



**BROTHERHOOD**  
of St LAURENCE

**Submission to the Ministerial Review of Preschool Services in Victoria  
December 2000**

The Brotherhood of St Laurence values this opportunity to contribute to the consideration of preschool services in Victoria. The Brotherhood's concern about and knowledge of preschool services comes from both our research about families and children and from our provision of a range of children's services. In addition, our work with disadvantaged young people and adults highlights the long term impacts of early disadvantage.

Our particular concern is access to affordable, high quality preschool services for children in families on low incomes. The role of early childhood education is increasingly being recognised as crucial for the life chances of disadvantaged children.

Research findings have been summarised as follows:

The impact of quality early education influences the lives of all children, but is greatest for children from backgrounds of poverty and disadvantage, locally, nationally and globally. (Raban-Bisby 1995 in Taylor 1997)

The Brotherhood undertook a research study on preschool attendance in 1995, following major changes to, and reduction of, preschool funding by the Kennett Government (Taylor 1997). The report's conclusions included that kindergarten fees were a problem for many low-income families and a reason for some children missing out on kindergarten.

The current Victorian Government has worked towards improving access to preschool for children in low income families in various ways, including by increasing the rebates available to families with health care cards. However some children are still missing out because of factors associated with costs. While these may represent a relatively small proportion of all Victorian children, they include some of the most vulnerable children and those on whom the loss of early education is likely to be most profound, a loss which will have both personal costs and future costs to the society at large.

In this submission we wish to address four areas of concern:

- Access to 4-year-old preschool (kindergarten)
- Access to 3-year-old preschool (kindergarten)
- Quality of the preschool experience
- Children with additional needs

**Access to 4-year-old preschool**

Basic questions include: do all children have a right to preschool education as they do to school education; and should any child be excluded from kindergarten because of costs?

The most recent statistics (August 2000) suggest that some 97 per cent of 4 year olds are attending kindergarten (Minister for Community Services Media Release 1 December 2000). However some children continue to miss out. The children missing out are likely to include indigenous children, refugees, rural children and those with disabilities.

Both research and services staff within the Brotherhood of St Laurence have raised concern during 2000 about recent evidence of children's continuing lack of access to 4-year-old kindergarten. The cost of

kindergarten fees continues to preclude some children from low income families from attending kindergarten, as evidenced by Brotherhood service providers' experience and in recent research.

A recent Brotherhood study of poverty on the fringe of Melbourne (July 2000) included four focus groups with people on low incomes. The issue of kindergarten costs emerged clearly even in this small sample. The report (Taylor & Jope forthcoming) states:

Kindergartens (preschools) were available in all areas but the fees acted as a barrier for families with low incomes. Some used alternatives, including childcare.

They're expensive at four hundred and something dollars a year for kinder. Which is a lot. My kids go to creche and we pay half of what I'd pay for kinder fees and they have a full-time kinder teacher at the creche. So it's cheaper. (Frankston)

One mother of six children noted that only her second child had gone to kinder.

Since then finances has stopped us [If it wasn't the cost would you send them?] Yes they pick up extra skills, specially related to the age group. This one [present at the group] she needs something extra, but we just can't afford it. (Hastings)

On the other side of Melbourne, another mother whose husband is unemployed repeated the problem.

I've got a daughter who should be in kinder. I couldn't afford it because I've got four children. [Asked about the subsidies she added] I don't even know where I would find that. I still couldn't afford it. (Craigieburn)

### *Preschool fees*

The provision of kindergartens commenced in Australia in the 1890s with the development of the Free Kindergarten Movement which aimed to open free kindergartens in poor neighbourhoods. It would seem that 110 years later this needs revisiting.

In Victoria kindergarten fees were relatively low before changes introduced in 1993 by the Kennett Government. Prior to the changes the Government paid each centre a small operating subsidy which gave the kindergarten flexibility to waive fees if a family could not afford them. The changes, which included an overall decrease of some 30 per cent of funding for kindergartens in 1994, meant that kindergarten fees rose dramatically, often doubling, and that because of the change to per capita funding, kindergartens lost the flexibility to forego the fees of families who could not pay.

To compensate families on low incomes, a rebate was introduced for health care card holders and this rebate has been increased significantly by the current Government. However the rebate is a set amount (\$62.50 per term) and does not relate to the actual fees of a particular kindergarten, so that while the rebate would make a major difference to families attending kindergartens with low fees, it would not bring the fees of higher-cost kindergartens within reach. Families on low incomes are particularly dependent on their most local kindergarten because of the additional costs of travel. In one area we were told fees ranged from \$80 to \$200 per term, with fees averaging \$120 to \$180 per term.

Some recent attempts have been made to assist low-income families with kindergarten fees from special funds to which they have to apply. For low-income families, having to prove that they are poor—either to their local kindergarten committee or through other systems—can be a demeaning and embarrassing experience, which may deter some from seeking a kindergarten place for their child. This did not seem to be an issue with the lower fees available before 1994. It is suggested that a redevelopment of a centre-based subsidy should be explored.

Other issues raised from their work by our children's service providers include:

- Children starting school before they are ready because it is cheaper than a second year of kindergarten.
- Children in family day care not attending kindergarten because of the additional cost.

### **Access to 3-year-old preschool**

Preschool for 3 year olds is not subsidised by government and, because of the fees, is not an option for most low-income families. An example of fees is \$300 per 10-week term for two sessions per week (4 to 5 hours per week). The 3-year kindergarten in Fitzroy ceased in 1994 because few could afford the \$12 per session.

It would seem timely for this situation to be reviewed in light of the increasing evidence about the importance of the first three years in determining long-term outcomes and life chances for children (Centre for Community Child Health 1999). Three-year-old kindergarten can provide timely identification and monitoring of developmental delay and can ensure that specialist services are accessed as soon as possible. Alternatives for 2 and 3 year olds, especially those that provide opportunities for socialisation in a group setting such as playgroups, also need to be available at no cost to low income families.

Our service providers note that the children who would benefit most from extra preparation for kindergarten and school include those from non-English-speaking families, for example those in Somali refugee families, those with developmental delay or with severe disabilities.

### **Quality of the preschool experience**

Taylor (1997) concluded that given the diversity of settings in which preschool programs are undertaken, and the funding pressures on both kindergartens and child care centres, there is need to ensure that high quality programs are provided in both settings.

Of the 97 per cent of children receiving some preschool education, some will be in sessional kindergartens, some will be within child care centres (private or not for profit) and some in private schools. An increasing number of child care centres are including 'kindergarten' in their title and parents may have little knowledge of the quality of the program provided. While many child care centres provide high quality preschool programs, there is considerable lack of consistency in standards across centres. There are also issues of the relative amount of funding for programs in different settings and issues such as the availability of preparation time and the impact of this on quality. When the State Government started funding preschool programs in child care centres (at a lower rate than in sessional kindergartens) it was suggested that this represented cost shifting to the Commonwealth Government which primarily funds child care. The implications of tensions between State and Federal Government for the quality of services needs to be examined.

The question of what is best for the child is another issue of quality that sometimes gets lost in discussions of flexibility based on the child care needs of working parents. Many of the low income families with whom the Brotherhood is in contact are not in employment. (Currently in Australia over 300,000 families with children have no family member employed.) Will local, low cost, high quality, half day kindergarten sessions remain available for these children?

### **Children with additional needs**

Children with additional needs include those at risk of developmental delay, with emotional or behavioural difficulties, as well as those with recognised delays or disabilities.

Issues raised by service providers include:

- Children with additional needs may not be getting additional support.
- Children with challenging behaviours, or with disabilities, who do not qualify for support offered through preschool support programs because they do not have a 'severe disability', may be excluded from kindergartens because their needs cannot be managed in a large kindergarten group (often 28 to 30 children) without additional support.
- Children with severe disabilities may get assistance to attend kindergarten for a limited number of hours, fewer than the standard hours, while their needs remain greater.

- There is different availability of funded support for children with disabilities in child care centres as opposed to preschool.

It is crucial that preschool staff be adequately resourced to provide an environment that will meet the needs of these children and enable them to be included in the preschool experience. This resourcing includes training, on site ‘hands on’ specialist support, higher staff ratios if needed and additional preparation time.

## **Conclusion**

While we have not made specific recommendations above, we ask that the following questions be addressed by the Ministerial Review:

1. Given that some children are still missing out, what funding arrangements can be put in place that best promote access to 4-year-old preschool for children from low income families?
2. Given the particular value of early childhood education for disadvantaged children, can additional funding be found to make 3-year-old kindergarten an affordable option for children in low income families?
3. Given the diversity of settings, how can it best be ensured that all children, whether in sessional kindergartens or child care centres, receive a high quality preschool education?
4. Given the difficulties of providing preschool services for children with additional needs, how can preschools be resourced to ensure that those children with the greatest needs receive at least the same amount of preschool education as other children?

We would welcome the opportunity to participate in ongoing consultation on these issues.

## *References*

Taylor, J 1997, *Kids and kindergarten: access to preschool in Victoria*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne.

Taylor, J & Jope, S (forthcoming), *Poverty on the metropolitan fringe*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne.