

I have been a kindergarten teacher in Victoria for 30 years. Despite it being suggested to me that I should utilise my high HSC marks and study Law I chose this profession and am more passionate about it now than when I started.

Mother to 3, my children have all attended the stand alone sessional kindergarten of which I am now Director. It is that community aspect of my work which is most important to me. They all received an education which set them up for a lifetime of learning, individual needs were addressed and interests catered for and despite there being lengthy gaps between them they all had the same teacher. I am fortunate that my kindergarten is both affluent and in an area which values education. This has meant that parents have expected that our program is developed in a way where the needs of their children are the priority and they are prepared to sacrifice in order to see that their children's needs are met. One of those sacrifices is a preparedness to pay higher fees to provide an above requirements staff:child ratio, another in juggling their commitments so that the hours their child attends are shorter rather than longer.

You are probably aware that sessional kindergarten in Victoria has always been delivered by tertiary trained teachers and that what we offer has always been designed with a view to what is best for the children even if that sometimes conflicts with providing an 'easier' life for their parents. So our sessions aren't around 'work hours' but rather school hours because we know that children are not at their peak if they are woken early or kept late. Our program is also of an obvious quality because it has a single focus. For over 60 years our kindergarten has existed to provide an early education for young children, we deliver a play based program with the sole aim of stimulating children's learning and the families who attend our centre are clear in their reasons for attending. Our ability to deliver this educational quality must be maintained and any requirement to lengthen hours to cater to a need not driven by an educational requirement would damage the quality service we provide.

A well delivered early childhood program is intense; it must be delivered proactively, responding to the needs and interests of the children and intentionally taught not merely following but leading and inspiring. For the program to work it demands that the staff must be 'on' every minute, (even toilet breaks are rushed and other staff informed before we go); there is no opportunity to zone out when you are with pre-schoolers. For the children also, their day is a whirl of discovery; yes there is down time but with 24 others around you every moment is alive with possibility. So our six hour program will leave even a child used to the hours of Long Day Care quite exhausted and it is ludicrous to think that for the child there could be benefit in extending attendance.

It is my dream that all children were able to access the type of quality we provide – we are not particularly special by the way, just devoted teachers who are clear in our goals. However ensuring this quality is available to all will not happen if the focus shifts from the children to their parents. Yes parents need assistance to access early childhood services but it is essential this is not done by compromising the quality that is available. To take the focus away from the children, away from quality education will merely lower what it is available to a child minding service not an educational one. Resources must be put into the area to ensure that it is quality we are delivering not just quantity. Increasing evidence demonstrates that the money spent in early childhood education saves significant expense in later life -it is time to recognise that and to plan accordingly.

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