

Submission to the Royal Commission into Early Education and Child Care in SA

Name: Liz Mitchell

I have been a Preschool Teacher for 47 years, and a Preschool Director for 35 years. While studying Early Childhood Education for my teaching qualification, I also completed an Arts Degree at the University of Adelaide, majoring in Psychology. I am currently a Board member of OMEP Australia, Treasurer of the SA Chapter of OMEP and a member of the SA Children's Week Committee.

While I was Director of Netherby Kindergarten the centre was assessed against the National Quality Standards, and the staff team and community achieved a rating of Exceeding National Quality Standards in every Element of each the seven Areas assessed under the ACEQA rating system.

This submission was prompted by my reading information on the Royal Commission website, in particular the First 1000 Days Overview.

A child's first 1000 days

In the First 1000 Days Overview "Early Childhood Education and Care" is listed as providing "Programs to support workforce participation and children's development and learning". As a teacher, I believe that Early Childhood Education and Care should focus first on the rights and education of the child, and that workforce participation to meet the needs of parents, and support the economy, are outcomes rather than the main priority.

Consequently, I am sharing my expertise and reflections in the following areas:

- 1 Philosophy about children's learning
- 2 Supporting parents as the child's first teacher
- 3 The importance of training and recognition of Teachers and Educators in Early Childhood Education

1 Philosophy about children's learning

Early childhood is a time of amazing growth and learning, and in our effort to meet the learning needs of our children we need to see them as capable, powerful learners, to listen to their voice and respect their rights.

During my teaching career, and as a parent and grandparent, I have been fascinated by the curiosity, creativity, persistence, and resilience in every individual child. I see children taking a scientific approach to their world. They observe, create a hypothesis, test it, and if it doesn't work, they formulate the next possible solution. This is evident as a small baby reaches for a toy, and with persistence rolls to reach it, and as older babies learn to crawl, walk, talk, even to use a spoon. Older children test their theories as they build with blocks, play in sand and water, as they tackle climbing equipment or tree climbing. When children ask questions, it is always fascinating to ask, "What do you think?"

As a preschool teacher I saw my role as first observing and listening to each child in order to understand their skills across all areas of development. Most importantly I also strove to discover their understanding of the world. Conversations with parents and caregivers provided further insights the staff team used when plan for learning opportunities for each individual child. Listening to what children were interested in led to staff planning projects with the group of children, to support their exploration, hypothesizing, experimentation and learning. With the children, and in staff meetings, teachers then reflect on the children's learning and plan for the next learning opportunities.

This approach to early childhood learning is inspired by the Reggio Emilia pedagogy, as shared with South Australia when Professor Carla Rinaldi was the Thinker in Residence.

The learning environment must be carefully planned, so that children are in aesthetically pleasing environments with lots of natural materials, and opportunities to explore and play both indoors and outside. Daily routines should be flexible to ensure that when children are engaged in deep thinking and exploring, whether it be group construction or an individual project, their concentration and commitment to the task is respected. "Open-ended" tasks, eg wooden puzzles with various solutions, stimulate better problem-solving skills than "closed" tasks, eg jigsaw puzzles with only one solution.

The learning environment must be carefully planned, so that children are in aesthetically pleasing environments with lots of natural materials, and opportunities to explore and play both indoors and outside. Daily routines should be flexible to ensure that when children are engaged in deep thinking and exploring, whether it be group construction or an individual project, their concentration and commitment to the task is respected. "Open-ended" tasks, eg wooden puzzles with various solutions, stimulate better problem-solving skills than "closed" tasks, eg jigsaw puzzles with only one solution.

From experience I believe that group size matters. Ideally preschool children (aged 3 -5) are in groups of no more than 25 to 30, with two university trained teachers and one or two educators with Diploma of Child Care training. When groups include children with "special rights" or for whom English is not their home language, the educator team should include Special Education Support Workers, or Bilingual Assistants. When groups are as large as 44, even with extra staffing, I have observed that the more confident and assertive children access all staff members, while the staff are so busy that it is harder for them to engage with the quieter, less "visible" children. In centres with children under 3, group sizes must be much smaller as specified by ACEQA.

Early learning centres for children of all ages should provide daily opportunities for engagement with stories, books, poetry and a variety of music reflecting the cultural diversity of Australia. Painting, drawing, modelling with clay and dough, construction using recycled and natural materials, as well as wooden blocks, should also be available for the children both indoors and out. Numeracy and science opportunities are also part of each day. The natural world provides wonderful resources which are readily available. For example, collecting, comparing, counting, sorting and patterning with seedpods provide opportunities for children to explore numeracy concepts. Gardening with children leads to countless learning opportunities. SA also has a great resource, the Nature Education Centre, which loans centres and schools a variety of living creatures, specimens, and resource kits.

2. Supporting parents as the child's first teacher

I have read some of the learned articles by academics and "experts" in their presentations and submissions to this Royal Commission. There is a focus on supporting parents to return to work. However, while there is lots of evidence about the value of high quality education and care, the importance of recognizing and supporting parents as the child's first teacher should also be emphasized.

Attachment theory highlights the importance of relationships in a baby's early years. Placing babies in institutionalized care at an early age must impact their sense of security as they have to learn to be brave as they separate from their parents.

Parenting a new baby can be an isolating experience when parents have been used to the adult interaction and companionship in the workplace. Where grandparents, family, friends or cultural groups are not involved with the family, this increases the sense of loneliness of new parents. New parents are on a rapid learning curve as they get to know their child, their needs and how to best take care of them.

Supporting parents by involvement with Child and Family Health Services, and the connections with new parent groups through the ante-natal classes offered by maternity services in hospitals are invaluable to supporting parents in their new role, and importantly identifying families which may be at risk because of poverty, dysfunctional relationships, substance abuse, mental health issues, or cultural or physical isolation. Early identification must lead to effective support for both the parents and the children.

Programs such as the Department for Education Learning Together Program support First Nations families by connecting with parents, valuing their culture and supporting them in caring for their children and supporting their education, and connection with their community and country.

COVID has taught us that working from home is productive and can support families in spending more time together, as travelling time does not cut into the day. Supporting parents to work part time across the week enables parents to spend more time engaging with their children, accessing facilities, such as playgroups, playgrounds and children's activities in libraries and community centres. This engagement builds connections between families, across age and cultural groups, and builds a sense of community.

Funding to support parents at home during their child's first year should be an option available in addition to childcare subsidies. This is likely to be cost effective as it would reduce the pressure on childcare places, reduce the financial stress on parents, as well as giving babies a less hurried start to life as their parents connect with others in their local community.

When children start attending childcare they are exposed to infections from other children and this often means that a parent has to use their sick leave entitlement. Small babies are especially vulnerable to respiratory infections as

their airways are so small, and often hospitalisation is needed. Some children with repeated or persistent respiratory infections develop hearing problems which can impair their speech development.

3. The importance of training and recognition of Teachers and Educators in Early Childhood Education

Significant problems faced by both teachers and child care educators are the poor wages and low value society places on their work. This inevitably leads to the more academically gifted students choosing careers which lead to higher wages. Increasing the salaries of staff in education and care would obviously not only solve the issue of staff shortages, it would also improve the quality of care provided, because child care and teaching would become respected, sought-after careers of choice and attract the “brightest” students.

A four year teaching degree course, with lots of regular opportunities for learning within child care and preschool services should be essential for all centre directors and teaching staff. This course should support teachers in learning about child development and learning across the 0 – 8 year range. Because all children are different and have a range of abilities, it is important that teachers see the early years learning as a continuum flowing into formal schooling. Most schools now engage in play-based activities in the early years, as there is an understanding that this approach is most effective in achieving good learning outcomes, as well as building cooperative communities within the classroom and across the school. Both the STEM and STEAM programs in schools also use cooperative projects as a strategy to build children’s thinking , creativity and problem-solving skills.

An additional 4 year teaching degree course specializing in 0-5 years, and a diploma course for educators would be appropriate for those wanting to work with very young children, but would less suitable for those wanting to work in preschool programs for the year before school.

All teaching and diploma courses would ideally require the student to undertake some placement in a regional centre, and this should lead to more young educators choosing to work beyond the metropolitan area. I assume that there are already online courses enabling those living in regional areas to study early childhood education. Practical experience in centres provides invaluable learning opportunities and can also lead to employment opportunities in the centre.

Courses in Early Childhood Education should, I believe, include study of the Reggio Emilia pedagogy.

Lisa Burman is a South Australian Educator who leads workshops in supporting educators to listen to children, and through playful learning opportunities build the children’s skills so that they see themselves as confident learners, writers and readers. Lisa’s resources should also be included in tertiary courses.

3 year old preschool

Preschool attendance for 3 year olds would provide wonderful learning opportunities for children. At present many government preschools offer playgroups, even though they are not funded in the site budget, because the teachers and the community understand the value of the learning opportunities available in a kindergarten setting and the social benefits of 3 year olds playing together.

Importantly children who show developmental delays can be identified, and early intervention across 2 years of preschool attendance would be beneficial. Currently it is not unusual for it to be months between when teachers identify a child’s need for additional support, assessments are completed and support from a speech pathologist, psychologist or social worker is provided. The extra year would make a huge difference and lead to better learning outcomes for children. In addition, there is a need for occupational therapists to be added to the support services in preschools.

Out of school hours care

Departmental regulations have limited the ability of government preschools to offer any additional time or programs to support parents who would prefer their child to the high quality government preschool programs but these do not fit their working hours. Some preschools have managed to extend the preschool day by offering a 30 minute lunch care program staffed with a small fee from parents, but this is not affordable for most families.

Co-location of preschools and childcare centres would mean that children could attend preschool programs for 3 hours each day, and also access before and after preschool care. With close working relationships between both sites there would be continuity of learning for children as well as opportunities for shared resources and staffing across the centres.

Schools offer learning programs across a much shorter day than childcare centres. Workers in Australia expect working hours to be limited to 8 hours. And yet we expect our youngest citizens to spend longer hours, sometimes 10

hours in their “workplace”. I know that care centre hours reflect the needs of working parents, but I think the Royal Commission should reflect on this expectation.

Additionally, reception children in schools who attend Out of School Hours Care, are literally working across two workplaces in a day, often with no continuity of staff or personnel across the two sites. This is not only tiring for children, but also stressful when a child is learning the routines and expectations and building relationships in their new school environment in both the classroom and OSHC settings.

Listening to children

I must finish this submission by drawing the Royal Commission’s attention to the words of Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

The Hundred Languages of Children

The child

is made of one hundred.

The child has

a hundred languages

a hundred hands

a hundred thoughts

a hundred ways of thinking

of playing, of speaking.

A hundred always a hundred

ways of listening

of marvelling of loving

a hundred joys

for singing and understanding

a hundred worlds

to discover

a hundred worlds

to invent

a hundred worlds

to dream.

The child has

a hundred languages

(and a hundred hundred hundred more)

but they steal ninety-nine.

The school and the culture

separate the head from the body.

They tell the child:

to think without hands

to do without head

to listen and not to speak

to understand without joy

to love and to marvel

only at Easter and Christmas.

They tell the child:

to discover the world already there

and of the hundred

they steal ninety-nine.

They tell the child:

that work and play

reality and fantasy

science and imagination

sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together.

And thus they tell the child
that the hundred is not there.
The child says:
No way. The hundred is there.

Loris Malaguzzi (translated by Lella Gandini).