

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

**REVIEW OF THE FUNCTIONS EXERCISED BY THE
COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**



**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 1 NOVEMBER 2017**

SESSION TWO

Members

**Hon Dr Sally Talbot, MLC (Chair)
Mr K.M. O'Donnell, MLA (Deputy Chair)
Hon Donna Faragher, MLC
Mrs J.M.C. Stojkovski, MLA**

Hearing commenced at 10.17 am

Professor STEPHEN RADE ZUBRICK

Principal Research Fellow, Telethon Kids Institute; University of Western Australia examined:

The CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for agreeing to appear today to provide evidence in relation to the committee's review of the exercise of the functions of the Commissioner for Children and Young People. We have already introduced ourselves, so you know who we are. It is important to understand that any deliberate misleading of this committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Your evidence is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, this privilege does not apply to anything you might say outside of today's proceedings. Today is a public hearing but if, during the hearing, you feel that the evidence you are about to give should be given confidentially, please let us know so that we can respond to your request appropriately. Would you like to begin by introducing yourself for the record?

Prof. ZUBRICK: My name is Stephen Zubrick. I am a principal senior researcher at the Telethon Kids Institute and a professor in the school of education at the University of Western Australia.

The CHAIR: Thank you. May I call you Steve?

Prof. ZUBRICK: Of course.

The CHAIR: We will not be ultra-formal in this session. We have a series of questions, I suspect, none of which, will take you by surprise. I was particularly keen, as a member of this committee in the last Parliament, for my colleagues who are new to this committee to meet you. You will have seen that Donna was the previous witness. We are going to start by asking you to talk a little bit about your role as an ambassador because that is something that is of great interest to us and, obviously, forms quite a nice jumping off point to talk about some of the ways that you are enhancing the function of the commissioner and his office. Can you tell us a little bit about your role as an ambassador and how you see that role?

[10.20 am]

Prof. ZUBRICK: The opportunity to be an ambassador occurred under the previous commissioner's leadership. Michelle Scott approached a group of people—I was one of them—with the proposition that we might consider being an ambassador for the commission. This was in 2012. I suppose at the broadest level what that allowed the then commissioner to do was to constellate a group of people around her that could offer advice and guidance more or less on an as-needs basis. When I say offer advice and guidance, my particular role is in the role of a developmental scientist and to provide, particularly given the work that we have done over the years studying Western Australian children, general background information and, at times, quite specific information about how the children of Western Australia are faring. The role of ambassador is a pretty flexible one. It involves, where appropriate, waving the flag for the commission's work. It allows the commissioner to bring us together, maybe about twice a year—I would have to consult my diary to say precisely how regularly we meet, but we do, at the behest of the commission. We are provided with an outline of what the current work and strategic plan of the commission is. From time to time I have been asked to contribute very specifically in areas of my expertise to work and reports that the commission undertakes. It is a privilege. You do not get an opportunity to serve Western Australia, short of the kind of work that you do, in the role that I am in. This gives me a wonderful opportunity to get out of the ivory tower, to learn a little bit about how the commission works and provides advice and

assistance to the government, and, particularly, to hear the voices of young people and their interests and needs.

The CHAIR: Do you feel that the ambassadors are being used to their full potential—recognising that you are all busy people?

Prof. ZUBRICK: The qualifier on the end of that sentence is quite a critical one. There are always things to do when you are in positions that the ambassadors hold. Broadly, my personal experience is that certainly I am well used and appropriately used where needed. Colin, the current commissioner, initiates, again from time to time, meetings with me when he is not pulling the whole group of ambassadors together. I get the sense that he knows, pretty much, what the range of, certainly, my skills and knowledge is. He certainly understands the networks that I am in touch with and I feel quite pleased about being used in that capacity and broadly feel that my skills are being used appropriately. The maximum is always a bit of a guess in terms of how you judge that, but I have capacity to respond and Colin's work and the work of the commission is very close to the front of the taxi queue.

The CHAIR: That is a great way of responding to that question. You will notice that in the opening statement we do have the capacity to go into closed session if you felt that there were comments that you would like to make that were not on the public record.

Prof. ZUBRICK: I appreciate that. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Do any other members want to ask questions about the ambassadors' role?

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: You have indicated that your expertise is utilised appropriately and all of those sorts of things. Do you see that there are any gaps where, perhaps, whether it is yourself or other ambassadors, could be utilised more effectively, perhaps in different ways than you might have thought you would be utilised by the commissioner?

Prof. ZUBRICK: That is a challenging question to ask, partly because it presumes a really firm understanding of the range of activities the commission undertakes. There is always that sense that, certainly when I step into the commission and am working with or providing advice to staff there, that it is a very broad front that they are working across. I might be providing advice either in a very narrow area that they are working on or in areas where they have a gleam in their eye. I think that I have probably more to offer in that latter area where judgements need to be made or where I can provide information that may balance the appetite for a very grand scale of work and bring that back to, pragmatically, what is doable and, essentially, what are the key elements that have to be tapped in this and anything else that is around the edge—if you can reach for that, that is good.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: So it is a bit like your analogy with respect to the ivory tower. Sometimes when you are in the ivory tower you can think of things as being large and grandiose. Sometimes you need someone to be able to, perhaps, pull you back and look at alternatives. That is, perhaps, an opportunity.

Prof. ZUBRICK: That is right.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: Okay. Thank you.

Prof. ZUBRICK: We are all ambitious to do things.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: Of course.

The CHAIR: There is always more to do.

Prof. ZUBRICK: Yes. I think I probably have a skill set that is relatively refined around pragmatic elements. I respond well to big vision, largely by going, "Now, how are you going to do that?" I tend

to be the detail freak that moves through that and goes, “If that is the ambition, here are the pieces that, probably, are implementable.”

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: Thank you.

The CHAIR: We have talked to the commissioner in some detail. Our hearing with the commissioner is on the public record. He has an impressive array of projects, all of which are reporting in the medium term, which is very interesting. I wondered if we could now go to some of those projects and look at the overlaps between, perhaps, the work that you are doing and how that work fits with what the commissioner is doing. I guess what we are leading to is an overarching question about the direction of the commission’s work and whether you have some observations to make about whether that direction is the best one or whether it should be changed slightly or radically.

Prof. ZUBRICK: Notwithstanding that the commission and the commissioner specifically is working against a set legislation—that is in your remit; not mine—there are things within that legislation that do specify a general scope of activities. The devil is in the detail in regard to that. I think that commissioners—both actually; and Colin specifically—have had to sit down and look at their remit. Broadly, the pleasing aspect that I see under development at the moment is a very serious consideration of, we have got better and better descriptions of what the status of children and young people is in Western Australia. If I can use an analogy, we have got very fine and better snapshots. What we do not have is the ability to put them together in a kind of motion picture around that. A more formal way of stating that is that there is a need for monitoring and time-series data so that people such as yourselves can be informed on the issue of: this is what it looked like a decade ago; this is what it looks like now; this is what we have attempted to do in the last four or five years; this is what the general progress is. So, Colin and his staff are deeply thinking about how that could be accomplished, whether it is feasible to do that; and, if so, which pieces can be practically achieved. That is work that I have been drawn into from time to time to offer advice around.

My general sense of the scope and remit of the work that is committed to at the moment is that it is certainly on a large scale. I do not get the sense that it is random in any way at all. I suppose in looking at and considering the best way forward, the other thing that I admire is that there is a hasten slowly ability—a good idea is selected or brought in and then really interrogated fairly closely. Anyone in a leadership position is ultimately dependent on the people around them as well. I think that while we have fine leadership, there is a very good team that is constellated around some of the goals that the commission has. I suppose, aside from the monitoring and vulnerability kinds of frameworks that the commission has in view, one of the most satisfying pieces of their work and achievement is in really bringing to Western Australia the voices of young people. Those are hard to get. I can get and analyse data, and give estimates of effects, but ultimately it is real lives that need to tell their stories. The commission has a very fine and emerging track record in doing that as well. So, it is a big agenda, but it has the interests of the wide community of children and young people in its gaze. It does not drill straight into a very tiny, narrow range, and I think that is kind of appropriate and rather unique amongst the set of commissions across Australia.

[10.30 am]

The CHAIR: When we start hearing those voices, a lot of what we hear is very troubling, is it not?

Prof. ZUBRICK: It is.

The CHAIR: Can we move, first of all, to your engagement in education project and talk a bit about that? I know that is of great interest to all of us on this side of the table.

Prof. ZUBRICK: That has certainly been a very enjoyable moment in my career and the career of my team, and a rather unlikely one. I want to spend a minute or two just describing to you how it even came to us, because I think the pathway for how things happen might be of interest to you. It is a very fine credit to the state in that regard. The Department of Education, Western Australia, collects some of the finest administrative data on children attending government schools. It is a very rich set of data. It is collected twice a day. It deals with things like attendance and, in addition to that, it deals with some aspects of their social adjustment, engagement. The data is then, because of the nature of the education department, able to be linked with NAPLAN results and academic competency and achievement results. This provides the state Department of Education a very fine guidance system, if I could call it that, in terms of monitoring how their children are. You, as parliamentarians, will fully appreciate what the commonwealth government has access to, which is quite limited. They do not deliver education services. One of the great policy needs of the government of Australia was in answering a very simple question: is there a relationship between school attendance and achievement? Now, on the surface of it, we would think, “Well, we would hope so in that regard”, but the policy, both at the state and at the commonwealth level, was operating in a data-free zone. So at a simple level —

The CHAIR: It took some courage to ask the question.

Prof. ZUBRICK: It did take some courage to ask the question. At a very simple level, the commonwealth department was in need and they would have liked to have accessed this state’s data on that to be able to answer that question. I will not go into the ins and outs of state–federal relationships here. What they needed, and found, was a third party that could safely handle those data on behalf of both the state and federal government, and we were asked if we would undertake the analysis of the data and produce a report. We did. We produced a report called “Every Day Counts”. That was a very simple title for a fairly large report that looked at the relationship between school attendance and academic achievement. You will be pleased to know, every day counts. There is not, one would hope, a threshold effect from that standpoint. Yes, children can miss some school. But there is not a threshold at which I can look at and say, “Well, it’s okay for 10 or 20 days to go missing”; you are better to be there.

That went up right through both federal and state policy processes to very good effect, and out of that report grew an interest in the commission, particularly, for some additional work on looking specifically at the issue of school engagement. Engagement is a part of the attendance story. Some would claim that if you are looking at attendance, you know as much as you need to know about engagement. It is a little richer than that. But the commission came back to us and said would we, having undertaken this big report, be in a position to do a specialist report, looking specifically at the areas of engagement. They put out an expression of interest on 19 March 2015. We submitted what we thought we could do. On 1 April, we said for about 86 person hours we felt we could produce a report that would meet the specification that the commission had. That was approved on 10 April and we submitted the report on 14 July. What we came out with as a team, in terms of what we had studied, was a very rich understanding of some of the dynamics that underpin how children find their way to school, what the attitudes are both within their families and their communities, and very particularly at schools, that keep them there and keep them engaged. There is not a silver bullet here. If we look at modern education systems at the moment, the engagement assumptions are being firmly loaded into the families’ bailiwick. Families are responsible for motivating engagement and getting children to school.

The CHAIR: So everything from breakfast to homework to —

Prof. ZUBRICK: That is right. I mean, those are very profound assumptions. It is fine for families that can do that. It is fine for families where the adults themselves have had a good experience at school. I mean, I find it staggering given some of the experiences that adults have at school, that they are brave enough to send their children to school, you know. And we could go into the Aboriginal circumstance and talk in detail about that. But the assumptions or the assumptive base that schools work with believing that, well, engagement in the processes and the processes of motivation to be there are all somehow behind the household door, I think, are fundamentally flawed. We are asking families to do a lot here. That trolley gets loaded with more each year.

The CHAIR: Too much you are saying.

Prof. ZUBRICK: Yes. I believe that. When you actually ask the students—and this was the hardest part of our review—“What keeps you engaged?”, there is remarkably scant empirical literature and study of what keeps kids at school. Particularly looking at that developmentally from year 1 to year 12 because your motivations and your understanding of what you are doing develop along with that. There is a very large gap of understanding, but what is there is very clear: the thing that keeps kids at school are the relationships that they have with the teachers and the staff at the school. That matters enormously. You can kind of, look at, “Well, the school actually thinks your engagement is all happening at home”, and the young person themselves, when consulted, is basically saying, “Things have to happen here at school. We have to feel safe. We have to feel value. We have to be involved in an understanding of what is in it for us”, and those are very critical processes that need to be carried out within schools.

Teachers have a much more ambivalent attitude about what their role is in engagement and at a rather blunt end of things, it can sound like, “Well, we are here to provide the curriculum. Engagement will somehow happen elsewhere around that.” So, the report we produced, I felt, and we certainly had indication from readers, made a contribution in actually calling the process of saying, “What are our assumptions about engagement? Where do we believe it occurs? What is the reality when you put together the opinions of the teachers, the opinions of school systems, and the opinions of parents about how that works?”

[10.40 am]

Now, one of the things that is writ very large in that is families and schools that cannot engage in engagement deepen social inequalities in children. There are some schools that are better at doing this than others. Leadership is critical in all of this and the skill base and talents of the teachers are critical in that. So, the report was in many ways a slight report. It was something we could produce from the materials that, as it were, had been set aside in the “Every Day Counts” report. The commission, I think, had a very appropriate gleam in their eye in terms of saying, “We think you probably could do this for us”, and my experience of it is that it was a very successful period of writing and very thoughtful piece of work. The extent to which it has been picked up and properly understood, I think, is still ahead of us. I have not had a chance to really penetrate into the education department system here and really talk with people about what they have made of the report and whether it is of any use to them. This is something I have said to the commission; I would like to see parents, students and educators coming together in a common forum to actually thrash out some of the assumptions underlying school engagement.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: Two quick questions: one, what is the name of your report; and, secondly, in the report did it address anything around flexible learning spaces, contemporary learning, that teaching pedagogy that is now starting to emerge, particularly in primary schools but less so in upper schools, and does that have an effect on children’s engagement in the classroom?

Prof. ZUBRICK: Can you ask me to submit the report to you because I can at a push of a button get it to the committee. I am embarrassed to say I cannot rattle off the title off the top of my head. I think, it was just “School Engagement”.

The CHAIR: Sorry; I should have introduced Mathew Bates, who is acting as our advisory officer today. That is something he might take care of.

Prof. ZUBRICK: I am happy to take that on notice and I can effortlessly get that in a precis to you.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: That would be lovely, thank you.

Prof. ZUBRICK: The second part of your question is an important part because one of the features—and this is something the commission was keen about—was what is the evidence on interventions that improve or increase engagement? We certainly trawled through the evidence. We are always looking for experimental evidence that really tests it at the pointy end. There is not any. There has not been good quality evidence there. There is a raft of general claims about flexible workspaces and even right down and including the size of classrooms and work groups. What you keep coming back to when you look at the evidence is that, you know, facilities and configurations of workspaces have a place to play but the paramount issue really is in the teacher–student relationship and the ability to control and motivate the classroom, to be in touch with students, particularly where they have particular needs or vulnerabilities. Again, there is not “Here is a set of six easy—I would not claim any of this would be easy—“Here is a set of six solutions that are goes.”

The CHAIR: Perhaps we could move now to the monitoring framework. So, you are doing some work with the commissioner, we understand, on the monitoring framework.

Prof. ZUBRICK: That is right.

The CHAIR: I am interested in what you say about the standard of our data collection through the Department of Education. Can you expand on that?

Prof. ZUBRICK: Gosh. Well, I suppose the reflection that I would make is that the education department has had—you will appreciate these are my opinions—I think, very good leadership over quite an extended period of time. I started working with various departmental officers in the WA Department of Education back in the very early 1990s and even then there was a good deal of careful thinking and leadership around what I would call the quantitative or data needs of a Department of Education with a real view towards trying to implement over time real-time data collection about students. Were they attending? What are they enrolled in? What does their achievement look like? A lot of that early data focus was in measuring academic achievement or performance. That has since been supplemented by, very appropriately, increasing information about social and emotional development of children.

When you look across Australia—and I tend to work in environments that allow me to do a lot of that—the WA Department of Education has some of the most robust data available. I am sure there would be officers in the department that could give a finer description of that than I can, but certainly in terms of being a scientist, the department here has been a marvellous supporter of our work and, I believe I am completely safe in saying, a major beneficiary of the kind of contributions they have made over time.

The CHAIR: We obviously heard from Professor Cross about the CoLab project, which is essentially what you are talking about. One of the things she was drawing our attention to is the fact that people are still working in silos.

Prof. ZUBRICK: Yes.

The CHAIR: So you are talking specifically about the Department of Education and their data collection. You mentioned briefly there at the end the social and emotional aspects of children's wellbeing. Is it happening and how can it happen more quickly and more effectively?

Prof. ZUBRICK: Boy; that is, again, a challenging question. I do not think at the moment—the education systems both here and around Australia have yet to really begin to grapple with their role in social and emotional education. If one were to use kind of economic language to describe the focus of education systems, it has largely been in the cognitive development of children as that relates to their performance in numeracy, literacy, mathematics and so forth. What has tended to have a much more diminished focus is who children and young people are as social entities. Do they have emotional intelligence? It is all well and good to be bright and able and have the necessary literacy and numeracy skills to make your way in the world, but if nobody will work with you or get on with you or if you cannot maintain relationships and resolve disputes, much of it is for nought. As the, I suppose, leading wave of interest in emotional intelligence and social and emotional development has progressed, schools have increasingly begun to grapple with what does a curriculum look like around those particular issues. I still think that the general environment with respect to the schools' role in that, and I do think they have one, has not yet landed on some basic principles that allow an even move forward. You will appreciate the notion of wellbeing and emotional adjustment is a contended zone. People will always have contentions about what works to develop children or not, and that is still, when I look at it, in a state of flux. I see that in terms of what I call the battle for the agenda. Who is defining that agenda? What gets put on it? What are the measures, for example, that are of interest? How much of that can be guided or should be guided by good quality science, and there is an ample quantity of that? It is a robust conversation that is occurring in school systems across the nation and here in Western Australia.

[10.50 am]

The CHAIR: The Young Minds Matter process, which we have now had two waves of —

Prof. ZUBRICK: That is right, 18 years apart.

The CHAIR: Has the changing data over those 18 years led to a fiercer contest for the agenda setting?

Prof. ZUBRICK: Yes. I believe that the data seized upon—you are victims of this, not beneficiaries of it. Certainly, the Young Minds Matter survey data have been seized upon. Just as a reminder, we conducted both the first national and the second national mental health surveys of children and youth, the Young Minds Matter being the second one recently completed in 2014. What we are able to say quite confidently is that the base prevalence of mental health problems or disorders in children is 14 per cent. That has remained consistent over an 18-year period of time. I think we need to be confident about that. People often go, "Aren't we lowering it?" I think it is an "is". What we found notable about the comparison is that rates of depression and anxiety have increased but then are offset by drops in conduct disorder and hyperactivity and ADHD. The base rate has remained 14 per cent, but the mix of disorders has changed.

The CHAIR: Is that 14 per cent children who are already manifesting symptoms?

Prof. ZUBRICK: Yes. They have reached, and we examined them through either interviewing directly and examining them or with interviews using their parents as informants with a set of clinical scales that allow us to make and assign what is called "caseness" to the children.

The CHAIR: How does the 14 per cent compare with the adult population?

Prof. ZUBRICK: Mental health disorders continue to rise until you are in your mid-20s and then through life they lower. So we see the highest rates of mental health disorders in the mid-20 to

almost early 30 age. I am not going to quote you a figure. I can take that on notice and easily get it. Our surveys go from four to 17 years. They are ahead of this.

The CHAIR: That is a good answer.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: With regard to the mix of anxiety versus ADHD, there has been some commentary in the past that ADHD was being overprescribed and things like that. Has that had any impact? Is that one of the reasons possibly why the ADHD recurrences have gone down?

Prof. ZUBRICK: I do not have an answer to that question and the data are silent on being able to inform that. What we can certainly say is that the mix in terms of prevalence of the individual disorders has changed and people have been surprised, sobered, by the high rates of depression and anxiety, particularly in teenagers and particularly in young girls. And we have been asked why; what has produced that? Again, in a cross-sectional survey, you get a snapshot; you do not get a cause. We have conjectures about what might be driving that in terms of modern living and modern society, but the definitive studies of here is the cause of the change of that prevalence are not to hand. I might add that we are not alone as a nation in observing this increase.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: Do you feel, in your opinion, that there needs to be more exploration of those causes?

Prof. ZUBRICK: I would welcome more explanation of those causes. Again, I think some of that would come from qualitative studies where we go back to the young people themselves and we start conversations with them in terms of “What is it like?” I have got very specific questions about the internet and the cell phone in the handbag or the pocket.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: I asked a similar question of Professor Cross as well and it is in line with what we are talking about now. Are you noticing through the research that you are doing that issues surrounding resilience and health and wellbeing and ability to cope are becoming more prevalent in younger children at an earlier age than perhaps a few years ago? Certainly, I mentioned this in the previous hearing. Certainly, anecdotally from what I see and read, teachers in particular are noticing that they are having to deal a lot more with younger children in kindy and year 1 with teaching them more about actually how to cope and not overact to certain scenarios, whatever they may be. Is that something that you are certainly seeing through the work that you are doing?

Prof. ZUBRICK: I think we are. I want to respond to the fact that the observations are anecdotal, but they are so uniform. As a scientist, you have to kind of go, now, wait a minute. They are just so uniform across not just our own state but across the nation. It is a heads up. You have to really pay attention to what is going on. I have spent my career largely studying Western Australian family and family life. So, it is not just the children that is in the focus; it is the family and the family unit as well. I go back to just the striking evidence of what we are asking modern families—well, modern families sitting here—to do in terms of work and family balance. The contemporary Western Australian family with children has to take care of their children. They have to have an eye out for the adult wellbeing, not only now, but into the future, so that their retirement and post-work lives are secure. They are very often now managing children into mid-adulthood at home, and elderly parents who are living longer and needing care considerations around that—all added work, too. I look at the day. I believe Western Australia still has a day that has 24 hours in it, and there is only so much of that that can be sliced and diced. I think it makes for challenges in managing children. One of the results of that is what I call a cooling of parental warmth. Babies and toddlers are usually raised in settings with quite a high level of parental warmth, but as we get ready to put them into care settings and onward into school, parental warmth cools off. It is, “Right. You know I love you. Get your bag; we’re going”, in terms of how that works. Again, I think that we are really struggling to particularly provide for our zero to five-year-olds the kind of care environments that not just support

the child, but support the parents as well. I think we are asking a tremendous amount of them. The repercussion of that, I think, flows into the kind of anecdotal observations that we are making in terms of children arriving at school and needing a more extended or deeper period of socialisation and orientation. Can I also say that I still find it very confronting that we treat children like horses—they all have the same birthdays, or they have all been manufactured on the same date. Children arrive at school in varying states of maturity and our entry points to school still do not provide a flexible response or what I would call an on-entry experience that would allow us to more appropriately respond in a tailored way to their needs. As we have watched them arrive at schools earlier and earlier, the need for that flexibility has increased.

[11.00 am]

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: Do you think that some of the challenges as well that add to that are the greater need for teachers—it is put on by governments—in respect to certain curriculum outcomes testing and all those sorts of things at a very early age? Is that also perhaps a contributor, particularly in those early years, where I would agree with you that you can have a four-year-old who comes in who is a very early four-year old and you can get one who is a very much more developed four-year-old.

Prof. ZUBRICK: That is exactly right.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: There is a whole spectrum who will be in a kindy classroom or a preprimary classroom, and they are all in together, and yet the teacher also has to have all of these measures that they have to deal with throughout the year and to test here and to test here. Are we putting too much pressure on everybody?

Prof. ZUBRICK: I think the short answer to that is yes. Part of that pressure comes from excessively high expectations for children. They are not rockets. They are not on a trajectory that necessarily goes straight up. When you actually look at their development, it bobs and weaves and moves in response to circumstances. I think we have an over-instrumental sense of what our children are about and what our schools should be accomplishing. I also think it is tragic that we have allowed such a sharp division between play-based pedagogy and more didactic pedagogies. I think that has been one of the biggest tragedies perpetrated on children. We want our teachers, our educators, the people in our care systems to be able to modulate what is led by the child against what is led by the teacher, and to be able to do that in ways that match where the child is at their particular point in development.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: I know that we would like to move on, but I have one other question. It is to do with the pressure. Do you think there has been an impact on the push for three-year-old kindy programs, for example? I understand that there is a desire, particularly in my community, for these three-year-old programs to be implemented because it helps the parents in the managing of the child if they can put them in a three-year-old program with background care that looks after them for a whole day. But do you think that is having a detrimental impact on the child?

Prof. ZUBRICK: I want to reassure you that I do not believe that any of the empirical evidence is returning to us that there are detriments here in what happens to children when they are put into early care and education experiences that are well designed. We keep coming back to looking at the world literature around this. I think the message that I would be sending to parents is one of greater confidence rather than uncertainty about it. I wish all parents knew more about what to shop for or look for in that experience. Certainly, those parents that do know and can do that and engage in it, that then raises for you how we guide the Western Australian system to allow better outcomes for children who are living in circumstances where their parents will not or cannot do that. My broad concern about the earlier edge, between zero and four years of age, and what we are offering in

services is really in seeing social inequalities emerge where parents who have those capabilities and know what they are looking for can do it and launch straight in there, but for children who are living in circumstances other than that, they are being left behind. That is of great concern to me. One of the things that you will find in the everyday counts report is very clear evidence from us that by the time grade 1 starts, children have already packed their attendance careers in their schoolbag. If we know what their attendance pattern looks like in grade 1, it pretty well tells us what it is going to look like right up the line. That is sobering. As we push back and look down into who enrolled in kindergarten and who enrolled in day care, we see the same sort of attendance features there. I do not have an immediate answer to it because we are observing this I think for the first time, but it invites people like you to lead and be sensitive to the fact that we want better outcomes for all children in our state. It will not happen perfectly, and I am not saying that it needs to, but it is a concern that I have about certainly the zero-to-four provision and how that looks.

The CHAIR: Again, I think we in turn throw it back to you as a researcher, and that leads us to what I think was probably our last question, which was around the vulnerable children report, because you are one of the people who has been very effectively changing the focus from poverty to disadvantage and dysfunction, which clearly is something that changes our perspective as policymakers, because it is like a kaleidoscope and all of a sudden the whole thing has changed.

Prof. ZUBRICK: That is right.

The CHAIR: I would be interested if you would develop that area as well.

Prof. ZUBRICK: I find this probably one of the most exciting features at this point in my career, and to be able to sit in a room and talk with you. At the broadest level, you have to have a view about the population. Certainly, in terms of your constituency, your door will be knocked on with individual issues; I do not deny that for a minute. But at the very broadest level, if we kind of think of the zero to four-year-olds in Western Australia, there are 173 000 of them. I think there are about 36 000 births a year from that standpoint, just in terms of rate of supply, if we could talk in that fashion. The vast majority of our children are doing well. They go on to lead productive, contributory lives. Our ambition for our children is for them to be able to choose a life they value and we would like them to be able to participate socially, civically and economically. About half of all Western Australian children will make the course from birth to adulthood, into their 20s, without but a light touch on any of our services. I call them the developmentally enabled; they just motor on and kind of make their way through it. The other half of our children move in and out of our system; some very, very fleetingly, just for the piece that they need because their parents know what they are looking for, or the system knows what it is looking for and gives the nudge at the right time. Others, about 10 per cent, for example, are overwhelmed—about 17 300 zero to four-year-old children live in overwhelmed families.

The CHAIR: Ten per cent of the total?

Prof. ZUBRICK: Ten per cent of the total. That would be 17 000 Western Australian children. When we look at those families, firstly, at the age of four they are on average 19 months behind their enabled peers. As we follow them, at the rate they are improving—they are—it will take 13 years for them to catch up, so it is a steady movement through there. I suppose, in answering your question, what we are bringing into the mix of policy is understanding that we have children who are enabled, children who belong in what I call the working poor—battler families—and we have a very separate and very small group of families that have what is called low human capital. They are in the lowest quintile of income and have a very high rate of teenage pregnancy. So in coming into policy settings, we can talk about the whole population and go, “Here are some of the different policy responses that move pieces of the population in different ways.” For you, some of that is very

broad brush stroke. Some of it involves a much finer focus and I think we see this in our models of family and parent centres that we are placing in some of our schools, where we admit that for some families it is not a matter of access that puts it right on their shoulders—“Well, you didn’t access.” It is a matter of the very capability and circumstances of being able to get to the service, being impaired by what life is bringing to their door. I think we have gotten much better at being able to describe that and what some of the policy options and ways of thinking are about that. In answer to your question, I was able to take that in my role of ambassador to the commission and workshop that with them in terms of saying, “This is what we’re seeing at a population level in Western Australia.” You can overfocus on risk and you can overfocus on targeting and fail to remember we have a whole population that contributes to this story.

[11.10 am]

The CHAIR: Is that the whole 10 per cent, the 17 000 for whom access is a meaningless concept?

Prof. ZUBRICK: It is probably not meaningless; it just is virtually impossible to really make it work.

The CHAIR: It is not a functioning concept. It is not just a matter of setting up the shopfront at the end of the street.

Prof. ZUBRICK: Yes. The metaphor of alligators and draining the swamp kind of comes to mind here. They are just up to here with what they have to do. I think the other thing is that, again, not all parents are really equipped with the talents, the skills and understanding of how to use what are increasingly sophisticated systems of service provision. The knowledgeable get what they want. If you have your eye on children, they are not making choices.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: Can I ask a question about this ability to identify those children that may come into contact with services and the child health checks and the recent changes around those. Do you think that is having a big impact on the ability to identify early and is it something we should be looking at?

Prof. ZUBRICK: I think it provides an improvement on our ability to identify early. It is certainly a needed improvement. There is no Holy Grail of identification. The reality is that our systems will over-identify children that appear to be needy at one time who, without intervention, would have gone on to be quite okay. That is normal; I like to reassure you that when you are faced with a three-year-old who is not talking, you are probably better to say, “Well, there’s some generic things we can do here right now; we don’t need to pull out the laser and get going on this, but let’s have another look at age four.” Being able to have repeated views of children in their development tells us more than a single snapshot at one time. It is how do we put that story together so that it travels with each child in meaningful ways.

The CHAIR: Perhaps before I ask the committee whether they have any final questions and, indeed, ask you, Steve, perhaps I could just ask you for a couple of comments on the proposition that the commissioner is considering at the moment about appointing a deputy commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people. I am sure you are familiar with the ideas and that other states have done similar things. Can we just ask for your views on that?

Prof. ZUBRICK: I think you are probably aware that I have a long history of very specifically studying the Australian Aboriginal circumstance, and most of that work has taken place here in WA. I am being thoughtful here, partly because I have not given this proposition the consideration that it needs, partly because I have not had an opportunity to hear the commissioner talk about this generally. I do not shoot from the hip in terms of giving opinions about, “This is what’s being thought about.” Certainly, our ability to have good Indigenous-led policy and contribution is critically important. How we get the voices and leadership of Aboriginal people represented in these

processes, to me I think is essential. It is not a change that I would see as threatening or problematic. I think the thing that would be important is to hear what Aboriginal voices offer to this, both as a proposition and what can be pragmatically achieved in doing this.

The CHAIR: Does anybody else have any closing questions?

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: It has been very interesting; thank you very much.

Prof. ZUBRICK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Steve, do you have anything you would like to say by way of conclusion?

Prof. ZUBRICK: Not at all. It is a privilege to have been here. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. May I thank you on behalf of the committee for your evidence to us today. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for the correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary document for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Thank you so much for your time this morning.

Prof. ZUBRICK: I wish you well in your work.

Hearing concluded at 11.16 am
