



Early Childhood Teachers' Association Inc.

20 Hilton Rd Gympie Qld 4570
Phone: 04 1815 7280 Fax: 07 5481 1148
Email: info@ecta.org.au
Website: www.ecta.org.au
ABN: 31 930 635 743

Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

ECTA welcomes the opportunity to comment and provide a voice for its members regarding the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning. In short, ECTA acknowledges the importance of kindergarten participation and supports the current staff qualifications and ratios under the National Quality Framework (NQF). It also suggests streamlining current regulatory requirements and the process involved in providing appropriate support for children with additional needs.

ECTA is a not-for-profit organisation representing early childhood professionals (teachers and other associated staff) across all educational programs for children from birth to eight years of age. As a respected peak body, ECTA is well placed to support Early Childhood Australia in advocating for a qualified and professional Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector in the best interests of children and their families. The Productivity Commission's Inquiry provides an opportunity to:

1. promote being an educator in early childhood services as a valued and respected role,
2. support the introduction of professional wages to the sector,
3. seek greater recognition for the importance of play based learning in optimising children's learning and development,
4. seek coordinated national strategies to address workforce shortages, especially in rural areas where it can be hard to attract higher-qualified staff,
5. support funding commitments to maintain and increase universal access to high quality kindergarten programs, and
6. seek to improve the integration of kindergarten programs with ECEC services and the school system.

ECTA supports the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education.

Access to high quality early childhood education before formal schooling must remain a priority. For the purposes of this submission, we refer to structured, play-based early childhood education before formal schooling as 'kindergarten'. In some jurisdictions, it is called 'preschool', 'pre-prep' or 'reception'.

Kindergarten participation enhances children's overall development

Australian children significantly benefit from attending kindergarten programs. Recent studies indicated that children who participated in a kindergarten program were more likely to achieve better scores in development overall. This positive association is further supported by higher AEDI and Year 3 NAPLAN results (Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013). Interestingly, more specific studies showed that children who attended full-day kindergarten programs performed considerably higher in overall development than children who attended half-day sessions (Boardman, 2005).

Staff qualifications and ratios reflected in the NQF should be upheld

There is strong evidence indicating that specialised training in early childhood education enhances the quality of teachers' interactions with children. Higher qualification and on-going professional development improves pedagogical quality by providing staff with a deeper understanding of the processes involved in promoting effective early childhood development. Research showed that university-qualified early childhood professionals were more able and likely to critically reflect on their practices (Elliot, 2006); a vital component of effective professional development.

Higher-qualified staff in kindergarten and ECEC services improves pedagogical practice across all staff. As teachers, there is an expectation for higher-qualified staff to play a mentor role by sharing their knowledge and understanding with other staff, often through their own professional development programs and systems within the workplace. Perhaps this should be clearly outlined in their role description, particularly in funding arrangements for those services that receive a grant for the additional costs of employing higher-qualified staff.

Further, sufficient staff-to-child ratios enhance the quality of interactions with children, which underwrites their learning and development. Improved staff-to-child ratios have also shown improved health and safety, and lowered the risk of infection among young children (Early Childhood Australia, 2011).

There must be public assurance of the quality and qualifications for people who provide care and education for young children. ECTA acknowledges that the ability to achieve the quality early childhood education outcomes that meet community expectations relies upon the availability of suitably trained and qualified early childhood staff. The importance of a skilled and knowledgeable early childhood workforce, and sufficient staff-to-child ratios, are key considerations in providing a high quality, sustainable early childhood learning system. In that regard, ECTA strongly supports current staff qualifications and ratios as they are reflected in the NQF.

Streamline regulatory requirements

ECTA members in community kindergartens reported increased stress and costs due to the extra workload in complying with the accountability requirements of the NQF. As a result, some community kindergartens are experiencing extreme financial pressure to meet the extra costs of facilitating NQF compliance. Staff burnouts further inflame the situation because many community kindergartens cannot afford to sufficiently increase staff wages to compensate the extra workload. The ECEC sector has a range of professionals with various training and experience that require different levels of accountability and scrutiny. A more streamlined process that differentiates between university-qualified staff and lesser-qualified staff may help ECEC services to better manage their compliance with the NQF.

Support for children with additional needs should be streamlined

Access to appropriate ECEC services is increasingly difficult for children with additional needs. Unfortunately, the current system is confusing and time-consuming.

Current support for children with additional needs tends to be fragmented and it is time-consuming for staff to access the range of services available. It is also important to note that children whom have experienced neglect or abuse may suffer extreme difficulties in mainstream education. There is currently no additional funding to support these children and their integration into ECEC services.

ECTA acknowledges the need for a more streamlined process of supporting children with additional needs. The new process should include a system that promotes a clear documentation trail from ECEC services to kindergarten to the school system to encourage a smooth, effective transition, strong partnerships and ongoing support for children and families.

References

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