

Study into the Early Childhood Development Workforce

By the Productivity Commission

SUBMISSION PREPARED BY AUSPELD

Those in the ECD Workforce play a critically important role in potentially influencing the development of oral language, memory, fine and gross motor skills, pre-literacy and literacy skills of the children with whom they work. High quality, extensive training – detailing the knowledge, skills and understandings relevant to children’s early childhood development is essential. ECD workers need to have a well-developed understanding of the precursors to successful social, emotional and academic development across childhood. AUSPELD provides expert advice in the areas of literacy and learning specifically and therefore comment will be made specifically regarding these key developmental domains.

About AUSPELD

The Australian Federation of SPELD Associations (AUSPELD) represents all state and territory SPELD Associations. These organisations, in turn, represent and support the many thousands of children and adults struggling with both learning difficulties and disabilities throughout Australia. In addition to providing advocacy and support for individuals with learning difficulties and disabilities, AUSPELD also promotes evidence-based approaches to teaching and learning for all children and adults. Over the last ten years a primary focus of the state SPELDs has been to prevent literacy failure, particularly amongst our most vulnerable children.

AUSPELD provides services to a range of professionals including early childhood teachers, education assistants, childcare workers, occupational therapists, speech pathologists and educational psychologists, as well as families and individuals. Through its state-based members, AUSPELD responds to in excess of 1,000 calls per week from community members and to a similar number of requests for information and support via email and website contact. State SPELDs also provides training, resources and support to over 30,000 teachers, principals and allied professionals working in schools and other organisations throughout Australia each year.

AUSPELD contributes to state and federal inquiries, forums and government departments on a wide range of issues related to improving literacy outcomes. AUSPELD is well-positioned to comment on the role of the ECD workforce on the development of children’s literacy skills. This submission will focus on the need to improve training in pre- and early literacy acquisition for ECD workers, the importance of an integrated approach to literacy and learning across early childhood service providers, and ways to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and quality of the ECD workforce.

RELEVANT TERMS OF REFERENCE

1. The Early Childhood Development Workforce

1. Factors affecting the current and future demand and supply for the ECD workforce, and the required mix of skills and knowledge, including:

(a) Delivery of fully integrated ECD services including maternal and child health, childcare, preschool, family support services and services for those with additional needs.

Perhaps one of the most effective ways that the poverty cycle can be broken is through education and children are most likely to achieve educational success if they become literate. The protective factors and risk factors for literacy failure are established in the early years – before school even starts – and there are a number of different ECD workers who, with the right training, could ensure that children did develop the pre-literacy skills necessary for literacy success.

The Early Years Learning Framework – “Educators: Belonging, Being and Becoming” – published and distributed by DEEWR in 2010 provided a valuable framework for discussion and planning for members of the ECD workforce. It was not (and did not pretend to be) a curriculum, syllabus or overview of the skills, knowledge and understandings that children need to acquire during the early years; or professional and strategic advice on how best these skills should be taught. In the past decade a great deal has been written, and there has been numerous international inquiries (NRP, Rose Report, Nelson, etc), clearly outlining the components of appropriate pre- and early literacy skill development and what needs to be provided to young children to ensure that their early language and literacy skills develop effectively. Unfortunately, very little of this information is ever provided directly and succinctly to members of the ECD workforce. Many ECD workers report a lack of confidence with respect to their ability to provide sound learning experiences to children to target the development of their early reading and writing skills and this is simply because they have not been provided with the appropriate skills.

Research suggests that children who become successful readers and writers are those who have been exposed to a language-rich environment in their early years. Children who are not provided with explicit instruction in vocabulary (building knowledge and understanding of words) and phonological awareness (the ability to distinguish and manipulate the sounds in spoken words) are at a significantly increased risk of struggling with literacy acquisition throughout their schooling. All children, but particularly, those children at greatest risk, require robust instruction in vocabulary, language comprehension and phonological awareness. They also require explicit, intentional, multi-sensory, systematic teaching of foundation-level literacy skills (such as a structured synthetic phonics program) from pre-primary (age 5 years).

There is strong evidence to show that there is a vast divide between the language experiences of children from different socioeconomic levels, and that these differences place children from low SES backgrounds at increased risk of academic and social difficulties. Graves and Slater (1987) found that year 1 students from high SES backgrounds had approximately double the vocabulary size of students from low SES backgrounds. Hart and Risley (1995) showed that not only do children from low SES backgrounds have reduced vocabularies; they are exposed to much fewer positive verbal interactions than children from high SES backgrounds.

The ECD Workforce has the opportunity to affect the volume and quality of oral language input children receive through the education of parents (by encouraging positive and appropriate parent-child interactions), and by intentional teaching of children. In order for parents to be provided with accurate and evidence-based information (including games, strategies, songs, etc) regarding language development, it is essential that the members of the ECD Workforce providing this information be well-informed.

Over the past thirty years the prevailing ideology in early childhood education and care has been that children learn best through play. This has therefore influenced not only policy and practice, but the development of resources, the physical layout of early childhood environments and the response to the needs of children demonstrating developmental delays. Obviously, the inclusion of play in early childhood centres is essential but for children with developmental disabilities, the lack of structure and the lack of intentional teaching have often added to their difficulties. The fact that ECD staff have often not been trained in delivering programs that are more structured, sequential, intentional and responsive also means that when asked to do so, they feel both out of their depth and also uncomfortable from a philosophical point of view.

(c) The availability and quality of pre-service education programs, including through undergraduate and postgraduate education and VET, and consideration of training pathways.

AUSPELD is an expert provider of literacy training to educational institutions. It is our observation through providing professional learning sessions to school staff that many teachers and support staff lack confidence with respect to their ability to teach literacy skills. As indicated earlier in this submission, there remains a very strong focus on play-based learning in early childhood education and child-care facilities throughout Australia. This is promoted to the exclusion of other approaches and fails to acknowledge the wealth of research evidence that suggests that those children considered to be at greatest risk do not respond well to unstructured, open-ended tasks. These children fall further behind their peers, become disenchanted with school and frequently display behaviour problems. Current pre-service education programs largely advocate for play-based, student-directed methods to the exclusion of any form of structured learning. As such, many teachers enter the workforce with little understanding of the science behind reading development and the strategies necessary to build strong literacy skills in their young students.

There is overwhelming support – both from current academic research and from practice – to support the view that *all* children benefit from teaching that is explicit, structured, sequential and multi-sensory. Pre-service training for ECD workers (especially teachers and teacher assistants) should focus on these key components in addition to the critical elements of effective reading instruction (Rose Report, 2006) which includes:

- explicit and systematic phonemic awareness instruction
- systematically sequenced phonics instruction
- guided and repeated oral reading with appropriate error correction and feedback to improve reading fluency
- direct instruction in vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies

It is our hope that the inclusion of explicit skill teaching in the early years will help to prevent the high (52%) level of functional literacy problems currently experienced by Australia's 15 to 19 year olds (ABS data, 2006).

1. The Schooling Workforce

(a) The availability and quality of pre-service education programs, including through undergraduate and postgraduate education, and VET.

See comments above (under the Early Childhood Development Workforce, 1c).

We would be happy to address any of our comments in greater detail or respond to any queries from the Commissioners. Thank you.

Signed

**Mandy Nayton
President
AUSPELD
30 January 2011**