

PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

**Inquiry into adequacy of services to meet the developmental needs of Western
Australian children**

**Submission prepared by staff of the Early Childhood Studies Program, School
of Education, Edith Cowan University, Mount Lawley Campus.**

The School of Education at Edith Cowan University offers four year Early Childhood Teacher Education programs for graduates teaching children 0-8 years of age at the undergraduate and post graduate level. Graduating students are qualified to work in a range of settings including, child care, kindergarten, pre-primary and junior primary classrooms.

The questions raised by the Community Development and Justice Committee into the adequacy of services for Western Australian children are timely and to be commended. Research clearly indicates that investing in the early years has long term benefits for young children's social, emotional and cognitive development. In addition, early identification of potential concerns, together with comprehensive diagnosis and intervention at the point of need can close the gap for those young children in vulnerable circumstances.

1. Whether existing government programs are adequately addressing the social and cognitive developmental needs of children, with particular reference to prenatal to 3 years

Currently program provision in WA addressing the social, emotional and cognitive needs of children 0-3 are fragmented and disjointed. For example:

- Child care centres under the auspices of Department for Communities cater for the largest number of children in the age range 0-3 years.
- With the change of entry age for children attending school, parents of children between 3 years and 3.5 years (ineligible to attend Kindergarten) sought programs that would prepare children for the school experience.
- Primary schools, through the Department of Education and Training have begun to introduce programs for 0-4 year olds, under the guise of 'closing the gap'. Reasons for such programs have included: early identification of disadvantaged children and the implementation of intervention programs (addressing the notion of 'closing the gap'); enhancing community.

It is widely recognised that quality care and delivery of services for children 0-3 in child care centres varies significantly from centre to centre and this places additional stress on families and children. In WA the collapse of ABC learning centres and anecdotal evidence of centres under financial stress has placed additional disruption to families and children particularly those from vulnerable circumstances.

Research (Barratt-Pugh, Barblett and Maloney, 2009) has demonstrated that transition from long day care to kindergarten has been largely neglected. Whilst staff in both setting recognise the importance of continuity between settings, transition procedures or strategies have been virtually non-existent.

Different government departments involved in the management of programs in different settings results in fragmentation of regulations, standards of delivery and continuity of provision.

2. How to appropriately identify developmentally vulnerable children.

For children 0-3 years, formal testing is developmentally inappropriate. However, we know that there are increasing biological, social, cultural and economic influences that can negatively impact on children's development and learning. These children need to be identified early for purposes of support and intervention.

The increase in the number of refugee children (with or without families) moving to WA in recent years, means that many of our vulnerable children are from non-English speaking backgrounds. The developmentally, culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment of non-English speaking children is an under researched and under-resourced area. Given that "Language affects not only cognitive growth but also social competence" (Mc Cabe & Meller, 2004) the assessment of non-English speaking children's language development and the consequent risk to their literacy development and school outcomes is of particular concern to researchers at ECU.

The language, literacy and social vulnerability carried by our indigenous children is another priority concern for ECU researchers. Although research evidence over decades (Dwyer, 1989) indicates that many young indigenous children enter our early childhood facilities with "language difference" rather than "language deficit", the need for child care providers and teachers to accurately distinguish between the two (Bochenek, 1989; Caruso, 2009), adds to the vulnerability of our indigenous children through disparate service provision. This is in addition to the array of research that shows that being indigenous significantly increases the risk of poor health, education, social and economic outcomes.

Best practice in early childhood education and care identifies several factors that impact on assessment and identification.

- High quality learning environments can promote positive outcomes for children. Assessing the various aspects of learning environments, their impact on learning and how the environment is responsive to the needs of very young children would provide useful information for practitioners.
- Highly qualified and knowledgeable practitioners who understand child development, learning and authentic assessment are in a stronger position to make informed decisions about assessment techniques. We very strongly recommend ONLY appropriately trained staff are permitted to work with young children.
- Strong links with families through on going communication enables practitioners to form partnerships with families that facilitate on going dialogue and support.
- The use of a range of appropriate methods to collect, monitor, document and interpret information about children will provide relevant and authentic observations that can be used to plan for learning and communicate about their progress.

3. Which government agency or agencies should have coordinating and resourcing responsibility for the identification and delivery of assistance to 0-3 year old children

We strongly urge an integrated approach to service delivery for children 0-8 years in this state. The fragmented governance in Western Australia exacerbates the dichotomy between education and care. With the Minister for Education acquiring the Office of Early Childhood Development it seems an opportune time to amalgamate the various services and provisions of early childhood from the Departments for Communities, Health, and Education

into this portfolio. Changes to governance and services in this area should be done with the BEST interests of children in mind.

4. What is the best model to ensure interagency and intergovernmental integration of developmental programs delivered to 0-3 year old children.

A single governance model will result in efficient and effective provision. Coordinated services will ensure children and families are supported. The model should represent an integration of education, care, health and justice services. It is suggested that the Minister for Education has overall responsibility with a Director of Education and a Director of Early Childhood Development reporting to the Minister. However it is imperative that the Early Childhood Development portfolio takes responsibility for all facets of children's services, including, accreditation, registration, licensing, and curriculum matters. Placing children in multiple services in the course of a week seriously impacts on their opportunity to create strong attachments with adults and has a long term detrimental effect on their social and emotional development. Therefore ONE agency which will encourage consolidated services and advocate for what is best for young children will be the ideal model.

5. How to prioritise the resources available for meeting the needs identified.

An integrated approach with a single governance model will streamline resources and processes for identification of needs and provision of services.

6. Any other related matters

Western Australia is in urgent need of an overall strong and clear Early Years strategy that will drive future policy and practice and advocate for what is best for young children. A component of this strategy must include workforce planning. The need for university trained staff has been recognised through the COAG agenda, and Western Australia must continue to support this initiative to ensure strong leadership in the field, and a highly skilled workforce.

(References available on request)

Edith Cowan University
Early Childhood Program Team
School of Education

