



Submission to the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Productivity Commission Inquiry

About Meli

Meli is a Victorian not-for-profit organisation committed to strengthening communities through supporting people.

Meli's Vision is for a fair, safe and inclusive community where everyone can thrive, and we are committed to fostering a culture that reflects our Values of Build Connection, Show Courage, Inspire Action, Celebrate Difference, and Be Dynamic.

The organisation is built on more than 300 years of combined local experience and heritage from two likeminded founding agencies, Bethany Community Support and Barwon Child, Youth & Family (BCYF), which formally merged in April 2023.

Meli offers a unique combination of services to support members of our community throughout their lifetime, from early childhood to adolescence, and adulthood. Meli is the Barwon region's largest provider of kindergartens and vital community support services including foster and kinship care, family services, family violence services for women, men and children, school engagement, youth justice, mental health, drug and alcohol services, homelessness support, family and relationship counselling, financial counselling, Gambler's Help, emergency relief and NDIS services.

This submission is informed by Managers, Educators and Practitioners working in Kindergarten, Out of Home Care, Early Childhood Approach (NDIS) and Access to Early Learning programs, providing comprehensive expertise and varied perspectives of children and families accessing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services in the Barwon and Colac regions.

Scope of inquiry response

Meli welcomes the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care, and this submission responds to the scope of inquiry relevant to the children, families, employees and communities where our programs operate, in particular the Barwon South West region of Victoria.

Meli would welcome the opportunity to expand on the content of this submission if requested by the ECEC Productivity Commission.

Affordability of, and access to, quality ECEC services that meet the needs of families and children

ECEC is an integral part of the Australian education system and sets the foundations for lifelong learning and skill development. Research shows that high-quality ECEC leads to improved outcomes such as better health, employment, and educational outcomes, however in order to support children's development, education and care services must be of high quality and easily accessible to all.

The barriers to affordability of, and access to, quality ECEC services that Meli has identified include:

Recruitment and retention of a skilled workforce

High-quality ECEC services that support all children, their families, and communities, and that meet national policy objectives, are unachievable without high-quality ECEC teachers and educators with specialised skills, knowledge, and understandings.

Unfortunately, the ECEC workforce that is central to the delivery of high-quality experiences for children is in crisis, with high attrition leading to unprecedented levels of staff shortage. This trend is evident both in Australia and internationally (1) and is also reflected in the communities in which Meli operates.

It is Meli's experience that some recent ECEC vacancies have taken more than six months to fill. Recruitment has been particularly challenging in more regional areas such as the Colac Otway Shire, despite this area boasting a population of 21,000 and with a variety of industries and good schooling, notwithstanding the assistance of [Victorian Government funded incentives and recruitment support](#).

National survey data indicates that ECEC educators' and teachers' wages and employment conditions form a significant barrier to efforts to increase and retain a capable and effective ECEC workforce.

Additionally, while it is understood that flexibility is required to attract students to ECEC courses, Meli holds concerns that fast-tracked courses are resulting in ECEC staff who are not equipped to: plan a high quality ECEC program; respond to children at risk; and engage with vulnerable and CALD families adequately. We know that teacher qualification has an indirect impact on children's outcomes via its direct relationship with the quality of the educational program (2).

Meli Children's Services has a leadership team with a combined 90+ years in the ECEC sector. It is Meli's recent experience that interviewees of all qualifications can lack knowledge of the Child Safe Standards including mandatory reporting, be unable to explain the National Quality Framework (NQF) including the National Quality Standard (NQS) and quality improvement processes or describe learning frameworks and planning cycles.

Another issue facing the retention rates in the ECEC sector is the availability of work-place learning and development, and peer mentoring. We know that for new educators to feel confident and competent they needed to be sustained by relationships based on mutual trust, respect, care and integrity (3). Research further shows that mentoring is an effective strategy in supporting early childhood teachers to improve workplace practices (4).

To support the current and future workforce, Meli recommends a greater investment in ECEC courses, as well as improved workforce support such as access to ongoing professional development, access to clinical supervision and mentoring, and better wage and work conditions.

Socio-economic disadvantage and access to high quality ECEC

Access to ECEC is considered a child's right in international agreements, including The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child that states children have a right to education. This is further highlighted by the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 target that by 2030 all children have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education (5).

However, research indicates there is a significant association between disadvantage and children's access to high quality ECEC services whereby services in more disadvantaged areas are less likely to meet the NQS (6).

Some of the areas in which Meli operates, notably some suburbs of Geelong and Colac, face critical social and economic challenges. The SEIFA Index of Disadvantage (2021) found that these areas are among the most disadvantaged in Victoria and below the state and national

averages on several critical indicators including higher than average unemployment, and high rates of low-income households and housing stress.

All Australian children should be able to reach their full developmental potential including physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language domains, with access to quality early childhood education and care, regardless of socio-economic status.

Affordability is a major barrier to participation in and access to ECEC. Meli kindergartens have seen a 9.1% increase in Geelong kindergarten enrolments with the introduction of [free three and four-year-old kindergarten](#) in Victoria in 2023 (Bethany Kindergarten Services data 2022-2023).

However additional barriers exist beyond ECEC service costs to cover additional aspects including transport, food and clothing. Meli educators have experienced reduced attendance rates due to factors including lack of public transport/cost of petrol, plus the shame and embarrassment associated with parents'/carers' inability to provide adequate food and/or suitable clothing and subsequent reluctance to send their child to ECEC services.

To increase children's and families' participation in ECEC services in low socio-economic areas, response strategies need to target the ECEC services' specific location. It is Meli's recommendation that there is significant engagement and collaboration with local communities in relation to the types of support they may require.

It is also of paramount importance that Australia maintains the integrity of its NQF, ensuring the provision of high quality of ECEC services, regardless of socio-economic status.

Adherence to Priority of Access terms

The Victorian Government has [priority of access for early childhood education](#) that applies to funded kindergarten places and long day care, which requires services to give priority of access to children in a determined order, including children who are at risk of abuse or neglect, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, asylum seeker and refugee children, and children with additional needs.

Meli's Access to Early Learning and Early Childhood Approach teams actively support families to access kindergartens and long day care, and it is our experience that more needs to be done to ensure ECEC services adhere to these terms. See attached case study (attachment 1) as an example of how difficult it can be to navigate the system despite the priority access requirements.

Developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school

There is a strong body of evidence that identifies the quality of ECEC (rather than an increase in attendance or other factors) as being the key influence in improving children's long-term outcomes. To best support the developmental and education outcomes for Australian children, Meli recommends an enhanced focus on areas of support, including:

Emotional quality

It is essential that ECEC services are enabled to facilitate the development of social skills and co-regulation of emotion – skills that have enduring impacts beyond school entry. Emotional quality of the ECEC service is the most potent long-term predictor of child development and educational outcomes, with emotionally supportive environments critical to children's ability to be actively engaged in learning, to engage confidently in learning, and to regulate their emotions in challenging situations (7). Professional development to continue the shift from a behaviour management approach to an emotion coaching style will provide children and families with the nurturing, supportive environment required to foster emotional regulation. Meli founding agency BCYF implemented Theraplay's Sunshine Circles® with much success resulting in a [Department of Education & Training Victorian Early Years Award in 2021](#).

Emotionally supportive environments are not possible without well-supported educators. This links directly to Meli's earlier recommendations for a supported workforce including enhanced professional development, mentoring, and better wage and work conditions.

ECEC – family partnerships

Australian families today come in many forms including from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, from the LGBTIQ+ community, and from diverse rates of socio-economic status, and can be single parents, blended families, and adoptive and extended families, as well as families experiencing complexities including experiences of poverty, drug and alcohol dependencies and family violence. This diversity is present across Meli's ECEC services.

Families also play a key role in supporting opportunities for children's development. It is therefore imperative that educators are able to build relationships with parents/carers that recognise this diversity, which in turn provides opportunities learning and engagement opportunities (8). Meli recommends a focus on collaborative partnerships between ECEC educators and families to elevate practice and ensure the most effective learning opportunities are realised by utilising established evidence informed initiatives such as [The Parent Research Centre's Partnering with Parents program](#).

Staff wellbeing

The most significant concerns identified by educators as barriers to effective teaching are children's challenging behaviours and staff ratios that do not account for the complexity of the communities, families and children they serve (9). We know that poverty is associated with increased complexity of teaching, including time consuming tasks such as providing administrative support and enabling connections with other required services, supporting transport arrangements (e.g., taxi vouchers) to enable attendance, through to emotional wellbeing challenges such as escalating occasions of conflict across the day in locations where children experience hunger (10).

Staff have also expressed concern about how the demand to perform and record quality as part of the Assessment and Rating process of the NQS adds additional educator stress and directs staff away from engagement with children (11).

In response, Meli recommends lower staff to child ratios particularly in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage as well as an increase in staff support, and a decrease in administrative requirements.

Access to support services

We know that one in five Australian children are developmentally vulnerable by the time they start school, with the majority of these children from families experiencing low socio-economic advantage (12).

Compounding this is the long wait lists many families experience to obtain specialist support for issues that affect their learning and development, such as speech therapists, occupational therapists, and psychologists. Low socio-economic families do not have the means to access private therapy, further disadvantaging outcomes compared to their higher socio-economic peers.

Long waiting lists for support services need to be addressed in order to support children's learning and development.

Outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children and families, and children and families experiencing disability

Today's children and families are becoming more complex. However, research shows that participation in quality ECEC services has the greatest benefits for children experiencing disadvantage (13) (14) including enhanced cognitive function, language, and social-

emotional development. Participation can also contribute to improved long-term outcomes for children, in turn resulting in higher levels of educational attainment, reduced dependence on social services and lower rates of criminality.

As previously mentioned in this submission, Meli operates in some of the most disadvantaged regions in Victoria, and we have experienced significant challenges in attracting new, high-quality staff who are able to adequately provide for the needs of children and their families.

Challenges we have identified in achieving positive outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children and families, and children and families experiencing disability include:

Access

Factors impacting access to ECEC services includes families' ability to provide transportation to and from kinder, provide adequate food for their child while at kinder, an ability to navigate the sometimes complex education system.

It is also our experience that for families experiencing disadvantage, ECEC is often a low priority as many are also faced with challenges relating to mental ill health and financial stressors including housing and food insecurity, which are taking up priority in their lives.

We would recommend a collaborative service approach to deliver accessible wraparound health and wellbeing supports, particularly mental health supports, whereby allied health and therapeutic services work with ECEC providers in a united approach. By removing the silos that ECEC services often operate in and implementing a cross-sector approach, services would be able to better address the broader needs of children and families, therefore helping to eliminate some of the barriers to accessing ECEC services.

Strategies to improve children's and families' participation should also be targeted to ECEC services' specific location.

Engagement

There are a range of barriers that exist that adversely affect children and families' access and engagement to ECEC services, and subsequently impact longer-term outcomes. These barriers including financial and cultural barriers.

Costs associated with ECEC service engagement, including transport, the provision of food and suitable clothing, accessing and printing administration/paperwork (some families do not have access to internet, a computer or printer), language and literacy are all barriers that are more prevalent among more disadvantaged communities.

We also know that in the most disadvantaged locations where children experience hunger, there is a correlation with escalating conflict within the ECEC setting (15). It is our experience that families will often refrain from accessing ECEC services due to an inability to provide substantial food or, when they do, the quality is poor which can also further impact upon behaviour and learning capabilities. Breakfast Clubs implemented through the Victorian Government School Readiness Funding initiative is providing anecdotal evidence of somewhat alleviating the effect of hunger and poor nutrition.

Cultural safety is also critical in supporting ECEC service engagement, with evidence demonstrating the presence of educators who are representative of the same cultural identity being a motivating factor for learning (16). This is relevant to both children and families from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background, and those of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent.

Complexity

The challenging behaviours of children and families is a key barrier to effective teaching, as identified by ECEC educators. This is often exacerbated in areas of low socio-economic status where higher levels of community disadvantage and associated complexities exist. There is a clear need for additional staffing of a high quality and supports within these services, to enable effective learning for all children (17).

Furthermore, Meli educators have identified training in trauma informed practices (during tertiary education and/or beyond) as being beneficial to supporting the needs of the communities in which they work. Meli staff have reported the experience of having a trained psychologist working alongside educators as a consultant once a month as being of benefit to educators' wellbeing while also providing information on strategies to enhance children's wellbeing (including ideas for individual children after observation and consultation with teachers).

The inclusion of children experiencing vulnerability and complexity creates an inequitable workload for educators working within areas of disadvantage. The attached Case Study 2 demonstrates the additional workload and the accompanying mental, emotional and physical impacts experienced by educators working in services with a higher proportion of children involved with: child protection; Kindergarten Inclusion Support; NDIS and/or Access to Early Learning compared to their counterparts in ECEC services without complexity. The non-contact time provided for educators to complete associated administration and engage with relevant stakeholders is the same regardless of the complexity they are dealing with. This inequity decreases the opportunity for services in areas of higher complexity to attract and retain the quality staff needed to adequately support complex families.

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