



Personal Reflections
on the Early Years

Professor Sharon Goldfeld, of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, used this quote in her presentation in Hobart this year at the invitation of Tasmania's Commissioner for Children, Mark Morrissey. Professor Goldfeld obtained the quote from *Children of the Lucky Country?*

"A society that is good to children is one with the smallest possible inequalities for children, with the vast majority of them having the same opportunities from birth for health, education, inclusion and participation."

(Stanley, Richardson & Prior, 2005)

If our Learners First mission is to provide every Tasmanian with the opportunity to continue to learn and reach their potential, to lead fulfilling and productive lives and to contribute positively to the community it must be part of our moral purpose to help build a society that is good to children.

I declare a passion and an interest in early learning here that started with the birth of my own children, developed as they progressed through their early years in our system and was heightened when I became Acting Principal of Forest Primary School many years ago and found myself with responsibility for teaching Prep literacy, having qualified in and mostly taught secondary and senior secondary mathematics!

I observed the high quality early years teaching and learning as Principal of Forest and Smithton Primary Schools with awe and was helped by my colleagues to understand the importance of strong foundations for our children especially intentional play based learning in our Kindergartens. I also had the privilege of leading a committed and dedicated cross agency team, and of working with the then Chair of the Tasmanian Early Years Foundation, to conceptualise and plan for the introduction of Child and Family Centres in our state.

Finally, I was privileged to be on the Community Advisory Group for the wayraparattee Child and Family Centre in Geeveston, supporting the centre staff to achieve their goals.

Now, I feel fortunate to be able to continue my commitment to supporting our families to ensure that every young Tasmanian has the best possible start in life, which is so important to our state from an education, social, health and economic perspective.

The research about the importance of high quality early learning to a young person's life, including their education prospects, is unequivocal. Indeed, Early Childhood Australia in recent publications and on their website make a number of references to the benefits of high quality early learning. For example, it notes that the longitudinal Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) study in the UK found, similar to other studies in the US, that:

...attending early learning can help to combat the effects of disadvantage, particularly for students of low qualified parents, especially for boys. For this group, if they had experienced a high-quality early learning program, they had better grades in English and maths compared to similar students who had not attended any preschool...

<http://www.everyonebenefits.org.au/why-invest>

and

'All children benefit from attending an early learning program from age three, if it is a quality program'

(State of Early Learning in Australia Report 2016 – p17)

James Heckman's writing on the importance of high quality early learning is also of note:

'Once a child falls behind, he or she is likely to remain behind. Impoverished early environments are powerful predictors of adult failure on a number of social and economic dimensions.'

(James Heckman, 2006)

'Inequality in early childhood experiences and learning produces inequality in ability, achievement, health, and adult success.' *(James Heckman, 2011)*

Since the 1960s, Tasmania has taken a different path to other states and territories in early years provision. Speaking with long-time colleagues who have worked extensively in the early years, I understand that was because the Government of the day recognised that many Tasmanian families weren't able to access the private Kindergartens, or play or preschools they may have been called, and made the decision to locate Government run Kindergartens on school sites. So, our Kindergartens are the equivalent of preschools mostly elsewhere in Australia and they are free and universally available to all children who have turned four on or before 1 January each year. To date, this has been a very successful model, demonstrated by Tasmania leading the national participation rates for that age cohort.

Similarly, there has been a history of strengthening access to learning in the Prep (Preparatory) year, which in Tasmania is the year before formal schooling starts in Year 1. The Prep nomenclature demonstrates the purpose of the year – it is to prepare our children for their first formal year of schooling. Again, the collective memories of my colleagues has it that originally Prep was introduced because the younger children going into Year 1 from Kinder were not as ready as others. Then the Prep year was seen as being valuable to all children and it became the pathway, and was voluntary. My memory was that Prep also was for four days a week, not five. More recently, in 2003, Prep became compulsory and for five days a week. At some stage the age cut off went from 30 June to 1 January.

So, early years provision has been in a state of continual improvement since the late 60s, and continues today. The question that is now on many people's minds is whether we should change the compulsory starting age from 5 in Prep to 4 years six months, meaning that parents would be able to choose to access early learning opportunities in Kindergarten from age 3 years six months.

We know that starting age is quite different across Australia including the processes, so in some jurisdictions there is a minimum starting age and a compulsory age. There is evidence to suggest that many, if not most, families take up the minimum age option because in Year 9 Tasmanian students are on average five months older than their counterparts elsewhere in Australia.

We know that many Tasmanian parents and carers are currently accessing quality early learning for their children in child care settings prior to those children starting Kindergarten, but we also know that about 40% are not.

By lowering the compulsory school starting age, and providing earlier access to Kindergarten all young Tasmanian children will get similar universal access to early learning as children in other states and territories. It is a matter of equity – why would we want anything less for our children?

It seems to me that much of the debate has not been around the value of early learning for children, or how more parents and carers can be encouraged to access early learning opportunities for their children, but rather what the most appropriate setting is for early learning to be delivered.

Just as I know that most education and care settings have high quality early learning happening for children, and more so since they have been working to meet the National Quality Standards, I also know that our Kindergartens do as well.

It seems to me that the setting shouldn't be the issue, but the quality of the learning and the access for **all** children, not only those whose families are able to access child care. Both sectors should be aiming to have the highest quality learning possible and also where possible be working together to achieve that. If we are to play our part in making a difference to the lives of our young Tasmanians, we *at least* need to ensure that our children have similar access to high quality early learning to their Australian counterparts. If the Prep starting age was lowered to 4 years six months, Tasmania would be in about the middle of the pack.

In 2009, all Australian Governments agreed to work together to provide better educational and developmental outcomes for children in the early years, with a key result being the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care that commenced in 2012.

Since January, I have been finding out more and more about our progress towards the previous Government's commitment to ensure, at a policy level, there is as much comparability as possible

with the National Quality Standards in our early years settings and have received much feedback from staff in relation to this and the early years more generally. Huonville Primary and Penguin School Kindergarten teachers trialled some of the standards, for example. We are actively planning to make more progress with this.

I have been bemused and somewhat disappointed with some of the commentary about the appropriateness of, and readiness of, younger children coming into formal schooling, referring to Kindergarten, because both Kindertgartens and child care are committed to implementing the National Quality Framework.

We have a very highly qualified teaching staff, all of whom have education degrees, and many with specific early years qualifications or are deemed under national agreements to have them. The Kindertgartens that I have visited, without exception, have been wonderful early learning settings.

To ensure continued focus on improving our early years delivery, I will soon be announcing the successful candidate for the newly created Principal Project Officer (PPO) – Early Years who will report directly to me.

The department has been working hard with teachers to ensure that the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) is the framework that guides the curriculum offered in our Kindergarten settings, and as early years educators know, that is the same framework that is being used to guide the curriculum offered in education and care settings.

Claims that children will be commencing formal schooling in Kindergarten are clearly wrong.

I have had feedback that Prep teachers may have been expecting, or had requested to be involved in, EYLF professional learning and that's something that the Principal Project Officer – Early Years will be working through. If the proposed changes to the Education Act become reality, we will certainly need to ensure that all teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to cater for the age group and ability range under their care.

In relation to qualifications, for many years UTAS offered only a generic K–6 teaching qualification to enable maximum flexibility in staffing. While those who wanted to work in early childhood chose optional units and undertook practicums in that area, other teachers have moved into the area over the years and many have years of relevant experience.

After negotiations and in response to the new national legislation, UTAS now offers a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood), with the first students graduating in 2013.

A Graduate Certificate in Education (Early Childhood) was agreed in late 2013 and the first unit was offered in July 2014. This course is being offered externally (fully-online) with a timeframe for completion of up to two years part-time.

The course has been approved accredited by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), it can articulate into the Masters of Education and on this basis is offered HECs free.

We have in the main, very experienced teacher assistants supporting our teachers as, over several years, the department and TasTAFE have offered the Certificate III in Education Support (CHC30812) for those employed as the general Kindergarten Assistant.

As far as staff to child ratios are concerned, Kindertgartens are also well within the National Law requirements for the ratio of staff to children for preschool in Tasmania at (2:25).

According to our February census this year, our average Kindergarten size is 18.8, each with a teacher and a teacher assistant, so the ratio is one staff member to fewer than 10 children. We have ten classes with class size of over 25. In all of these cases there is either extra teacher time or additional teacher assistant time so that seven met the ratio and the other three are very close to the ratio.

The Government's commitment to, and investment in early learning is also a wonderful opportunity for us to create high quality early years provision with smooth transitions pre and post school entry. An opportunity to work together to redefine our work by connecting service delivery, wherever it occurs, be it in our Child and Family Centres, as part of our Launching into Learning program, in an education and care setting, in our Kinders and through to Prep, Year 1 and Year 2 so that we have those smooth transitions that we know will benefit our children. We already have several great examples of where that occurs successfully, and the one that I am closest to is the wayparattee CFC. Its development also included collaboration with the Huon Valley Council and as a result, their child care facility is co-located with the CFC.

Irrespective of the outcome of the review of the Education Act, we will be providing opportunities for our early years teachers to overlay the Early Years Learning Framework onto the Australian Curriculum from Prep to Year 2 to ensure we have best practice across our early years provision; ensure that all early years staff have access to high quality professional learning in line with school improvement plans; explore how we can work side by side with the education and care sector to learn from what they do and also to support wherever possible their sector. We will also be working with our school leaders to build their understanding of the National Quality Standards and more particularly the Early Years Learning Framework. We will also be investigating how we can ensure we assess against the standards without duplicating our review processes. The Schools Registration Board has done similar work to this as it prepares for those child care service providers who may wish to register their service as a Kindergarten should the changes go through.

I recently wrote to Ros Cornish, the CEO of Lady Gowrie Tasmania, to formalise a discussion that we had previously about working together in the best interests of our children and I'm looking forward to a strong collaboration with the sector. Included in that letter was a recent publication by the Australian Council for Education Research, *Five Challenges in Australian School Education* (May 2016), which makes the point that it is important to recognise, at any given age, children are at very different points in their learning and development.

The focus should be on providing individualised support and learning opportunities. Importantly, the report promotes the idea that there should be close collaboration between early childhood and school to ensure seamless transition for children. I want to strengthen the relationships between the two sectors so that we work together in the best interests of Tasmanian children.

Many of you may remember the *Making Connections* document that was co-developed by education and the education and care sector a number of years ago. We are reviewing that document currently with a view to re-establishing our policy for working with the education and care sector, to get consistency across all sites and we will be looking for opportunities to co-locate, to share facilities, and to provide wrap around care that smoothes transitions and could also lessen the cost of overheads for the sector.

As I said before in relation to the National Quality Standards, we already meet the agreed ratios, we are working on specific early childhood qualifications for those staff who need it; all new and re-furbished Kindergartens are designed to meet the standards, we have reviewed other facilities and will be progressively ensuring upgrades for those as well.

As soon as the Principal Project Officer – Early Years has been appointed, we will be forming networks of early childhood staff to start to consider and build upon the work done to date by our principals and leadership group.

I would be very happy to receive advice from early years teachers about the best way to form those networks and I also welcome feedback and suggestions about my reflections above.

Jenny Gale
Secretary
Department of Education
29 July, 2016