

BACKGROUND

Monash Community Family Co-operative (MCFC) is a not for profit 'workplace' service, providing care & education for children of Monash University staff & students. MCFC has an operating capacity for 108 children per day. Currently there are 165 children enrolled per week. We are able to provide a more flexible service : for example - we open on the days Monash University is open , including public holidays : Queens Birthday, Cup and Labor day. We are open Monday to Friday between 7.30am and 6.30pm. MCFC employs 41 staff.

MCFC has been in operation at Monash University Clayton Campus since 1973. Since that date the sole purpose of MCFC has been to align its service provision to the needs of our community, supporting parents so they can work and study.

Purpose of Submission

The educators of MCFC, whose names are listed below, prepared this submission. We are responding predominately in relation to Qualification and ratio requirements.

Direct comments from educators are quoted in italics. Our purpose is to express the views of those who are employed in this sector and advocate for the best interests of children.

KEY ISSUES OF CONCERN

Qualifications:

- Recommendation to remove the requirement for Diploma qualified educators for under three year olds, and establishing certificate 3 as the only required qualification for this age group.
- Recommendation that the number of under 3's are not taken into account in assessing the employment of Early childhood Teachers

Children in early childhood services are living their lives at our services, spending the most active part of their day in this environment. 70% of the children attend our service 3 days a week or more.

Early childhood is "...a period of momentous significance for all people growing up in [our] culture... By the time this period is over, children will have formed conceptions of themselves as social beings, as thinkers, and as language users, and they will have reached certain important decisions about their own abilities and their own worth." Donaldson, M., Grieve, R., and Pratt, C. Early Childhood Development and Education: Readings in Psychology. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983, p. 1.

We believe that children are best supported by experienced and qualified educators who are trained to understand that the most formative years of life are the early years, underpinning future mental and physical health, development, learning and behavior.

Educators at our service identify the positive impact of completing higher-level qualifications on their understanding of child development and how children learn :

"I have worked in a Centre where staff were predominately cert 3. Rooms were set up on the basis of how pretty they looked. As staff became more qualified they became aware of the

effect of the environment on learning and development, how visually cluttered noisy environments can over stimulate and distract children. As some educators completed their Diploma they restructured the environment in playrooms- children became more settled and focused, behavioral issues and communication improved.”

‘ The brain has evolved to educate and be educated. The brain is the machine that allows all forms of learning to take place. Research has shown that children learn from birth which is why the quality of care and early education they receive in the first five years matters immensely. Babies and young children’s brains are hardwired to learn and 85% of what they learn (including walking, talking, being aware of themselves and others as well as the world around them) happens in these vital first few years of life (0-3). The learning that occurs in these early years lays the foundations for their future, which takes them through childhood, adolescence and adulthood. So the learning experiences a child has in the early years can either support learning or interfere with it. Educators with a higher level of education (such as Diploma and Bachelor trained) have a deeper understanding and knowledge of the Early Childhood environment and as such plan and implement a high quality educational program, with the aim of achieving the best learning and developmental outcomes for all children. We as educators are able to recognise and understand toddlers' learning and as such have the ability to guide and promote intentional teaching and sustained shared thinking. Having the knowledge to understand and identify a deeper level of learning in young children ensures that the children's learning is enhanced to their full potential.’

“Diploma level training helped me understand how to support independence skills better “

‘As a Diploma qualified with more than 10 years of experience, I have had cert 3 and newly qualified educators draw and gain from my experience. I have supported, encouraged and mentored educators, empowering them to achieve their own personal outcomes with careers in early childhood’

‘As a recently qualified educator I have become more confident in my understanding of child development and the different stages of development, and I am more able to think critically about my practice”

“Learning about theorists gave me a better understanding of how children develop and learn- Theory becomes a basis for programming, increased knowledge about indoor and outdoor environments, sustaining children’s attention & challenge & encourage development “

“Parents recognise and appreciate our education, experience, knowledge about best practice and they are more confident in seeking our assistance.”

“We feel that through our education we are more knowledgeable about best practice and are therefore better equipped to contribute to professional discussions and offer useful advice and resources to support families. For example in a babies room we noticed behavioral and physical issues that had been discounted by a child's parents. We were able to discuss these issues confidently with them, based on our sound knowledge of development, which we acquired through our Diploma training. Both educators in the group had Diploma qualifications. The child was ultimately diagnosed with diabetes”

‘The Diploma level education increased ability to recognise developmental issues, recognizing gaps and need for early intervention’

“Diploma Qualified educators are taught what questions we should be asking about our practice, analysis of children’s development, achievements and learning, the purpose behind the play and the importance of meaningful interactions”

‘My confidence has grown over the years and I was able to discuss outcomes that parents wanted their children to achieve. One child needed support with his social development and

being the only child, it can be hard for the parents to notice until it is being discussed with an early childhood professional. My discussion with the parents brought about a more positive outcome for the child, and the parents were able to understand how the program was inclusive and how we encouraged better outcomes to best support the child's needs'

"We recognise that learning is from birth and our education to Diploma and Bachelor levels has greatly increased our knowledge and skills which we utilise every day"

"After mid year assessments on children we organised parent meetings. We looked at child's holistic development, and set goals for future directions. "

"I was instructed by a parent to feed a child in a cot, My Diploma level qualification gave me the knowledge to confidently recognise that this is not good practice and I had the confidence to discuss safer alternatives and provide information & resources."

"Completing my Diploma helped me understand the value of learning through play – for instance sensory play - and the development and skills children learn through these experiences. My program and experiences have become more purposeful and meaningful and challenging. My observations show the learning and development that has occurred and the outcomes children achieved "

"In my work with under threes I came across a child with a developmental speech delay. I worked in conjunction with his parents and speech therapist to achieve the best possible outcomes for this child. I introduced simple colour and counting books for him and scaffold his learning, to extend his number recognition. However, I wanted to take a holistic approach in observing this child. Therefore, I undertook ongoing observations and noticed that in a few other developmental areas he was also demonstrating a delay.

For example, I noticed he preferred to be indoors, so I encouraged him to take a walk with me in the outdoor learning environment. He showed a lack of physical coordination in moving up different steps, moving along ascending and descending slopes and balancing on low beams.

As part of my responsibilities as a Diploma qualified Educator and my knowledge of child development, I planned activities to develop his physical skills. I began with encouraging him to push a pram around the yard, which interested him when playing inside. Therefore, he was able to develop his confidence in moving around outside. I know there is a link between developing a child's confidence and their learning. Then he was ready to attempt different activities, which involved balance and coordination, such as the balancing beam, moving up and over boulders and walking up a ramp. I recognised the importance in firstly developing his confidence and then offering him more complex experiences whilst supporting him. He seemed unbalanced when he moved around and was continuing to struggle with his language; therefore I spoke with his parents about his balance and suggested they check his hearing. The parents found that he had a blockage and fluid in one ear and he had a slight hearing loss. Therefore, the child was treated for his ear problems and his balance improved and the child became more articulate in the few words he used in his verbal communication. His parents are now obtaining early intervention for this child."

"As research and our own personal experience shows that warm and nurturing relationships are important for under threes, but this is just the beginning step on the ladder exploring the world, when they develop warm and secure attachment with their educators. Here comes the role of Diploma qualified educators – with in depth knowledge, understanding and extensive practice skills, they will extend the learning of children through intentional teaching, spontaneous and planned experiences"

Certificate 3 qualifications provide a basic understanding / level of competence, focusing on practical skills and briefly touching on development, behavior and

planning. The courses are explicitly designed to provide skills to support Diploma trained staff in caring for children, not designed to teach trainees how to organize and take responsibility for a group. We strongly believe that Certificate 3 is not adequate alone to support child development and extend children's learning. The responsibilities involved in managing a group of children are significant and are best supported with educators with a higher level of qualification as part of the team.

We have noticed that quality of certificate 3 courses has declined over time – and can now be completed online, with minimal or no practical experience.

While, unquestionably, there are highly skilled and experienced Certificate 3 educators, we are deeply concerned that the recommendations in the draft report do not foster development or quality. Qualified Educators who are knowledgeable, passionate and dedicated to educating children are not valued - and would only be required in older groups and the younger age groups under resourced.

Educators state that completing higher qualifications was motivating and sustained their interest in remaining employed in the sector. Stable staff relationships are important for children's mental health, learning and development. This service implemented a strategy of encouraging and supporting professional development to ensure staff continuity. Our experience tells us that lack of professional and career development results in high staff turnover and the loss of experienced educators.

"I worked in a center that discouraged staff from training and upgrading qualifications. Educators were not challenged, they became stale and unmotivated, and the children's development was not supported."

"The main reason I decided to further my studies (Bachelor of Education) was because I believe that the children should be cared for and supported by experienced and qualified Educators. While completing and gaining knowledge about children has helped me to understand the value of learning. This Centre always encourages and assist in evry other way to undergo studies and participate in training programs which assist me to have a quality program"

"I left a Centre because I felt there was no challenge and I could not achieve any further development"

"Parents joining our waiting list always ask, "what is the staff turn over?". They want to know that their children have continuity in care and develop strong relationships with their primary educators."

"Educators who are not motivated, don't motivate and encourage children's development"

"The Commission (recommendation) is demotivating and devaluing the role of Diploma qualified educators in the under three year old groups"

"Working in a less skilled environment would be stressful, detrimental frustrating"

"I appreciate the professional environment, support and discussions, sharing ideas and improving my practice, talking through issues with educational leaders"

"I feel Australia is going backward, I don't understand why... I can't believe that a developed country like Australia is going backward. The government is saying we don't want you to rise or excel, we want you to stay at a (low level)."

“To me first of all it seems that someone is saying ‘take your under threes to a nurse , not a Doctor, because they only need basic treatment that a nurse an do “

‘I have a Certificate 3 qualification & will do my Diploma to learn more. I saw that people with a Diploma really know more. Experience also helps “

Staff Child Ratios

- Lower staff child ratios (lower number of staff per children)
- Allowing services to temporarily operate with staffing levels below required ratios.

All the educators at this service saw any possibility of returning to 1: 5 ratios allowing averaging over a week as a profoundly retrograde step, which would affect their view of employment in this sector and threaten the health, safety and development of children.

With the exception of two Educators directly working with children all stated that they would either

- Only work with under threes if there were no other options
- Seek to work with over threes
- Consider moving away from this sector, take up other career options

“The quality of the program would be compromised - you would be struggling managing children waking needing changes, needing food, bottles, time to play. You could not run an indoor-outdoor program.”

“ In Australia we are already working at a higher ratio of 1:4 with under threes, which puts a lot of pressure on educators. Since the change to 1: 4 we have had better quality educators, inspired to be better educators, passionate about their work and the outcome that they have helped achieve for the children in their care. Why would we go back to where we were jeopardising all that we worked for and built in this industry? “

“It would be really stressful - tough, I would not be able to work full time. You would take the stress home with you – it would affect the family. In NZ we had a 1:3 ratio - we could manage routines well, communicate so well with children – it was great”

‘(If this happened) I would prefer not to be in the babies groups’

‘Returning to the poorer 1.5 ratio is not good, especially with babies. I would not like to work & would only do this if there were no option.’

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