



Response to the
Productivity Commission's
*Early Childhood
Development workforce
issues paper*

Brotherhood of St Laurence

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Submission by

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The Brotherhood of St Laurence and early childhood development

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s. Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile, the Brotherhood continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty, guided by principles of advocacy, innovation, inclusion and sustainability. Our work includes direct service provision to people in need, the development of social enterprises to address social exclusion, research to better understand the causes and effects of inequality in Australia, and the development of policy solutions at both national and local levels.

The early years has been identified as a key life transition towards which the Brotherhood will focus research and services. Engagement with children and parents as they navigate the challenges of family life, especially in difficult circumstances, has been an enduring part of the work of the Brotherhood. This is evident from our pioneering work in the early 1970s with the establishment of the first family day care scheme in Australia to the recent national rollout of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY), funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

This submission

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is primarily concerned with the social inclusion of those most disadvantaged in society, which involves the organisation in striving to improve access to both employment and quality services for those most in need. This submission attends to questions and matters raised in the Productivity Commission's *Early Childhood Development workforce issues paper* (2010) that reflect this main organisational focus.

As discussed in this submission the Brotherhood of St Laurence unequivocally supports the recent reforms that will provide a framework for managing the quality and consistency of early childhood education and care (ECEC) across Australia. Our particular concern is that urgent consideration be given to ensuring access to and affordability of ECEC for Australia's low-income parents.

1 Demand for ECEC services

The growth in the number of children under five years of age in Australia is expected to increase demand for ECEC services and thus demand for ECEC workers. The Brotherhood of St Laurence is concerned, however, that recent federal government initiatives will push ECEC services out of the reach of families who need such services most. If children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are excluded from early childhood development (ECD) services, this will create a false representation of demand, which should be addressed.

Access and affordability of ECEC services

The Brotherhood supports the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care developed by the federal government and applauds the recognition demonstrated by this framework of the importance of early life experiences to the whole of life. However, the implementation of the framework – in particular, the increase in the ratio of staff to children in ECEC centres and changes to qualifications required of staff – means that childcare costs will

increase. While the Brotherhood fully supports higher quality standards in the industry we also want to ensure that low-income families are not excluded due to increased cost. A small research project into family day care undertaken by the Brotherhood for the City of Melbourne (Cameron & Beaton 2010) as well as research conducted by Gong, Breunig and King (2010) have found that the cost of child care is a significant determinant of a woman's decision to purchase formal care for her children so that she can return to work. We also wish to note that many families do not have access to informal care.

When low-income parents feel they cannot work due to the high cost of child care, their families not only miss out on income they might desperately need but are also excluded from other 'in kind' benefits associated with participation in the workforce and particular kinds of opportunities for social participation.

Children, in particular, from low-income families may also be seriously disadvantaged by their parents' inability to afford child care. The issues paper states that 'formal and informal childcare arrangements are, to some extent, substitutable' (Productivity Commission 2010, p. 13). In fact, many forms of formal care offer learning experiences, especially for children 24 months and older, that are not obtainable through informal care yet are crucial to a child's intellectual and social development. Data collected through the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children indicate modest developmental advantages for children attending high-quality childcare (Harrison et al. 2010).

The issues paper queries the reasons related to child development that might encourage parents to choose ECEC services. Interviews conducted with prospective users of family day care by the Brotherhood Research and Policy Centre indicate that parents are increasingly aware of the enhanced learning experiences ECEC can offer their children (Cameron & Beaton 2010). Such awareness impacts parents' decision-making about whether to use ECEC services and potentially increases the demand for ECEC workers.

To ensure that implementation of the National Quality Framework does not impact low-income families adversely, we strongly advocate the adoption of recommendations from the 2010 Henry Tax Review. The Henry Tax Review recommended that Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate be combined into a single payment to parents or to childcare centres and that low-income families receive a higher rate of subsidy. The full cost of child care would be covered for 'at-risk' children – that is, children who are at risk of abuse, neglect or significant developmental delay, or who have 'multiple disadvantages'.

Ideally the National Quality Framework can be implemented with no additional cost to low-income families. This in turn will mean that planning for an expanded ECEC workforce will be required.

Demand for family support services

One determinant of the demand for particular family support services is the ability of ECD services in general to operate as a network or refer families to other services. The experience of services involved in the Victorian Early Years Integrated Services Practitioner Network indicates that co-location of universal and targeted services facilitates movement of families from using 'softer' (unstigmatised) services such as long day care to intensive support services as needed. This is supported by the Brotherhood's experience in developing Community Hubs, in partnership, to link schools, family support and early years services (Hub Strategy Group 2007, 2009). On this basis, we express our support for co-located or integrated service initiatives within the ECD sector. Such

is our belief in the utility of co-located services that the Brotherhood has formed a partnership with the City of Yarra and Broadmeadows UnitingCare to operate the Family and Children's Community Hub in Atherton Gardens, Fitzroy. Expected to open in 2013, the hub will demonstrate fully integrated service delivery, contributing to improved outcomes for children and families.

2 Supply of ECEC workers

Improving access to training

The Brotherhood of St Laurence recognises the relevance of improving staff qualifications to increasing the quality of ECEC services. The Brotherhood's experience in delivering services to migrants, refugees and the long-term employed, however, has alerted us to the fact that many individuals who are otherwise suited to ECEC professions can find it difficult to obtain the relevant qualifications. Specifically, our experience in training family day care educators and HIPPY tutors has highlighted the limitations of delivering qualifications to people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. It is essential that approaches to teaching, learning and assessment are flexible enough to ensure that potential participants are not deterred or excluded based on their competence in the English language.

Essential to attracting individuals with an aptitude for working with children to the ECD workforce will be the development of highly flexible entry points into the field that recognise experience and academic-based knowledge.

The government should also examine the possibilities for delivering curriculum, or portions thereof, in languages other than English or combining English-language training with professional educational content (in the manner of the Workplace English Language and Literacy program). It is important for children's development to have access to diverse role models, so government and workplace policy should support the employment of ECEC workers from a range of cultural and economic backgrounds.

Promoting and retaining the workforce

The Brotherhood also suggests that challenges related to the anticipated shortfall of workers within the ECD sector may be partly addressed through encouraging men into ECD professions. We recommend the promotion of the sector among males at secondary school level and above. As lack of interest among men may be related to both the perceived and actual status of the profession, attracting more men to ECD work would likely require a 'rebranding' of working with children.

We strongly support the position of the Productivity Commission that the recruitment and retention of ECD workers will be largely dependent on improved remuneration. Such an improvement would increase chances of more men, and more women, entering the ECD field.

Retaining workers in the ECD field will also be facilitated by the creation of quick pathways from one area of the workforce to another. One such strategy could include creation of a broader common curriculum for ECD-related qualifications, which would require child development workers to undertake only a small number of additional subjects plus a professional placement before moving from one specialisation to another. Tertiary institutions might also develop stronger Recognition of Prior Learning programs that make it easy for those already working in the sector to obtain formal or higher qualifications.

The Brotherhood's experience in providing professional development has also drawn our attention to the need for flexible training options for ECD workers. This is discussed in more depth in the following section.

3 Quality of service

That services are of a high standard is important for all children who attend ECEC. Children who attend quality ECEC reap a range of developmental advantages but poor-quality ECEC services can be injurious to children (see Harrison 2008 for an overview of this issue). For this reason, as stated earlier, the Brotherhood supports the National Quality Framework. There are measures additional to those suggested in the framework that may also be important in assuring the provision of quality services for children.

Specialist skill development

The Brotherhood is especially concerned that ECD staff be capable of working with the most vulnerable children in Australia. The Brotherhood supports the Inclusion and Professional Support Program. We also argue, however, that skills for working with children with additional needs – such as those who have experienced trauma, abuse, poverty and other forms of serious disadvantage – should be a large component of qualifying training for all ECD workers.

Skills for integration

The quality of service an ECD worker is able to provide children and their families is not merely determined by the discipline-specific skills they hold but also by their capacity to refer to and work with other ECD professionals to develop tailored solutions for families. Research pertaining to UK integrated child and family services indicates that the achievement of truly cooperative service provision is reliant on workers possessing knowledge and skills directly related to cross-disciplinary work (see Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford 2010). Those such as Hartle and colleagues (2008) argue that while the benefit of collaborative work is generally understood across the ECD sector, individual agencies and workers often lack – through insufficient funding or other causes – the opportunity to develop strategies to support this. We recommend that funding is made available for workers already in the ECD sector to access training related to integrated service provision and that working collaboratively is a significant component of the curriculum for all ECD professions.

Conditions for quality

The increased demands on the ECEC workforce resulting from the greater policy emphasis on quality will necessitate considerable forward planning on the part of government and individual services to ensure workers receive adequate professional development. In particular, funding and work plans will need to take account of workers receiving professional supervision and mentoring. It is also important that ECEC service providers are able to give staff sufficient time within their work plans for planning quality educational activities.

Diverse skills for a diverse sector

The Brotherhood's experience in providing professional development has drawn our attention to the fact that standard ECD packages do not meet the needs of all workers in the ECD field. The Brotherhood has provided training for community liaison workers based in schools and early years programs, HIPPY tutors and parent engagement facilitators in schools. These roles represent a

blend of family support and child development responsibilities for which children's services, family support and community development training packages are not in themselves adequate. A number of new roles in the ECD field will require development of new types of flexible professional development options.

Regulating and monitoring quality

Through our experience in providing family day care, the Brotherhood has a strong knowledge of what resources are required to implement quality services for children and to support and monitor home-based workers. New entrants to the family day care field, and those new to other ECEC fields, need particular support and monitoring prior to commencement and accreditation as an educator. The Brotherhood is aware of a number of families in Victoria who have experienced poor or inconsistent service provision from family day care providers that have begun operation prior to undergoing quality assessment. We are concerned that the viability of quality services may suffer if adequate regulation does not occur consistently and efficiently across all ECEC services. Ensuring quality delivery within the ECEC sector will require that no service can operate prior to being assessed for quality practice.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence believes that attention to the points discussed above will improve early childhood education and care. We also urge that any changes made as a result of this study are not to the detriment of Australia's most vulnerable families.

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