

# **Early Childhood Submission to the Parliament of Victoria's Education and Training Committee Inquiry into Pre-Service Teacher Education June 2004**

## **1. Introduction**

After discussion with Dr Nick Fischer, it was agreed that the AEU could provide the Committee's inquiry into pre-service education an additional submission which focuses solely on preschool teachers. There are compelling reasons why the Committee should address the situation of pre-service education for preschool teachers as well as that for school teachers.

Preschool is defined as "...a planned educational program for children in the year before the first year of school. Children are usually aged between 4 and 5 years of age. A qualified early childhood teacher, who has completed a degree in education, plans the program and is usually supported by a teacher assistant".

Preschool education is an essential part of an education continuum which includes primary, secondary and post-compulsory education. The value of early childhood education is not just in setting the foundations for cognitive, physical, emotional, social and language development. It is often essential in terms of the detection of impediments to learning, which if not attended to could affect a child's learning potential for the rest of their life.

"Children who have participated in preschool education programs, when compared with children who have not participated, show fewer referrals to remedial or special education classes, lower absenteeism, better grades and retention, and higher graduation rates. Beyond school, participants in preschool education have better employment rates and earnings, fewer arrests and antisocial acts, and greater family and community development."

Specific strategies are required to ensure that the links between preschool and school education are strong and supported. In Victoria these links have been made particularly difficult by giving responsibility for preschools to the Department of Human Services rather than, as with most states in Australia, to the Department of Education and Training. The rationale for giving responsibility for preschool education to the Department of Human Services is situated in a blurred distinction between education and care. The AEU believes that there is a fundamental distinction between the disciplines of care and education and that the Department of Education and Training (DE&T) should be the single agency responsible for preschool education in this state. DE&T has the capacity to integrate preschools into an overall framework of education, rather than the present situation where preschools are cut off from schools and administered by a wide range of separate employers.

## **Early Childhood Teaching Qualification Requirements**

Early Childhood Australia (Vic. Branch) (ECA, formerly the Australian Early Childhood Association - AECA), is contracted by the Department of Human Services to recommend which early childhood teaching courses in Australia and overseas should be listed in the regulations as suitable qualifications for those staff employed in preschools as early childhood teachers. This role is incorporated into the Early Childhood Teachers Award and the Multi-Employer Certified Agreement (MECA).

The Qualifications Approval Committee of ECA has set out a list of attributes and component subjects for early childhood teaching courses:

Degrees must be a minimum of three years of full-time tertiary education. The major

emphasis of the degree must be to prepare teachers to work with children in the 0-8 years age range. Combined degrees must demonstrate that there has been an appropriate balance of studies.

Courses must contain major studies in all areas of child development and include component subjects covering curriculum theory, pedagogy including a sequence of studies on early childhood pedagogy (especially play as an educational medium and units on language and literacy development in the years 0-8), history and philosophy of early childhood, parental involvement and management and leadership.

The recommended supervised practicum in a three or four year course should be 100 days, with at least one practicum of 20 days with children in the 0-3 years age range.

The vast majority of new graduates qualified to teach in preschools have four year tertiary degrees. At present four Victorian universities offer courses in early childhood teaching. The courses at Melbourne University, Monash University and RMIT are four year dual primary-early childhood degree courses. Victoria University offers a three year early childhood teaching degree. It is considering changing this to a four year dual course. At present graduates from Victoria University can upgrade their qualification by doing an approved 4<sup>th</sup> year of tertiary study. There are salary advantages, incorporated into the Award and MECA, for teachers with a four year qualification. A clearly evident gap in the provision of pre-service education for preschool teachers is the lack of any courses in regional universities. There is also little support for teachers wishing to upgrade their qualifications through distance education.

The AEU believes that all new graduates should have completed four years of tertiary education covering the ECA course components (set out above). This requirement should be regulated through the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) registration procedures. At present there is an anomalous situation where, because early childhood teachers come under the responsibility of the Department of Human Services (rather than the Department of Education and Training), they are excluded from the VIT, as though they were not members of the teaching profession. The inconsistency is glaringly obvious when it is considered that graduates from the existing four year dual courses who choose to work in a primary school are covered by VIT registration while graduates from the same courses who choose to work in a preschool are not.

The inclusion of early childhood teachers within the VIT also makes sense because of the VIT's role in relation to pre-service courses. The Institute is presently developing a set of standards for graduates exiting from pre-service courses, including the dual courses, which will then be used in the accreditation processes to approve tertiary courses. These standards will inevitably have a wash-back effect on the content of pre-service courses and the assessment of teacher education students. Newly graduated preschool teachers could also benefit from the compulsory mentoring and induction processes the VIT has introduced for all provisionally-registered school teachers. The structures of preschool education in their present form do not support the induction of new teachers.

One of the respondents to the Review of Preschool Education commented:

“New graduates when faced with choices about career options are understandably daunted by the prospect of taking up a position in an independent kindergarten with limited practical experience...and an isolated workplace that has no structure for mentor programs or peer support”.

The AEU believes that the following pre-service course issues need to be addressed:

Dual Courses. It is important to ensure that graduates who qualify to teach early

childhood education through completion of a dual primary-early childhood course have had an appropriate balance of studies and experience between the two sectors. This balance includes university staff who are qualified in and knowledgeable about early childhood education (not just primary), specific early childhood subjects and sufficient practical experience in preschools. While the dual course importantly facilitates the continuity between primary and preschools, this should be in conjunction with a recognition of the unique educational characteristics of each sector.

The practicum.

Preschool teachers should be paid the same supervision rates as school teachers for supervising teacher education students. University student supervision payments sent to preschools should be automatically paid to the preschool teacher concerned. This does not always happen.

Support should be provided for rural-based practicums, at least to the same level as that proposed for teacher education students doing a practical teaching experience in a country school ie a subsidy of \$900 per student teacher for a three week placement in a remote location and a travel-only subsidy for placement in other hard-to-staff locations.

Support processes, and funding, should be in place to ensure that pre-service students are able to have a practicum of at least 20 days in the 0-3 years age range supervised by a qualified teacher. At present, because of the nature of the childcare industry, this can be difficult to achieve.

There needs to be a common framework of recognition used by all university pre-service providers allowing childcare workers to upgrade their qualifications. At present, each university has its own set of criteria to recognise the prior learning of potential students.

Understanding and catering for student diversity. Pre-service courses should have their content reviewed to ensure that graduates have the skills and understanding to cater for the wide range of learning needs in their classroom. Factors which may contribute to this diversity include gender, age, culture, language background, ability, learning styles, impairment, behavioural characteristics, social circumstances, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, socio-economic status and isolation.

The AEU believes that all graduating teachers should be adequately equipped to meet the needs of indigenous students and to contribute to the process of Reconciliation by ensuring that all students are able to develop a respect and understanding for the unique cultures of Australia's indigenous peoples. The national AEU position on this matter is to ensure that all undergraduate teacher education programs, within an agreed time-frame, build in significant and assessable mandatory indigenous studies units. Measures should also be taken to support koori staff in early childhood centres to progress from TAFE diploma to teaching degree qualifications.

## **Supply and Demand for Preschool Teachers**

Unlike the schools sector where the Department of Education and Training provides comprehensive supply and demand statistics, there is no systematic data made available about the supply and demand for teachers in preschools. When Peter Kirby reviewed preschool services on behalf of the Government in 2001 he found that the Department of Human Services was unable to provide accurate information about something as basic as the number of teachers employed in the sector.

“While every funded centre must employ at least one qualified preschool teacher in order to be eligible for government support, it is not known how many of the preschool

teachers (almost 70% of whom are part-time) are employed in more than one funded centre”.

The Report went on to comment on the fact that the Department of Human Services had not undertaken any research into supply and demand since at least 1994. The only planning for teacher supply that the Report could find was that undertaken by ‘a few local authorities’. The Report concluded that from their investigations “...there are shortages of preschool teachers right across the State and these are especially acute in rural areas”. The review received widespread complaints about the difficulties in recruiting qualified staff, especially for relief to cover short-term absences. Early Childhood Centres reported spending hundreds of dollars advertising for permanent and relief staff and considered themselves fortunate to receive a single reply. There were many reported cases of preschools having to close for a day or longer because of their inability to replace teaching staff absent on account of illness or pressing family needs.

Preschool teacher supply difficulties have been exacerbated over the past few years because of the different salaries and employment conditions for primary and preschool teachers. Graduates who emerge from dual pre-service courses are eligible to teach in either primary schools or preschools. They make a choice about the sector in which they will seek employment. All things being equal, there should be a balance of graduates entering each sector.

Because of salary differentials, 4 year trained dual course graduates who choose preschool teaching receive 10.31% less than they would have received if they had chosen to work in a primary school. The entry level salary for a preschool teacher is \$37,151 and \$40,983 for a primary school teacher. At the top of the classroom teacher scale this differential increases to 15.39%. The preschool teacher salary is \$48,380 as compared to \$55,828 for a primary teacher. There are major relief teacher shortages in both the preschool and primary sectors in a range of geographic areas. The dual course qualified teacher who chooses to do relief teaching in the preschool sector receives only 62% (\$19.96 per hour under MECA) of their primary school counterpart (\$32.07 per hour). These salary differentials will be increased with the draft agreement for government school teachers.

The relevance of this data to the Committee’s inquiry into pre-service education can clearly be seen in the conclusions of the Kirby Report.

“...the major problems in securing an adequate supply of good quality candidates for preschool teaching have little to do with the content or quality of the current courses, and more to do with the employment arrangements and remuneration for preschool teaching. Given the employment arrangements and low salaries relative to other areas of teaching, the job insecurity and lack of access to professional development, it is no wonder that preschool teaching is declining in its attractiveness.”