Understanding what great early childhood educators do: New Australian research

Researchers from Charles Sturt University (CSU), Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and Rutgers University are focusing on the nature of the work of exemplary early childhood educators and the context in which they work. Exemplary early childhood educators at work: multi-level investigation, aims to create rich portraits that capture the depth and breadth of what great educators do and to gather, what may be, the largest database ever collected about the everyday work of early childhood educators.

Skilled and knowledgeable early childhood educators are the key to high quality early childhood education. However, in an era where the importance of early childhood education has been recognised throughout the world, the work of early childhood educators is beset with myths and misconceptions and the working conditions and pay of early childhood educators are relatively poor (Ryan & Whitebook, 2012). In part this is because the workforce is highly feminized, with many countries having an early childhood workforce that is over 90 per cent female. Thus, the work is often constructed as an extension of mothering and instinctual for this predominantly female workforce. In addition, early childhood emphasis on learning through play is at odds with the more structured, teacher-led examples associated with the school classroom. The thoughtful deliberations that underpin educators’ actions as they set up the environment, work with small and large groups of children, and interact with children to support their learning, may fail to be recognised as teaching. The Exemplary Educators study aims to dispel myths surrounding early childhood education by identifying, highlighting and documenting the distinct and complex nature of early childhood educators’ work (Press, Wong, & Gibson, 2015).

The study will (a) identify the work, skills and knowledge of exemplary educators in each of the three mandated qualification levels: Certificate III, Diploma, and Degree; and (b) investigate and document the organisational, professional and relational dimensions evident in high quality childcare centres and kindergartens with educators whose work is considered exemplary.

The project is conceptualized using the Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA) (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008). TPA allows the researchers to consider the environmental conditions that affect the formation of educators’ dispositions, actions and abilities and the individual agency of educators, stressing their capacity to problem solve and make decisions.

The Exemplary Educators study will map the nature and complexity of early childhood educators’ work and the personal, professional and organisational dimensions that support the work of exemplary educators. The research methodologies include:

A Random Time Use Diary: Quantitative data on educators’ work activities will be collected across...
high-quality ECE kindergarten and childcare centres via the Random Time Sampling Time Use Diary smart phone app (RTS TUD). Through the RTS TUD app, the researchers hope to develop a large empirical evidence base to show the distinctive and complex nature of early childhood educators’ daily work.

Focus Groups: Qualitative data will be collected through focus groups to find out the knowledge, skills and dispositions that underpin the work that educators do.

Case Studies: Quantitative and qualitative data will be collected through case studies of exemplary educators and their organisational context.

The three levels of data collection will enable breadth and depth, capturing the individual, professional and organisational dimensions of exemplary educators’ work. For each component, purposive sampling will ensure representation of: kindergartens and childcare centres; community characteristics (cultural diversity, socio-economic status); size and auspice (community-based/private/school-based); and location (rural and urban). Selected centres will include representation from eligible Partner Organisations, including C&K centres.

It is anticipated that this research will contribute to the retention and further development, of a skilled, appropriately remunerated and valued early childhood workforce. The research findings will be used to support pay equity, well targeted professional development and preservice early childhood educator preparation, and the effective management of high quality early learning environments. Additionally, the research will help address the ongoing shortage of qualified educators.

References


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For further information, including to publications from the study: https://exemplaryeducators.wordpress.com/

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