

Response to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care Interim Report

Respondent:

Sally Barnes
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]

1 May 2023

Dear Commissioner

I am writing in response to the Interim Report of the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care. I am an early childhood educator with more than 30 years' experience in the field. I have been employed as a kindergarten teacher and Director, curriculum writer and early childhood academic at both Flinders University and the University of South Australia. I currently work as a private consultant and a casual academic at La Trobe University. I was a member of the core writing team responsible for the development of the first version of the Early Years Learning Framework.

My response is directly related to the issues involved in defining a preschool program. I hope that the comments that I offer can clarify some of the misunderstandings that are reflected in this section of the report.

The term preschool was not used in South Australia until the mid-1990s when the then Children's Services Office was merged with the Department of Education. Preschool is not an early childhood term – it is a term that was applied to kindergarten education predominantly by those with a schooling background. The term kindergarten – meaning the children's garden - is linked to the historical roots of early childhood education and is attributed to the 'father of early childhood education', Friedrich Froebel. In early childhood education, children are no more 'pre' anything than any other group of people. The continuing influence of Dewey on how early childhood education is understood by educators work in the prior to school sector is that our job is to teach children fully for the time that they are with us. As Fred Ebbeck said many years ago, the best way to teach a child to be five is to let them be four for a whole year. A similar sentiment could be applied to every child at every age. In South Australia, the shift to the term 'preschool' was political and related to

positioning early childhood education in a larger education department. It was not driven by the kindergarten sector.

A preschool is nothing more than an institution concerned with children's education in the year prior to starting school. A preschool program is early childhood education that takes place in a preschool, nothing more and nothing less. Early childhood education is concerned with supporting the learning and development of children between the ages of birth and 8 years. The individual child (and her needs) is the concern (not the name or type of institution) and a focus on play as the primary means through which children learn is the basis of the curriculum.

The perception that the program that is provided in stand-alone (DfE) services is somehow 'more' or 'better than' that offered in long day care is historical and not related to actual evidence. Evidence from the National Quality Standard would indicate that there are many long day care services that offer programs that are equal to and in some instances, better than, what happens in stand-alone kindergartens. The point here is that what is offered in long day care centres and DfE kindergarten/preschools is early childhood education. The idea that a 'preschool program' is something special or unique is a fallacy.

In South Australia, kindergartens/preschools are a privileged part of the early childhood sector, although they are not often recognised as such. Due to history, they are funded differently to the long day care sector, with one significant difference being that the wages of warranted educators are fully funded by the state government. These educators receive the same remuneration as school teachers and the same entitlements. These privileges are not afforded to educators working in the long day care sector – they earn far less than their kindergarten/preschool colleagues and have access to far less annual leave. Kindergartens/preschools receive a variety of grants from the government to maintain facilities and offer different programs that are not available to long day care services. As a service focused only on one year of a child's life, kindergartens/preschools can direct substantially more resources to that age group, thus giving the impression of a 'better' or 'different' service type. In most instances, they have outdoor facilities that surpass what is provided in many long day care services. Again, this relates to the history of the development of kindergartens/preschool and is not evidence that a preschool program is something unique or special.

All South Australian children deserve the best education that we can provide. In the birth–8 sector, and more specifically with reference to 3- and 4-year-old children, the goals should be to provide all children with the best early childhood education. Quality early childhood programs are those which are developed by skilled and qualified educators and informed by the Early Years Learning Framework. They attend to the developmental needs and interests of individuals and groups of children and they are culturally responsive to each and every child. Quality programs are developed in partnership with families and transitions within the service and beyond the service are supported. The curriculum should be play-based and guided by broad outcomes. Learning should be deep and sustained, with a focus on imagination, creativity and critical thinking skills. Assessment of children's learning should focus on how each child's repertoire of skills and knowledge can be expanded (rather than identifying deficits in children) and emphasise how each child demonstrates their own achievement against particular outcomes. A narrow list of skills and abilities that children

are expected to achieve through a preschool program is not desirable. A view of the child as rich, capable and competent should underpin practice and children's voices within the curriculum should be evident. These are the elements of a quality early childhood program regardless of whether children are three or four and regardless of the institution in which their education takes place.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to provide this response and hope that it can assist the commissioner in responding to the challenge of defining a preschool program. I look forward to reading the final report.

Sincerely

Sally Barnes