

Universal Three-year-old preschool

Introduction

The University of South Australia (UniSA) Education Futures' Early Childhood teaching staff welcome the opportunity to respond to the Royal Commission (the Commission) into Early Childhood Education and Care. Our response is in relation to the Commission's Terms of Reference, specifically, point (b): *'How universal quality preschool for three- and four-year-olds can be delivered in South Australia, including addressing considerations of accessibility, affordability, quality and how to achieve universality of both age cohorts'*.

We address two key ideas in relation to point (b):

1. The scope of early childhood Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs to fully prepare graduates to work as teachers with three- and four-year-old children.
2. Social justice, equity and inclusion issues as fundamental to the provision of preschool for three- and four-year-old children.

Responding to the Commission's key considerations

Accessibility & Affordability

UniSA has a commitment to social justice, equity, and inclusion, as core values that underpin teaching, learning and research at the university. However, it is becoming increasingly challenging to ensure our early childhood initial teacher education program continues to privilege these values within the curriculum. This challenge is due to how early childhood is defined in South Australia. In South Australia early childhood spans birth to eight years, encapsulating both prior-to-school and the early years of primary school contexts. As a result, there are two accrediting bodies for early childhood ITE programs – the Australian Institute for Teachers and School Leadership (AITSL) and the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). AITSL is primarily concerned with primary curriculum content, whilst ACECQA takes a more holistic approach to program requirements for children aged birth to five years. Within an early childhood ITE degree, seventy percent of the content relates to the primary school curriculum, whilst the remaining thirty percent, focuses on children aged birth to five years. As a result, issues that relate to social justice can become marginalised within the program, with limited time for appropriate consideration. For example, the undergraduate early childhood program at UniSA has just one course that focuses on children and families who have experienced trauma, yet high numbers of preschool children come to school with these experiences.

Therefore, if early childhood ITE programs are to truly prepare graduates to work with children aged birth to five years, it is imperative that program standards for early childhood ITE be examined. A recommendation to the Commission is that a degree that specialises in early childhood, birth to five years, be supported to attract preservice teachers who wish to work in the prior-to-school context. The ability for ITE providers to design programs that are specific to children aged birth to five years would enable accessibility and other social justice issues to be critically and adequately explored within the program. This would require the Teachers Registration Board of South Australia to recognise birth to five qualified teachers, enabling them to register and be paid as teachers and therefore, work exclusively in prior-to-school contexts in South Australia. At present teachers who come to South Australia from Victoria or New South Wales with a birth to five teaching qualifications, cannot register to teach. A registrable degree in South Australia, that is birth to five focused, would produce graduates who have specialised knowledge of children in this age group.

Preschool, from age three, has the potential to provide some of our youngest South Australians with an early connection to country, community and society. However, accessibility is a key issue and must be considered in terms of proportionate universalism. This would enable funding, resourcing and access to be at a scale proportionate to the degree of need. Without this, children in the most disadvantaged groups or rural/regional contexts will continue to be overlooked. It must be acknowledged too, that early education and care occurs in multiple settings, particularly for those children and families/carers in rural and remote areas. It is important that parents are aware that preschool is a non-compulsory sector, with attention to funding and resourcing for other forms of early education and care such as playgroup, child-care, creche, family day care and home care.

The provision of preschool needs to be considered as providing holistic support for families/carers and communities. Early intervention through the provision of three-year-old preschool provides the opportunity to integrate with services such as the Child and Family Health Service, occupational therapists, counsellors, speech pathologists etc., wrapping support around children and families/carers.

Quality

Quality in early childhood education and care is a contested term, and at present is largely defined by the National Quality Framework (NQF) which regulates, assesses and provides a process for quality improvement for early childhood services (ACECQA, 2012). However, fundamental to providing high quality education and care for our youngest citizens, is the teacher (Hattie, 2009). Therefore, how we prepare early childhood teachers throughout their ITE program requires re-visiting. As previously discussed, in a birth to eight early childhood degree, only thirty percent of the program addresses content relating to children aged birth to five years due to existing AITSL (2009) program standards. Arguably our current ITE programs in South Australia do not provide graduate teachers who are fully prepared to teach children aged birth to five years. It is again proposed that the Commission recommend that ITE providers be supported to develop birth to five early childhood degrees that are registerable by the Teachers Registration Board of South Australia. This will enable the quality of three-and-four-year-old preschool to be realised through the provision of early childhood graduates who have specialised knowledge and a passion for working with children from birth to five years.

Given that quality early childhood programs require highly skilled teachers focused on learning suitable for children to five years of age, we recommend that the Commission advocate for an emphasis on play-based pedagogies as detailed in the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2022). Play-based, embodied, and multisensory learning (Robinson et al., 2018), is critical for development and learning in the early years and is explicit throughout the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2022). Continued focus on preparing children for school and the increased 'schoolification' of the preschool curriculum, threatens children's opportunities for play.

High quality and inclusive preschools for three-year-olds provide increased child-centred and unstructured play, with access to nature with ample space to move to support physical and mental wellbeing. Quality preschool programs draw from pedagogies and practices that actively engage with children's voices and visions for what matters in their lives, communities, and the world at large. Children experience agency in quality preschools; thus, culturally responsive pedagogies and culturally sustaining practices are recommended in preschools to engage with the 'whole child' and acknowledge children's funds of knowledge and identities (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005).

Since 2016 'preschool teachers [have been] required to use the Indicators of Preschool Numeracy and Literacy to inform their planning and teaching, to monitor children's numeracy and literacy development, and to inform the statement of learning for discussion with and reporting to families' (DfE, 2016, p. 1). This

has led to an increase in formal instructional times, limiting the learning created when teachers invite children to engage with multimodal and multilingual resources that connect to their life experiences and many ways of communicating (Brown & Hao, 2022 p. 156; Rinaldi 2015). It is concerning that there is an increase in prior-to-school settings focusing on preparing children for school via structured monolingual literacy lessons using a range of phonics programs, or via skills-focused literacy instruction in English (Campbell, 2020).

Increased pressure for reading, writing, and mathematics learning in early years' curricula is symptomatic of a view of children as human capital and an 'investment for the future' (Moloney et al., 2019). Commercial phonics programs are inappropriate methods of 'code-related literacy instruction in the prior-to-school years' (Campbell, 2020, p. 806). We question the goals of 'high-quality' early childhood education programs that aim to provide for individual and national economic futures. We argue that the expansion of access to early childhood education should not be about preparing children for discrete skills for school. We recommend that programs focus on children's interests; social, emotional, physical, cultural and linguistic development needs; and their sense of wonder as they progress with their learning journeys and establish their places in the world.

Schools' increased involvement in preschool programs has frequently dismissed the complexity of providing quality early education for children, particular for children in high poverty contexts (McCabe & Sipple, 2011), and exacerbated the narrow focus on academic content and skills (Lipsey, Farran & Durkin, 2018). We recommend that the Commission explore developing more appropriate pedagogies in the early years so that the fragmentation of early childhood education and care is reduced.

Universality

The percentage of children aged four who attend preschool has been found to be lower in South Australia than in other Australian states (ABS, 2021). Children who live in high poverty, regional or remote areas attend preschool less than those children who live in the metropolitan area (ABS, 2021). Therefore, a key consideration of the Commission must be the uptake of three-year-old preschool given the number of South Australian children currently accessing four-year-old preschool.

Universality must not only be considered in how three- and four-year-old children come together as a community in a variety of contexts, but also how universality is considered in terms of proportionality. Will three-year-old preschool be universally accessible to all children and families/carers, particularly for those who need it the most? How will the model for universality divide resources and funding to address the explicit needs within individual communities?

As previously discussed, early childhood education and care occurs in a variety of contexts, not exclusively in preschools. Preschool designs and services differ in response to their local communities' needs and values. Thus, universality must also consider how preschool will be delivered, resourced and funded, for the diverse communities it will serve.

The above issues are important to UniSA and the early childhood teaching staff; however, as previously discussed, it is challenging to explore such issues with students in early childhood ITE programs. Having the space to critically engage our students in such issues is necessary so that the next generation of early childhood teachers can influence social change. Given that we know teachers positively influence outcomes for children and their families/carers, it is critical that early childhood ITE birth to five programs are developed. Therefore, a recommendation to the Commission is that the Teachers Registration Board of South Australia agrees to register birth to five qualified teachers. This will enable graduates with specialised knowledge to make a difference in not only how universality is delivered but influence the development of policy to ensure all children, no matter their postcode, their family's wealth and education status, or their linguistic or cultural background, have access to preschool.

Conclusion

The Early Childhood Education teaching staff of UniSA Education Futures emphasise the key ideas that have been raised in response to the considerations of accessibility, affordability, quality and how to achieve universality of preschool for three- and four-year-olds. To reiterate, these key ideas are:

1. The scope of early childhood Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs to fully prepare graduates to work with three- and four-year-old children.
2. Social justice, equity and inclusion as fundamental to the provision of preschool for three- and four-year-old children.

These key ideas are relevant to each of the considerations that the Commission has sought response and underpin the provision of *universal quality preschool* in South Australia. We emphasise the proposal that the Commission advocate for an ITE birth to five-year degree that is registerable by the Teachers Registration Board of South Australia. The benefit of such a degree will be graduates who are committed to and passionate about working with young children in the prior-to-school context. This requires a national approach to teacher registration and further highlights the need for a national early childhood strategy in initial teacher education.

The Australian Government's Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) discussion paper is timely, and it is hoped that the Commission is able to inform the Strategy moving forward. It is important that there is universal reform, with agreement between States and the Australia Government, but with room for issues at the State and community level to be addressed within the reform.

We look forward to further opportunities to respond to the Commission, particularly addressing issues regarding early childhood workforce.

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