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I am a Canberra-based early childhood teacher, freelance writer and advocate, particularly focusing on early learning in political and policy contexts.

Please accept the following as my submission to the Inquiry about the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Jobs for Families Child Care Package) Bill 2016, and the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Family Payments Structural Reform and Participation Measures) Bill 2016.

I have argued for some time that the entire bedrock of the Jobs for Families package is the view that children's access to early childhood education should be tied directly to their family's working status. Basically, some children are in "worthy, hard-working" families and some aren't. The language in the Senate Report from April 2016¹ is the clearest indication yet that this Government views ECEC funding as welfare for parents, not education for children. When education or learning is referred to at all, it is in complete subservience to workforce participation outcomes. Some highlights:

"The aim of the Bill is to support improved affordability, accessibility and flexibility of child care for families and thus encourage greater engagement from families with the paid workforce. (p. 1) [emphasis mine]"

"Even stakeholders who seek changes to the package concede that, as ECA did, 'most working families will be better off as a result of the package'. (p. 19)"

"Encouraging greater workforce participation is a **primary aim** of the Jobs for Families package, and the committee is of the view that the activity test provisions of the Bill are a fair and equitable way to ensure that the Child Care Subsidy is targeted

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http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/jobs_for_families/Report

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best at the families who will need and use it the most. (p.19) [emphasis mine]”

These are specific examples, but it must always be remembered that this is about the fundamental thrust of the entire package.

The Government’s defence against all attacks on the disastrous impact of this Package on children and families experiencing vulnerabilities has been the new Australian Child Care Subsidy (ACCS). Details about the ACCS are hard to come by, and the Report makes clear that the actual functioning of the subsidy are still being worked out.

“The department’s submission further notes that the department is ‘currently developing the list of circumstances in which a child may be considered at risk of serious abuse or neglect’. The completed list will be incorporated into the Minister’s rules. The Minister’s rules will also provide a legal basis to grant or reject an ACCS ‘at risk’ claim. (p. 21)”

The Government is expecting everyone to support a package that includes a fundamental safety net that is still being worked out. We’re expected to just trust that they will develop a good system to determine funding support for at-risk children.

The Government cannot, and should not, be trusted to do so. People advocating for the passing of this package, and using the ACCS to do so, are taking a huge risk. It’s one that should not be taken.

There are huge unanswered questions about this package. But at least the Conclusion makes the Government’s view crystal clear.

“Conclusion

2.67 The Jobs for Families package as a whole aims to encourage and enable families seeking to increase their workforce participation, whether by working more or undertaking activities (including studying and training) that will improve their options for participating in paid work.

2.68 One component of the package is to improve access to and affordability of early childhood education and care. The committee recognises that access to high-quality

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early childhood education and care is of substantial developmental benefit to children in addition to its role in helping to facilitate parents' workforce engagement. (p. 23)"

The package aims to increase workforce participation. ECEC is "*one component*" of that. Not a fundamental part, not an unassailable foundation. A component. And even mentioning that, it's only an "addition" to helping workforce engagement.

I will not, and cannot, support in any way a proposed reform package that at its heart shackles together a child's right to participate in ECEC with the economic contribution of their family. That is what this package does, and no amount of amendments, or tinkering or minor changes will change that unassailable fact.

Earlier in the year Senate Estimates put some hard numbers on the number of families that will be adversely affected by the Government's proposed changes. 37,000 families will have their access to ECEC either slashed or eliminated as they are deemed to not contribute enough to the Australian economy. SNAICC released a report that demonstrates Indigenous children will have the most to lose² from this package, after this year's Closing the Gap report revealed that Australia had failed to meet the targets for early childhood education³.

Summary and recommendation

- The legislation as proposed drastically cuts access to ECEC for the children who would most benefit.
- The legislation as proposed will see the closure of Indigenous ECEC services, and failure to meet the Closing the Gap target for early childhood education.
- The legislation entirely priorities workforce participation over a child's right to education
- I recommend to the Committee that the legislation be retracted, and re-introduced following amendments that fundamentally realign the purpose of the package to focus on children.

² <http://www.snaicc.org.au/news-events/fx-articles.cfm?loadref=168&id=1386>

³ <http://www.snaicc.org.au/news-events/fx-articles.cfm?loadref=168&id=1384>