



postal address
PO Box 833
Newcastle NSW 2300

street address
The Officers' Quarters
James Fletcher Hospital
Newcomen Street entrance
Newcastle NSW 2300

e-mail
himh@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au

telephone
02 4924 6900
fax
02 4924 6901

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Childcare and Early Childhood Learning
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
CANBERRA CITY ACT 2601

Re: Childcare and Early Childhood Learning: Productivity Commission Draft Report July 2014

The Child, Youth and Wellbeing Program at the Hunter Institute of Mental Health supports the Commission's recommendation that the Government invest in ECEC. This investment, informed by the current science, evidence informed policy and stakeholder input, will provide an important and timely commitment to families today and for future generations.

Overall the draft report is positive and addresses many of the key issues in ECEC that are relevant and pertinent in the current climate. We are pleased to that the Commission is recommending an alignment between the states and territories, making early childhood education and care more congruent. This aspect of the ongoing Early Years agenda promises to provide tangible benefits in strengthening the profession and supporting national interventions and programmes.

We also welcome the review being undertaken by the Australian Skills and Quality Authority into the quality of education being delivered by RTOs and the job readiness of graduates. The preparation and further professional development of the ECEC workforce is a critical component in quality care.

We would like to re-iterate the importance of a focus of wellbeing, development, care and learning in the early years. We know that disruption of healthy development, reduced wellbeing, and mental ill-health lead to poor outcomes learning, behaviour, and health. The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University note that these types of outcomes incur an enormous cost to society and individuals - from failure to complete school, greater probability of contact with the criminal justice system, poorer overall health outcomes, increased risk of substance abuse, and reduced life expectancy.

Professional groups who are consistently engaged with children and families can assist in preventing or mitigating the consequences of mental health problems by buffering young children

from serious threats to their wellbeing. These professional groups can build the “social and emotional capacities of infants and children by supporting predictably available, adequately sensitive and responsive care giving”.

Ensuring the provision of a healthy, safe, and supportive environment for all young children requires responsible management of the available workforce. It is critical that we act on existing scientific knowledge and ‘close the gap between what is known and what is done’. It is equally important to seek out new and more effective workforce strategies to support families and expand opportunities for children. Taken together, these priority areas reinforce the importance of education workforce strategies that consider the wellbeing of children and parents as central to the work of childcare and early childhood learning.

By targeting a common core of capacities that are essential to support vulnerable children and families we can simultaneously strengthen both the workforce and the community. If we want to achieve better outcomes for children, we must continue to strive for high standards for quality care and learning. One promising pathway to achieve this is to focus on fostering skills, during their professional preparation, in key professions that will allow them to become (or to be) better enablers of children’s mental health. Appropriately equipped early childhood and teaching professionals can actively work to strengthen children and families so that they are more likely to possess the tools they need to achieve self-sufficiency, as well as healthy, secure lives.

Based on the content of the Commission’s draft report we would like to make the following further comments for consideration by the Commission:

- Quality needs to remain a focus of the enquiry. Quality care has been established as essential in ensuring the best outcomes for children’s social and emotional wellbeing and development. To this end future revisions to the NQF would benefit by retaining processes or requirements that ensure quality.
- The promotion of wellbeing and mental health needs greater consideration. The current discussion tends towards the preventative and early intervention aspects of work in the early years. There is significant work that can be done in supporting wellbeing and enhancing outcomes for all children.
- Investment in the preparation of ECEC educators is essential in setting the platform for quality service delivery. With the projections showing that the ECEC workforce will need to increase by over 100,000 by 2026 (pg 97) this is an investment that should not be delayed. Ensuring that educators are trained with baseline knowledge and skills that make them ‘job ready’ for today and into their future careers is paramount.
- Based on international trends and research data from examinations of quality care and its connections to staffing qualifications we question the Commission’s recommendations to remove qualified early childhood teachers. We would see educators with higher qualifications are able to perform different tasks and share their knowledge and skills with other staff and families. This would deepen the support available to families, assist in preparation for early learning, and enhance the culture of professional support and development within the ECEC Sector.
- The separation of Education and Care, as described in the report, is inconsistent with our scientific understanding of development. We would be supportive of a framing of the work within the ECEC

sector as being integrated in its concern and awareness of education and care. This separation can obscure the important role that ECEC educators can play and that quality care can make a difference to long term outcomes.

- We recommend further evaluation of what the minimum level of preschool is to ensure children's best outcomes. Once an evaluation is completed this should form the minimum hours available to children attending preschool. The current 15 hours should not be removed without replacing it with an evidence-based strategy.

Positive social and emotional development in early childhood is critical for children's wellbeing and outcomes in later life. Developing a strong foundation of social and emotional skills in early childhood allows children to learn the behaviours, skills and values they will need to be functioning and contributing adults. Social and emotional wellbeing positively contributes to outcomes in later life including likelihood of higher level of education; attain and retain employment; build healthy and satisfying relationships; and being an active participant in the community. These positive outcomes benefit both individuals and the communities in which they live.

Yours sincerely

Dr Gavin Hazel
Program Manager
Child, Youth and Wellbeing Program