



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION & CARE INQUIRY: Australian Government Productivity Commission

The Hive, Mt Druitt (United Way Australia)

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May 2023

The Hive, Mt DrUITT

The Hive, Mt DrUITT (United Way Australia) is a place-based, Collective Impact initiative operating in the suburbs of the Mount DrUITT postcode in Western Sydney, NSW. The goal of The Hive is for all children in Mt DrUITT to start school well, with equal opportunity to learn, be healthy and participate in quality community life.

The Hive is guided by the belief that all children deserve to start school well despite the postcode they are born in. We recognise that investment in our youngest citizens will benefit whole communities and assist in breaking cycles of disadvantage and stigma within areas of entrenched vulnerabilities. The Hive believes that for outcomes for children to be improved, an ecological approach must be embraced to recognise that children belong to families, who live in communities who are affected by policies and systems and as such a holistic approach must also be considered in Australia's Early Education & Care system.

The Mt DrUITT postcode has a long history of entrenched intergenerational poverty and social stigma with some of the postcode's twelve suburbs having exceptionally high rates of unemployment, crime, financial insecurity, and issues of domestic violence and mental health. According to the Australian Early Development Census, in certain Mt DrUITT suburbs, 2 in 3 children start school considered developmentally vulnerable, which is significantly higher than the national rate of 1 in 5 children¹. The percentage of children classed as developmentally vulnerable is only increasing, and so is the gap between Mt DrUITT children and the rest of NSW. Living in a region of socioeconomic disadvantage, these children are starting school already behind compared to children from other communities, and without significant investment in Mt DrUITT suburbs, these children will struggle to break out of the cycle of poverty.

Early Education & Care

The Hive work individually with families to overcome barriers in accessing early education and care, as well as investing in early education centres and educators across the postcode through professional development opportunities and mentoring to ensure children can access a high-quality education, and that educators are more equipped to support children who enter their service. The specific work that The Hive undertakes specifically regarding ECEC includes:

- *An Early Learning Linker* role to support families to overcome barriers to access early education for their child. This includes working with families to seek information of early education options, navigating the childcare subsidy process, access birth certificates, provide brokerage support for bonds and any support to overcome any other barriers to ECEC access.
- *Quality training & professional development* for early childhood educators and leaders. The Hive have organized professional development and mentoring opportunities through a range of partners for early learning services in the 2770 postcode.
- *Early Childhood Educators' Network*. The Hive have also established an Early Childhood Educators' Network 2770 in collaboration with Western Sydney University for professional development and networking opportunities for educators across the postcode. It gives early childhood educators an opportunity to leave their services to engage in collaborative learning, sharing funds of knowledge and taking with them new ideas and strategies to implement in their respective services.

- *Specialized Support.* The Hive enable a speech therapist, occupational therapist, and other early intervention specialists to attend ECEC services to observe and provide capacity building strategies for early childhood educators to support children experiencing developmental challenges.

Research demonstrates that access to 600 hours of quality preschool before starting school is instrumental in ensuring children are developmentally on track and ready to commence primary school. In disadvantaged communities such as the Mt Druitt area, many families face barriers to accessing early education including the cost of bonds or enrolment fees, financial hardship, a lack of available spaces in services, lack of services who can meet the needs of children with developmental delays or disabilities, transport barriers, access to birth certificates, and other family complexities they may be experiencing.

We know that children in disadvantaged communities require a unique approach to ensure they can succeed, and we believe that the ECEC sector should consider vulnerable children in every outcome and priority area. If the ECEC sector supports the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, all Australian children will benefit.

Quality of care rather than just quantity must also be considered as research demonstrates that the provision of high-quality care in early childhood has positive impacts on children's developmental outcomes and children who have experienced high quality care programs are most likely to exhibit school readiness abilities and become successful adults.^{2 3 4} Investment therefore must also be provided to existing ECEC services, as well as ensuring there is sufficient resourcing of centres to meeting the demand in communities.

Barriers & Gaps

From our experience working with families and early educators in the Mt Druitt area, we have witnessed the following barriers and gaps in the ECEC sector:

Barriers families face in accessing early education and care:

- The cost of a bond is often too expensive for parents to afford. While daily fees are subsidized and manageable for families, the bond is calculated at the full un-subsidized fees which can be hundreds or thousands of dollars required to confirm the enrolment. Some long day care centres have quoted \$2000 for two children five days a week which is unrealistic for most families, especially those in low socioeconomic communities.
- The Child Care Subsidy process is overwhelming for families, and this can be considered “too hard” and prevent families from considering childcare.
- Limited access to information about the childcare enrolment process and understanding which subsidies families are entitled to. The process can be complicated, and families can get overwhelmed, particularly if literacy is also a concern.
- Transport is a barrier as not all families have access to a car and public transport is often unreliable and inconsistent. It is also considered stressful to take children on public transport, and the financial cost of transporting the family is also a barrier.
- Children often don't have a birth certificate or weren't registered at birth which. Families don't know the process to get a birth certificate, and the registration process is complex and requires access to the internet and technology. The cost of paying for a birth certificate is also a barrier for families.
- Sustaining an enrolment can be challenging due to wider concerns in the family unit which can result in arrears, financial stress and the child being excluded from the service. A family is

often unaware or misinformed of the financial hardship options to sustain the enrolment, and centres do not implement trauma-informed practices to assist the family.

- Parents/carers are often anxious about sending their child to early learning centres due to separation concerns, behavioural concerns, toilet training etc. and are unaware of the support educators can provide with these challenges.
- Lack of knowledge of the importance of attending preschool or when they should start attending, having the common belief that teaching children can wait until Primary School.

Barriers and gaps in the ECEC sector:

- Many services in low socioeconomic areas do not meet the National Quality Standards as they are under resourced, with a high number of children enrolled with additional needs or vulnerabilities and receive a lack of support from the sector. Children in vulnerable communities need the highest quality of care due to the adversity they are often facing, and investment must be made to ensure ECEC services in these areas are of high quality.
- The expectations set by the NQS is too high considering the minimal support extended to the educators. High-quality can only be achieved if we start by supporting and valuing the early childhood educators.
- Staffing ratios are inadequate to achieve high quality standard for centres with children with vulnerabilities or additional needs. At current, a preschool room only requires two educators for 20 children which is insufficient to provide high quality of education and care.
- The administrative load is excessive and complex, particularly when applying for additional educators and other resources when the sector is understaffed. Completing additional administrative work is often unachievable, and with centres unequipped, we have witnessed services turn children with additional needs away from their service as they have not been able to meet their needs.
- There is a known shortage of educators in the ECEC sector which is impacting the availability of child spaces in the community, with some centres closing their doors on days they do not have enough staff.

Recommendations:

- Free universal childcare for children aged 3&4 years for all children, especially prioritising children from low socio-economic families and communities. This should include long day care services not only registered community-based preschools.
- Abolish childcare bonds or adapt to a sliding scale system to determine bond amount for families experiencing financial stress or vulnerabilities to ensure access to early education where children are prepared socially, emotionally, and developmentally for school.
- Allow enrolment of vulnerable children into early learning services without a birth certificate, recognizing the importance of them commencing care as a protective factor.
- Increased resources for ECEC services to support educators in meeting the needs of children with learning and developmental delays. This includes but not limited to professional development, physical resources for the classroom, additional staff to support students in their learning environments.
- Increased funding and resources for ECEC services to enable early childhood educators to effectively deliver high quality education and care for all children. Such as providing additional educators in classrooms to achieve higher standards of practice.
- Simplify the process for funding applications, or ideally provide all services allocated funds to meet the needs of children with developmental delays or vulnerabilities who enter their care.
- Increase the ratio of teachers to children to allow to higher quality education and care to be provided.
- Increase investment in wellbeing and support for early childhood educators to prevent burn out and leaving the sector.
- Increase investment in infrastructure to ensure there is enough ECEC services and educators for every community and ensuring these educators have received adequate training to provide a high-quality education and care for children.
- Ensure equitable resource distribution for communities of disadvantage rather than equal distribution across the sector.
- Funding streams to be made available for services in remote or social disadvantaged areas to create specialised programs for the needs of their community such as childcare bus, culture programs, allied health programs for children with disabilities.
- Increase investment in First Nation early educators to encourage First Nation families to enrol in culturally safe care.
- Promote a collaborative approach between ECEC educators and Early Stage 1 coordinators and teachers to ensure smoother transition to school for all children with special attention to First Nation's children, children with additional needs, CALD children and children from highly disadvantaged communities.

Conclusion

The Hive, Mt Druitt is pleased to see the Productivity Commission prompt an inquiry into the Early Childhood Education & Care sector. We greatly value the early educators that provide great care, support, and education to the children in our community, many of whom are experiencing vulnerabilities. We recognise that there are gaps in the sector which leave educators unsupported, families unable to access a service for their children, and a lack of high-quality services and educators in communities who need it most. We hope our reflections on the barriers and gaps from our experience in Mt Druitt can help to inform recommendations to improve the sector, and we welcome any opportunity that we can partner with the Commission moving forward to form a ECEC sector that is equitable for all children.

References

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- ² Ishimine, K. (2011). Quality in early childhood education and care: a case study of disadvantage. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, Vol. 38(3), pp. 257-274. <https://link-springer-com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/article/10.1007/s13384-011-0028-6> DOI: 10.1007/s13384-011-028-6
- ³ Jay, J., Knaus, M. & Heterman S. (2016). High quality education in the early years of school. Retrieved from <http://thespoke.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/high-quality-early-childhood-education-early-years-school/>
- ⁴ Manning, M., Garvis, S., Fleming, C. & Wong, G. T. W. (2017). The relationship between teacher qualification and the quality of the early childhood education and care environment. *A Campbell Systematic Review*, 2017:1, pp. 1-85. Retrieved from <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-02/ECG-Manning-Teacher-qualifications.pdf>