

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

THE HON JULIA GILLARD AC, Commissioner

THE ROYAL COMMISSION INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

**FRIDAY, 27 JANUARY 2023
AT 10.00 AM**

This transcript is intended as a guide only and as an aide memoire with respect to the audio-visual record, which constitutes the official record of the hearing on 25 January 2023

SARAH ATTAR, Counsel Assisting

<HEARINGS RESUMED AT 10.00AM

COUNSEL ASSISTING

We're starting this morning with a panel of three witnesses and I call Gordon Combes, Jane Lemon and Joanne Smith. I'm sorry, Catherine Cavouras.

<MR GORDON COMBES AFFIRMED
<MS JANE LEMON AFFIRMED
<MS CATHERINE CAVUOLO AFFIRMED

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I'd like the three of you to start by introducing yourselves. Tell us a little bit about your background in the education and care sector and a little bit about your current working environments.

MR COMBES

I'm Gordon Combes. I'm the Director of The Briars. Um, I've had bit of a history with the Department. I've had many leadership roles. I've had from early childhood leader to a childhood consultant to principal roles, to leadership in schools around, especially with inclusion and disability has been my, my sort of background today. So, and at the moment I'm the Director of the Briars, like I said before, which is a unique space.

It's the only one in Australia that is built for children with complex communication needs and different types of disabilities. We support, we have an advisory program there and we support mainstream schools and preschools and some special options sites around the State around, especially around communication behaviour sometimes with practice and bits and pieces as well.

COMMISSIONER

What, what number of children?

MR COMBES

Oh, we have around 40 children, and we do dual enrolments. So sometimes we have a lot of children who come with us for to be supported, get some intervention, and then they'll go and spend some days at mainstream as well. Sometimes we have some children who will transfer from mainstream. It sort of doesn't fit, you know, the right environment. So they'll come to us and they'll spend time with us. And then sometimes they transition back through to the mainstream. So a bit of a support and outreach program as well for the State.

COMMISSIONER

And for the sort of the lay person. Could you give some examples of what are complex communication issues for a child?

MR COMBES

So the children would use devices. We have most of the children who are there. We've got, say about 96% are nonverbal. So we use many models of AAC, different types of communication devices like Proloquo, on laptops or iPads and pods, depending on the needs of the child or signing as well. Plus we have vision and hearing too with children.

COMMISSIONER

And the aim of, when you say children might transition into mainstream, or they might come out of mainstream, what, what's the aim of the, your intervention?

MR COMBES

It's more about how to support the children around access to curriculum, supporting the, sometimes we are supporting educators from the other sites around how they can work some strategies as well. They might come to us and say, look, I need some support around this, with communication or this, with how do I do sensory work with the child as well, or the interception of sensory profile as well.

COMMISSIONER

And so would these children generally be on a journey into ordinary schooling?

MR COMBES

Most will go to special options. So we've got that package where we've got parents who may be grieving. This, this would be the first time we sort of supporting, we have a lot of new arrival families and we'll support them through that whole special options process with the psychologists and all the children who come to us have to go through a panel process. So it represents myself a psychologist and the special educator too. And we will sit down as a panel and adjudicate the application. So it's sort of a inclusive, exclusive, but inclusive, right. Sort of aside.

COMMISSIONER

Yeah. So, so you are really trying to assess their level of need and whether your service is the best to meet their needs.

MR COMBES

That's why we'll decide sometimes we'll have them full time with us, or we might do a dual, and sometimes parents might choose to do that as well. If they want to have mainstream, they

might want to have the support of the early intervention. And then from there, they'll choose what's best for the child.

COMMISSIONER

And can you just tell me a bit about your funding and staffing models to meet the needs of children?

MR COMBES

Our staffing is different to any other site in the State where we are two to six. Um, so it's highly much more high staff ratios for the children of the needs. And we get, we used to a few years ago, many years ago should say, was to be supported for our outreach program. And it sort of wasn't, it went through some changes a few years ago and the funding was stopped, but I've committed my, my, some funding from my own site to support it because the State actually needs the support. I have many, many Directors and many, many teachers call needing help with strategies.

As we know, it was one in five children who had trauma, maybe have a disability, but now it's actually become the gap has got smaller. So it's one to three now, and we're getting more and more stress from the educators and people who are not qualified who, and that's all we need to do some work with the unis around.

And I was saying to Sarah, when I spoke to her last, the eastern states have been doing this work, doing some collecting data and looking around teacher qualifications around that there's a need that teachers need to look, educators need to have some sort of special education as part of a package when they come out. Because again, like I said, the gaps getting smaller too, then we're seeing that by through the outreach program.

COMMISSIONER

So you're seeing more, a greater percentage of children who present with some form of special need, correct?

MR COMBES

Yeah. Okay. And like I said, the gaps getting smaller, plus we haven't had the COVID babies, so that we're going to have more anxiety coming through as well. So there's, there's a whole snowball effect, but people need to have the support and the training. That's what I'm finding through the outreach program. Right. And, and I guess from people's voices when they call to have the support.

COMMISSIONER

Okay. Um, and so the staff ratio, so it's two staff to six children.

MR COMBES

Six children, and that's a teacher and an ECW. Okay.

COMMISSIONER

And, and could you just give me a sense where obviously you know, one of the things we are thinking about is, you know, how we create universal access to three year old preschool. And one of the things we are thinking about behind that is, you know, universality vs. you know, more targeted support packages. Could you just give me a sense of how, what you do compares with the mainstream offering? So at the moment the mainstream offering would give people access at a four year old level to early education programs, you know, can you kind of line it up or it just doesn't line it up?

MR COMBES

It doesn't sort of line up in a way, but I guess they have a ratio of like one to 10 or one to 11, depending on the category. So then, you know, we're lucky because we're sort of two to, you know, one to three, so with the disability, but um, yeah, it doesn't sort of line up in some ways, right?

COMMISSIONER

Yeah. But you covering the cohort that you do of two to six, I think you said you've tried to embed early education offerings at every level in that. Absolutely.

MR COMBES

Yeah. And I guess from my time at the Briars, we've done a whole change around the difference between care and education and having a balance because you can go so far with care and you forget about the education sometimes, especially with people with disability. So we really need to focus more on education and have more with the level of care and education.

COMMISSIONER

But you wouldn't be able to divide that into, at a two probably two's too young, but at a three year old level it's X hours of education sounds to me like it's not like that. No, no.

MS LEMON

When you said two to six, you mean two educators to children, not the years?

MR COMBES

Two to six children. Sorry.

COMMISSIONER

Right. And so what age children?

MR COMBES

So we'll go up to depends on where their birthdays fall. We might have children up to five depend where they're going to school, so.

COMMISSIONER

Yeah okay misunderstood. And what, what would be, how young could a child come into your service?

MR COMBES

From three from five.

COMMISSIONER

So three to five ish. Five-ish six as well, but they have to be at school sign.

COMMISSIONER

Okay. Understood. Sorry about that. No, that's right. Um, thank you. So we're going to introduce everybody else and then get a conversation going.

MS LEMON

So I'm Jane Lemon. Um, my involvement in early childhood is very long. So 51 years now.

COMMISSIONER

Um, you started young.

MS LEMON

For most of that time, I've worked with the Education Department as a preschool teacher and Director for the last 20 years that I was in the Department, I was working on a program for families with children, aged birth to three a support playgroup program called Learning Together, which is not to be lost in this mix, I don't think.

And since I've left the Department, I have run a consulting business called Citron Early Childhood and do a wide range of work primarily in the country with preschools, both individually and across partnerships. So in whole groups with childcare with integrated services, we run a birth to three network across the southeast which has been going for five years now. So some of those people will be teachers and some are early childhood workers.

So quite a gamut. Plus I also do some pre-service teacher liaison work as well and writing for Learning Potentials website, Great Start website, various other things. So got my feet in it.

COMMISSIONER

Yes, yes, absolutely. Well, I I'd be interested at this stage of the discussion I'm going to uh, later on in the discussion ask each of you to speculate forward about the, what the Royal Commission should recommend in a series of areas, but I'm keen in this section of the discussion to kind of understand what's out there now.

So from your perspective, which obviously long period of involvement, and you've got a kind of wide remit now what are, what are some of the trends and factors that you're seeing that you think we should have on our mind? You know, we are trying to get, obviously we've had the perspective from a series of uh, wonderful experts on Wednesday, but this is a more of a sort of ground up look. So anything you've got to share there would be great.

MS LEMON

I think one of the strengths of the work that I get to do now particularly is the one on one work with the centre. So I'll take a role as a, a coach, a mentor, a thinking partner, and it might, it often will be dropping into virtually, because they're almost all in the country into planning sessions and so on working with them, building up philosophies and so on. What that's led me to be able to do is to work with a really broad range of centres and it's most obvious in the country, much more so than in cities. So I might have worked with a centre where there are four children, which brings its own complexities.

COMMISSIONER

Because that's the level of demand in that region because of small population – in that year. In that. So four children at a year level. Because small population, not that many kids

MS LEMON

But next year there might be 14. Oh, okay. Um, so for example, a centre I've been working with this week, last year had 11, this year have 23, and three more coming for mid-year intake. So this up and down makes life quite complex.

But I'll also work with very big integrated childcare centres. So centres that will have a big preschool program and a full-time childcare program alongside, but they might be the only offering in town. And also for them, they find that getting support for children with not just complex needs, but other often trauma informed needs that make children's engagement, quite difficult. Getting that support is really hard.

Getting, keeping recruiting and maintaining staff is really hard for centres. So if you are a centre with a small number of children and you're a 0.5 centre, and you're only operating two, maybe two days, one week, three days from next or two and a half days each week, that's a big step for somebody to move to the middle of the country to work in that kind of setting.

COMMISSIONER

For a half-time job.

MS LEMON

For a half-time job. Yeah. For a halftime job. There's usually plenty of work as a relief teacher as well, but it's still quite difficult to recruit people in. So those kinds of issues I think are really problematic at the moment. So I think staffing is a huge issue and then support.

COMMISSIONER

And so you obviously deal with centres in metropolitan Adelaide too.

MS LEMON

Not very often, no.

COMMISSIONER

Oh right. Okay. So you, you so what do you think could assist around the, the staffing issues? Is it a, is it a pipeline problem? Not enough people being trained, is it a retention problem? There's lots of trained people, but they don't want to work in the sector?

MS LEMON

There's a, oh, it's a very complex space to be in. Um, I think, well, for example, lately people have been asking for student teachers to come and do their placements in country settings. There's nowhere for them to stay and they have to go for six weeks at a time, for example. So small things like that, where people aren't even getting a taster of what it's like to be out in a country setting really don't help.

I think the up and downness of the sites that will go big, small, big, small that cycle that they have. I actually think there's a huge advantage in thinking about a three year old program there, because it will smooth out that kind of staffing bump if you like. And that could well help. Um, three year old programs, I think as well in country areas in terms of staffing will also help staff who might be working in a 0.5 centre to find work elsewhere as well. So they could put together a full-time commitment, which would be excellent. Yeah.

COMMISSIONER

And one of the big themes that we talked about on Wednesday was data and Gordon obviously for the children coming into your service, you've got a lot of information because you've got your assessment process. Uh, but for the centres you deal with, I mean, how much do the workers in the centre know about children before they present? I mean, what sort of data sources are they getting?

MS LEMON

Yeah, they, in my experience, a lot of people think that educators and sites in the country miss out, I actually think so most of my work, well it's pretty much all of Coorong Mallee Tatiara and all of the south-East. So the whole of the eastern side of South Australia and then pockets in on Eyre Peninsula that I've been working with consistently over time. What I find particularly in the south-Eastern Coorong Mallee Tatiara is that the leadership in those areas is such that they value high quality, professional learning, including myself coming in. And they have, they work very hard to make sure that centres aren't isolated and that they're connected.

And so using, for example, the AEDC data is commonplace in those communities. You also will have, particularly in small towns, people know those children, they know them really, really well. One project, the birth to three project that we've had up and running across Blue Lake Wrattobully and Southeast Coast and Vines. So that program has meant that we have hundreds and hundreds of children involved at the preschool or the childcare in a playgroup setting, in a supportive playgroup setting. So that means that a big advantage is that educators have the opportunity to get to learn, know, families much more intimately than they would if they just turned up at four. Right. So there there's a lot of possibility there.

COMMISSIONER

Right? So that's actually an advantage.

MS LEMON

Huge advantage and you're building you've got the opportunity to build what I call learning partnerships with families. So the early years learning framework, which I know you're familiar with really values that partnership building that in itself is aspirational, but working towards that is absolutely crucial for any project that, program that we put forward. But most particularly for the younger, the child, the more important it is to be engaged with the family and my opinion.

COMMISSIONER

Yeah. So that sense of uh, community and place. We talked on Wednesday, the expression was used the glue between services and with community that that discrete place.

MS LEMON

Very often even in a place, and I will name the centre, so Bordertown, which has a one big centre, which is a preschool and childcare, they are - because they've got the abattoir there, so everything's very complex. But they've got the abattoir there, which means they've got a lot of migrant workers, new arrivals and so on.

And they are consistently finding children, turning up to preschool that nobody knew was there. So there is this downside, but as soon as they can get them into childcare, preschool, or a supported playgroup, those families are seen, right. And when they're seen they're much better off. So you often find the husband or the partner, the male will be working, the female, the mother will be isolated at home because she doesn't have language, doesn't have English and

hasn't made connection. As soon as you get that happening, you're you are much further down the track. So that, that particular site has just carved out time, which is really hard – there's no other playgroup in that town – to run a playgroup specifically for those families, to build that early connection into community and also into children's learning.

So, you know, reading every day, singing every day, talking every day, playing every day, those really important foundational experiences for children to have are much richer when they're coming through families as well. The home learning environment enhances that.

COMMISSIONER

And is it true to say under the current funding model they're doing that because they're committed to it rather than that they're rather than being specifically funded for it?

MS LEMON

Hmm-mmm. And I think the other part is where, and this is from my perspective as a provider of professional learning and mentoring, when a site becomes really hooked into working with families, thinking about their, their philosophy, really carefully looking at the data that they are developing and using internally and externally, when they become hooked into that, they really can see the benefit and the value. And so therefore they move heaven and earth to make things happen.

And I think Catherine's going to talk about that as well. You stop buying things and you start putting energy into building relationships within the community because it's better for children.

COMMISSIONER

Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. Well, Catherine, over to you please.

MS CAVOURAS

Na maani na naari Catherine Cavouras.

Hi, my name's Catherine Cavouras. I'm not a Kurna woman, I respectfully use Kurna language to start the day. Just acknowledge that I pay my respects to the Kurna nation in which we meet today.

Julia I'm a teacher, but I've also been and a part of that is teacher for first and foremost, I recognise expertise in the room too, and my colleagues next to me, it's a bit special and I appreciate the time that you've taken to connect in with us.

I also spent my early years learning on Adnamuthna country in Port Augusta. I'm a Badu Suki woman from the Torres Strait and have lived, learned and worked on Kurna country most of my life. And it was in Port Augusta that sort of sealed the deal about me moving into early childhood. There was a learning experience that Miss Hart-Nixon set for us, and it was about drawing something that you wanted to be when you grew up. So of course I drew an Abba

inspired woman with hair and red shoes and she said, 'Wow, you're going to be a wonderful actor!'. I said, 'Oh, it's actually me as a kindy teacher'.

So anyway, fast forward 40 years and I've been working, firstly as an educator, moving into teaching and directing in the early years learning space in southern Adelaide, in sites that I guess have provoked responsibility that are generally Aboriginal Torres Strait Island focus sites, so my respects to Auntie Margie Goodwin, who was a big mentor of mine early in my career, an Aboriginal focus standalone kindy at Christie Downs. And the last 10 years I have been Director of a Department for Education site called Taikurrendi Children and Family Centre. So the children and family centre model where we have under this umbrella of services, I'm the leader of a preschool and occasional care program, but also a family support team that provide programs to connect and engage community from prenatal to elderly, our elders. So that, that breadth of community engagement is a big focus in our site, particularly around our Aboriginal families.

We are a universal site we're for everybody. So with that, we also have an allied health centre. We have our educator team, our allied health team. So lucky enough to have a speech pathologist and OT as part of our broader team. And then a community development worker and a family practitioner, which is they're our DHS team (Department for Human Service team) that are social work trained and community development work worker that has I guess the requirements of what that, what that job entails in terms of engagement with community. And have been working in a space that have always had a three year old program from a long time.

And I know that you would be aware that there's Aboriginal focus sites. We've had the State government has made a really strong commitment for a very long time. And I must say, it's my daughter's 30th birthday today. And she was one of the recipients of the early entry program. So she's a doctor at the moment at Flinders. But so it is a resource that I, as a parent has used to have that access. And for me it was it was access, it was my first start, which is a lot for lots of Aboriginal families. It's their first connection into, I guess, a more formalised part of education. And I still say education and care, particularly for those, those the three year old cohort because uh, and, and it was a big step in for, I guess me as a person, but what I see in our community as moving into a space where you can still be connected but also begin, I guess, the connection with educators and, and I guess the nuances of what we are bound you know, under the requirements of service provision, you know, all the good gear around assessment and learning and curriculum and all that sort of stuff.

So we have 60 children in our site in our preschool space. So they are from three to five and sometimes we have extended kindy a lot for our guardianship children that have some struggles. And it's, so the, the cohort's quite wide in terms of age. Which makes it extremely wide developmentally. Yes. Um, and I guess tuning into how that comes about, there's lots of things that play in terms of the children's centre that support, I guess, transition for families into our space. So we have the playgroup, we have the targeted programs. We have strong connections with the Christie's Beach, high school, young parents groups. So, you know, when you talk about, do you know, our families are coming, you know I, I being, being in the space for 10 years at, at, at Taikurrendi at Christie's Beach you know, we get ready for babies four years before they're here.

And it's such a joy when that sort of cycle of connection contributes and I know local standalone kinds, kindies kinds connected to schools. Um, our CDCs I guess equally have that opportunity. I just am a strong advocate for that children and family centre model where particularly for Aboriginal families experiencing risk and vulnerabilities have access to high quality care, but also the, the services that can support uh, their needs at certain times. Um, and yeah, I guess I could just keep talking anything specific you wanted to.

COMMISSIONER

Uh, just talking about the 60 children that you've got in the, the three to five and maybe a little bit more uh, preschool age range. Can you just talk us through you know, that is a wide span, but how is it how's it sort of physically run? I mean, are you grouping that across that age range mm-hmm and getting them to do comparable activities or perhaps breaking them out more on developmental levels rather than age levels? I mean, you know, we're obviously thinking in a policy sense four year old and three year old. But it sounds to me like you are running a very integrated model, so the sort of the hours, the staffing of that would be good to understand.

MS CAVOURAS

Yeah. And so I, I guess uh, for us it's very much about I guess that family model where children of all ages in a family don't get you much into different spaces. So it is fully integrated from our occasional care. We have children starting occasional care just before they're one and occasional care's a beautiful resource that is heavily utilised by our community because it's low cost in, in a space that's really warm and, and connected. So it's three hours of care integrated in the whole preschool program. Um, so we've got, and our three year olds, I think we've got about we have rolling enrolments with three year olds. So with the Aboriginal families I mean, I think it guidelines say the year before they, their eligible year, but we start children perhaps, you know, just after their third birthday. So we're, we are starting at about five or six, three year olds at this term. Um, but by the end of the year we'll end with the double intake, because they are eligible enrolments, we'll have probably up to about 20 what that looks like individual generally uh, I guess a bit of history around that resource too, without, because we are a site that has a large cohort of early entry children the Aboriginal Torres Strait, children in care or children with specific additional rights that are supported. They are part of the cohort, but we do get an extra resource.

We get a 0.8 teacher if you're a full-time site like us, so that's four days a week and the model that came around was it's aligned to a strategy called the Aboriginal family literacy strategy, and the lead educator that has that role has uh, some time, extra time off the floor. So three days on the floor, one day off the floor to support connection with families. I guess pedagogical documentation stuff that is different for three year olds. We don't ... there may be small group work, but that's mainly about relationships. It's not about may be explicit teaching in it, but generally my educators in the space and I have three teachers, two ECW is probably a support worker that are, broker and differentiate in the earlier years way accommodating the needs of every child. So we have three year olds that we may have to wrangle a little bit. Yeah. But we've got three year olds that come with a depth of knowledge and understanding, understand the rhythm of the day they've been in childcare a lot too or have got older siblings

that have paved the way for, you know, being the instrumental success in how they can approach learning in I guess, a formalised setting but certainly it is very integrated.

And while we have a lead, I guess, three year old teacher every educator is responsible for every child and accommodating their needs. So we'll have, we'll have opportunity to connect in and share understandings about every child. And we do make time in our site to ensure that we do get together, we have that reflective practice. And then that's a, I guess that's another critical thing around uh, responding to being responsive. And I guess also the environment has to reflect the, I guess, the needs, uh the developmental levels, but also it's, it's actually usually the educator that brokers that really well. Um, so we don't have a table for three year olds. We don't have a room for three year olds. We all eat together.

You know, they recognise, I guess, and get a very strong, grounded understanding around, I guess, our rhythm of the day. And the things that we, we hold high you know, like mindfulness and, you know, connection and relationships and friendship and things like that. So yeah, I think what you'd see in our space is a whole lot of kids doing lots of different things in different peer groups, different age groups, different ability groups yeah, quite but that's comes about because we have a team that can support and make that happen.

COMMISSIONER

And on Wednesday looking at the statistics the sort of evidence shows there can be very big gaps between the vision of universal access and actual uptake. So can I ask you to you know, talk to us about the things that might be challenging, holding families back from accessing a service like yours? You know, what is it that gets people there and what is it that prevents them getting there?

MS CAVOURAS

I guess one of the key things is being as an education leader, pedagogical leader of the site, is also being part of the community. And that's not just because you know, it is a community that I love and am a part of because of sharing of culture, but I think leadership and courage of connections in community are really important. It's equally important to, and I do have the time because of the way that we are funded, to connect in with our, I guess, key organisations like CAFHS and our NGOs Anglicare and Communities for Children and our Aboriginal focus orgs like Nunkuwarrin Yunti and, and Tauondi College having that community connection because often it is community that, and, and colleagues that refer into our space.

We also are able to have those targeted programs like for young mums experiencing DV and find a safe place to be for themselves. And then generally, you know children come. So its those hard to reach families Commissioner Gillard, that I guess we are always thinking about as well, those are other ones that we're able to with, you know, I guess the range of disciplines that we have in our site and the way that we like to go about our work, definitely fosters reaching those harder to engage families.

But generally, we don't have a bus Commissioner Gillard, but we do are on a transport corridor and families get to us because of the engagement and the relationships. And I guess that's like

every early childhood leader you know, the aspirant understanding around relationships, critical how those cascading relationships we, I want, the government holds me how I want to hold my families and I hold myself. Yeah, that was, that's a lovely Jane Lemon moment there that we, hold people how we want to get held as well.

And that high expectation, what we've found for three olds that we might want, you might want to explore it a little bit more is that, and there's probably some really strong data around attendance and engagement, but for our three year olds and our families that really warm entry flexible, not every three year old starts two days a week from the go get go in the same group, it has to be a really flexible arrangement. That's what I've found works best. It sets them up to so that having children over two years has without a doubt, particularly for our Aboriginal children, our children in care, connected them in relationally to service provision, to connections with educators and connections with their peers, which cannot be underestimated as a life skill that we want to sort of provoke in our education system of friendships and relationships are at the core of our learning.

MS LEMON

... and belonging

MS CAVOURAS

and belonging. So uh, yeah, so the engagement with families over two years is, is definitely uh, an absolute wonderful element outcome of, of the children coming, but it's also learners being in that space for those two years certainly adds to the optimising outcomes.

COMMISSIONER

Yeah. And what sort of hours is your service open?

CCAB

So we're school based. So we are as a children's centre, open 50, out of 52 weeks. So my allied health team and my family support team are, are there, you know, but our education, so we're notionally kindy starts at 8.45 and finishes at three. We have, and it's been really important that we have strong connections to our local childcare centres and have actually done some crossover learning with them too, because what we know is some of our families, a lot of our families re-emerging into the workforce.

we want to have high quality care in our whole sector. We've got very good connections with at Christie's with our OSHC provider who is a private privately run OSHC in a public school. So Tracy and the team there, and I mean, are critical to making it work, particularly for our families that are emerging back into the workforce, or it's valuing the access of what public preschool can provide alongside childcare. So it's actually in, in our interest to ensure that we've got that sort of connection to, for children continuity, that's what it is, services not competing.

MR COMBES

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Continuity of learning.

COMMISSIONER

And, and, and just for those who might be as familiar, do you want to just briefly describe what OSHC is, what that stands for and what it is? I know we all wander around saying it ...

MS CAVOURAS

OSHC is out of school out care. So and I think for a, for our sector, especially we, we know that under the umbrella regulations, they are sort of need to provide a service that is high quality care, but it is a different service that provides care for children before school and after school. So that families have that flexibility in the workforce or just their general day to day, but have an option for longer care. And so that yeah, having that relationship is probably, is really critical in our sense, because it supports families to make choices and to also engage in our site.

COMMISSIONER

Thank you. No, that's been really interesting. And so, I mean, you know, looking across your experiences, so obviously your [Indicating Gordon Combes] experience is very deep with children with a particular form of disability. Your [Indicating Catherine Cavouras] experience is very deep with Aboriginal families, but very deep, both personally, as a parent, and now, now in the sector with three year old preschool, and so that's obviously very important to us. And you've [Indicating Catherine Cavouras] got this look right across the sector, but particularly at regional.

I'd be just interested in your analysis through your various lenses, about, as the system is now, you know, what is missing that would make a difference to the performance of the system as it is now? Uh, because we we've particularly focused obviously on three year old preschool, but we are looking at four year old preschool too. We're looking at the first thousand days of life to get a sense of what could uplift across the board. So I'd be really interested in what you think as you look at the system now is, is missing. If we have that conversation and then we'll move to a break at some point, and then come back and focus, you know, very specifically on what you would think the Royal Commission should recommend looking forward. But give me a sense of that.

MR COMBES

Um, I'd love to start with the representation of early years in the actual Department. I think we really need to focus on that. And with, especially with Support Services too. We have some wonderful primary trained, secondary trained, special educators. And but we don't have the early childhood people understand the curriculum, understand how our curriculum works, how children access the curriculum. So we really need to focus on that's a big gap I find.

COMMISSIONER

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And so, sorry, I just want to be clear, so it's that early childhood educators haven't had exposure or, or formal learning around children with disabilities.

MR COMBES

Yeah. Yeah.

COMMISSIONER

And so that's not part of their academic course, if I can put it that way.

MR COMBES

And they come with other expertise around disability, for example, but we don't have people, a lot of people in the system who have got the early years experience of understanding curriculum and, and how our world works around learning environments and how we set up.

COMMISSIONER

So it's not, not that they don't understand the general curriculum. They don't understand your specialist curriculum.

MR COMBES

Yeah. They don't understand actually in early years, a whole from mainstream to, to specialists.

COMMISSIONER

Okay. They don't understand the early years curriculum.

MR COMBES

Curriculum. Yeah. As much they, I mean, they come in with their headset, if that makes sense from a primary perspective and that, which is wonderful, but there's not enough people representing early years within the actual Department too. I, I believe.

COMMISSIONER

Okay. So that's an, an education gap. And you think in terms of the uh, sort of policy makers, public servants in the area that they tend to be more expert in school education rather than early years education.

MR COMBES

Yeah. I think it's just a gap there that.

MS LEMON

I think actually following on from that is if we're thinking about the Department and most of my work is within Department sites, that early childhood, somebody once said to me that when we are talking in early childhood it's as if we are talking Mandarin and the schooling sector is speaking French. All right. And so often it's hard. That shared base, it's not like speaking Italian and Spanish. So a lot of what we in early childhood will be valuing and talking about is misunderstood. So you've talked about special education.

I think leadership is a huge issue. So again, if I think about levels of leadership, we need partnership leaders. So regional leaders who understand the value, not just of that preschool year or preschool two years, but also that first thousand days, because that is increasingly obvious that that's so crucial. Um, and also the transitions between those. So we need that higher level leadership.

And then very often in country areas, the preschools are, so you heard Catherine talk about standalone preschools. You've talked about mainstream preschools, there's sort of two structures of preschool it's in South Australia. One is the old standalone preschool and the other one is what was a, so the history of go back to history was that preschools in South Australia primarily started with the Kindergarten Union, which then became Children's Services Office that then was amalgamated with the Education Department. And the fit has never been a hundred percent, but it's getting better.

But before the Children's Service Office merged with the Education Department, the Education Department set up a range of preschools too, which were called CPCs – child, parent centres - didn't have much to do with parents, but are now called school based preschools. And the leader of those sites is the principal. And there are a lot of them in the country because and they're often very small.

So these ones that I've been talking about and what it means is that the educational leader in that site is often a middle to senior primary school background person, so not preschool and below. And I worked with one regional town doing a project across the whole town where we were trying to develop a resource around learning dispositions for children four to eight. And we really struggled and it took us a long time to work out it was because there wasn't a single principal in that school that any, in any school in that town that understood early childhood. So that makes issues for children going into school. And it makes issues if those principals are leading the teachers in there.

So that's a next layer of leadership that is really important because you can't because of the French - Mandarin thing you can't, and you'd be aware of this, the early learning framework, isn't a bunch of knowledge that has to be taught. No, it's a series of outcomes that are foundational. Yeah. As well as some things that we learn, and so the philosophy and the practice are very, very different. And people – the danger is that push down and already in public discourse, there's danger about people see preschool as being a push down to from school, or 'why aren't you teaching them to read and write?' Well, we are, we're just doing it a different way. And the fear is that that push down will continue into three year olds and beyond.

So I think a lot of the things, the possibilities come the other way, you know, so thinking about those first thousand years, thinking about making sure what you've heard from both Gordon and Catherine, particularly from Catherine, is about being connected, being part of community, recognising that the children are born and they're living and they're living with families and community, and then they come to us for a little while and then they keep going. But they're always part of that bigger, broader context. And so if we are not connected in all those directions, then I think that preschool programs fall over, right. I think it's crucial, but funding and **impramateur**, if you like to do that, work with families and to do it early.

So when we went to universal access of 15 hours of preschool and I was still in the Department then and running a playgroup program effectively playgroups plummeted, because there wasn't room.

If we go to a three year old program in those same settings, playgroups may well plummet again, because there isn't room.

COMMISSIONER

Can you just tease that out a bit about why playgroups plummeted?

MS LEMON

Because playgroups are ... traditionally preschools operated four or four and a half days a week with children and half a day without. That's the old fashioned model. And in that half a day without very often you'd have a playgroup then. It'd be a parent run playgroup.

COMMISSIONER

So you'd have your standalone, when you say old fashioned model, you're referring to?

MS LEMON

No, I'm thinking about when children had 11 and a half, three quarters, hours of preschool a week right before the 15 hours came in.

MR COMBES

Yes

COMMISSIONER

And oh I see.

MS LEMON

And so very often they would come four, half days they'd come in morning kindy or they'd come in afternoon kindy. 15 hours changed all of that. And it did mean that Fridays, which

were the traditional non teaching time needed to needed to be used to give children that extra time in preschool. And so the easy program to ditch was playgroup.

COMMISSIONER

Okay.

MS LEMON

Because very few people integrate a playgroup into a preschool session because there's a bunch of other ... a playgroup has parents. There has adults there and it ...

MS CAVOURAS

And the spaces weren't too, what that requires to ...

MR COMBES

And I think the solution around all of this is, we need to look at going back to 12 hours to you know, I know, when you look

COMMISSIONER

At no, no we're trying to get it all. So keep going.

MR COMBES

That's good. The mathematician, I mean, look at the mathematics of it. If we go back to that then, because the capacity, I mean a lot of the science around the city and, and beyond they cannot fit in even all the four year olds yes. At the 15 hours that just does not work.

So if we actually look at going back to 12 hours, I am just putting out we can actually fit in all the other children too, plus keep the playgroups.

COMMISSIONER

Right.

MR COMBES

And those rich dialogues with our staff teams as well, you know, we can go, you know.

MS LEMON

The danger is that what we're trying to do is retrofit to the system that isn't actually potentially always working as it stands.

So for example and you, both of, you [gestures to Gordon Combes and Catherine Cavouras] will know more about this than me, but the new mid-year intake is very, it's causing all kinds of issues in big centres and let alone, because there's going to be these bulges of children that you can't fit in because of ratios.

MR COMBES

Yes.

MS CAVOURAS

So the current model that exists with the three year olds or the Aboriginal three year olds or the children in care, or it is that it's 12 hours of kind. So it's two. Well we, we, they have two days and four year old eligible children have two and a half days. So they do have a small, a smaller uh, component of access to care. So that's just what the current model is. Yeah. Which

MR COMBES

And I guess most sites do approximately six hours as well, don't they? Not all, but some do long, a long day, but just fitting in the calculations would be much easier if that makes sense.

COMMISSIONER

So just, can you, so from your earlier discussions, I mean, you [indicating Catherine Cavouras] obviously tend to take in three year olds around the time they've turned three. So you've got a lot of flexibility and obviously, you know, children aren't uh, there's not a nice linear pattern over the year that, you know an equal number of children are born in each month. Life doesn't work like that. So there would be some peaks and troughs, but it's sort of smoothed.

MS CAVOURAS

Absolutely.

COMMISSIONER

And you've [indicating Gordon Gombes] got your assessment model, so presumably you do some smoothing around intake too, but for the universal models - So the mainstream model for want of a better term, I don't like that term, but I can't think of another one quickly enough, with the mid-year intake that you [indicates Jane Lemon]are referring to, can you just flesh out the statement you made about how?

MS LEMON

I can't, because I'm not living it.

MR COMBES

Mine's a bit ... I take intake all the time,

COMMISSIONER

And you tend to take intake all the time...?

MS CAVOURAS

Absolutely. So and because they're eligible enrolments and if we know they're coming then, and generally we do, but particularly with our children in care, when they may be taken into care that suddenly come into that system, we, we need to have spaces for them, for those, for those three year olds. So basically on my list already, we've been capped at 60, 60 because of our previous enrolments and then we're and about, oh, and I've got provision for two, three year olds coming in term three term two. So it's a little bit complicated. So I hold spot. So, cause I know they're coming.

But I sensibly, I can't go over the cap unless I get an adjustment. Um, but the midyear intake, so I've already got so 60 I've already got 20 on the, on the list. Um, so we're going to have, and we can go up to 120 in our space, which is no 111. I can have 111 over the week. Um, it's just a blip, but what you sleep, but I think, and so I don't know if I can have three year olds in that space. I can't accept three old enrolments. I'll have to go somewhere else. It's just a blip here. I don't now if that, that explained it very well.

COMMISSIONER

So I mean, what, what we are effectively, so, I think you're pointing to in the system currently. the ratios and I would think the physical infrastructure drives physical infrastructure and funding drives a set capacity and then manoeuvring within that set capacity to meet the needs of families. And the intake models can be very complicated and can mean families get left out, whereas their child really ought to be accessing at that point.

MS LEMON

And often they're the most vulnerable children that are left out because they're the ones that you don't already know.

COMMISSIONER

Right.

MS LEMON

They haven't pre-enrolled, they, you know, it might be a first child in a family, it might be child children going into care. It might be people who, you know, someone suddenly said your child really does need to be at preschool. Um, so often they're the most vulnerable families and there isn't the flexibility at the moment to do that.

COMMISSIONER

And they didn't have the ... so the people who navigate the system and know how to navigate the system and get their kids on lists early, tend to absorb the space, which is understandable, but does have this effect that people who don't know how to navigate the system first child, or otherwise marginalised from information sources aren't getting in there. Right.

MS LEMON

That's another really good rationale behind, and I know it's outside the remit of this, but it's inside the first thousand days for really early engagement with families and in a very strength based in warm, connecting unthreatening kind of way through playgroups, parenting programs, things like that, in trusted spaces, as a norm is a really powerful way for setting up family engagement in children's learning, not just through attending, but beyond that. So that early, early engagement is really, really important, particularly for vulnerable families.

MR COMBES

And how do we get them to access?

MS LEMON

And, and one way is to do that through interdisciplinary work. Okay. So really connecting. So when the children centre program and, and children family centre program started and it's not quite where **aspirationally** could have been and was perhaps for a little while, having allied health there so that you can really easily access a worker. Or you've come in for playgroup, and what do you know, there's a speechie sitting right next to you. You don't have to actually march across the road and make an appointment and forget to go, and something gets in the way.

So it's almost making sure that we are bringing services to families really early in their parenting journey in very, with multiple entry points that will not guarantee, but give a better likelihood of our more vulnerable children being able to be connected into the services and for families to be valuing preschool, school and beyond.

MR COMBES

Yeah. And there's quite a few families who can't access, you know, and new arrivals who can't access NDIS. We have even New Zealand, which I was quite surprised about, New Zealand families can't access NDIS you know, and, and that's why we decided to develop our three year old program, because we've got a lot of parents looking for intervention and they can't access, they can't afford a speechie, they can't afford an OT, physio. So that's what we ended up talking to the Department and saying, look, we'd like to trial a three year old program so we can help support our families.

COMMISSIONER

I'm interested in this uh, French Mandarin analogy and - French Mandarin was your terminology (indicating Jane Lemon) - but you raised it too (indicating Gordon Combes). I mean what, what can be done to, to try and, you know, arbitrage that if to build a bridge or to build a common lexicon that would enable it to be more seamless.

MR COMBES

It's like continuity of learning, you know, we had to have that rich understanding of what does that mean, stock inclusion. We need to really pull that apart. That's the thing I, you know, I'm always going on around with the Department and, and, you know, we need to, it's not tokenistic. It's really about, you know, I find sorry, I'm just going a bit of tangent, but for children with additional needs, like we've had researchers come and present the last 20 years and it's probably more than that. And they're saying, why, why do we put the less educated with these high vulnerable kids in South Australia? Why do we keep doing this? We haven't learnt, we just keep sometimes going on.

COMMISSIONER

You mean less, less skilled workers?

MR COMBES

Yes. Less skilled workers. The higher end, you know, especially for like country, why are we getting the high end? Why aren't we getting high end? The better. Everyone deserves best.

MS LEMON

You know, I think recognising early childhood as an absolute specialism, but recognising that it is a real specialist area and training and respecting people in that way. So we are talking about the Department a lot. But when we look at teachers within the childcare setting, when we look at childcare workers across the board, why is there such an issue with people having, you know, staying? Why is there such a big issue around attraction and retention and it's around not being respected? There was an article this morning on The Conversation I think about the number of teachers across the board that are looking at leaving, but they still have a strong sense of belonging to the profession.

And I think people still think that when you work with young children, 'oh, it's really nice. Just play with them all day' where it's so much more, we understand so much more, this is why the first thousand days are so crucial. And if we are not getting the first thousand days, right then that three and four year old preschool program becomes really crucial. And it can't just be, you know, someone who has a little bit of knowledge and not enough support.

And even for people that are well trained, you know, from my experience, I bring more current research. I help them to reflect that the value of reflective work is really, really important, but understanding that it is a specialist, it's not a watered down school program, it's a specialist area. And recognising, that's the other thing, that divide between preschool and early years of school, you know, I would almost argue that not only looking at three year old preschool, but

what happens to children in the early years of school becomes a really valid point

COMMISSIONER

As the nature of the interaction with the child is changing over time?

MS LEMON

And how children learn,

COMMISSIONER

How children learn is ...

MS LEMON

... changing over time. And we also know that we're looking at three year olds or we're looking at four year olds. And you indicated that when you said you've got three to five year olds, it's not just a chronological difference. It's a developmental difference as well. It's hugely like a just three year old is very different than a three and a half year old is very different than a four year old, but all the just three year olds will be very different from each other, too. It comes closer together the older they get and the more they're **school-ified** or socialised or whatever, but they're very broadly different.

And Catherine talked about the Aboriginal family literacy strategy, which is one of the things that I used to run. And when we did work with those specialist teachers who weren't specialist teachers to start with, we had to train them into that. But the, the one key quote that came back was someone saying three year olds, aren't four year olds. And it's so true. It's that they're on this path. Their, you know, their trajectory, their progressions will be really different, but also every three year old isn't the same. No, no. And every four year old, isn't the same.

COMMISSIONER

I'm just doing a time check for us, but let me just ask you one more question, then we'll take a bit of a break. I just, on this question of staff skills, staff training, staff retention can you just give me a sense of your personal experience with that at your services?

MR COMBES

I'm very lucky. Cause a lot of my staff have got Masters in Special Education and have been lecturers for different unis as well. So and we try and if train up as well, I've got people who are very passionate or have some experience, so we will train up them around disability or whatever their needs are. But a lot of our staff need to have a lot of qualifications around transfer positioning plans or eating, drinking care plans. It's quite a complex background.

But yeah, so I'm very lucky in a way, but it's trying to keep maintain and, and build the future. And that's why I think we really need to have a conversation with the universities and we, and

we really need early childhood to really focus on some component of special ed, especially around the trauma and that, and like I saying that, that gap getting smaller, because like I said before, through the outreach program, we do the outreach service, we do, there's a lot of I worry about people's wellbeing because people are struggling out there with, with how to do these strategies with children.

And so I think we really need to, I mean, I'd love if my site could get, be financed again, but I'm doing it for free because I know the State needs it. And again, we don't not expect – there's not enough early years people trained or understanding of supporting kids with additional needs.

COMMISSIONER

So, so it sounds like you are you are getting a very highly motivated sense of vocation about the special nature of the work and that presumably keeps people in it for longer. You're not getting as much churn.

MR COMBES

Yeah.

COMMISSIONER

You're not currently funded for the outreach you're doing, but you're continuing to do it.

MR COMBES

This is about capacity building within the mainstream because people are crying out for for help.

COMMISSIONER

And, and so you, you do that despite not being funded for it. And can you give me just a sense in your core funding what, what percentage is State, what percentage is federal, what might come from other sources? Or if you don't have it now we can get it later. It's not a problem.

MR COMBES

No, it's probably more complex. Yeah. I'm quite complex with mine. That's probably the better.

COMMISSIONER

Yeah. Okay. We'll get it, no problems. And can you (indicating Catherine Cavouras) just get, talk to me on the staff and the funding views?

MS CAVOURAS

Yeah. Okay. I think particularly in our space it's really important that there's a collaborative approach across all our, under the umbrella of our services. So our educator team work really closely with our allied health team and our family support team. So we so it's about capacity building. The team does that because so our speechie shares learning and understanding with our team and our OT. And we set this up, you know, really purposefully our family prac you know, shares, you know, understandings around therapeutic practice or programs. Not that not for us to be practitioners in that space, but to broaden our understanding around whole child, whole families and needs.

So, you know, what we do know about all our children is, you know, the understanding sensory processing from an OT perspective, not just, you know, manipulatives and sensory tools, it's deeper than that. Um, it's also our speechies oral language communication for every child and what that looks like, but what are the, you know, the really sort of what's the expert understanding around you know, the stages of language acquisition and things like that, stuff that you get from speechies, stuff that you get have corridor conversations, you have those intimate PDs you know, where um, an educator's knowledge and this is ECWs, you know, admin person to our finance officer, a big part of that consistent language. Um, and our community development worker talking about the data, the LAN data, the AEDC data that drives you know, our responsiveness to our programs.

Because at the end of the day as educators, we have such a trusted responsibility. Don't we, I don't know, Gordon, you know, families talk to us and rely on us to provide support. And sometimes we're the first place they've actually, you know, given us permission to look up to the child. So if, if they're talking just about the, the child learning and, you know, there's still very much a sense from our families around the requirements of, you know, getting to school and all that sort of thing, but you know, about their wellbeing, about regulation, stuff that they can do at home sharing all the good stuff that helps children become ready to learn. Got to have the trauma lens to support all our families, but we also need to be a system that can support the dispositions for learning, because at the end of the day, they've got to navigate this system, you know, for a very long time and hopefully alongside their families.

And so our staff are really quite, and, and I guess you create a culture of connection. And so we practice mindfulness as a staff, just as much as we practice mindfulness with children, if you don't have a, a regulated leader, you won't have a regulated staff team. And that's and I, I think our CE has, has spoken about you know, the wellbeing and looking after the stuff that helps sustain us in the space, because it can get tricky and complicated, but it can't be underestimated the intent and purpose around, you know, providing educators and leaders with you know opportunity to learn in that space as well.

So not just the pedagogy in practice, we spent a lot of time learning about that sort of stuff in very expensive forums, but at the end of the day, we're sort of breaking it down into the sort of the human element of what teaching and learning and that's around relationships. Sounds a bit airy fairy, but at the end of the day, when you can pull it all together and you've got experts that hang around, continuity of educators is critical. Critical to sites, but critical to the continuity for families having same conversations or threads of same conversations honours, you know families, us providing a service for families.

Our breakdown we're totally State funded, we rely on a tiny amount of parent contributions. And in that, as a leader navigating the nuances, the priorities is something I didn't learn at uni, but certainly have had to grasp really, really well. Similarly as a leader being open to you know, the expert expertise in occupational therapy and speech pathology and, and child psychology and things like that, not being the expert, but having that broader understanding, looking outside the Department for things – Berry Street is a big factor in our and being trauma informed. Um, yeah, I think it's just that seeking that continuity of seeking that, those different bits of understanding that pull together because that's you know, we're not just a learning space.

MR COMBES

And the children's centres funding is totally different to a standalone's funding. Our stand alone's get hardly anything, they're sometimes scraping the barrel.

MS LEMON

Well, professional learning allowance is what, \$40?

MR COMBES

Yeah. It's hundred dollars for training, you know, it's yeah.

COMMISSIONER

Understood.

MS LEMON

I think the Department has less issues around retention. I think it's a far bigger issue in the childcare sector. And you know, that's a gigantic structural concern. I think attraction becomes an issue in the country. And so you will find very young people in leadership roles. And as long as they've got their own leaders who are supporting them, or they've got another way to tap into somebody else to support them in that role, then they're fine, but it's getting, getting them in there.

MR COMBES

Sometimes it's trying to still get their head around curriculum and they're trying to lead as well. Is that trying to manage leading the curriculum and managing, managing a science it's quite difficult when you're young and you're trying to isn't so that's a big

MS CAVOURAS

And when you're older!

MS LEMON

Definitely, but you know, mentoring and professional support and professional learning are absolutely crucial to bring everybody along.

COMMISSIONER

It's been a really interesting discussion. What I suggest is we it's 11.11 on my watch. So if we take a break.

<THE HEARING ADJOURNED AT 11.11 AM

<THE HEARING RESUMED AT 11.30AM

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Commissioner, before we move on with the panel conversation, there are two short visual representations of both the Briars centre and the centre run by Catherine that we would like to show.

And can I ask that the video is marked 'Video of the Briars Preschool' and will be made available on the website?

COMMISSIONER

Certainly. So marked thank you.

Short video played.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Mr. Combes, I believe you were involved in helping to transform that outdoor space. Is that correct? Since you started?

MR COMBES

Yes. Cause I've only been there three years, so I've done a lot of work around taking a, a, I guess a clinical place into a loving, warming learning environment. And we're doing a lot of work around the outdoor space. Because when I got there, because the building was built in 2000, it was specifically for children with disabilities, but when I'm in there with fresh eyes there was ramps going into steps and bits and pieces. So like for children chosen that they couldn't access certain areas.

So we're working with the architects at the moment and it's sort of changing them cause I've been doing a lot of sort of mainstream sites to say, look, our children may look physically older, but where they are mentally doesn't suit like role play. So they've got, had to really look at sensory input for a whole outdoor space. So there's water and it need to have that quick

reaction that want the cause and effect straight away. Cause you got to think like a young child an 18 month or old or six month old, what their sort of reactions to and what their sort of equipment they would like.

So we have to adapt the whole outdoor. So we're working on that at the moment, which is fabulous. So variety of being fabulous around supporting us through that. And, and I've got other sites who come to visit because sometimes they haven't got spaces for their children to be able to access a safe places with higher fences and bits and pieces. So it's wonderful to share that within the community too.

COMMISSIONER

So thank you. That's great. Thank you very much.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

We have a series of several photos that I think illustrate nicely the importance of connection to family, culture and community at Taikurrendi.

Photos shown.

MS CAVOURAS

It doesn't come with music.

MS CAVOURAS

So deadly three year olds. Yeah. And family. Kindy on country. And educator connection. And that's our team. Ah, big team, big team. It's fantastic.

MS LEMON

Can I point out that one of the teachers in that ... shall I name her?

MS CAVOURAS

Yep.

MS LEMON

Elizabeth with the blonde hair in the middle, there was a parent initially at our Learning Together program, which was nearby to there. So through the program, we connected her into her. We reconnected her to learning and she did her year 12 and then she did her teaching degree.

COMMISSIONER

Oh that's great.

MS LEMON

And now she's back in the community as a really important light. Isn't she? So

MS CAVOURAS

She's one of three, I've got three parents

MS LEMON

Yeah.

MS CAVOURAS

That have now got their qualifications.

MS LEMON

And that's that adds immeasurably because what you are, what you are able to do then is to have educators who know the community and who have lived experience of the community as well as that professional experience as well. That professional understanding really crucial. Yeah. For not having a push down white middle class approach.

MS CAVOURAS

Yeah. And I think that's, that's part of the quality in early childhood education, particularly around that community engagement and being present capacity building, I mean a big focus. We have a beautiful space, highly qualified and passionate educators, but we also connect into community. So kindly on country, walking down main road, being visible, talking to the neighbours, children being citizens in their own communities. And I think we also want to share that with their families, particularly for our families that have you know, limited access or, or confidence around accessing community space in place. So while we do have a beautiful learning environment, that's well resourced. Um, it's creating those opportunities for connection because those are the connections that are going to live and exist beyond, you know, their, their couple of years or one year with us at Taikurrendi.

So it is, it does take some really strong leadership and support connection with our, our broader colleagues to ensure that that stuff can happen. And I think sometimes that that insular notion of perhaps providing spaces can, can limit absolutely at the end of the day life outcomes for our families. It's particularly important for Aboriginal Torres Strait Island children, children that are experiencing care, vulnerabilities of housing and homes, and all that sort of gear. And equally our rural remote communities and our children with additional rights.

MS LEMON

Yeah. When I worked at Christie Downs, so a little bit up from there, many of the families and their families that you've subsequently had, they never went to the beach and it's, it's, you know, five minutes down the road, you can walk there. And so you get that dual option with good quality early childhood programs where you're giving children and families opportunities within their community. And then likewise, you want to be influenced by the community that's around you.

At which point I could tell my Lucindale story. So a community that I've been working with for quite a while Lucindale, which is quite a small isolated community. I have learnt more about fox hunting and animal skin stripping from that community that I ever needed to know before or need to know now. And it's because that centre works so strongly with their community and reflects who it is around them. So one day I was there and several children, they happen to have 15 boys and one girl at that time again, an integrated service because they have rural care. So they've worked hard to integrate little from six months up to five year olds within that setting for part of the week.

But these, these young lads were having a big debate about what you, how you fox hunt, what you do with it, what you do with the heads afterwards. And then when they went on an excursion subsequently to somebody's shearing shed to see the shearing, it was the Fox heads up, along on hung by a nose on a nail that made the difference, but you could palpably see the way the centre was reflecting the community and the community was feeding into the centre. So real strength in, in country areas.

COMMISSIONER

If we can come now to gathering from you based on your deep experience you know, a forward look. So we've been discussing them and you're obviously aware of the terms of reference of the Royal Commission. And I'd be interested in your reflections looking forward. I mean, we've spent a bit of time talking about what you do, which is fantastic, and also talking about the issues you see in the sector as it is now.

So I'd be keen to move the conversation to what are the issues you see as we try to build out from the current sector to achieve this vision of universal access for three year old preschool, but also to achieve a vision of looking at four year old preschool and what more can and should be done there and what difference we could make in the first thousand days.

So just any reflections you've got on that would be very useful. I'm happy to go in any order. Catherine, did you want?

MS CAVOURAS

I guess as a leader that sort of held the space notionally for a while, the value of uh, early entry into formal education and care space has, is from what I understand and our experience in our sector too. Really important it does come right now with reporting mechanisms and some, I guess, some rigour around what it means.

So that we have an early entry program, but it comes with, you know, One Plans and, you know, some rigour around that sort of thing. I wonder if we are getting lots of three year olds in how that will change that, that mandate around requiring One Plans and things like that for all children, I think is this something around that.

That three year old program, as it sits is around a certain sort of understanding and strategy family connection comes with a resource that ensures that a, a teacher that is highly tuned into the developmental needs, but also community capacity to communicate with families. Um, and I'm sort of losing a little bit track there, but basically also as a site what the capacity actually is for the physical environment to reflect perhaps all the elements of having that sort of range of children in the space.

MS LEMON

Sleep, changing, those kinds of things.

MS CAVOURAS

Educators' capacity in that space, what are the roles and responsibilities, and I guess that all gets worked out, but yeah, it will be interesting.

MR COMBES

You don't want it to affect the quality

MS CAVOURAS

Yeah, absolutely quality interactions and stuff.

MS LEMON

I think bottom line one size won't fit all. And I think being able to develop a range of possibilities for different communities will be really essential. So as I've said, small country preschools have a fair bit of capacity to do that. I'd certainly that's where I'd start probably.

Whereas in a large setting like the one I was describing before, even though it's in the country, there's no space at all, already for the children, let alone, there's not enough space already for the children, let alone adding another whole program in.

And the, the bigger issue I think is around quality staff. And the kind of quality leadership, quality staff and the ongoing learning and reflection requirements for staff because three year olds aren't four year olds. And if we're suddenly opening up to a bunch of three year olds in a setting with educators that have been used to four year olds and know them inside out and back to front, then it will ...

I mean, we already see it when we see three year olds, particularly you might only have one three year old in a four year old program. So you might have one Aboriginal child or one child

under guardianship. That's very complicated because very often educators will say 'just fit in' and miss that it matters that you need to work just a little bit differently with that child. The relationships are the same. The sense of belonging is the same. The connection should be the same, but the content might be a little bit different. You might give children a little more time. You might want to be focusing on other aspects.

So ongoing professional learning and support, I think will be a really essential part of this in a multi in a multidisciplinary ways should be for both preschool and four year old preschool and three year old preschool.

And then I would suggest that in some places it could be that preschool isn't the best option, but supported playgroups actually are.

COMMISSIONER

And can you just flesh that out little bit?

MS LEMON

What supported playgroup is?

COMMISSIONER

No. Why it would be the best option?

MS LEMON

Um, well, if you don't have very many, very many, three year olds, so I'm thinking demographically in some country towns that can happen it will a three/four program would support that smoothing out a little better, but if you had kind of a gap year, which in the south-east, they did trial some three year old programs, not preschool, but programs for three year olds. And they discovered that sometimes they weren't able to maintain it like that.

But if you opened it up to a birth to prior to preschool, so a birth to end of three supported playgroup where you've got an educator, intentionally planning and working with the children and the families most strongly the families, then you can keep that connection and that learning going for longer rather than going, oh, we've got a three year old program this year. We haven't got one next year. And that, that can be that volatility of demographics can be a real issue in, in some settings.

Likewise, I think sometimes in very big centres or actually conversely in very big centres, if you cannot physically fit three year olds in what might you do instead, and it might be an outreach supported playgroup in the school or somewhere else that might suit the needs of that community better.

And there's probably other options as well, but those that needs to be considered and having high quality educators, because these programs, it can't just work in Department preschools,

it's going to have to go into childcare settings and other settings potentially into schools, perhaps. Being able to attract and retain and pay high quality educators in those settings is really crucial as well.

COMMISSIONER

Thanks. Interesting.

MR COMBES

I think it's the access too. I just think about my families, a lot of them just need the respite. And I understand this, you know, many years ago we used to have taxi services for families, but I understand that, you know, certain reasons we had to lose that, but that lost for a lot of parents who can't access.

Because I've had families who've had to get three busses because I, my site encapsulates the whole state in some respects, I've had families come from Tintinara do one week with me and then back home. So it's sort of being a unique service for people to access. And if for some parents who may have their disability, they can't access or can't access NDIS or get support around travel, there might be some things we need to sort of unpack around, have some wonderings around that, just the access, if that makes sense.

COMMISSIONER

Obviously at this stage of the Commission's work, we've got, we are interested in any all options for building out for three year olds. So there's been no decisions taken about how that should best be done. Which is why when you elucidate various options, that's very useful.

As we are thinking about those options though, we're also very much from the material that came through Wednesday, being challenged to think about what's the difference between the standard universal provision and what can be built out for more targeted provisions.

So you might want to say something about that. So there's, you know, what children generally would get, but how we might layer in additional supports for children who through family circumstances, through disability, whatever we know are going to need additional support.

And then there's also the reflections on the first thousand days. What, from your point of view, you looking into that, and I know your experience might be with slightly older children and some within the first thousand days, but if there's any reflections you've got there. That would be of interest too.

MS LEMON

Birth to three, I understand lots and lots of children for various reasons will be going into care settings. I think again, high quality is, is the key. And what does that look like? That looks like people who are consistent for children. It looks like connecting with families. It looks like uh, building strong relationships, being able to support children in their own language and so on

that there are other children that already go into care, but there are also a whole range of children that don't access anything. And those families are the ones that I think we should be providing much better response to in that wraparound family kind of process. Because one of the things that the AEDC has very clearly shown us is that vulnerability, whilst it is often tied to geography and socioeconomic status, isn't always. And in many ways you are more vulnerable if you're a vulnerable family, particularly now we notice we pay attention to mental health issues, if you are a vulnerable family in Burnside compared to a vulnerable family in Parafield Gardens. You're going to get much more services there than you, than you will there. As a given as a norm.

MR COMBES

And the funding of schools is exactly the same. Isn't it set up how, what area you're in, who gets more money and sometimes the ones who need the money, actually, people, you know, suffering.

MS LEMON

So I think universalising or normalising high quality family services is a really positive and actually relatively low cost way forward. Uh, and we've seen that with the Learning Together program that the Department runs and various others lots of other agencies run. We see it through the children's centres and the children and family centres.

MR COMBES

My time's another one.

MS LEMON

Yeah. So there's lots of opportunity.

MS CAVOURAS

I'm wondering though, I guess in a, in a very general sense and my community that access Taikkurendi is quite diverse, although we do accommodate mostly our community, but I think access for three year old spot will be highly taken up by families that have the capacity to do it. And if we don't fit them, if we don't do a lot of work around community engagement for those families that are hard to reach and ostensibly, that's why, I guess our Aboriginal three year old program was around because the government recognised that the early access to learning for our Aboriginal families is critical to the beginnings of their, you know, foundations of learning and all that sort of good gear.

We could actually sort of sort of, I guess, widen the gap between, you know, the great stuff that two years of kindy can do for those that can access it really successfully anyway, and then those that, you know, sort of bump in or you know, we don't work as hard on or have the provision around the flexibility, the removal of the barriers around access to ensure that the the communities that we need to reach and have a responsibility to reach and not being met. So I

guess that's got to come with a lot of thinking around, you know, the community that we want to engage with that we need to engage with.

MS LEMON

I would certainly be targeting our more vulnerable communities first in a three year old preschool program. But I wouldn't make that my only response, I would want it to be more broadly within those communities to pick up that first thousand days as well.

COMMISSIONER

That's useful. Thank you. One of the things that came out strongly on Wednesday was the, the need for how we think about all of this to be informed by the best possible information. And that we do, for example, get a lot of very useful information from the Australian early development census, but it is necessarily backwards looking in the life of those children. And that doesn't mean that it's not useful to inform what people are doing because they can.

And I think one of you made reference to the fact that people are using that data, looking at what it's telling them about their own community and adapting practice in light of it. So that's great to hear, but it is inherently for the children a backward looking index. So we were trying to discuss and think through on Wednesday, what would a more dynamic data system look like, which gave you more real time information for educators, caregivers to respond to now, clearly there's some very complicated questions behind that question about privacy and the like. But is there anything in your experience your day to day practice that you'd want to share on that point?

MS LEMON

It tends to be ... I would usually, so I'm thinking back a little bit now when we were developing programs when I was working in the Department and where we would roll things out where we might try something, and so it would tend to be a conglomeration of all of those things.

So we'd look at census - I'm a census junky, so, oh, it's census day, let's get that information. So we'd be looking at census, so you couldn't come out fast enough for me. I hate that it's every three years, I'd like it every year because that I think would give us more dynamic data.

Because we would, we are still looking back, but we'd be able to pick up changes a lot more quickly. So community and centre changes that at the moment you've got that three year lag. And so principals in particular tend not to engage with it at all. Because it's one in three years. We'd use all of that kind of data, but then we've been looking at local data. What, what are we seeing on the ground and who are we not seeing who we know are there, so that, but it's very hard to institutionalise that or to, to put it into something else.

I think you spoke with Rhiannon Pilkington the other day and a lot of work that they're doing of drawing data together. I think gives us some really interesting ways forward. If we could get up more universal first thousand days and we didn't have so few people going through an 18 month checkup with CAFHS, we would have more data that way too coming that way. But I, I

don't think there's an easy answer. And partly because educators, childcare educators, and preschool educators, they don't have time to be doing that kind of assessment in a formal way as well.

They're already under pressure because of the requirements or perceived requirements of National Quality Standards, which are requiring a lot more documentation than happens in schools, for example. So that is, you know, they're already under the pump, but when you get communities working together and when you think about the way children's centres were originally set up here, which was not just about education, but everybody else connecting as well, particularly community development people. When you think about what we had hoped would happen with AEDC and does in some places where other agencies, it's not just a education issue, it belongs to a community. And when we think about how the Department originally set up partnerships, they were not insular, they were supposed to be all the way out, even the EYLF, you know, originally it was sorry, Early Years Learning Framework.

COMMISSIONER

Thank you. Some of us know it well but others don't.

MS LEMON

That coincided with children's centres. And so we were saying to speechies and paediatricians and everybody else, this is your work too. Well, that's gone by the wayside. So we lose some of those data sources because we silo that's. what I'm saying. So being able to get back to that and what structures you would use for that. I do not know.

COMMISSIONER

Okay, interesting. Sorry. No, no, no, that's good. Good to hear.

MS LEMON

It's very hard to assess young children because young children are so varied. Um, you know, we can look at big broad milestones, but never tells us the story. The whole story.

COMMISSIONER

And from Wednesday's discussion, there's obviously some developmental changes that have got predictive abilities about likely future outcomes and some that are just the normal distribution. So I mean the terminology, you know, child that walks early isn't going to be a marathon runner just because they walked early. So it's not a predictor of later life. So it's really being very specific about the ones that are.

MS LEMON

And often the things like we talked about learning dispositions, so dispositions for children to be curious and resourceful and purposeful and persistent and be you know, have a, a default

response to be communicative. Those kinds of things. It's almost impossible to assess them lots, you know, better people than me have done a lot of work on that, but we know they're really important. And this is, I think often an issue when we are looking at very young children is you just simply, can't put a score on these things because it's going to look different for every child. And it will also be very dynamic and change rapidly.

MS CAVOURAS

You, I know, like there, there has been a little bit of a refresh around, particularly our partnership, Beach Rd partnership, that have got similar cohort of, I guess, children and families around a kind of an aligned response. So we do with Support Services undertake the ASQ sort of things, and some screeners that the speechies have worked with us around. And I guess that's sort of a little bit more collaborative understanding around how we do go about, I guess, collecting data to a sense, but also screening for developmental. And what comes with those, those I guess they are sort of formalised assessment tools is something that we as a team have to navigate and learn together. And even the nuances around how you, in relationship, because that's often the best way that you can find where kids are at, you know, the nuances around what screeners look like in terms of how children see it side by side, in the way that you do it. There's a whole lot of, and I think in the early years, we're sort of really wanting to expand our understandings around collecting data and actually interpreting it and, having some kind of common understanding around what it means.

MS LEMON

And its reducing children to that, to things that can be measured.

MR COMBES

For my side, we do deep inquiry and we use a lot of video evidence. So we do a lot of filming of the children, more about the educators, about their practice and how they can develop through the Marte Meo technique. But a lot of that's given us a lot of evidence to show over the time from when they first started at early entry, pre-entry right through the years to see that growth. And we've got that quite strong evidence too. Plus we, we use a, another analysis, a ROC, which is about a data tool, which actually about communication development.

So we can share with the schools later on around the development, what sort of devices they're using and how much they use it and if it gets used at home and the influences there as well. So we use a couple of tools.

COMMISSIONER

And just the, the video tool, is the purpose of that to measure the child's development, or to give you a record of the child's development? Or is it to see the interactions with staff and support professional development, so you can reflect back on, I interacted with that child that way, maybe an alternate strategy would've been...?

MR COMBES

Both, both. Plus professional capacity building as well with people's pedagogy and practice as well. So it's three layers to it. So we can see the children from how we've gone into the world, for example, with Marte Meo going into the world and naming things to the next layer to linking up others. So we can see the children, especially with autism, they can actually recognise others over the development of time. And we've got that data analysis by video.

COMMISSIONER

Right. And, and just explain the staff piece of it?

MR COMBES

So they'll look at themselves and work out the next strategies. It's all strength based as well, which is lovely and they'll work out 'okay, what do I need to do next for next child?' Cause they'll link back to the child. Cause what Catherine was talking about One Plans. We have One Plans for the children. So they'll have specific goals that they need to, we work towards. And for my centre at the beginning of every day, we talk about every child before the day even starts.

We go through the, because we've got so many complexities going on with, you know, manual handling and bits and pieces and oral eating, drinking care plans and seizures and this. So we've got a touch base each day say, okay, this is, this is the goal for this child today and we'll work on that for that day. So every day we sit down as a whole team, everyone has a whole sense of stops before children arrive. And we go through all the children who are coming that day to make sure we are on track and consistency with using the same strategies.

MS LEMON

So within Department preschools too, on that individual level, I was talking before perhaps at a more general level the centres that I work with around their quality improvement planning and their challenges of practice data collection within that is high and both around educators and children. So, but there's small sets of data. They're not necessarily able to be brought together. Yeah.

COMMISSIONER

Right. Okay. And that, and the not being able to bring together therefore limits.

MS LEMON

Well, most of the centres that I work with will have a different challenge of practice. So there might be working on children's thinking skills or they might be working on literacy practices or they might be working on wellbeing and being part of a group. So they may not be able to bring it together to say every child has reached the point. Yeah.

COMMISSIONER

Then you (indicating Jane Lemon) made some comments before about potential ways of phasing in what is a major reform and where to potentially start. If you have views on that, it would be great to hear them.

And there was some references before to, you know, the challenge of growing the workforce. And then in the earlier session, before the break, there was some reflections on some of the you know, potential gaps in people's skills at the moment. You've (indicating Gordon Combes) originally reflected on whether or not people understood special education and the challenges there, you were reflecting on the education vs. early childhood dialogue or lack thereof. So I mean, as we think about this workforce challenge, are there any things that you would want to share there?

MS LEMON

I was doing some work in Victoria last year. I was in the supermarket getting dinner and there was an ad for come and work in our three year old program. And we'll give you \$50,000.

So there's a lot of clearly there's a lot of need for, or there's a dearth of educators who either want to work in that program or are available. And I'm very concerned that with Victoria and New South Wales perhaps running slightly ahead, that we are going to lose a lot of educators in that way. So this is a long term process. I would hate to see somebody say we'll start this in 2028 across the board. It is just not doable, I don't think.

So I would certainly look at targeting, but targeting for a range of areas. So, you know, vulnerable communities, communities where there's capacity, communities where it's already been happening and drawing on those kinds of learnings. But workforce is going to be an enormous issue.

COMMISSIONER

Do you have any reflections?

MS CAVOURAS

I think, I guess similar lines around when I just think about my site and the additional requirements and it would be staffing I guess having a plan around what that could look like and I guess the responsibility of leaders to support and grow an existing workforce as well.

I think COVID especially has given us a mantle of understanding around the absolute engagement of our relief workforce and how we hold them as a system as well. And sites' responsibilities to, you know, grow and support an existing pool of educators that perhaps haven't been able to tap into those longer contracts that do the help of, and support sites on a regular basis. And, and then if they're lucky enough get an opportunity to have a bit of a small contract and things like that.

So I think there is an element of having a bit of work to do on the ground. And this is leadership's responsibility, partnerships' responsibility, to nurture and grow the team, staff that are educators that are already sort of on the ground, but not so much in the system. So that's potentially something.

What I do know has been quite successful particularly in terms of Aboriginal employment and, recruitment is fairly targeted, traineeships around, connected in with high quality sites to ensure that we, the Department, grows a workforce and that it comes from within those high quality sites as well.

And then I guess that comes with because there's sites that do it really well there's sites that do it and teachers take on a lot more than other spaces and places because of the good will and, and I guess the honouring of our system and that perhaps that sort of needs to sort of come with a little bit of support you know, in terms of either remuneration or something around that. You know, flexibly thinking around you know, calling on high quality sites to support a workforce revival or renewal.

But also the Department holding the, especially around the targeted workforce of highly qualified, additional special needs teachers, you know diverse ethnic groups of communities seeing targeted as you know, a valuable resource. And then I guess, obviously additionally to that, our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce as well.

COMMISSIONER

And yet the interesting examples you had of the parents who went on to become educators.

MS LEMON

But you know, with that parent, she started it so gently. And we had many, many parents go through this program where they were, we developed year 12 subjects that where they were learning about their children and about parenting, and breaking that cycle at the same time. Not a lot of that is happening now, but that was a gentle start.

And then they were for Elizabeth was very fortunate in that there was a project called Catalyst that was running through Flinders Uni. So tutors and lecturers were coming down to Christie Downs to work with them. And, and so they didn't have to even get to uni, right? They would come down and then from there, people like Elizabeth were able to be strong enough and confident enough to go into the University setting and be supported through back in the community that she'd already made connections with.

COMMISSIONER

So it'd been demystified because you met people from there, rather than just propelling yourself through the gates.

MR COMBES

I feel like we're in a really good place. Because the Department, sometimes we do a lot of bandaid effects and we're in a place where we can really do some deep diving and, and some inquiry. And I think, again, we need to align ourselves for the unis and look at, for workforce, future, maybe doing the final year, actually being inside the, in a space of a learning environment, inside a preschool or in front the classroom, really working.

Because I mean, now we've had to use support, get support from unis to use student teachers cause we don't have enough TRT relievers in the system. So I think there's, there's a great opening there for people to develop themselves from the unis perspective to be mentored and especially for aspiring leaders as well. Especially, we'll go to the country, we've got some great actually it's a really good time. I think at the moment we can use and tap into supporting each other. I know we've had a few conversations with this, with the music strategy system through the Department the, the previous CEO, having some conversations with the unis around this and I think it'd be really timely to actually support our workforce and promote it.

MS LEMON

I think there's a danger in only, and I'll say I've said it before, but only thinking about the Department. So I think there's an equity issue where any program that's put into the depart through the Department for whatever foibles there may be, will be far better supported than rolling the same kind of project out through childcare settings.

And I think equity for staff, and therefore children, will be really, really important in this because we already see it. We see some early childhood teachers will go into the Department because the conditions and the pay are so much better than if you are staying in a care setting. And the support is so much higher, generally, not across the board, then in a care setting.

And so there's already a bit of a sorting out that isn't great for children and families. So how do we make this a project that isn't a Department project, but a government project that goes across and gives equitable support in both sectors, I think is a really big challenge. And crucial.

COMMISSIONER

So irrespective of the service setting.

MS LEMON

Yep.

COMMISSIONER

I just wanted to tease out - each of you has spoken about the of the glue, the connections with the community and particularly the connections with parents, and I, if you've got any reflections on upscaling that because you know, more kids, more families there, there has to be an upscaling effect, what that will require?

MS LEMON

Learning Together, the program we used to run, which still operates the strength and that was a program for families with children, aged birth to three ish looking at engaging them in their children's learning from birth. And part of that, they were all located in and still are in disadvantaged communities. And one of the big strengths of it was that many families that we worked with had very negative connections with school authority, whatever, but we were able to be a bridge for families in that.

And I think having roles within communities, and it might be community development people, it might be educators that might be definitely supportive playgroup leaders and so on to have those kinds of roles, not just in the birth to five, but going into school as well is a really important way of keeping families connected into the things that we know really matter, which is about home learning environments, and Iram will probably maybe touch on that today.

So where families have a sense of efficacy families have a, a sense of understanding that what they do matters to their children and that it's not, we're not turning them into teachers, but we are giving them a sense of their own importance and critical nature of it. And also the tools and the ways to be able to do that in a very simple way, like reach your child every day, sing when you're walking down the street might look silly, but that's okay. Talk to your baby.

All of these things are really, really important and they are the way that you build connections with people that haven't been connected within community before. And it breaks down a whole lot of the structural barriers that can come into play that lead to children and families dropping out of school, fighting with principals, all those kinds of things you can start to do by having those connector kind of roles. So I could go for days.

MR COMBES

I'm thinking that, so for my family's actually to learn, to love their own child, yes. And to try and to connect and communicate with them sometimes I don't even have to say, I love you. So sort of having that opportunity to just learn, to love your kid, not try and fix your child.

MS LEMON

Because you have to work so hard with your child.

MR COMBES

Yeah. Cause I have families who will take them overseas to get fixed, you know, but we try and teach them to, you know, because some of my kids won't reach 12, won't reach 13. So they deserve quality and education now.

MS CAVOURAS

I think for communities, Aboriginal communities, communities experiencing vulnerabilities, community development, community connection is critically important to the success of engagement in learning, in programs, in playgroups, in you know, even just accessing services

that are available. And I think a structure of a site should have the opportunity for leaders, educators teachers to be part of community. I know in my role, it's not just about the teaching and learning.

It's about connecting in and, and you know, going to the high school and, and seeing the young parents, usually young mums, but young parents and their children it's um, connecting in with Christie Downs community centre and supporting some decisions and moving forward in that sort of space because at the end of the day, it's our whole community. And I think when a community is thriving, it is how services are, are really congruent and connected.

You know, we can have those beautiful, warm referrals that we can have those tricky conversations because we've got reciprocal relationships and families can go and come back into the space too. And I couldn't do my role as effectively if I didn't have a little bit of flexibility in my leadership role that can support or releasing a teacher to be in the playgroup that was run by speechie and brokering that with my staff team. So I think, you know, going to the events with all the children and things like that, being a facing community you know, the shop with the, the bakery out the road, you know, delivering bread and all the things that like that support our families to access, access services that are out there.

But there does need to be a congruency and it's, and it is, I guess, part of more intentional for Education to move out that space, you know, I'm meeting with DCP colleagues off site to ensure that they've got a really strong understanding about what the services are that we provide. Not just in education and care, but also, you know, that we have got a little space to play in reunification, because that's super important that we can have Aboriginal colleagues that are in organisations that are not uh entirely focused on Aboriginal business, but can this, it can be a space to network and, and, and, and learn together and that sort of thing.

So I think creating those spaces of children's centre model has got a fabulous capacity in terms of, you know, the, the spaces and places that they've been you know, built on and the intention and purpose around it. And I guess revising perhaps what that, what the possibilities look like in those spaces. And that relies on lots of players coming to the table, you know, our colleagues in CAFHS and you talk about the first thousand days critical and that's still being developed and it's often sites that do it really well. It is about leadership that can drive it. Um, so certainly that community development sort of thinking around what educational leadership looks like as well, which is not always a given, is it?

MS LEMON

No.

MS CAVOURAS

Like finances, but we have to learn them.

MS LEMON

But's that wrap around the village, isn't it, around child to support and also for families and children to be seen as really important within community. Not in the way; child friendly.;family friendly.

COMMISSIONER

Well, our time is coming to an end. So I did want to give you an opportunity for any last reflections before we draw the session to an end. So if there's something that you were thinking you wanted to say today that you haven't had the opportunity to say because of the nature of the discussion or anything else you want to put on the table,

MS LEMON

I'd just go back to flexibility.

MS CAVOURAS

I know in my experience it, while there's a bit of a prescriptive notion around early entry and three year olds being I guess having access to the space, there are leaders out there that have managed and danced to ensure that you know, when children or families or situations or referrals from colleagues, particularly our DCP colleagues, come about that they're I think, hand on heart, that we do try to respond to the need of the most vulnerable. But knowing I guess over the two years of you know, access and connection and relationship building moving in and supporting families through grief that you talk about Gordon, our rural remote communities, that staffing sort of changes and that sort of thing that continuity and those two years absolutely has, is grounded in so much. So many positive outcomes that it'll be a shame if we can't do it really, we, you know, do it really well, but also roll it out with the right intention and purpose, and that is reaching our most vulnerable communities.

COMMISSIONER

Thank you very much. Thank you. It's been great. Thanks a lot. And so we will conclude there until we come back at 1.30. Thanks everybody.

<THE HEARING ADJOURNED AT 12.21 PM