

INQUIRY INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SECTOR IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Centre for Research in Early Childhood Education, Macquarie University

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Inquiry into the early childhood education and care sector in New South Wales

The Centre for Research in Early Childhood Education brings together a critical mass of early childhood education researchers from Macquarie University in order to generate empirical evidence to support the provision of high quality early childhood education. We work closely with the early childhood sector, including providers and policy-makers, to co-design and implement impactful research that supports children, educators and communities.

In this submission, we focus on several of the terms of reference outlined for consideration with the NSW Inquiry into the early childhood education and care sector in NSW. We note that this inquiry has been instigated due to significant and serious allegations of health, safety and wellbeing breaches in Australian early childhood services. These breaches and offences have been reported widely by the ABC and other media outlets.

The media reports have been shocking and distressing to the majority of educators, providers and professionals working in the early childhood sector. In our opinion, media reports have been sensationalised, and often portrayed as if serious health, safety and wellbeing breaches are frequent and characteristic of the sector. We would challenge that view, and argue that the reporting has overlooked the high quality professional practice of the majority of educators and providers in our early childhood sector. They have also pitched the for-profit sector against the not-for-profit sector, which in our view presents a simplistic analysis of the cause of health and safety breaches and offences. We fully expect that the Inquiry will receive submissions from a number of early childhood providers from both for-profit and not-for-profit providers who are best placed to explain the rigor with which most educators and providers ensure that very young children receive safe and healthy care and education.

In our submission below we focus on evidence that has been generated from research and from our in-depth understanding of the Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. We concentrate on our expertise related to the early childhood workforce and initial teacher education. We draw the Inquiry's attention to critical issues within the broad landscape of ECEC provision that will need to be addressed in order to ensure high quality ECEC for all Australian children.

The safety, health and wellbeing of children in ECEC services

The ABC and related media reports have raised serious concerns about safety, health and wellbeing of children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. As a core element of the quality of early childhood education, and a critical aspect of our National Quality Framework, efforts to protect and enhance the safety, health and wellbeing of all children must be prioritised. It is not helpful to portray the Australian ECEC quality and regulatory system as flawed or 'broken.' Australia has a rigorous and legislated National

Quality Framework that is regarded worldwide as best practice, and is the envy of early childhood providers, researchers and policy-makers in many other countries. While improvements can always be made, this National system must be protected as it regulates the structural conditions and provisions that are required to ensure that all young children receive the quality of care and education that ensures that their safety, health and wellbeing is protected and supported. We strongly advise that the Inquiry engages rigorously with ACECQA and the Department of Education regulators so that a solid understanding of our regulatory landscape and processes is developed and presented in the Inquiry's final report.

The critical issue that we feel the Inquiry needs to address is the question of what causes breaches and offences such as those portrayed in the ABC and other media reports. What is the root cause? One potential cause is insufficient attention to supporting the early childhood education workforce. There is strong evidence that the early childhood workforce is under extreme pressure – with many educators reporting burnout and attrition in the sector is high (see for example, *Early Childhood Educator Well-being Project*.) This attrition results in a workforce that is often inexperienced and educators being promoted to positions of leadership early in their career, often without the requisite skills to lead the diverse teams that work in EC settings. In addition, the bolstering of the workforce by employing overseas educators has brought challenges, with educators, often who have English as a second language and who may have different social and cultural understandings about children and early childhood education, requiring additional support to operate within the Australian sector. Incidences of bullying in the sector are high – especially for CALD educators. These challenges facing the workforce may be a contributing factor to the abuse that has been reported. Any investigation should include a root cause analysis.

The quality of ECEC services and the educational and developmental outcomes for children attending ECEC services

There is strong and compelling evidence that access to *high quality* ECE has a range of benefits for children's long-term development and learning outcomes, their families and society more broadly. Decades of international research, including large-scale evaluations of programs targeted for disadvantaged children (e.g. Head Start, Abecedarian and High/Scope Perry Preschool programs), provides compelling evidence that attendance at high-quality ECEC services can have positive effects on children's social, cognitive, language and physical development and school readiness (see for example: Bellfield et al, 2006; Bergen et al., 2021; Cornelissen, 2018; Harrison et al., 2011; Huston, 2011; Melhuish et al. 2015; Puma et al, 2012; Weintraub et al, 2013; Zaslow et al., 2016).

This research suggests that benefits for children and families accrue directly as children interact in development and well-being enhancing early learning settings in which relationships are caring, where experiences and materials are responsive and individually appropriate, and in pre-kindergarten, where there is intentional instruction (Berger et al, 2021). For example, preschool programs have been shown to improve cognitive, and social and emotional outcomes, and research on the long-term impacts of preschool highlights

the interaction of academic and social and emotional skills on lifetime education and employment (Taylor, 2016).

By and large, the quality of most NSW ECEC services is at least meeting what is required to promote children's development, wellbeing and learning outcomes. However, this is not universally the case. In short, many children are attending services that do not meet quality expectations. We need to do better – especially for those children experiencing disadvantage, vulnerability and marginalization. A crucial point is that high quality early education and care provision is contingent on a *highly knowledgeable, skilled and capable early childhood workforce*. Doing better requires a highly-quality workforce, supported by organisations that put children's wellbeing and development, and not profit, at the forefront of practices.

The safety, pay and conditions of workers within the ECEC sector

There are around 220,000 educators in the ECE sector (ACECQA, 2023 <https://snapshots.acecqa.gov.au/workforcedata/index.html>), serving approximately 1.3 million children from around 950,000 families. Yet Australia is experiencing a critical shortage of early childhood educators and teachers – a situation that has been growing for at least a decade. Existing evidence indicates that EC educators' wages and employment conditions form a significant barrier to efforts to increase and retain a capable and effective ECE workforce. The evidence strongly suggests that historical inequities related to ECE employment conditions has deterred people from entering the profession and has caused dissatisfied staff to seek employment in other sectors and professions. Evidence also points to a complex combination of system, organisation and individual factors that form barriers to attraction and retention in the sector.

The workforce shortage that is being exacerbated from low pay and poor working conditions is creating considerable strain in the profession. This strain has been building for over a decade, and reached unprecedented levels during the COVID 19 pandemic. In 2023, in response to The Early Childhood National Workforce Strategy's priority to research educators' pay and conditions, a team of Macquarie University, lead by Professor Sheila Degotardi, conducted a comprehensive investigation of the enabling and constraining factors contributing to pay and conditions of our early childhood workforce. The research, commissioned collectively by all States and Territories and Administered by the ACT Education Directorate, investigated the workplace relations landscape, educators' and providers perspectives and experiences and the economic implications of reform. The research generated a complex model of barriers and enables, which recognised that measures to support educator psychological, physiological and economic wellbeing, commitment and resilience is key to addressing the attraction and retention of a high quality workforce. This model is portrayed overleaf.



Model of barriers and enablers to ECEC attraction and retention. In Degotardi, S., Mitchell, R., Thornthwaite, L., Gu, J., Gu, Y., Sinha, K., Brand, N., Cumming, T., Kan, L., Lobytsana, M., Veres, J.C., Yu, D. & Byambadorj, N. (2023). *Early Childhood Education and Care Pay and Conditions: Final Report* (currently embargoed). ACT Directorate of Education, ACT Government.

Importantly, the report presented 12 recommendations and associated options that can be implemented that our research indicated would address current dissatisfaction and stress in the sector. The comprehensive final report has been presented to the Education Ministers Meeting, and is accessible to all State and Territory Governments, and is currently accessible by the NSW Department of Education. It is currently under embargo, but we recommend that you contact the relevant people in the NSW Department

of Education to gain access to this report. Alternatively, please contact
to discuss access to the report.

The effectiveness of the regulatory framework for the ECEC sector as applied in New South Wales

In our work with the NSW ECEC Regulatory Authority, including through the NSW Early Childhood Advisory Group, we have always found representatives to have the best interests of children at the centre of their work, and they consult with the sector regularly. However, the capacity of the NSW ECEC Regulatory Authority to implement the Framework is limited by resources. It is simply inadequate that some services have only received Assessment and Ratings every four or five years. In the life of a child, that equates to no visits being conducted at their service during their attendance. Recent suggestions by the NSW ECEC Regulatory Authority to try to increase frequency of visits, by reducing the scope of the visits to two or three Quality Areas, is not in keeping with the holistic nature of Assessment and Rating – and should be avoided.

The availability and affordability of quality training institutions for early childhood education qualifications

There are currently a great many universities and vocational institutions that provide training and qualifications in early childhood education. For some time, the sector and those working in training organisations have been expressing strong concerns about the variability in the quality of the training and the graduates. At Macquarie University, our teacher education programs are led by experts in early childhood education, our courses embed evidence-informed content and supervised professional experience to ensure the competence of our graduates, and are subjected to rigorous quality reviews. Unfortunately, this is not the case with all institutions and courses. Recent research has highlighted the variability of content covered in early childhood teacher initial education as well as required practicum days.

Firstly, in NSW, early childhood teaching degrees either qualify students to work in prior to school settings only, or cover the full birth to primary Year 6 age range. Some courses that cover both prior to school and primary school relegate the early childhood content to less than 20% of the course, which we argue provides inadequate preparation for those graduates who do ultimately teach in prior to school settings. While we recognise that these courses do meet the ACECQA mandatory content requirements, it is difficult to see how students can gain any depth of understanding of the unique content and skills that are required to be effective teachers of children in prior-to-school settings.

Second, the extreme shortage of teachers has led to pressures to allow those with inadequate early childhood qualifications to be recognised as equivalent early childhood teachers. Currently this extends to registered primary or secondary teachers who have completed only a Certificate III in early childhood education and care. This entry level early childhood qualification is inadequate preparation for effective early childhood practice. Furthermore, with most early childhood teachers assuming room or service leadership

positions on or shortly after commencement in the sector, a Certificate III qualification does not equip graduates to guide and lead the professional practice of others

Third, there has been a recent dramatic increase in private vocational training institutions and colleges who are offering degree courses in universities. Early childhood education is one of the few degree courses that is allowed to be delivered through vocational institutions, and research and/or auditing is urgently needed to assess the quality of these programs and their graduates. Unlike programs delivered in universities and TAFE colleges, many private colleges do not have specialised, highly qualified staff to develop and deliver their programs. The authors of this submission have received numerous requests from private institutions to write, review or revise their course materials, which suggests strongly that the early childhood knowledge capital available to them in their institution is poor.

Fourth, and associated with the point above, many early childhood courses are either targeted specifically at international students. While we welcome the enrolment of international students into early childhood degrees, we caution that these degrees are often marketed as a pathway to permanent residency. The caution here is that work visas require the recipient to demonstrate ongoing employment which requires sponsorship from an employer. This reliance on employer sponsorship creates a situation where educators may not report health and safety breaches due to a fear of dismissal.

We are aware that ACECQA is currently undertaking a review of the current staffing and qualification regulations, however, it is clear that this review needs to be extended to examine the entire early childhood education qualification landscape. In an increasingly marketised early childhood qualification system, we recommend that a thorough review of the different qualification pathways and the quality of courses and course providers is undertaken. To date, there is no extant research that has examined the relationship between these diverse courses and graduate teacher quality. This topic is currently being addressed by the ARC Funded ARC Discovery Project *Attracting, Sustaining and Preparing Quality Teachers in Early Childhood* (DP 240100249).

In summary, in order to ensure that children's health, safety, wellbeing, learning and development is prioritized in ECEC settings, the current workforce and qualification challenges need to be addressed. If you would like to discuss this submission further, we encourage you to contact us on

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