

Why we are missing the point in the childcare debate ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Since the federal government's childcare subsidy replaced the childcare benefit and the childcare rebate on Monday, there has been endless talk of whether the change has been beneficial or not, and to whom.

There was debate over whether families whose combined income is over \$350,000 deserve any assistance with childcare fees at all, viewing the subsidy as a welfare payment to help low-income families. And many have pointed out that means tests and caps and the extortionate price of childcare are major disincentives for primary carers (usually women) and subsidiary earners (also usually women) to return to the workforce.

But all these arguments about the changes to the rebate (because call it whatever you like, it's still a rebate) ignore the bigger problem: the policy is a bad one in the first place. The changes make it better for some and worse for others, but it is still a bad way of subsidising childcare.

Because it presents childcare as a service for parents, instead of a service for our littlest citizens.

Cashback schemes sound like something from a budget white goods store and gloss over the fact that education and care are not commodities. They are rights.

As a teacher with a fairly decent understanding of child development, I know that 80 per cent of my child's brain will be formed by the age of three and 90 per cent by age five. Surely our discussion about where the money for early childhood education and care should come from should be about kids' education and their right to it. I don't care who your parents are or how much they earn. Education is not a parental right, it is a child's right as a citizen.

Getting parents squabbling with each other about who deserves what serves no-one but a government who want to save money on a childcare system that isn't working.

And let's be clear: the system isn't working for anyone. Not for parents, who can barely afford to keep the lights on and keep their kids in care, not for early childhood educators, who are paid shamefully low salaries, and certainly not for children who have no or very limited entitlement to access. It's not even working for the economy because so many parents are forced not to work or to work less than they would like to because of the prohibitive cost.

And the problem isn't a lack of government investment. On the contrary, Australia spends well above the OECD average per child on ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care). But the way the money is spent is just plain ridiculous.

In 2016, the former minister Kate Ellis said the childcare system was "incapable of meeting the needs of Australian parents, our economy, government, the workforce that keeps it going, or most importantly, the children for whom it exists".

The hodgepodge system was also described by Ellis as an egg needing to be unscrambled. And while I'm sure there's some hip café in Newtown or Brunswick currently serving unscrambled eggs on sourdough, I think we'd be better off getting a new egg. What we need is not tinkering with policy, what we need is whole system reform.

We need to start again with how we can make a system that provides universal access for all children, that supports parents to return to work without remortgaging their house, and that pays educators in a way that reflects their high level of skill and expertise.

Not a week goes by that I don't hear a parent say "why can't it be more like the school system?" and, yeah, why can't it be? Why can't ECEC schools just be another level of schooling like primary and secondary schools? For all the negative press our education system gets, it sure works better than our early childhood system and provides exceptionally high-quality education for all children for free.

So forget about contacting your local member about whether you should get a higher percentage, or whether the cap is fair, or whether you should get the rebate at all. Contact them and demand they advocate for the rights of your children to education. The right that a democracy is built on.

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

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