

28<sup>th</sup> August, 2011

Dear Commissioners

We are a group of early childhood educators and fourth year early childhood education students from Macquarie University. We appreciate the efforts and resources that have gone into the Early Childhood Development draft report and value the opportunity to respond.

We are advocating for a higher staff qualifications and an increase in the overall ratio of early childhood teachers in all prior to school settings, including long day care and preschools. We strongly believe that if young children are to have “the best possible start in life” (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p.4) then they require access to university qualified teachers at all times. The proposed national standards currently under represent and devalue early childhood teachers in these settings. We strongly support universal access to an early childhood teacher for all age groups from birth to school age. Such a vision, however will only be achieved if early childhood teachers achieve pay parity with teachers in primary school settings.

Early childhood teachers actively promote and facilitate access to high quality educational programs, they provide pedagogical leadership to less qualified and inexperienced staff, and they provide a professional family centred environment that supports families in their decision to use early childhood services.

Research by Whitebook (2003) has shown that early childhood teachers lead to high quality education, enhanced engagement in practices and improved developmental outcomes for children. Qualified teachers engage children in higher level thinking, and are more likely to encourage ‘sustained shared thinking’ (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Taggart, Sammons, Melhuish, & Elliot, 2003). In addition research demonstrates that teacher’s positive interactions have a positive impact on children’s pre-reading and social skills (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2003).

Early childhood teachers also play an important role in mentoring and leading other staff. As indicated by the productivity report (chapter 4) the early childhood workforce is represented by two different groups of workers. These two groups differ greatly in their educational qualifications and their associated roles and responsibilities. Early childhood teachers provide pedagogical leadership, they direct and monitor staff implementation of regulations and standards, and they role model quality interactions with children and families. It is therefore essential that less qualified and inexperienced staff are mentored and supported by educational leaders. This will ensure that all staff implement a high quality program based on best practice for young children and their families.

Proactive engagement and support for families in early childhood settings is a professional

responsibility of early childhood teachers. In order to support families in their complex role of parenting early childhood teachers need to have a broad range of skills and knowledge. Effective partnerships with families rely on an understanding of the changing nature of families, respect for diversity, and high level communication skills (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Families need access to qualified teachers who recognise and support the challenging role of all parents. Families also require access to qualified teachers who understand and can articulate issues surrounding child development. Early childhood teachers ensure that families have access to the support and guidance they require to give their child the best start in life.

Currently university qualified early childhood teachers only make up 30% percent of the early childhood workforce. The National Quality Agenda recognises the importance of early childhood teachers to some extent, however there continues to be significant gaps in the provision of early childhood teachers in prior to school settings compared with school-based settings (Sumsion, 2007). The draft regulations only require an early childhood teacher to be employed in centres of up to 25 children for 20% of the time, which equates to 1-hour 36 minutes per day or 1 day per week in a service open for eight hours. (Department Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 2011), this is neither effective nor equitable in providing high quality education and care.

As most early childhood teachers are placed with pre-school groups, younger children, and children who attend centers with enrolments of less than 25, miss out on the expertise and knowledge of early childhood teachers. With brain development research indicating that the first three years are the most formative, then access to a qualified teacher is also crucial for the under 3's.

We support universal access to a 4 year trained teacher in the year prior to school as a minimum standard, however to ensure quality and equity we strongly recommend that universal access to a 4 year trained teacher is essential for all groups of children. This amendment to the national standards will ensure that all children (aged birth to 6 years) have daily and continuous access to committed and highly educated early childhood professionals. In order to relieve financial hardship on families and services we also recommend that government funding be provided to support these changes.

We also support finding 5.1 which proposes that salary and conditions for early childhood teachers in prior to school settings need to be increased and be competitive with those offered to teachers in primary school settings. It is essential that the sector is able to retain and recruit highly qualified and highly committed teachers to the early childhood sector.

Finally, we believe investment in early childhood professionals improves learning outcomes for children and is an investment in the future of Australia.

We hope you find our contribution beneficial when finalising your recommendations.

Yours sincerely,

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