

Submission for Childcare and Early Childhood Learning – Draft Report

As the draft report outlines, childcare must be improved to properly address flexibility, affordability and accessibility. Where there are many worthwhile suggestions in the draft, disadvantaged groups and marginalised families still seem to be potentially at risk. There are several areas in particular which the final report must carefully consider.

The draft report details the benefits of increased participation in the workforce, particularly for women, who already fall far behind in the financial sphere. It is well known that women disproportionality represent the stay-at-home parent, and as a result, the pay gap demonstrates that on average, men in full-time positions earn \$15000 more than women per annum (according to the ABS). For this reason, the government is obliged to properly address childcare needs in reference to this inequality. Where the draft report does make significant reference to this point, further measures must be taken to meet the disadvantages of women, as a result of improper childcare options of the past and present. For example, ACTU President Ged Kearney states “there is currently no obligation for employers to show they have seriously considered a request for flexible work arrangements to assist with caring responsibilities. As a result, many women face discrimination when they return to work after having children and are pushed out of quality jobs into less secure, poorer paying work” (<http://www.news.com.au/finance/business/womens-pay-to-lag-further-behind-actu/story-e6frkur-1227025712264>).

This speaks to the goal of flexibility and access that the draft report outlines, and whilst this indirectly relates to childcare, it speaks to a larger need for flexibility in legislation, regarding parents, and mothers in particular. Changes are therefore needed at the level of employers, to facilitate a community that supports parents, and mothers in particular who remain unfairly disadvantaged on a financial scale. Only through creating a network of support throughout the community, based on legislation that recognises women’s unequal positions due to childcare, can the whole community benefit. Gender equity is a large issue in regards to childcare. Whilst nobody should be forced back into the workforce should they want to stay at home to care for their children, measures must be put in place through the Fair Work act to ensure that women are not discriminated from accessing the public arena of paid employment.

Further, where mothers do return to work following childbirth, childcare expenses are known to claim such a large percentage (reportedly, up to 60%, according to article <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-06-22/parents-losing-up-to-60pc-of-income-after-returning-to-work/5541598>) that remaining in the private arena, that is, staying at home, is a more practical option. Again, this effects the representation of women in the workforce, and further damages the pay gap between men and women. Where male partners of pregnant women may remain in the public workforce, women are severely disadvantaged in the public sphere, and held back from financial (and often, social) accolades as a result. A website which averages out the financial earnings of a stay-at-home mother suggests that mothers work to the

equivalent of \$75 000 in the public arena, for free (<http://insights.bt.com.au/whats-a-stay-at-home-mum-worth-in-2013/>). Affordability of childcare must come into play to address this social inequality, and to attempt to protect and offer the opportunities in the public workforce to the women who seek it.

Where women still suffer from what is known as the “double shift”, (that is, women who work in the public sector and also perform a disproportionate amount of domestic work, compared to a male counterpart, <http://kurtcendana.wordpress.com/2010/09/28/sociological-concept-of-the-week-double-shift/>) the government has an obligation to grant women a stronger public work identity where one is desired. As mentioned in the NATSEM Report (<http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1202754-amp-natsem-35.html#document/p11>), this can be achieved through affordable childcare (page 15). I would also like to quote this report, which identifies “This future balance will require a stronger child care sector and a *greater role for men in the caring of children in the home*”.

I suggest here, that legislation which encourages domestic duties of men (such as increased paternity leave) may assist in the previously mentioned “second shift” that many women are burdened with. Further, and importantly, this will assist to change perceptions of the woman’s domain as the private sphere, and in contrast, the public domain (along with its socio-economic benefits) belonging to men. This dualistic model only serves to restrict everybody within the confinements imposed by our modern patriarchal hierarchy.

The draft report, whilst attempting to target the needs of lower income and disadvantaged families, must be aware of the limited options for parents in rural and remote areas. As a recent article discusses (<http://www.easternriverinachronicle.com.au/story/2482205/childcare-changes-small-communities-could-be-hit-hardest/?cs=628>), regional childcare centres may be severely disadvantaged by particular new measures. New criteria for funding, including only registering educators within the area, could see already struggling childcare organisations at a loss, and subsequently, rural families will be hit by increased funds. Funding must be secured and guaranteed for regional childcare centres that are concerned about their situation, due to such measures introduced in the draft report. As the article discusses, whilst such childcare organisations only account for small numbers on a national scale, for the community, such childcare centres are essential. I stress that the final report must prioritise proper accessibility for regional and rural communities which have fewer options for childcare. The organisation in place must be supported through funding, in line with the desire for universal access to childcare across Australia.

Along with the focus on affordability, childcare must be equitable and adopt a flexible model, according to the needs of the child and family. For example, the draft report suggests funding nannies, as part of its goal for flexible child care. The New Zealand system of home-based childcare, which focuses on educating a pre-school aged child within the home by a carer, also provides an acceptable alternative to childcare centres. Necessary qualifications must be obtained by such carers however, and this must be properly funded and subsidised so that both quality and cost expectations are adhered to.

This may also assist with out-of-hours care for parents who work shift work, or outside of the daytime child care centre hours. This is a needed measure which ensures alternative means to child care centres. The draft report also wishes to implement means-testing, in a “90-30 linear model”. Under this model, however,

people earning above \$60 000 will still receive subsidies from the government. I recommend that those earning under \$60 000 receive 100% subsidies for childcare costs, and those earning over this amount are above the bracket to receive subsidies. The funds that are given to high income earners can be better spent, by re-directing funding to child care centres so that they are able to charge less to families, which will benefit everybody.

Where childcare costs are known to reach the exorbitant amount of \$170 a day in areas of inner city Sydney and Melbourne, and remote mining towns, funding must be supplied to lower these unmanageable costs (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-06-22/parents-losing-up-to-60pc-of-income-after-returning-to-work/5541598>). Further, childcare must provide quality education, as dictated in the National Quality Framework (NQF), and must do so equitably regardless of the financial bracket that parents fall under. Through these measures, childcare will achieve an affordable and equitable status, and importantly, those on lower incomes will be completely assisted as needed. Means-testing needs to cover vulnerable families, and to give them the opportunity to participate in the workforce (or studies) if desired, where they may increase their socio-economic capital. These measures could relieve those suffering from generational poverty, which will benefit the child and its education most of all.

Groups known to be at risk, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children with additional needs, must receive relevant subsidies to ensure an equitable childcare system. As the City of Sydney submission to the Childcare Inquiry advocates, the Commonwealth must strengthen programs to ensure such children have better access to childcare systems. Currently, the City of Sydney reports that there is a lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children based within private childcare facilities; the statistics show 0.4% access private centres compared to 10.8% at Council operated enquiries in the City of Sydney. Whilst this demonstrates the necessity of Council operated centres, it also posits a financial burden that Local Government is not currently equipped to manage. The role of Local, State and Federal Government must be clarified in relation to childcare so that proper services can be delivered.

Where Local Government is often the first to respond to the community needs, there must be funding allocated to their response, which often directly assists those who are most at risk within the local community.

It is also worth noting here, of the draconian effects on childcare as a result of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), also known as the "Northern Territory Intervention". Whilst these measures came about through the recognition of the need for proper care for children, government tactics have failed both children and the community at large with highly paternalistic and disenfranchising methods. As a result of this disgraceful policy, community programmes which are highly specific to the needs of the area have been overrun. Worse, they have been overrun by militant tactics, such as mandatory invasive health checks of Aboriginal children without consultation of parents, and with no specific proof of assault required.

Through the NTER, Government has abolished funds to Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP), which focus on the needed "local aspirations" of the community (http://caepn.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/Publications/topical/Altman_Paternalism.pdf, p. 1). Schools, and childcare centres in these highly vulnerable areas must not be invaded by government officials. They must be organised and run by the people of the community, with teachers and minders who are able to give specific pedagogy

relevant to that community, beyond a western-centric perspective of education. This requires funding, not the overbearing tactics that the government has demonstrated.

Whilst more than half of the languages in the Northern Territory communities have been lost, and many “critically endangered” (as mentioned in the film *Our Generation*, 2010), childcare is an essential place to pick up this threat to culture. This can only come through funding and empowerment of the community, from within the community. It was reported that in 2005, only 1 in 5 children in the very remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory could read at the accepted minimum standard (<http://www.indigenouliteracyfoundation.org.au/what-is-indigenous-literacy.html>). Relevant childcare must be facilitated to grant these children access into education models, which not only support literacy and numeracy, further, will promote cultural lessons and meaning. This may also serve as an influencing factor for school attendance, through more applicable and specific learning and therefore, higher levels of retention and interest.

In assessing overseas models, New Zealand operates a childcare centre in Kawakawa which emphasises indigenous learning. The building, Te Mirumiru, was “designed to represent the culture and values of the local Ngati Hini iwi, in which guardianship of the earth is deeply engrained” (<http://sourceable.net/nz-childcare-centre-shortlisted-leadership-award/>). The focus in the design of the building, as stated in this article, seeks to emphasise a cultural value on nature and land. Further, it is the only childcare centre in Australasia to achieve a 6 Green Star rating.

Knowing the importance to Australian Aboriginal people of land, the Australian Government could advocate for a similar approach, after having consulted with the targeted communities. This would not only empower communities, it would be a significant environmental achievement. This could serve to empower the community, beginning with this necessary emphasis on early learning. We must inspire this through focussing on what the culture and community values, through proper consultation methods.

Overcrowded housing, which the NTER has not properly addressed, creates a stronger need for proper childcare systems to operate. Again, I stress that these childcare models must be sensitive and flexible to the needs of the community, and must without doubt, be community-run organisations. Government need only involve itself through supplying funding for this to succeed.

Children from low-income families must not be disadvantaged through the draft report’s proposal for parents to meet specific requirements, including work, study or training requirements. Under no circumstances should funding be conditional to government-mandated performance measures of the parents, as this will only unjustly disadvantage the child, and further fuel the generational poverty cycle. Punitive measures must not be taken, and a community approach of raising children must be adopted. Children are not a private matter, nor does the sole responsibility lie on the parent; it is the community’s responsibility as well, (which is guided by fair policy) to ensure children are properly cared for and receive proper education through childcare. As stated in the article (<http://www.smh.com.au/national/100000-vulnerable-children-at-risk-of-losing-childcare-spots-20140811-102mmg.html>), the draft report’s goals to simplify payments, and as such, remove the financial hardship category, could have devastating effects for low-income families, and as such, the education of young children. Where the article indicates that 13 700 families receive the Special Child Care Benefit under the category of financial hardship, this proposal clearly demonstrates a serious gap which further impoverishes and marginalises those in need. The final report must not seek to streamline its payments where it will

adversely affect those whom it claims to be helping. Such funding and support must remain to ensure equitable education for those who most need it.

Further, such measures will adversely affect transitioning from childhood services to school, disadvantaging children from lower socio-economic backgrounds at an early and integral stage of development. According to a research report to the NSW Department of Community Services

(http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/docswr/assets/main/documents/research_child_care_school.pdf), childcare assists in transitioning into the scholastic setting, and those without the educational (and social) benefits from childcare are unfairly positioned to achieve positive results. However, it must be noted that this can only be properly achieved through a fair and equitable system where all childcare follows the requirements of the NQF, to produce equitable outcomes through all childcare facilities. This can be achieved through the education of childcare workers, however, this must be subsidised by the government. Childcare workers are known to be underpaid (<http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2014/07/22/union-slams-childcare-report>), and are not able to sustain themselves financially in their occupation. This sector must be better funded, to ensure that our childcare remains of a high-standing quality.

Early childhood is known to have long-standing and considerable impacts over the course of a person's life, (http://www.aracy.org.au/publications-resources/command/download_file/id/97/filename/Early_childhood_and_long_term_development_-_The_importance_of_the_early_years.pdf), and for this reason, the government must invest in childcare workers to provide a favourable experience in these essential years.

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