SUMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING


DESCRIPTION OF MY WORK IN THE PROVISION OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS.

I held a senior leadership position in both the Kindergarten Teacher’s Association of Victoria and the Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch) as Vice-President (Early Childhood) for a total period of 31 years. Additionally, I held the position of Convenor, AEU National Early Childhood Committee and AEU Federal Executive Member (Early Childhood). I retired from these positions in August, 2007. I am a qualified Early Childhood teacher.

As part of these roles, I undertook the development and delivery of professional development programs in both rural and metropolitan areas on very diverse topics which were seen as important to the professional growth of Early Childhood teachers. These programs were additional to the information and training opportunities provided by both organisations to their members.

Currently, I am providing workshop and seminar presentations designed to assist Early Childhood teachers with addressing some of the professional expectations inherent in the Interim Early Childhood Teaching standards. I had a leadership role in the development, finalisation and introduction of these new statements in 2004. To date, I have focused predominately on preschool teachers but may extend my work to the P-2 area of primary education in the future.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

I wish to briefly draw to the Committee’s attention, the very diverse organisational arrangements that exist in early childhood services in Victoria and in particular, the provision of early childhood education programs by qualified early childhood teachers. There are many auspice bodies namely parent Committees of Management, Cluster Management bodies, Local Government Authorities, voluntary groups and welfare/charitable organisations, churches and for-profit commercial companies. These auspices employ early childhood teachers of whom approximately two thirds are employed less than full-time and also who are predominately female.

The funding of programs provided by the Victorian Government to these auspice bodies meets about 60 per cent of the operating cost, the remaining income is supplied from fees charged to parents and fund-raising.

The cost of professional learning programs undertaken by teachers has in the recent past been an unaffordable impost on the majority of centre budgets. The positive initiatives taken by Kindergarten Parents Victoria to encourage centres to make staff professional development a higher budgetary priority has had beneficial results.

There has been a welcome increase in the level of employer support for early childhood teachers to receive time release and/or to receive a financial contribution towards the cost of these programs. It is however not a requirement made of employers.
On the other hand, over the last 8 years, there has been an increasing obligation placed on teachers to undertake a prescribed quantity of professional development each year, most of which is undertaken at their own cost and in their own time. This increasing priority is reflected in the industrial certified agreements which regulate the employment of the vast majority of early childhood teachers in Victoria. The introduction of the Professional Development and Enhancement Program (PDEP), the Interim Early Childhood Teacher Standards and the associated Validation process are all evidence that ongoing professional learning is an important focus. The link to attraction and retention of teachers and the improved quality of educational programs are also key motivations.

However, there are some critical barriers which impede early childhood teachers’ access to professional learning opportunities. One major problem is the dearth of appropriately qualified replacement teachers which means that a teacher does not attend if their employer does not approve attendance because the educational program would not be offered to children on that occasion. Alternatively, where the teacher is granted permission to attend, the educational program is not available, parents and children are sometimes disgruntled. This is particularly the case in regards to very part-time programs (e.g., 2 or 3 hours per week). Many teachers in this situation decline to attend professional development because of the perceived disadvantage to families.

Further, the cost of participation for individual teachers is often prohibitive, especially for teachers in rural areas. In addition to the registration, travel and accommodation costs (if applicable), the family responsibilities which the predominately female members of the profession often have add to the level of difficulty experienced by teachers in accessing professional development opportunities.

Of further concern is the limited or unavailability of a range of appropriate, high quality teacher learning programs particularly in rural areas.

QUALITY ASSURANCE MEASURES FOR PROVIDERS

This submission will later argue for increased government support for early childhood teacher learning programs. In so doing, it will be necessary to introduce accreditation arrangements for providers or at least some form of approved suppliers.

At present, the provision of teacher programs is not profitable in this sector and thus, there are few private operators. Should government funding be utilised to generate greater provision, then a rigorous quality assurance process should be introduced as an essential component.

I RECOMMEND that this be carried out by the Victorian Institute of Teachers. This process would in my view be accompanied by teacher registration for early childhood teachers by a re-vamped V.I.T.
The inclusion of early childhood services within the newly formed Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the current development of a Birth to Eight curriculum framework are both very welcome initiatives. It is therefore timely to ensure that both early childhood and primary teachers (and indeed childcare workers) in the early years have access to high quality, appropriate in-service programs that inform teachers regarding the framework, the sound early childhood pedagogy and practice that will hopefully form the basis of this document(s). However, it is relevant that these teachers be engaged now in professional exchange and dialogue that will in time provide a sound base for the implementation of the curriculum. The recent introduction of Transition statements further supports the need for a 0-8 approach to teacher learning and the development of strong professional relationships and understanding.

As pointed out in the introductory section of this submission, professional development has been regarded in the early childhood sector as the responsibility of teachers and more recently, an interest of employers. However government has not taken a leadership role in the sector nor facilitated or sponsored teacher learning in any comprehensive manner.

It seems to be apparent that current government policies at both state and federal levels should mean that government has a significant interest and stake in workforce planning issues such as retention and attraction of teachers and also in the attainment of high quality educational programs for young children. Ongoing and rich teacher learning programs are central to these concerns. As previously stated, the provision of these programs to early childhood teachers is sparse and barriers exist that inhibit access. There are few providers of programs and I believe that this dwindles to a negligible number who are competent to provide teacher learning that span the 0-8 age range.

I RECOMMEND that the government provide funds to significantly increase the provision of teacher learning programs and introduce measures that ensure access to these programs by teachers engaged in the education of children 0-8 years. These programs should include specific programs for those teaching children 0-3, 3-5 and 5-8 years. Further, that the government introduce an accreditation system for providers of these programs. Consideration should be given to identifying current providers and to investigate sources of new providers and what assistance or encouragement can be provided by government.

I RECOMMEND that the government sponsor local and regional forums where professional dialogue can be fostered both on a formal and informal basis. State-wide opportunities through conferences and seminars should also be included.