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New early childhood education standards don't add up!

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An important development in the childcare and early learning debate in Australia took place last week with the release of the Centre for Independent Studies review of the costs of childcare in relation to early learning outcomes. At the same time, a report prepared by Checkmate Analytics and available on our website arrived at similar conclusions i.e. that NQF (National Quality Framework) guidelines are overkill when subjected to scrutiny. Maybe nice to have but too expensive given their failure to demonstrate even modest improvements in early-learning outcomes outside of circumstances involving disability or disadvantage.

The [Checkmate Analytics report](#) noted that over the last six or seven years, the emphasis in the US has shifted to quality of teaching and away from strict class size mandates. Some US researchers suggest savings may be as high as US\$60 billion if class size restrictions are loosened and teacher quality pursued.

Data from Australia and elsewhere shows that quality of teaching is not directly related to level of teacher education. Rather, the key lies in having specialized skills in early learning derived from specialized early learning training. One [substantive Australian study](#) found that six month certificate trained practitioners were apparently as effective as degree-qualified practitioners without specific early learning training and that two year diploma-trained practitioners held their own if not exceeded the performance of childcare trained university graduates.

Leading Brookings Institute scholar Russ Whitehurst argued before the US Congress recently that it is not a question of whether the US federal government supports early childhood but how it supports it. He pointed out to Congress that that:

- [The federal government spends a disproportional amount on early learning programs relative to other levels of education.
- [It was not getting its money's worth.
- [The impact on children of differences in teacher quality is larger than the impact of differences in the centres they attend (code for class size and teacher qualifications).
- [We should not focus on early learning as the yardstick for measuring the value of public expenditure on children and that learning is not totally determined by "hard" measurement (i.e. socialization is an important aspect of childcare and early learning).

Certainly, a superficial glance at the differences between NSW and Victorian Year 3 NAPLAN test results indicated that Victorian pre-schoolers, who five years earlier attended preschools where average pupil-teacher ratios were fifteen to one, delivered equal if not superior scores to NSW pre-schoolers where average ratios were ten to one. The cost implications are massive and the savings by reverting to the former Victorian standard would also be massive.

And there are other savings to be made on the basis of the evidence presented in the Checkmate Analytics paper. Degree trained teachers who did not have an "early learning" major were shown to deliver poorer Year 3 test outcomes than those specifically trained in preschool learning - whether at the 2-year diploma or degree level. Moreover, in many instances, degree trained childcare practitioners were no more effective than diploma trained teachers.

It might also be possible that with pressure to fill degree-trained teacher quotas that high quality, highly experienced diploma trained practitioners may lose out to recent university trained graduates with little or no childcare or even general teaching experience should present NQF (National Quality Framework) standards be enforced.

The impact of these new regulations looks scary, particularly if government is unable to make up the financial gap. A national survey of more than 2600 parents undertaken earlier this year by the national representative body for private childcare practitioners, Australian Childcare Alliances, showed that a 10% increase in fees would result in 56% of parents reducing their weekly visitations by at least one day and 13% dropping out altogether. Even worse, if that increase in costs as some pundits estimate runs to 15-20%, then almost eight in ten (77%) say they will cut back their number of childcare days while three in ten say they would drop out altogether.

Whereas more research would provide further evidence, steps can be taken immediately to cut costs. A wind-back in line to the previous Victorian legislation on student teacher ratios would be a great start until this matter is resolved. This action might be undertaken in conjunction with a less arrogant view of diploma-trained early learning specialists in the teacher quality debate.