A woman with dark hair tied back is kneeling on a light-colored carpet, interacting with a young child. They are surrounded by colorful toys, including a blue ball, a yellow ball, and a red ball. The woman is wearing a light blue t-shirt and dark jeans. The child is wearing a floral patterned dress. In the background, there is a wooden playhouse and a white wall with a decorative pattern. The left side of the image is overlaid with a teal gradient.

SHINING A LIGHT ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS' WORK

A report from the
Australian study
*Exemplary Early Childhood
Educators at Work: A Multi-
Level Investigation*

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge and pay respect to the past, present and future Traditional Custodians and Elders of this nation and the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Nations owners of the land.

We raise our hand to the sky that covers the Gadigal land

(raise your hand up to the sky)

We place our hand on the ground in the care of the Gadigal land

(place your hand on the ground in front of you)

We place our hands on our heart in the love of the Gadigal land

(place your hand over your heart)

POSSUM ROOM
CHILDREN AND EDUCATORS

Images included this report (with the exception of cover image) are from services that participated in the Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work study and are included with permission.

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Foreword

The site of early childhood education sits at the intersection of other policy objectives: parental workforce participation, mitigating education disadvantage, access to early intervention, school readiness, and importantly the cultivation of community – both for children and their families. However, these objectives and the aim of increasing children’s access to early childhood education are all too frequently undermined by shortages of appropriately qualified and skilled educators.

Too often proposed responses to this issue are simplistic and potentially damaging - for example, reducing qualification requirements, requiring fewer staff with higher-level qualifications, diluting early childhood specialisations in tertiary education courses. Such suggestions are underpinned by a belief that working with young children is easy, requiring nothing more than a kind disposition and a watchful eye.

However, early childhood education is complex work. It requires a caring and informed pedagogy, tailored to the exploring, developing child, and always with an eye to the present and future communities in which children, their families live and desire.

The *Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work* three-phase study helps us understand the unique nature of early childhood educators’ work. Using time use data, focus groups and case studies, the research sought to understand the everyday work of early childhood educators in high-quality settings, and the knowledge, skills and understanding that underpin this work.

Importantly, the study recognises that great pedagogy is not just predicated on the skill of the individual, but blossoms within a context of collegiate relationships and organisational support.

Pay and work conditions that recognise, and are commensurate with, the skill and expertise demanded of educators are an important aspect of attracting and retaining a well-qualified early childhood workforce. Another is understanding and articulating the complex and distinct nature of the work. Early childhood education has a long history. Its knowledge and practices are informed by educational theorists and philosophers, and in the past half-century, an ever-growing body of research. This study draws a picture of educators who have at the forefront of their actions and decision making a vision for their centre (or early childhood service) that is focused on what makes for a good childhood experience in their early years settings. These educators are actively engaged in professional learning, conversations and networks that support ongoing reflection and evaluation.

This study focused on the work of educators in high-quality early childhood settings. It did so deliberately, to draw out the best of what we know about high-quality pedagogy and practice. By developing a deeper understanding of what ‘exemplary’ educators do, and the ways in which this work is organisationally supported, the report aspires to inform preservice training, professional support, policy and practice. At its heart, the report draws together evidence to garner early childhood educators the recognition that they deserve and honours the body of specialist expertise that underpins this work.

Professor Frances Press
Head of Department, Childhood Youth and Education Studies (CYES)
Manchester Metropolitan University

Background

At the commencement of the *Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work* study, the National Early Years Workforce Strategy (2012-16) (Standing Council of School Education and Early Childhood [SCSEEC], 2012) committed all Australian governments to building a skilled early childhood workforce, an estimated 117,000 staff. The then shortfall of an estimated 16,000 educators (Productivity Commission, 2011) was expected to escalate with growing demand for early childhood education and care (Productivity Commission, 2014).

At the conclusion of the *Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work* study, the predicted educator shortages have been exceeded. There is an increasing shortfall of appropriately qualified educators¹(ACECQA, 2023a, 2023b), with workforce challenges amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic (McFarland et al., 2022; Thorpe et al., 2020, 2023) and worsening international economic context. It is anticipated that the sector will require around 37,000 additional educators, including 7,000 additional early childhood teachers, by 2024 (ACECQA, 2023b).

Reasons for this long-standing shortage include low professional status; poor pay and conditions relative to the responsibilities of this work (Ryan & Whitebook, 2012); perceived gaps in vocational training and pre-service education resulting in inadequate preparation for the work (Bretherton, 2010; Productivity Commission, 2011; Wynes et al., 2013); and a lack of general awareness and recognition of early childhood educators' specialist knowledge and skills (Cumming et al., 2015; Cumming & Wong, 2012; Fenech et al., 2021; Jackson, 2020; Press et al., 2015; Ryan & Whitebook, 2012).

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

early childhood education'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 (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2014; Gibson, 2013).

Such views generate and exacerbate ongoing educator shortages contributing to high levels of attrition from vocational and university early childhood education courses, and the workforce itself (Wynes et al., 2013; Bretherton, 2010).

In 2021, Education Services Australia released a 10-year plan for a high-quality children's education and care workforce - "*Shaping Our Future*", structured around six interrelated focus areas: professional recognition; data and evidence; qualifications and career pathways; attraction and retention; leadership and capability; and wellbeing. The *Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work* study 'shines a light' on the work of early childhood educators in high-quality early childhood settings, and in doing so provides pertinent insights into how we can nurture and sustain this valuable workforce.

Why this research?

The *Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work* study, examined in depth what it is that exemplary early childhood educators do, what informs their practice, and how workplaces support educators to be exemplary in the care and education of young children.

We focused on high-quality settings, because research has clearly shown that it is the quality of children's and families' experiences, in and with these settings that make a difference, both to how children experience their day and outcomes for children over time (e.g., Burchinal et al., 2009; Degotardi, 2010; Slot et al., 2018).

Study Design

Conceptual Framework

The *Exemplary Early Childhood Educator at Work* research was conceptualised using the **theory of practice architectures** (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008). This theory takes into account the organisational and professional conditions and knowledges that inform educators' dispositions, actions and abilities and the individual agency of educators, stressing their capacity to problem solve and make wise decisions. Through the framework of the theory of practice architectures, 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.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What constitutes the everyday work of educators? How does work vary across qualification levels, position and service types (long day care and preschool)?
2. What personal, professional and organisational resources support the work of exemplary educators?
3. What are the professional relationships and communication that support the day-to-day work of educators?
4. What knowledge, skills and dispositions underpin the work of exemplary educators? How does this differ across qualification levels?



Defining Exemplary

The study focused on educators working in very high-quality centre-based early childhood services for children up to school age (long day care and kindergarten/preschool centres).

Educator characteristics and practices are strongly implicated in the determination of early childhood education quality (Manning et al., 2019; Sylva et al., 2010). For this reason, the study focused on exemplary educators identified through the proxy of Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) quality ratings.

We recruited educators who worked in early childhood services rated as Exceeding National Standards through the National Quality Standard¹ (ACECQA, 2023) assessment and rating process.

Not only did the services have to have an overall rating of exceeding, they had to be rated as **exceeding in every quality area and standard** that allowed an exceeding rating. For the case studies, we added an additional layer of Centre Director nominations of exemplary educators.

Design

To develop rich understandings of *exemplary early childhood educators' work* we used an innovative multi-level mixed methods study that involved three sequential phases. The first phase used time use diary methods to record educators' work activities – this helped to build a picture of a typical day. The second phase was a series of focus groups – this helped to verify the time use data and gain a greater understanding of what exemplary early childhood educators do. The third phase involved intensive case studies – this provided a deeper understanding of educators' work and how organisations support the quality of their work.

¹ In Australia, early childhood centres and outside school hours care services undergo an assessment and rating process through the National Quality Standard (NQS) (ACECQA, 2023). The NQS includes 7 quality areas centres are given a rating for each of the 7 quality areas and an overall rating based on these results.

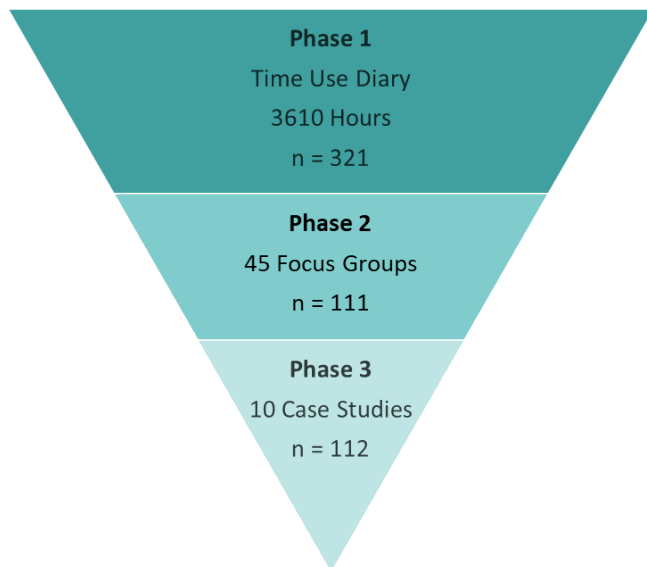


Figure 1. Three phases of study

Phase One: Time Use Diaries (TUD)

Quantitative data on educators' work activities were collected from educators across qualification levels and different positions within high-quality early childhood services, including long day care and preschool/kindergarten, using a specially developed time use diary app, developed by the research team and delivered via a smart phone (Wong et al., 2022).



Participants were asked to complete the Time Use Diary for two randomly sampled work hours, over ten working days. At the commencement of each random-time-sampled hour, a 'beep' would signal to the educator to complete the time use diary app. Participants had the option to delay completion of the app, if warranted.

At each data collection point, educators reported on their previous hour: what work activities they did, where they were, and who they were with. Their time was recorded in ten 6-minutes blocks of time, with up to two activities recorded for each 6-minute block.

The app used pre-coded response options that had been co-developed with the field (Wong et al., 2015) and 'road tested' for applicability to educators' working day through a pilot study (Harrison et al., 2019). The app enabled work activities to be recorded within 10 broad work domains:

1. Staff personal time;
2. Intentional teaching with children;
3. 'Being' with children;
4. Routine care/transition with children;
5. Emotional support;
6. Family communication;
7. Organise room/Occupational Health and Safety maintenance;
8. Plan/assess/evaluate;
9. Administration;
10. Professional learning and support.

After selecting the domain, sub-classes of work activity could then be selected to provide more detail. There were 55 sub-classes of activity across the 10 domains.

Educators were also asked to record who they were with and where they were located for each block of time. After completing the records for each hour, educators were asked to rate how they felt about their work experience during the previous hour. Feelings were rated on a 1 to 10 scale for 'rushed', 'stressed', 'satisfied' and experiencing multiple demands.

Phase Two: Focus Groups

Qualitative data were collected from educators through Focus Groups. The focus group questions were asked in two parts. The aim of the first part was to probe three findings from Phase One time use diary data regarding rapid changes of primary activity, multi-tasking and positive ratings for work satisfaction. The second part of the focus group investigated what it takes to be an exemplary educator (including at a particular qualification level), the role and work across different positions, the structural elements, resources, and professional development needed for educators "to be exemplary", and what "being" an educational leader meant. The focus groups with Directors included further questions about what makes an educator exemplary and the role of Centre Directors in supporting exemplary educators.

Up to three educators from eligible services were invited to participate and included Directors/Centre managers. Whilst the initial intention was to conduct focus groups in qualification groups, in many of the services that met the eligibility requirements, educators were working in positions for which they held a qualification higher than required (e.g., assistants who were required to have a Certificate III qualification, held a Diploma or Bachelor degree). Therefore, a research design refinement saw focus groups conducted in position titles.



Phase Three: Case studies

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through 10 intensive case studies of exemplary educators and their organisational context. The case studies were conducted over two visits (a mixture of face to face and online) and included:

- **Interviews** with Centre Directors about the characteristics of exemplary work.
- **Interviews, Shadowing & Collection of Samples of Practice** with up to three individual educators (Bachelor qualified early childhood teacher/ Diploma qualified / Certificate III qualified) who had been nominated as 'exemplary' by their Centre Directors. Interviews focused on the educators' and directors' perspectives on what makes an exemplary educator. Shadowing included the researcher making observations of the educators as they went about their usual work with children. The researcher and the educator then worked together to co-construct vignettes of their practice from the observations. Educators were also invited to share examples of their practice that they considered exemplary – for example, documentation, and photographs of room and outdoor environments.
- **Collection of Artefacts** examples of documents such as centre policies, as well as photographs, were collected by the researcher to provide contextual information about each of the case study services.

In addition, all staff in case study services were invited to complete the Supportive Environmental Quality Underlying Adult Learning [SEQUAL] survey (Whitebook et al., 2018). This was the first time this tool was adapted for use in Australia.

SEQUAL gathers educators' ratings of how well their workplace supports their work as an educator, and their professional growth. Developed in the United States at the Centre for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE), University of California, Berkley, the SEQUAL was adapted for the Australian context by the research team in collaboration with the CSCCE Team.

In addition to collecting demographic questions, SEQUAL has subscales for **five domains**:

Teaching supports: curriculum, observation, materials, support services, staffing, and professional responsibilities.

Learning community: professional development and applying learning.

Job crafting: making decisions in the classroom, and teamwork input into the workplace.

Adult wellbeing: economic, wellness supports, and quality of work life.

Leadership: of supervisor and program leader.

Educators rated their degree of agreement with each item in the five domains, from one to six – with six being the most positive.

Open ended questions were also included for participants' comments.

Partner Meetings and Stakeholder Forums

Partner meetings were held annually to share research progress. As the project unfolded, the research team shared preliminary data analysis and theory building with partner organisations that in turn informed discussions to interrogate the data further. Robust dialogue shaped subsequent approaches to data analysis, so as to optimise the impact of the research for the partner organisations, and more broadly for the whole of the early childhood sector.

Two Stakeholder Forums, one at the midway point and another near the end point of the project, were attended by over 50 key representatives from government, policymakers, peak providers of early childhood programs, educators, and academics. These discussions provided timely opportunities to consider emerging research findings from the *Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work* study and draw on the findings to inform contemporary early childhood workforce policy.



Where did we recruit from?

Centre-based early childhood services (long day care and kindergarten/preschool) that had an exceeding rating across all seven quality areas (QAs), standards (e.g., 1.1, 1.2) and elements (e.g., 1.1.1, 1.1.2) of the National Quality Standard from ACECQA were eligible for recruitment. Recruitment for each of the three phases of the study gave consideration to obtaining representation from long day care services and kindergarten/preschools; community characteristics (cultural diversity, socio-economic status); size and auspice (community-based/private/school-based); and location (rural and urban).

All eligible services in regional and metropolitan locations of NSW, QLD and WA (States where partner organisations were located) were invited to participate in Phase One of the study (supplemented by invitations to additional eligible services from the other States/Territories). All services in NSW, QLD and WA that had participated in Phase One were invited to participate in Phase Two, along with additional services in these three states that met the eligibility criteria for the study. Recruitment of services for Phase Three was restricted to those that had participated in either Phase One or Phase Two. *Figure 2* is a map indicating the spread of NSW, QLD and WA services that participated across the three Phases of the study.

The study recruited educators who worked directly with children. Centre managers and directors were included when their work week included a regular allocation of time providing care and education for children. Participants were asked to provide information about their early childhood education qualification (Degree, Diploma, Certificate III), position (teacher, educator, assistant¹, room leader), and type of early childhood education centre (long day care, preschool/kindergarten).



Figure 2. Location of services where participants were working.

¹ The position title 'assistant' is used in some but not all jurisdictions in Australia. In NSW for example the term 'educator' is used. An assistant (or educator) role holds a minimum Certificate III, one year, qualification.

Who participated?

Time Use Diary (TUD)

Data were collected from 321 participants, providing a description of the work completed over a total 3,610 hours, further broken down into 10,155 episodes of work-related activities. Information provided by participants showed that, for type of centre: 166 of the educators worked in long day care and 133 worked in preschool; for qualifications: 129 held an early childhood education degree, 97 held a Diploma-qualification and 78 held a Certificate III qualification; for position: 116 were employed as teachers, 102 as educators, 40 as room leaders, and 46 as assistants.

Focus groups

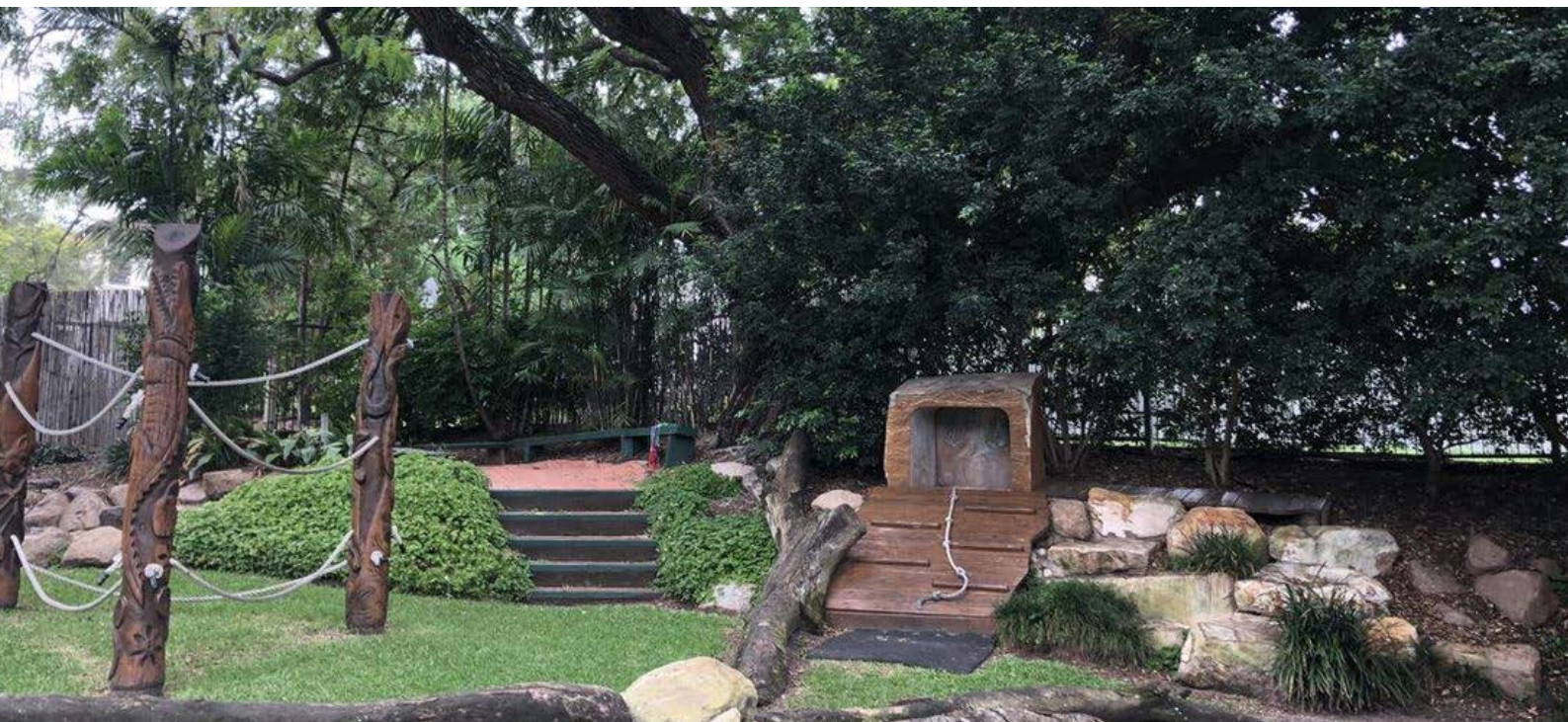
Focus groups were conducted in kindergarten/preschools and long day care centres, located in metropolitan and regional locations in QLD, NSW, WA. Forty-six focus groups and interviews were conducted, with 111 participants. Focus groups were conducted according to position title: 27 assistants, 34 room leaders, 23 early childhood teachers, and 27 Centre Directors (of the 27 Centre Directors, 16 participated in individual interviews as they were unavailable for focus groups).

Case Studies

Case Studies were conducted in 10 early childhood services, from across NSW (2 regional and 4 metropolitan), Queensland (3 metropolitan) and Western Australia (2 regional).

Centre Directors were interviewed at each of the 10 case study services. Additionally, up to three educators at each service were nominated by the Centre Director as 'exemplary' and interviewed. Interviews (65+hours) were conducted with: 12 Centre Directors¹ (15 hours +); 10 early childhood teachers (20 hours +); 9 Diploma qualified educators (15 hours +); and 6 Certificate III qualified educators (15 hours +).

A total of 113 educators employed across the 10 case study sites completed the SEQUAL. These included educators with Certificate III (22%), Diploma (41%), and three-year degree or higher (37%), working with children across a range of ages (37% birth to 3; 51% 3 – 5; 12% mixed-age groups). Some 26% of educators were employed in formal leadership positions at their service. Nearly one-third (33%) of educators were born outside of Australia, and almost one-quarter (22%) spoke a language other than English, either at home or at work.



¹ In one of the case study centres, the Centre-Director role was undertaken by two people, each working part-time. Therefore, there were a total of 12 Centre Director interviews undertaken.

Analysing the Data

The Time Use Diary: The composite data set of 10,155 episodes of TUD records were analysed according to the ten categories of work domain to illustrate the nature and changing pattern of educators' work over the day. Comparisons were made across qualification level, position, and early childhood education type (preschool/ kindergarten, long day care). Analysis of multi-tasking (two work activities recorded during the 6-minute block of time) and task-rotation (the number of work activities recorded during the sampled hour) were calculated to measure the intensity and complexity of educators' work. Ratings of feeling satisfied, stressed, rushed, and having multiple demands were analysed across each hour of the working day.

Focus Groups and Case Study interview data:

Data from the focus groups and case studies were analysed in two steps: thematic analysis and applying Theory of Practice Architectures (PA) as a frame to identify practices and arrangements. Cross-case analysis was used to interrogate the data across the 10 case study sites. Case study vignettes were co-constructed with the researchers and educators to produce illustrative and evocative stories that 'capture the magic' of exemplary pedagogical practices by educators at all levels of qualification, and across a range of circumstances with differently aged children.

SEQUAL data were analysed by the designers of the tool from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkley.

Presentation of data to partners and stakeholders:

Over the five-year research project, partner meetings were held annually to share research progress. The research team shared preliminary data analysis and theory building with partner organisations. Insights from our partners informed discussions to interrogate the data further. Robust dialogue informed data analysis and shaped subsequent approaches to data analysis.

The findings from the *Exemplary Early Childhood Educator at Work* study were presented and discussed at our final Stakeholder Forum (June 2022). *Figure 3*, created by illustrator Rebecca Lazenby, synthesises the conversations from the day and captures the key ideas that emerged, providing a visual anchor for this findings section of the report.



Figure 3: Illustration made in real time during Stakeholder Forum June 2022 by Rebecca Lazenby

Snapshot of findings

In the following section, we first provide an overview of the findings and then consider their implications for Australia's early childhood education and care workforce strategy for the next decade, *Shaping the Future* (ACECQA, 2021).

For ease of discussion, we have organised our findings under the following headings:

- What did we learn about the everyday work of exemplary educators?
- What knowledge, skills and dispositions were evident in the work of exemplary educators?
- How were educators supported in their work?

Further detail is provided in a range of journal papers, published (references included at the end of this report, denoted in bold), and under development.



What did we learn about the everyday work of exemplary educators?

A unique feature of the Time Use Diary dataset was the fine-grained level of detail that educators provided. Work activities were reported for specific periods of time, in 6-minute blocks, and covered the full range of work time at their long day care/preschool/kindergarten service. The combined dataset for 321 educators was used to create an 'average working day', which ranged from 7am to 7pm, that was examined by domains of work, educator qualifications and positions, and type of early childhood service.

All educators were engaged in each of the 10 domains of work. Through our analyses of the Time Use Diary data, we found that across the average working day educators reported undertaking all 10 domains of work activity: 1. Staff personal time; 2. Intentional teaching with children; 3. 'Being' with children; 4. Routine care/transition with children; 5. Emotional support; 6. Family communication; 7. Organise room/Occupational Health and Safety maintenance; 8. Plan/assess/evaluate; 9. Administration; 10. Professional learning and support. The average amount of time reported for each of these domains is illustrated in *Figure 4*. The bulk of educators' time was spent engaging with children: 'being with children' (34%), 'routine care/transition' (13%), 'intentional teaching' (10%) and providing 'emotional support' (2%). Children may also have been involved with educators during 'plan/assess/evaluate' (9%) and 'organise room' (7%) activities.

What educators did varied according to qualification and position. While all educators reported that they engaged in all ten domains of work, there were marked differences in the time spent in some domains for educators with differing qualifications. Teachers holding a degree spent more time in family communication, plan/assess/evaluate, and administration than Certificate III-qualified staff, who spent more time being with children, engaged in routine care/transitions and organising the room/OH&S. The work distribution of Diploma-qualified staff was less clear-cut, being similar to degree-qualified staff for some domains, and to Certificate III-qualified staff for others. There were also differences in work activity by position. Teachers spent less time being with children and involved in routine care than room leaders, educators and assistants. Teachers and room leaders spent more time in family communication, planning, and administration than educators and assistants. Similar amounts of time were reported, regardless of position, for intentional teaching, organising the room, providing emotional support, and personal (break) time. Time spent in professional development was also similar for teachers, room leaders and educators, but less for assistants.

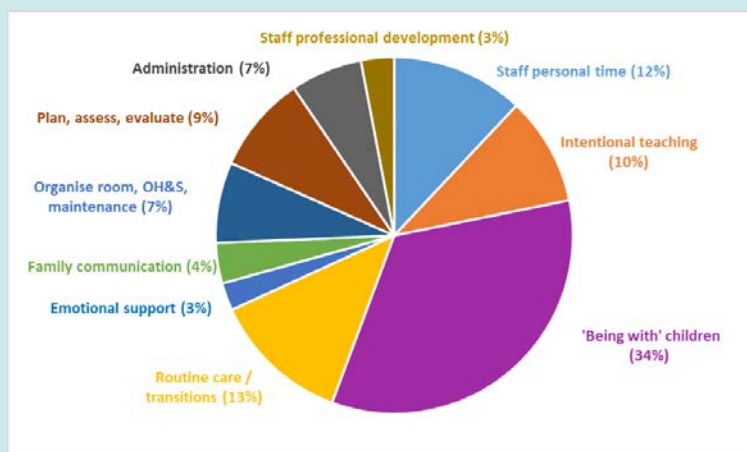


Figure 4. Educators' work time across ten domains of activity

Rapid changes of work activity and multi-tasking were typical. Time use diary data revealed that educators were engaged in high levels of task-rotation and multi-tasking, highlighting the intensity and complexity of educators' work. Multi-tasking was reported for more than 60% of diary entries, measured by the number of episodes when educators reported undertaking two work activities during the same time period. While multi-tasking was reported for all ten work domains, it occurred more often when educators were being with children, engaged in routine care/transitions and intentional teaching.

Task-rotation or switching of tasks was indicated by the number of work activities recorded for 12-minutes or the minimum block of 6 minutes. Overall, results showed that nearly 50% of work activity occurred for 12-minutes or less, indicating a high level of task-rotation across educators' working day. Rapid changes of work activity and multi-tasking were also reinforced from the focus group findings, illustrated by the following quotes (see also, Cumming et al., 2022).

*"need to **prioritise** which is more pressing to do first.... always felt like I was **changing, constantly changing... didn't realise how much I was doing until I did the time sampling.** You are weighing up the options constantly. Luckily, I feel calm as we have many staff"*

- **Early childhood teacher**, Bachelor Qualified

"You are like a duck swimming on a pond, with legs paddling away under surface"

- **Early Childhood Teacher** Bachelor Qualified

"Many things go on at the same time... I'm never still"

- **Early Childhood Teacher**, Bachelor Qualified

*"You are interrupted a lot... You are **continually changing hats**"*

- **Room Leader**, Diploma Qualified

Educators enjoy their work. Overall, ratings of work satisfaction were high (7.2 on a 10-point scale), while ratings of feeling rushed or stressed were relatively low (3.6 and 3.4 on a 10-point scale). Interestingly, although task-rotation and multi-tasking were typical of educators' work, their ratings for having multiple demands were only moderate (4.4 on a 10-point scale). Notably, educators viewed task-rotation and multi-tasking as 'part of the job'.

*"If you did one thing at a time, **you wouldn't be doing your job**"*

- **Early Childhood Teacher**, Bachelor Qualified

*"[the] **ability to multi-task is critical** to being an exemplary educator"*

- **Early Childhood Teacher**, Bachelor Qualified

*"You have **really got to think on your feet - you're juggling**"*

- **Room Leader**, Diploma Qualified

There were differences in educators' work by type of early childhood service: Educators who worked in preschool/kindergarten reported that they spent more time across the day in intentional teaching, organisational work, and administration than educators in long day care. By contrast, educators who worked in long day care services spent more time across the day in routine care and providing emotional support for children than educators in preschool/kindergarten. Across long day care and preschool/kindergarten there was no difference in time spent being with children, communicating with families, plan/assess/evaluate, and staff professional development. Staff personal time was longer in long day care, which was to be expected given the differing work hours. Ratings of feeling rushed, stressed and having multiple demands were significantly higher for educators who worked in preschools, for example, 4.0 for rushed versus 3.3 for educators who worked in long day care, and 4.9 versus 4.1 for having multiple demands. However, there was no difference in ratings of satisfaction by the type of early childhood setting.

What knowledge, skills and dispositions were evident in the work of exemplary educators?

The focus group and case study data enabled rich, deep, nuanced exploration of the knowledge, skills and dispositions that informed the work of exemplary educators. From over 175 hours of focus groups and interviews and over 50 hours observations we were able to locate key themes that provide insights into the nature of the educators' work. In this section we provide an overview of these themes, and then turn to the specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions that were identified.

- ▶ **Educator worthiness.** Educators had a strong sense of the worthiness of their work. They valued their work, and felt valued by their fellow educators, families, their service, the community in which they worked, and their employer (service provider).
- ▶ **Educator agency.** Educators took ownership of their professional work, having agency in decision making to contribute to the operations of the centre and to their own professional growth. Their voices mattered, and they were listened to.
- ▶ **Educator work hours.** Educators were 'working above and beyond' and often in their own time. There was a sense that their work was a significant, and rewarding, part of their life. However, there is a need to exercise a cautionary note, as educator work hours could also contribute to normalising long hours of work in order to attain quality and be an exemplary educator.
- ▶ **Educator capabilities / competence.** Educators drew on their extensive knowledge, especially of early childhood education, child development, theory, and critical reflection.
- ▶ **Educator support in professional growth.** Educators were encouraged and supported within their service to engage in professional development and learning, and more broadly experiences that would enrich their own (and their service's) growth.
- ▶ **Educator beliefs / conviction.** Educators held clearly articulated views about children, which translated into philosophy statements in the centre, and were implemented through the program. They were not alone in these beliefs and talked about their vision – which was shared with their team, their colleagues, and contributed to a shared sense of purpose.
- ▶ **Educator professional relationships.** Educators noted the importance of the relationships they had with colleagues, across qualifications and positions within their centre, and more broadly across the early childhood profession, enabling their work and ongoing growth as an educator.
- ▶ **Educator knowledge, skills and dispositions.** Educators in the study demonstrated particular knowledge, skills and dispositions that informed their work. The educators had a strong understanding of theory, curriculum and policy. Their knowledge of theory, especially child development, was spoken about extensively.

What knowledge, skills and dispositions were evident in the work of exemplary educators?

These themes can be distilled and categorised as follows:

Knowledge: professional knowledge, qualifications, ongoing learning, informed professional judgement, regulatory knowledge, knowledge of ethics, knowledge of children's development, knowledge of relationships.

Skills: expertise in early childhood, intentional teaching experience, responsiveness, incidental teaching, common sense, programming clarity, flexibility, critical reflection, communication, patience.

Dispositions: positive attitude, humour, advocacy, value of early childhood education and care, passion for work, willingness, reliability, dedication, high expectations.



How were educators supported in their work?

The study was predicated on an understanding that the organisations within which educators work, play an important role in enabling or constraining what it is that educators actually do. Data from the TUD, focus groups, interviews and SEQUAL provide an insight into the ways in which the educators were supported by their workplaces to undertake their work at such a high level.

Although the SEQUAL survey was conducted in the final data collection phase of the study, the findings from SEQUAL affirm and encompass many of the findings from the focus groups and interviews, hence this discussion commences with an overview of the responses from SEQUAL.

All educators in the case study services had the opportunity to complete the SEQUAL and provide a rating from 1–6 (with 6 being the most positive), for each of the five domains: teaching supports; learning community; job crafting; adult wellbeing; and leadership. Educators' responses indicated a strong level of organisational support with all domains rated very highly, mostly above five (6 being the highest). The highest rating was for leadership (5.19) and the lowest (though still high at 4.98) was for learning community. The educator quotes below provide illustrative, typical comments from educators, about the supportive environments they experience, but also reflect a finding that educators would like more input into decision making about their room in the service, including resourcing, environment set up and staffing (appointments and rosters).

Teaching supports (5.13): curriculum, observation, materials, support services, staffing, and professional responsibilities.

*"We do a lot of **brainstorming** that happens inside the [classroom] and are constantly **following up and implementing experiences**. We have a **daily reflection** of things that work and don't work. "*

- Educator (Diploma, working with 3–5-year-old children, informal leadership position)
(SEQUAL report, p. 16).

Learning community (4.98): professional development and applying learning.

*"We have one-on-one meetings to discuss our strengths and weaknesses, this is when we can **plan which professional training courses** will best **suit us individually** and help us become better or more **confident** in certain areas **within our professional careers**."*

- Educator (Diploma, working with mix-age groups of children, informal leadership position)
(SEQUAL report, p. 20).

Job crafting (5.03): making decisions in the classroom, and teamwork input into the workplace.

*"Educators working on the floor need **opportunities to have a say in the things that occur in the centre**. We should be **consulted about the running of the room**, how we are doing, and whether it is practical to add more children to the room or overbook. We should be **given a say** in the educators that are placed in our room each year and **the way that this process occurs**."*

- Educator (Diploma, working with 3–5-year-old children, formal leadership position)
(SEQUAL report, p. 22).



Adult wellbeing (5.03): economic, wellness supports, and quality of work life.

"My well-being has a huge effect on my work as an educator. If [I] feel supported and happy in my personal life and role as an educator, I have an amazing time with the children and feel that I can overcome most things and get through even the worst day at work. If I am not being supported or appreciated at work, [it] is easy to not care anymore and not cope with what is going on around you, and this leads to poor educator performance and interactions with children that are minimal and not meaningful."

- Educator (pre-pandemic, diploma, children of mixed-age groups, informal leadership position) (SEQUAL report, p. 22).

Leadership (5.19): of supervisor and program leader.

"[T]he leadership at my service has a great effect on me, and [I] can see it has a great effect on other staff, as well. [E]veryone is respected and knows the hierarchy of the centre's leadership. [T]here is always someone to look up to for help when [I] face [challenges] in the centre and that is because of the leadership it holds."

- Educator (Certificate III, working with birth to three year old children, informal leadership position) (SEQUAL report, p. 32)

The data from SEQUAL confirmed many of the findings that had previously arisen through focus groups and interviews. Significantly, the results across different data sets in the Exemplary Educator study were both complementary and consistent, strengthening the findings that are presented in this report.

Leadership. The impact of leadership is woven throughout many of the factors identified in this section, for example, the facilitation of sound organisational systems, ensuring access to professional development and so forth. However, a theme that came through very strongly from the interviews and focus groups was that educators felt very supported by their Centre Directors, that there was a strong focus on building relationships and 'giving people a go'.

Clear communication and clear expectations.

Constructive feedback was enacted through collaborative dialogue that drew on critical reflection, with a quest to always improve and be the best they could. Expectations were communicated clearly, with open, honest and supportive strategies to demonstrate valuing of the team.



"...there is kind of soulful, kind of non-judgmental way of operating....Caring about people seeing potential in people (children, families, educators)"
 - Director Bachelor qualified

"[Our] Director [is] on the floor and accessible. She knows the staff and has an awareness of team strengths. Communication across the team [is key]."
 - Educator Certificate III qualified

"(The) Director is trusting and excited with others taking on leadership. We are not micromanaged."
 - Teacher Bachelor qualified

"To have support (from your Director) takes your stress levels down and you are more satisfied."
 - Room Leader, Diploma qualified

"...Director who cares about team ...who wants to work with you to see you thrive and go on and do big things."
 - Room Leader Diploma qualified

Physical environments were inviting for children and for adults to work in. Buildings and grounds were aesthetic, with attention to storage and resources, and used adult-sized furniture. There were private spaces for educators to engage professionally e.g., rooms for professional conversations, meetings and planning/documentation. Environments were beautifully put together, with attention to multiple sensory considerations, including colour, light and smell. In most services there was consideration of natural elements – leaves, flowers, pictures of nature and so on.

Effective organisational systems. The systems in place in the workplace, and the organisation/employer, enabled educators to engage in their work fully and effectively. Across the case studies we found the following range of activities:

Embedded opportunities for professional conversations: this included regular staff meetings which were structured with clear agendas and included a focus on skills building and professional discussions in room meetings.

"Regular staff meetings are held, for the whole centre, leader meetings, and team meetings."
- **Educator**, Diploma qualified

Attention to staffing: recruitment strategies to support alignment between educators' and service values, philosophy and ethos, an established pool of casual/relief staff that ensured continuity for children and other team members, equitable and flexible staff rosters, and attention to succession planning.

Space for reflection and thoughtful pedagogy: providing non-contact time for educators and employing staff above the prescribed ratios for significant parts of the day.

"Designated non-contact time with colleagues is important for deep thinking, questioning, seeing different perspectives, purchasing resources, professional dialogue."

- **Teacher** Bachelor qualified

Wages: a number of services in our study paid staff above the award rate of pay.

Teamwork: There was a strong ethos of teamwork. Within services, teams of educators were purposefully created, with attention to mentoring and guiding professional practice. Teamwork was underpinned by collegiality, trust, autonomy, cohesion and equality.

Connections were key, with time and space for different teams within the service to talk and share ideas, working through professional matters. This communication was done as a whole team, though also in larger services in room and special interest teams (e.g., environment, literacy, visual arts).

Community connectedness and strong philosophical orientation: Services were anchored in their communities and had a clear sense of purpose – often expressed as a vision or philosophy. This shared common purpose informed daily and strategic decision-making. 'Beyond the gate' was regarded as a natural extension of the physical setting, with networking opportunities for both staff and families. The connection with families, in particular, reinforced educators' commitment to the profession.

A note about work undertaken outside of hours. In the TUD, time spent in the domain of plan/assess/evaluate (documentation) and professional development, was reported as occurring for 9% and 3% of an average working day. However, the TUD hours were only recorded during the 'official' workday. Consistent with other research findings, and our focus group discussions, it may be the case that these tasks were often also undertaken outside of the workplace during educators' own time.

End result – High staff retention

These and other elements made the early childhood services in which the exemplary educators worked attractive workplaces, where staff satisfaction and retention were high.

Evidence from the 321 educators who provided TUD data showed that, overall, 39% of educators had more than 16 years' experience in the early childhood education sector and a further 36% had between 5 and 15 years' experience.

Similarly, the SEQUAL data showed that, overall, the educators in the 10 high-quality case study sites had long tenure, with 39% having more than 10 years' experience and 27% had between 6-10 years' experience. Almost one-third (29%) of educators had been employed at their current service for more than ten years and a further 16% for 6-10 years.).

Those in formal leadership positions had longer tenure than their colleagues not in leadership positions, both in the field (62% & 31% respectively employed in the field for >10 years) and at their current place of work (41% and 26% respectively were employed >10 years at their service). Tenure differed according to the age group with whom the educators worked. Whilst educators working with younger children (birth to age three), and those working with older children (age three to five), reported similar years of experience in the field, those working with mixed-age groups tended to report longer tenure in the field.

Almost one half (46%) of educators working with older children were employed at their centre for more than 10 years, compared to 31% of educators working with mixed-age groups, and 10 percent of those working with younger children.

Importantly, a majority of the educators (72%) who completed the SEQUAL survey reported that in three years, they were likely to still be working in their current service.



Understanding similarities and differences across qualification levels.

Our study emphasised that all educators felt valued, regardless of qualification and years of experience. Every member of the team was acknowledged for what they contributed through their knowledge and attributes. However, the time use diary data, focus groups, and case study data including SEQUAL, offer additional insights across qualification levels. There were differences in educator dispositions, and in particular the ways in which they drew on and articulated their skills, knowledge and dispositions.

The TUD data provided useful comparisons for work activities. Degree-, diploma- and certificate-qualified staff reported spending similar amounts of time in intentional teaching, providing emotional support, professional development, and staff personal time. Certificate III- and Diploma-qualified educators reported more time being with children and engaging with children in routine care activities than degree-qualified staff. Certificate-qualified staff spent more time organising the room, while Degree- and Diploma-qualified staff spent more time in family communication, and planning. Time in administrative tasks was highest for Degree-qualified staff.

Table 1

Comparison of per cent time spent in each work domain by staff qualification level

	Certificate (%; range)	Diploma (%; range)	Degree (%; range)	Test of significant differences **p-value<0.01, *p<0.05
Staff personal time	13.6 (9.3-17.9)	13.2 (10.1-16.3)	10.0 (7.3-12.7)	No difference
Intentional teaching	8.0 (5.8-10.1)	10.0 (7.8-12.3)	10.1 (8.1-12.1)	No difference
Being with children	37.2 (31.9-42.5)	37.3 (32.7-42.0)	29.0 (25.3-32.7) *	Degree lower than Certificate/Diploma
Routine care/Transition	16.3 (12.9-19.6)	13.6 (11.1-16.0)	9.7 (7.6-11.7) **	Degree lower than Certificate/Diploma
Emotional support	2.2 (1.4-3.1)	3.0 (2.0-3.9)	2.3 (1.5-3.0)	No difference
Family communication	1.7 (0.9-2.5)	3.4 (2.2-4.6) *	5.1 (3.9-6.3) **	Degree/Diploma higher than Certificate
Organise room/OH&S	11.5 (8.0-15.1)	6.3 (4.3-8.3) *	6.2 (4.8-7.6) **	Degree/Diploma lower than Certificate
Plan, assess, evaluate	4.1 (2.0-6.1)	7.2 (5.3-9.1) *	12.7 (10.6-14.8) **	Degree/Diploma higher than Certificate
Administration	3.2 (1.1-5.2)	3.6 (1.8-5.5)	11.0 (8.1-13.9) **	Degree higher than Certificate/Diploma
Professional development	2.3 (0.0-4.5)	2.4 (0.5-4.2)	3.9 (2.6-5.2)	No difference

After completing each TUD hour, degree-qualified staff gave significantly higher ratings for feelings of stress and being rushed, and lower ratings for feelings of satisfaction, compared to diploma and certificate-qualified staff. Ratings for 'having multiple demands' were lower for Certificate-qualified staff, and higher for degree- and diploma-qualified staff

The SEQUAL ratings across all domains were consistently highest for Certificate III qualified educators, and consistently lowest for Diploma qualified educators.

Across qualifications educators drew on knowledge, skills and dispositions to shape their work, though there were differences across qualification levels:

Certificate III qualified educators: For these educators, dispositions were more prominent than knowledge and skills, particularly with their passion about the importance of early childhood and their dedication to the work they were undertaking.

*"Personally, I think because the **children** are the most important part about this job. If they weren't here the job wouldn't exist and if you aren't going above and beyond what they need then you're not doing everything you can do give them **the best chance for the next stages of life** and for the remainder of their lives and it's **not good enough to just do the standard.**"*
- **Certificate III qualified educator**

Diploma qualified educators: For these educators, skills were more prominent than knowledge and dispositions. Diploma qualified educators demonstrated skills in and across a number of practices, including intentional and incidental teaching, being clear about the program they were creating and delivering, and critical reflection.

*"I think you need to be willing to get the information from anywhere, but you also need to be critically reflecting. **Without critical reflection there's nothing there, you've got no input.** If you're just spilling information like it's a uni assignment in first year, you have to have some perspective. If you don't have your own views, then it means nothing you can't just spill out regs or outcomes. It doesn't work. You need to take all the information in for all different sources."*

- **Educator Diploma qualified, undertaking Bachelor qualification**

Bachelor qualified early childhood teachers:

For teachers, skills, knowledge and dispositions were all equally prominent, drawing on each of these in their daily work.

*"The **depth of knowledge**, the understanding... **theorist background** knowledge...they need to know absolutely at least the basics of child development."*

- **Early Childhood Teacher Bachelor qualified**

Teachers were often in leadership positions, including as centre manager/director or educational leader. Hence, they were often in positions as mentors, and guiding higher level discussions through drawing on theory.



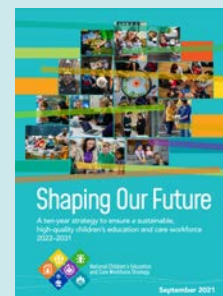
Shaping our Future

In 2021, Education Services Australia released "*Shaping Our Future*" a ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable, high-quality children's education and care workforce 2022–2031. The focus areas that form the workforce strategy are the result of extensive collaborative industry consultation. Twenty-one short-, medium- and long-term actions provide strategic focus over the next 10 years. Notably the strategy includes a "call to action" (p. 7) for "All stakeholders [who] have a role to play, and interlinking responsibilities, in advancing the goal of a sustainable, highly skilled and professionally valued workforce". The stakeholders are specified as: service providers, governments, education and training providers, educators and teachers, peak associations, and regulatory bodies. The overarching Vision for *Shaping Our Future* is that:

"The children's education and care sector has a sustainable, high-quality workforce of teachers and educators that is highly respected and valued by the broader community" (p.7).

As the following graphic shows, the Workforce Strategy (p. 8) was developed to "support the recruitment, retention, sustainability and quality of the sector workforce" across six focus areas (FAs):

1. **Professional recognition**
2. **Attraction and retention**
3. **Leadership and capability**
4. **Wellbeing**
5. **Qualifications and career pathways**
6. **Data and evidence**



Professional recognition

Workforce professional standing, including pay and conditions, registration, and community perceptions and value.

Data and evidence

Enhanced national data collection, analysis, and strategic discussion.

Qualifications and career pathways

Supporting quality, improving consistency and reducing complexity, as well as enabling flexible career progression.



Attraction and retention

Workforce diversity, including attracting the right people into the sector, and valuing and retaining high calibre staff.

Leadership and capability

Workforce culture, including professional development, leadership and mentoring, and management capability.

Wellbeing

Helping service providers to have strong mental health and wellbeing supports for their workforce.

Education Services Australia, 2022, p. 8

The findings of the *Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work* project have a number of implications for the implementation of this strategy. In the following section, we consider the implications of our findings in the context of this Strategy, and with stakeholders in mind.

Quality counts for staff as well as children.

The exemplary educators in this study faced multiple demands during their workday. However, they also expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their work, as well as passion and commitment. The SEQUAL findings reinforce these findings, with many of those surveyed committed to remaining in their jobs. There is no doubt that the quality of the work of these educators has contributed to the quality ratings of the centre. However, the organisational conditions of the service have also supported the work of the educators, their agency and their impact.

Focus Area 1 Professional recognition: Workforce professional standing, including pay and conditions, registration, and community perceptions and value.

Mentoring (Strategy Code: FA1-3 Enhance mentoring and induction for support for new teachers)

Findings from our research suggest that mentoring for early career educators could be especially beneficial in relation to fostering adaptive, flexible dispositions that make it easier to manage the high levels of multi-tasking and task-rotation required in educators' work. Mentoring in other key topics could include how to be an effective team member; how to negotiate hierarchies in the workplace; and identifying how an educator's own pedagogical philosophy fits within a shared service and team philosophy.

Promoting careers (Strategy Code: FA1-4 Promote the importance of a career in children's education and care through a national communications campaign)

The study findings document the high mental load and complex decision-making in educators' and leaders' work. This knowledge could inform communications campaigns, as well as better understanding by potential educators/leaders, about the complexity of the work.



Focus Area 2 Attraction and retention:
Workforce diversity, including attracting the right people into the sector, and valuing and retaining high calibre staff.

Recruitment and Retention (Strategy Code: FA2-1 Review and develop targeted programs to support studies and placements for specified groups of potential educators; FA2-2 Review a streamline existing application and approval processes for overseas trained educators and teachers; FA2-3 Development of an accessible suite of resources highlighting the careers and career pathways available within the children's education and care sector)

Services rated as 'exemplary' often had low turnover due to a combination of above-award pay and supportive work environments. Strong staff retention frequently began with recruiting the 'right' people.

Recruitment

Our research identified numerous creative approaches to recruiting staff – notably, from services in regional areas - who will fit a service's particular needs. Participants reported identifying people in their community and network whom they sensed would 'fit' the service, and who would be open to further development of their practice, even if they did not initially have the requisite qualifications.

*"Our director] **recruits people not** solely based on their **qualification...** [she says] sometimes people **can be really qualified** but they **don't have** the joy and the presence and the patience and **curiosity and willingness to learn** to work with children, so it kind of seems to require all of that coming together."*

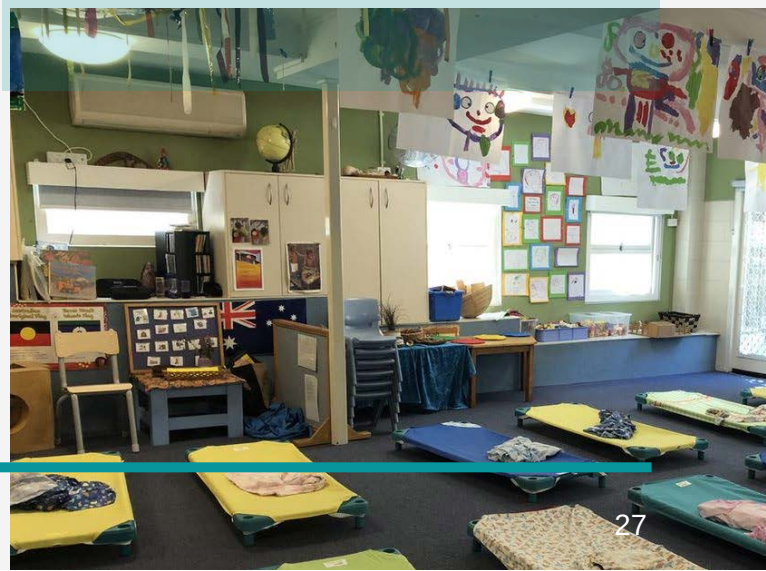
- Certificate III qualified educator

Relatedly, participants also highlighted the specific knowledge, skills and dispositions to support their recruitment processes. Dispositions were seen as the foundation on which knowledge and skills were, or could be, built. A practical implication of this finding would be to develop a recruitment guide for all services that acknowledged the importance of underpinning dispositions relevant to the service, and which applicants would be required to address in their application and interview.

Retention

Participants also discussed the need to develop approaches for working with staff who may not readily discern the implicit norms of the sector and of individual services. Examples included those who did not 'just get it' or could not 'read' the situation. Guidance in how to question dominant norms and make expectations clear is needed for these situations, as the efficient and effective functioning of teams is often predicated on educators and leaders working according to implicit knowledge.

The need for this guidance becomes critical when considering FA2-2, which calls for the review and streamlining of application and approval processes for overseas-trained educators and teachers. Introducing overseas-trained educators and teachers into work environments with implicit norms that they may not necessarily know or cannot 'read' could contribute to the attrition of these staff if left unaddressed, and become seemingly the 'fault' of the overseas-trained staff member 'not fitting in'.



Focus Area 3 Leadership and capability: Workforce culture, including professional development, leadership and mentoring, and management capability).

Professional development (Strategy Code: FA3-1 Improve access to core professional development for educators and teachers)

Our research highlighted the critical role in exemplary services of professional development that is relevant to the social and learning context of the service, and the professional learning and growth needs of particular educators. Findings also showed that specific conditions within exemplary services enabled professional development beyond the completion of qualifications. One key condition for effective professional development was that a discourse about professional learning, growth and development existed within the service, alongside a willingness to individualise professional learning and growth planning, and assistance in implementing learning.

Related to FA1-3, mentoring and coaching approaches were frequently cited as means of developing quality practice within and across the service. Having time for leaders to spend with other staff were seen as key catalysts for professional growth – whether in direct learning about how to do a task, how to plan, program or implement new knowledge. Similarly, exemplary services often facilitated opportunities for educators to engage in or with research, and to develop connections with the services' community and the early childhood sector, especially in relation to professional growth planning.

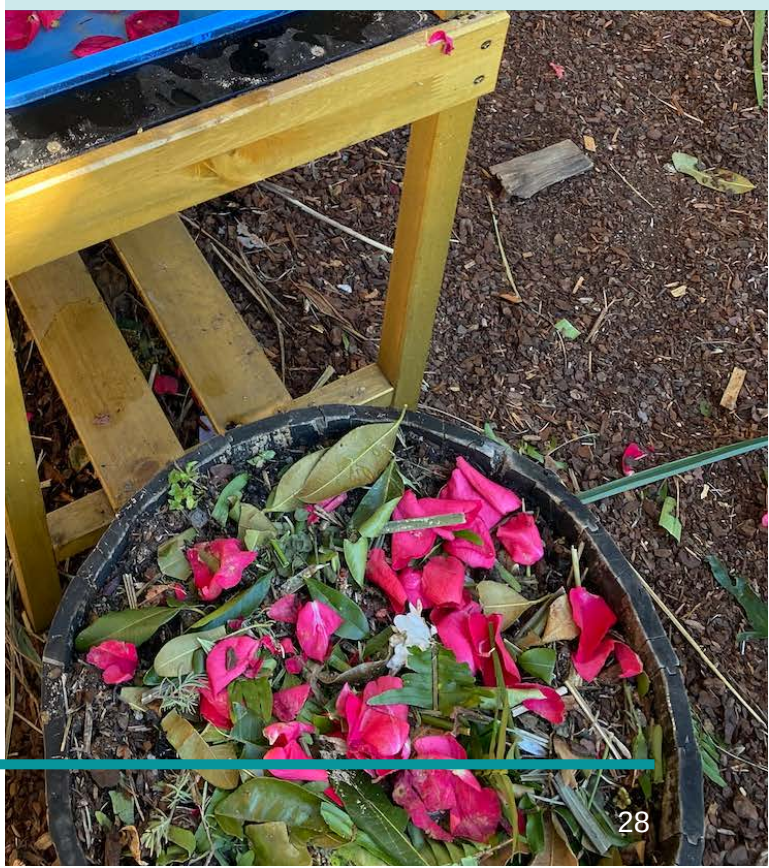
Funding is required not only to engage in professional externally and internally provided development activities, but also for paid time within work hours to participate in a range of professional development and learning activities.

Areas of identified need (Strategy Code: FA3-2 Improve access to an increasing range of micro-credentials for educators and teachers in areas of identified need).

Leadership development was a frequently cited topic requiring professional development. In particular, development of productive leadership styles, developing and sustaining positive work culture, change management and auditing and resourcing work environments would also make useful professional learning opportunities.

Many participants highlighted the importance of their service philosophy in supporting exemplary practice. Greater attention could therefore be given to revisiting service and room-level philosophies and what they look like in practice across areas of the National Quality Standards, learning frameworks and at different levels of qualification.

As suggested in the Workforce Strategy FA3-2, micro-credentials in these areas could be a useful approach to improving both leadership capacity and capability, and more broadly, professional development for all staff working in early childhood services.



Focus Area 4 Wellbeing: Helping service providers to have strong mental health and wellbeing supports for their workforce.

Wellbeing (Strategy Code: FA4-1 Investigate options for improved wellbeing supports)

Despite the exemplary nature of the services and educators participating in our study, findings showed that there were aspects of educators' and leaders' wellbeing that could be improved. While multi-tasking and task-rotation were shown to characterise educators' work, perceptions of the acceptability of these characteristics differed. While some found multi-tasking and task-rotation a source of stress, others just accepted them as 'the norm'. However, reported effects of these characteristics (see Cumming et al., 2022) such as constantly feeling rushed, that tasks were always unfinished, or not being able to slow down after work, suggest that they may compromise wellbeing regardless of perceptions. Guidance in actively managing job design and workflow to minimise task-rotation and multi-tasking could be one means of improving educators' wellbeing.

Alongside attention to work environments that better support educators' wellbeing, our findings suggest some individual-level approaches that may assist educators' wellbeing. Professional learning in self-compassionate practices and boundary management, aspects of coping and resilience and learning to recognise and make visible implicit assumptions, expectations and norms of practice and the sector (as raised in 'Retention' above) are also likely to support the wellbeing of all educators.



The existing *Be You* program has excellent resourcing and reach and could be better promoted across all initial and ongoing professional learning to ensure both educators and leaders are aware of the resources and assistance available. It is critical to note however, that these individual level approaches must not replace attention to structural arrangements contributing to compromised educator wellbeing.



Focus Area 5 Qualifications and career pathways: Supporting quality, improving consistency and reducing complexity, as well as enabling flexible career progression.

Qualifications (Strategy Code: FA5-3 Continue the ongoing focus on the quality of vocational education and training)

Many exemplary services who participated in our study were staffed above mandatory requirements. This arrangement contributed to overall practice quality, and also increased opportunities for educational leadership and mentoring within the service. Despite the current critical shortages of staff, our findings suggest that staffing requirements should not be diluted if quality is to be maintained.

Our research suggests that in relation to reviewing requirements for early childhood teaching programs specifically, more attention to leadership and management is warranted. In particular, additional attention to managing staff, and fostering knowledge, skills and values and a positive attitude to professional learning and growth is important.

In relation to vocational education and training, our findings suggest that the quality of education and training providers is an ongoing problem requiring greater regulatory attention if levels of quality are to be maintained in the sector. Educators also noted that having flexible work conditions that gave time for full engagement in study and integration into practice was highly effective.

Recommendations

This *Exemplary Early Childhood Educator at Work* study provides strong evidence to demonstrate the complex, highly skilled nature of exemplary educator practice across Degree, Diploma and Certificate III qualifications, and the organisational and structural processes and systems required to enable high-quality early childhood education provision.

The findings provide positive **evidence that the early childhood sector knows what is required to ensure that all children, in every Australian early childhood service, have access to high-quality educational practices that will support their learning and wellbeing.** What is needed for the future is to ensure that this becomes a reality for all early childhood services, by investing in the things that matter, such as:

- educator pre-service and on-going tailored and responsive **professional development** that is focused on enriching the learning and development of children in the early years and supporting their families.
- opportunities for **workforce to have a say about the type/mode/approaches for professional development** – coaching and mentoring, and site-based.
- creating the **conditions and providing the resources** to enable educators to provide high-quality practice (e.g., adequate ratios; non-contact time; safe and collegial workspaces); building educators' leadership capacities and opportunities for growth.
- providing the **conditions (time, non-contact, dialogue) for educators to deeply explore and locate theoretical perspectives that inform their images of children, their vision and purpose**, as essential anchors for their pedagogy and practice.

The findings presented in this report suggest four major areas as priorities **for policy, organisation/employer, and educator** attention to ensure that *exemplary early childhood educators' work* is enabled, and that their work with children is valued and matters:

Priority Area 1

Invest in professional development that supports educators' career pathways, to upskill, build knowledge, skills and dispositions and in doing so impact pedagogy and practice in their early childhood services, and for children.

Actions

For Policy

- provision of professional development funding included in regulations.

For organisations/employers

- providing conditions (within workload) and access to diverse professional development opportunities, with educators having choice about what and how they engage.

For Educators

- engaging with professional development that is meaningful and aligns with career aspirations and brings opportunities for growth.



Recommendations

Priority Area 2

Create authentic opportunities for educator agency to have a valued and meaningful say in decision making at all levels of service provision.

Actions

For Policy

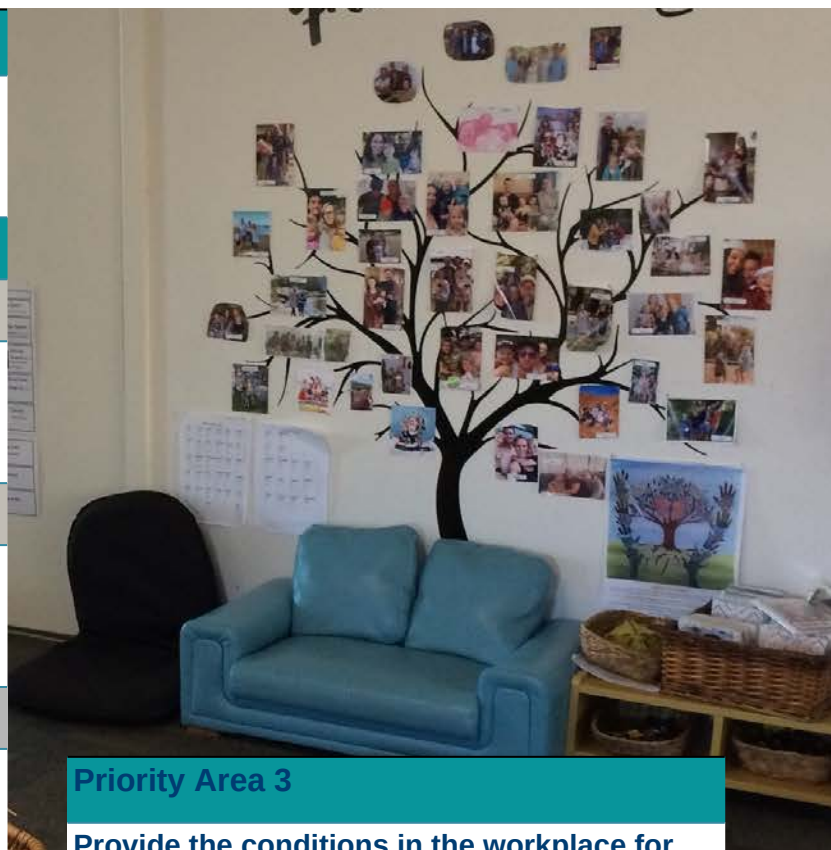
- provide structures and opportunities for educators' voices to be heard in policy matters that affect them.

For organisations/employers

- create opportunities for educators to have input into decision making – such as in the recruitment of colleagues.

For Educators

- engage in, and contribute to, centre, organisational, community and policy discussions.



Priority Area 3

Provide the conditions in the workplace for educators to have sustained time to fully engage in and with their work (non-contact time, room meetings, paid staff meetings, flexibility).

Actions

For Policy

- provide policy and regulatory conditions that shape and facilitate realistic and safe work conditions that support both high-quality practices and sustain educators; pay particular attention to Diploma qualified educators, with further research on time outside of paid work.

For organisations/employers

- provide realistic and safe adult working environments and conditions that prioritise the needs of both children and the educators who work with them.

For educators

- consider and advocate for working conditions that both enable high-quality professional practice and sustain educators.



Recommendations

Priority Area 4

Grow and sustain leadership, that fosters teamwork, valuing each educator, inclusive of qualifications and experiences.

Actions

For Policy

- clearly defined regulations; leadership qualifications and opportunities for upskilling – with appropriate recognition (e.g. time allocation) and remuneration.

For organisations/employers

- clear roles and responsibilities that enable and do not constrain educators; refining leadership beyond positional titles; clear vision and purpose.

For Educators

- support leadership enacted at all levels.



The findings from the *Exemplary Early Childhood Educator at Work* study shine a light on key priority areas to focus on – professional development, conditions, agency and leadership. We invite further considerations about whose responsibilities the recommendations are, including service providers, governments, education and training providers, educators and teachers, peak associations, and regulatory bodies.

Our hope is that the recommendations proposed here are taken up by all of these groups to collaboratively effect change in the early childhood sector, so that all educators are enabled to be exemplary, and that all children in all services have high-quality early childhood education.

We recommend that all stakeholders and end-users work closely and respectfully, sharing responsibilities to put in place the arrangements that enable exemplary educators, and exemplary practice.

Closing Statement

What constitutes a quality early education has been the subject of debate and research for decades.

Paradoxically, while it has always been recognised that early childhood educators are key to the quality of young children's educational experiences, they are rarely foregrounded in these debates. For too long, early childhood educators have been 'missing in action', spoken about, spoken for, and spoken to.

Early childhood educators are a diverse group of individuals inhabiting a wide range of job roles (leaders, teachers, assistants, educational leaders etc.) within a loosely coupled system. The expectations and qualifications required of a particular role vary based on the age group, where educators work (e.g., center-based, homes, schools etc.), who they work for (e.g., for profit, not for profit, etc.), and which part of the sector they are located (e.g., long day care, preschool, family childcare, infant toddler care). Yet despite this variation, the research available on this workforce tends to focus on a particular role (early childhood educator), and often within one kind of setting (long day care). Consequently, not a lot is known about how these individuals work together to enact high-quality educational experiences for young children.

The *Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work* study is unique in its scope and reach. Assuming that those who work with and for young children are professionals with a unique knowledge base, this study foregrounds the voices and perspectives of all those who work in programs and services. The findings illustrate the complexity of the work, the multiple tasks and responsibilities involved in teaching young children and importantly, the organisational contexts that educators need to be their best for young children.

As a collaboration with key Australian early childhood organisations and services, this study is grounded in the realities, not the rhetoric, of what quality early childhood education looks like in action.

The key takeaway from this study is that Australia's young children require qualified early childhood educators who understand how to support, nurture, challenge, and include every young child they work with. If early childhood educators are to do the best by the children in their care, then they need and deserve supportive organisational contexts that allow them to thrive professionally. These kinds of organisations are respectful and collegial spaces, led by individuals who understand how important it is to create early childhood programs as learning organisations for both educators and young children. It all sounds so simple, right?

Whilst there have been promising developments, policymakers continue to revisit old debates such as whether early childhood programs are really beneficial to young children's learning rather than focusing on what needs to be done to ensure that every young Australian child, regardless of who they are and where they live, experiences a high-quality education. The *Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work* study shows that if we are to ever reach this ideal then we need to invest in our workforce. We need to recognise, value, and support them in the complex work of ensuring Australia's future.

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Vignette of practice: An exemplary early childhood educator (Teacher)

Multi-tasking at the end of the day: Authentic engagement with families

The following observation was made at the end of the day. The end of the day in children's services can be busy and a little fraught, as families are coming to pick up their children, it can be quite distressing and disturbing for some children – if they are anxious about when their parents will come. During this time, Sharon was constantly scanning the room, multi-tasking, and task-shifting. In a short window of no more than ten minutes, Sharon engaged in the following activities:

Sharon was sitting on the sofa in the middle of the room, a child was sitting next to her, leaning on Sharon as she (the child) quietly reawakened from her sleep. Sharon was tying the child's shoelaces – she gave this child a reassuring stroke on her leg, indicating that she'd finished tying her laces – but that she wasn't rushing the child to leave the couch. Another child approached Sharon and asked her to tie her apron so that she could so she could 'work' in the area set up as a 'café'.

At the same time, a group of children were sitting on the floor in front of Sharon reading a book about the human body. Sharon engaged them in conversation about the contents of the book, acknowledging the children's interest - not overpowering their peer conversations - but questioning them in a relaxed atmosphere. She said, "Put your hands on your chest you can feel your breathing and your heart". She modelled and extended the children's language, referring to body parts such as 'skull' and other organs.

Simultaneously, Sharon was monitoring a child in the toilet, reminding him to wash his hands. She also checked on a child who was wandering and appeared a little 'lost', directing him to an activity; and she responded with a smile and nod to another child who tapped her on the shoulder. Then she reached out behind the sofa to a child who was still sleeping - gently rocking him and waking him up; all the while comforting and holding the hand of an upset child - and providing guidance to a prac student about her programming for the following day!

Sharon also helped prepare children for departure by letting them know when their parents were coming she looked and pointed to the clock and said to one child, whose mother was coming to pick him up a little earlier than usual: "It's two minutes - mum will be here soon". She also supported children's independence – reminding them to get their lunch boxes out of the fridge and put them in their bag and encouraged children to pack away the resources they were playing with before they left. She said to one child, who had been in the café "Have you finished your shift? – you need to clean up for the next shift before you clock off".

Sharon also welcomed and engaged in conversation with every parent who entered the room - telling each parent an anecdote of something interesting that their child had done or said during the day. The mother of one child - who had returned to pre-school that day after having sustained (at home) an injury to his arm and was wearing a cast - was concerned about how her child had coped during the day. Sharon acknowledged the mother's concerns and then allayed her anxiety by telling her that he hadn't complained about pain, and about some of the activities he had engaged in throughout the day. He had been wearing socks on his hands to keep the sand out of his cast – but she wasn't quite sure how well that had worked!

Vignette of practice: An exemplary early childhood educator (Teacher)

What has enabled this?

These pedagogical practices are enabled by the facilities and resources available. The pre-school building is a ten-year-old purpose built space. It is very well maintained. The paint is fresh, and furniture is aesthetically pleasing and well maintained. The learning spaces are bright and open to the outdoor environment.

There are exceptional resources for the children to engage with. There are multiple learning stations across both the indoor and outdoor area. These stations are set-up with a variety of inviting and engaging materials. Some resources are available at all times to children – others are introduced gradually throughout the day based on children's interests.

The pedagogical practices are also enabled due to Sharon's professional skills. Sharon is a highly skilled and experienced educator with over five years' service in this centre. Her enjoyment in actively and sensitively engaging in children's play was highly evident. She displayed authentic relationships with children, and genuine engagement through facial expression, use of voice modulation, and gentle touching. She seemed to derive great joy from interacting with the children. She also displayed close professional relationships with families.

These activities is also supported by the enactment of daily routines. The children understood what was happening, were prepared and knew the educators' expectations of them. This comes from multiple experiences of consistent routines.

Vignette of practice: An exemplary early childhood educator (Room Leader)

Responsive Rituals

As noon moves closer, the children are starting to wind down their play, three of the younger children have already been invited inside to a small dining area, where they are sitting with an educator for lunch. The table is set with a tablecloth, ceramic crockery, a vase with a flower and a small tea candle is burning in the centre; this is the first group of children who will eat before moving to the sleeping area with this educator. Misha has spoken with me about the intentionality of having the children divided into small groups as it facilitates relationships. This small grouping allows routines such as sleeping and eating to become rituals with purpose and intent. Misha says that she often reflects on the question “Who are we doing this for? What does it look like when we are rushing? Would I want to be here?” when thinking about her practice as a teacher and how children perceive what is happening around them.

Whilst Allie tends to the children who are eating, Misha is outside with a small group of older children who are playing quietly. They will eat lunch with her, once the first group finishes. She is watching them and making small talk whilst tidying up some toys that are lying around. The mood is calm as the children sense that rest is near and the meditative music from inside, filters to the outside space. An educator speaks quietly to Misha about one of the children, asking whether the child will sleep now or later. It's one of many discussions Misha (as the Room Leader) will have during the day. Having a program that is very flexible to the needs of individual children means that Misha is continually making decisions about the children based upon their individual needs in each moment in time. Working with an age group that historically has many 'routines and housekeeping', this is a testament to her commitment to intentional practice.

The evidence for creating these rituals is all around the room. Misha has been very purposeful in creating a learning environment that supports small group experiences. This is possible due to having higher ratios of educators, which currently sits at four to five educators for 14 children. For example, Misha has the sleeping area divided into three sections by curtains to allow for staggered sleep times. The dining table is set in a quiet corner of the room and can only accommodate four children at any one time. Misha states that children are viewed as protagonists of their own learning and that by listening to children they are able to tell the team what they need. Misha spoke about being very deliberate in not wanting to have 'production lines', acknowledging that making children feel valued is embedded in rituals.

Vignette of practice: An exemplary early childhood educator (Assistant)

The Teddy Bear Dice Game

It was a rainy, drizzly day and the children in this four-year kindergarten group had just finished morning tea on the undercover, outdoor verandah area. As the children put their lunchboxes away, Magda, the kindergarten assistant, asked everyone if they would like to play the “Teddy Bear Dice” game. To squeals of delight, it was unanimous that everyone wanted to play this game. It seemed that the children were familiar with how to get ready, sitting in the middle of the mat, and watching as Magda proceeded to put six chairs in a circle around the perimeter of the mat, then place six laminated pictures each with a different coloured teddy bear on each chair. She then explained to the children the rules of the game, taking time to explain each verbally and use her body to move around and show the children where and how they could move. Magda then showed the children the dice, with different colours on. She carefully explained the rules of the game (although I later found out that the children had played this game once prior in the year). “If you’d like to play this game turn listening ears on” “Stand in the middle of the green mat”. Then she explained “When the music starts move around” and “When the music stops stand in front of a chair”.

The music started, not “children’s music” rather contemporary pop music. The children moved around the circle, skipping and dancing, with more squeals of happiness. When the music stopped the children moved quickly (reminded not to run) and stood in front of a chair. The children watched intently as Magda rolled the dice, and it landed on red. The children who were standing at that colour teddy were out, moving to sit to the side, and ready to watch the others still in the game.

As the music once again began playing the children once again danced, skipped (and some jogged) around the circle, moving close to the chairs. Magda’s voice was calm and quietly spoken as she encouraged the children to skip around in a circle, saying “Knees up for skipping” and “In front of the chairs”. During the game, which continued (for about 30 minutes and was played twice) these phrases were used repeatedly.... “Knees up for skipping” and “In front of the chairs”, calmly reminding the children of the rules for the game that would keep them and their friends safe.

The noise level increased as the children still in the game squealed louder as they skipped around laughing, some holding hands. Madga said “You know what - if you squeal it will be too noisy”. Gradually the groups of children at each chair, and those remaining the game grew smaller. Turn after turn as children were “out” Magda said “Be a watcher”(not “You’re out”). There were no protests as children became out- they sat on the mat and watched, doing upper body dancing. As Madga continued the game with the children, Patricia, the Director, was controlling the music. As children became watchers she said, “Bad luck, that happens” and “That was unlucky Sofia” then “That’s how the game goes”.

The game was played through to the end with one last person remaining. Then, promptly, with little fanfare for the last person remaining the game commenced again. All up the Teddy Bear Dice game took about 30 minutes, with all children engaged.

The focus in the Teddy Bear Dice game was on turn taking and being okay about missing out. The children’s engagement in participation, rather than winning was apparent, with much happiness and laughter as they played, it seemed to be a favourite game. The day before the children in this kindergarten group had had a party, and there was a focus this week on turn taking (missing out) and developing resilience as well as sharing.

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