

**Response to the Productivity
Commission's
Draft Report on
Childcare and Early Childhood
Learning
Griffith Child Care Centre Inc**

September 2014

Introduction

"Investing in the Early Years- A National Early Childhood Development Strategy" (COAG 2009) used as its foundation the strong body of evidence that exists regarding children's learning and development and the long term social and economic advantage to the country. This in itself provides a strong argument for the continued implementation of the National Early Childhood Agenda and for little tampering with what is in place now.

There are a number of key factors which influence the best outcomes for children, families and broader society that are critical.

- The Educator team that supports and works with the child and family. Their knowledge and skill and their professional practice are essential to getting the best out of every child and ensuring that that hit school ready to learn and engage.
- Improved Educator:child ratios are critical to the provision of quality care. There needs to be a concerted effort by all jurisdictions to improve this so that every child has the same standard so that their outcomes may be advanced as best as possible.

Our organisation has deep concerns about the recommendations in the draft Productivity Commission Inquiry Report into Early Learning and Childcare and they they do not support ongoing quality improvement in education and care. We firmly believe the recommendations undermine the practices and principles the Early Years Learning Framework, the National Quality Framework and indeed the "Investing in the Early Years- A National Early Childhood Development Strategy" (COAG 2009) that the reforms in the sector were built on.

We strongly believe that if implemented the recommendations will disadvantage children, families and educators; it will directly impact the quality of care and education for a majority of children and create greater disadvantage across society. The Recommendations will undermine the capacity of the ECE sector to deliver the best outcomes for children, families and the community and mean lower quality care and education.

In the latest research from the Heckmann Foundation (<http://heckmanequation.org/content/resource/research-summary-jamaican-study>) they indicate that high quality early childhood education programs produce better life outcomes at age 22, and increased earnings by 25% of those who were disadvantaged. Supporting and building a quality early childhood care and education system should be paramount to any society, and this should be built on the best research.

Response to the Productivity Commission's Draft Report on Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

We are concerned about the proposals in the draft which impact on the following:

National Quality Framework:

The National Quality framework provides an important platform for services delivering early childhood education and care to be accessed for quality. It is much stronger in its assessment regime than the previous QIAS and therefore requires children's services and the professional educator team to engage with the documentation at a deeper level, engage with families and the broader community.

The Framework however doesn't create more work, doesn't create more paper and in fact provides a mechanism to reflect on practice that can provide new ways of thinking around delivery of practice. In our our circumstance it has reduced our workloads around paper and audit trails significantly and enables our team to focus more on the work with children and families.

- Given that we have not yet completed a full cycle of assessment with only 40% of eligible services currently with a quality rating (http://files.acecqa.gov.au/files/Reports/2014/2014_ACECQA_Snapshot_Q2_Final.pdf) It would be wrong to simply the system at this time.
- A simpler and watered down assessment process does not support quality and doesn't deliver the best outcomes for children, families and the community and certainly doesn't appear to be a wise investment of Government if they want a smarter and more able workforce into the future.
- The exclusion of some service types (such as preschools) from the National Quality Framework does not support the idea of a National Quality Framework and is detrimental to children and families. It harks back to the days of the QIAS with preschools being excluded from that process. It also brings into question about who monitors the excluded services and what are they being assessed against . We believe and support all services providing education and care continuing to be included in the NQF.
- We would also support current "out of scope" services such as Mobile Children's Services, be included into the current system. We firmly believe that all services that receive funding through government agencies for the delivery of early childhood programs should be able to be assessed against the NQF.
- We do not support the proposal to down grade qualifications and ratios for children's services. As a service based in NSW we have not struggled to comply with the regulatory requirements on educator qualifications nor ratios. In fact we have been able to deliver better ratios across our program for many years without significant increase cost to parents. Our fees sit well below other children's services in our community but we maintain higher ratios and higher qualification levels. (birth to 2 years - 1:3; 2 - 3 years - 1:6; 3 - 5 years - 1:9. We have been able to grow the qualification levels within our workforce and now have more than half our staff with a diploma or higher qualification, 3 with ECE teaching Degrees and 2 currently studying for EC Teaching.
- The EPPE Report (2004) (<http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/5309/1/sylva2004EPPEfinal.pdf>) strongly suggests that Education and care cant be separated and this is supported by the ECE sector and the National Quality Framework. They go hand in hand. To separate them is to a great injustice to the critical early years where so much learning and early brain development is taking place. Lessening the qualifications of those who work in this age group, means that the b=best outcomes of children are not being considered. Programs lead by highly trained early childhood educators deliver better outcomes for children. A cert III qualification is minimalist and would undermine the NQF and the EYLF. This is not diminish those who have this qualification, but they work within a team environment and should be lead by ECEC Teachers and Diploma Qualified educators. .
- Training for Early Learning teachers must include children birth to school years. Education and Care starts at birth and progresses right through to school years and onwards.

Response to the Productivity Commission's Draft Report on Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

- The possible inclusion of approved Nannies within a funded early childhood delivery agenda is flawed. It could mean that they operate without supervision and to all intents and purposes unregulated. If consideration is to be given to something like this then it needs to be within a structure similar to Family Day Care and regulated and monitored accordingly. The "in home" care model should be further explored.
- Education happens all day and is not confined to a core period of the day when all staff are "on the floor". It would be wrong to enable services to operate for periods of time without the full complement of educator staff available or outside of ratios. This would undermine the quality of the program and also make conditions for the educator team intolerable at pick up and delivery times.
- There is not a crisis in getting staff qualified in the sector, in 2013 we surveyed all the services in the Riverina Murray and found that less than 2% of staff did not have a minimum of Cert II qualification and less than 1% were not going to acquire it by the beginning of 2014. Most services had staff studying for higher qualifications.
- There is an issue of retention of staff, but this is more about pay parity with colleagues in the school sector.

Financial implications for families, service providers and educators:-

The issue of affordability is one of both the prices charged by providers and the capacity of the consumer to pay. Each is important in the system and in particular where government supports specific outcomes from policy decisions. It is important to look from the perspective of what is the cost of quality and what is affordable for parents. Children have a right to quality education and care; parents and the sector expect quality and this must be supported by a government policy that supports quality whilst supporting affordability.

- The cost of delivering early childhood services is not consistent across the country. There are far too many variables that are often localised. Far more work needs to be done before the recommendation to implement a funding base per child is implemented.
- The current position of pay parity for educators must be addressed; ongoing and viable funding for service must be reviewed and improved and subsidies that address affordability for families must be supported by government. The removal of tax benefits for not-for profit services who supply a large proportion of the education and care, does not benefit the sector nor the government.

Conclusion

We are a not for profit early childhood organisation based in a regional community in south west NSW. We operate a long day care centre and a stand alone preschool service. We also operate a family support program. We opened in 1985 as a 40 place long day care centre and in 2001 expanded to a 60 place service.

We have consistently exceeded the quality assurance systems QIAS and the NQF. We have high staff child ratios, high qualification levels and low fees. We participate in national forums, and have been invited to participate the development of the NSW Curriculum Framework, The National Early Years Learning Framework, the implementation of the National Quality Framework, and have participated in the development of resources to assist the sector understand the EYLF and the NQF.

Our organisation believes that the best outcomes for children and families is supported by high staff child ratios, higher qualifications and better conditions. We do not support a diminishing of the NQF and believe that all children and families should have the right to access the best possible care and education. We do not believe that the provision or aspiration to have higher ratios or qualified staff leads to higher cost burden to families, because in our case it hasn't done that, and we have a team of 32 staff.