

Bound for burnout: Early childhood educators are swimming against a gendered, micromanaged tide ^[1]

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Burnout is rife in the early childhood sector, with educators saying burnout, administrative overload and overwork are the reason they want to leave early. Alarming, up to 73% of educators say they wish to leave the sector in the next 5 years. Our educators are swimming against a fast-moving tide.

Why is burnout such an issue in our essential workers? While the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly increased stress for educators, it has only made the tide run faster. A 2021 transnational survey exploring educators' work is shedding some light on these challenges with responses from 50 Australian educators.

Gender related challenges and the managerial system were found to cause educator burnout. An educator highlighted this by saying she had 'been dealing with burnout from the job. (I am) losing enjoyment as we are dealing with so many regulations and behaviour issues'.

Gender

Gender plays a major role in educators' work and lives in four main areas: intersectionality, pay, status and invisibility.

Intersectionality (overlapping marginalisation and discrimination)

Females make up 91% of the workforce, meaning they experience the many challenges of female dominated professions (e.g. pay, status, and invisibility). Most females carry a heavier burden in their own lives from caring responsibilities, managing their household and the mental load required.

This increases their stress levels. One educator said 'the pay and hours make life with a family difficult to juggle and the stress and requirements detract from the joy of working with children'.

Pay

Educators' pay rate is based on the notion of undervalued work that was traditionally the role of females. Many educators in the survey commented on their wages, with one calling it 'unfair pay'.

Status

Despite the low status of educators, women are socialised to be compliant from childhood so tend not to speak out. When they do, their work is undervalued and ridiculed.

Some say the sector needs to be professionalised to create better quality education and care as a pathway to the higher pay and status that school teachers (rightly) enjoy.

However, school teachers are paid more with the same qualification because it was traditionally a male occupation. Importantly, they were paid reasonably before managerialism was a feature in schools. In this study, one educator called for 'respect as a professional' from the authorities.

Invisibility

Educators work is largely unrecognised in mainstream media and government documents. For example, in educators curriculum and accompanying educator handbook, educators are asked to recognise the knowledge and strengths of parents, and identify and work with the interests and strengths of children. However, none of the 200 plus pages in these documents mention the strengths of educators.

ACECQA's newly announced 'Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Strategy' addresses a few of these gendered issues, however, whether stakeholders carry through is another matter. It does not seem to address the root cause of educator burnout, administrative overload and overwork caused by the elephant in the room, managerialism.

Managerialism

In a managerial system, workers are not trusted to understand or do their work. Authorities write excruciatingly detailed lists of what the worker needs to do, then appoints many managers and administrators to ensure compliance.

Authorities say this is necessary to improve quality and because nobody can argue with 'quality', it goes unquestioned. But only the authorities' ideas of quality are considered important.

Due to this constant quality mantra, some workers take on some of these ideals. However, contrary to quality, workers find themselves spending large chunks of time proving their compliance to these detailed lists rather than actually doing their job.

Workers are therefore being micromanaged most of the time. This is either by the systems put in place by the authorities, or supervisors trying to enforce these systems.

This study revealed 63% of educators felt micromanaged by their supervisors in the last week, while over 78% felt micromanaged by government requirements and documents which make up these managerial systems.

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[2]

Tags: child care workforce ^[3]

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