

EXEMPLARY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS AT WORK:

A multi-level investigation
ARC LP160100532



Research Team

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Partner organisations

- 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
- United Voice
- Rutgers University

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Project Summary

By investigating the complexity of early childhood educators' work, this project aims to inform strategies to better attract, prepare, recognise, support and retain a high quality workforce. 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 educators, leading to attrition. This project's audit and rich description of exemplary educators' work, across each level of mandated qualification, will inform strategies to sustain a high quality early childhood workforce into the future.

Impact statement

This project builds a unique alliance of university researchers, employers, unions and professional development agencies to address skill shortages in early childhood education. New knowledge produced by the project will inform the design of effective strategies to better prepare and sustain the profession. Specifically, it aims to lift educators' professional status, improve employment practices, and provide evidence-based content for preservice education and in-service professional support.

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.
- To 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

- a) What constitutes the everyday work of educators in high quality centres? How does this work vary across qualification levels and service types (childcare and preschool)?
- b) What personal, professional and organisational resources support the work of exemplary educators?
- c) What are the networks of professional relationships and communication in the day-to-day work of educators? How do they vary across qualification level and service types (childcare and preschool)?
- d) What skills, understandings and dispositions underpin the work of exemplary educators?

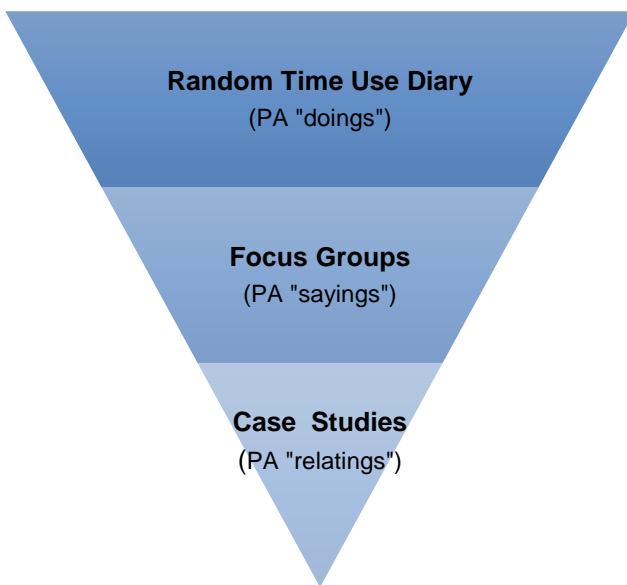
Eligibility for the study

Preschool and childcare centres in NSW, QLD and WA that have exceeded the National Quality Standard across all of the standards and elements of the National Quality Standard from the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA).

Phases of the study

The project is conceptualized using Practice Architectures (PA) (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008). PA attend to both 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.

This project takes a multilevel, mixed methods approach to identify and map the nature and complexity of early childhood educators' work and document the personal, professional and organisational dimensions that support the work of exemplary educators.



1. **Random Time Use Diary:** Quantitative data on educators' work activities ('doings') will be collected across high-quality ECE preschool and childcare centres via the Random Time Sampling Time Use Diary smart phone app (RTS TUD).
2. **Focus Groups:** Qualitative data ('sayings') will be collected through focus groups.
3. **Case Studies:** Quantitative and qualitative data will be collected through case studies of exemplary educators and their organisational context ('sayings' and 'relatings').

Three levels of data collection enable breadth and depth, capturing the individual, professional and organisational dimensions of exemplary educators' work. For each component, purposive sampling will ensure representation of: preschools 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.

Team publications

- Press, F. (2017). Understanding and valuing the work of early childhood educators. *Bedrock*. 22(1), 8-9.
- Press, F. (2016). The impact of feminisation, feminism and fragmentation. *Bedrock*. 21(1), 20-21.
- Press, F., Wong, S. & Gibson, M. (2015). Understanding who cares: creating the evidence to address the long-standing policy problem of staff shortages in early childhood education and care, *Journal of Family Studies*. 21(1), 87-100.
- Wong, S., Harrison, L. J., Gibson, M., Press, F., Sumsion, J., & Woods, A. (2015). The construction of a taxonomy of early childhood educators' work. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*. 40(3), 79-88.

Research significance

The project will construct an empirical evidence base of the everyday work of educators, with a focus on exemplary educators; and it will identify the personal, professional and environmental resources that facilitate exemplary work. This data will be used to produce policy and organisational briefs for government, employers, unions, vocational training institutions, university teacher education programs, and other stakeholders with implications and recommendations for workforce sustainability, professional and quality standards.

Conceptual underpinnings and rationale

The project's dual focus is on the nature of educators' work and the context within which they work. Drawing on the theory of Practice Architectures (PA), (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008) the work of educators is understood to be mediated by the skills, understandings and dispositions of the educators themselves and the organisational, professional and relational dimensions of their work. The focus on exemplary educators will ensure that data obtained on educators' typical activities, understandings and dispositions is tied specifically to the delivery of high quality programs. Existing conceptualisations of exemplary educators are contested and poorly defined Berliner (2005), however, educator characteristics and practices are strongly implicated in the determination of ECE quality (Press, 2006; Sylvia et al., 2010). For this reason the project identifies exemplary educators through the proxy of centre quality ratings and

centre director nominations. The project focuses on educators in ECE services that are rated as exceeding all elements in the National Standard through the National Quality Standard assessment and rating process.

Background

Highly skilled educators are critical to attaining the key social, educational and economic objectives sought by government investment in early childhood education (ECE): 1) improved developmental and educational outcomes for the more than one million children who attend ECE services (especially those who face disadvantage); and 2) increased parent participation in the labour market. (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2014; Productivity Commission, 2014; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2010). The National Early Years Workforce Strategy (2012-16) (Standing Council of School Education and Early Childhood [SCSEEC], 2012) commits all Australian governments to building a skilled ECE workforce, currently estimated at close to 117,000 staff. Yet there are widespread industry concerns that workforce preparation is inadequate and that the longstanding problem of educator shortages has not abated. The present shortfall (an estimated 16,000 staff) (Productivity Commission, 2011) is expected to escalate with growing demand for ECE (Productivity Commission, 2011, 2014). Together these problems threaten the returns from governments' multi-billion dollar investment in ECE (\$6.7b in 2013-14 for the Federal Government alone).

Documented reasons for educator shortages include: low professional status; poor pay and conditions relative to responsibilities and work complexity (Ryan & Whitebook, 2012); perceived gaps in vocational training and pre-service education resulting in inadequate preparation for the demands of the work (Bretherton, 2010; Productivity Commission, 2011; Wynes, Gemici & Stanwick, 2013); and a lack of awareness and recognition of educators' specialist knowledge and skills (Cumming, Sumsion & Wong, 2015; Cumming & Wong, 2012; Ryan & Whitebook, 2012). Common to these factors are underlying popular misconceptions. These misconceptions include: 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 (Gibson, 2013; Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2014; Ryan & Whitebook, 2012). Such views generate and exacerbate ongoing educator shortages contributing to high levels of attrition from vocational and university ECE courses, and the workforce itself (Bretherton, 2010; Wynes, Gemici & Stanwick, 2013).

Educator shortages and attrition have a deleterious impact on the quality of early childhood programs. Yet this problem has appeared, thus far, intractable. In the proposed study, new technologies combined with a new approach will, for the first time, make visible the nature and complexity of educators' work. The project aims to directly address the misconceptions underlying the causes of educator shortages. 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.

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