

## **Productivity Commission Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning**

Submission prepared by:

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### **Advocating for the best interests of the child**

As a parent who has used early childhood education (ECE) and care services, and as an employee in the early childhood education and care sector, I am passionate about the accessibility of **high quality** education and care services for all young Australians. I live and work in the inner suburbs of Melbourne, where demand for ECE services is high.

Despite always being interested in working with young children, what deterred me from pursuing a career in ECE directly after high school was the low social status of early childhood educators and the poor remuneration. After having children of my own, my priorities changed, as did my attitudes towards ECE, and my passion for improving accessibility of quality kindergarten programmes became a driving force in my career change to ECE. At this time, the Early Years Learning Framework was being introduced, and this guiding document increased my confidence in believing that the changes needed to ensure greater accessibility to high quality programmes was achievable. I sensed that this was a time of positive change for the ECE sector, and was motivated to be part of this evolution.

As a child, I attended a sessional kindergarten in the year prior to schooling, and wanted the same experience for my children. However, high demand and low availability of sessional kindergarten places in my municipality meant that my children were unable to attend sessional kindergarten. The children were offered a place in long daycare instead. My concern was that the quality of the kindergarten programme in a long daycare centre was inferior to that in a sessional kinder. This was an opinion shared by many of my fellow parents who were assessing the ECE options for their children at that time. I was well aware of reports of poor quality childcare centres and was fearful that accepting a place in daycare may be detrimental to my children's wellbeing.

I endeavoured to find out as much as I could about the programme at daycare, and was interested in learning how it actually differed from sessional kindergarten. After gaining a better understanding of how the centre operated, observing the practice and discussing my feelings with the director, I came to the conclusion that there was no reason why a long daycare centre could not run a kindergarten programme that is as good as a sessional kinder programme. The introduction of the EYLF and the NQS, which apply to both long daycare and sessional kindergartens, further supported my newfound belief. Having said that, I do acknowledge that my children and I were lucky enough to be offered a place in a high quality daycare centre and this was not necessarily representative of all daycare centres at the time.

An incident that had a particularly profound effect on me was at a public meeting regarding accessibility of ECE held by the local council. At this meeting, the council were proposing the establishment of a new, purpose built centre, which would incorporate maternal and child health, long daycare and sessional kindergarten on one site. While the proposal would create much needed additional sessional kinder and long daycare places in the community, there were many parents who disagreed with this option, expressing their dissatisfaction with the

sessional kinder operating on the same site and under the same roof as the long day care centre. The outrage expressed by some of the parents at this meeting left me feeling shocked and angered at the elitist attitudes of these parents who felt that by sharing a building with a long daycare service, somehow the quality of the sessional kinder programme would be compromised.

Not long after this incident, I decided to enter the field of ECE, with a long-term goal to help change these discriminatory attitudes. In my mind, there was no reason why quality kindergarten programmes should be limited to sessional kindergartens and Early Learning Centres.

After having worked in the ECE field for a few years, it became apparent to me that the perceived superiority of sessional kinder programmes was a longstanding belief held by many sessional kindergarten teachers. For a workforce that often feels undervalued by society, this divisive attitude within the field further weakens our professional identities and self-worth. How can we expect people outside of the field to value and respect the work we do, if we cannot value and respect each other?

The introduction of the EYLF and NQF has meant that kindergartens and long daycare centres are now working within the same regulatory frameworks and their quality is assessed by the same criteria. What differs between sessional kindergarten and long daycare are the employment conditions under which staff work. In Victoria, council and community run sessional kindergartens pay their ECE teachers in accordance with VECTAA 2009 and LGECEEA2009. Many ECE teachers employed in long daycare centres are paid at Educational Services (Teachers) Award rates. Significant variations in conditions and remuneration create inequity within a system that assesses each service's quality by the same criteria. For example, the amount of time allocated to ECE teachers for planning varies significantly between sessional kinder (12.5 hours per week) and long daycare centres (2 hours per week). One would expect these differences to be reflected in the quality of the programme provided by each service. Yet, when assessing the quality of each programme, the same standards and criteria are used for each. It is my contention that by rectifying this inequity, more children will have access to high quality programmes in long daycare centres in Victoria. This should also address the issue of ECE teacher retention in long daycare services.

#### **Factors which influenced my career change to Early Childhood Education and Care:**

- Passion for improving access to high quality ECE programmes
- The introduction of the EYLF and NQF, which support continuous improvement in striving for high quality programmes for children. In my view, these frameworks were the catalysts for change that the sector desperately needed in improving accessibility of high quality programmes for all young children.
- The removal of TAFE fees for the Diploma of Children's Services.
- The Early Childhood Qualification Fund Scholarship offered by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Victoria. This scholarship has enabled me to study the Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies. Without this scholarship, I would not have undertaken the degree, as I could not justify the course fees in comparison to the minimal increase in salary I would achieve as a graduate.
- The pathway program from the Diploma to the Bachelor degree with Monash University, which awards credit for 1 year of study. The mode of delivery of the Bachelor degree was also a factor in deciding whether or not to continue with further studies. The multi-modal course combines a face to face workshop with online study for each unit and was the most practical option for me as a working parent.