



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

Dear Commissioners,

Please find attached a submission from the Professional Support Co-ordinators Alliance 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

Convenor Professional Support Coordinator Alliance

The PSCA includes the Professional Support Coordinator (PSC) in each state and territory as a part of the Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP). Professional Support Coordinators provide professional development and support to education and care services to enhance the provision of quality services to children and families. PSCs also manage Bicultural Support, the IPSP Resource Library, and Specialist Equipment.

The PSCA exists to ensure effective implementation of the IPSP program through collaboration between state/territory PSCs to work towards achieving national consistency in information to education and care services about government policy and consistency in professional development and support.

Our delivery at a state/ territory and a national level has contributed to the implementation of government reforms and our evaluation of our programs identifies great success in improving standards and quality in education and care services. This means positive outcomes for children, families, communities and the sector.

Australian Capital Territory

Communities@Work

Website: www.actpsc.com.au

South Australia

Lady Gowrie Child Centre

Website: www.pscsa.org.au

New South Wales

Children's Services Central

(Lead agency **Community Child Care Co-operative NSW**)

Website: www.cscentral.org.au

Tasmania

Lady Gowrie Tasmania

Website: www.psctas.org.au

Northern Territory

Child Inclusive Learning and Development Australia

Website: www.childaustralia.org.au

Victoria

Gowrie Victoria

Website: www.gowrievictoria.org.au

Western Australia

Child Inclusive Learning and Development Australia

Website: www.childaustralia.org.au

Queensland

Health and Community Services Workforce Council
Inc.

Website: www.pscq.org.au |

A submission to the Australian Government Productivity Commission Public Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning by the Professional Support Coordinator Alliance

This submission provides a perspective based on the implementation of policy and the essential professional learning, development and support required to deliver quality early childhood programs.

The focus is upon the important aspect of professional learning, professional development and support and its role in enhancing inclusion and the delivery of quality education and care services and in the comprehensive implementation of reforms and policy agendas.

This submission is based on four key elements.

1. Professional learning, development and support is essential for the delivery of high quality early childhood education and care;
2. Professional learning, development and support is a tool for policy implementation;
3. Professional learning, development and support is an essential component for the continuum of learning and education and a professional workforce ; and
4. Professional learning, development and support must be intentional, innovative, targeted and consistent.

Professional learning, development and support is essential for the delivery of high quality early childhood education and care

The quality and effectiveness of early childhood education and care is directly linked to the knowledge, expertise and experience of those providing it.

“There is a general consensus, supported by research, that well-educated, well-trained professionals are the key factor in providing high-quality ECEC with the most favourable cognitive and social outcomes for children. Research shows that the behaviour of those who work in ECEC matters and that this is related to their education and training. The qualifications, education and training of ECEC staff are, therefore, an important policy issue.” (p.144, OECD, 2012)

The more an educator knows about child development, health and safety and early childhood pedagogy the better they will perform. We know that the use of higher qualified educators results in improved outcomes for children. To this end a core element of the National Quality Framework (NQF) is the increase of qualified educators in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Sector. Effective professional development and support assists in creating stability in the ECEC workforce.

Formal qualifications ensure a strong foundation and a base level of knowledge and the continuous improvement required of educators and services under the NQF also requires reflective practice and the maintenance of currency of knowledge and best practice standards.

“However, it is not the qualification per se that has an impact on child outcomes but the ability of better qualified staff members to create a high-quality pedagogic environment that makes the difference.” (p30, Elliott, 2006)

The amount of change and growth in our sector presents us with opportunities for increasing the quality of early childhood programs, adapting to and working positively with change. Keeping up to date with theory and research is indeed a challenge. Professional development and support is the key to driving continuous improvement through the growth of both knowledge and expertise in the ECEC sector. Professional development and support can and should be a combination of both accredited training leading to formal qualifications and other forms of professional development and support such as mentoring and coaching, online and live hosted sessions, inservice training and workshops. Guided and reflective practice that supports educators to use and build on their existing knowledge and experience will achieve improved outcomes for children.

Professional learning, development and support is a tool for policy implementation

Policy implementation requires significant resourcing and support

Policy reform in the area of education and care delivers positive outcomes for children, families, communities and the sector itself. In delivering reforms it is the stage of policy implementation that is critical for successful reform. Implementation strategies that ensure success include adequate resourcing to support communication of new mandates and compliance, the acquisition of qualifications to support compliance and legislative requirements, the delivery of professional development and support to provide inspiration and aspiration for achievement of policy goals and a positive response to the introduction of reforms.

The Early Childhood Development Workforce Report (p259, Productivity Commission, 2011) notes that 'meeting the requirements of the NQS, EYLF, and FSAC (all components of the National Quality Framework) will require ECEC staff to alter and to critically reflect on aspects of their professional practice. In order to do so effectively many ECEC workers will require professional development and support'.

Communication of new compliance and regulatory standards

It is clear that effective communication on newly introduced compliance and regulation requires commitment, collaboration and consistency in messages. This must be considered from an external view and should be carefully targeted, planned and delivered. The development of a communication strategy is best supported and achieved through a professional development lens. Professional development perceived as continuous learning enables practitioners to affirm existing understandings and to acquire new knowledge and skills and thereby remaining up-to-date with policy change and reform (PSCA, 2010).

An example of the use of a strategic approach was at the launch of the National Quality Framework. The collaborative strategy of Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and the PSCA resulted in fact sheets, nationally consistent information sessions, website information and informed and expert responses to questions through free call numbers.

Upon reflection this strategy successfully achieved communication objectives by;

- keeping awareness and commitment high;
- maintaining consistent messages

- ensuring expectations did not drift out of line with what would be delivered. (p4, Pocknee, Mulvaney, Schier, 2011)

Acquisition of qualifications

The reforms within the education and care sector have come with the requirement for increased qualifications. Higher level qualifications are indeed a key driver in improving sector and service quality and also in supporting workforce development.

Examples of initiatives to assist with the acquisition of qualifications include the RPL Remote strategy, funded TAFE qualifications, Traineeships, HECS Help to name a small number. Take up of these initiatives is wholly dependent upon awareness of opportunities, targeted approaches, work place relevance and support from colleagues, employers, family and friends. Coordination of opportunities has, to date, been inconsistent and significant improvement is needed.

In addition to meeting qualifications requirements, further study and qualifications (separate to mandated requirements) can contribute to raising professionalism within the sector. In recognising the importance of leadership and its contribution to successful change a leadership qualification has been developed and mapped to the Advanced Diploma of Community Sector Management (National Quality Framework Leadership). A number of PSCs have successfully sought funding for this accredited course through the Workforce Development Fund. Outstanding results and increased professionalism as a result of studying the course are attributed to quality of content and facilitation, employer support and contribution for the achievement of leadership goals, the valuing of professional learning by the employee and external funding sources.

It is essential to ensure the quality of qualifications delivered by training organisations and higher education institutions and this issue is comprehensively explored within the Productivity Commission Early Childhood Development Workforce (Chapter 10, 2011).

Inspiration and aspiration-reaching for higher quality in education and care

In 2008 PSCA research identified that ‘staff who access a rich array of professional development opportunities are well positioned to contribute to ongoing improvements in their own practice and make significant contributions to the quality of programs in their workplace.’ (P 6, Russell, 2010)

The amount of change and growth in our sector presents great opportunities for increasing the quality of our services but it also presents challenges in adapting to and working positively with change and in keeping up to date with theory and research.

Professional development, when planned and implemented effectively, is a key tool that can be used not just to support policy implementation but also to provide inspiration and aspiration for improving quality within services and more broadly in the sector.

Ongoing professional development has the potential to fill in the knowledge and skills that staff may be lacking or require updating due to changes in particular knowledge fields. This is especially crucial in ECEC where new programmes are being developed continuously. The body of research on what works is growing, the discussions on quality in ECEC are ongoing, and the focus has changed to a developmental perspective. (P148, OECD, 2012)

Professional learning, development and support is an essential component for the continuum of learning and education and a professional workforce

Professional learning, development and support assists services to engage with sustainable change and to improve practice. Professional development and support enhances educator abilities to work towards innovative solutions and support continuing improvement, challenge assumptions and reflection on current practice (PSCA, 2013). By linking professional learning, development and support with the National Quality Standard educators are able to engage in professional dialogue that supports deeper understanding and ongoing reflection of contemporary research, child development and early childhood theory to enhance and improve practice.

The Productivity Commission's Early Childhood Development Workforce report (p 36, 2011) recognises the importance of ongoing professional learning, observing, 'Professional development and support augments formal qualifications and assists in the maintenance of ECEC workers' skills. It is an important means of imparting specialised skills where they are required, distributing knowledge and supporting the career development of ECEC workers.'

Enhancing professionalism and leadership capacity

Professional learning, development and support are imperative components for improving and recognising professional practice, and enhancing sector leadership. Through professional learning, educators build knowledge, skills and professionalism to support improved outcomes for children and their families. Research demonstrates that services accessing professional learning and support enable educators to develop 'deeper levels of understanding...and enhances our effectiveness in work with children, families and staff teams' (Russell, 2010). In addition to furthering educator understanding,

Russell (2010) determined professional learning supports educators 'to link theory and practice', providing 'understanding of the value and significance of our work.'

The National Quality Standard outlines the minimum standard for ECEC services to meet; including specific requirements focused on professional learning. Standard 7.1 - *Effective leadership promotes a positive organisational culture and builds a professional learning community*, defines how professional learning must be incorporated in everyday practice.

A professional learning community requires a commitment to ongoing improvement through professional development, engagement with contemporary research, professional dialogue and critical reflection. The Productivity Commission's report (p 49, 2011) recommends, 'Governments should ensure that every member of the ECEC workforce has access to appropriate professional development and support programs...Priority should be given to enabling all workers to participate in professional development that will assist them to implement the National Quality Standard, the Early Years Learning Framework and the Framework for School Age Care'

Through the provision of professional development, learning and support that links the National Quality Standard and Learning Frameworks to everyday practice, educators are encouraged to be innovative in their thinking, build on their learning and develop confidence in their curriculum decision making and leadership abilities (DEEWR, 2009). This is further supported by the Early Years Workforce Strategy 2012-2016 (SCSEEC, 2012), defining a national strategy to sustaining a highly qualified ECEC workforce through professional development and support as a necessity to enhance professionalism and leadership within the ECEC sector. Findings from New Zealand research highlight that changes in ECEC policy and practice require, "ongoing programs of professional development...to help ensure that teachers maintain currency in their understanding of recent theories and research related to children's learning" (McLachlan, 2011).

Enhancing career and training pathways

Staff retention is adversely affected by remuneration and may lead to staff feeling undervalued (Productivity Commission, p 100). However by planning, financing and supporting staff to engage in professional learning and career development, services are "contributing significantly to staff commitment and engagement" (Russell, 2010) to an individual service and, more broadly, to the ECEC sector.

'Professional development and support provided by all PSCs, aims to provide equity of learning for all educators and staff by using a diverse variety of learning formats that reflect Bloom's Revised

Taxonomy (Anderson, 2000), and support professional growth, retention, promotes career pathways and may link to formal qualifications' (PSCA, 2013). Professional learning cannot occur in isolation or as a onetime occurrence, making it imperative for effective professional learning, development and support to be 'ongoing to engage educators to plan, act, observe and reflect and inform continual improvement process that takes place over time' (PSCA, 2013).

Professional learning, development and support must be intentional, targeted and consistent

Planning is the key

The development of a workforce plan requires knowledge and expertise as well as time. Whilst some of the larger providers in the sector with multiple services can achieve this it is often beyond the scope of many stand-alone services. Support for workforce planning is necessary to ensure that all services and educators are accessing quality professional development and support. Support assists services and individuals to unpack their needs and goals; consider the balance between catering for neophyte and experienced staff, and design professional development programs that suit their context.

The range of service types, delivery modes and business models in the sector is broad and the capacity and resourcing available to services and individuals in the sector for professional development and support is just as broad. Providing equitable access across the sector is a challenge for Government. A program of professional learning, development and support, including workforce planning, is essential if all services and educators in the sector are going to meet the continuous improvement requirements of the NQF and achieve better outcomes for children.

Programs need to support all service types for consistency and full implementation of reforms

Under the NQF, early childhood educators are required to have deeper understandings of early education pedagogy and child development and provide richer experiences for all children, including those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged. The emphasis on the value of partnering with families to meet the educational and well-being needs of children requires educators to develop strong connections with a diverse array of families and the communities in which they are placed.

Effective professional development and support provided to services requires innovative thinking and a full range of activities that attempt to increase the knowledge base, skill set, and attitudinal

perspectives of educators to support continuous improvement and build the capacity of educators to resource their own learning to sustain high quality professional practices. Approaches must be based on contemporary research and trends in adult education and be customised for individuals, teams and the sector.

A core component of achieving the outcomes of the NQF requires educators to think critically about practice, to investigate and to challenge assumptions. Expert facilitators leading localised, multi-disciplinary/service networks, communities of practice and professional development cycles support this by expanding on key points, questioning, connecting and building on ideas and keeping the group on task. This exposure to a range of services and service types also importantly, enables educators to develop peer support relationships with the range of community services available, thereby enhancing linkages and transition for families and children across service types.

“Co-operation between different services – centre-based services, family day care, school and out-of school – helps to create a continuum of services that is reassuring for parents and can meet the needs of young children. It can also build up a network of dialogue and social relationships that goes beyond the simple provision of services to enhance the participation of parents and other civil society stakeholders. Eventually, co-operation between different services can give birth to a comprehensive services approach that is more sensitive to the full range of children’s learning and developmental needs across the day, and to parental need for child care and other opportunities.” (P55, OECD, 2006)

In addition to raising the quality and supporting continuous improvement, the NQF aims to drive national consistency. In order to achieve this, it is essential that an integrated, national approach that draws on state based knowledge and expertise to deliver professional development and support is provided. National consistency can only be achieved by ensuring professional development and support provided is consistent in quality, access and cost, is responsive to local need and ensures services in rural and remote locations are not disadvantaged.

Inherent in any pursuit of quality and excellence is increased professionalism and a clear continuum of learning and career growth. PSCA believes remuneration, status and standing are also key contributors to quality and excellence and these components are contingent upon professional learning, development and support.

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