

Low pay but still we stay: Retention in early childhood education and care ^[1]

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Excerpted from introduction

A skilled, engaged and professional early childhood workforce is critical to positive life trajectories for children as well as broader economic and social productivity. Yet a range of persistent challenges adversely impacts the pay, working conditions and qualification attainment of early childhood educators, especially in long day care settings (Cumming et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2016; Productivity Commission, 2011), limiting optimal outcomes. Retention in particular has been identified as a significant challenge for the sector in Australia and across the developed world. International research indicates that early childhood educator retention rates continue to be poor compared to other occupational groups (Gable et al., 2007; Rolfe, 2005; Whitebook and Sakai, 2003). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, (2012: 190) has further noted that against a background of social policies demanding an increase in the size and qualification levels of the early years workforce, there are considerable challenges in developing and maintaining a high-quality workforce in many countries:

Chronic shortages of ECEC staff are observed, especially in remote and disadvantaged areas ... the main reasons for the shortages are often cited as: low wages, low social status, heavy workload and lack of career progression paths ...

In Australia, the percentage of job turnover amongst early childhood education and care (ECEC) employees each year has been estimated to be more than 30% for over a decade (Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council, 2006; United Voice, 2011a, 2014). Such turnover includes churn within the sector as educators move between centres, with educators averaging 3.5 years' tenure within a centre (Social Research Centre, 2017). Turnover also includes permanent skill loss as educators exit ECEC for personal or family reasons and/or to pursue careers in other parts of the education workforce (Productivity Commission, 2011). Adding to this concern is the finding that the most qualified educators, including degree-qualified early childhood teachers, are most likely to leave the sector (Irvine, 2016; Phillips et al., 2016). Continuity of educators and skill retention have consistently been associated with positive outcomes for children's development and emotional security, the welfare of families and future economic prosperity (Early et al., 2007; OECD, 2012; Roseveare and Taguma, 2009; Whitebook et al., 2015). Yet low pay, poor working conditions and expectations to gain qualifications are consistently cited amongst the causes of high turnover in the early childhood context; that is, why educators leave the sector to work elsewhere. Meanwhile, structural barriers such as distinctions between care and education, which continue to impact award provisions, and demand-side funding models which see money go to parents, have constrained efforts to improve opportunities and outcomes for educators over time.

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

Tags: workforce ^[4]

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