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Looming cut in preschool entitlements defies all evidence

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Research shows kids are better off with quality early childhood learning, so why cut the funding?
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The recent announcement by assistant education minister Sussan Ley that the 15-hour preschool entitlement introduced by the ALP in 2013 may be wound back to 12 hours signals a worrying trend in Australian early childhood care and education policy.

This proposal was made in conjunction with the announcement that childcare benefit rebates may be expanded to include nannies. These decisions pre-empt a Productivity Inquiry report, which is due in July, and raise questions about the basis for such significant change. Are the changes based on research evidence or are they the result of special interest lobbying, personal opinion or ideology?

That these potential changes have been signalled prior to the Productivity Commission report is worrying. Even more concerning is the place that will be given to research in future education policy. The 441 submissions to the Productivity Commission include a wide range of individual opinions and responses from businesses and researchers.

One of the responses (submission number 209) from the Indonesia Institute argues that employing Asian nannies would significantly cut the cost of childcare. So how will this submission be considered? Will the response made by the Australian Institute of Family Studies - based on decades of research - be considered equally with that of an individual parent who is unable to enrol her child in childcare, or parties like the Indonesia Institute, which have something to gain?

International research clearly shows the benefit of investing in early childhood education. Comparisons among OECD countries show those nations that are performing best invest much more than Australia in early childhood education.

The proportion of GDP invested by Australia is 0.6%. When this is compared with countries that consistently top international comparisons, such as Finland and Sweden (which dedicate 1.3% of GDP to early childhood education), the relationship between consistent ongoing investment in early childhood education and long-term educational outcomes becomes evident.

In Sweden, after 70 years of political vision, access to universal, integrated health care and early education is seen as an unquestionable right rather than being exclusive to the privileged few, an institution for needy children, or a substitute for parental care for those who work.





Countries that top international rankings of academic performance, such as Sweden, have universal access to early childhood learning. Shutterstock

Educational research must drive educational policies, not anecdotal or subjective opinion. There still seems to be a lack of respect for educational research.

The track record of Australian educational policy decisions based on educational research evidence is not good. In fact, research is often treated with disdain in many public forums.

For example, a recent opinion piece in *The Australian* challenges both international and national research that provides evidence of the benefits of quality care and education of children in their earliest years. With disparaging comments such as “Oh really, professor” and “so-called expert opinion”, years of longitudinal research in fields such as economics, education, neuroscience and sociology are ridiculed.

The writer, Angela Shanahan, argued experts such as Edward Melhuish have “hijacked” the concept of care to include education. She constructed a division between preschool teachers as four-year qualified teachers and childcare workers who are “ill-educated” and “barely literate”. Perpetuating this division takes us back to attitudes prevalent at the beginning of the century, and puts Australia far behind other OECD countries.

The early years of children’s lives are formative years, yet the Australian government still does not seem to realise the importance of providing quality early childhood education and care, despite the evidence. High-quality early childhood learning not only contributes to the economy but makes a valuable contribution to Australia as a democratic, pluralistic and interdependent country.

Preschool Childcare entitlements Early childhood learning