Research Team

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Partner organisations

This project draws upon a unique alliance of university researchers, employers, unions and professional development agencies. Our partners are:

- Community Early Learning Australia
- Child Australia
- Crèche and Kindergarten Association (QLD)
- Independent Education Union (NSW and QLD, ACT & NT branches)
- KU Children’s Services
- Inner West Council, Sydney
- United Voice
- Rutgers University
- Manchester Metropolitan University

Funding

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Project Summary

Seemingly entrenched workforce shortages threaten the objectives that governments and families seek through investment in early childhood education. Popular images of work with young children as easy and instinctual, or of teaching as only school based, mislead potential workforce entrants and erode the status of early childhood educators, leading to attrition from the workforce.

In response, this project investigates and sheds light on the complexity of the work of early childhood education. It aims to build an empirical evidence base of the everyday work of exemplary educators and identify the personal, professional and environmental resources that facilitate exemplary work.

Impact

New knowledge produced by the project will inform strategies to better prepare and sustain the profession.

Specifically, the project seeks to lift educators’ professional status, strengthen employment practices conducive to high quality ECEC, and provide evidence-based content for preservice education and in-service professional support.

Project aims

Through a dual focus on the nature of educators’ work and the context within which they work, the project aims to:

- identify the work, skills and knowledge of exemplary EC educators in each of the three mandated qualification levels: Certificate III, Diploma, and Degree.
- investigate and document the organisational, professional and relational dimensions evident in high quality childcare centres and preschools with educators whose work is considered exemplary.

Research questions

- What constitutes the everyday work of educators in high quality ECEC centres? How does this work vary across qualification levels and service type?
- What personal, professional and organisational resources support educators’ work?
- What networks of professional relationships and communication are evident in the day-to-day work of educators?
- What skills, understandings and dispositions underpin the work of exemplary educators?

Conceptual underpinnings

The project is conceptualised using the Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA). This theory takes into account both the environmental conditions that inform educators’ dispositions, actions and abilities and the individual agency of educators, stressing their capacity to problem solve and make wise decisions.

Educator characteristics and practices are strongly implicated in the determination of ECE quality. For this reason, the project identifies exemplary educators through the proxy of ACECQA quality ratings and director nominations. The project focuses on educators...
in ECE centres rated as exceeding in all standards and sub-standards in the National Quality Standard.

This focus ensures that data obtained on educators’ typical activities, understandings and dispositions is tied specifically to the delivery of high quality programs.

Phases of the study

A multilevel, mixed methods approach will identify and map the nature and complexity of early childhood educators’ work and document the personal, professional and organisational dimensions that support this work. The three phases of the project’s data collection are:

1. **Collecting a large quantitative data set on educators’ work activities** in high-quality ECEC via a Random Time Sampling Time Use Diary smart phone app (RTS TUD).
2. **Focus Groups** with educators from each level of qualification to gather qualitative data about what shapes and informs their practices and decision making.
3. **Intensive Case Studies** of exemplary educators and the settings within which they work to help us understand why educators do what they do and how organisations support high quality work.

From this data we hope to produce an audit and rich description of the work of educators across each level of mandated qualification working in high quality ECEC centres as well as capture the professional and organisational dimensions of their work.

Eligibility for the study

Preschool and childcare centres in NSW, QLD and WA that have an exceeding rating across all eligible standards and sub-standards of the National Quality Standard from the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) are eligible for all phases on the study.

Nationally, all preschool and childcare centres meeting the aforementioned criteria are invited to join the first phase of the study.

Background

Highly skilled educators are critical for high quality ECE. Yet there are widespread concerns that workforce preparation is inadequate and that the longstanding problem of educator shortages has not abated. The present shortfall of appropriately qualified educators is expected to escalate with growing demand for ECE.

Documented reasons for educator shortages include: low professional status; poor pay and conditions relative to responsibilities and work complexity; perceived gaps in vocational training and pre-service education resulting in inadequate preparation for the demands of the work; and a lack of awareness and recognition of educators’ specialist knowledge and skills.

Common to these factors are underlying popular misconceptions: that work with young children is, for its predominantly female workforce, instinctual and requires only a caring disposition; that ECE’s play-based curriculum requires little more than supervision (because play is ‘natural’ for children); that the quality of childcare is homogenous; and that children’s education only occurs with formal, teacher-directed instruction such as that found in school classrooms.

Such views exacerbate ongoing educator shortages contributing to high levels of attrition from vocational and university ECE courses, and the workforce itself.

The project aims to directly address the misconceptions underlying the causes of educator shortages. It is anticipated that the knowledge and evidence created will:

- inform the content of vocational training, early childhood education degrees and professional development to better prepare and support educators meet the demands of their work;
- support pay equity claims by making explicit the skills, knowledge and responsibilities required of the early childhood educator;
- contribute to broad public understanding about the specialist knowledge and skills required to teach very young children;
- inform the development of management strategies that enable exemplary work; and
- ensure a high quality early education system through improved educator preparation, reduced staff attrition and greater retention.

For Further Information

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References


Team publications


