

One in five early childhood educators plan to leave the profession ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Despite lip service being paid to the importance of early education, little is being done to encourage early education staff to stay in the profession.

One in five early childhood educators plans to leave their job in the next 12 months, a survey finds.

Of the 1200 early childhood educators and degree qualified teachers working in long day care centres and preschools across Australia who were surveyed, around one in five said they planned to leave their job within a year because of low pay, feeling undervalued and increasing time spent on paperwork.

Educators who took up further training or upgraded to an early childhood teaching degree were most likely to leave.

This means that some of our most qualified educators are choosing to leave the profession early in their career.

Young educators who entered the profession because they liked the idea of working with children are also leaving. This is mainly because their experience is not matching their expectations.

Challenges of working in early education

This is intellectually, emotionally and physically demanding work and there are qualification requirements for all educators.

To work in long day care, educators need a vocational qualification (certificate III or diploma). Teachers in long day care and preschools have an education degree, often the same qualification as teachers in schools. Yet, wages and conditions are poor by comparison, particularly in long day care.

This may be linked to the gender pay gap and the fact that 94% of this workforce is female. A female-dominated workforce is often associated with lower wages within particular sectors. Government distinctions between care and education, and overemphasis on childcare to support parent workforce participation are also unhelpful and devalue the professional work of educators and teachers in these services.

Here are the main reasons why people are leaving the sector:

Feeling undervalued

The vast majority of educators talked about their love of children, the importance of early education and the satisfaction they derived from their work.

In fact 85% described their work as a profession rather than a job.

However the study highlights a tension between educator views of their roles and responsibilities, and a lack of professional recognition within the community.

While educators talked about their years of study and contribution to early learning, they felt many in the community continued to view them simply as babysitters.

Drowning in paperwork

While filling out documentation is part and parcel of the job - this includes observations of children's learning and teaching plans - the sheer volume of paperwork is becoming unmanageable for many educators, and many struggle to complete it in the time given.

This is leading to feelings of guilt about not meeting personal and/or external expectations, and a sense of obligation to complete this work during breaks and outside of paid working hours.

An over-focus on paperwork is distracting educators and teachers from the most meaningful aspects of their work; their daily interactions with children and families.

Low pay

While there are a range of factors that contribute to job satisfaction and retention, it is clear that in the end money does matter.

The study revealed that some educators were barely surviving on their income. This is a particular problem in long day care where salaries range from \$18 per hour for an assistant educator to \$32 per hour for the most senior and experienced director of a long day care centre; many indicated they were only able to continue working in early education because their partner or family financially supported them.

Despite government and employer incentives such as TAFE fee waivers and early childhood teacher scholarships to grow a more qualified workforce, many educators are training to leave their centre in search of better pay and working conditions in preschools or schools. Others are choosing to leave the education sector completely.

Implications for the sector

The quality and stability of educators and teachers working in these services is the single most important influence on children's development, learning and well-being.

The professionalism of educators also enables confident parental workforce participation.

These two factors combine to ensure the best social and economic return on national investment in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

Building a qualified, professional and sustainable workforce is essential to delivering quality ECEC services and to achieving the best outcomes for children, families and the broader community.

Yet only one party, Labor, has addressed the ECEC workforce in their election policy.

Labor said it will focus on "valuing the professionalism of early childhood educators" committing to develop a new national workforce strategy with a strong focus on valuing the work of educators and supporting their professional development.

Going a step further, Labor commits "to work to address the gender pay equity gap for early childhood educators". However, there is little detail as to how this might be achieved.

We need a shared plan and collective effort to grow the workforce to provide these services. This has to be a policy priority and the solution needs to include professional wages for professional work.

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