



# Response to the July 2014 Productivity Commission Draft Report Childcare and Early Childhood Learning September 2014

## Background

The Montessori sector is unique, diverse and significant in Australian education, particularly in early childhood. There are currently over 500 Montessori schools and ECEC centres throughout Australia with diverse cultures and communities.

Montessori educational programmes in Australia are offered for children from birth to three, three to six, six to twelve and twelve to eighteen years of age. Montessori professionals also work to support the needs of children outside the classroom setting, with a particular emphasis on parent education and community outreach programmes. The Montessori approach to early childhood education and care facilitates holistic child development while providing excellent preparation for transition to primary schooling. Its approach is consistent with what is frequently identified in the literature as being critical to best practice:

- ✓ The importance of well-trained practitioners who have the knowledge and ability to develop, implement and evaluate appropriate curricula.
- ✓ The key role of pedagogies that facilitate appropriate targeted and personalised learning and development experiences for each child.
- ✓ The need for consistency, continuity and stability of environments, particularly for very young children.
- ✓ The importance of strong relationships with families, including the vital importance of building capacity to support vulnerable families (Eliot, 2006, p.21)

Montessori education is growing steadily in Australia. Community-based, non-profit associations run the majority of schools with Montessori programmes also streamed into some public schools. In the early childhood sector the majority of centres are privately owned or otherwise integrated into a larger school setting.

Montessori Indigenous learning programmes are also emerging. A recent joint initiative called "Strait Start" has been established between the Torres Strait Islander Regional Education Council, Tagai State College and the Montessori Children's Foundation.

## The Montessori Australia Foundation (MAF)

This is the peak national body for Montessori in Australia. It is a non-profit organisation providing support services to Montessori schools and ECEC centres, teachers and parents. MAF maintains communication with all Montessori programmes across Australia and acts as a clearinghouse for Montessori information and communication. MAF also participates on an international level, particularly with initiatives in Asia (China, India, Thailand), and through the Association Montessori Internationale (recognised by UNESCO and the United Nations).

[www.montessori.org.au](http://www.montessori.org.au)

## Response to the Draft Report

MAF welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the Productivity Commission Draft Report.

Our submission covers the following points some of which are explained in further detail below:

- ✓ The focus on children's rights, their needs and interests is missing from the framing of the recommendations of the enquiry.
- ✓ The workforce participation of women rather than the needs and interests of children is placed at the forefront of policy framework for ECEC
- ✓ The report privileges the needs and desires of employer groups over the needs and interests of children.
- ✓ There is a fundamental disregard for the progress we have made in the last 30 years in recognizing the interrelationship between care and education.
- ✓ CCB should be made available for all children irrespective of family income levels.
- ✓ The possible exclusion of some service types (such as preschools) from the NQF.
- ✓ The removal of tax benefits for not-for-profit services who provide a large proportion of the education and care of young children.
- ✓ The emergence of a division between "child care" for children under 3 and "preschool education" for children over 3.
- ✓ The potential impact of a deemed rate of care on families and services that could cause significant disadvantage those in high cost provision in rural and remote locations.
- ✓ The lack of provision of a plan to ensure supply of education and care meets demand
- ✓ The possible exclusion of children from vulnerable families to early education by the imposition of the proposed 24 hour work/activity test per fortnight.
- ✓ Nannies should be linked to an approved service to ensure quality provision and to ensure they are supported to achieve quality outcomes for children.

### The focus on children's rights, their needs and interests is missing from the framing of the recommendations of the enquiry.

There has been an ad hoc development of early childhood policy over the years. In relation to the needs of parents, the workplace and the economy have tended to subsume the needs of children. We believe there needs to be reflection on policy priorities from a perspective that places the needs and interest of children to the fore.

## The workforce participation of women rather than the needs and interests of children is placed at the forefront of policy framework for ECEC

By linking the provision of the education and care of young children to the workforce and economy the Productivity Commission is also making the system for young children responsible for the workforce demands of employers which we consider to be fundamentally wrong. It is asking for government support for funding and regulation for young children to be responsive to what might be seen as unreasonable demands of employers by asking employees to work longer, irregular and unpredictable hours. Those issues should be addressed by workplaces creating responsive family friendly work environments, not through unreasonable demands on the early childhood system.

## The report privileges the needs and desires of employer groups over the needs and interests of the long-term benefit of investing in ECEC.

The economic rationalisation underpinning early childhood policy is widely understood. Such returns on investment are long-term benefits. In Australia, investment in early childhood programmes is often seen in terms of its short-term benefits: the benefits accruing to the nation arising from improved parental employment: "Increased workforce participation can result in benefits to the wider community through for example: reduced social and economic disadvantage; increased gross domestic product and economic productivity; and improvements in the Government's fiscal position" (p207). In fact, in the report, financial benefits in the short term appear to be the most important priority in the report, including the financial viability of services. For example: "While higher ratios and qualifications than those currently in place may be desired by some stakeholders in the sector and may bring increased benefits to the community, imposing them on the entire sector is likely to result in costs that substantially outweigh these benefits. It should be left up to ECEC providers to decide whether they wish to incur the additional costs associated with exceeding minimum standards in order to position themselves as a 'high quality' provider" (p277 – 278).

Many argue that the state should invest in early childhood programmes, not because of the short-term economic benefits, but because of the fundamental requirement to offer social justice and to positively influence the long-term wellbeing and development of young citizens. High quality early childhood programmes have the potential to close the gap between those in society who are advantaged and those who are disadvantaged (UNESCO, 2010). Given that social disadvantage is now shown to be transmitted across generations through epigenetic if the state does not address disadvantage now, the impact in future generations will be even more devastating.

## There is a fundamental disregard for the progress we have made in the last 30 years in recognizing the interrelationship between care and education.

Fundamentally the PC enquiry doesn't examine policy from the perspective of the child. It doesn't recognize the importance of sibling relationships in the early childhood programme. It separates the notion of care from education when really all policies and all research has been reinforcing the nexus between care and education. This care and education nexus that, at its best, is so prevalent in early childhood programs should be having an upward influence on schooling programmes.

## CCB should be made available for all children irrespective of family income levels.

Australian children should be funded equally to receive an entitlement to high quality education and care during their early years. With a focus on the child's rights, eligibility for funding should not be dependent on the current work, study or training criteria for parents.

MAF also recommends that CCR should be paid directly to centres to ensure that the centre does not have to chase outstanding fees in cases where parents have received the benefit but withdrawn from the service without full payment for fees owed.

An issue of major concern to the Montessori sector is the current exclusion of families choosing Montessori early childhood education and care for their children in services that operate for less than 48 weeks per year from accessing financial support through either CCB or CCR. This issue also impacts on a number of independent schools with early learning centres providing early childhood education and care.

Many families make considerable sacrifices in relation to, for example, their work commitments, to ensure that their children are not in long day care 48 weeks of the year, but rather are able to spend significantly more time with their families. This often involves negotiating flexible working arrangements, some of which are achieved as a consequence of sacrificing income. In many cases, this involves parents taking recreation leave at different times, or ensuring other family members are available to take care of children while centres are closed. As a result of the current CCB regulations, these families receive no financial assistance, and services that are ineligible for CCB require families to pay full fees for service. This precludes many families from having a choice of service due to financial circumstances.

'Registered services' are also unable to access the Inclusion Support Subsidy for children with additional needs as this is only linked to 'Approved Care' services. This discriminates against families accessing the environment of their choice to best cater to the needs of their child. Given the increasing demand for childcare, and the government's commitment to quality provision for all Australian children, there is an urgent need to redress this situation if the supply of early childhood education and care places, the right of parents to exercise choice, and provision and standards of service are to be supported.

## The possible exclusion of some service types (such as preschools) from the NQF.

We are concerned about the possible exclusion of preschools from the NQF and believe they should be part of the ECEC sector's move to include all services in quality improvement.

## The removal of tax benefits for not-for-profit services who provide a large proportion of the education and care of young children.

Currently there also appears to be inconsistency in whether local councils charge land tax and council rates dependent on the status of ownership of the childcare centre. Privately operated childcare centres must pay the rates whereas community centres are not required to comply. Similarly this is the case with payroll tax that adds significantly to the cost of service provision of childcare employers. Not-for-profit centres are exempt from payroll tax whereas privately operated centres are not. Consideration of the waiving of additional taxes for privately operated childcare centres would impact on the overall cost of service and affordability for families.

## There seems to be an emergence of a division between “child care” for children under 3 and “preschool education” for children over 3.

The experiences children have in the first 3 years of life lay the foundation for life-long learning, development and wellbeing. Research clearly demonstrates that children under 3 need quality learning experiences in the context of secure, nurturing relationships. The neurobiological research confirms that the quality of relationships between adult and child is a key predictor of long term. Staff need to be able to attain a balance between relationship building/maintenance and the provision of appropriate learning experiences, and research shows that more highly trained staff are more able to achieve this balance.

There are real concerns internationally that teachers not trained in early childhood do not offer the most appropriate learning experiences for young children, and many, in fact, offer learning experiences that are counter to children’s development and wellbeing (Save Childhood Movement, 2014). Requiring early childhood educators to have experience with very young children in their pre-service training ensures that the wellbeing of young children remains the key focus. It is recognised that not all early childhood qualified staff choose to work with children under 3 (p282 of the report). However, given that practical experience with children under 3 is a crucial component of pre-service training to ensure quality service delivery, it is not an acceptable option to remove this requirement. Nor, in our opinion, is it acceptable to differentiate training into those who are qualified to work with children birth to 8 versus those who are qualified to work 3 – 8. We do not agree with the claim that operating birth – 8 courses limits the pool of staff willing to work in the sector (p282). There are many factors that limit the availability of early childhood educators: poor pay, conditions and status are the most influential of these but the requirement to include experience with children under 3 in pre-service training is not one of these.

## Conclusion

MAF has consistently recommended quality provision of early childhood education and care in Australia. We support any initiatives and changes to current legislation and practice that will provide support consistency and equity across the diverse range of providers, give support to all families who are in need of high quality early childhood education and care, ensure affordability and lessen the regulatory burden on ECEC services.

Montessori Australia Foundation  
September 2014

### References:

NSW Children’s Services Forum response to the Draft PC Enquiry  
Professor Margaret Sims - Professor of Early Childhood, University of New England