

The false choice of quality vs cost in early childhood education ^[1]

Author: McDonald, Myfanwy

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AVAILABILITY

- Full-text online ^[2]

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EXCERPTS:

The Productivity Commission is undertaking an inquiry into childcare and early learning. In a recent Issues Paper the commission suggests that there is an "inherent trade-off" between affordability and quality in early childhood education and care services. The implications of "trading" quality and affordability in early childhood education are troubling, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The National Quality Framework

In 2009, all Australian governments agreed to establish a National Quality Framework (NQF) for early childhood education. The framework aims to improve the quality of early childhood education services, which include long day care, family day care, preschool/kindergarten and outside school hours care. Quality improvement will be achieved through a legislative framework, National Quality Standards, a national quality and rating process and a new authority (ACECQA) responsible for assisting with implementation.

The NQF took effect in January 2012 and sets requirements for qualifications, educator-to-staff ratios and other staffing arrangements.

The costs of these requirements for families and early childhood education services have caused some concern. The Productivity Commission suggests that:

There are also inherent trade-offs between different aspects of early childhood education systems ... Measures to improve the quality of childcare and the standard of learning and development outcomes could often be expected to put additional cost pressures on early childhood education providers, therefore working against the achievement of the objective of improving affordability.

However, we need to ask why there is an inherent trade-off in the Australian early childhood education system and to consider the implications of making this "trade".

The high stakes of early childhood

In any sector, large-scale improvements, such as those required as part of the quality framework, are likely to cost money. In a sector that comprises for-profit services, such as the Australian early childhood education sector, it is not surprising, therefore, that improvements in quality have met with some resistance.

The "market model" for early childhood education and care has led us to believe that a trade-off between quality and affordability in early childhood education is inevitable. Can we imagine a similar trade-off in the healthcare sector? Do we want high-quality unaffordable healthcare or poor-quality affordable healthcare?

What about schools? Do we want high-quality schools that some parents cannot afford or poor-quality schools that all parents can afford?

These questions are unpalatable. We want both quality and affordability, and we expect it. Why then are we willing to accept a trade-off in early childhood education? Is it because the stakes are not as high?

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