

To the productivity commission inquiry for Early Childhood Education and Care

I am currently working as an Education and Care Consultant, providing training and professional development for educators in Long Day Care, Family Day Care and Outside School Hours Care services and settings. I have experienced the Education and Care sector from all facets – as a casual no qualifications, as a qualified educator, a manager, director and also as a parent using both Long day care, Family day care and Outside school hours care facilities.

I have over 15 years of experience in this sector and seen some amazing changes. I have worked in various settings and therefore been fortunate to meet and talk with many educators, managers and families over this time.

Recently I was fortunate enough to hear Professor Carla Rinaldi, president of Reggio Children, Reggio Emilia, Italy. She beautifully explained that children are the best essence of human beings and that it is society, educators and all adults' roles to take responsibility to take care of children as the first and most crucial citizens of society – citizens from birth.

Professor Rinaldi understands that children are intelligent, competent and social right from birth and that their learning and education starts from birth – not just when they are preparing for school!

I have some concerns with the draft report as I believe that there are indications in the draft report that quality from birth is not important. QUALITY is important! Educators with underpinning knowledge of child development, theory, critical reflection and intentional teaching are important – also for the children 0-3 years old. Educators with Certificate III are showing interest in learning and beginning their journey of learning and knowledge, however it is educators with a Diploma or above that have the embedded knowledge and understanding to be able to create programs, collaborate appropriately with families, deal with concerns, emergencies, procedures and guide children's learning and development in preparation for all life experiences.

Children's social and emotional development abilities continually come up as concerns in schools across the country as teachers are becoming over stressed and finding that a lot of their teaching is being devoted to supporting children's social skills and emotional capacities.

'More than 40 per cent of Australian primary and secondary school students have poor social and emotional skills, according to a study of 11,000 participants. Study author from the University of Melbourne, Professor Michael Bernard, said poor social and emotional skills can have a significant impact on student motivation and engagement in the classroom.'

(Media release <http://www.psychology.org.au/Content.aspx?ID=2347>, 2008)

Neuroscience is confirming the following factors as being vital in early childhood development:

- The first five years last a lifetime
- Children are born ready to learn
- The best learning happens in nurturing relationships
- The brain develops through use
- Children's wellbeing is critical to brain development and learning
- Children learn through being engaged and doing
- Children learn from watching and copying
- Children's self control is critical for learning, responsibility and relationships

(Engaging families in the early childhood development story, national project conducted on behalf of the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, 2010)

All current research and evidence is pointing to learning and development support for children already from birth. As so many families choose to participate in the workforce, they are requiring education and care for their children as young as 3 months old. It is crucial that the relationship, the social and emotional development is supported by qualified, experienced and skilled educators that

understand that the learning occurring before the age of 3 years is the foundation to a child's whole learning and development for the future schooling. By the age of 3-5 years children have their foundation for learning, socialising, regulating emotions and are ready to extend and practice these skills in more complex and contextualised situations – thus preparing them for the challenges and learning tasks of school.

Below are some comments I have gathered from parents and educators I have work with giving their views and experiences about early childhood and in particular quality

"I have been very happy with the quality my child has had. I know that room coordinators require qualifications and it is obvious that they know what they are doing. This has been particularly important for me with my child's allergies – staff know what they're doing. I feel safe and trust staff at the centre. All staff know what they are doing. They follow the policies and procedures in place. At other center's he has been I didn't feel safe. I would worry about my child having an allergic reaction and no one knowing what to do. You hear of horrible stories on TV like 60 minutes where not once but twice, of children needing an EpiPen and it being administered incorrectly both times".

T Cleaver
Parent to 3 year old Angus attending long day care Early Learning Centre

"Families value the relationships with us because feedback doesn't fall into the "they've had a good day' style. Our families really appreciate high quality feedback about their interests and how they have been going. Families report this back. If a child has a major incident or is even really sad or somehow out of character, we speak with families. We don't just do this for a job. We invest ourselves into it. We are shaping children's lives."

Bachelor of Teaching Early Childhood
Length of time in ECEC – 2 years

Families value what quality Education and Care settings deliver and without quality, would not be comfortable in using these settings to enable them to participate in the workforce.

"I see Early Childcare Education and Care as a necessity for working and non- working families. I believe 100 percent in ECEC and can see the learning and confidence my child has gained. He has learnt things that I would never have thought to do with him. His socialisation is amazing. I feel that ECEC is needed for the whole development of children. I would like to see that it is not seen as just childcare or babysitting. They are educating little minds and creating a start for their future".

T Cleaver
Parent to 3 year old Angus attending long day care Early Learning Centre

"It's our duty of care to provide quality education and care. Really good quality care happens when high communication is used between educators, educators and children and educators and families. With children, it is seen when educators listen to children in a way that then allows educators to run with children's ideas. It's rewarding to assist their learning and development in this way."

Bachelor of Teaching Early Childhood
Length of time in ECEC – 2 years

“A lot of what we call quality is due to parent feedback. Parents like to know how we work, creating and implementing programs for their children. What parents definitely notice is if the educators working with their child are not high quality educators.

“Families trust us. Most are busy working and don’t have the option of extended family for their children. To work full time, they need to put their child in care full time. Families come to us wanting their child to be more sociable, have more interactions with other children before they attend formal schooling.

*Permanent Educator studying Diploma
Length of time in ECEC – 3 years*

“In terms of education of staff, I believe a mix of levels of training is fine across the staff caring for the children, but there do need to be educators in the room who have a greater level of training, to design a program with appropriate activities and to be directing and providing a rich experience for the children. They can gain so much from their day care time if it is planned creatively and delivered well, and informed by training and knowledge. There needs to be a mix of intuition and ability, combined with appropriate educational knowledge, of development, childhood psychology and academic skills. Those early learning skills are critical for education down the track, so the staff do need to be much more than babysitters for the experience to be a beneficial one.”

“One thing we have experienced at Max's current daycare that I have been very unhappy about is that they take on junior staff completing their Cert III, which they receive the subsidy for, and then move them on once they've finished it, to get new, wage-subsidised trainees. I've complained about this as the centre has as part of its mission to value the relationship between the carers and the children, and this action completely contradicts that and shows them to only be financially motivated.”

*M J House
Parent to Max 2 years old attending private long day care setting*

Not all families know exactly how we do our work or understand the theories behind our strategies. What we do know is how happy they are that their children are with us. They let us know how happy they are about the activities in the room, the building of friendships, the teaching of turn-taking and sharing. Without us, some families have felt concerned that their child would be unable to learn these skills because of limited time and access to children other than their own.

Families have told us about the changes they have seen in their children particularly about the improvements they see in behaviour, social graces and being kind. It’s because of the collaborative strategies that we use within our teams and share with families that makes this happen. Without consistent staffing, you can’t get that level of consistency in how strategies are used. The inconsistency confuses children and the improvements wouldn’t be there like they are.”

*Qualified Diploma Educator
Length of time in ECEC – 4.5*

One parent was particularly concerned about the ratios in ECEC and the concept of averaging ratios over a weekly period in the draft report.

'The questions regarding ratios are very important, particularly for the early years. I don't believe this can be averaged out across the week - it must be on a daily basis. 1 educator for 4/5 children frequently seems insufficient, so any more would be even worse. At the younger ages where the children are less independent, require nappy changing and assistance eating, and closer attention generally, this is so important. The staff work so hard, and to expect more isn't fair to them or the children. They are constantly stretched, and making that even worse completely isn't in the best interests of the children in their care.'

M J House

Parent to Max 2 years old attending private long day care setting

One of the largest impacts on the ability of providing quality relationships required to support early learning is staff turnover. Educators feel the stresses of working in a low wage sector and many educators leave the service and sector every year. The impacts of staff changes are felt by children, families and other educators. The draft report notes that employers of services should be able to support the wage requirements of educators and if necessary increase the fees for families to do so. This is detrimental to both families and services and is not viable for the future of ECEC. Families look at affordability and what they see as required by the Government to support families:

"The government has taken away our Child Care Rebate which has been a great loss to us as a family. This was hard. It has been difficult for us to estimate our yearly income and the Child Care Rebate was a safety net for this. Now it's gone. I believe that child care should cost something. If it didn't cost anything to run a centre there would be poor quality and a lot of scary things would be happening. Child care running costs go up just like anything else. To me it's just like paying fees for my child's education. The government should take some responsibility for this"

T Cleaver

Parent to 3 year old Angus attending long day care Early Learning Centre

"I like everything about working in ECEC except the pay. On this wage I'll never be able to have my own home. I earned more money when I was working at IGA. If we had a professional wage, the community would better respect our role.

"I've invested time and resources into my own learning. The level of the wages is a complicated issue. This is a career that I'm passionate about. My passion and my study is benefiting children and families but wages don't reflect this.

*Bachelor of Teaching Early Childhood
Length of time in ECEC – 2 years*

"I feel that workforce participation would be enhanced to a much greater extent by investing in childcare. Available places and quality care, so that you know your child is safe, cared for, supervised and having a valuable experience, would enable much greater participation in the workforce."

M J House

Parent to Max 2 years old attending private long day care setting

“Real life examples don’t make sense when you look at what we do and the rate of pay. We know the outcomes for children and with what drive they’ll approach education throughout their lives, all comes down to the quality of care they receive in the early years. Then you’ve got these real examples of how our pay just doesn’t make sense. My sister’s partner has a summer job that pays \$20 per hour which is the same wage as me. He’s washing cars. I’ve been continually trying to get ahead. I’m 21 and living at home. I’ve got a goal saver account trying to get a deposit together. This is just me - I dread to think what it would be like with a family. I would stay in the sector for sure if the wages got better.”

*Permanent Educator studying Diploma
Length of time in ECEC – 3 years*

The real question I ask, is why the focus in this draft report is not depicting the best interest of the children? Surely they are what is most important in this whole debate and inquiry. The productivity inquiry draft findings are mostly indicating a financial interest that takes away as much government responsibility as possible. Where other governments around the world are taking great strides forward in emphasising their commitment, investment and importance of Early Childhood Education and Care, our country is stepping backwards. As a country we will pay the price with future generations.

What will this productivity commission do to ensure we move forward in ensuring Australia is forefront in early education and care providing the best quality and learning environments for our youngest Australian citizens?

Kerrie Hansen