

Accreditation effects on early childhood educator morale ^[1]

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Staff morale is the workplace attitudes, emotions, enthusiasm, satisfaction and future hopes employees have. It is important because it affects workplace attrition, attention, productivity, dedication, detail, effort, engagement, relationships (between workers and with management), and attendance.

Low workplace morale can be caused by unreasonable demands, poor work-life balance, unhealthy workplace culture, lack of encouragement, poor supervisor practices (e.g. micromanagement, bullying), poor communication, one-way communication, inadequate or unprofessional feedback, unfair pay, types of work, lack of opportunities to be innovative, lack of effective collaboration, management not listening to workers, organisation's values and expectations, inferior management systems, frustrating processes and managerialism.

What is managerialism?

Managerialism is a type of management that positions the worker as untrustworthy. With this in mind, authorities and managers document huge lists of duties workers need to perform in dizzying detail.

To justify these enormous documents, authorities and managers say it is needed in order to produce quality, although their ideas of quality are detailed. To comply with the authorities' ideas of quality, workers spend a lot of time proving that they are fulfilling the tasks outlined in these documents. This takes their time away from the job they were employed to do.

Managerialism in early childhood education

In Western nations, managerialism has even crept into education systems, affecting practices and the identity of the educator. In early childhood education, managerialism now includes huge documents detailing what educators need to do in order to deliver the government's ideas about quality. These are often so complex, guides and handbooks are needed to describe how to use the original document.

In Australia, early childhood documents detailing government notions of quality are in the form of frameworks, standards, and curricula. However, quality education and care are dependent on meeting the needs of individual children, their families and communities in unique environments.

Registration and accreditation in early childhood education

To be registered, early childhood services need to spend inordinate amounts of time documenting their compliance so that they can be accredited. In each state and territory, the relevant regulatory authority is responsible for accreditation and registration to these standards.

Services need to prepare these documents every three years, but more often if they do not do well. Enrolment is affected by accreditation rankings so there is a lot of pressure to do well, and even exceed the requirements.

A transnational study is exploring the work of early childhood educators in Australia, Denmark and Canada. Of the 50 Australian educators (including staff and directors) who participated, half reported unpaid hours during accreditation. This is alarming given they are one of the lowest paid workers in Australia.

Educators also reported the effects accreditation had on staff morale in their workplace. 66% of participants reported a decrease in staff morale, with 46% describing a sharp decrease.

Those reporting a sharp decline in morale said:

- 'staff felt criticised and undervalued by management'
- 'staff felt stressed and overwhelmed'
- 'worried that they needed to get "exceeding" (rating) to be valued'
- 'staff were exhausted from ensuring everything was done and up to date'

Some educators reported a decrease in staff morale by saying:

- 'nervousness, stressed. Staff are worried about the outcome because it reflects their work'
- 'staff get anxious because the experience is so incredibly subjective'
- 'people feel that they spend too much time on box ticking and not the important things, relationships with children'
- 'staff were very anxious about the process and having someone on site'
- This wordle summarises the educators' comments about their experiences.

Does it matter?

Does it matter if high numbers of services experience a decline in staff morale during accreditation? Staff morale affects the quality of work. Poor staff morale, excessive workplace stress and extra hours can lead to exhaustion and burnout.

It is particularly concerning for early childhood educators, given effective education requires high quality interactions with children. Poor staff morale and quality interactions are unlikely to coincide. Poor morale increases staff attrition, which in turn negatively impacts children's relationships and learning.

In Australia, early childhood educators are leaving in droves, with services struggling to stay fully staffed. One survey found that 73% intended to leave in the next 3 years.

Results from ACECQA's own 2021 National Workforce Strategy Survey revealed educators who planned to leave the sector in the next 5 years said 'administrative burden, workload, burnout and retirement' were the main reasons. Additionally, educators said wellbeing, attraction, recognition, and promotion were the major problems preventing services being fully staffed.

Do we have an accreditation system that unwittingly adds to the overburdened sector? This study has revealed accreditation can contribute to workplace stress, unrealistic workloads, poor work-life balance, unpaid hours, poor staff morale and a reduction in time spent with children.

What needs to be done?

More research is needed to understand the extent of the problems this study has identified. We need to increase pressure on governments to make far reaching reforms in the sector.

To rebound from the economic havoc caused by the pandemic, we will need strong workplace participation. This will only be possible with well-staffed early childhood services with educators who want to stay in the sector. This will require systems that improve rather than reduce staff morale.

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

Tags: workforce ^[4]

well-being ^[5]

quality ^[6]

legislation and regulations ^[7]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/legislation-and-regulations>