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School of Education: University of South Australia

RESPONSE TO THE EARLY CHILDHOOD PRODUCTIVITY DRAFT REPORT

The University of South Australia's School of Education appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Inquiry Draft Report. The response focuses on the following key areas:

- Educator qualification levels and age of children, and teacher – child ratios
- Early childhood teacher professional experience requirements
- Excellence rating level
- Dedicated preschools and the National Quality Framework
- Nannies and ECEC assistance

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 7.2

Requirements for educators in centre-based services should be amended by governments such that:

- *all educators working with children aged birth to 36 months are only required to hold at least a certificate III, or equivalent*
- *the number of children for which an early childhood teacher must be employed is assessed on the basis of the number of children in a service aged over 36 months.*

This recommendation indicates that education and care should be separated. Such a separation runs counter to evidence that good quality early years environments combine education and care. Furthermore, the level of educator qualification has been found to be related to short and long term outcomes for children (Mustard 2008; Shonkoff & Phillips 2000; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2007 & 2010; Siraj-Blatchford 2010 in Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart 2010). Neuroscience research has demonstrated that the architecture of the brain is created in the first 3 years of life and that the environment in which children are placed directly informs, via epigenetic processes, long term mental and physical health, behaviour and capacity to learn. Rich, stimulating, active play environments are crucial for the development of the pre-frontal cortex, and executive function which governs planning, organising, reasoning, problem solving. The brain is highly 'plastic' in the early years and so if children's experiences are limited "pruning" of little used neural circuits occurs which can be deleterious to later development.

Further, there is evidence that young children from families living with disadvantage benefit the most from quality care and education long day care environments. All domains of children's development benefit from care and education programs which are designed to support them. Unidentified and unaddressed difficulties with physical abilities, cognitive and expressive abilities and social-emotional learning in the early years translate into learning and behavioural difficulties in primary school and a problematic education trajectory. Investment in quality early years experiences, supports children whose development may be falling behind to catch up with their peers.

It can be concluded that to staff programs with educators who are minimally qualified is likely to be deleterious to infant and toddler development, and so is a retrograde step. Diploma or degree level early childhood qualifications provide knowledge, skills and understanding of child development that are essential for those working with this age range. The adult role in providing environments conducive to learning that are inclusive of all regardless of gender, culture, disability and so on is a complex area that needs educators to have higher level knowledge about children, their development, how they learn as well as how to observe, assess, evaluate and plan. It is widely accepted that children under three years need more educators per children than those over three.

Many settings currently have integrated infant and toddler programs for children from the first year until around their third birthday that take into account children's developmental needs for long term attachment relationships with educators, provided in a family style context. Separating out infant from toddler programs would disrupt this continuity and staffing of these often field-leading programs. Moreover learning would be hindered. Modelling and learning through observation is a key aspect of learning in these early years. Thus, integration of infant – toddler services provides the best environment for this to take place.

School of Education RECOMMENDATION

Staffing qualifications need to be consistent for all educators, so that all children are in environments that support their development in the short and long term. Irrespective of children's age group, educators need to have either a diploma or degree level early childhood qualifications, or be working towards either in the immediate term. Educator: child ratios should remain as they are currently.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 7.5

To provide services with greater flexibility to meet staffing requirements, ACECQA should:

- *remove the requirement that persons with early childhood teacher qualifications must have practical experience for children aged birth to twenty four months*
- *explore ways to make the requirements for approving international qualifications simpler and less prescriptive in order to reduce obstacles to attracting appropriately qualified educators from overseas.*

All governments should allow services to temporarily operate with staffing levels below required ratios, such as by maintaining staffing levels on average (over a day or week), rather than at all times.

The New South Wales and South Australian Governments should allow a three month probationary hiring period in which unqualified staff may be included in staff ratios before beginning a qualification, as was recently adopted in all other jurisdictions.

The recommendations of the Productivity Report need to prioritise the needs of children and families when making decisions about the environments into which children are placed, and the relationships they have with primary carers. Birth to three years is the developmental foundation upon which subsequent development is based. Therefore, should this recommendation be accepted, access for children in the first three years to the most qualified educators to apply their

knowledge of child development, early years curriculum and policy to those who are in the most developmentally sensitive years of their lives will be limited. This recommendation implies that children under two do not require or need quality educational environments, and that education is somehow disconnected from care.

Regarding the proposal that the professional experience requirement for early childhood teachers exclude children under two, research (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2007 & 2010) has demonstrated that early environments shape subsequent development and so teachers with four year early childhood degree qualifications need to know about early development if they are to be effective educational leaders in their sites. Also, knowledge of the first three years provides early childhood teachers with critical knowledge of early development and informs their understanding and capacities to work with children in later years. Furthermore, this proposal assumes that those with early childhood degree qualifications would not be working with children under two years. Why? Why shouldn't infants and toddlers have the best quality education and care environment?

Also, under the Productivity Report's recommendations, those who work with children under two years with low level qualifications would not have any possible career path if early childhood teacher qualifications were not inclusive of this age group. In effect, educators for under twos would become second class staff within early years' settings.

The recommendation of creating a smoother pathway for those outside Australia who wish to work in long day childcare may be useful provided that there is a match between those individuals' qualifications and those required in Australian services. Such educators would need to possess equal or better levels of qualification to those currently required for Australians in the same roles. Furthermore, attention would need to be given to cultural matching as infants and toddlers are best cared for and educated by those of the same culture and language as their home. This consistency supports optimal development as it avoids stressing young children by requiring them to transition between in 'care cultures' at this vulnerable age.

The recommendation that services should be permitted to operate 'temporarily' or at 'average' levels of staff qualifications raises serious concerns. Children do not need staff with appropriate qualifications on average; they need qualified staff at all times. Currently many settings have variable attendance over the course of the week. On some days settings may be full to capacity and other days they may have very few children. Averaging attendance over the week means that settings could be well over capacity for 4 days out of 5 as long as a very low number attend on the fifth day. This would adversely affect children in that settings could operate for much of the time with staffing levels below required ratios. Moreover this would be open to abuse by settings wanting to reduce staff numbers yet increase the number of children they enrol.

School of Education RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that the current qualifications and ratio levels remain. We also recommend that early childhood teachers continue to be required to undertake professional experience with infants and toddler as part of their degree. The proposal to staff long day child care centres with educators

from outside Australia may assist the current challenges around obtaining sufficiently qualified staff, however qualifications must be equal to or above those required for the same positions in Australia and must allow culturally consistent environments for infants and toddlers. On average and temporary operations with below the designated staff qualification levels should not be permitted.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 7.6

Governments and ACECQA should:

- *urgently reconsider the design of the assessment and ratings system, giving particular consideration to finding ways to increase the pace of assessments*
- *explore ways to determine services' ratings so they are more reflective of overall quality*
- *abolish the 'Excellent' rating, so that 'Exceeding National Quality Standard' is the highest achievable rating.*

We agree that the assessment process needs to be efficient, however not at the expense of quality. The removal of the 'Excellent' rating is not supported because the services that have applied for and received this superior rating have to date provided inspiration and high level models of care and education that might be achieved regarding the provision of high quality children's services.

School of Education RECOMMENDATION

We agree that the assessment process should be made more efficient but not at the expense of quality and care. We recommend that the 'Excellent' rating remains

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 7.9

Dedicated preschools should be removed from the scope of the National Quality Framework and regulated by state and territory governments under the relevant education legislation. The quality standards in state and territory education legislation should broadly align with those in the National Quality Framework. Long day care services that deliver preschool programs should remain within the National Quality Framework.

A key principle of the National Quality Framework (NQF) is that there should be consistency across the country in terms of educational environments for four year olds. To remove dedicated preschools from the NQF requirements seems to run counter to that consistency of offerings principle. It also creates discrepancies between the two setting types, and thus unequal provision for children and families.

School of Education RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that the National Quality Framework remains in place for all services for children until they enter school just before or after their fifth birthday.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 8.5

Governments should allow approved nannies to become an eligible service for which families can receive ECEC assistance. Those families who do not wish their nanny to meet National Quality Standards would not be eligible for assistance toward the costs of their nanny. National Quality Framework requirements for nannies should be determined by ACECQA and should include a minimum qualification requirement of a relevant (ECEC related) certificate III, or equivalent, and the same staff ratios as are currently present for family day care services. Assessments of regulatory compliance should be based on both random and targeted inspections by regulatory authorities.

The challenges of regulating homes where nannies are providing care are formidable. When there are significant efforts to streamline the regulation and assessment of education and care provision, the inclusion of the requirement to regulate home environments (Quality Area 2: Children's health and safety, and Quality Area 3: Physical environment) including inspections, seems to be a massive challenge. Furthermore, how will nannies be assessed against Quality Area 1: Educational program and practice?

School of Education RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that further detailed consideration of this proposal is undertaken to determine its feasibility.

References

Mustard, F 2008, *Investing in the early years: closing the gap between what we know and what we do*, Adelaide Thinkers in Residence Report, South Australian Government Publication, Adelaide.

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Siraj-Blatchford, I 2010, 'The EPPE setting in the context of English pre-schools, in K. Sylva, Melhuish, E, Sammons, P, Siraj-Blatchford, I & Taggart, B, *Early childhood matters: evidence from the Effective Preschool and Primary Education project*, Routledge, Oxon, UK. (Chapter 2)