

A submission in response to the Productivity Commission's Draft Report on Childcare and Early Childhood Learning by the Professional Support Coordinator Alliance

This submission responds to the Draft Report (July 2014) and provides a perspective based on the implementation of policy and the essential professional learning, development and support required to deliver quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs. We note that the Draft Report gives some attention to professional development but recommendations are inadequate to comprehensively support quality and inclusion in ECEC.

We reiterate:

1. Professional learning, development and support is essential for the delivery of high quality, inclusive early childhood education and care;
2. Professional learning, development and support is a tool for policy implementation;
3. Professional learning, development and support is an essential component for the continuum of learning and education, and a professional workforce; and
4. Professional learning, development and support must be intentional, innovative, targeted and consistent.

We will focus on **three key elements** of the report either implicit or explicit. In doing so, we note that the role of the Productivity Commission is to help government make better policies that are in the long-term interest of the Australian community. As an alliance (PSCA) of future-focussed organisations delivering funded programs, our work is driven by government goals of children's wellbeing, inclusive society and workforce participation. Our missions are therefore aligned.

In a developing sector where knowledge of children, families and community is proceeding at an unprecedented pace it is essential that the sector is sufficiently equipped to develop and deliver education and care programs that are inclusive, and respectful of children's growing capacity and development. A contribution to the growing professionalism is professional development. This is defined as "the process of improving staff skills and competencies needed to produce outstanding educational results for students" (Hassel, 1999).

Guskey (2000) notes that “One constant finding in the research literature is that notable improvements in education almost never take place in the absence of professional development.” Professional development is key to meeting today’s educational demands.” (P4)

Key Area 1–The need for funded professional development programs

A rapidly changing Australian society has resulted in the care of young children becoming increasingly a shared responsibility of families, communities, governments and private enterprise. Studies by the Australian Institute of Family Studies confirm the changing needs of Australian families in terms of the growing requirement for quality ECEC provision. One of the most significant social trends of the 20th century has been the move of mothers into paid work, with widespread repercussions for family life, workplaces and community supports for families. (AIFS, 2010) Further to this, the changing nature of work in Australia necessitates a much more flexible system of ECEC.

What happens in ECEC matters — neuroscience research points to the vital importance of early childhood environments and experiences on children’s learning and development. Participation in ECEC impacts directly upon children’s educational and social development, and this impact has a lasting effect. It is participation in high quality programs that deliver the greatest benefit for children (Tayler, Cleveland, Ishimine, Cloney & Thorpe). On the basis of international research, the UNICEF report (2008) emphasised that “improving the quality of early childhood education and care remains the most potent of all available opportunities for resisting the entrenchment of disadvantage.”

Well-educated/trained staff are better able to create more effective work environments and also will increase the efficiency of other ECEC staff members. Ongoing professional learning maintains the benefits from initial education and ensures educators stay updated on professional developments and best practices. This contributes to improved pedagogical and professional quality, and stimulates early child development.

The Draft Report implies that children younger than three years of age only require support from minimally qualified educators, however, our knowledge of brain development emphasises the importance of quality provision for children from birth to three years in particular. Couple this with the research that clearly shows that the general educational levels of staff and their specific preparation in early childhood education predict the richness of language and cognitive experiences, and the extent to which interactions with children are positive, responsive and sensitive (Whitebook et al. 1989), and that greater staff training and higher levels of staff qualifications have a beneficial effect on children’s developmental outcomes, as illustrated by studies in the United Kingdom, United States, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Canada, Northern Ireland, New Zealand and Australia (Harrison et

al. 2009; Klein & Knitzer 2007), it is counter-intuitive to suggest that the younger the child the less qualified their educators need to be. It is the norm in the government-funded school education sector for both qualified teachers and other ancillary staff to continue their professional development through funded activities. This is equally applicable in the ECEC sector.

Key Area 2–Qualifications *Draft recommendations 7.2, 7.3, 7.5*

As noted above, the Draft Report implies that children younger than three years of age only require support from minimally qualified educators. Since the release of the Draft Report, the Productivity Commission has heard from many expert voices in the sector about the importance of high qualifications and adequate ratios and particularly on the experience of children under three years of age.

“The experiences children have in the first three years of life lay the foundation for life-long learning, development and wellbeing” (Sims, 2013). An early [UNICEF \(2008, p. 7\)](#) report argues “... the mastery of skills that are essential for economic success and the development of their underlying neural pathways follow hierarchical rules. Later attainments build on foundations that are laid down earlier.”

We refer you to the research of our learned colleagues on the matter of qualifications of educators working with children under three years of age (including the work of Dr Margaret Sims, Sandra Cheeseman, Dr Sheila Degotardi, Dr Linda Harrison), the absolute requirement for early childhood teachers, and the need for adequate pre-service training. We also note within the report (P 172)

“There are also the process aspects of quality which involves the quality of the interactions between staff and children. Importantly, it is the structural aspects of quality, particularly child teacher ratios and child numbers, which underpin the one on one interactions with children and the process aspects of quality (Sylva et al. 2004).”

Professional development, mentoring and enriching peer experiences are key to converting qualifications into professional practice.

Key Area 3-Women’s workforce participation and the child care and early learning workforce (or ECEC workforce) *Draft recommendation 7.2, 7.9*

The Productivity Commission inquiry into Child Care and Early Learning seeks to provide recommendations to enhance access to affordable, high quality ECEC in order to increase participation of women in the workforce and optimise children’s learning and development.

The Draft Report highlights a range of private and community-wide benefits derived from greater participation of women and mothers in the workforce, for example on-the-job training, opportunities for career progression, superannuation, increased return on public expenditure on higher education of women, and increased productivity of the workforce.

A 2014 research paper by the Fair Work Commission's pay equity unit shows 97% of the Long Day Care workforce is made up of women. We must ensure that we are not privileging the workforce participation of one group of women, to the detriment of the predominantly female ECEC workforce.

By lowering the minimum qualification to work with children birth to 36 months, we are reducing opportunities for career progression for women and offering a disincentive to upskill qualifications — this will continue to contribute to the low status of the ECEC workforce.

“Most direct care roles have been held by the entry-level trained (Certificate III) as this allows employers to conform to mandated qualification requirements while sourcing labour more cheaply. In practical terms, the prerequisites for entry to Certificate III are less stringent and the qualification can be completed more quickly. These employees can also typically be employed at lower cost. As this report indicates, this approach has proved to be an ineffective and unsustainable workforce strategy, both for local employers and sector-wide because it generates and reinforces a low pay–low skill cycle of atrophy. The low status and low-pay profile of the sector becomes self-perpetuating, or as research overseas describes it, a low pay–low skill nexus (Watson 2003 – within Bretherton 2010). Employees become less likely to commit to a career path in the industry. In turn, employers are burdened with higher recruitment costs as a consequence of high turnover and labour churn.” (Bretherton, 2010)

Professional Support Coordinators have noted that providing professional learning, underpinned by a National Quality Framework, has engaged the full range of ECEC service types, including preschools, in professional development, networks and other locally based supports. This has enabled opportunities for shared learning, peer support, and targeted approaches and resource sharing within communities. After historical segregation and notions of care and education as separate, rather than intrinsically intertwined, we are seeing the beginnings of an ECEC sector that is cohesive and collaborative and thereby conducive to optimising workforce development.

The recommendation that dedicated preschools be removed from the scope of the National Quality Framework not only erodes unification of ECEC services, but threatens the accessibility of pathways for early childhood educators to gain higher qualifications.

In 2013, Professional Support Coordinators provided the ECEC sector with:

- 13,608 responses to phone calls and emails for support

- 4,230 professional development events for 55,697 participants
- 872 services with Intensive Service Support
- 746 items of Specialist Equipment on loan
- 1,688 instances of Bi-cultural Support opportunities in 58 different languages.

In concluding, we would draw your attention to the experience of our international colleagues where participation in professional development is mandatory for ECEC staff and the costs are shared between the government, employer and the individual (the current experience of the majority in Australia as a result of the IPSP).

Ongoing professional development has the “potential to fill in the knowledge and skills that staff may be lacking or require updating due to changes in particular knowledge fields. This is especially crucial in ECEC where new programmes are being developed continuously” (OECD, 2012 p 29).

It is ‘high-quality subject training, field-based consultation training or supervised practices’ that are most effective. Ongoing professional development should not only be available, but it should be a requirement to stay and grow in the profession.

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