



SA MONTESSORI
quality early childhood education and care

27th February 2023

Preamble

This submission has been prepared by Barbara Langford and Jessica Langford on behalf of SA Montessori. SA Montessori is a collective of seven early learning and care settings in South Australia. The first SA Montessori centre, Jescott Montessori Preschool in Magill, was established in 1989 and our most recent addition, Echoes Montessori in Modbury, opened in January 2022. Our founder and CEO, Barbara Langford, not only manages the seven SA Montessori centres but also runs her own consultancy company, Montessori Management and Mentoring, and volunteers with various industry groups, including Australian Childcare Alliance (SA) and Montessori Australia. Jessica Langford (Barbara's daughter) was one of the inaugural students at Jescott Montessori and returned to that classroom to begin her career as an educator almost 20 years ago. Jessica has obtained several Diplomas in Montessori Education, a Diploma in Children's Services, a Diploma in Positive Psychology and a Degree in Education (Early Childhood). Jessica has worked 'on the floor' as an educator for 15 years, spent many years as a centre Director, is a part-owner in four of the SA Montessori centres, and is now mother to a 2-year-old, giving her a view from multiple perspectives when it comes to this potential program.

Purpose and Aims

What should every 3-year-old child in South Australia be entitled to in terms of early learning?

Every 3-year-old child deserves the opportunity to access experiences that are emotionally empowering and developmentally enriching. Some 3-year-olds already encounter these conditions in their home life with the family. Some attend child care services that have varying levels of success in providing these elements. Other 3-year-olds may be languishing in emotionally and developmentally insecure situations. Funding for 3-year-olds could provide a social justice pathway for ensuring that every 3-year-old has equitable access to the experiences that they deserve.

What should be the central aim of 3-year-old Preschool?

The central aim of a 3-year-old Preschool should be for the child to build social-emotional well-being that acts as the foundation for future living, loving and learning.

What are important but secondary aims?

A child who is meeting the central aims of feeling socially supported and emotionally nurtured will have the confidence required to act upon their natural drive to explore, inquire, investigate and connect. Therefore, the secondary aims are to provide the resources, environments, relationships and scaffolding that can help a child capitalize on their curiosity as they learn about the world around them. This does not mean that a 3-year-old program ought to have an emphasis on traditional academic preparation, but instead that it should be an enriched program to help each child build on their knowledge and acquire new skills.



SA MONTESSORI
quality early childhood education and care

Defining key terms

What does universal preschool look like to you/your organization? Does a universal program mean the same program design and service is offered to everyone? How would you define universal?

From our perspective, the term ‘universal’ – meaning equally available to all, regardless of individual circumstance - applies to the *access*, not the *implementation*. That is, every child is universally deserving of access to a learning program, but this program should not be delivered in a homogenized manner. Children have universal rights, but there is not a universal developmental pathway. Each child is a completely unique and inimitable individual. It is not enough to say that a child’s development unfolds at its own pace, because even that implies a linear journey. It is more accurate to say that a child’s holistic development propagates from a central seed in a way that not only takes its own time but also its own many directions as it branches off into the varied facets of overall growth. There may be traits that are universally associated with early childhood - such as the need to connect, and a desire for a sense of belonging – but even these are expressed differently by each child, particularly when considering those who are neurodivergent. The idea of a program being designed and offered to all children in the same way ignores the fundamental truth of what it is to not only be a child, but to be human.

How should 3-year-old preschool differ to 4-year-old preschool?

In our opinion, both age groups (and in fact, every year level of formal education) ought to account for individual developmental differences and personal strengths, interests, and challenges. All education should be about building upon the needs and abilities of the child, helping them explore the wonders that the world has to offer, and empowering them to acquire the skills that they will need to navigate that world confidently and successfully.

In reality, many 4-year-old programs have become “school preparation programs”. Ironically, many primary school teachers feel increasing pressure to focus on preparing children for their middle and high school experiences. It seems, far too often, that at every level of education there is an emphasis not on responding to the child as they are today, but on looking at what adults will expect of them tomorrow and then working backwards to manufacture a program that will help them ‘prepare’ for that.

If 3-year-old Universal Access is introduced, we believe it is extraordinarily important for clear and consistent messaging to be shared with educators, families, and service providers that the programs are not intended to make children start engaging in ‘structured, formal academics’ at an increasingly early age. Lest we continue in that direction until children are doing phonics in utero, we must take a stand to protect the 3-year-old’s right to learn *as they are intended to*, not as adults expect them to. Three-year-old preschool must offer fun, freedom and flexibility. It must intertwine learning into joyful experiences that activate the senses, involve the whole body and spark the imagination.

In our opinion, it should therefore not differ at all from 4-year-old preschool because we hope that 4-year-olds are receiving that same beautiful blend of joyful and enlightening discovery, rather than sitting down ticking boxes on initial sounds worksheets.



SA MONTESSORI
quality early childhood education and care

How should 3-year-old preschool differ to ECEC currently provided to 3-year-olds?

There should be very little difference between a *high-quality* ECEC program for 3-year-olds and a formal ‘3-year-old preschool program’. That is, meaningful play-based and individualized learning within an enriched environment supported by suitably qualified professionals in line with the EYLF should be, and is, already happening in many environments. Those settings, including our own, should be used as an inspiration and model for any 3-year-old funding, and should be celebrated for having developed and provided this service for so long already rather than being penalized by an artificial distinction between what is already offered to 3-year-olds and any future proposal.

In particular, a 3-year-old preschool program will have to embrace the experience of the ECEC sector by understanding the interplay between education and care at this age. A 3-year-old child will not necessarily have the physical, emotional or developmental maturity to be completely independent when it comes to fundamental personal needs such as toileting, eating and resting. Again, this is an area where a high-quality and effective ECEC will already be thriving, and we do not therefore need to create an entirely ‘different’ approach but instead to learn from what is happening in practice already.

It is our assumption, and to an extent our concern, that one difference that will likely be assumed is that ECEC services currently deliver programs to 3-year-olds based on the expertise of a variety of early learning professionals, including those with Certificates, Diplomas, or Masters Degrees. We suspect that, as with Universal Access for 4-year-olds, the expectation will be that a 3-year-old preschool program is delivered by a 4-year Bachelor Degree Early Childhood Teacher. This difference is not one that we necessarily or automatically support. We believe that there are many highly skilled educators with other qualifications who can, and do, effectively provide for the educational and developmental needs of a 3-year-old child.

From our perspective, as providers of a service that already offers exceptional early learning experiences for 3-year-old children, the main difference that we would see from a Universal Access funding model would be greater and more equal opportunities for access. More families would be able to afford to begin, increase or maintain their attendance.

Quality and Innovation

What does a high-quality 3-year-old early learning look like? What are the markers of optimal program delivery?

High-quality early learning for 3-year-olds looks like a kaleidoscope. That is, there are integral components that go into building its structure, but when you look through the lens there is not one picture awaiting the eye but an array of interconnected images. The learning process, and its outcomes, should look different for each child. A fundamental marker of a good quality program should be that what is happening for each child is based upon *who* they are, not just how old they are. A 3-year-old program should not consist of all children doing the same things at the same time.



SA MONTESSORI
quality early childhood education and care

When building the structure of our kaleidoscopic program, there are certain key features that enable that multifaceted perspective of the child to appear. These integral components include:

- Physical environments that are safe and free of hazard, yet also challenging enough to encourage healthy risk-taking,
- Enrichment of those environments through furnishings and resources that invite the child's interest in learning, and offer a range of options including independent exploration, peer collaboration and scaffolded experiences with an educator,
- Educators who care. This feels important enough to state again in the simplest terms first. It is not enough for educators to teach, they must also *care*. They must care about what they do, they must care about each child, and they must tend to the child's caregiving needs, such as using the toilet, with the same respect that they offer when the child is learning to count. 3-year-olds need and deserve care. It is not possible or desirable at this age to try to disconnect education from care, they are two halves of the same whole. Therefore, a high-quality 3-year-old program is delivered by professionals who are not only effective educators, but compassionate caregivers.

Dr Maria Montessori once said, “the true test of the correctness of educational procedure is the happiness of the child”. This underpins our belief that it is the child's satisfaction, participation and well-being that is the truest marker of quality in a 3-year-old program. Success is not measured by standardized academic outcomes, but by the personal growth that each child has experienced from who they were and what they could do yesterday, to who they are and what they can do today. If each child is progressing in relation to their own personal pathway and each child is finding a place to belong within that program, then it is effective and important.

What does high-quality look like in terms of the amount of time spent in preschool?

The current model of 15 hours per week for 4-year-olds is a reasonable standard for general access, in that it effectively enables 2 days' worth of attendance (although in long day care settings, not all of the hours in those days are funded through Universal Access). Attending twice a week is generally enough time for a 3-year-old to develop a sense of security and gives them sufficient exposure to the learning opportunities to make a meaningful impact.

It is worth considering that true high-quality in terms of time may look slightly different for each child. Children who have highly enriched and supportive family lives may want and need less time in a preschool program than children with dysregulated or disenfranchised home lives. We therefore believe that any 3-year-old funding model should ideally take personal circumstances into account, in terms of ensuring that it does not create a societal *pressure* for parents to enrol their 3-year-old for more time than they are comfortable with, while also reaching out to those who need support the most by offering them enough days to enable the child's sense of belonging.

How does quality differ for different cohorts of children?

Quality should not be about the cohort, but the individual. It is not enough to recognize diversity *between* groups, we must also respect diversity *within* groups. One 3-year-old does not look, act, feel, or learn in the same way as the next 3-year-old or all other 3-year-olds. The same is true for 2-year



SA MONTESSORI
quality early childhood education and care

olds, 4-year-olds, and anyone of any age or stage. Regardless of the calendar year of a child's birth, a high-quality education and care program will be looking at questions like:

- What does this child know already? How can we build on that?
- What interests does this child have? How can we explore those in greater depth?
- What areas has this child not yet explored? How can we expose them to that?
- What does this child's behavior say about their needs? How can we fulfil those needs?
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A quality program asks and answers those questions for all children. The general parameters you might expect for those answers to fall into can be broadly categorized by age, but these generalizations are far less helpful in practice than personalization. One 3-year-old might have the emotional maturity more commonly associated with a 2-year-old but the intellectual abilities expected of a 5-year old, while the next 3-year-old might be remarkably precocious in their social skills but still yet to show any interest in numeracy or literacy. Both of these children, and every possible variation of degrees of maturity in each developmental domain, deserve to be understood, as we have said before, by who they are, not how old they are.

Where is innovation happening in programming and service delivery? What does that look like?

We know that innovation is happening in our own classrooms, such as the ground-breaking intergenerational program that we have developed at Echoes Montessori within the village of Encore Apartments for independent retirement living. We would be delighted to share more about this particular program, and as a starting point we would encourage you to visit the following sites:

<https://www.samontessori.com.au/echoes/>

<https://www.montessoriforlife.com.au/>

In terms of where innovation happens outside of our own centre, we have found that it is not always in the most obvious places. It is not necessarily the loudest voices or the most highly rated services that offer the greatest inspiration. We have spoken to passionate professionals who will advocate for the rights of children, but who are too humble to seek accolades for their own practices. We have met remarkable educators who develop truly incredible programs within centres that have low ratings due to socioeconomic disadvantage. The current Assessment and Ratings system, particularly the Excellent Rating, rewards centres who document in-depth and formalize their collegiate friendships, but there is a great deal to be learned from more spontaneous and/or casual interactions, such as visits to observe in other centres or chats with colleagues over the phone. Sometimes the best practitioners are so busy *doing*, that they have less time for documenting. The most innovative programs are sometimes so engaged with delivery, that they are not focused on publicity. We would therefore encourage the Royal Commission to accept input from unexpected sources, to make submissions or contributions accessible and convenient, and to give weight to learning more about programs than their Quality Rating.



SA MONTESSORI
quality early childhood education and care

Workforce

What are the most important competencies for the people delivering the 3-year-old preschool?

The vital competencies for a professional delivering a 3-year-old program include:

- Sufficient real-world experience classroom experience to have developed a toolkit of strategies that they can choose from to deliver personalized support,
- The flexibility and creativity to be able to deliver learning experiences with a degree of responsiveness rather than relying on a ‘one size fits all’ technique,
- An understanding of caregiving needs,
- Effective verbal and non-verbal communication,
- Awareness of child development, and an understanding of these theories translate into practice,
- High levels of empathy and respect for parents/families, as the younger the child, the greater the degree of involvement that a family is likely to expect and offer.

None of these qualities are exclusive to those with a Bachelor Degree in Teaching, nor does a Bachelor Degree guarantee these qualities. We have known exemplary educators with ‘lower’ levels of qualifications but extraordinary abilities to connect with and inspire children. We have also known ‘highly qualified’ educators with Degrees who show that they excelled at writing essays but struggle with ‘real world’ skills such as remaining patient with children, expressing enthusiasm during play, or working within the team atmosphere that is integral within early childhood environments.

What are the highest value interventions to improve workforce supply in South Australia?

In our opinion, the highest value interventions are those which focus on retention not just recruitment. Bringing large numbers of new professionals into the field is helpful, but it also results in a workforce with more novices than masters. There are many highly experienced and effective educators in the workforce who are on the brink of burnout and refuelling them would be a better solution than cutting them loose and replacing them with someone new to the field. Our preferred interventions therefore focus on making this work sustainable for those already doing it.

Several years ago, the South Australian early childhood sector was supported by the Long Day Care Professional Development Program Funding. Each service was allocated a specific amount of funding to be used exclusively for professional development for educators. This made a tangible impact not only on the well-being and satisfaction of our team members, but also on our overall retention rate. Since there was guaranteed funding available, rather than working within the limited budget of the service and/or the individual professional’s budget, there was also a greater sense of *freedom* and open-mindedness. *Without* that funding, when services have the pressures of doing a ‘cost-benefit analysis’ to determine what the centre would have to do without in order to afford to pay for professional development, there is always a tendency to focus on necessary or high-priority training. A ‘triage’ process occurs, even if this is not explicitly stated, where the educators opt for the training that is most urgent (for example, a workshop focusing on supporting challenging behaviours, if there is a child in the group with additional needs) at the expense of less critical but still meaningful explorations (such as, a workshop on cultivating creativity in artistic expression for children).



SA MONTESSORI

quality early childhood education and care

Since the professional development funding goes through this triage process, it can unintentionally reinforce an emphasis on crisis management rather than cultivating meaning. An ongoing pool of funds for professional development would encourage educators to continue engaging with the uplifting aspects of their work, improve their skillset, and feel greater satisfaction within their roles.

Another high value approach to improving retention is trying to increase social awareness of the importance of early years education not just in an abstract sense, but in terms of *how valuable and valued the educators who provide it are*. In recent years it seems that the government and lobby groups have been quite successful in cementing the importance of early learning in the public consciousness. However, this seems to have resulted in more *pressure* on early childhood professionals, rather than more *appreciation* of them. That is, parents and families now have higher expectations and demands of educators because they have been primed to understand that their children deserve a great start to life. It would be preferable if, in addition to that understanding of what their child deserves, families were also being encouraged to recognize *how hard their educators are working to provide this*. It is still seen as somewhat taboo for educators to publicly admit how *hard* this job is. They are either met with rolled eyes from people who ask how hard it could possibly be to play with playdough all day, or they are met with disgust from people who feel they should feel nothing but privilege and gratitude for working with children in such an impressionable stage. Both of those responses are equally damaging and demoralizing to the educator. We do far more than ‘play with playdough’ (even when we *are* playing with playdough!), and it is entirely possible for us to deeply appreciate how blessed we are to work with young children and still find it physically exhausting, intellectually demanding and emotionally draining. The best educators are the ones giving the most of themselves, and therefore the most likely to be feeling depleted, and yet also those least likely to feel ‘safe’ to admit how tough it is (until it’s too late!) for fear of being seen as ungrateful or disrespectful. It is vital that we educate families on how much *effort* goes into early childhood education, how much intent and time and energy each educator gives, what it actually looks and feels like to do this job. This includes a need to be transparent about political shifts within the sector, and how this impacts the public perception of our profession. For example, ACECQA introduced the ‘Exceeding Themes’ to the Assessment and Ratings system, with the result that it became harder to achieve the rating of Exceeding. Yet, it did not publicly express this. Parents and families have absolutely no awareness that the standards have effectively shifted, and that a centre rated ‘Exceeding’ prior to 2018 is likely to be on par with a centre rated ‘Meeting’ *after* 2018. From an educator perspective, that shift created an atmosphere where we were asked to work just as hard for lower recognition, as one of the *only* ways that quality is formally ‘measured’ for families became inconsistent over time without anyone explaining this to those families on our behalf. The government, lobby groups and boards seem happy to spend their budget and time telling parents how they’re working to *improve* early childhood, but don’t tend to stop and tell them how wonderful it is already, and how hard the educators are already working. ACECQA could, for instance, have been upfront and transparent with the public by openly advertising the fact that so many centres were being rated as ‘Exceeding’ that it was necessary to adjust expectations to grade on a curve, and to celebrate that so many centres were going above and beyond the standard that this adjustment was necessary. Instead, it was done quietly, within the industry not the public eye, and as a result we have families comparing apples with oranges when looking at centres assessed before or after that change, and educators in the latter category feeling like their efforts have gone underappreciated. This is one example of the many ways that the information that is disseminated to the public can unintentionally



SA MONTESSORI
quality early childhood education and care

undervalue the work of the educator. Another recent example is the fact that the Covid JobKeeper relief package was removed from early childhood professionals several months prior to every other industry in the country. We were the *only* profession singled out to have this support revoked early. The impact this had on morale was far greater than the financial disadvantage because it sent the message that not only did the government put us on the very bottom of their list of priorities, but the rest of the population seemingly agreed with them because there was no public outcry about this decision. There was no media attention, nor social media shaming, around the fact that only one industry in the country was targeted as no longer deserving the assistance that was still being offered otherwise universally. We were alone in our outrage, once again unseen and undervalued by the government and public perception. Even campaigns that do focus on supporting us, such as through increased wages for early childhood professionals, are usually framed in negative contexts rather than an uplifting manner. The country is told that we need higher wages because it is a 'low paid sector' and/or a disparity relating to the female dominated workforce. These may both be accurate statements, but they focus on correcting a deficiency and thus prime the public eye to view wage increases for early childhood professionals through this lens: that we should correct an underpayment on a technicality, not that we deserve higher wages because we earn them through work that requires specialized skills. Educators hear those messages too, and so every day we go to work after being told that we are underpaid. There is a huge psychological difference between believing you are paid less than you deserve, and being told that you deserve even more than you're being paid. It may sound like a subtle distinction, but the narrative matters. There are still far too many people who view early childhood education and care as the 'easy' option for young women who are 'good with kids'. Assisting all Australians to view early childhood education as a profession that is challenging yet rewarding, which is demanding of cognitive and emotional intelligence, that is beneficial to our society not only in terms of enabling workforce participation for parents but also building up the next generation, and where its professionals deserve high pay because they earn it through hard work, would give educators a huge incentive to remain in the field.

What else should South Australia do in addition to workforce supply initiatives already underway?

Reaching out to younger students (in the high school years) to help them develop a view of early childhood education as an aspirational career path would be beneficial. Students often begin contemplating higher education when they reach Year 9 or Year 10, as at that point they are asked to plan ahead for subject choices that will lead to particular tertiary courses. There is, of course, a lot of growth and change that can happen as students finish their high school years, but many do graduate from Year 12 with certain goals in mind. Reaching out to students at that earlier age to build a positive view of the early childhood field would yield rewards in future years.

On a more immediate level, it may be necessary to consider greater flexibility when it comes to practical placements during a Bachelor Degree. At present, most universities prohibit students from undertaking a 'prac' within their own workplace. Furthermore, many universities also insist that each practical placement takes place in a different setting. Many courses include three practical placements, with two of those lasting up to 10 weeks. For students who are also working part-time or full-time, the logistics and financial difficulties associated with taking extended periods of leave to undertake placements in other settings can often result in them postponing the prac and therefore delaying their graduation. It is an understandable concern that there may be a conflict-of-interest in a student doing a



SA MONTESSORI

quality early childhood education and care

prac placement in their own workplace, but perhaps there are measures that could be put in place to protect against that rather than an outright ban. For instance, universities could implement a course facilitator doing additional site visits if a student completes a prac in their workplace, or further evidence could be required in these circumstances (such as video recordings). Some creative thinking and flexibility about these expectations could make a significant impact on the timeframe between enrolment and completion for many students.

Another potential consideration would be marketing Degrees specifically at the preschool age. At present, most Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) courses encompass the ages of birth to 8. This means that early childhood teachers have the option of working in the preschool years, or in early primary. This not only creates a sense of competition, but also a perceived hierarchy. Many freshly graduated teachers believe that working in preschool (particularly working in long day care) is almost an ‘apprenticeship’ to earn a place in the more desirable environment of a primary school classroom. While each environment has their own strengths and challenges, most early childhood teachers seem to feel drawn to the allure of working in school terms and avoiding nappy changes. Therefore, the more experienced educators are often working towards leaving the true ‘early years’, while long day care and preschool rely on an ever-rotating roster of fresh graduates. If a Degree was offered specializing in the early years (birth to 5), with incentives in place to attract students such as a 3 year study period rather than 4 or a more affordable fee structure, then professionals could commit to specializing in the early years. They would walk out with a degree that more deeply explores the development of that age group, and with a greater sense of commitment to consistently teaching at that level instead of treating it as a stepping-stone to primary school.

It would also be beneficial to investigate ways of re-engaging professionals who have left the field. Over the past decade we have seen large numbers of skilled educators step away. There was a shift in 2012, when the National Quality Standard introduced qualification requirements that were certainly important, but in some cases undervalued *experience*. Professionals who had spent decades in the classroom without formal training were made to feel that all of their on-the-job learning was invisible. Many of them chose to move out of the sector entirely rather than feel patronized by ‘upskilling’ with a Certificate that told them how to do the very basics of what they’d been doing at an expert level for 20 years. Covid caused another culture shift, with many educators feeling burnt out by the demands of ever-changing Covid restrictions, coupled with the demoralizing decisions by the Government of the time such as revoking JobKeeper from early childhood teachers and capping the Childcare Relief Package to provide significantly less income than the service would usually receive while still having to deliver the same standard of care to children and families. We have seen many exceptional educators step away in the last two years because they simply had nothing left in terms of emotional energy. Reaching out to these professionals and finding ways to entice them back into education could be massively beneficial to the sector. It would bring back experienced mentors, rather than simply recruiting new and inexperienced emerging educators, and it would be far more cost-efficient to offer courses that reorient capable professionals rather than starting from scratch with brand new students.



SA MONTESSORI
quality early childhood education and care

Are there innovative approaches to building workforce supply that the Commission should consider?

At present, we are using our intergenerational program at Echoes Montessori to investigate the potential interplay between early childhood services and aged care services. There are many parallels between these two settings, and many of the skills and personal characteristics associated with caregivers can translate quite naturally from one cohort to the other with relatively brief bridging support. We are about to engage in formal research using Echoes as a case study for co-located and integrated intergenerational settings as a potential model for other developments. We are hopeful that intergenerational environments may be an innovative method for attracting new recruits as well as retaining staff as a result of the high levels of fulfilment found in a program of this type.

Delivery and Administration

What is needed to support 3-year-old preschool?

As a Montessori early learning setting, we are already fulfilling the requirements of a high-quality 'preschool' program for 3-year-olds, just as we are doing for 2-year-olds and 1-year-olds. That is, we are designing inspiring environments, preparing them with materials that provoke curiosity and enable child-led exploration, and offering intentional presentations that introduce new concepts and scaffold each child's skills. At all ages and stages, we are learning about each child so that we can empower each child to learn. There are very few changes that we would need to make to facilitate a formal 'Universal Access' funded 3-year-old preschool program. Any alterations would depend on the specifics of the funding model. Most importantly, we would need to determine whether an Early Childhood Teacher would be required to implement the program. That could be the single most significant barrier to delivering the program within the confines of a formal funding arrangement, as there is already a shortage of ECTs. If *access* to an ECT was sufficient, or a part-time ECT presence satisfactory, with provisions for a Diploma qualified educator to then deliver the program it would certainly make it much more achievable not only for us but for environments around the state.

What are the strengths of the current SA government administrative arrangements for delivering 4-year-old preschool programs? What are areas for improvement?

The greatest strength of the current administrative model is the flexibility for families to choose where they spend their allocated hours. Ensuring that parents have the opportunity to make this decision, rather than having their parenting choices limited by government intervention, not only protects the rights of the family but also the diversity of the early childhood landscape. Each child is an individual, each family has its own values, and there are many differing perspectives on the ideal way to support early childhood development (hence why we have an Early Years Learning *Framework* rather than a *curriculum*). It is therefore vital that an array of different early childhood settings can flourish, in order to provide multiple pedagogical options so that children and families can find the right fit. The current 4-year-old funding model ensures that parents can still choose to keep their child in a long day care environment where they are already comfortable, confident, familiar and flourishing. It is vital that a 3-year-old preschool program shares this approach. If funding is only accessible within a government setting, then it infringes upon the rights of the parents to make decisions about their child's wellbeing as it would act as a financial pressure to accept the government program even if their existing long day care setting was their preference.



SA MONTESSORI
quality early childhood education and care

Who should be primarily responsible for paying for 3-year-old preschool? Who should share that responsibility?

The funding arrangement should reflect the 4-year-old model, as the two programs should be built on the same theoretical underpinnings.

Supplementary questions

How should demand for 3-year-old preschool be modelled? What assumptions should be made? What evidence could support these assumptions?

Demand could be modelled by looking at the number of 3-year-olds already enrolled in long day care settings. This would give a reliable indication of the number of Australian families who are already choosing to invest in the importance of early years education prior to the age of 4. There are, of course, families who access long day care out of necessity rather than a recognition of developmental benefits, so the attendance figures would not directly translate to demand. However, it would be easy to survey enrolled families at long day care settings to ask what percentage of them use the service purely for ‘child-care’, purely for ‘educational’, or for a combination of both. We strongly assume that the vast majority of Australian families would indicate that it is a combination of both, thus demonstrating strong demand for 3-year-old care. A survey could also ask families how many of them would attend *more* days/hours of long day care if funding was available.

How should the conversion of existing vacancies (in government preschools and long-day care) into 3-year-old preschool places be modelled? What assumptions should be made (for example, about the willingness of services to operate at 100% capacity)?

It would be safe to assume that most long day care services would be *delighted* to operate at 100% capacity *if suitably qualified staff members are available*. The workforce shortage is likely to be the most significant barrier to being able to operate at capacity. This will be particularly true if a 3-year-old program must be implemented by a Degree qualified Early Childhood Teacher. If that is an expectation, then it will likely be a barrier to participation. Finding enough full-time equivalent ECTs to deliver the program for all eligible 3-year-olds would be an enormous challenge, and trying to retain these teachers or risk losing access to the funding could become a logistical nightmare for operators. Flexibility with this expectation – such as allowing a part-time ECT to develop the program with a Diploma teacher assisting with implantation – may increase the likelihood of long day care services being able to implement the program and therefore operate at capacity.

What assumptions should be made about how many hours of service can be delivered in a single day (in government preschool and long day care)?

This would depend on how much guidance was given on the parameters of the program. For instance, if curriculum expectations were put in place that mandated a separation between ‘education’ and ‘care’ then allowances would need to be made for the fact that many 3-year-olds are still napping, and that a significant portion of each day would be taken up with ‘routine caregiving’ such as assisting with toileting and mealtimes. 3-year-olds do not tend to have the same level of independence as 4-year-olds, and thus if a distinction is made between the hours that a child is being ‘cared for’ and the hours that they are being ‘educated’ then each ‘day’ of ‘education’ would have to be a shorter number



SA MONTESSORI
quality early childhood education and care

of hours. We would hope that this distinction is *not* drawn, since it would be an artificial one that ignores the inherent reality that children are still learning during caregiving moments and still need compassionate caring interactions while they learn.

Similarly, if an Early Childhood Teacher is a requirement of the 3-year-old preschool model, then the hours of service per day would likely be capped by the realities of rostering. It is highly unlikely that any service – government or long day care – would be able to roster two Early Childhood Teachers on the same day. Therefore, it is more realistic to consider that one ‘shift’ for an educator – usually 7.5 or 8 hours - represents the maximum number of deliverable hours in that day.

What inputs should be considered in the development of a costing model (in government preschool and long day care)?

The financial modelling of a centre can be influenced by many factors. Rent is often one of the biggest expenditures for a centre and the amount can vary substantially depending on factors such as the location of the centre. For example, a centre located in the city will probably attract a higher rent based on cost per square meter, than a similar centre located in rural areas. Over the past few years, we have also seen an influx of childcare centres in SA being developed by ‘investors’ who seek a high return on their capital. This has impacted the market value of childcare centres and many operators are now paying extremely high commercial rent for these properties.

On the other hand, some community not-for-profit childcare centres have very low rent which is often subsidised by their local council. Similarly, early learning centres located on school premises are often cross subsidised by the whole of school budget.

Staffing costs account for about 60%-75% of expenditure depending on the type of service and the ages of children in care. Centres that provide care for children under three require a higher ratio of staffing and therefore their financial modelling for staffing will be higher than a facility such as a government Kindergarten where the age group of children does not require so many staff.

Kindergarten hours are also shorter in general than long-day care centres and as such staffing rosters do not require a change of shifts to cover the longer day. Larger centres must also employ additional Early Childhood teachers.

Private childcare providers also attract payroll tax which not-for-profit centres do not. This places an extremely high financial impost on private providers that is not equally applied in the not-for-profit sector.

These are the sort of variables that can impact significantly on the budgeting and finances of a centre. As the cost of the provision of service would be extremely difficult to identify between varying service types, it will be important not to disadvantage children who access care from a provider with higher overheads and higher fees by placing a ‘value on the child’ that does not cover the full extent of the cost to the family to access a centre of their choosing.



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Does the nature of the preschool program impact on facility costs?

Most long day care centres, including our own, already cater to children younger than four years of age and therefore have facilities, furnishings and resources in place for that age group. It is unlikely that the nature of the preschool program would cause significant additional costs for facilities.

How should key tipping points for profitability for long day care providers be represented in the model (eg. the proportion of under 2 enrolments to over 2 enrolments)?

Increasing the number of 3-year-olds in attendance, and the associated funding that they would bring from a Universal Access program, would certainly increase viability, sustainability and longevity for many long day care services. We don't personally focus closely on "profitability" as a success measure, although we recognise that some providers do chase that goal. Anecdotally, we have found that there are certain providers who will accept a decrease in quality for children in the pursuit of profit. For those, the 3-year-old funding could ensure that their occupancy and income is high enough to satisfy the profit motive *without* sacrificing the quality of the program. This would certainly be an important way for government funding to contribute to the well-being of the child.

In our case, we are not focused on profits but on delivering a high-quality service to families so that we can create a sustainable early learning environment. Our longest-running centre is 34 years old and we have 'second generation' children in attendance. What would change for us with this funding model is being able to offer our loyal families more flexibility, formalizing the value of the work we already do, and offering our professionals greater recognition of their efforts and importance.

More important than profitability is integrity. With more 3-year-olds in attendance and therefore a higher overall occupancy, long day care providers could make more choices about the numbers of younger children, and staffing. We are aware of many providers who feel that they have no choice but to operate with as many babies and toddlers as possible squeezed in with the minimum number of staff legally required. Providing the 'minimum' level of care does not seem enough for the most vulnerable and impressionable members of society. The funding injection and increased occupancy of the 3-year-old program would have the ripple effect of enabling operators to redistribute their resources to better serve those younger children as well by increasing staffing levels and/or capping numbers of babies and toddlers. This capping would not necessarily decrease supply or access for families, because there are many centres operating at such low levels of occupancy due to oversaturation in the market that the 'fuller' centres could cap their baby and toddler numbers due to the influx of 3-year-olds and the emptier centres could welcome more babies and toddlers to reach viability. These trickle effects could have a positive impact for providers, educators, children and families.

We hope you find our comments useful, and we are available for further discussion by contacting us at ceo@samontessori.com.au.