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Higher wages vs more training: why the government is going the wrong way on childcare

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The policy solutions of Labor and Liberal governments are not facing up to the big challenges in childcare. Childcare image from www.shutterstock.com

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At this point in the history of early childhood education and care in Australia, we're at a policy crossroad. The Coalition has the choice to either continue the reforms begun by the ALP or take a different path.

At the moment, the signs aren't good. The withdrawal of the A\$300 million Early Years Quality Fund (EYQF) committed by the previous ALP government to improve childcare workers' wages is a worrying development that will impact on the country's future in important ways.

The coalition has announced that it will instead use the funding to support the professional development of childcare educators, shifting the attention away from salaries and conditions.

Assistant education minister Sussan Ley has also stated that she would formally invite the 16 operators with signed funding agreements to "do the right thing" and join the professional development program so all the funds were available for all long day care educators. Effectively, asking them to pay back the small pay rise they had secured – between \$3 and \$6 an hour.

It seems that the Coalition sees short term professional development as preferable to long term change.

At this stage, it's unclear whether the professional development will be recognised or accredited. It is also unclear who will decide what the program will involve and who will provide it.

But it is beyond doubt that the Coalition inherited a policy "hot potato" with the EYQF. When the funding was first announced by the ALP, the sector welcomed it as a first step in attracting and retaining qualified staff.

The EYQF was seen as a positive move toward improved professional wages across the sector.

The situation certainly needed – and still does need – to improve. Currently a Certificate III qualified educator is on the award wage rate of \$19.72 per hour. When a base level cleaners' salary is \$18.09, it's not surprising that the turnover of childcare staff is high.

The sector's union, United Voice, estimated last year that 180 carers leave the profession every week.

But the implementation of the funding was fraught. The \$300 million was a once only, finite amount which meant centres and providers were competing with each other for their share of the money.

The criteria meant many smaller providers were ineligible and also unable to apply for any funds and

the process therefore resulted in inequitable outcomes.

In the end, the EYQF became a divisive issue that caused some distress to the sector. As the ministerial review points out:

The funding constraints, together with the implementation and operational issues... significantly constrained the ability for the EYQF to be implemented in an effective and equitable manner. Further, the experience of the sector during this time appears to have been one of confusion and angst.

Despite these issues, Early Childhood Australia, the peak body for early childhood education and care, stated that even with these concerns “we supported the fund as a step in the right direction to appropriately remunerate early childhood educators”.

This one-off increase did not support the objective of the fund to increase the number of qualified educators and neither does the recent Coalition policy shift.

Redirecting the \$300 million of funding to professional development for early childhood educators in lieu of a wage increase sounds a reasonable solution to a messy situation.

But how reasonable is it? Ask yourself this: how would you feel if you were offered professional development in lieu of a wage rise? Particularly if you being paid \$19 per hour.

There are many assumptions underpinning the policy shift that need to be put on the table for consideration. Firstly, Susan Ley stated that the funding would release childcare practitioners to attend Professional Development.

This sounds wonderful until we stop to consider what it involves. Firstly, it assumes there is a pool of relief staff ready to step in to the babies or toddler rooms around the nation to take on the job for a day or half a day so educators can actually go to a professional development course.

In many rural areas and in smaller centres, this is simply not possible.

Secondly, in order for childcare staff teams to attend professional development and yet maintain continuity of child/adult relationships, a common strategy is for staff to attend in their own time (often weekends or after hours) and to then be given a day in lieu. Given that many childcare educators are parents themselves, this is a double whammy in terms of work/life balance.

Lastly, unless the professional development counts toward accreditation it is a one-off, short term unsatisfactory solution to a policy dilemma.

Amid the high profile national issues such as the demise of Holden demise and Australia’s relationship with Indonesia, early childhood education and care could be seen as a less urgent or dramatic policy area.

It is most often seen as a necessary “service” enabling mothers to participate in the workforce. It’s rarely positioned as a matter of national interest.

But until we put early childhood education and care in a central place in the national psyche as a major contributor to the innovative, creative minds of our children, setting the trajectory for educational success, it will continue to be seen as “babysitting”.

Until we shift the mindset of the community and policy makers about childcare as a “babysitting” service, we will fail to attract or retain a stable and qualified workforce.

 Education Early childhood education Early childhood