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What a difference a portfolio makes: early learning is not babysitting

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What children learn in their first 2000 days of life is the most vital, so early learning shouldn't be dismissed as babysitting. Lukas Coch/AAP

The reorganisation of federal ministerial portfolios this week moved early childhood education and care (ECEC) from social services to education, with Simon Birmingham assuming ministerial responsibility. This movement is not unusual as childcare policy-making is not easily siloed into one portfolio.

Childcare policy is related to social welfare, education, employment and health. The cross-portfolio nature of childcare policy means that successive governments prioritise it in different ways, at times locating it within social welfare and at others including it in education.

Has childcare historically been education or social services?

In 2013, the incoming Coalition government positioned childcare in the education portfolio. Tony Abbott named Sussan Ley as assistant education minister with responsibility for early childhood education and care. A reshuffle transferred these ECEC responsibilities to social services (Scott Morrison assumed responsibility).

If we trace the history back further, it is in the first Rudd ministry (2007) that the word childcare is used in any ministerial portfolio. Julia Gillard held the portfolios of education, employment and workplace relations alongside social inclusion. Maxine McKew held a prime ministerial and cabinet portfolio as parliamentary secretary for early childhood education and childcare. In a subsequent shuffle, Kate Ellis assumed ministerial responsibility for early childhood education, childcare and youth.

Under the Howard government, childcare was included in the children and youth affairs portfolios and at times also located in the family and community services portfolios.

Now we have a situation where responsibility for childcare is named and located in the education portfolio.

Many of the changes in the past reflect a confused and confusing attitude to early learning. In Australia, as in many other countries, learning and education are often positioned as different to childcare. This positioning has a long history.

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Foundations for learning are set at an early age. AAP/Lukas Coch

Early learning isn't a means to an end, it's an end in itself

Similar to the situation in many Western countries, the establishment of childcare services in Australia was related primarily to women's participation in the labour market. The emphasis in childcare was on health and therefore practices focused on hygiene, safety and regularity of routines such as sleeping, eating and toileting.

In comparison, historically, preschools had primarily educational aims. The emphasis was on learning.

While internationally and within Australia there have been many attempts to align the purposes of childcare and education, the common perception is that they are different. One of the underpinning assumptions of this difference is that "real" learning begins at school (or preschool).

Most often engagement with the "three Rs" is viewed as more important than the learning that has occurred before it. This perception persists despite the research evidence from neuroscience, economics and social science that the experiences and learning in the first 2000 days of life, before a child enters primary school, are critical in establishing trajectories in health, learning and behaviour.

The variability in the way ECEC is positioned in public discourse reflects its complex nature. ECEC is both a public service and an educational endeavour. Availability, affordability and access to quality childcare are important for children, families, communities, the economy and civil society.

However, in the current debates about childcare, the rhetoric of the labour market still dominates discussion regarding the importance of childcare for the economy. This is because government responsibility for young children has been framed in particular ways using a market-driven approach.

As a result, the provision of childcare in Australia is based on a "demand" model rather than "supply". Childcare is seen as a private affair rather than a public good. Parents and families are constructed as "consumers" and "clients".

From this perspective, care and education are the responsibility of the individual family rather than a shared task between family, community and government. Children are caught in the middle as "profitable assets".

It's a positive move to shift ECEC responsibility back to the education portfolio. This move signals the importance of learning in the early years, rather than positioning childcare as primarily a welfare or labour market issue.




Not just fun and games: early learning is vital. AAP/Lukas Coch

Given the contemporary importance and status of international comparisons of educational outcomes, the Australian public and policy debates must be attentive to the fact that, in OECD comparisons, the countries that are performing best invest much more than Australia in ECEC.

The countries that view childcare as a public, shared, important responsibility demonstrate the relationship between consistent ongoing investment in early childhood education and long-term educational outcomes.

If Australia is to live up to its aspirations of being the innovative clever country, it needs to pay serious attention to the learning that occurs before children enter primary school. Viewing childcare as important learning rather than babysitting so mum can go to work is a good place to start.

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