age. Optimal development relies on the interplay between nature and nurture and children's development related to social and emotional, cognitive and physical domains have been related to the quality of interactions and care they receive during childhood. The Commonwealth Reform Agenda includes a renewed accreditation system with seven new quality standards of assessment. These standards focus on improving the programs practice and qualifications of staff. The changes to staff qualification requirements for preschool and long day care in the National Quality Standard are designed to improve on existing arrangements and are intended to deliver educational leadership across services and the early education and care sector. A goal for all staff working with children in early learning centres is for them to have a minimum Certificate III level qualification. Other minimum qualification requirements include having a qualified professional for educational leadership in every service. This means for each group of one to twenty five children centres will be required to provide access to a four year degree early childhood trained educator (ACECQA, 2012). However,

merely increasing ratios of educators to children or insistence on employing qualified teachers does not mean positive change will occur.

There are many factors related to providing quality education and care that can influence children's development but it is teacher education and training that is most effective in promoting optimal child outcomes (Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002; Dwyer, Chait, & McKee, 2000; Weaver, 2002). Professional development for child care providers has been shown to have positive impacts on children (Powell, Diamond, Burchinal, & Koehler, 2010; Saracho & Spodek, 2007). The ongoing professional development and training requirements of degree qualified and non-degree skilled staff working with young children in early childhood education and care settings need to be carefully evaluated. In particular, it is essential that leadership is developed in ECEC services to support the changes required in the NQF (Child Australia, 2011). To ensure links to the National Quality Standard it is essential that training needs are identified and coordinated by experienced professionals who are able to assist services in making decisions about pedagogy and promote professional autonomy.

Conditions for educators working in early learning centres are not comparable to those educators working in school settings especially in regards to the security, support, leave and pay set down in the union conditions related to teachers. Therefore, while the number of four year qualified teachers needed due to the new regulations may be available, the early learning centre context may not be attractive to those who can also be employed to work in a school setting (Thorpe, Boyd, Ailwood & Brownlee, 2011). It is unclear at this stage if educators will remain in early learning settings once they complete the degree course. If not, this will place additional pressure on the early learning centre sector to employ and retain degree qualified staff.

There needs to be responsiveness to changing family and society needs but care must be taken to recognise that staff working in different education and care contexts requires different professional development. For example, In Home Care (IHC) is a

separate sub specialty of early and middle childhood and requires a different set of skills. Consequently, there would be little industry support for simply filtering centre based staff into IHC. Instead, comprehensive investigation of the learning needs of practitioners working in different early childhood education and settings is required.

An Integrated Approach

Currently, despite research describing the importance of early childhood development and advances in government commitment there is fragmented system design related to the education and care of young children. The agencies involved are active at the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) table to reduce regulatory burden in an effort to reduce costs, but this is a mono-policy agency approach. The average early learning centre service is subject to a minimum of 26 separate pieces of law and regulations e.g. health regulations alone costs services in the vicinity of \$1500 a year. A multi-agency approach to regulation of child care and education and care services is recommended. This should include health, education, child protection and local government. There are a number of sectors who have already explored this avenue and a comprehensive review of these experiences would be beneficial i.e. disability services in developing and implementing parent purchase of service program costs and implications. Integrated service delivery is the most flexible model available but is problematic as private providers and some large not for profit service are in commercial competition with each other. It is also recommended that services eligible for Australian Government support have a requirement to work in an integrated receptive management model.

Educational environments can potentially be pivotal to coordinating inter-professional relationships and this places educators in a central position to manage such resources. The benefits to children in educators building positive relationships with parents and families have been well documented and are apparent in many of the new Australian policies, reforms and curriculum documents (ACECQA, 2012; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, AITSL, 2011; DEEWR, 2009).

Cumulatively and independently children's experiences at home and in education settings are related and there is a complex interplay between home and community cultural beliefs and practices and the different influences on individual children. Therefore, educators are required to fully understand the set of contextual structures surrounding the child, at the micro and macro level, described in the social ecology model by Bronfenbrenner (1977) together with a deep understanding of the importance of family-centered practices (Pang & Wert, 2010). Indeed, a local Western Australian university has recently re-designed their early childhood undergraduate teaching degree course to include specific training in managing an integrated approach to the education and care of young children (Davies & Trinidad, 2013). An inter-disciplinary approach to education and care of young children requires the provision of targeted educator training. This will provide preparation in the skills needed for successful implementation of inter-professional services and is perhaps the beginning of providing a truly professional holistic service to parents and young children that encompasses health, education and care.

Summary

Quality Early Childhood Education and Care is an inalienable right of every child and an essential element of Australia's future growth. There is a clear parallel between school education reform in the late 1800's and the current milieu of early childhood education and care as a public good, universally accessible and publically funded. To reiterate, quality education and care should be available for all children 0 – 5 and take place in various settings: family, school and community based. Early childhood educators must receive appropriate remuneration and recognition. Large scale reform is required in Australia's early childhood education and care system and it is the role of both Federal and State/Territory Governments to lead and fund this reform in collaboration with the Early Childhood Education and Care sector. Reform must focus on a system that adopts a holistic and inter-disciplinary approach to children and families. Targeted and

ongoing professional development and training for all staff working with young children in early childhood education and care settings is essential. To this end, the findings of this review should be used to inform a redesign of Australia's current of early childhood education and care system ensuring a focus on social inclusion, quality and affordability.

References

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). (2012). *Criteria for use in assessing qualifications*. Retrieved from <http://acecqa.gov.au/storage/Criteria%20for%20use%20in%20assessing%20qualifications.pdf>

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). (2011). *The national professional standards for teachers*. Retrieved from http://www.teacherstandards.aitsl.edu.au/static/docs/AITSL_National_Professional_Standards_for_Teachers_Final_110511.pdf

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32, 513–531.

Burchinal, M., Cryer, D., Clifford, R. M., & Howes, C. (2002). Caregiver training and classroom quality in child care centers. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6(1), 2-11.

Child Australia (February, 2011). Submission to the Productivity Commission: Early Childhood Development Workforce Study. Retrieved from http://www.pc.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0020/106454/sub078.pdf

Davies, S. M., & Trinidad, S. (2013). Australian early childhood educators: From government policy to university practice. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 44(1), 73-79. doi:10.1080/10901027.2013.758539

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2009). *Belonging, being, becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia*. ACT: Commonwealth of Australia.

Dwyer, C. M., Chait, R., & McKee, P. (2000). *Building strong foundations for early learning: Guide to high-quality early childhood education programs*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Planning and Evaluation Service.

Pang, Y., & Wert, B. (2010). Preservice teachers' attitudes towards family-centered practices in early intervention: An implication for teacher education. *Educational Research*, 1(8), 253–262.

Powell, Douglas R.; Diamond, Karen E.; Burchinal, Margaret R., & Koehler, Matthew J. (2010). Effects of an early literacy professional development intervention on Head Start teachers and children. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102(2), 299-312.

Saracho, O. N., & Spodek, B. (2007). Early childhood teachers' preparation and the quality of program outcomes. *Early Childhood Development and Care*, 177(1), 71-91.

Thorpe, K., Boyd, W., Ailwood, J., & Brownlee, J. (2011). 'Who wants to work in childcare? Pre-service early childhood teacher's consideration of work in the child-care sector', *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 36(1), pp. 85-94.

Weaver, R. H. (2002). Predictors of quality and commitment in family child care: Provider education, personal resources, and support. *Early Education and Development*, 13(3), 265-282.