

Submission to: Productivity Commission: Early Childhood Development Workforce Study

Disparity Between Roles/Responsibilities and Pay and Conditions

A continuing stumbling block in the supply and retention of early childhood teachers is the lack of pay parity and working conditions with colleagues employed in the compulsory school sector – both private and public. Examples of issues of disparity include hours of employment, paid holidays, access to funded professional development, clearly defined career development pathways, access to administrative support, provision of adequate paid preparation time, provision of ongoing support to meet the needs of children with additional needs etc.

Australia would do well to look at the New Zealand model where pay parity has been reached between the EC sector and that of the compulsory school sector. There is absolutely no research to support the current practice in Australia of paying teachers less simply because of the age of the children with which they are working. In fact most research, particularly in the area of neuroscience identifies the critical importance of early childhood education and lifelong learning opportunities and outcomes.

Lack of Leadership in Early Childhood Education

To date EC education in Australia has been fragmented by differing licensing requirements, differing qualification requirements for EC staff, differing funding models and inconsistencies in the assessment of services for quality assurance.

Each state/territory has a public service department assigned with responsibility for varying degrees of monitoring and support for EC services. Many states have developed their own EC curriculum framework which share some common elements. Of concern is the fact that where these administering bodies provide advice and support to EC services there is no requirement for support staff to have EC qualifications. In fact, if the new National Quality Standards are administered by staff in organisations such as NSW Community Services then it is highly unlikely that these staff will have high level EC qualifications. I believe that this presents a real problem for the future development of the EC workforce in Australia. If we are going to require all services to provide a 4 year trained EC teacher to work with children the year prior to compulsory schooling we must also set minimum qualifications and experience criteria for any staff employed by governing bodies to provide high level professional support to the EC profession and monitor our new quality standards. I believe that staff employed for this role must be selected from within the early childhood profession, ideally holding a Masters in EC and have a minimum of 10 years' experience at a senior/leadership level in EC education.

Qualifications Pathways: The Long and Winding Road

A Certificate III in Children's Services has been determined to be the minimum qualification for any primary contact staff working in a children's service. The current CHC30708 Certificate III in Children's Services is a nationally recognised vocational qualification at AQTF level 3. . For Children's Services entry level training commences at Certificate 3. In other industries entry level may begin at 1 or 2. The qualification consists of 15 units of study, which, when completed provides a pathway to CHC 50908 Diploma in Children's Services (Early Childhood Education and Care).

Certificate III includes the development of skills and knowledge in 6 broad areas of study, including Working in a statutory environment, children's health, safety and wellbeing, care practices, child development, play and pedagogy, communication and inclusive practices. The qualification demands a high level of underpinning knowledge which many learners find extremely challenging.

The Diploma in turn provides a pathway to a degree in Early Childhood Education (with the approximate equivalent of one year's credit transfer – depending on the university selected). The Diploma consists of 18 units - 13 core units and 5 elective units (plus Cert. 3 competencies as a prerequisite). The broad areas of study include child development and pedagogy, observation and planning, inclusive practices and management.

The specific content of a degree in Early Childhood Education can vary greatly – some universities offer a double degree such as a Bachelor of Social Science and Bachelor of Teaching, other offer an EC degree with a compulsory one year of general education (usually combined with those studying for a degree to work with children of compulsory school age. The specialist EC content of the EC degrees currently offered varies widely promoting concern about the *specialist* nature of the qualification. A popular choice among staff currently holding a Diploma in Children's Services is the EC degree focusing on children 0-5years offered by Charles Sturt University.

Staff wishing to upgrade an existing qualification from Certificate III to Diploma can opt to undertake an existing worker traineeship which allows them to complete a Diploma while continuing their employment. Options include distance learning and part-time on-campus studies. Both options are quite demanding as learners continue to work long hours.

Staff who are not able to access a traineeship may study part-time (on-campus or distance education). One frustration faced by staff seeking to upgrade is the requirement by some public providers for students to undertake a practicum outside of their regular workplace. This requires staff to take annual leave to complete their studies, resulting in reduced annual leave. This in turn becomes an OHS issue as staff in such situations get little or no break from the physical and emotional demands of the workplace.

Staff wishing to upgrade from a Diploma to an EC degree can also opt for part-time on-campus or distance education. Again, some universities require students to attend compulsory on-campus training and/or also undertake practicums outside of their normal workplace. Again this places a great amount of stress on learners attempting to juggle work, study, family and also find some down time just to relax.

There is also the issue of cost – staff at Diploma level are not well paid and find the cost of a degree prohibitive. Those wishing to upgrade are likely to be people in their mid 20's – 30's+ with family and mortgage commitments. Working full-time in such a demanding job makes the prospect of part-time study quite daunting.

Pedagogical Leaders: Where Are They?

A critical issue for future workforce development is the need for well trained, experienced pedagogical leaders who can mentor and support future EC educators. The decision to require the employment of 4 year trained EC teachers to 'educate' children in the year prior to formal schooling will not, in my experience, lead to greater pedagogical leadership in the EC sector. This decision excludes some of our most experienced EC educators – staff with diplomas who have extensive pedagogical experience but do not hold an EC degree.

While new graduates have much to offer the majority will have extremely limited experience as practitioners and workplace leaders. The development of EC professionals does not end with university, in fact it can be argued that it provides a sound platform from which individuals will develop their pedagogical skills and knowledge through years of experience, critical reflection and professional conversations with colleagues.

I do not believe that new graduates will have the skills to act as pedagogical leaders, particularly in situations where they are working with older, experienced EC educators. I believe that this situation has the potential to reinforce the current disparities in working conditions, pay and professional recognition of experienced diploma trained educators. It may also place graduates, particularly young graduates, in a very difficult position with limited professional and life skills to successfully lead teams in curriculum planning.

A Possible Option for Consideration

Having worked with students undertaking an EC degree and with students undertaking a Certificate III and Diploma I have had the opportunity to explore training at both a tertiary and vocational training level. I have been involved in the development and delivery of courses as well as assessment and learning materials at all levels, including a series of textbooks for the vocational sector.

It is my experience that the EC sector not only has a lack of highly qualified EC teachers it also has a lack of opportunity to develop and nurture pedagogical leaders who are able to take on

the role of guiding the planning and delivery of a curriculum that is socially and culturally relevant to service users. Currently those in the role of pedagogical leader are also service managers with overwhelming and unrealistic workloads that leave them with little time to mentor and develop staff to become confident and competent in the delivery quality EC programs.

I offer the following suggestions for consideration of workforce reforms for the EC sector:

1. Undertake a review of the current Certificate III and Diploma qualification with a view to:
 - a. Reducing the breadth and depth of Certificate III to bring it in line with what is typically expected of a qualification at AQF level 3.
 - b. Review Certificate III to better reflect on-the-job expectations, responsibilities, pay and conditions of employment.
2. Review the current Diploma in Children's Services so that the primary focus is on child development and pedagogy. Remove the management component of this course to allow a more in-depth focus on EC best practice and pedagogy.
3. Rewrite the current Advanced Diploma to focus on the development of advanced pedagogical leadership skills. This course could be made available to diploma trained staff with a minimum of (for example) 5 years' experience as room or team leaders.
4. Require staff wishing to take on a leadership role such as Director or Co-ordinator to undertake a generic management qualification (that can be customised to children's services management) such as a Diploma of Management from the Business Services Training Package which offers a wide variety of competencies focused on leadership, management, customers services, OHS, mentoring, supervision, business planning etc.
5. Allow staff who gain the revised Advanced Diploma to take on the role of pedagogical leaders.
6. Work with universities to develop an EC Masters' Program for experienced EC graduates which would provide an opportunity to study and take on a part-time role at the university working with undergraduates. This may allow interested EC professionals to take 2 years leave without pay from their current place of employment to gain a Masters' degree and at the same time share their experiences with undergraduates.
7. Encourage all private and public RTO's to allow staff undertaking part-time study to complete all practicum requirements in their current workplace.
8. Follow the lead of New Zealand and provide achievable pathways for staff wishing to upgrade current qualifications and provide parity of wages and conditions with school-based colleagues.
9. Ensure any staff employed to administer the new National Quality Standards have a minimum qualification of an EC degree (preferably a Masters in EC) and extensive experience in a leadership role in EC education.

As an EC professional with over 30 years of experience as an EC educator, mentor, colleague and trainer I believe that change must be led by the EC sector – this will only occur if members of the EC community are supported to voice their views and share their wealth of skills, knowledge and experiences.

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