

Early childhood educators rely on families to prop up low income, research finds ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Early childhood educators struggling in low-paid jobs often have to prop up their income through family members and/or partners, new research shows.

Wages for qualified early childhood teachers have improved over time. However, incomes of those with vocational qualifications, including diplomas and certificates, remain low and do not reflect the responsibilities that characterise the role.

Certificate III-qualified educators, who assist in the design and delivery of educational programs, are paid A\$753 per week before tax. This is considerably below the average weekly earnings of \$1,137 across all occupations.

The difference between the pay rates of certificate-qualified early childhood educators and the Australian national minimum wage of \$17.29 per hour before tax is minimal.

Dissatisfied with pay and conditions

Many early years educators believe their pay is too low. This is a view shared by politicians, including Tanya Plibersek and Sarah Hanson-Young, unions and an increasing number of peak bodies and employers.

The 2013 National Early Childhood Education and Care Census reported that 87% of educator respondents indicated satisfaction with their job, but half were dissatisfied with pay and conditions.

Another survey of educators who had left the sector found that low pay had influenced the decision to leave.

In any one day, early childhood educators may undertake a range of tasks requiring different skills. These include observing and interacting with children, planning and implementing the curriculum, engaging with parents, including referring them to other services, and other care activities such as preparing meals, changing nappies and cleaning.

Educators said that their daily work exposed them to health risks such as acquiring illnesses when children were unwell.

Significant physical demands were also reported. These included lifting children, as well as furniture and equipment. Receiving a decent day's pay was considered a reasonable expectation for these physical requirements and risks.

They also compared their pay to the hours they worked. Although weekend work and work after 6.30pm should be paid at 150-200%, we found many examples of educators who worked unpaid hours.

Typically, this involved preparing learning materials at home in the evenings for the next day, attending professional development after hours, or community liaison work on the weekends. This kind of unpaid work is also common for other educators, such as schoolteachers.

Why retention is still high

Although pay is low, early years educators often rationalise their decision to stay in the sector as essentially a vocational choice.

Many argued that their desire to assist children to develop and learn trumped the pursuit of money in occupational decisions. But this happened only when educators had access to alternative sources of household incomes to cover basic necessities such as rent or mortgage payments, food and child-rearing expenses.

To cover these expenses, additional household income is often needed. For some, this is derived from partners who earn higher incomes in other occupations and hence offset their low wages. Others describe the importance of financial support from parents, ex-partners and other extended family members.

While increased demand has led to improvement in wages for early childhood teachers, this is not the case for all educators in long day

care.

Shallow pay structures, the costs of study for educators earning near minimum wage, as well as inflexible training programs, constrain the process of professionalisation of this workforce.

Yet this remains an important goal for the sector, because staff qualifications strongly impact the quality of care and education provided to young children.

Policy needs to redress low pay

Developing effective policy in the early childhood education and care sector needs to address more than just issues of access and costs to parents and the government.

A critical, but often invisible, part of delivering effective early years education and care is about ensuring fairness for the workforce itself.

The idea of fairness and equality is especially important when we consider that the sector is staffed almost exclusively by women.

The very low proportion of men working in the sector, reported at around 3%, is likely to be a consequence of low pay.

It may also be part of the cause. Highly feminised sectors of the labour market are often low-paid. Examples include librarians, community service workers and retail service assistants. This situation needs to change.

In economic terms, the broader conversation about financing early years education and care should acknowledge that the sector is financed not only by governments and parents, but also propped up financially by members of educators' households.

Where additional household income is not available, such as when educators do not have partners or families to partially support them, the educators themselves bear the cost of early years education.

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