

To Productivity Commission

This submission addresses, briefly, three main areas relating to the provision and quality of early childhood services:

1. *Home-based care: accessibility, flexibility, affordability*
2. *Early childhood services in very remote communities*
3. *Provision of early childhood education- teacher education*

I am happy to provide further, more confidential information and concrete examples, from professional research and field visits/observations about issues raised in the following statement.

1. Home-based care

While the concept of 'home-based care' is a contentious area amongst early childhood professionals there is a clear need for greater flexibility in child care options for families. Most people I know (including me) have used home-based care at some point to accommodate child care outside of standard (8am to 6pm) working hours- plus many friends, families and acquaintances use or have used home-based care as a more permanent arrangement for child care, especially where there is more than one child requiring care and/or where they have been unable to access suitable centre-based care and/or where they require or prefer flexible, responsive care.

The reasons for using home-based child care ('nannies' and 'au pairs') are mainly a combination of flexibility, accessibility, quality and cost.

Flexibility: Home-based care offers a flexibility not available in centre-based care (or family day care). A carer (often a 'nanny' or 'au pair') can work non standard hours including on weekends, and where necessary, in 'broken shifts'.

Accessibility: The shortage of child care places, especially in the birth to 2 age group makes finding a child care place almost impossible in many areas. Home-based care offers a flexible option that offers, first, a 'place' that suits parents' work hours and secondly, avoids the need to transport young children to a centre often far from home.

Quality: Home-based care offers families the opportunity to find an educator or carer who is able to cater for their family's cultural, care and early education needs. My

experience is that there are many qualified early childhood educators (Diploma and degree qualified) who work as ‘nannies’ in home-based care situations and provide high quality because they value the more intimate work environment, the flexibility (perhaps around study or family responsibilities) and the higher pay that can be achieved in comparison to working in a child care centre. Casual rates for ‘nannies’ in Sydney seem to be in the vicinity of \$25 to \$35 per hour. ‘Au pairs’ usually work under arrangements that offer accommodation as well as salary, plus a ‘cultural’ experience living with a family.

Cost: The cost of employing a ‘nanny’ or ‘au pair’ can be less for families than the cost of the equivalent centre-based child care, especially where there is more than one child requiring care. When this is considered together with the convenience and flexibility, the option is attractive. Even where the cost of home-based care is the same or more than that of centre based care, the convenience and flexibility makes it a more realistic (and often the only) option for families. Consideration should be given to bringing home-based care within the normal child care subsidy and/or tax rebate system (or similar) so families are not disadvantaged. By keeping their children out of the child care ‘system’ they are in a sense helping to relieve pressure of the system (albeit unintentionally).

Regulation:

Given that home-based care is already widely used by families, it would seem wise to include it within a regulatory framework (perhaps the NQF) for both the protection of families/children and educators/carers, and to bring it within the ambit of the wider taxation system. At present nannies are not required to have a ‘working with children check’ (or equivalent) and many ‘nannies’ are paid cash, so the community is not benefiting from their tax contributions; they may not be covered by relevant workplace health and safety provisions or by superannuation and other relevant benefits. Equally, most families using ‘nannies’ are not eligible for relevant financial/tax concessions or rebates.

Concerns/suggestions

Over the many years that I have been observing the ‘home-based care’ landscape, the only major concern that I’ve noticed and one often raised by families, is the lack of ‘back-up’ should the ‘nanny’ become ill or otherwise be unable to care for a child due to an unexpected emergency situation. Obviously, addressing this ‘gap’ in a systematic way would be complex; in fact, most families usually have some back up (often family or friends or a ‘shared nanny’) in place for emergencies.

There are some agencies providing ‘au pair’ services- usually bringing international workers for ‘work and cultural’ experiences with Australian families. A closer look at the work of these agencies might be informative together with an exploration of the ways these services might (or whether they should) be regulated.

Promoting a relevant VET qualification as a starting point for ‘nannies’ would be a helpful initiative in better assuring the educational quality of ‘nannies’ and in turn, proving families with some assurance of the quality of the care they provide. Such a qualification could become part of a regulatory system.

Bringing home-based care within a regulated and supported context (in terms of carer-education, resourcing and support and back-up) would help assure the quality of the education and care service provided by ‘nannies’. It would also help educate families and the wider community about the importance of quality early childhood education and care.

2.Early childhood care and education in remote communities

It is now well established that participation in high quality early childhood programs enhances children’s social and emotional development, general well being, cognition and language and general ‘readiness’ for school. In particular, children from economically vulnerable family backgrounds are most likely to benefit from quality early education and care programs. While children living in very disadvantaged circumstances are likely to benefit most from quality programs, even poorer quality care (in that it protects children from family violence or abuse, and provides regular meals) can be helpful. However, there is no evidence that this poorer quality education and care provides the required ‘strong foundation’ for transition to school.

My many visits to early childhood services catering for predominantly Indigenous children in very remote communities indicate that few early childhood services meet the same quality standards we would expect in urban or region communities. Too often this poorer quality is couched in terms of ‘cultural appropriateness’ and/or condoned because centres ‘can’t attract and keep qualified staff’. Few services have qualified educators or strong, planned and intentional early learning programs. There is rarely evidence of a rich language program in either children’s first/home language (or in the predominant community language) and/or in English. Yet, we know that children’s language facility is the best predictor of early literacy development in the school years.

Too few early childhood services in very remote areas are covered by the new regulatory system. While there is a wealth of good intent, there is too little focus on quality experiences and outcomes for children and families. While many services in remote areas are ‘Budget Based’, this should not be a by-line for poor quality. Further, the significant investment in early childhood education and care by the community, tax payers and Australian government must be protected. Regulation of the Budget Based services would better support achievement of key policy outcomes, especially relating to transition to school and early literacy achievement and help protect public investment in early education. In the longer term, families’ utilisation of early childhood services is likely to help break the poverty cycle,

enabling more effective educational outcomes leading to greater participation in the workforce.

One of the key issues in very remote communities, is not so much lack of employment opportunities, rather, local people are not qualified to take the jobs that are available. Communities employ teachers, health workers, and many other professionals and para professionals, but rarely are these jobs performed by locals. More commonly qualified workers come into remote communities for a short time/contract and then leave.

I have long contended that the most vulnerable children need the best early childhood education and that this needs to be carefully targeted to families' and children's learning and cultural strengths (Elliott, 2006). Ensuring that children in remote communities receive an early education equivalent in quality (at least and preferably more intentional and targeted) to those in urban and regional communities is not easy, but should be a key goal for us as a nation.

Early childhood services in very remote communities, where they exist, experience a range of challenges not normally present in urban or regional services. These relate predominantly to geographic isolation, transportation, housing for staff, difficulties in attracting and keeping qualified educators* and provision of a quality curriculum.

*The importance of qualified educators is well recognised. Professional qualifications in early childhood education enable appropriate pedagogy leading to better learning environments and developmental outcomes for children. While the new NQF early childhood educator qualification requirements imply a improvements in qualification across all early childhood services, the fact that many remote early childhood services fall outside the NQF means that they are excluded from this quest for professionalisation, and hence, increase in quality provision.

At the same time, families and children in very remote communities experience a range of issues in accessing early childhood services; these relate mainly to accessibility, trust in the services, quality and 'cultural appropriateness'.

It is well established that participation in early childhood services enhances children's readiness for school; nowhere is this more important than for children living in poverty and where there may be issues around community safety and child wellbeing. Additionally, there are likely to be wider community benefits from strengthening children's development and wellbeing. Families are also likely to establish a routine of educational participation from children's earliest years.

My extensive observations in very remote communities in Qld, WA and NT indicate huge variability of early childhood services in terms of provision and quality. There is little consistency in provision and quality of programs across remote communities. Even where communities have a new(ish) purpose built premise, there are issues in attracting and keeping qualified staff and engaging families and children.

The challenges of living and working in very remote communities are well known- isolation, shortages of housing, expensive food and services etc. And clearly, early childhood services are not alone in experiencing problems in attracting and keeping qualified staff.

But given that these challenges are well recognised, and have existed for decades, it is timely to commit addressing them- once and for all.

Ideally, remote communities should be able to offer children and families the same quality of early childhood service as available to families elsewhere in the country. Critically, all children need to become confident users of English and their family language (where relevant). For children who speak a language other than English at home and in their community, early childhood services provide an important context for developing familiarity with English. *Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework* establishes a range of language outcomes that are critical for all children as they transition to school. My experiences in remote early childhood services indicate that children rarely have the opportunity for sorts of rich, immersive opportunities in English that will enable their smooth transition to school, yet children in very remote and other disadvantaged communities need the most exposure to rich standard English language environments (and where relevant their 'home' language) in the early years if they are to become bi literate.

The strong link between children's vocabulary knowledge and phonemic awareness and early literacy achievement is well established. The notion of 'closing the (literacy) gap' is unlikely to be achieved unless all children have well developed English language skills. Immersion in English language environments is critical to building English language skills. Whatever the community/home language spoken, unless a child becomes literate in English there is little hope of achieving the educational outcomes that will lead to school success and progression and to further education and/or employment.

The benefits of a nationally consistent early learning curriculum framework such as the *Early Years Learning Framework* are widely acknowledged (eg. OECD, 2012). Specifically, it provides clear and consistent learning goals and outcomes, while enabling educators to customise and adapt learning processes and environments for individual children. Most importantly, for children in remote communities, the *Early Years Learning Framework* provides clear guidelines about educational expectations and outcomes that should be achieved. However, where educators are not qualified, it is unlikely that they are able to implement learning activities and programs in keeping with the ideas, goals and intent of the *Early Years Learning Framework* (or similar). In such cases, children are clearly missing out. My observations suggest that too often, children in early childhood centres in very remote communities miss

out; they are simply left to wander around; there is little evidence of a planned, intentional teaching and learning program.

Clearly the issues in remote communities are very complex, and there are a range of factors that impact on the provision of early education and other education services. But unless there is a serious, concerted effort to improve the quality of early childhood services, provide a more consistently high quality early childhood programs and boost children's participation- another generation of Indigenous children in very remote Australia will struggle in the early years of school, fail to achieve acceptable levels of literacy and be relegated to a life on welfare.

3.Early childhood professional education and preparation

Early childhood professional qualifications are a key indicator of quality in early childhood programs. Generally, Australian higher education and VET providers do a good job in providing quality educational programs leading to relevant degrees and diplomas in early childhood education. The new NQF requirements should serve to increase the professionalisation of educators working in the early education and care sector. However, given the extreme shortage of early childhood teachers it would be helpful to liaise with higher education providers to ensure sufficient places and resources for early childhood education students.

An on-going concern is around the shortage of qualified early childhood teachers in the sector. There has been a long standing trend for qualified early childhood teachers to prefer to work in the school sector where salaries, working conditions and career progression are more attractive than in the child care sector. In particular, teacher education students that I have worked with over many years say they prefer the 'longer school holidays' and 'school hours' that better fit with their own family intentions and/or responsibilities.

If the birth to 5 sector is to attract sufficient and quality early childhood teachers there needs to be a much great focus on building industrial parity between the prior-to-school and school sectors in terms of working conditions and salaries. My research, however, indicates that working conditions (holidays, shift work, career opportunities), rather than salaries *per se*, present the greater barrier to seeking employment in the child care sector.

A current concern is that the recent transition to teacher education courses covering mainly birth to 8 years is creating a potentially twofold problem. On the one hand, qualified early childhood teachers will seek employment in the school sector, where they are qualified to teach- rather than in child care; those who cannot gain employment in the school sector will, by default, have to seek employment in the child care sector. In this way the child care sector is gaining teachers who would have preferred to teach in schools and are 'marking time' until a school job becomes

available. It is likely that these teachers will lack the passion for teaching very young children that is so critical in early childhood settings.

My conversations with students undertaking early childhood teacher education courses (over some 20 years) and including over the last couple of years indicate that about 80%+ of enrolled students (and graduates), would far prefer to teach in a school (rather than a child care centre) but will 'probably end-up working in child care'.

There is also the increasing situation where international students are 'discovering' that doing an early childhood degree can 'fast track' Australian residency opportunities. My conversations with a number of such students indicate that their long term employment goal is not with the early childhood sector, rather it is to gain residency in Australia. It must be said that these students are often very talented, lovely people, but their 'heart' is not in early childhood education.

Professional regulation

Over many years there has been discussion about a national approach to early childhood teacher/educator regulation. Early childhood education professionals are one of the last unregulated groups of employees in human services related professions. While there is some registration 'crossover' for teachers qualified to work in both the school and prior-to-school sectors, and early childhood teachers working in schools (and preschools that are integrated as part of the school system) are required to be 'registered' with the relevant 'teacher registration' authority, there is no national registration for the bulk of early childhood educators (degree, diploma and certificate qualified)- although they are usually working side by side and often performing the same work with the same children in a child care or preschool setting. While there is some work between the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), the Australasian Teacher Registration Authorities (ATRA) and ACECQA on streamlining accreditation of teacher education programs, there does not appear to be any current focus on developing a national professional registration system for early childhood teachers and other educators. The national system for approving early childhood educators' qualifications (via ACECQA) is a very positive step in the right direction.

Professor Alison Elliott

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References and detail

To be provided as needed