

## ***OPINION – ACSSO's Guest Columnists address values-driven issues in education***

***Dr Alison Elliott reflects on the needs and opportunities of early childhood development, in the March edition of ACER eNews\****

---

### **Preschool hope and reality**

Few early childhood experts would disagree with the idea that young children require rich, nurturing learning opportunities to optimise social and intellectual development.

Education Minister Julie Bishop is spot on with her call for compulsory pre-school for four-year-olds. The early years of development are critical to brain development and there is overwhelming agreement that the early years shape later social and academic outcomes.

Just recently, the former head of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's education directorate, Barry McGaw echoed long held concerns about the alarming socio-economically linked learning gaps between children at the commencement of school.

How we go about providing early learning experiences for all children in the years before schooling is a \$64,000 question.

That said, making preschool (or kindergarten as it is called in some states) mandatory or compulsory requires a huge leap in our thinking about the 'educational ladder' and the logistics of provision.

Few areas of education are as complex as early childhood services. Report after report says that early childhood services are regulated, administered and funded by a dogs' breakfast of government and non government bodies. Preschools and child care centres are operated and owned by a range of community groups, government, small and medium private owner-operators, and large corporations.

They operate within a variety of legislative frameworks. There are several types of early childhood services and the same types are called different names in different states. The confusion is exacerbated by a lack of a nationally common school starting age, although this should be solved by 2010. Few people really understand how all the early childhood bits fit together.

The basic cut is along 'care' versus 'education' lines. 'Child care' is funded federally, largely as a labour force measure. 'Education' in the years before school, that is, preschool or kindergarten, is funded by the states and territories. Regardless of the funding source, parents usually pay substantial fees as well.

A four-year-old child might attend one of several early childhood services, or all of them. Some children attend preschool, child care, occasional care, and Family Day Care all in the one week. In some parts of the country a four year old might

already be at school. In some states, preschools are part of the school system. In others, preschool programs are embedded in child care centres. Sometimes there's a mix of both models. In some states children are shunted from child care to preschool and back to child care- all on the one day, just to make sure they get their 'dose' of 'education'.

Parents are often confused about the type of early childhood service their child attends. Is an Early Learning Centre a preschool, a kindergarten or a child care centre? Is a kindy or a preschool really a preschool or is it a child care centre? Could it be both?

Whether a centre provides a 'preschool' education depends very much on the curriculum or the program in the centre and the training of staff- not its name or funding source.

And here is a problem. Nationally, there is no agreement about what a 'preschool' curriculum should cover, who should decide and how children's learning and development should be monitored and reported. Rarely, do preschools or child care centres provide schools with information about children's early learning and development.

The 'care' – 'education' divide in early childhood services is further exacerbated by staffing within centres. Typically, 'preschools' that provide 'education' programs are staffed by qualified early childhood teachers who have a degree in early childhood education. Staffing in child care centres is much more varied. Only about 10 per cent of child care staff have degrees in early childhood education. Most have vocationally oriented diplomas and certificates. About 30 per cent of staff have no formal qualifications. The *Australian Standard Classification of Occupations* describes early childhood practitioners without degrees as 'intermediate service workers' along with bar workers and casino croupiers.

Typical of the confusion in terminology used to describe early childhood staff is the frequent reference to the late Princess Diana as a 'kindergarten teacher' despite having no formal post-school qualification in early childhood education or anything else. Today, early childhood educators are grappling with the notion of professionalism. There is no registration for early childhood educators, no professional accreditation for early childhood education courses, and no core professional standards.

For the last decade there has been a serious shortage of early childhood educators. Child care centres in particular, struggle to attract qualified staff. Degree qualified early childhood educators are as scarce as hens' teeth.

Around the country universities have fought to maintain strong, specialist early childhood degrees and they struggle to attract students in the face of competition from 'sexier' courses. Young people are spoilt for choice when it comes to careers. The low pay, low status and shift work in early childhood care and education is hardly a draw card.

Nationally, as practically everyone has been saying recently, early childhood care and education is in need of an 'overhaul'. So, before any thoughts about universal or 'mandatory' preschool can progress much further we need to think carefully about the entire early childhood sector.

The current scattergun approach to early childhood services is no longer working and more importantly cannot be expected to build a nation of learners. Tens of thousands of children miss out on formal early learning opportunities in the years before school. And with the average participation in early childhood services at around 10 hours per week many more are underserved.

Clearly, finding quality, affordable early childhood care and education is one of the most important issues for working parents as they struggle to balance work and family responsibilities. All families want more than baby sitting. They want strong, active early education programs for their children.

Every child needs the opportunity to participate in rich, nurturing early education, at least in the year before school. And some children need more nurturing and more help to get ready for school than others. Countering widespread differences in early childhood provision, quality, accessibility and cost won't happen by magic. Nationally, we need quality early learning programs for all children. But whatever form they take, and what ever they are called, we already have a network of early childhood services to build on. What's needed is a national agreement from all the relevant Ministers and jurisdictions on the vision, action and logistics to turn goodwill and hope into educational reality for each and every young child.

**Dr Alison Elliott**

26 March 2006

© Dr Alison Elliott & ACER

*Dr Alison Elliott is Research Director, Early Childhood Education at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). This article appeared in the [ACER eNews March 2006](#).*

*Dr Elliott has previously outlined the issues and needs of early childhood in "Where to Now for Early Childhood Education and Care?" which appeared in the [ACER Journal Summer 2004](#).*

***The views which Dr Elliott puts in these articles strongly mirror points of need and importance to parents, families and children across Australia which ACSSO has also raised in formal submissions to government.***