



25th January 2011

Playgroup Queensland Submission on the Early Childhood Development Workforce Productivity Commission Issues Paper

Playgroup Queensland

Playgroup Queensland is the state's peak body for Playgroups and a leading early intervention service provider. The organisation supports families with young children by offering a range of universal, targeted and intensive programs aimed at strengthening families and connecting them to their local communities. Along with direct service delivery, Playgroup Queensland also has a strong focus on community capacity-building, and provides a range of training services and resources to support the work of others in this field.

Playgroup Queensland is a leader in the Early Childhood Development Workforce. We currently provide work for more than 100 people, in a range of flexible family-friendly positions. The majority of our workforce are women, and many of them have young or school aged children. Playgroup Queensland was awarded a work-life balance award in 2009 in recognition of this family-friendly environment. The introduction of paid maternity leave, flexible working hours and office arrangements has allowed us to retain many of our female employees post parental leave and also employ young staff looking for career advancement within an organisation that will allow their personal as well as professional goals to grow in the future.

Early childhood development

We recommend broadening the scope of the study to include local community activities that involve staff working with young children and their parents, and early intervention services who work with children with special needs.

The scope of the ECD workforce included in the study is in-depth and appropriate for most of the ECD sector. However, there is a general absence of community based services provided for children and their families, such as those provided by Playgroup Queensland. The following section outlines the kinds of community services provided by Playgroup Queensland that should be included within the scope of the study in terms of early childhood development.

Playgroup Queensland provides services to young children and their families in the communities they live. These include universal services like Community Playgroups and access to resources such as toy libraries and workshops which target parenting skills. Targeted services exist to support families experiencing hardship, such as Supported Playgroups; and intensive services exist for families who are deemed at-risk, including families who are Indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse, from low-socioeconomic background, are young or single parents, or experience mental health or drug addiction issues.

Early Childhood Development services for children with additional needs should also be included in this study by the Commission. These should include early intervention services provided in health and community settings for children with a range of disabilities including autistic spectrum disorder, Asperger's syndrome, Down's syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, cerebral palsy, intellectual disabilities, developmental delay and medical and chronic illnesses such as asthma, eczema and food allergies.

Playgroup Queensland provides services for children with such additional needs through a variety of programs. These include MyTime, PlayConnect, Sing & Grow, HIPPY, and Supported Playgroups. Specialised services are also provided for Indigenous families including playgroups at community, supported and intensive levels.

We also provide a number of integrated and co-located services that meet the needs of families across universal, targeted and intensive program settings. We are constantly striving to strengthen families and communities through capacity building and therefore seek to integrate services within communities as much as possible, and co-locate services where applicable.

Community Playgroups are co-located in community spaces to provide accessibility to families and to encourage ownership of the Playgroup by the local community. Some Playgroups are located in hubs that act as central locations for a number of health and community services. Others are located in church or community halls.

Supported Playgroups are located within communities where families with additional needs reside. These groups are staffed with highly trained workers who aim to build capacity in the group and within the parents to eventually transition from a supported to a community based Playgroup. These Playgroups are often run in collaboration with community organisations that support families. An example of this can be seen at the George Street Neighbourhood Centre in Mackay where the multicultural supported playgroup established for newly arrived migrant and refugee families continues as a community playgroup with the ongoing support of the Multicultural Worker based at the Neighbourhood Centre.

Intensive playgroups are conducted in Indigenous communities and co-located at community centres / hubs with other health and community services. Locational Supported

Playgroups currently are being established in both Lockhart River and Woorabinda. Both of these locations are remote Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT) communities administered by Aboriginal Shire Councils. These playgroups operate up to four sessions per week, with local permanent part-time staff employed and partnerships developed with the Councils, schools and other local agencies, including health services.

Playgroup Queensland is currently collaborating with four schools in the Ipswich region to implement Playgroups in primary schools to help break down some of the barriers in school attendance for Indigenous pupils. These groups are run in an integrated fashion with the school with the weekly playgroup sessions facilitated either by Indigenous Teacher Aides at the schools, or by a local Indigenous person.

Sing & Grow programs are run in collaboration with community organisations that support families with additional needs including young parents, single parents, Indigenous families, CALD families, parents in prison, and those living with a mental illness, as well as families living with disabilities. These groups are conducted in 10-week blocks in an integrated setting that increases parents' capacity to access other services and health professionals. Evidence from an independent evaluation showed that this kind of 'soft entry' point increased families' transitions to other services including Playgroups, and helped them meet and make social support contacts with other parents.

MyTime and PlayConnect are two examples of programs that Playgroup Queensland offer to families with disabilities. MyTime groups are run in conjunction with family support services and provide parents opportunity for time out from their child's daily needs to connect with other parents and gain critical parenting support. PlayConnect groups are offered to families with children who display behaviours on the autistic spectrum. These groups are often co-located in community venues with collaborating organisations that support children with autistic spectrum disorder and other disabilities.

Playgroup Queensland is also currently running a health prevention initiative in partnership with Queensland Health. The Have Fun be Healthy program will provide supported and other playgroups with extra advice, support and resources to encourage better nutrition and higher levels of physical activity for young children in the community.

Recent cutting edge initiatives by Playgroup Queensland have seen management and service delivery structures altered in some sites in order to better support a place-based integrated service delivery model as advocated for by current policy in the early childhood services sector. A thorough evaluation has found the benefits of this approach to include higher staff satisfaction, better provision of supervision, training and support for staff, a reduction in service duplication, and enhanced outcomes for families. Playgroup services are often seen as a 'soft entry' points and families involved in these programs can feel less threatened to access workers, ask questions and accept referrals to other services once rapport is built.

The early childhood development workforce

The productivity commission provides an extensive and comprehensive list of formal childcare settings and covers the childcare and preschool workforce. The family support workforce is extensive and is well covered by the commission's list.

We recommend a detailed consideration of the demographics of the ECD workforce and a review of pay and working conditions in order to best improve staff recruitment and retention.

Generally speaking, the family support workforce is predominately female and often consists of women with young or school aged children. Wages paid to this workforce are traditionally low and the workforce as a whole is under-recognised, underpaid and undervalued, and often utilises part time and casual employees to meet demand. Staff turnover can be high due to the predominately female workforce who leave work to start families, and may not return, as the low wages do not always offset the high costs of childcare. Furthermore, job satisfaction can be affected by low pay and inflexible work environments thus not encouraging retention in the sector.

Playgroup Queensland does not offer any formal childcare arrangements to families. Rather, Playgroup offers supports to new parents who do not return to full time work through community based Playgroups, Supported Playgroups, workshops, resources and targeted or intensive intervention programs.

Playgroup Queensland employs an enthusiastic workforce to provide these services to families. Currently, there are 108 people working in universal, targeted and intensive programs. The workforce is predominately female (98%) and part time (36%).

Currently, Playgroup Queensland's workforce demographics show that:

- 98% are female (N = 106)
- 2% are male (N = 2)
- 12% are full time (N = 13)
- 36% are part time (N = 39)
- 31% are casual (N = 34)
- 20% are contractual (N = 22)

The workforce consists of:

- 16 operational staff , including management staff
- 25 are community playgroup field workers and staff
- 19 are supported or intensive playgroup workers
- 48 are allied health professionals and related staff conducting targeted or intensive early intervention and prevention programs

Playgroup Queensland aims to provide competitive wages and salary packages for the industry, but this is often difficult to do given restrictions in government funding, the effects of the global financial crisis on sponsorship money, and competition amongst other community sector employers using different award scales. The community sector wages are also low in general when compared to other industries such as health.

Playgroup Queensland offers very flexible employment conditions to allow employees to work effectively and happily around their family commitments.

There are currently no unfilled vacancies at Playgroup Queensland. Turnover rates in casual staff have been high, but these have been reduced to a moderate rate in the last 12 months. Staff turnover for permanent employees is very low.

Job satisfaction at Playgroup Queensland is reported as very high. Most staff work for the organisation because they are passionate about the grass roots impact that our universal and early intervention services have for families with young children. The staff are dedicated and passionate, and their enthusiasm is evident in their hard work in a sector that has a notorious reputation for low pay. In recognition of the fact that other industries, such as the health industry pay higher wages, Playgroup Queensland works closely with staff to provide a fun, rewarding, flexible and family friendly workplace. Playgroup Queensland was awarded a Work Life Balance Award in 2009 in recognition of its strong family friendly work ethic and flexible work arrangements.

Playgroup Queensland does not currently collect data on the ECD workforce, though there are plans to employ a Human Resources Manager in the future, which would allow for such activity.

Institutional arrangements and COAG reforms

The differing roles and policies of governments affect the planning and provision of the ECD workforce in many ways. There is clearly room for improvement in streamlining policies so that efficiency and effectiveness of the workforce can be improved.

We recommend that CAOG aim to bring all state and federal awards (pay rates and working conditions) and reporting requirements into equivalency.

Award rates that govern payment scales within the community sector differ from state to state and across state and federal levels of funding, even if people are employed to do the same job. This makes affordability difficult in organisations like Playgroup Queensland that run both state and federally funded interventions. For example, the Queensland State SACS award will be 33% higher than the federal SACS award by January 2012. This creates many challenges for staff retention as staff may choose to work for organisations that pay the state award, rather than the federal award.

Similarly, due to different funding streams, we often have staff working in the same office (in fact neighbouring desks) doing very similar work, but getting paid two different rates due to one being on the Federal Award and the other on a State Award. This can cause dissatisfaction and tension in an otherwise cohesive team.

Different levels of government also have differing reporting regimes and protocols, which can frustrate staff and lead to inefficient use of staff time, especially if their hours are part time.

Differing government policies also affect employment conditions such as parental leave, though this has recently been addressed with the introduction of paid parental leave by the Gilliard government. As a peak employment body of women, Playgroup Queensland commends the current government for their vision in implementing this policy.

Demand for ECD services

Playgroup Queensland is the peak body for advocating the importance of play, both for children's learning and family relationships. This message is becoming more relevant in the current economic environment in which people are feeling simultaneously financially pressured, and socially pressured to pay for services that promote children's early development.

We recommend the widespread dissemination and promotion of social messages that value parents as their children's first teachers, and promote the value of parent-child play. This may have a flow-on effect in taking the pressure of traditional ECD services if parents feel they are 'good enough'.

In our experience, families are looking for services that will support their child, but also the parents, in learning about child development as well as provide activities that are developmentally appropriate for their child, including social interaction skills. We feel it is important to reinforce to parents that they are their child's first and most important teacher, and we provide support services and resources to allow parents to do this to the best of their ability. This begins with our Community Playgroup program, toy libraries and parent workshops. We then provide Supported Playgroups for families needing some extra support and targeted and intensive programs for those who are most vulnerable.

Playgroups are an excellent forum for parents to come together to share knowledge and ideas, and to support each other through difficult times whilst providing for the developmental needs of their own children. This environment encourages parents to spend quality time with children on developmentally appropriate tasks, such as craft, reading, music, messy play and climbing games. Parents stay with their children at Playgroup, thus reinforcing their important role as first teacher and constantly nurturing and building the important relationship between the parent and child. Research clearly shows that infants and young children that experience secure attachments with their primary caregivers are

more confident, resilient and school ready in later years. These activities build the child's confidence and developmental skills, while providing the parent with ideas of ways to play in the home environment, and social contacts with other parents in their community. Playgroups are therefore economically efficient and effective as a frontline preventative measure in our communities for supporting parents and their children.

Many of the ECD services parents may wish to access are expensive. The relative cost of early childhood education and care services has a direct impact on the demand for services. Most early childhood activities accessed by parents are considered to be expensive. If parents plan to send their child to formal care they need to be able to afford it, hence the cost must be less than their net income. The community sector is notoriously underpaid which makes the decision for some women to return to work in this field a difficult one, as the cost of child care sometimes outweighs the financial benefit of returning to work in this sector. This in turn impacts on the female workforce. While more women return to work after having a family, due to financial stress, career commitments or other reasons, the availability and cost of care has a direct impact on the decision of if or when to return.

Playgroup Queensland's work force is predominately female. Many of the staff have young families and require formal and informal child care to engage or continue in their employment. The degree to which high quality formal childcare is available, has a direct impact on the current workforce and our capacity to recruit staff in the future. While Playgroup Queensland prides itself on child friendly work practices, some staff utilise formal childcare during business hours and report it is very difficult to access and expensive to maintain.

COAG has outlined new standards and targets for the ECD workforce. Playgroup Queensland commends these standards. The proposed qualification standards and staffing levels are necessary to ensure children are a priority in our community, and that the services we offer them are in fact best practice, well-resourced and well-staffed. There is a risk, however that the new standards and targets will have a negative effect on the future workforce as the current workforce will be expected to do more work for the same wages. Furthermore, some of the current workforce will not see the value of upgrading their skills, which can be very costly and stressful, for what is in fact a small potential increase in wages.

Currently, there are no options for funding increased wages and salaries for more highly qualified workers at Playgroup Queensland. While our organisation is committed to increasing current wages to match changes to awards, government funding has not been forthcoming to match their own review of the award schedules. Playgroup Queensland uses the federal SACS award, which is currently 10% lower than the Queensland State SACS award. Wages within the organisation have been raised by 4% in an effort to meet the award changes and retain staff. We must however, either increase wages or risk losing staff to competing organisations.

Future Supply of ECD workers

We recommend that the commission investigate pay parity with other sectors in view of Australia's renewed vigor in prioritising children. This should lead to pay increases, salary sacrificing and other improved conditions across the ECD sector.

The Commission reports that the ECD workforce will have to grow in numbers and increase in average level of qualification of staff to meet the future COAG and Closing the Gap targets. This is a commendable target but presents many challenges to the employers of the current ECD workforce. Low wages continue to plague the ECD sector in terms of recruitment and retention of high quality staff. An increase in wages to reflect the expertise of the workforce and the prioritisation of children (and therefore related services) in our communities is a must. It is also important to ensure that working conditions and hours are flexible to allow people with families to work around their parenting commitments in order to attract them back to the workforce. Furthermore, the capacity to salary sacrifice in this traditionally low paying industry could entice more workers to join the workforce. Other issues that affect the engagement and retention of staff in this sector include the current 10% variation in state and federal awards.

We recommend the creation of further scholarship programs which encourage people in rural and remote communities to gain ECD qualifications and retain them within the community.

Playgroup Queensland has not experienced difficulties recruiting staff in recent years with the exception of finding suitably qualified and experienced staff in rural and remote areas. This could be addressed by creating scholarships that support residents of these communities to gain relevant ECD qualifications and encourage them to keep those skills within the community. Playgroup Queensland has gone some way in improving recruitment options and staff retention by offering part-time work rather than casual wherever possible.

It should be noted however, that if qualification levels increase but wages do not, this may pose a serious problem for recruiting appropriately qualified staff in the future.

Playgroup Queensland commends the efforts of the Australian Government, COAG and the Productivity Commission to date and we look forward to following the progress of this study.

We feel that the following issues need to be addressed to ensure the quality of the ECD workforce is guaranteed in the future thus protecting and prioritising our children, and to ensure the volume of workers can meet the future needs of Australian families:

- The inclusion of Playgroups and other community-based family support services as part of the ECD community
- A detailed consideration of the demographics of the ECD workforce in order to best inform a review of pay and the types of working conditions that might be attractive and satisfying to the workforce
- The alignment of relevant State and Federal Award systems and reporting requirements
- The dissemination of the key message to parents that they are their child's first teacher and that parent-child play in the early years is critical, worthwhile and 'good enough'
- An increase in pay and working conditions across the ECD sector
- The creation of scholarship opportunities to better recruit and retain qualified staff in rural and remote communities.

Regards



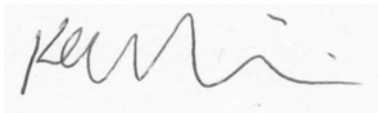
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