

Early Childhood Development Workforce

Productivity Commission Issues Paper

KPV welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Early Childhood Development Workforce Issues Paper.

About KPV

KPV is the peak organisation representing the voice of parents in quality early childhood education for Victorian children. Our membership represents over 1,200 early education and care providers such as independent kindergartens, cluster managers, long day care services, integrated services and local governments. We advocate for quality early childhood education for over 200,000 children and their families.

Our vision for the strategic development of early childhood education, that reflects the intrinsic value of family and community involvement, includes six core elements:

- education for life
- universal participation
- excellence and innovation
- a cohesive service system
- involved community
- responsive and flexible

Over the past 20 years, KPV has worked with parents, kindergarten committees of management, cluster managers, government and other key stakeholders and peak bodies in the early childhood services sector to ensure that Victoria is leading the way in the provision of quality early childhood education that remains accessible and affordable for families.

KPV's strong relationship with Government at the federal, state and local levels ensures that we are an effective voice for the sector. We proactively engage government to ensure that services are funded appropriately to deliver high quality early childhood education to Victorian children.

Our collaborative approach to advocacy and service development has ensured that KPV is working alongside organisations such as the Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS), Gowrie Victoria, FKA Children's Services, Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), Australian Education Union, Early Childhood Intervention Association, Noah's Ark, Playgroup Victoria, Community Childcare Victoria, WorkSafe Victoria, Monash University and Berry Street to provide a unified voice for change and development. KPV is a well respected organisation within the early childhood education sector, ranked highly for its commitment, professionalism and expertise on all matters relating to the governance and management of early childhood services.

KPV welcomes the opportunity to present this submission outlining key challenges and recommendations for investment in the early childhood education workforce sector. KPV believes that it is critical that significant workforce investment occurs in this sector at both a state and national level to ensure that high quality early childhood education is a right rather than a privilege for all children.

Context

Historical management of kindergartens

Prior to 1994, kindergarten programs were mainly delivered from stand-alone buildings, often owned by local government or churches, and commonly managed by councils, parent committees and churches. The educational programs were typically two and a half hour sessions providing up to 10 hours per week for four year olds. Some also provided four hours per week to three year olds. During this period, long day care programs operated separately from kindergartens. They offered all day care, at a time when care and education were perceived by many as separate concepts. As such child care did not attract funding for kindergarten programs.

Major reform in government spending from 1994 impacted directly on kindergartens. Changes swept through the sector with:

- the withdrawal of government as the direct employer of kindergarten staff
- the introduction of per capita funding formula for kindergartens, which immediately reduced individual service funding
- the amalgamation of councils into larger municipalities
- the imposition of new 'competitive tendering' legislation resulting in many councils relinquishing their management of kindergartens to parent committees or group managers (now known as Cluster Management)
- changes to the industrial awards and enterprise agreements which paved the way for increased contact time
- the establishment of funded kindergarten programs in long day care centres

As a result of these reforms, the responsibilities of volunteer parent kindergarten committees intensified. Committees were now the employer and their obligations increased with the responsibility of regulation and more specific funding and licensing requirements. In reality, committees were now operating a small business and reconciling conflicting demands as employers, strategic business planners, financial managers and being parents of the children enrolled in the service.

With the ever increasing financial, legal and employer responsibilities, some committees explored alternative arrangements that relieved them of some or all direct management responsibilities. These alternatives included cluster management or the group employer model. Both were government initiatives intended to relieve committees of the major obligations associated with employer, licensee responsibilities and funding accountability.

Different models for cluster management emerged and included:

- Community based organisation - Included church agencies and other non-government organisations.
- Amalgamated model – kindergartens merged to create one incorporated association.
- Local government – Council managed the day to day operations of the kindergarten including employment of staff, licensee responsibilities and finances.¹

¹ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development *Review of Kindergarten Cluster Management*, KPMG, (2007)

In 2001, The Kirby Report² highlighted significant structural management issues and made recommendations to the Victorian government regarding the funding and management of services and the employment arrangements of staff. This resulted in the government allocating funding to increase the salaries of kindergarten teachers, an increased per capita grant rate, an increase in the kindergarten fee subsidy for low income families and a plan to address other recommendations in the Review.³

In 2007, the administration of kindergarten education was transferred from the Department of Human Services (DHS), along with the Office for Children. A new department was created that included early childhood, “The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development” (DEECD), and a Minister for Children and Early Childhood was appointed.

In 2011, kindergarten programs for three and four year old children are offered in many different settings including independent, cluster managed, local government kindergartens, long day care, schools, family and children’s centres and community hubs. The integration or co-location of kindergarten with other services remains in the spotlight.

Current figures show that close to 50% of previously parent managed independent kindergartens are now managed under a cluster management arrangement.⁴

The Federal Government has now established a new Office of Early Childhood Education and Child Care⁵ (OECECC). “The OECECC is responsible for providing leadership to achieve a nationally consistent system of quality, accessible and affordable early childhood education and child care for Australian families”.⁶ A new national quality framework is envisaged, comprising:

- strong national quality standards for early childhood education and care
- a quality rating system to drive continuous improvement and provide parents with robust and relevant information about the quality of learning and care
- streamlining or integrating licensing and accreditation arrangements
- a national Early Years Learning Framework

These initiatives have major implications for kindergartens in Victoria and intensify the imperative for qualified staff to be available to deliver these programs.

Monitoring of these policy directions and their implication for early childhood services has been on the agenda at the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), which includes representatives of the Federal Government and each State and Territory. The COAG Productivity Working Group has developed a national quality framework for early childhood education. This framework has developed a national system that is consistent for the licensing and administration of early childhood services across all states in Australia.⁷

² Kirby. P. and Harper. S, (June 2001), *Review of the issues that impact on the delivery of preschool services to children and their families in Victoria*, Published by Community Care, Department of Human Services (Victorian Government)

³ *Review of the Issues that Impact on the delivery of Preschool Services to Children and their Families in Victoria*, The Government’s Response, (November 2001), Victorian Government Publishing Service (2001)

⁴ *Kindergarten Cluster Management Policy Framework*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2009)

⁵ The OECECC was created on 18 March 2008

⁶ <http://www.mychild.gov.au/oececc.htm>

⁷ http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/early_childhood/policy_initiatives_reviews/coag/discussion

Educational Research

The evidence regarding child development and early intervention is compelling. The past two decades of international research clearly demonstrates that investment in the early years is cost effective, delivering long term benefits with a powerful impact on social and economic future that far outweighs initial costs. Early investment maximises potential benefits from a health, wellbeing and welfare perspective.

Despite this, Australia's expenditure on early childhood services is extraordinarily low in comparison to other countries. Public expenditure on pre-primary education as a percentage of GDP lags behind most other OECD countries, including nations as diverse as Mexico and Korea.

The importance of the quality of staff employed in early childhood services is critical to the development of children. This was emphasised in the *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education* (EPPE) research which considered the key question of whether higher quality preschool provision makes a difference to the intellectual and social/behavioural development of young children.

Significantly EPPE found that *"there was a positive relationship between the qualification levels of the staff and ratings of centre quality. The higher the qualification of staff, particularly the manager of the centre, the more progress children made. Having qualified trained teachers in pre-school settings (for a substantial proportion of time, and most importantly as the pedagogical leader) had the greatest impact on quality and was linked specifically with better outcomes in pre-reading and social development"*.⁸

Further evidence demonstrates that, *"ability gaps between advantaged and other children open up early before schooling begins. Conventional school based policies start too late to completely remedy early deficits, although they can do some good. Children who start ahead keep accelerating past their peers, widening the gap....Early advantages accumulate, so do early disadvantages...The best way to improve the schools is to improve the early environments of the children sent to them"*.⁹

Despite the evidentiary basis, investment in the workforce and the sector as a whole has been inadequate to match the level of professionalism and specialist skills required to deliver the quality standards articulated within the research. In Ontario, Canada, the Government has implemented 'full-day' learning for four and five-year-old preschool children in response to the overwhelming documented research showing the positive impact on their academic, social and emotional development, and subsequent economic returns on this investment.

Veronica Lacey, President and CEO of The Learning Partnership & Don Drummond, Chief Economist, TD Bank Financial Group (both of Ontario) have supported the Government's substantial investment by saying, "At a time of soaring deficits there are, understandable, concerns as to whether the initiative can be afforded. But given rates of return to investing in early childhood education, the more pertinent question is whether we can afford not to make such an investment."¹⁰

⁸ Sylva, K. Melhuish, E, Sammons, P, Siraj-Blatchford, I., Taggart, B. and Elliot, K. (October 2003) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings From the Pre-School Period*, Research Brief, Institute of Education, University of London, University of Oxford, Birkbeck, University of London, Research Brief No. RBXX15-03, p.3

⁹ Heckman, J, & Masterov, D.V. (2005). *The productivity argument for investing in young children*. http://www4.fgv.br/cps/simulador/infantil/Apresenta%C3%A7%C3%A3o/dugger_2005007-24_dvm.pdf

¹⁰ *With Our Best Future in Mind:(2009) Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*, www.edu.gov.on.ca/kingergarten

In Victoria the providers of early childhood education remain diverse. While government plays a primary role in the provision of formal schooling, this is not the case in the early childhood sector. Service providers fall within the following general categories:

- services run on a not for profit basis that incorporate volunteer governance and management structures (including cluster managed services)
- services managed by local government
- services that are delivered by private providers on a for profit basis

The system is highly disparate, and as acknowledged in the ECD Workforce Issues Paper (p.6) the education of children occurs in a variety of different settings. In many instances the provision of early childhood education within a local area has emerged in response to community needs at a given point in time, and as a consequence there is a great level of disparity within the general categories of formal childcare and kindergarten settings.

Within recent years the capacity of early childhood providers to deliver services in their respective communities has been influenced by a range of factors including:

- increasing birth rates, particularly in municipalities where birth rates have increased rapidly with a reported 21% increase in Victoria over the past 10 years¹¹
- a DEECD reported increased participation in 4 year old kindergarten at just over 95%

Since 2007 early childhood education has received increased priority at both state and federal levels. This renewed commitment is demonstrated through:

- Universal Access to 15 hours of kindergarten per week for 40 weeks in the year before formal schooling, to be delivered by a university qualified early childhood teacher, by 2013
- the development of a National Early Years Learning Framework
- the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood and Care
- introducing a national licensing and quality assurance system from 2012
- transition statements for all preschool children entering formal schooling

KPV welcomes this commitment from government that recognises the imperative of high quality early childhood education. The development of curriculum, legislative quality measures and a common framework that allows for parents and services to interact and communicate in respect to the progress of children is critical.

The substantial research based evidence for the provision of high quality early childhood education has understandably emphasised the significant benefits to children. Unfortunately, at the same time there appears to have been a lack of focus on the practitioners that need to drive the significant pedagogical outcomes.

As a consequence, there is a crisis in the capacity of the early childhood education workforce to meet demand. There is a lack of available staff with requisite qualifications and skills to meet the changing needs of sector reform. For at least the last five years, the capacity of services to find qualified staff to meet increased qualification requirements within changing regulations, let alone to provide the necessary pedagogical leadership has been extremely limited. This is also compounded with many existing staff reporting that they feel unsupported in updating their professional development to meet contemporary needs. The insecurity of constantly changing volunteer committee employers would add to the inadequacy of professional support and career development of staff.

¹¹ ABS, *Population Projections*, Series B

State and federal governments have kept detailed data on the workforce projections of staff in the formal schooling system. However, until the announcement of the commencement of a workforce census in the early childhood sector in mid 2010 at a federal level, there has been no comprehensive formal workforce data kept at a central point in respect to the early childhood sector.

Given the significance of the sector that aspires to improve the future opportunities of all children, the unprecedented regulatory reform currently taking place (such as the need for increased qualifications, changes to staff/children ratios, etc) the need for accurate data collection and workforce projections are critical to the future provision of high quality early childhood education.

The Demand for Early Childhood Development Services

Families make early childhood education choices for their children based on many and varied reasons. Some are based on preconceived ideas and reputations of different settings particularly relating to long day childcare and sessional/stand alone kindergartens. Other major influencers are availability of places within their local area, accessing programs to meet working parents' requirements and the disparate cost of long day care compared with sessional kindergarten programs.

It is the view of KPV that the preferred model would genuinely value the interactions between the service and families that attend the service and view high quality early childhood education as paramount, without seeking to judge families for the "choices" they make in respect to service type to meet their individual family needs.

In discussions with service providers and parents, KPV has identified the following key reasons impacting why families utilise different services:

1. The working patterns of families – the impact of different hours of working parents/carers that impact on accessing particular services; for example, parents who both work are generally unable to access sessional kindergarten services as the program models do not fit within a standard working day. However, a funded kindergarten program provided within a long day care setting/integrated service provides a genuine alternative, although cost is reported as a barrier.
2. The cost of services – families report that the cost of some services within communities are prohibitive. While formal schooling is provided in the state sector as a "free service", the comparative costs within the early childhood sector are significant and a genuine barrier impacting on families accessing high quality services.
3. The quality of interactions between services and families that then impacts on the reputation of the service.
4. The environment provided by the service – both physical and social.
5. Accessibility and availability of services that genuinely meet the needs of local families; for example, many parents report being unable to access the kindergarten that was initially their first choice on the basis that the demand for places far exceeded supply.
6. Local community perceptions – including the perceived strength/weakness of one setting over another. For example, parents consulted by KPV spoke about different key messages provided within communities about the quality of kindergarten programs provided in long day care settings and those provided in standalone sessional services.
7. The impact of key influencers within communities, such as maternal health nurses and other parents who promote particular models or services.

The Demand for Early Childhood Development Workers

The proposed qualification standards, staffing levels, and the implied mix of skills and knowledge are welcomed by KPV. These must be a priority for high quality early childhood education to be recognised as paramount for the ongoing development and future educational success of children.

However, in speaking with early childhood education practitioners and service providers there is anecdotal evidence that the raft of changes taking place within the early childhood sector is placing considerable pressure on practitioners. Many have described feeling professionally isolated and often work with small numbers of other staff and experience minimal peer interaction.

Those that are not within a cluster management arrangement can be working within services where their employer is a voluntary parent committee which constantly changes, has limited, if any early childhood experience, and restricted time available to spend with staff as they are volunteers with external daily responsibilities. Staff feel that they are expected to lead change within their early childhood service when they have received limited, if any, professional development. Staff report undertaking additional administrative duties, such as transition statements, at a time that they are also expected to make significant changes to curriculum, as professionally challenging particularly when they are provided with minimal management support.

Despite the evidence demonstrating the importance of pedagogical leadership and the benefits this brings for children and the ongoing professional development of staff, there has been inadequate investment in this area. It is acknowledged that recent initiatives in Victoria, such as leadership programs provided through the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership, scholarship initiatives and employment incentives have recognised current inadequacies and sought to redress these. However, these programs and initiatives in isolation cannot train sufficient staff to lead the important reform initiatives in the sector, and there is no systemic mentoring and leadership programs to provide genuine professional support to staff. It is useful to compare this to the schooling system, where substantial investment has taken place in such programs, including the formal mentoring that is provided to every graduate teacher in order to gain registration with the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT).

It is clear that further investment needs to occur to not only attract staff to the early childhood sector, but also provide genuine professional development and career opportunities to staff to enable them to lead the critical quality reforms occurring in the sector, and to reward, recognise and retain existing staff.

The Supply of Early Childhood Development Workers

KPV consulted with a broad range of services, including long day care, cluster managed and standalone sessional services in regard to this issue and all reported having difficulties finding staff. Services reported the following issues of particular significance:

- Difficulties in accessing diploma or above qualified staff. As a consequence, services report that they often have a very limited field of applicants for advertised positions, many of whom may not be an appropriate “fit” for the service.
- There is a greater accessibility of Certificate 3 staff, however the quality of staff is impacted by the training providers. For example, services reported issues regarding the poor quality of training provision by specific providers, especially where courses have been completed by correspondence.
- The impact of regulatory changes in the sector has impacted on the capacity of services to retain, as well as attract, staff. For example, changes to ratios, the requirement for higher qualifications and the need for staff to retrain have led to some staff indicating they intend to leave the early childhood workforce.

- The impact of the new child:staff ratios will create considerable challenges for services. For example, services are currently considering whether they will reduce the number of children in rooms catering for 0-3 year old children, therefore keeping the same number of staff. Alternatively, they are considering whether they have the capacity to increase the number of children and therefore require additional staff. Many factors are impacting on decision making, such as how the additional cost of staffing will be met and whether services can access additional employees. Without additional government funding fee increases will need to be considered, as will the subsequent impact on parents.
- The additional cost of engaging staff with increased qualifications, including enabling staff to attend necessary professional development and engaging additional staff as replacements.
- Students who are dual degree qualified regularly elect to enter the schooling system rather than the early childhood education workforce. The reasons reported to KPV for this include:
 - increased salary over time
 - professional development opportunities
 - working within an environment with a broader range of other professionals and peer support
 - career opportunities and the perception of greater support at the beginning of their careers
 - the perceived increased status of working within a school environment, rather than in early childhood
 - DEECD is the employer and there is a consistent and peer professional manager in the role of a school principal

Pay and Conditions – attracting and retaining staff

Given the significant evidentiary base demonstrating the benefit of high quality early childhood education to the life trajectory of a child, it is clear that early childhood practitioners working with young preschool aged children are not remunerated and recognised accordingly.

Many practitioners have reported their decisions to work in specific early childhood settings have been impacted by pay, conditions and status. For example, a high proportion of kindergarten teachers have indicated that they perceive a higher status working in a standalone sessional kindergarten, rather than working in a long day care service providing a funded kindergarten program. Kindergarten teachers and assistants in standalone sessional services have long received improved pay rates compared to many of their counterparts working in long day care.

There are some exceptions to this, such as staff working in local council services that tend to provide pay and conditions that are superior to those available under general industrial Awards. Further, kindergarten teachers report that they believe the community at large undervalue long day care services, and rather than valuing the educational opportunities provided over longer hours, these services are perceived as having considerable lower status.

Managers of long day care services report significant challenges when staff receive differential pay rates and conditions of employment as a consequence of different industrial instruments. They advise that this impacts on the willingness and ability of staff to work in different early childhood services and believe that this can create friction between different groups of employees, with different status attached to various positions within the one service. In turn this leads to an associated distinction between the perceived worth of employees.

There has been significant progress in respect to the wages of kindergarten teachers within the *Victorian Early Childhood Teachers and Assistants Agreement 2009* (VECTAA) and the *Local Government Early Childhood Education Employees' Agreement* (LGECEEA) over recent years. However wages continue to lag behind those of the teaching profession in schools, inevitably leading to many students in their final year electing to enter school environments rather than early childhood services. Students also report electing to enter schools rather than early childhood services as they believe the positions are of a higher status, they are provided with genuine professional development opportunities, the support of peers, career opportunities and collegiality.

Teachers and staff working in early childhood report they believe there is a lack of status working in early childhood and this could be attributed to the reason why the early childhood workforce is highly feminised.

Many staff report working in professional isolation and report challenges in working with voluntary committees of management which result in their employer changing on an annual basis. There is a tremendous burden on committees of management to operate what is a small business on a voluntary basis, with many committees reporting that they spend between thirty to fifty hours per week at their service dealing with employee related issues, fundraising, enrolments, fee collection, marketing and other governance issues.

Given the extraordinary responsibility and professional management experience required of a voluntary committee, it is difficult, if not impossible, to expect these volunteers, that may have no educational background, to lead pedagogical change in an early childhood setting. It is impossible to see how this would be considered acceptable in any other educational system. It should be noted however, that while teachers in standalone settings reported challenges in working with volunteer committees that change from year to year, in a number of cases they reported that they preferred the autonomy and enjoyed working closely with their local community.

The lack of formalised portability arrangements for a long service leave scheme creates a further disincentive for staff to remain in early childhood. Employees report that they are often unaware of this until they are some way into their career. Despite efforts to have a formalised portable long service scheme established, to date no such scheme has been established. KPV acknowledges that, along with other peak organisations in the sector, KPV is involved in a working party to seek to redress this. However, whether this is possible will depend on state government and a financial commitment to establish a scheme.

Workforce Planning

Anecdotally a significant number of staff KPV consulted have indicated that they will leave the sector as a consequence of the need to upgrade qualifications, changes to curriculum and the impact of other legislative changes. At this point in time it is difficult to gauge whether this will come to fruition, but it is clear that staff require support and incentives, to remain in the sector.

Specific government incentives have been implemented to encourage staff to work in hard to staff areas, including rural and regional areas. KPV has been surprised at some of the locations nominated, for example, those in metropolitan Melbourne which would suggest that the difficult to staff locations are not isolated to rural and regional areas which are experiencing considerable difficulties in attracting appropriately qualified staff.

It is clear that there is a need for greater data collection pertaining to the supply and demand of all early childhood staff to track trends and have meaningful workforce projections. These trends must incorporate the impact of the choices students make when leaving university. Once again, KPV reiterates that students report the significant attraction of the school

system to impending graduates that results in dual qualified staff electing to work in a school rather than an early childhood service.

KPV believes that it is critical to work closely with communities to genuinely identify local current and projected needs of families. In particular this must address the needs of working families who need long day services with the assurance of an integrated quality early childhood education program prior to school.

There are numerous unions and professional associations in the early childhood sector. This in itself should not be an impediment to innovation and flexibility in the workforce. In fact, various unions and professional associations have driven advocacy for early childhood practitioners and lobbied successfully for significant change in the sector. Examples of this include VECTAA and significant improvements to wages.

It is critical that key influencers in the early childhood sector take a collaborative and sophisticated approach to ensure that the established evidentiary basis is matched by a system that is well placed to meet the reforms. A number of factors are key to this, including utilising language that embraces the entire sector, working to improve the perceived status of working in particular environments and associated pay and conditions. The varying pay and conditions of different employees and the limitations of employees working in different roles within one service will remain an issue within current industrial limitations.

Regulatory Burden

As recognised by all in the early childhood sector, this is a time of significant change. It is critical to embrace the changes that will lead to increased quality of services. However, it is also critical to recognise that this is an intensive time of change. For example, to enact the important initiatives resulting from the *Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010* at a service level will require significant commitment and expertise from employees and management. For many employees these changes, along with other recent reforms to curriculum, will require substantially different practices. Kindergarten teachers consulted by KPV have reported that they are fearful of introducing such a significant raft of reforms to the sector without any associated support.

Services have reported that while they support the improvements to the overall quality of early childhood education, the cost of implementing change, in terms of time and infrastructure, is incredibly challenging. Some services believe this will threaten their ongoing sustainability, or alternatively as a consequence of increasing fees, will prevent families from accessing services. These costs relate to both time and infrastructure. While the costings for improved infrastructure have been estimated, there has been no genuine costing of the time and associated commitment that will be required by staff and management to implement these changes.

Within early childhood services when regulations change there is an intensive changeover, time of roll out, implementation and the continuation of constantly monitoring that regulations are followed. This is particularly significant for the kindergarten sector that will be undertaking an accreditation process for the first time.

The requirements for extensive regulatory documentation are extensive. When combined with associated pedagogical requirements, for example, taking into account the individual child developmental documentation, including portfolios and the self guided process that must be demonstrated to show a teacher is meeting each child's individual needs; this is an overwhelming and time intensive task for service providers, and particularly for staff implementing these initiatives.

Services that claim CCB regulatory requirements are required to complete further regulatory tasks that create additional pressure in addition to the requirements set out above. While KPV acknowledges that these regulatory requirements that are targeted at delivering high

quality early childhood education are critical, services must be properly resourced in order to deal with the regulatory burden. It is unfair and unrealistic to expect management and staff to simply undertake these additional tasks without further support, from both a financial and personnel perspective.

The regulatory burden impacts significantly on the face to face time that staff have to engage with peers and families at the service. It is foreseeable that under current arrangements this will impact negatively on the ability of staff to engage in professional discussions with colleagues, attend contemporary professional development and enjoy building positive relationships with children and families. It must be noted that all of these factors are also key indicators of the quality of a service.

Qualifications, Career Pathways and Professional Development

Many of the issues that exist for practitioners in this area have been previously raised in this submission. These include the professional isolation, lack of access to contemporary professional development and the lack of career pathways in the sector.

Within many services the employer does not have educational qualifications, and therefore is not well placed to recognise the need for specific professional development, to provide mentoring and career development. Many practitioners report that it is difficult for them to attend professional development as the service will advise them that they cannot access a relief staff member and do not want to close the service for the day. This scenario would be improbable in the school sector, where the school is led by a professional with educational qualifications, who has the opportunity to network regularly with other school leaders, and all staff are required to undertake professional development to maintain registration with VIT.

Given the clear nexus between high quality early childhood education and the qualifications of staff working with children, it is imperative that incentives exist for qualified staff to enter the early childhood sector. This includes improving pay and conditions, the provision of mentoring and leadership opportunities, security of employment and a consistent professional employer.

Without such incentives, it is impossible to see the current trends of dual qualified graduates electing to enter the schooling system change. Overall, the issue is a lack of government funding, at both a federal and state level, to genuinely invest in early childhood education, improving the status of the profession to genuinely broaden the resource of potential high quality employees. While staff regularly report their love for working with children and families, at the end of the day this does not pay the mortgage or necessarily provide the broader professional recognition that employees in any highly valued profession would ordinarily expect.

Future supply of ECD Workers

It is reasonable to assume that the future supply of early childhood employees will be predicated on government investment in the sector. Investment is required to improve the pay, conditions and status of early childhood practitioners, to promote the profession and promote the extraordinary benefits of high quality early childhood education to the wider public, improving their understanding of its importance.

While the evidentiary basis is compelling and demonstrates that the early years are the most significant to the ongoing development of a child, the investment in the early years is substantially lagging in comparison to investment in the schooling sector.

It will be imperative to appeal to school leavers and dual qualified staff leaving university to attract high quality candidates to the early childhood education field.

It must be noted that status pertains to not only financial worth, which of course is considerably significant, but also about the social worth and the contribution this makes to the social capital of society. The change of perception that is required needs to recognise the importance of early childhood education and accept and reflect the research that demonstrates unequivocally that the experiences of children in the years between 0 – 5 is imperative to predicting their life trajectories.

Should staffing continue along current trends, with the changes to regulations, including improved staff:child ratios, and the provision of 15 hours of kindergarten to all children in the year before school, it will be impossible to have an adequate future supply of qualified staff to meet the needs of services and children. It is imperative that the legislated requirement for qualified staff is not watered down as a consequence, but alternatively, that additional workforce investment occurs as a matter of urgency.

KPV believes that the registration of early childhood teachers with VIT is critical to ensuring that the standards of the education profession are upheld by all. The registration process provides a true recognition of the early childhood education professional, illustrating the value of all teachers in the education sector.

Quality of Training Courses and Providers

The need for high quality, qualified early childhood practitioners is paramount to ensure that all children have access to a high quality educational environment.

Whilst the early childhood sector has previously had no specific curriculum to work towards in modelling early childhood training courses, this is no longer the case. It is hoped that now a national framework is in place, that a more structured approach will be taken by training providers.

KPV advocates passionately for high quality training providers to ensure that that early childhood educators are well qualified and trained to succeed in the sector. Quality training providers, such as Gowrie Victoria, provide a model where training curriculum and programs are driven by research undertaken in partnership with Monash University. This model is clearly based on highly researched material and pedagogical excellence.

However, it is noted that other providers have taken a less rigorous approach. With the introduction of the Victorian DEECD Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development and the Federal National Quality Framework (and the subsequent National Quality Standards) it is imperative that training providers review their practices and a more rigorous accreditation process occurs to ensure that they are teaching to these reforms.

It is critical that training providers work to a benchmark that must be independently evaluated and accredited to ensure high quality training provision. Numerous services reported serious concerns to KPV about poor training provision, particularly when completed entirely by correspondence. Services advised that they were reluctant to engage any prospective applicant who had completed their qualifications with a training provider where they had cause to believe that rigorous standards were not applied and that those completing their course were unlikely to be well prepared to provide high quality early education experiences to children in their services.

Integration of Early Childhood Development Services

KPV advocates strongly for the integration of early childhood development services. It is critical that the planning for integration occurs in partnership with the local community to ensure specific community needs are taken into account and that the opportunity for all children to access a high quality early childhood experience is provided.

From the perspective of workforce, a genuinely integrated early childhood development service should provide greater career opportunities, including increased opportunities for pedagogical leadership and peer mentoring. Working with a broader range of staff in an integrated service, there are enhanced opportunities for a greater sense of collegiality and collaboration across professions, with improved outcomes for children and families. This team approach overcomes the sense of professional isolation other staff currently experience in standalone services.

As mentioned above, a key challenge for integrated services is co-ordinating various professionals employed under different industrial instruments, with varying levels of pay and conditions. Without doubt this results in an impediment to true integration.

ECD Workforce for Indigenous Children

In August 2010 DEECD published *Balert Boorron: The Victorian Plan for Aboriginal Children and Young People*, a publication that sets out a bold reform agenda that states “For the two years before school, Aboriginal families will be able to access services with innovative curricula combining best practice in early childhood learning with Aboriginal language, history and culture. Services will be staffed by suitably qualified workers who can also work with families to support home learning or find needed supports, and with schools and other services to ensure that all Aboriginal children make a smooth transition to school.”

Within the current staffing crisis it is difficult to imagine how this reform can come to fruition.

The Australian experience of incorporating indigenous culture remains largely isolated to where Aboriginal communities are situated and those communities where there is an identified disadvantage for indigenous children and families. There is minimal integration into early childhood education programming within the broader non-indigenous community.

This stems from a lack of early childhood educators with historical knowledge of the indigenous experience, or as the Manager Children's Services, Melbourne University, Brian Newman puts it, “....early childhood educators often find it difficult to meaningfully include Aboriginal education as part of their program...”¹². Newman sites some of the reasons for this may be due to a lack of knowledge, fear of getting it ‘wrong’ and individual and institutional racism.

An excellent international example of successful integration of indigenous culture into early childhood education curriculum and staff professional development is the New Zealand Ministry of Education’s early learning framework.

¹³*Te Whāriki* is a bicultural curriculum statement developed in New Zealand. It contains curriculum specifically for Māori immersion services in early childhood education and establishes, throughout the curriculum document as a whole, the bicultural nature of curriculum for all early childhood services.

Te Whāriki is a framework for providing tamariki/children's early learning and development within a sociocultural context. It emphasises the learning partnership between kaiako/teachers, parents, and whānau/families. Kaiako/teachers weave a holistic curriculum in response to tamariki/children's learning and development in the early childhood setting and the wider context of the child's world.

The importance of the social context within which children are cared for and learning takes place is one of the foundation stones of the curriculum. It is clearly acknowledged that the

¹² Brian Newman (2008) article, Early Childhood Australia, *Walking Respectfully, Exploring Indigenous Culture and Reconciliation in Early Childhood Practice, Taking responsibility and taking action*

¹³ www.educate.ece.govt.nz/learning/curriculumAndLearning/TeWhariki

relationships and the environments that children experience have a direct impact on their learning and development.

ECD Workforce for Children with Additional Needs

Significant issues face the early childhood education workforce in respect of working with children with special needs. Again, from an evidentiary basis the research clearly demonstrates the substantial benefits that children with additional needs gain from a high quality early childhood experience. However, there is a lag in respect of action and necessary funding.

From the perspective of children and families, the capacity to access additional funding is limited and frustrating. Parents report issues to KPV such as feeling unwelcome in services and that their needs are unable to be accommodated, due to inadequate funding and a lack of staff with specific training to work with additional needs children. Equally, teachers report feeling overwhelmed as a consequence of providing the extra support to assist these families. Parents describe significant waiting lists due to the lack of appropriately trained staff and lack of funding to employ them.

Qualified staff are not attracted to working with children with additional needs in the early childhood education sector as a consequence of limited pay, conditions and career opportunities. In reality, other settings, such as hospitals, can provide far superior conditions of work and increased status for suitably qualified employees. There is also a great disparity within and between geographic areas in respect to waiting times for children to access professionals to assist them with their additional needs.

It becomes blatantly apparent that without additional funding and resources it is unlikely that the true needs of children with additional needs within the early childhood sector under the current system can ever be met.