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Hearing Parents and Carers' Voices: Experiences of Accessing Quality Long Day Care in Northern Regional Australia

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Abstract

This article explores parents' and carers' experiences of accessing quality long day care in northern regional Australia. The data was gathered in 2009, after the collapse of ABC Developmental Learning Centres (herein referred to as ABC Learning) and before the implementation of the National Quality Framework, and provides a snapshot of respondents' experiences at this key moment of transition in the long day care landscape. In communities often characterised by distance from friends and family, fluctuating economic growth and limited services for those outside the mainstream community, the experience of many parents and carers was of a childcare landscape that was unresponsive to their unique needs. More broadly, this research provides policy-makers with insight into the material implications of a childcare policy environment that encouraged over-reliance on the 'market' to provide accessible, quality long day care services.

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Introduction

Research background

Accessing quality long day care in the large regional cities of northern Australia requires parents and carers to negotiate a unique and particularly complex childcare landscape. A 2007 study focusing on the experiences of Townsville women found the regional context, with its associated high levels of growth and mobility, isolation from family support, and at that time a rapidly expanding corporate childcare sector, further diminished these women's opportunities to choose quality long day care services (Harris, 2008). The recent global economic downturn and the collapse of a large corporate childcare provider may further complicate regional parents' and carers' access to quality child care.

The Townsville 2007 research focused on 20 women's experiences of choosing quality long day care in a childcare landscape that privileged for-profit child care. The research presented in this paper replicated the Townsville study and increased its scope by focusing on the experiences of male and female parents and carers (49 in total) in three additional large northern Australian regional cities: Darwin, Cairns and Mackay.

Child care policy: Issues and context

The goals of this follow-up research were also informed by the aims and objectives of an international network of non-government organisations and scholars whose establishment was supported by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), the Academy of the Social Sciences of Australia, the British Academy and the Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW. The network aimed to encourage research across Australia relevant to childhood education and care policy (Brennan, 2008b). The network argues that the 'impact of neo-liberal economics has opened up early childhood services to the private for-profit and global corporate sector in a way which is profoundly changing early childhood policy and provision' (p. 19). The network has also noted 'the extent to which governments can

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achieve social and educational objectives via market based child care is a question that is yet to be answered' (p. 19). This research significantly contributes to answering this critical question.

According to UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre, the network's concerns are well-founded. In their 2008 report *The child care transition: A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries*, Australia was ranked 23rd out of 25 countries. Countries were ranked according to 10 'minimum standards for protecting the rights of children in their most vulnerable and formative years' (Adamson, 2008, p. 2). Australia met only two of these minimum standards and only one of the three childcare quality benchmarks. Julia Gillard, the then education minister, said the UN was 'rightly critical of the policy settings of the former government where effectively the market was allowed to rip' (2009, p. 2).

There is no doubt that the Howard Government, and the Hawke and Keating governments before it, encouraged the 'market rules' approach to child care (Brennan, 1998; 2008a; Sumsion, 2006), believing that a market driven-sector, responsive to parental demand, would ensure accessible, affordable, high-quality long day care services. However, the women who participated in our original Townsville study thought linking parental demand and quality was flawed, as such a link assumed that there would be a range of quality options to choose from. This was not their experience. Further, the women claimed the government used the 'market' as a mechanism, under the guise of consumer choice, for supporting the unaccountable growth of the corporate sector and to avoid funding community-based childcare services (Harris, 2008). The women's material experiences may not be uncommon in the contemporary neo-liberal policy environment where 'there has been a retreat from state welfare provision to privatised services and a shift from interventionist economic management to free market principles' (Baker, 2008, p. 53). In this environment, rational choice is valorised as both an expression of individual freedom and a mechanism that will deliver innovative and

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responsive services, free from the restraints of government. The Rudd Labor Government began to express concern with the dominance of neo-liberal ideology, calling for balance between the market and the state. Kevin Rudd derided the 'triumph of neo-liberalism—that particular brand of free-market fundamentalism, extreme capitalism and excessive greed which became the economic orthodoxy of our time' (2009, p. 1).

Until recently it seemed that market-based childcare provision was 'pervasive and uncontested' (Sumsion, 2006, p. 102). However, the change from a Coalition to a Labor Federal Government, the global economic downturn and the collapse of Australia's largest corporate childcare provider, ABC Learning, all potentially destabilise the 'market rules' certainty. Deborah Brennan argues, 'there is an extraordinary opportunity to reconsider the fundamentals of Australia's approach and to re-instate a national program focused on the needs of children and families' (2008a, p. 2). Marta Santos Pais, the Director of UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre, also called for the Australian Government to develop a national early childhood plan and policy settings that promote the protection of children's services from an unpredictable economic environment (2008). And indeed the Rudd and Gillard governments have 'made early childhood education and care one of its top priorities' (Jarvie, 2008, p. 1). Subsequently, the Federal Government in partnership with state governments, as endorsed in 2009 by COAG, has moved to implement the *Early Years Learning Framework* 'a key component of the Australian Government's National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care' (DEEWR, 2011a, p. 1). The National Quality Framework has been progressively implemented since 1 July, 2010, and aims to 'ensure high quality and consistent early childhood education and care across Australia' (DEEWR, 2011b, p. 1).

Research aims

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The purpose of this research, therefore, is to contribute to the ongoing policy dialogue about early childhood education. More specifically, the aim of the study was to qualitatively explore, from the perspective of parents and carers who are searching for/using long day care, the impact of the rapidly changing childcare sector on their opportunities to access quality child care. The regional context of parents' and carers' experiences was emphasised. This paper will present data from 49 qualitative in-depth interviews with parents and carers in Darwin, Mackay and Cairns. The data was gathered in 2009, after the collapse of ABC Learning and before the implementation of the National Quality Framework. Therefore, the data presented here provides a snapshot of parents' and carers' experiences at a key moment of transition in long day care. This research project was funded by a grant from the Ian Potter Foundation.

Childcare landscapes in northern regional Australian cities

Although Cairns, Darwin and Mackay are all located in northern Australia, their social and economic contexts vary. Baum, O'Connor and Stimson (2005) assert that the populations of non-metropolitan cities are highly urban, with approximately 20 per cent of Australia's population living in these areas. Baum et al. define regional cities, using six categories with two main sub-categories, advantaged and disadvantaged. Mackay is defined as a service-based advantaged centre with characteristics that include: a diverse economy, sound economic growth, and substantial education and government facilities. Darwin also meets the requirements of the service-based advantaged category, although Baum et al. label it slightly differently owing to its capital city status. Mackay and Darwin act as service hubs for their surrounding areas and as 'jumping off point[s]' (p. 04.12) for workers in industries such as mining. They have reasonably strong economies, with higher than average levels of well-educated and well-paid populations, and pockets of disadvantage rather than entrenched disadvantage. Cairns is defined as a tourism/population-boom advantaged centre: 'Cairns is a city driven by tourism. Its fundamental reason for being is to attract tourists and to

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provide them with a wealth of ways to spend their money from gift shops to reef visits and snorkelling' (p. 04.14). Its economy largely relies on the service and recreation industries, with high labour force participation rates and below average levels of disadvantage (Baum et al., 2005). All cities have a higher than average number of children aged birth–14 years and a lower median age when compared to the median age of all Australians; and high levels of residential mobility (ABS, 2006).

In 2009, when the data was gathered for this study, Cairns, Darwin and Mackay were feeling the impact of the global financial crisis (GFC). Towards the end of 2008, industry representatives in Mackay were reporting in the local press that the economy of the Mackay region was continuing to do well despite the GFC, arguing: 'I wouldn't say we were totally protected, but we do have a buffer [the mining industry]' (Pearse in Daily Mercury) 'Gloom hangs over world economy but Mackay region has \$36b worth of jobs and hope' (2008, p. 1). The press reported that Darwin was also continuing to do well despite the economic crisis (Calacouras, 2009, p. 1), although the CEO of Anglicare NT noted that: 'More and more people are coming to us because their work is winding down' (Nicoles in Falkiner, 2009, p. 1). After a sustained boom between 2002 and 2007, the Cairns economy slowed as the GFC impacted 'on employment in the construction and tourism industries and thus Cairns as a region' (Lockhart, 2010, p. 2). As a result, for example, in early 2009 the Cairns Novotel Rockford Palm Cove Resort's childcare centre ceased operations, with staff and parents given only three days notice of the closure—95 per cent of its enrolments were from the local community. Mr Emery, the Rockford regional manager, instructed that the centre close, claiming that: 'At the end of the day, the business lost a stack of money and we couldn't continue' (Jobs go as resort cuts child care, 2009, p. 3).

In 2008 escalating childcare fees were reported in the local press as causing Mackay parents significant financial challenges (Child care fees hit families hard, 2008). These high costs were in addition to difficulties in accessing a

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space in a long day care centre: 'Child care facilities are full to the brim and if new parents wait until after their child is born to put their name down on a waiting list they could be out of luck for years' (Three-year wait on childcare, 2007). In early 2009 concerns were raised about the quality of child care in Darwin when the *Northern Territory News* reported that a baby had been accidentally locked alone in a centre at the end of the day (Betts, 2009). This incident followed the collapse of ABC Learning in 2008 and the identification of two of Darwin's 14 ABC Learning centres (28.5% of all centres in Darwin) as unviable, leaving parents and carers uncertain about their childcare arrangements in 2009 (Langford, 2008). The Darwin City Council, which owned seven community-based centres, expressed an interest in purchasing some of these centres: 'We are certainly interested in taking over the land and the buildings and facilitating what we do now, which is a community child care model' (Sawyer in Langford, 2008). Parents and carers in Cairns and Mackay faced similar uncertainty, with ABC Learning having a substantial presence in both cities; six (25%) in Mackay and 17 (37%) in the Cairns region. The Cairns and Mackay City Councils, unlike Darwin City Council, did not own or administer childcare centres and neither publicly expressed an interest in purchasing the ABC Learning facilities in their cities.

As a result in 2009, parents and carers in Cairns, Mackay and Darwin were accessing care in an uncertain childcare landscape, impacted on by external forces such as corporate provider bankruptcy and the global economic downturn, as well as overstretched local childcare infrastructure.

Capturing the voices of parents and carers

As with the Townsville study (Harris, 2008), this research project relied on a qualitative methodology informed by a feminist perspective. The study focused on the experiences of parents and carers in large regional cities with populations greater than 50,000, in northern Australia. A qualitative semi-structured, in-depth interview was chosen as the data-gathering technique (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). Forty-nine parents and carers were interviewed

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in Cairns, Mackay and Darwin. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to one-and-a-half hours. Respondents were recruited through the distribution of flyers to all types of long day care centres and public locations such as libraries and university campuses. Each respondent was interviewed once, the focus of the interview questions being:

- * accessing quality child care in a large regional city
- criteria used for selecting care
- ideal vision of childcare quality
- exploring the link between the 'market', childcare choice, and quality
- views on the current childcare landscape.

As in the Townsville study, no questions directly focused on the corporate childcare sector. The interviews were analysed using the grounded theory techniques of coding and theme development (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Ethics approval for this study was received from the James Cook University Human Ethics Sub-Committee.

All but one of the respondents who participated in this study were women. Four women were Indigenous and one non-Indigenous woman identified her child as Indigenous. The respondents had an average of 1.5 children in child care, the children's ages ranging from four months to 13 years. Most women were using part-time child care and had been using care for more than two years. Most respondents had partners. Respondents were using community-based child care; small independently owned centres and corporate childcare centres. Seventy-five per cent of parents in Darwin were using community-based care, with 28 per cent in Mackay and 50 per cent in Cairns. Seventy-three per cent of parents and carers had no access to extended family support.

The experience of parents and carers

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Three themes related to parents' and carers' experiences emerged from the data:

- Accessing long day care in northern regional Australia
- The experience of long day care quality
- Negotiating a regional childcare landscape.

The data is presented according to these themes and we have selected data that best exemplifies respondents' experiences (Evans and Gruba, 2004).

Beggars can't be choosers—accessing long day care in a large regional city

The majority of parents and carers (84%) indicated, regardless of the city where they lived, that locating child care was a challenging experience. Parents reported there was 'not a whole lot of choice' (Darwin parent).

In the end I was in a position where you had to use the strategy of putting her name down in several places to see what came up, and keep my bloody fingers crossed that I got somewhere that was good (Cairns parent).

That (a Montessori centre in Brisbane) was great right up until we moved back to Mackay. There was nothing like that available here, it's just child care centres ... we had such a short amount of time to find a solution so I just rang all the child care centres and got him in to the first one that said yes (Mackay parent).

We moved to Darwin and I just rang around to see where we could fit in ... beggars can't be choosers ... we were fortunate to get a place (Darwin parent).

The four Indigenous parents had the additional challenge of finding culturally appropriate care, a priority for Indigenous families: 'Of particular concern in

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relation to formal child care is the need for programs to be culturally strong' (Guilfoyle, Sims, Saggars & Hutchins, 2010, p. 68).

I put Tyson's name down at (Community Based Centre) when I was six months pregnant, because I had heard through my work that it was good and culturally appropriate. They really work hard to address the cultural issues for Aboriginal kids and kids from other backgrounds ... Firstly I wanted to see if anyone on staff was black or at least not white. Then I was interested in how it looked. For me, it is really important that the kids are in touch with the earth and the ground ... (Cairns parent).

The implications of limited long day care availability was also profound for parents whose current childcare arrangements failed, or who were uncertain about the future viability of their centre:

In desperation Harry was in another day care centre that closed and it was closed with three days notice, so we literally went to every day care centre within the local travelling area, and put down his name or had a look to see what was available, and that centre had a place available that fitted Harry's age group, which was such a relief (Cairns parent).

I didn't really know what was happening because they were closing down (her ABC centre) ... so it was the uncertainty of having to start here and then having to leave, but as it turned out they have had the continuity in operating the centre (Darwin parent).

In 2009 these respondents' experiences occurred in a context of heightened public anxiety about the viability of their local childcare services. The *Cairns Post* reported: 'Parents still fear their children will be locked out of battling Far North ABC Learning centres despite a new plan to give children a secure placement' (Chamberlin, 2008). In such a context parents and carers were often grateful for any childcare place that became available; and respondents

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in all cities felt that accepting any available vacancy led to compromises in the quality of care they chose:

When we arrived in Darwin ... I started to think OK I will need to find care in Darwin, I did not really know anyone up here ... I only really found one centre that had any positions ... so I had to take whatever was available at the time because we both worked and we really didn't have any other options. It (the centre) was OK—it probably would not have been my first choice, it was not ideal ... so if I had had other options available I probably would have chosen a different alternative (Darwin parent).

The majority of parents and carers (63%) in all cities reported that, if they were able to locate a long day care place of reasonable quality, it was a matter of luck or good fortune: 'I was lucky I did not have problems' (Darwin parent).

It was a fluke ... I got my name down at a lot of centres and found the waiting list was usually six, 12 or even 18 months at that time, and then they opened a brand new centre. So it was really lucky that I got in there before it was even built ... I got my name on the list and I was one of the first in the door, so it was really lucky (Cairns parent).

I have been lucky I think, in the sense that I did get a place for Billy and that was probably—they said that a few people had left because of the uncertainty of the ABC ... (Darwin parent).

These parents' and carers' experiences may not be unique. In 2005 The National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) reported that 241 (39.5%) mothers (with children younger than 15 years) participating in the HILDA survey had persistent problems with child care and that, of these mothers, 27.6 per cent and 29.5 per cent, in Waves 2 and 3 of the data respectively, reported difficulty in locating good-quality care (McNamara,

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Cassells and Lloyd). Also, Hand (2005), in a qualitative study of mothers' reasons for using/not using formal child care in metropolitan, regional and rural locations, found that 'a small number spoke about not being able to find care of adequate quality that they were willing to use. This was especially the case for mothers in regional areas who spoke about a lack of choice of services' (p. 14).

Boyd, Thorpe and Taylor (2010) discuss the connection between quality of care and women's decisions to return to work, noting that mothers were less likely to participate in the workforce if they perceived care options to be of poor quality. The majority (73%) of respondents in this study also reported, as with the Townsville 2007 study, a lack of access to extended family support. This lack of additional support meant that parents and carers were less able to choose an alternative to formal care, even when they experienced the quality of the service as less than ideal: '... you don't have family around you and so a lot of people only have formal day care as a choice ...' (Darwin parent).

Looking for happiness—the experience of long day care quality

This sense of compromise was also evident when parents and carers discussed the quality of care their children were currently receiving. Respondents were asked to describe their ideal quality environment and then the quality of their current childcare arrangement. When describing their ideal childcare quality, respondents emphasised good relationships between staff, children and parents; children's wellbeing; and sensitivity to the unique needs of families. This is an emphasis on process rather than structural quality (Ishimine & Wilson, 2009) and is consistent with findings from research undertaken by Weaven and Grace (2010), where parents tended 'to associate quality with observable childcare experiences—such as child interactions with staff and peers' (p. 59).

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Parents' and carers' understanding of quality often existed within a discourse that assumes that parental and extended family care are always preferable and, consequently, formal child care is always second-best: 'Such negativity frequently frames child care as a poorer quality of care ...' (Boyd et al., 2010, p. 5). A Mackay parent's comment captures this common dilemma: '... it would be a centre run by me and everybody be me, because ultimately no-one can look after your child the way you can'. Respondents' preference for informal care was consistent with findings from the Townsville study where their ambivalence about using formal care underscored the importance of finding a quality long day care environment: 'Child care is a deeply emotional and difficult thing because you are actually looking for someone to replace you ...' (Harris, 2008, p. 45).

When respondents were asked if their current childcare arrangement matched their ideal vision of care, most indicated that it either did match their ideal (31%) or somewhat matched their ideal (39%). It is also worth noting that 36 per cent of respondents had had to change their childcare provider to find a service they were happy with. Parents and carers using community-based care, particularly in Darwin (75%), were more likely to report they were satisfied with the quality of care for their children:

The first child care centre, I was very happy with it. They had some fabulous workers in there that, you know their enthusiasm, their energy was right there. I mean I'm wanting child care to add on to what I don't provide, given that I'm putting a kid in care for a long time. Um, so that was, it was fairly important that I felt there was a lot of happiness (Mackay parent).

... it was good, my child care experience—really stressful to get there though. There was not a market there and I felt like a lot of people I would deal with were not very interested in me either—you know they were

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running a business and that was where it started and stopped, whereas I am coming from this is my child ... (Darwin parent).

Many parents and carers, however, were dissatisfied with the quality of the care their children were currently receiving (30%) or had received in the past (36%):

I'm not real comfortable there and I'm sure part of it is that we are the only black family. I'm hoping we won't stay there for much longer, but at the moment the boys have to wait. They're not so unhappy, they seem OK, you know kids, they're adaptable ... But you don't want your kids to have to adapt ... I hate the thought that they are going somewhere second rate, but what I want doesn't exist and the closest thing to it has a six month waiting list (Cairns parent).

... looking back the first one—she was only at for couple of months um probably met my expectations by about 70% ... The second one, everyday I said to myself get her out of here, get her out of here now (Mackay parent).

Governments have linked childcare quality to an expanded childcare market—that quality will be driven up by market forces. As with the Townsville study (Harris, 2008), all parents saw as problematic the reliance on the market mechanism to ensure a range of quality childcare options:

It seems ridiculous. I mean there aren't choices for a start. And if there are choices then they'll be catering as always to the majority of people where the market is. So people in the minority, like Indigenous kids ... will never receive the care they need. I thought that argument (market forces) was known as false (Cairns parent).

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I think it only works if the women have a choice—if you have got a couple of different child care centres to choose from then of course you would pick the best one and that one would prosper and the other one would not ... But in reality there is not a market, so women have to choose whatever they can up here ... there is not a choice (Darwin parent).

A sign of the times—the regional child care landscape

In 2009 parents and carers negotiated a childcare landscape that was the result of policies linked to specific political agendas: 'a combination of conservative family values together with neo-liberal market strategy' (Brennan, 2007, p. 32). This policy environment created a childcare landscape that shaped parents' and carers' assumptions about/expectations of services, as well as how they made sense of their childcare experiences. The following comments provide valuable insight into the nature of these assumptions, expectations and experiences.

Respondents were asked to comment on this current child care landscape:

... but the rise in the number of profit, yeah I just, I'm just trying to be realistic, that's just a sign of the times. I mean look at ABC, who didn't think to themselves I should snatch one of them up, they'll be going cheap, we could make a real, you know, killing here. You forget that your customers are newborn you know, but I guess that's just being realistic ... So you'd have to be an idiot not to step up and say well I'll open a child care centre and I'll charge whatever I want and people will pay it. Especially in a town like Mackay, maybe not so much at the moment but I mean it is a boomtown and people will literally pay what it takes ... (Mackay parent).

This altered landscape led this group of parents and carers to have an experience of child care that seems to be a long way from the 1970s' feminist vision of services grounded in the needs of individual communities—a strong communal childcare movement (Curthoys, 1976). For example, 59 per cent of

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respondents in Cairns and Mackay were unaware of the existence of community-based child care:

Well, I suppose I wasn't aware that I had a choice and that there were such things as community based child care centres ... I think I might have been lucky in finding somewhere that I was happy with (Mackay parent).

Look I don't really know much about them (community based and for-profit). I just know (a Cairns Community Based Centre) is really nice and closer to what I want. It has friendly staff, there are different languages on the posters and some Murri posters and things ... and the play area outside is big and grassy with trees and sandpits. I don't really understand the differences (Cairns parent).

Regardless of geographic location and current childcare arrangement, the business model of childcare provision had dominated respondents' experiences: 'I just think big dollar signs written all over them ... It's actually something that I expected in that they were running a business and it wasn't charity' (Mackay parent), and respondents reluctantly concluded that because, in theory, anybody could open and run a childcare business then quality would be haphazard ...

If you open a child care centre, you can do whatever the hell you want ... they are for profit, they're on their own, they make their own rules ... I just thought to myself you're just a bunch of cowboys, you just do what you want when you want, and no-one sort of pulls anybody into line on a lot of it ... (Mackay parent)

... and further that the ownership of a childcare centre can and will change:

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You know, some of them open expecting to make a fortune and then they find out it is hard work and they can't get the staff and people don't pay. There's a lot that opened say four years ago ... that didn't look too bad, but are now older and changing owners and are just tired ... (Cairns parent).

Respondents also thought the way childcare service provision is currently structured and operated is now being accepted as the norm by parents:

I guess and a lot of people are accepting of that (that child care will become for-profit) to occur and more as we go along less people are going to know about alternatives to that—so they won't know to ask or demand it—so they'll just take what they've been given (Mackay parent).

You know having a new teacher every couple of months—used to bug me a bit but now I just accept it. I think it is just how it is. Nothing you can do about it (Mackay parent).

Although the majority of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the for-profit model of childcare provision: 'I find it disgusting that there is for-profit child care or, you know, for-profit social services' (Darwin parent), parents and carers also noted that services were provided on the basis that they would be profitable: '... you can only have so many staff and still run a profitable centre and I understand that ...' (Darwin parent), and not on the basis of community need:

I think child care is a problem all over the country and especially for families that need something different from the norm. Because they have to offer whatever the most people want, so they can get lots of kids to make their money ... It doesn't make it fair though for those of us who aren't in the majority (Cairns parent).

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Conclusion—ask the community what they want

These experiences are profoundly moving and incredibly concerning. Although there were parents and carers who were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their current childcare arrangements, many were not. For those who were satisfied, their journey to adequate care had been difficult. Quality child care was by no means guaranteed, and parents readily attributed positive childcare experiences to 'luck'. Many knew other parents who had not been so 'lucky'. Scarcity of reliable care also meant that parents felt that external forces—such as corporate provider bankruptcy, the impact of the global economic downturn, and the boom-and-bust cycles of their local community—threatened the stability of their care arrangements. This sense of vulnerability is consistent with Marta Santos Pais' (in Adamson, 2008) assertion that current Australian childcare policy settings mean that the long day care sector is vulnerable to an unpredictable economic environment.

As with the 2007 Townsville study, parents and carers saw the market as a poor provider of quality childcare options. In reality, their experiences were of a lack of choice and childcare quality driven down by the requirements of a profit-driven sector, particularly in Cairns and Mackay.

In Cairns and Mackay, where there were few community-based childcare options, there was also a significant lack of knowledge about the potential variety of long day care options, pointing to the importance of local government involvement in community-based childcare provision. Further, for all respondents, regional location and its associated lack of access to extended family support, impacted on parents' and carers' ability to withdraw from formal child care if the quality of that care did not meet their expectations.

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Perhaps this study's most powerful finding is the snapshot it provides of the 2009 Australian regional childcare landscape, and what this meant for parents and carers whose experiences were anchored in that landscape. It seems that many respondents reluctantly, and somewhat fatalistically, assumed and expected the following:

- that finding quality child care will be difficult and complicated
- the quality of care will be less than ideal
- where you live affects your access to quality care
- accessing a quality childcare environment is a matter of luck
- that child care will be culturally inappropriate
- that child care is a business that prioritises profits
- there is a lack of information about childcare options such as community-based and for-profit services
- there is a lack of clarity about who is monitoring quality; after all, anyone can open a childcare centre
- flexible responsive services will not be provided unless they make money.

So, for the majority of respondents in this study, their experiences were of an unresponsive childcare landscape shaped by what they saw as a flawed policy rather than their community's need. In 2006 Jennifer Sumsion, noting the emphasis on 'consumer choice, competitiveness, profit maximisation, and a downsizing of government's role in favour of private sector expansion' (p. 101), asked 'what could eventuate if we continue on the present policy trajectory?' (p. 100). This research helps to answer that question by identifying what this policy trajectory meant for northern regional parents' and carers' experiences of accessing quality long day care in 2009, a key moment of transition in the childcare landscape, and thus providing some lessons for current policy-makers about the implications of an over-reliance on market-based solutions.

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This research also adds parents' and carers' voices to the early childhood education policy dialogue. In this study respondents urged governments to listen to communities: 'Well I'd be saying till I'm blue in the face to ask the community what they want ... find out what is important' (Cairns parent).

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