CHILDCARE WAGES

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Australia's Early Childhood Sector (ECS) is critically understaffed. Low wages, poor working conditions and burnout have led to heightened attraction and retention challenges, resulting in a workforce shortage of around 21,000 early childhood professionals in 2024 (Jobs and Skills Australia 2024). While increasing demand for early childhood education and care (ECEC) over the past two decades has been accompanied by a strengthening of national regulations and professional standards, direct efforts to support the workforce have been lacking, with notable silence and inaction around the systemic undervaluation and underpayment of workers (Andrew and Newman 2012; McDonald *et al.* 2018; Thorpe *et al.* 2023). Improving wage conditions in the sector has been an obvious, yet elusive, solution to workforce sustainability sidelined by policy makers and government bodies until recently.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought national attention to wage challenges in the ECS. Growing public recognition of ECEC as an 'essential service' (Collins 2023: 25) and backbone of society and the economy (United Workers Union 2021a) led to increased support for higher wage attainment. Widespread childcare centre closures and caps on enrolments accentuated public concern.

Promising to reform the sector, improve working conditions and work toward universal childcare provision, the current Albanese government has made the sustainable provision of high-quality, accessible and affordable childcare a major priority and 'legacy vision' for their term (Thorpe *et al.* 2023: 2). To date, it has initiated two major inquiries into the sector which have highlighted low wages as a key driver of workforce turnover (see Productivity Commission 2024; Australian Competition and Consumer

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Commission 2023). Guided by a national ECEC workforce strategy report that recognises the importance of pay increases as an immediate priority for workforce sustainability, the government's interest in solving the 'workforce crisis' presents a unique opportunity for improving pay conditions (ACECQA 2021: 41). Recent developments in the sector reflect this potential. In July 2024, a 3.75% increase to award wages was implemented nationwide for all ECEC professionals and, in August 2024, the government announced that it would support an additional wage increase over 2 years to eligible providers, equivalent of up to 15% above the current national award rate (Klapoor 2024).

This article seizes the opportunity to comment on contemporary changes to wage standards in the ECS and to evaluate progress thus far. Building knowledge of the causes of low wages in the ECS from a political economy disciplinary perspective, it begins with a brief history and outline of wage dynamics in the sector. It then moves to an exploration of theoretical frameworks for understanding wage determination in Australia, including orthodox neoclassical economic theories and heterodox feminist-Marxist theories. Its following section considers the impacts of orthodox wage frameworks on ECEC pay standards, dissecting their influence on different wage improvement pathways, such as professionalism and upskilling, and on the gendered industrial relations architecture and limited wage bargaining opportunities. The article then explores recent wage developments and workforce initiatives in the sector to demonstrate the growing relevance of feminist-Marxist political economy perspectives in national wage reform.

Wage dynamics in the early childhood sector

Australia's ECS is a complex, 'evolutionary creature' (Hill *et al.* 2007: 3). For most of the 20th and early 21st century it was largely untended, with the years between 1996 and 2006 commonly acknowledged as a 'long period of indifference and neglect' (Cheeseman and Torr 2009: 61). Lacking a national policy approach and treated as a residual variable by policy makers, ECEC governance was haphazard and fragmented, with little attention given to wages in the sector. This 'messy' governance approach shifted dramatically in the mid-2000's as governments attempted to accommodate unprecedented demand for ECEC services and growing international awareness of the importance of ECEC for children's learning and women's workforce participation (Lee 2020: 835). Attempts to streamline sectoral governance peaked in 2007, heralding the beginning of a ‘new era’ in ECEC reform that would involve a national approach to quality regulation, learning frameworks and equitable access (Cheeseman and Torr 2009: 68). Growing rapidly in size and scope from the late 20th century, the sector has expanded to cater for over 1.4 million children as of June 2023, compared to around 1 million in June 2013 (ACECQA 2023a) and approximately 300,000 in 1993 (Bray 2023). This included just under 1 million families accessing over 14,000 ECEC services daily in 2023, with the average child attending around 26.2 hours of ECEC per week, a 1.1% increase from June 2022 (Department of Education 2023). However, despite growth in demand for services, ECEC wages continue to be some of the lowest in the country.

In early 2024, childcare workers earned around $680 less than the average Australian per week, only 10% more than workers in occupations that do not require a qualification or substantial experience, for example in hospitality, retail and clerical roles (Jobs and Skills Australia 2024). While these conditions have improved since the July 2024 wage increase, which raised average earnings by $103 per week, the average ECEC worker still earns at least $500 per week less than the average Australian. Wages in the sector for Children’s Services Award employees start at $910.90 per week for support workers; $1,016.40 per week for certificate III level 3 qualified educators; and $1,162.40 per week for diploma qualified level 3.4 educators (Fair Work Ombudsman 2010). Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) earn wages under the Educational Services (Teachers) Award 2020, starting at $1,342.40 for Level 1 ECTs per week at preschools and schools and $1,396.10 per week in long day care centres (Fair Work Ombudsman 2020). The average weekly earnings of Australians in 2024 were $1,996.40 per week, more than double the average of an ECEC support worker (ABS 2024).

In a 2021 survey, the vast majority of Australia’s early childhood workforce reported ‘always’ or ‘often’ worrying about finances, with many stating they would not recommend ECEC as a career choice to others (United Workers Union 2021a: 3). An acute awareness of low wage conditions has driven many potential ECEC workers from the sector, one saying that: ‘It’s all about money. You go to uni for four years, come out with a $16,000 debt to go to work for $29,000 a year. I can earn more pulling beers at my local pub. I loved prac and could really see myself in child care but then reality hits’ (Thorpe *et al.* 2011: 92).

Current pay standards, wage setting mechanisms and bargaining opportunities reveal a complex interplay of political economic ideologies, values and priorities that shape the persistence of low wages embedded in industrial relations architecture and practice. As conversations about the systemic undervaluation and underpayment of childcare workers have garnered attention, so have nuanced understandings of the causes of low wages and potential pathways to improving pay conditions (see, for example, Richardson *et al.* 2024). This article adds to these insights by dissecting the influence of different political economic theoretical frameworks on wage dynamics in the sector.

Orthodox wage theory

Neoclassical market supremacy

Orthodox wage theory, informed by neoclassical economics, views wages as a price that can be defined in terms of exchange value. Neoclassical theories centre the market as the most effective means of wage regulation. As Mutari *et al.* (2002: 73) explain, neoclassical economists position the market as 'the primary – indeed, almost exclusive – basis of their wage theories.'

This approach assumes that markets tend toward equilibrium, are impartial and therefore unbiased. As a result, they do not discriminate according to gender or race; and they produce wage outcomes that adjust independently to consumer demand, lowering in sectors where there is a greater workforce supply and rising in niche disciplines or in sectors that need more workers. Individuals are assumed to act as rational economic actors who have the power to choose to work in sectors that maximise their personal gain. Government intervention in wage setting processes, for example via minimum wage standards, is viewed as a distorting factor and threat to market equilibrium (Brožová 2018). From this perspective, market mechanisms are seen as the most effective way to ensure that wages are at the 'right' price determined by the laws of supply and demand. This ideological approach has dominated international discourse and practice over the past century and effectively masks the socioeconomic goals and agendas closely related to a particular conceptualization of capitalist society that prioritises profit maximisation (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021).

Human capital theory

Orthodox wage theory also deploys Human Capital Theory (HCT) to explain wage differentials and inequality within and between sectors, including gender wage gaps. HCT is rooted in the neoclassical belief that all individuals have some form of human capital which is determined by their abilities and skills accumulated through experience, education and professional training. These human capital levels form the 'basis' of earnings, with higher levels leading to increased pay rates and vice versa (Grybaitė 2006: 86-7).

To explain wage variations and dismiss the idea of gender wage inequality, HCT argues that women are traditionally less educated than men, and spend more time performing the bulk of unpaid, domestic labour. This leads them to have more intermittent attachment to the labour force. The division of labour by gender means that women accumulate less work experience and professional skills than men and have less incentive to invest in their formal upskilling, resulting in lower human capital which, in turn, reduces their ability to earn high wages relative to men. This gendered division of labour is taken as a given factor, the origins of which are not explored in detail (Mutari *et al.* 2002).

When women do choose to enter the workforce, they are theorised to continue juggling domestic labour, which decreases their attachment to paid labour, therefore reducing their productivity and wages. Orthodox theorists also argue that women will avoid professions that require significant or niche skill development, as their returns on investment are only reaped when they remain with that employer for extended periods of time, which is made more difficult by domestic commitments. Employers may avoid hiring women due to perceived uncertainty of long-term employment, a lack of return on investment, and women being more likely than men to work in part-time or casual positions (Lips 2013). Finally, wage depression in highly feminised sectors is understood to result from qualified women being excluded from male-dominated occupations for the above reasons, resulting in an oversupply of available workers within these sectors (Lips 2013: 170). HCT thus claims to account for wage discrimination within and between sectors. The theory's proponents argue that 'worker contributions and merit can be quantified and that rewards are then distributed in a rational, bias-free way that reflects this quantification' (Lips 2013: 170). The theory individualises the responsibility for professional wages[1] by assigning each person a level of human capital determined by their skills, education and experience levels which will influence their pay prospects. It ignores the influence of non-economic factors on wage standards.

Heterodox wage theory

Feminist-Marxist political economy

Heterodox feminist-Marxist political economists argue that wage-setting is an economic, cultural and political process which is embedded in societal and institutional contexts (Karamessini and Ioakimoglou 2007). Wages are viewed as a social practice that enforce implicit beliefs pertaining to factors such as gender, race and class. Feminist-Marxists argue that orthodox wage theories are severely limited by their treatment of wages as a price, and wage differentials as 'distortions of market wages' (Mutari *et al.* 2002: 75). By addressing gender and race only in relation to wage discrimination, rather than treating them as underlying influences throughout wage determination processes, orthodox approaches treat wage inequality as a 'special case of market failure' (Mutari *et al.* 2002: 75).

More generally, a heterodox approach to wage determination refutes neoclassical claims that markets tend toward equilibrium and perfect competition, and that wages are prices determined through supply and demand. Rather, it views wages as 'indeterminate outcomes of bargaining between workers and capitalists' (Mutari and Figart 2002: 76). Employees' capacity to organise and bargain is of central importance to wage determination processes. Sectors that can organise collective action and/or hold great negotiation power are more likely to achieve higher wages than unorganised or decentralised workers with limited negotiation power. In such cases, employers drive down wages to maximise profit and wages can become parasitic.

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[1] Professional wages that reflect ECEC worker's qualifications, skills, financial investment and responsibilities, support them to achieve economic independence and security, and enable workers with relevant experience to be paid at or above national wage average.

Parasitic wages

Parasitic wages occur when wage standards do not enable a person to support themselves and/or their families, with labour continuity and reproduction only possible due to support from another source (Power *et al.* 2003; Kaufman 2010). This is a common scenario historically and globally in caring occupations, including early education and aged care, with many workers dependent on family or state assistance for survival – making them financially vulnerable and limiting agency to pursue alternate opportunities (Webb and Webb 1920). While these systems often disempower women engaged in paid care labour, they serve the goal of the capitalist class to maximise profit by driving down labour costs to exploitative levels. The capitalist profit-oriented agenda of wage minimisation and profit maximisation means that the 'interests of capitals and the interests of wage-labour are diametrically opposed to each other' (Marx 1847, cited in Hurst 2018: para. 30). Market supremist narratives that ignore the gendered, class-based power structures embedded within wage architecture fail to understand the causes of low wages and their effects, including the disincentive for workers to remain in the sector long-term.

Undervaluation of care labour

The ability to pay workers low and/or parasitic wages is enabled by the undervaluation of care work, wherein sociocultural beliefs devalue caring labour. Low societal valuations enable the imposition of 'care' or 'wage' penalties directed toward highly feminised care sectors. By naturalising caring expertise as inherently feminine, gendered narratives absolve the idea of a skilled workforce and need for higher wages (England and Folbre 1999: 41). This cultural sexism misrepresents care labour as unskilled work suiting 'women's innate skills and desires' (Cook *et al.* 2017: 39) and leads to unfavourable power structures that dismiss and silence ECEC voices. This lack of 'voice' limits individual and collective opportunities to influence enterprise and sector conditions.

England and Folbre (1999) argue that occupations which involve care work are not paid high wages for five core reasons. Firstly, gender bias and cultural coding mean that care skills are perceived as coming naturally to women. Women in general are seen as nurturing with mother-like qualities, therefore not having to learn any skills to work as an educator or teacher; whereas men deserve 'greater compensation' because they have to learn skills to work (England and Folbre 1999: 44). Secondly, ECEC is argued to produce intrinsic rewards or 'compensating differentials' (England and Folbre 1999: 45). This means that, because of the assumed satisfying nature of this work, staff do not need to be highly compensated and deserve lower wages. Thirdly, ECEC produces human and social capital which is hard to measure and quantify. It is therefore too difficult to 'charge a price that reflects' workforce contributions, so minimum wages are appropriate (England and Folbre 1999: 45). Fourth, because many families struggle to afford ECEC and represent 'poor clients', there is downward pressure to make ECEC accessible and therefore educators are kept on low pay. Finally, there is the 'sacred cows' argument which contends that commodification demeans the 'love and care' provided by ECEC workers; therefore, it is best that the workforce does not prioritise professional wages at the risk of devaluing care (England and Folbre 1999: 46).

Decentralised, gendered industrial relations architecture

Feminist-Marxist political economy considers gendered Industrial Relations (IR) including *The Fair Work Act 2009*, which governs modern industrial award regulations and bargaining processes, to be a major factor in wage setting processes. Through enabling the decentralisation, de-collectivisation and de-unionisation of national wage bargaining systems and processes, while simultaneously slimming the role and scope of minimum award rates and conditions, the *Fair Work Act* has exacerbated barriers to high wages in ECEC. This shift decreased wage protection for women in lower paid occupations (where they are disproportionately reliant on minimum standards); as comprehensive awards and union representation historically provided lower-paid occupations with protection and opportunities for wage increases (Strachan and Burgess 2000: 363-4).

Charlesworth and Smith (2018: 88) describe modern award wage conditions as behaving as both a 'floor' and 'ceiling.' Minimum award rates limit the potential for parasitic wages in highly feminised sectors, while simultaneously providing a ceiling for workers who cannot access enterprise bargaining. As a result, minimum wage rates no longer act as a tool for collective empowerment, as they had for most of the 20th century under the *Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1904*; rather, they have become a mechanism that enables the government to defer responsibility for low wage standards to market-based determination.

De-unionisation also negatively affects ‘agreement making’ and bargaining opportunities. The reduced role of unions, which empowered workers through their knowledge and capacity to navigate agreements, has led to a capability gap and unfair power dynamic in enterprise bargaining, resulting in risk of being ‘exposed’ and pushed into agreements with minimal gains and increasingly ineffective engagements with wage bargaining architecture (van Gellecum *et al.* 2008: 47). This understanding is important as it recognises the disempowered position of highly feminised workforces, the ECS being over 90% female (Jobs and Skills Australia 2024). Extending on Marxist theory to position gender as an organising principle of wages and sociocultural structures (Glenn 1998: 33), feminist-Marxist theory highlights:

> the limits of theories and politics which ignore the capitalist basis of women's lives […] [and] the common location of most women in the mode of production, as the most oppressed and exploited members of the world's working classes (Gimenez 2004: 101-2).

Causes of low wages: Interim summary

These fundamental differences between orthodox and heterodox approaches to wage setting mean that each theoretical framework develops different explanations of low wages and solutions to improving pay conditions. From an orthodox perspective, low wages in the ECS can be attributed to low human capital levels amongst workers and women's precarious engagement in the paid workforce. Higher wages can be achieved if ECEC workers increase their levels of human capital through professional development opportunities. Alternately, heterodox theories identify layered and multifaceted understandings of low wages. Causes of low wages include ECEC’s status as care work and the ability of employers to drive parasitic wages due to gendered IR architecture and decentralised wage bargaining opportunities.

Improving wage conditions is not simple and there is no clear solution. Systemic change is required, such as supporting high valuation of ECEC work, improving unionisation and collective bargaining pathways, and using feminist-Marxist theories to challenge and overcome the limitations of orthodox wage theories, including the primacy of HCT and undervaluation of ECEC. The principles and critical perspectives embedded in feminist-Marxist theories can help in analysing the multi-dimensional factors embedded within wage determination and distribution processes and inspire heterodox solutions to professional wages that would otherwise be sidelined by orthodox economists.

The following section explores how orthodox theory's persistence as the popular means of understanding and shaping wage dynamics has influenced ineffective solutions to ECS wage growth through professionalism narratives and upskilling programs, and gendered IR architecture and ineffective wage bargaining opportunities.

Theory in Practice

Orthodox wage theories have had a significant impact on ECEC pay standards. They have driven the promotion of professionalism narratives and upskilling initiatives which have placed the responsibility for wage improvements on individual workers rather than collective or systemic change; and they have maintained gendered IR architecture and ineffective wage bargaining opportunities that create high profits for ECEC providers and wage stagnation for the workforce.

Professionalism narratives in public policy

HCT promotes the idea that if an individual collects more units of human capital through professional development, work experience and qualifications they will be rewarded with higher wages. Reform agendas popularised during the early 2000's were influenced by this narrative and promulgated the idea that ECS workforce professionalisation would result in a natural progression toward increased wages, regulated by market forces and public policy initiatives. Subsequent investment has targeted the provision of free and subsidised upskilling opportunities, and increasingly paid practicum placements to support workers through this required learning.

Government funding for professional development

Government bodies have attempted to indirectly boost wage conditions by funding professional development opportunities for ECEC staff to support their human capital maximisation. In the Albanese government's ten-year strategy ‘Shaping Our Future’ (2022-2031), designed to support a sustainable, high-quality ECEC workforce, Focus Area 5 titled ‘Qualifications and Career Pathways’ directs funding toward professional upskilling under the rationale that it will enable ‘career progression’ and the maintenance of a ‘highly qualified, experienced and sustainable sector workforce’ (ACECQA 2021: 55). As part of this focus, the government has invested significantly in providing and/or subsidising fee-free TAFE, vocational education and training, ECT scholarships, bursaries and other professional development initiatives. Of these initiatives, $1 billion was invested directly into a partnership with state and territory governments to establish a twelve-month Skills Agreement delivering 180,000 Fee-Free TAFE and vocational educational places from January 2023 for ECEC and other priority sectors (ACECQA 2023b). The Albanese government also allocated $12.56 million for investment in professional development subsidies and $3.21 million into paid practicum subsidies for educators and ECTs between 2023 and 2027 (Education Department 2024).

State governments have followed suit, introducing localised incentives to commence study in ECEC. In Victoria the ‘Victorian Early Childhood Teacher and Educator Incentives programs’ provide scholarships for eligible students, including up to $25,000 for Bachelor degree students, $18,000 for Master degree students, and $12,000 for graduate diploma students (Department of Education 2024b). Similarly, the Australian Capital Territory government funds around 8 Early Childhood Degree Scholarships twice a year to eligible educators, each worth up to $25,000 (ACT Education Directorate 2024). In Queensland, the Early Childhood Practicum Placement offers $5,000 to eligible students studying an undergraduate or postgraduate ECT degree to support them in completing unpaid practicum placements (Department of Education 2024a).

Low wages persist despite more qualifications

These education initiatives have been effective in increasing the number of workers pursuing and completing professional development and qualifications. Data from Australia's 2021 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census (Department of Education 2022: 15) demonstrates a significant decrease in the total percentage of unqualified members of the ECEC workforce – from 19.7% in 2013 to 15.2% in 2021. Meanwhile, the total percentage of staff with teaching qualifications rose from 12.2% in 2013 to 14.1% in 2021; and the total qualifications in an ECEC-related field rose from 68.1% in 2013 to 70.7% in 2021. Between 2020 and 2021, 139,140 staff also reported undertaking professional development training. Despite this, as qualification levels have risen, wage standards have not risen correspondingly to parity with average Australian wages.

Improvements in qualifications and experience levels mean that an educator can move up through minimum wage standard levels, as dictated by the Fair Work Commission's Children's Services Award 2010 and Educational Services (Teachers) Award. However, these wage standards may still be low in comparison to other professions or national standards. For example, a new certificate III level 3 qualified educator earns $1,016.40 per week, compared to a certificate III level 3.3 qualified educator with 2 years of experience earning $1,101.50 per week – an $85.10 difference per week. If an educator upskills from being a new level 3.4 diploma qualified educator earning $1,162.40 per week (Fair Work Ombudsman 2010) to a new Level 1 ECT earning $1,396.10 per week in a long day care centre, they will earn $233.7 more per week (Fair Work Ombudsman 2020). This means that a worker can move upward within the confines of the awards, and still not reach par with the average Australian. A full time Level 5 ECT (a teacher considered highly accomplished with at least 3 years of experience) on the award rate earns $1931.7 per week, still $64.7 less than average full time Australian earnings (ABS 2024). As over 70% of child carers are reliant on award rates, compared to 23% for workers in all other occupations, this represents a significant earnings gap between industries that HCT does not effectively account for nor provide solutions to overcome (Job and Skills Australia 2024).

Assuming freedom of choice

HCT adopts the neoclassical belief that individuals are utility-maximising. This includes the assumption that workers choose to work in the ECS based on personal preference and, if/when they are faced with adverse conditions, including low pay and suboptimal working conditions, they can leave without much difficulty. This movement is theorised to result in increased demand for workers, higher compensation and improved workforce conditions as the market compensates for supply and demand factors (Mutari *et al.* 2002). While orthodox theory ‘acknowledges limits on choice’, including preferences, values and norms, it ultimately ignores systemic and institutional barriers that women have historically faced in navigating paid work and wage improvement pathways (Folbre 2012: 601).

Government funded initiatives developed through a HCT lens don’t account for the diverse and layered needs of this predominantly female workforce who often do not have adequate resources or time to upskill and face a ‘care gap’, where they are reliant on others and/or have to take on additional work to help finance living expenses due to low wages and cost of living struggles (McDonald *et al.* 2018: 662). The ECEC workforce has tended to be predominantly female due to limited choice and workforce constraints. As Folbre (2012) explains, explicit laws restricting women's labour force participation enacted throughout history have limited their work options to caring occupations. The simplistic assumption underpinning HCT which views individuals as being able to enter and leave employment at ease neglects women’s comparative struggles to gain entry to, and discrimination faced within, job markets. Coercion, punishment and restriction have led women to specialise in ECEC, restricting opportunities to explore other occupations (Folbre 2012).

The focus on professional development adopted by government bodies at the expense of funding wage growth directly has also contributed to ECEs and ECTs feeling unsupported, leading to workforce burn-out and limited motivation to upskill. Some ECEC workers choose not to ‘bother’ working toward bachelor qualifications due to limited financial benefits and large study fees compared to other occupations (Oke *et al.* 2021).

While professionalism narratives and initiatives have led to an increase in the number of educators and teachers in the sector who participate in training and upskilling programs, they have not been an effective avenue for collective wage increases or workforce sustainability (Cumming *et al.* 2015: 2). In practice, collective improvements and wage increases have been primarily linked to improvements in minimum wage standards. Increases in ECEC minimum wage standards were not the result of market responses to human capital acquisition, rather government intervention to boost minimum awards conditions. As Boyd (2013: 1) explains:

> The solution has been framed as a need for professionalising the workforce – professional development training, higher education and enhanced skills. While seeking professional status is expected to improve the quality of childcare programs and worker compensation [...] They [still] experienced poverty wages, few benefits, high work-related expenses and job insecurity [...] Obtaining professional status and credentials for early education and care workers is not enough.

Gendered architecture and ineffective opportunities

Gendered industrial relations

Orthodox political economy's adoption of market values and neglect of sociocultural factors' impact on wage setting practices, discourages critical engagement with gendered IR architecture and embeds ineffective wage bargaining practices that enable high profits for ECEC providers and wage stagnation for the workforce. Gendered IR architecture constructs wage bargaining environments that are not conducive for ECEC workers to negotiate higher wages, and mechanisms created to ostensibly encourage and enable women to improve wage conditions have failed thus far. The shift to enterprise bargaining was historically promoted to: 'chart a middle course […] balance the needs of flexibility for employers with the need for fairness for employees [...] [and] promote productivity]' (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2022: 4). The embedded assumption that a decentralised bargaining process, initiated and progressed without any union support, is more compatible with 'gender work-force objectives' neglects to consider the agendas of service providers and negotiation power dynamics that are commonplace in bargaining practices (Strachan and Burgess 2000: 366-7).

Attempting to negotiate professional wages and/or conditions above minimum award regulations within modern IR architecture is a difficult pursuit. Embedded androcentric bias in national policymaking processes marginalises, devalues and treats women's labour (paid and unpaid) as an expendable, exploitable resource. As a result, women, especially those who work in highly feminised care-based sectors, occupy a disadvantaged position relative to men. This bias is 'built into the system' and results in minimal attention and support for ECEC services and their unique negotiation capacities being considered in national wage architecture, governance and wage bargaining mechanisms (Jenkins 2021: 8). This has manifested under the *Fair Work Act's* bargaining streams, including the Low-paid bargaining stream and Multi-enterprise agreement stream.

The Low-Paid Bargaining (LPB) stream was introduced under the *Act* to specifically acknowledge the unique experiences of workers in highly feminised sectors and their unsuccessful interactions with wage bargaining structures. As set out in sections 241 to 246 of the *Act*, the now-reformed bargaining stream was created to assist and encourage low-paid sectors that have difficulty bargaining to commence multi-enterprise agreement negotiations covering two or more employers. If a party was awarded a Low-paid Authorisation by the Fair Work Commission, they could commence multi-enterprise bargaining negotiations with a funding body (Cooper and Ellem 2012).

There were, however, significant barriers to commencing this process, which resulted in marginalisation of the very groups identified as the target beneficiaries. Fair Work Commissioners conservatively and inconsistently assessed the eligibility criteria for inclusion in the bargaining authorisation, resulting in 'only one successful variation of an award to date through the equal remuneration provisions of the *Fair Work Act*' (Smith and Whitehouse 2020: 550) and 'only five applications [...] made for an LPB authorisation' over the first decade of the *Act's* implementation (Macdonald *et al.* 2018). Cooper (2014: 64) contends that: 'the limits of the legislation – its failure to incorporate access for employees with little real experience of real collective bargaining and its uncertain arbitral framework – are laid bare.'

This 'complete failure' has been recognised broadly and sparked movement toward a new system of collective bargaining under a 'Supported Bargaining' (SB) stream of multi-employer bargaining (Charlesworth and Macdonald 2023: 405). Introduced in 2022 through amendments to the *Fair Work Act*, it replaces the LPB stream and adopts less restrictive criteria to provide greater access to multi-employer bargaining. These changes demonstrate the failure of enterprise bargaining systems to empower ECEC workers to achieve professional wages, highlight national recognition of these failures, and point to potential movement toward more accessible bargaining arrangements.

A lucrative environment for ECEC providers

Increased corporatisation of the ECEC landscape has meant that a defining dynamic of the ECS has been the capacity for service providers to exploit the sector's quasi-market structure by extracting large subsidies from the government and relying on low minimum wage standards to maximise profits. Despite workers struggling to survive on low wages, the sector represents a relatively secure, lucrative, long-term, and sought-after investment opportunity for large multinational corporations. While extensive research has been conducted into the causes of workforce challenges, subsequent policy initiatives tend toward addressing 'only some aspects of workforce sustainability' rather than 'multiple challenges at setting, community and policy levels' (Cumming *et al.* 2015: 1). The movement toward ECEC marketisation has created more potential for the leveraging of public funds for the purposes of private profit and gain as opposed to supporting children, families and staff or improving wage standards, with this risk 'rarely acknowledged' by policy makers and state representatives (Adamson and Brennan 2014: 50).

The United Workers Union (2021b: 5) claims that a significant portion of taxpayer money that is directed toward funding the ECS ultimately ends up as 'huge profits' for large for-profit providers. While the ECS is not fully private nor for-profit, as of 2022 around 50% of national ECEC services were from for-profit providers, compared to 39% from not-for-profit providers and 11% from public providers. This growing dominance of for-profit providers is relevant as they are consistently ranked lower in terms of quality than alternative providers. For example, in 2021, only 16% of for-profit services were rated as exceeding National Quality Standards, compared to 36% of not-for-profit and 40% of government run centres. The diversion of resources in for-profit services away from caring tasks or staff wages toward 'dividend payouts, other financialised transactions, and million-dollar executive compensation packages' is alarming, considering they are publicly subsidised yet privately delivered (Grudnoff 2022: 29).

From 2019 to 2020, $10.6 billion was channelled by government bodies into the ECS, the majority into subsidies to reduce the cost of ECEC for parents through the Child Care Subsidy, with this number expected to climb to over $12 billion by 2024. From 2019 to 2020, total revenue in the sector was estimated to be between $13.8 to $15.4 billion (United Workers Union 2021b: 5). This indicates that:

> 70-80% of revenue in a sector attracting investors from Australian and global finance houses is funded by the Australian taxpayer. The level of subsidies and the firm expectation they will only ever be increased by Australian governments are commonly cited in ECEC prospectuses as guarantees of future growth.

The prevalence of government subsidies creates extraordinary opportunities for profit making, with private investment encouraged and enshrined in the *National Early Childhood Development Strategy – Investing in the Early Years*. The strategy identified private sector ECEC growth as playing a large role in the sectors' future development; but it did not acknowledge potential conflict between investment being channelled toward profit versus social investment (Adamson and Brennan 2014). The 2023 *Childcare Inquiry* revealed that for-profit providers are more likely to increase and charge higher service fees than not-for-profit providers, while the latter tend to pay more staff above award wages. The inquiry also confirmed that services with higher quality ratings were more likely to pay educators and teachers higher wages (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission 2023). This demonstrates that there is a positive link between higher staff wages and higher quality ECEC provision, and that for-profit centres are likely to charge higher fees, pay lower wages and deliver lower quality services compared to not-for-profit centres.

Integrating wage theories in recent reforms

Orthodox wage theories evidently cannot explain the causes of and solutions to overcoming low wages in the ECS. Market-oriented wage theories that look at wages through an economic relations lens fail to consider the systemic, gendered and multidimensional barriers faced by ECEC workers when pursuing higher wages. Heterodox theories, however, can be used to critically understand diverse factors affecting wage determination. While not offering a definitive cause of or solution to overcoming low wages, heterodox approaches engage dynamically with factors outside of the scope of the market that directly impact pay standards. Recognising this, industry actors including employers, government agencies, unions and ECEC organisations have increasingly turned to heterodox theories to complement and overcome the limited scope of orthodox theories in recent reform initiatives.

While orthodox theories have been, and continue to be, the primary framework used by stakeholders to set and manage pay standards, heterodox theories are growing in relevance and popularity for their capacity to explore systems-based causes of and solutions to low wages. New approaches are emerging because orthodox approaches have failed to deal effectively with workforce attraction and retention challenges; and government bodies are recognising that immediate changes to wage conditions are needed to prevent further loss of staff and to work toward attracting and retaining the estimated 89,000 additional workers needed to meet growing demand between 2024-2034 (Jobs and Skills Australia 2024). Efforts under way by employers, government, union and ECEC sector bodies to move past low wages are demonstrating the benefits of integrated theoretical and policy approaches, exemplified below.

Employers

To attract and retain workers, some major ECEC organisations like G8 Education have committed to providing wages at above award rates for all staff and discounting childcare fees for their children (G8 Education 2024). Goodstart Early Learning has committed to paying educators and support staff at a minimum 5% above award rate and centre directors 12% above award rate; providing allowances for staff who undertake additional responsibilities such as being mentors and educational leaders; and allowing cultural leave of up to 5 days per year for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees for ceremonial purposes, including Sorry Business (Goodstart Early Learning 2024). Direct wage boosts and culturally considerate approaches to wage conditions and leave entitlements are increasingly influenced by national findings that poor working conditions are driving workforce burnout (Productivity Commission 2024; Australian Competition and Consumer Commission 2023). This responsiveness by employers demonstrates a break from orthodoxy. While both these organisations also provide access to subsidised training and promote professional development and qualification attainment, directly funding above award wages and additional perks catering to the needs of this workforce suggests heterodox influence.

Government

The failure of Australia's previous multi-enterprise bargaining mechanism, the LPB stream, and its replacement by the SB stream provides a new opportunity for collective bargaining gains. According to Charlesworth and Macdonald (2023: 407), a significant change in the 2022 *Fair Work Amendment Act* included liberalising bargaining-approval conditions, with other improvements including: not excluding employees who previously had an enterprise agreement from engaging in multi-enterprise bargaining; granting employees access to protected industrial action; and including the potential extension of SB multi-employer agreements to other organisations, subject to certain criteria being met. These improvements enable greater engagement with the SB stream, thus creating increased access to multi-employer bargaining opportunities and, if successful, providing the opportunity for sharing collective gains, fundamentally supporting a greater chance for professional wage obtainment in the ECS. Changes implemented through the 2022 *Fair Work Amendment Act* have also led to changes in the 'single interest' bargaining stream, including improved access to multi-employer bargaining across different enterprises that hold 'common interests', compared to its previous limitation to a narrow group of employers including franchises and related corporations (Charlesworth and Macdonald 2023: 407).

These reforms are heterodox in nature and have the potential to support the incremental growth of collective bargaining in Australia. Thus, while enterprise bargaining may still be the main form of wage negotiations, multi-employer opportunities could extend gains to care sectors more liberally (Stanford *et al.* 2022).

Unions

As evidence of the potential for the SB stream to produce professional wages, approximately a year after the stream was introduced, the United Workers Union (UWU), Australian Education Union – Victorian Branch (AEU) and the Independent Education Union of Australia (IEU) formally lodged an application for a supported bargaining authorisation to commence negotiations to cover employees and employers in the ECS, representing over 60 individual employers (Marin-Guzman 2023). As the first application lodged under the new *Secure Jobs, Better Pay* legislation, the application was accepted on the grounds of multi-employer wage negotiations being justified due to 'a relatively high degree of award dependence in the ECEC sector, and low rates of pay prevailing in this sector' (Roberts 2023: 8). The successful acceptance of their right to bargain up to a 25% pay rise across multiple employers has been described as the:

> first order of its kind delivered under Labor's new laws, triggering a path to force the government to the negotiating table [...] The decision means workers will also have the right to take protected industrial action as part of the bargaining and can seek to get the Commonwealth, as a third-party funder, to the negotiating table [...] UWU (United Workers Union) intends to call on the federal government, as the funder of the sector, to come to the bargaining table and come prepared to fund a real wage increase (Marin-Guzman 2023: 9).

As negotiations progress, the SB bargaining process has the potential to redistribute earnings to lower-paid workers. This approach moves past the individualistic nature of the orthodox theory in favour of collective gains.

ECEC sector

Across the sector, wellness programs, including coaching and mentoring initiatives to support educators navigating professional upskilling and ECEC careers, have grown in popularity. One such program, 'Early Learning Connection', provides supported career pathways in early childhood education for women in Canberra. A key action in the ACT Government's *Valuing Educators, Values Children - A Workforce Strategy for the ACT Early Childhood Education and Care Profession* (2023-25), it prioritises a systems-based approach to workforce empowerment, providing free and subsidised study opportunities, career and coaching services, study skills, group workshops, and facilitating paid employment in early learning centres across the ACT. The program is heterodox in nature as study programs have been designed with the workforce in mind, including certificate III classes which operate during school hours from 9:30am-2:30pm over an extended semester to allow for school pick-ups and drop-offs, and early morning classes offered to students studying toward the bachelor of early childhood education (from birth to five years) to allow for their 'release' in the morning for study, rather than in the afternoon when conflict with centre staffing ratio requirements is more likely (Early Learning Connection 2024).

Conclusion

Orthodox labour market theories have been, and continue to be, the primary framework used by stakeholders to set and manage pay standards; and there is little indication that this is likely to change in the immediate future. Concurrently, however, recent inquiries into the sector have provided nuanced, heterodox-influenced insights into workforce sustainability. Recent reforms from employers, government, union and ECEC sector bodies demonstrate that heterodox theories and approaches to wage improvements are increasingly influential post-COVID.

The outcome 'on the ground' for workers in the sector remains uncertain. There is no guarantee of continued, sustainable future wage growth. Historically, the ECS has experienced a pattern of advances, retreats and changing barriers to pay reform, with women being 'penalised' regardless of how they seek pay equality (Smith and Whitehouse 2020: 535). Government action since the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated its significant power to push continued wage increases in the sector through workforce inquiries, strategies and changes to minimum award conditions. Heightened access to policymakers' agendas in recent years has supported significant wage increases and positive progress in the sector. A blending of orthodox and heterodox values is also evident in actions taken concurrently by employers to directly boost wages, by government to support direct engagement with wage bargaining, and by unions to collectively engage with the SB stream and the ECEC sector to support worker wellbeing and workforce sustainability.

Probing these issues and outcomes, this article has provided a contemporary analysis of wage standards in Australia's ECS from a political economy disciplinary perspective. It has analysed low wages as a form of structured inequality faced by this highly feminised workforce; and it has evaluated the theoretical elements underpinning recent changes to pay standards and wage setting mechanisms in the sector. It has shown that orthodox theories of wages deriving from neoclassical economics cannot produce substantial systems-based change to low wage conditions because of their individualistic focus on human capital and market wage mechanisms. On the other hand, heterodox theories, drawing on Marxian and feminist political economy, engage more dynamically with a broader range of factors to explain wage determination and distribution processes, thereby having greater capacity to reveal the barriers and enablers of higher wages. The heterodox approach supports more direct action to improve wages, rather than the indirect engagement with wage improvements that is more characteristic of the orthodox approach.

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