

## **Response to ECEC workforce for children with additional needs Draft Report**

I would like to comment on the ECEC workforce document for children with additional needs. I have been working in the area of early intervention for 20 years as a special educator. I have my masters (hons) in special education and have worked and researched in the area of early intervention (for children 0-6 years) at Macquarie University for 16 years as the co-ordinator of the Early School Program and now as educational programs manager of the STaR Inclusive Early Childhood Program. This program provides training and intensive in-centre support for staff working with young children with disabilities in eleven participating childcare centres across Sydney. I therefore have an in depth knowledge of provision for children with additional needs in childcare centres.

In response to your information request I would like to provide some information about the unique service our program provides in early childhood education and care for children with additional needs. The STaR (Special Teaching and Research) Inclusive Early Childhood Program was established to support young children with disabilities, their families and the childcare staff of the childcare centres they are attending. Childcare staff are trained and provided ongoing support to provide developmentally appropriate, evidence- based programs within the daily activities and routines of the centre, to promote the child's learning whilst in care. The program is funded primarily by FaHCSIA and has been accepted as a 'Promising Practice' by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

It was great to read the document and the recommendations proposed. I agree with all recommendations and following are my comments on issues and recommendations.

### **8.2**

- The FaHCSIA funding under the 'Helping Children with Autism' and 'Better Start' Programs is definitely discriminatory against children with disabilities other than 'the chosen disabilities' and this needs to be addressed.

### **Draft recommendation 8.1**

Re modifying the structure and operation of inclusion programs:

Having worked in childcare centres over the past 8 years I have become very familiar with the support provided by the Inclusion Support Agency. This support has been beneficial in generally assisting staff to be more thoughtful of including children with additional needs but does not provide the knowledge and support needed to provide an appropriate program for children with disabilities. Children with disabilities in early childhood settings should have an appropriate individual education program to support their inclusion and childcare staff should be taught the skills they need to implement that program within the everyday routines and activities of the centre. Staff in childcare do not have the skills or strategies to successfully include and provide for the developmental needs of children with disabilities and ISA support does not provide this. Childcare centres may be becoming more "inclusive" but are not becoming more "high quality educational programs" for children with additional needs.

Most of the children we are supporting in childcare have moderate to high support needs and therefore qualify for an ISS worker. Most of the centres we are supporting have 4-5 children supported by ISS workers and because of the funding situation, are spending a considerable amount of their own money to subsidize the ISS worker's salary. They are therefore penalized for being inclusive! I fully agree with the recommendations proposed and would add

- Extend support to include children with feeding issues such as tube feeding.  
Currently children requiring feeding assistance do not qualify for ISS

### **Draft recommendation 8.2**

I agree, training for ISS workers is necessary but so is training for all staff working in the centre. Responsibility for the child should not be placed on one person. It needs to be a shared responsibility or true inclusion does not happen. Training and in centre support and tutoring for all staff on-the-job is far more practical and effective.

### **Draft recommendation 8.3**

The government appears to be increasing funding for allied health professional services but not early intervention educators. In selection of service providers for their panel of the 'Helping Children with Autism' and 'Better Start' Programs, the government does not recognize the expertise of early intervention special educators as this population of professionals are not considered reputable service providers in their own right to provide services on this panel.

I would agree that training of early childhood staff is critical if children with additional needs are to be adequately catered for in early childhood centres. Experience of our program over the past 8 years has demonstrated that training a targeted 'significant' staff member has been an important part of the inclusion process but the in-centre tutoring and support of all staff on the job has been critical for the child's true inclusion and development.