

I have been an Early Childhood and Special Education Teacher for over 30 years. Until recently I worked in a variety of early childhood educational systems and settings both here and overseas.

For the past 17 years I have been the Licencee of a 75 place Child Care Centre and have always upheld an educational perspective for the operation of the Centre. It was always about the service to children and families and never about 'the bottom line'.

Over the past 17 years I have both marveled and despaired at the changes in Childcare. Whilst I agree with many changes in Childcare for the benefit of the children, I am angered that the importance of the Early Childhood Years which in my training and experience was 0 – 8 years is conveniently forgotten once the children move out to the school environment. It appears to me that 'childcare' is regulated in absolutely every aspect and yet none of these regulations continue into the school arena which makes a mockery of the regulations.

When the new regulations and The National Quality Framework were first mooted, we were assured that it had been costed out by the Government at the time to be a 60c per place per day increase to cover costs. I recall at the time from attending the meetings that we in fact costed it to approximately \$25 per place per day. Both the public and childcare centre owners were totally misinformed about the real costs of the new regulations and framework which unfortunately in a 'user pays' environment cannot be absorbed by the Centres.

What comprises the cost increase? Let me address just 3 areas

Staffing

When I took over my (5 room, 75 place) Centre, we operated on 10 permanent room staff 5 Group Leaders with their Diploma in Childcare or working towards their Diploma. There were 5 untrained/trained Assistants (Cert 3 in Child Services). And 1 Full Time Director (Diploma in Childcare). (11 full time staff in total).

Although we have no increase in child numbers, we are now operating on 14 Fully trained full time staff, 3 trained lunchtime relief and a Part time trained Assistant Director. The Assistant Director is required to cope with an inordinate amount of extra paperwork that has been required with the National Quality Framework. Both the Director and Assistant Director are not floor staff. As a matter in case – our Centre Policy Document is now over 198 pages with policies being constantly rewritten, updates etc. and risk assessments now required for 'everything'.

Not only have the numbers of staff gone up but due to training requirements, their rate of pay has gone up. All staff should be fully qualified and we also have to provide a trained early childhood teacher. All rooms have to now be covered with trained lunchtime relief which is interesting given that the children are resting at the time. The new regulation that requires a Certified Supervisor with 3 years experience to both open and close also impacts negatively on rostering staff to cover our now extended hours.

As there is now no flexibility in terms of staffing, we have had to hire 2 permanent floaters at a cost of 80k per year to cover holidays and sick leave as well as give some consistency to the children.

With regard to the hire of an Early Childhood Teacher for the 4-5 year olds – there is a further issue of finding qualified staff who will be happy to work in Childcare. To attract staff we have to offer very high incentives and inducements to get the staff to consider Childcare as the attraction of extra pay and holidays in Government Education makes retention of teaching staff a real issue

Historically our staffing costs comprise 60% of all income and the above changes make a big difference to our entire budget. Without a significant fee increase passed on to our parents, our staffing budget would be at least 75%. Incidentally as an owner I am also aware that some of the new regulations giving programming time or any forms of in service or staff meetings have to be fully paid by the Centre and yet as a Teacher in Government Education, it was just part of my job and I was not reimbursed for such requirements.

Resources

When I first bought the Centre – the playground was set up with natural resources including tunnels, real grass etc. Over the years dependent on the Government Supervisor at the time, we have been asked to change, remove, implement changes. The requirements changed depending on the Government Representative and very little consistency between the representatives. With the now current requirements and push for natural resources, I have had to redo our playground at a cost of 130k. Is it any wonder that Childcare is getting expensive.

In our changing world, we have had to implement a lot of technology at a price. For example due to the extra programming load and expectations of reporting eg – The Learning Journey, we have had to get extra laptops for all the rooms, an interactive whiteboard for the teacher and of course some tablets for the older children. Conservatively this has come at a cost of at least 15 – 20k and this is not talking about all the other general equipment that needs to consistently be replaced etc.

Funding

I am absolutely appalled at the recent debacle of the pay grant that was to be administered to just a few childcare centres. Surely any changes and grants etc must be totally across the whole field as it places owners in a predicament of having to salary match in order to keep staff which again would need to be passed onto parents in their fees.

With the new ‘Kindergarten Program’ which is being implemented in our Centre this year, I am also appalled that having to employ a qualified teacher at a great cost, parents can choose to send a child to a C & K Centre for example and to my Childcare Centre for the rest of the week. The parent can choose for the Program funding to go to the other

Centre and although we have provided the same, we do not receive any funding. This inequity also forces our fees up.

I believe that all the aforementioned have contributed greatly to the cost of childcare rising so sharply & the Government in their excessive implementation of 700 pages of regulations including the new regulations.

We all want the same thing – a quality educational experience for our children. Surely with common sense and better consultation this can be achieved without parents working long hours to pay for their childcare.

I would be happy to discuss any of the above should anyone wish to do so.