

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION

childcare@pc.gov.au

3 February, 2014

Dear Commissioners,

I would like to submit the following information to the Productivity Commission - Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning. I am submitting this document as an individual early childhood professional representing my views and opinions.

My background in early childhood education and care is 30 years long with various levels of qualifications from certificate to degree. I have worked as a child care educator, vacation care employee, teaching director, non-teaching director in both not-for-profit and private services. I also have experience working with children who have additional needs and families in crisis. I have been a consumer of early childhood services as a parent.

I am a keen early childhood advocate in terms of not-for-profit community owned services and most importantly the right of every child to a safe and nurturing education from birth. Humans learn from birth and even more so when they are safe and nurtured, especially when strong bonds with carers and effective partnerships between all parties are formed.

I believe that as a Nation with inclusive and diverse communities, including our First Nation People we are in a unique position to ensure that every child knows they belong, celebrates their sameness and starts life's journey with a sense of being able to achieve.

WORKFORCE ISSUES

I am University trained, and continue to attend University in a Masters program. My colleagues who attended University and now work in the K – 6 sector earn up to \$20,000 p.a. more (this not taking into account that I am a Director with 40 staff + the education and care of 55 children every day, 50 weeks/year and an additional 40 children per day 12 weeks/year during school vacation periods).

As a manager of an early childhood service I have pro-actively undertaken recruitment of University trained teachers. I also recruit TAFE trained educators who provide an excellent balance in the care and education of children. I have been a strong commitment to best outcomes in relation to both education and care of children from birth to six (6). I am finding it increasingly difficult to recruit teachers due to poorer conditions and pay specific to early childhood services.

I encourage educators at the service I manage to continue studying towards University levels supporting them to research and practice education and care. A barrier to this is the cost of training given the low wages. I myself will most certainly have to withdraw from studies this year as I am unable to afford the fees without a scholarship.

As an early childhood educator over the past 30 years I have undertaken 1,000s of hours of unpaid work i.e. writing developmental reports, meeting with parents/carers, attending meetings, developing curriculum, providing additional centre based family activities to form stronger partnerships. It is indicative of community attitude that child care educators love children and do not mind giving up their own time to provide additional quality practice to the early childhood setting.

It is without payment that I have purchased \$1,000s of my own money (from a low wage) to purchase equipment and materials to provide quality educational experiences for children beyond which the centre budget has allowed. This is a common practice in both community and for-profit settings.

I have also engaged skills of repurposing items and purchasing items from recycle services such as Reverse Garbage. I have been known to ask families and businesses for donations of goods. Whilst I am proud of the fact that I am undertaking sustainable practice and teaching tomorrows citizens it is still mostly on my wage and time to undertake.

As a University trained teacher having come from a certificate (TAFE trained) background I undertook early childhood as a specific focus given my strengths, interests and knowledge of early childhood development.

There is a marked difference in the outcomes of training between University and TAFE levels. Having completed three (3) separate TAFE level qualifications I was fortunate to have a grounding in the practicalities across all domains of early childhood service provision. My University studies have provided further evidence and knowledge of child development particularly in terms of educating children aged birth to six (6) years.

As a supervisor and mentor to students currently studying and attending practicum placement in early childhood settings I am concerned as to the quality of training by some Registered Training Organisations. Some private RTO's do as little as provide a very slim guide to activities and no support, mentoring or liaison with the early childhood setting.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Increase University trained teacher wages and conditions to parity with school based teachers Australia wide.
- Increase TAFE level trained early childhood educators wages and conditions to above the minimum wage and conditions.
- Improve working conditions for all early childhood educators, paid curriculum development time away from children, paid meeting time etc.
- All RTO's be formally vetted in an ongoing process by ACECQA with an approval number provided for prospective students to choose from.

AFFORDABILITY & AVAILABILITY

I reiterate that I advocate for provision of early childhood service by community not-for-profit groups. Community = partnerships with shared visions, values and purpose. Recognising that the development of a person's intellect begins at birth and not when they commence schooling is essential to a change in the rights of every infant and child as well as the increased support of society towards quality service provision.

In July, 2013 the Australian Government Productivity Commission released the Staff Working Paper 'Deep and Persistent Disadvantage in Australia' (McLachlan, Gilfillan, Gordon, 2013). The paper includes the section '*Early experiences and how they can influence life chances*' (4; 4.1 p98) supports the research of investment in quality, affordable early childhood services. The authors identify the quality of stimulation from first, the home and family, then other environmental factors such as good quality child care.

I refer to the following paper as an indicator of contemporary Australian early childhood provision: *Starting Well: Benchmarking early education across the world, (2012)*

The paper is a research based document which is based on current available data and relies on reference to several sources such as research data. The paper has both qualitative and quantitative data with empirical evidence used to support its conclusion.

The paper was facilitated by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), the foundation commissioning the programme, The Lien Foundation, and outlines the number of countries (45). The participants included academics, practitioners and policy specialists with expertise in the field of early childhood provisions in their country.

The report is referenced against various sources most notably the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) from various studies and reports (2006 – 2012) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (1990 – 2012). References are inclusive of specific research undertaken in countries which are included in the study cohort. References are varied between research on practice and social and human capital e.g. "Lifetime Effects: The High Scope Perry Preschool Study through age 40" Schweinhart, J. et al, (2005); investment e.g. "Return on investment: Cost vs benefits". James Heckman, University of Chicago, (2008).

The paper is inclusive of an index which measures and ranks, social context, availability, affordability and quality of early childhood program provision in 45 countries.

'At its core the Starting Well Index assesses the extent to which these governments provide a good inclusive early childhood education (ECE) environment for children between the ages of three and six. In particular, it considers the relative availability, affordability and quality of such preschool environments.' (p. 5).

The paper outlines its research focus on children aged 3 – 6 years in early childhood settings. The research is inclusive of the concept of growing long term social capital by investing in the early years of human development (0-5's). The authors indicate threats to investment of the early years as '*preschool provision is threatened by policymakers battling to rein in deficits. This is especially true within countries where preschool provision is not yet a societal norm,...*' (p. 7)

Throughout the paper the social status of early childhood education has been addressed in terms of the curriculum provision and early childhood professionals. Identified in the paper is the lack of attention to early childhood education in deference to higher learning therefore the social and professional status of early childhood teachers is lowered, *'Until the 1980's, preschools in most countries were largely focused on providing simple child minding.'* (Tobin, Wu, Davidson, 1991).

'From neuro-scientific research, we understand the criticality of early brain development; from social science research we know that high quality programmes improve children's readiness for school and life; and from econometric research, we know that high quality programs save society significant amounts of money over time.' (p.5)

Sharon Kagan, Professor of Early Childhood and Family Policy, Columbia University, USA. *Starting Well: Benchmarking early education across the world.* (2012)

SUGGESTED ACTIONS:

- Develop and promote the concept of early years education and investment aligned with the need to see the child from birth to adulthood not from their commencement in schooling.
- Decrease the restrictions of finance and difficulties to recruit and retain qualified early childhood staff. Increased Government investment into community based services through direct contribution.
- Inclusion of early childhood agendas on the policy landscape.
- Investment in human capital above infrastructure and technology is required. Research indicates that although wealthier countries such as Australia have a high social context index there are deficits in availability and affordability.
- Provide ongoing Government investment in terms of capital for infrastructure, funding for qualified early childhood educators and reducing the fee burden for families.

REFERENCES

McLachlan, R., Gilfillan, G. and Gordan, J. 2013, *Deep and Persistent Disadvantage in Australia*, rev., Productivity Commission Staff Working Paper, Canberra.

Watson, J. (2012) *Starting Well: Benchmarking early education across the world.* Economist Intelligence Unit.