

Childcare workers need a pay rise to reflect the importance of the work they do ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

"How much does the average Australian worker earn per hour," I ask early childhood educators in my work as a childcare consultant. Invariably their answers are out by about \$10 an hour – because they can't conceive that the average Australian worker earns \$40.61 an hour compared to their measly \$21.

This week the Fair Work Commission rejected the educators' claim for a 35 per cent pay increase. The educators - 97 per cent of whom are women - argued that childcare work is undervalued due to gender inequity. The argument was simple: society undervalues the skills of an early childhood educator because they are seen as "soft," just an extension of the unpaid work performed by mothers at home (and really they are not even actually skills - don't women just innately know how to care for children?).

The people that do appreciate early childhood educators and teachers are the parents and families that see what their children learn and the love that they are given. Photo: Janie Barrett

The Fair Work Commission didn't like how the unions argued it, so it is back to the drawing board for a case that started back in July 2013. Some early childhood teachers represented by a different union are having a crack before the commission later this year.

One consideration for the Fair Work Commission is the capacity of the employers to pay for any wage rises it orders. Preschools and childcare centres are generally cash-strapped and reliant on government funding, so big pay increases would depend on governments.

When childcare educators announced that they were going to strike on March 27, calling on families to keep children at home that day, Education Minister Simon Birmingham called it a stunt. So it is hard to see him recommending more money to cover wage increases.

Last week all state and territory governments released a report on a review they had jointly commissioned about how early education could be used to increase children's school performance.

The report, *Lifting Our Game*, showed that Australia barely values early childhood education. Nationally, we invest less than 0.5 per cent of our gross domestic product in this field, well below the OECD average of 0.8 per cent. We only spend 2.5 per cent of our total education budget on preschool, although children learn more in their first five years than at any other time and there is a veritable tsunami of evidence that early education improves children's NAPLAN scores, PISA scores, and gives them a raft of soft skills they will need for later employment.

Lifting our Game (and yes, we need to) made it clear that fixing education and care workforce issues, especially supply, is imperative to improved outcomes. (Apparently to get the highly skilled educators you need for quality early education, you have to pay for them – who would have thought?)

Nationally, we invest less than 0.5 per cent of our gross domestic product in early childhood education, well below the OECD average of 0.8 per cent. Photo: Sylvia Liber

One in five early childhood educators are considering leaving the profession because of the low wages, status and standing of their work. They are sick of doing demanding jobs without love or money. In Sydney, high rents are forcing many out of living near their workplace – don't even talk about home ownership to this lot.

So with no wage rises imminent and a minister that makes it clear that childcare is really no more than that – caring for children to enable more important workers to go off to more important jobs – why would anyone want to remain in the job?

The people that do appreciate early childhood educators and teachers are the parents and families that see what their children learn and the love that they are given at childcare and preschools.

Maybe this is what it comes down to: parents had better start speaking out about the need for educators to get liveable wages because

they are the ones that know that caring for and educating young children are skills that need to be learned.

If educators all leave, what will we do as a country when there is no one left to care for the children? It may just be women's work, but like all women's work you sure as hell will notice when it is no longer done.

-reprinted from The Sydney Morning Herald

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