

SUBMISSION**To the****AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION****Early Childhood Development (ECD) Workforce Study**

Prue Walsh
Play Environment Consulting Pty Ltd
November 2010

“The early [childhood] care and education field continues its decades-long expansion... [yet]...it lacks the institutional frameworks necessary to address basic challenges to continued growth and development.”

Sussman & Gillman (2007)

1. OBJECTIVES OF SUBMISSION

This quotation in many ways embodies the problems facing the ECD workforce in that the ECD workforce has struggled to be acknowledged as a specialist profession (rather than a low-level adjunct to schooling). In much of EC policy development, ideas and information are drawn from [educationalists, financial/funding disciplines, OH&S, administration] and rarely from those with early childhood knowledge—it is the early childhood voice which is missing—and therefore the policy product tends to be less effective on the ground.

Analysis suggests this is due partly to the fragmented nature of the industry (including the professional associations/peak bodies) and partly due to the *ad hoc* development of workforce training courses with major variations in quality of training.

By way of background, I have 25 years of experience covering a wide diversity of early childhood services providing a rare insight to issues and management, so I have seen what does and does not work in practice (despite good intentions by governments). My consultancy work has covered advising and design over 3,000 early childhood facilities in Australia and overseas, which deliver age / skill appropriate learning opportunities and which support state-of-the-art-teaching. My focus is on effective support of the stakeholders.

In my view, teachers and other ECD workforce members need to have substantially improved, modern training courses. Current training varies markedly and relies on short, standalone modules, not the informed, in-depth courses needed to bring the workforce into the more sophisticated appreciation of their work environment.

This submission considers some factors which would improve the workforce for effective operating.

2. THE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

If the ever-growing workforce in the early childhood field is to be effective, it must take directions from early childhood practitioners (Best Practice) and early childhood professionals (theory of child development). To the extent that these twin sources of

expertise are neglected, then policy / regulation / training will be disadvantaged. Currently not always able to identify major shortfalls in training and practice.

2.1 Formal course and institutional viability and interactivity

Professional training tends to be delivered either by private organisations receiving federal funding e.g. ABC, church groups, TAFE courses (hands-on) and University courses (theory). It is critically needed that a review of this process is undertaken and merit in fostering institutional inter-reaction:

- A review of a number of private colleges and the contents and quality of courses they are providing needs to be undertaken by an independent party, preferably comprising both academic and practitioner expertise.
- TAFE graduates should be able to access further development courses, and for these to earn points towards a higher degree.
- Degree graduates should be able to access formal mentor programs within quality centres, so as to provide them with hands-on experience.

It is stressed that any private development course should be accredited (to prevent the dysfunctional in-house workshops offered by some companies in the past).

The approach taken by Komilda College, NT, for Aboriginal communities whereby TAFE students actively observed in a childcare centre attached to the TAFE is to be commended as a variant of institutional interactivity.

2.2 Curriculum shortfalls

In my experience, curriculums in formal courses tend to operate in catch-up mode. For example, although the 2009 *National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care* identified seven quality areas, four have been addressed in formal courses; this is the case in my own area of expertise, physical environments (Quality Area 3).

Without this in supplementary training for the existing workforce or primary training for new staff, how can this quality area be trained? Ideally training would cover an initial outline of this topic and a more detailed course would be available for further study.

It is a sad fact that there are very few independent sources of information on physical environments (both inside and outside areas), yet staff are expected to deliver or create play-rich opportunities without recourse to information. NSW certainly had a *Best Practice Guidelines in Early Childhood Physical Environments* in 1996, but this was vetoed by some sectors of the stakeholders. It would be beneficial to the workforce to have access to such a document, although its development would need funding and official approval.

Other areas of training which need to be modernised are:

- how to work in trans-disciplinary teams
- how to identify when external expertise needs to be brought in (from disability problems to redevelopment of a facility)
- ensuring an early childhood voice when establishing early childhood facilities particularly one with specialised knowledge in this area.

The problem areas identified in this submission are presented as a bare outline aiming to expand perceptions and act as a catalyst to implementing changes in the ECD workforce environment.