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Educators working with infants and toddlers from low socio-economic status families

Belinda Davis^{1*} and Rosemary Dunn¹

Abstract: There is strong evidence that access to high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) has a range of benefits for children's long-term development and learning outcomes. Furthermore, ECEC has the most benefits for children who experience vulnerability, marginalisation and disadvantage (Heckman, 2008; OECD Starting Strong, 2017; National Scientific Council for the Developing Child [NSCDC], 2020). In Australia, universal measures involving funding and regulatory frameworks do not necessarily ensure inclusion of low socio-economic status (SES) children and families in ECEC. This research seeks to address the gap by exploring educators' reflections on their role and challenges they face working in ECEC settings with low SES infants and toddlers. Deductive coding using Molla and Nolan's (2019) classes of professional functionings was utilised with further inductive approaches to capture the specific Australian context including the National Quality Framework (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2018) and the Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). Findings showed the complexity involved in educators' work, relating to their understandings of the issues

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Belinda Davis' research activities have focused on the conditions impacting the early childhood education and care of infants and toddlers, including the impact of mandatory regulatory documents and the working conditions of early childhood professionals. The early childhood workforce in Australia is a critical sector but suffers from high levels of workplace dissatisfaction, low professional status and high workforce attrition and turnover. Promoting, acknowledging and supporting the further development of the expertise and professionalism of early childhood teachers to ameliorate this is a key purpose for her research. This paper reports on the experiences of early childhood educators working in low socio-economic suburbs of metropolitan Sydney, investigating the strategies and resources available to them in their work. The findings of this research will support the development of initial teacher education and ongoing professional development programs to develop early childhood professionals' expertise, in particular in their work with infants and toddlers experiencing disadvantage.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

High quality early childhood education has been found to support children to overcome the disadvantage they can experience as the result of growing up in circumstances of low socio-economic status (SES) and poverty. Many more babies and toddlers are now attending early childhood education and care centres. This research investigates the work of early childhood educators working with infants and toddlers in a low SES area in metropolitan Sydney, Australia. We found that the educators were caring and worked to support a sense of belonging for the children and their families in the community of the early childhood centre. While they were aware of some of the issues created by low SES, there was evidence that this could be strengthened. Greater understanding of the impact of low SES would support more consistent, effective educational strategies to be applied. Developing educator knowledge and expertise would also contribute to higher levels of work satisfaction and workplace well-being in this critical sector of the Australian workforce.

faced by low SES families. This study aims to raise awareness of the specific needs of low SES children under three years and their families in the ECEC context. Recommendations identify the need for support targeting the workforce to increase levels of understanding, strategies and expertise.

Subjects: Education - Social Sciences; Educational Research; Education Studies; Teachers & Teacher Education

Keywords: low SES; educators; infants; toddlers; early childhood; challenge

1. Introduction

Socio-economic status (SES) is one of the key factors influencing developmental, educational, health and wellbeing outcomes across the lifespan (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017; National Scientific Council for the Developing Child [NSCDC], 2020). SES is a complex construct, capturing relative access to resources and can be measured at the individual, family, household or community/area levels (Hackman et al., 2010; Kent et al., 2020). The Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] defines SES relatively in terms of advantage, or access to social and economic resources that enable social participation (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2011, 2017). ECEC for infants and toddlers is a complex undertaking, requiring a balance of responsive care and education that supports on-going development (Davis & Dunn, 2019; Essa et al., 2006; Gyöngy, 2017; Recchia, 2012). This is especially so for infants and toddlers from low socio-economic backgrounds (Singer, 2018).

Several recent reports in Australia, for example, the *Lifting our game report* (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017) have highlighted the failure of the ECEC sector to fully realize the benefits of quality ECEC to disadvantaged children, stating bluntly *A child who starts behind stays behind, which comes at enormous cost to him or her, the community and governments. Targeted, evidence-based early childhood interventions can prevent this from happening, and break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.* (Pascoe & Brenna, p. 8). The disadvantage created by low SES is compounded by the extent to which low SES creates barriers to very young children's successful inclusion in ECEC, from the earliest years of life.

This research seeks to understand the expertise of educators working with infants in a low SES area in metropolitan Sydney, Australia and, in doing so, support development of appropriate professional education for pre-service and in-service educators.

2. Impact and access to quality ECEC on children experiencing low socio-economic status

High quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services play an important part in building strong communities and buffering the effects of socio-economic disadvantage for children and families. There is strong evidence that access to high quality ECEC has a range of benefits for children's long-term development and learning outcomes (Gullo & Ammar, 2021; Horm et al., 2018; Jamison et al., 2014; O'Connell et al., 2016). Further, ECEC has the most benefits for children who experience vulnerability, marginalisation and disadvantage (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; Torii et al., 2017).

Australian data shows however, that children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and vulnerable groups are more likely to under-utilise ECEC services (Leske et al., 2015; Power et al., 2018; Productivity Commission, 2019; Trudgett & Grace, 2011). The universal measures meant to support inclusion of all children in quality ECEC are not being accessed by many children from low SES families (Skattebol, 2015). Adopting a similarly universal approach, the National Quality Standard (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2018) and the Early Years Curriculum Framework (EYLF; Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) have not provided any specific support for work with vulnerable or disadvantaged children. Previously educators have commented that they find the

documents vague and difficult to apply to their day-to-day work (Davis et al., 2015; White & Flear, 2019). This universal approach could be argued as contributing to a poverty blindness that perpetuates disadvantage (Nolan & Lamb, 2019).

Families with low SES experience considerable barriers to participation in ECEC, in large part because of their own lack of financial resources, limiting capacity to meet fee gaps even where funding is available, provide required equipment and resources (including bags, food, clothes and nappies/diapers), meet excursion/activity costs and even to transport their children safely to and from the service (Cloney et al., 2016; Grace & Trudgett, 2012; Skattebol, 2015). The suitability of available hours for shift workers is also an issue (Leske et al., 2015; Whiteman et al., 2018)

Evidence that the quality of ECEC in low SES areas in Australia is quite varied also raises concerns. Data ratings from the National Quality Standard show that services rated as either “working towards” or “meeting” the quality standard overall were largely located in low SES areas (Tayler, 2016). Australian families in general tend to access ECEC services close to home but this is even more the case for low SES families (Cloney et al., 2016). While the relational aspects of ECEC were rated more consistently high quality across SES areas in a large-scale Australian study, the quality of instructional support and classroom organisation was found to be lower in low SES areas, regardless of ECEC type (preschool or long day care (LDC)) or for profit/non-profit management structure, a finding echoed in another recent small scale Danish study (Cloney et al., 2016; Næsby, 2020). Workforce issues remain a concern in ECEC: low pay and conditions broadly means there is a general difficulty attracting and retaining qualified staff because early childhood teachers tend to move into the school sector where professional recognition, pay and conditions are much better (Jackson, 2020; Wong et al., 2020). Together, this would suggest children from low SES backgrounds are more likely to experience low quality ECEC, a situation compounded by less access to qualified, experienced early childhood teachers. Work is needed to improve these critical educational aspects of ECEC in low SES areas and to develop specific strategies to support the inclusion of vulnerable children from low SES backgrounds.

There is some evidence that, on the whole, the quality of ECEC for infants and toddlers is lower (Bjørnstad & Os, 2018; Hestenes et al., 2007; Ruprecht et al., 2016; Tayler, 2016). The failure of the Australian Productivity Commission (2019) to recommend that infants and toddler rooms in ECEC should be led by qualified early childhood teachers has not assisted in providing long term, systematic improvement to quality ECEC for this age group, effectively placing very vulnerable children at long term developmental risk. There is, however, a wide research gap in relation to the care and education of infants and toddlers in formal ECEC settings. Collectively, studies on early childhood educators’ work with children living in disadvantaged communities have either focused on educators’ work with preschool aged children or sought out a sample of educators with a range of age-group specialisations (Bentley, 2012; Hawkins, 2014; Hyland, 2010). While these studies provide useful insights into the reflections of early childhood educators’ work with low SES children and families, there remains a lack of research focussing on specific ways educators work with children under three years and their families.

There is an evident need to find ways to improve the quality of ECEC in low SES areas. This research seeks to address this gap by exploring the perspectives of educators working with children under three and their families residing in a low SES community. The aim of the current project is, therefore to investigate the perspectives of ECEC educators working with low SES families:

How do ECEC educators conceptualise inclusion of low SES infants and toddlers and

how does this knowledge impact their practice?

3. Method

The study involved six female educators from five ECEC centres located in a socio-economically disadvantaged area within metropolitan Sydney, New South Wales.

We used a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) to identify centres. The criteria for selection included both a low Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) score (<1000; Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2008) and a high Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) vulnerability rating (AEDC 2018 Vulnerability 2 levels >9.6%) at the Local Government Area (LGA) level (Australian Early Development Census [AEDC], 2021). The selected LGA's local attributes included higher rates of: one parent families; more children per family; more parents who were born overseas and higher levels of parental unemployment than the NSW average. The LGA also has a lower median family income for most suburbs than the NSW average along with poorer participation in early childhood education (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare [AIHW], 2020). These factors all contribute significantly to family financial stability, individual mental wellbeing and ultimately to children's learning opportunities. Eight centres within the LGA were invited to participate in the study and five centres agreed. Four of the centres were run under the auspices of the local government and one centre was a private for-profit service. The centres ranged in National Quality Standard ratings with four centres rated as "Exceeding National Quality Standard" and one centre rated as "Meeting National Quality Standard" (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), 2018).

3.1. Participants

The educators worked with children aged from 6 weeks to 3 years. Four educators held a diploma or a two-year vocational qualification, and two educators held a four-year university degree. Their experience working at their current centre ranged from nine months to four years, while their total experience working in ECEC ranged from four years to 32 years. A profile of participants' qualifications and experience in ECEC services is presented in Table 1.

3.2. Data collection

To understand educators' perspectives/reflections on their work in ECEC settings with low SES children and families we undertook "Professional Conversations" (Irvine & Price, 2014) with each educator. Irvine and Price (2014) explain that "while designed to be open, flexible and responsive to the strengths, interests and needs of participants, the professional conversation has a clear purpose and is based on a series of pre-planned reflective questions" (p. 88). The questions followed the four level question framework for professional conversations adapted from Stanfield (2000). The four types of questions and some examples used in professional conversations with educators in this study are found in Table 2.

The overarching research topic and specific questions arose from both our experience teaching across the early childhood sector in both classrooms and tertiary institutions, where we have seen the direct impacts of low SES on children and families and the challenges that working with low SES children and families can create, as well as our reading of recent research.

4. Data analysis

According to Miles and Huberman (2019), coding begins with deductive codes derived from any structured or semi-structured instruments used for data generation. This is because analysis and write-up of these deductive codes should feed back into the original study aim or question. Specifically, as we took the time to ask about a particular issue, due to the aims of the research, it was important to consider coding prior to analysis. We then were able to add to these deductive codes by supplementing more inductive ("in vivo") codes derived more creatively from emergent topics in the data. The categories of professional functioning developed by Molla and Nolan (2019) were used to develop a framework of codes within which to analyse and thematically code the responses to the reflective and interpretive questions in this inductive phase of analysis, in recognition of the professional nature of educator's work and also to determine which aspects of their work may require support and

Table 1. Profile of participants' qualifications and experience in early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Centre	Educator (pseudonyms used)	Qualification	Years of experience in ECEC	Years of experience at current centre
1	Emma	Diploma	5	1.5
2	Agatha	ECT	19	1.5
3	Jorsi	ECT	6	0.75
4	Fatima	Diploma	32	5.5
5	Tracy Inge	Diploma Diploma	20 4	2 4

development. These categories have been used in previous research to examine pedagogies and professionalism of infant and toddler educators (Davis & Dunn, 2019; Martin et al., 2020; Quiñones et al., 2021). The five categories of professional functionings encompass responsiveness, integrity, expertise, recognition and deliberation. Each category will be defined below in a brief preamble to our findings. We also directly explored the educators' application of the NQS and EYLF in supporting their work as part of a process of understanding how these mandatory, regulatory frameworks may be contributing to practice in low SES contexts with infants and toddlers. A brief summary of the main codes used in our analysis is provided in Table 3.

5. Findings

The aims of the study were to understand how ECEC educators conceptualised inclusion of low SES infants and toddlers and how this knowledge impacted their practice

5.1. Responsiveness

Molla and Nolan (2019) give responsiveness, identifying and meeting the needs of each child on an individual level, primacy in early childhood professional functioning. The responsiveness of the participants towards the children they worked with was unquestionable. There was a strong sense that individual relationships with children and their families was at the core of all work and decision-making by these educators. They placed personal and professional value on this work and its foundational nature for very young children,

... every child has the right to an education. Regardless of where they're from, whether they're a refugee or they're only going to be here for a month. They deserve the best and to be a better adult. They can be the best adult that they can be. (Agatha)

Awareness of the SES of individual families contributed towards maintaining a sense of equity. Access to toys for all children, for example, was one strategy adopted to minimise a sense of difference children might feel from other children whose families had more resources:

... we're also big on when children bring toys to school we ask if the families can take them home, so that way there's not children in our rooms that bring in toys and the other children get upset because they don't have that toy. So, we do things like that. (Jorsi)

Educators described the intentional provision of affordable ideas for parents that could be achieved at home that linked to the learning experiences of children in the service. This was particularly important for families whose children attend the service infrequently because the family could not afford the fees:

Table 2. Examples of questions from the four-level question framework for professional conversations

Type of Question	Example
Objective	<i>What qualifications do you have? How long have you been working in early childhood services for? How long have you been working at this centre? Do you speak any languages other than English? Do you live in the area? Can you tell me about your teaching philosophy? Can you tell me about the families at your centre?</i>
Reflective	<i>What does “inclusive practice” mean to you? How would you say that you include low SES children and families in your work? Can you talk about a time when a child from a low SES household has been successfully included in your room? What do you find hard about including low SES children and families in your room?</i>
Interpretive	<i>How do you manage the challenges of including low SES children and families in your room? Based on your experience, what do you think helps low SES children and families to feel included? Why is it important for you to include low SES children and families in your room?</i>
Decisional	<i>How does the EYLF influence your work with low SES children and families? Do you draw on any elements in the NQF to support your work with low SES children and families? How can educators be supported to work with low SES families and children?</i>

... sometimes it’s about having activities or ideas in the curriculum that can be transferred to home and so we might say, “oh today, you know, so and so really enjoyed, we did drawing with candles and then we painted over the top with water colours. You can buy food colouring from Coles ... finding those less-expensive options and then that way they can do them through the week when they’re not here and feel like they’re still part of what we’re doing. (Agatha)

Educators also described planning for centre experiences and events that would not require additional costs for parents. This required sensitivity and the provision of options for children whose families might not be able to afford costumes, for example,

... next week is children’s week and we’re doing a dress up week, but on the invitation it says the children can dress up if they want. They can dress up in their clothes that they wear every day, they can dress up in a costume if they like, it’s just more about them. So, it’s not like ... all the children have got to come in a superhero costume or all the children have got to do this. Because we understand that some parents don’t go and buy costumes for their children every week and all these toys. (Jorsi)

Flexibility was at the core of responsiveness. While the predictable nature of routines provided security for the children, educators reported they needed to be flexible to meet the immediate needs of children, especially when they arrived at the centre hungry, for example,

... we’re very flexible with our routine and it’s all really based about the child’s needs. If a family were to come in to me and say, they haven’t had anything to eat and it’s 11 o’clock, I can go and get them something, it’s not ever an issue. (Fatima)

5.2. Integrity

Molla and Nolan (2019) claim that integrity, visible when educators act with judgment and reflective deliberation, is essential for the ethics of professional actions and conduct. The

Table 3. Explanation of codes used in data analysis

Code	Definition	Interview Question Type
Qualification	Tertiary qualifications held	Objective
Experience	Years worked in ECEC field and current workplace	Objective
Responsiveness	Identifying and meeting the needs of each child on an individual level, primacy in early childhood professional functioning (Molla & Nolan, 2019)	Reflective Interpretive
Integrity	Actions based on judgment and reflective deliberation, ethically based conduct (Molla & Nolan, 2019)	Reflective Interpretive
Expertise	Decision making and action involving recognised specialist knowledge and skills which support decision making and action with reasoned intention (Molla & Nolan, 2019).	Reflective Interpretive
Recognition	A sense that work and expertise is recognised by self and others (Molla & Nolan, 2019)	Reflective Interpretive
Deliberation	Reflection on practice by making conscious decisions and judgements (Molla & Nolan, 2019)	Reflective Interpretive
Conceptualisation of “inclusion”	How inclusion is defined including categories of diversity identified	Reflective Interpretive
Use of EYLF & NQS	Explanation of how documents support or frame thinking about inclusion and teaching	Decisional

participating educators evidently respected the children and families they worked with and regarded this as an ethical requirement for their work. The safety and welfare of children was taken seriously. This responsiveness was underpinned by the ethical intention to promote the opportunities and safety of individual children and support families. Discretion and respectful interactions with families was prioritised. Mandatory responsibilities for educators to report suspected neglect and/or abuse was alluded to by one educator as a necessary but difficult aspect of her work,

... there’s a fine line of what we can do but we just report everything. We document everything down if there’s a certain case that we are concerned about. That child will have its own individual exercise book so if anything comes in for the day we sort of just document. You know “blah blah has the same clothes as yesterday or what have you”. So, we have just something to back ourselves up but it is hard. (Tracy)

The participating educators evidently respected the children and families they worked with and regarded this as an ethical requirement for their work.

5.3. Expertise

Expertise involves recognised specialist knowledge and skills which support decision making and action (Molla & Nolan, 2019). Expertise supports professional educators to deliberately plan a course of action with reasoned intention. Participant’s specialist knowledge and expertise that is particularly relevant when working with low SES children and families is required in the areas of child development; relationships with families and children; curriculum knowledge and the impacts

of social factors on children's lives. The conceptualisation of diversity and thus inclusion was foundational to their intentional strategies and decision-making to support inclusion of all families and children in the infant/toddler rooms they worked with:

We have children here that need support. Perhaps not so much diagnosed in the nought to threes room, but you don't know, further down the track sometimes you can see things ... nought to threes is obviously a very important time, with a lot of rapid development going on. So, if they have any delays and things, just working with the therapists or whoever they're seeing. Or if they're not, working out how we can organise things for them. (Fatima)

It was evident that the educators recognised the diversity of the populations that their centre served in terms of parent employment and occupation, core factors in the determinants of SES,

We have quite a variety of families at this centre. I find that there's kind of one extreme to the other ... with quite well to do jobs. They're very educated and English is their first language. And then we also have parents who have not long come to Australia. English is not their strong point. Some of them can't read or write in English either ... (Inge)

... non-working parents, working parents, we have where two parents work or only one parent works ... and they work in different fields as well as different industries. We have quite a few factory workers ... and then, we have journalists, scientists, and teachers, early childhood teachers, high school teachers and primary school teachers. ... we have a vast variety of families here. (Agatha)

The educators' understandings of the implications of low SES for young children was centred on the sense of difference children and families may feel in comparison to others. Most attention was directed at parents' restricted financial ability to meet basic needs (food and clothing), afford regular costs (for example, nappies/diapers) and participate in "extras", like excursions and family outings or to provide costumes for theme days.

The potential for ECEC to provide children with opportunities for learning and a level of early intervention in ECEC was expressed by the more educated and experienced educators,

... everyone deserves an education so that basically early intervention is really good ... I'm hoping that they do come to preschool first because you don't want to wait and then they go to primary school and they've already fallen behind ... it's advertising to those parents and educating them to make sure that they understand how important childcare is ... (Emma)

One educator demonstrated a clear understanding of how funding regulations had negatively impacted on children's access to the service. What seemed fairest for the majority of families using the service had actually disadvantaged children from low SES families:

Because the way [the system] works and our hours, so you can either go based on the hours the child attends or the hours of operation of the centre. And we do the hours of operation at the centre because week in week out it normally changes with each family. So that makes it hard because if they get 24 hours a fortnight, that only covers one day and a half a fortnight. It doesn't cover the second day. So when that came into effect we had a lot of families that dropped down to one day and that makes it hard. It makes it hard for them to settle in. When we have projects running it ... makes it hard for the child to feel included in that project because from one week to another the project may have expanded in so many different ways. (Agatha).

Even so, developmental issues were explained in very generic terms, with a view to children progressing educationally, into the preschool room and later to school, that could relate to any children in the birth to three age group in any socio-economic group,

Starting in our room to get children confident and developing those social skills is crucial because we can see how much a child can grow and develop in a year, just being in the nought to three room and I feel like that sets the foundation for moving into the preschool and then to school eventually (Emma).

This explicit awareness was unusual across the group of participants, only one educator made mention of this situation. More often educators seemed to not know with any certainty which of children in their care came from a low SES family and seemed uncomfortable identifying individual children as from a low SES family. This was expressed by one educator in terms of equity and non-discrimination. She stated that a sense of inclusion for low SES families came about because

... they're not singled out and I find that if they're treated the same like everyone else and, basically, they get the same privileges as everyone, because they're still paying for childcare. And so, they're still having the service and their child is still entitled to be here as much as anybody else is. There's no discrimination. We just basically, as soon as you walk through the door, everybody's welcome. (Tracy).

Fee relief systems via the service provider and government childcare subsidy payments supports participation in ECEC more broadly. Generosity from activity providers (for example, a local arts centre) also supported opportunities for children from low socio-economic families to participate in learning opportunities. Educators alternatively found ways to supply children's needs (food, clothing, nappies/ diapers) while at the centre. This could potentially impact on the centre budget and sometimes this had to be passed back to the family.

Nevertheless, there were contradictions in recognising the different needs of children from low SES families with statements like *... all children can achieve regardless of their socio-economic status ... (Emma)* and *every child has the right to an education no matter what their economic status or where they come from or what parents look like or anything (Agatha)*. While these sentiments are noble, they do not acknowledge that children from low SES families experience known disadvantage and therefore potentially need additional strategies to engage the children in learning experiences.

5.4. Deliberation

Deliberation is a professional function involving reflection on practice by making conscious decisions and judgements (Molla & Nolan, 2019). The key strategies educators described using to support the development of a sense of inclusion for children and families lay firstly in being welcoming to all. The creation of a welcoming, home-like atmosphere in the service aesthetically and in terms of staff greeting and interacting with children and families that supported relationship development and a sense of welcome and comfort in the service was uniformly described, as for example,

... (We) try to remain quite a cosy centre have settings that don't look like a school or institution, more like a home where children are comfortable. So, that's really important about our centre aesthetically. But also too, our attitudes. Everyone walks in every day, and it's "Good morning, how are you?" every day. So, making sure that everybody gets that feeling that they belong and they're included here. (Emma)

The second key strategy revolved around supporting home to service links and consistencies so children felt comfortable, and the provision of consistent routines and experiences that all children could participate in,

... keeping routines consistent so that all children are aware of what's happening ... one of the most important parts of our day in the 0 to 3 room is our music group time ... they're so engaged in it and with each other ... really helps them all be included ... (Fatima)

While the creation of relationships between the staff, children and families was reported as foundational to curriculum development, educators did not directly express explicit understandings or knowledge about the impact of low SES on children's development and learning.

We have a display up in our room, is about relationships with children. And also, that children's current abilities and interests are the foundation of our curriculums. So, those sorts of things I feel like really guide us in everything that we do in the 0 to 3 room because if you don't have that relationship, you don't have that bond then I don't feel like you can effectively plan and implement experiences based on that child. So, I feel like that is really the foundation to everything. (Emma)

While one educator gave a more specific example of using language to model emotional regulation with children, there was no sense that this was directly related to any knowledge that children from low SES families may need more developmental support in either the language or emotional domains of development.

... doing things about feelings and reading stories about feelings ... It's okay to feel angry ... So if I drop a paint brush and get paint on the floor, I'll go "Ohhh I don't like it!" I'll show that I'm angry or I'm sad or I'm disappointed in my own behaviour and they look at you like "what are you going on about?", I'm like "I dropped the paintbrush now I have to clean it up but that's okay. I'll clean it up or take a breath". Kind of talking through how I would manage it ... (Agatha)

Some of educators' strategies were aimed at ameliorating that sense of difference by eliminating opportunities for the feelings to arise, by discouraging children from more resourced backgrounds from bringing their own toys to the centre or giving parents ideas for less expensive alternatives for family activities and play materials. A strong theme in educators' responses was the equal, undifferentiated attention given to all children and their families, from their regular inclusion in the documentation of learning to trying not to make parents feel they were being given particular attention,

Mainly that everybody is treated the same with the sense that we don't shadow particular children, we don't shadow particular families. The way that I would have a conversation with you or one parent is the way that I would have a conversation with another parent ... We make sure that all of the documentation, all of the children's artwork, it's all equal. So, we don't have just particular children featured in it, we have all the children all the time. (Jorsi)

5.5. Recognition

The recognition of the expertise and what it means to be professional is integral to a sense of professional identity (Molla & Nolan, 2019). Recognition of the work that ECEC educators do can occur from a range of sources: parents/carers of children, the owners and managers of ECEC services, colleagues within the service and from the broader community. It was evident that educators felt a level of recognition in their work from most of these sources. A measure of self-recognition was also evident, in the feeling that educators perceived the work they were doing was worthwhile and made a difference,

I don't know if I find it hard. As part of the job I actually find it quite ... You get a feeling that you make a difference ... more so than the children that have everything that they want. If you feel like you can make a difference at the end of the day, I think that's the good part of our career, our job. (Inge)

While it seemed that participants in this study felt recognised by their workplace management and colleagues, some parents were described as unresponsive, not recognising the educative work done with children. This was mostly attributed to cultural differences however,

Something I do find challenging is sometimes parents are not very responsive. Whether it be a language barrier or their expectations of an early childhood service is not, kind of, what it is. I think

sometimes when they come to Australia they have the impression that in our service, we're essentially a baby-sitting service not necessarily a place where so much education happens. (Emma)

This was quite a different matter from the feeling that educators had good relationships with parents in a general sense. All the participants reported they worked very hard at developing good relationships with parents/carers and which were generally Increasing parents' recognition of the educative intent and outcomes of ECEC for their children was a process of regular, consistent communication about the child and their learning,

I try and manage it in really the most simple way, which is trying to create a relationship with that family, with that parent. Starting off every day saying, "Hi, how are you?" and telling them about their child's day like, oh you know, "Your child today participated in a cooking experience. They're really good at mixing and things like that. Do they do that at home?". Just those small conversations where I try and shed a bit of light on what we do here but tailored to their child so that it's of their interests. (Agatha)

5.6. Educator application of EYLF and NQS

The EYLF and NQS shape the practice of ECEC in Australia, as the expression of mandatory curriculum and standards. Most of the participating educators expressed a general understanding of the documents, mostly related to their practice of curriculum planning based on children's interests:

... its focus is essentially what I want to focus on. So, I want children to feel like they are safe, secure and supported. I want them to be involved in their own learning. So, I feel like those outcomes for our children are what we should be aiming not the typical, can they spell their name, can they recognize their colours and things like that. It's really looking at the foundation. So, making sure children have that self-confidence to learn. (Inge)

Including EYLF language:

I just think that as much as the EYLF huge and there's all these things that they say helps children's learning, I think it comes back to children and their sense of identity and their sense of belonging and how they feel about themselves. (Emma)

However, some educators were unsure how the EYLF supported their practice:

It gives you a good guideline. It gives you the guideline to work with within the EYLF framework. And this is probably something that I can do now as part of my journey as an educator. I haven't really thought about it specifically, of how it benefits the lower socioeconomic families and children. (Fatima)

I guess we view everybody in the big picture here and see everybody as equal, and try and include them and support them. So, I don't know whether I've really thought about it that way. But I guess it's something to think about. I don't know. (Fatima)

Relationships seem to be what educators have drawn from the NQF in working with this age group:

... relationships with children would be the biggest one. I guess it's all about the way that you look at it and you perceive it though. Personally I just believe that relationships are the most important thing. I believe if a child doesn't have a relationship with you or they don't respect you or you don't have that sort of connection or you're not making the effort I just think everything else is not as important. That might just be my perception of it. (Jorsi)

However, there is also uncertainty in the role the NQF plays in informing their practice:

it's just looking at the children as being ... Obviously, they need more support. But as far as the NQF goes, I'm not really sure whether I can answer that. (Emma)

6. Conclusion

All educators interviewed articulated a strong commitment to the rights of the child to access high quality ECEC, and to working to build families' capacity and empower them—this aligned strongly with their services' philosophies. Their pedagogical programs were grounded in and reflected quality practice, as set out in the EYLF and the NQS (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), 2018; Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). The NQS (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), 2018) has a specific focus on relationships which these educators integrated particularly well into their practice. Relationship-based pedagogy contributes to positive child learning, development and well-being outcomes and is especially important for children from low SES. The utility of the EYLF (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) was less apparent, the educators seemed to draw on generic understandings of child development and demonstrated limited intentional strategies for meeting the needs of low SES children.

The conflation of low SES with language and cultural diversity was concerning, echoing Nolan's (2021) findings that cultural heritage is given greater attention than SES. Educators need to know which children have particular needs and understand the specifics of those needs in order to provide a highly individualised program that enables them to observe children, develop awareness of their strengths and find ways to authentically include infants from low SES backgrounds. Individualised educational programs that build on children's strengths are known to improve child learning, development and well-being outcomes. Specific intervention to address the needs of children from low SES backgrounds can be very effective when well targeted (Kent et al., 2020). The capacity of educators to work with children from low SES backgrounds to ameliorate the risks poverty and disadvantage create requires knowledge, resources and policy support (Nolan & Lamb, 2019).

7. Implications for practice

There are some areas that may assist educators' practice when working with low SES infants and families. Training in EC undergraduate programs with a focus on social justice addressing inclusion specifically with children under three years and their families is imperative. Given that working with low SES children and families may be a neglected area of teacher- education courses and an area where educators often feel ill-prepared (Horm et al., 2018; Recchia & Shin, 2012), it is important to develop a framework or approach that could be a useful focus of such courses. Using a strengths-based approach, such as advocated by Fenton and McFarland-Piazza (2019) and Nolan and Lamb (2019) would allow students in undergraduate courses an opportunity to learn more about issues involving low SES children and their families. Knowledge of additional resources and organisations that support children and families is critical. The Australian *Early Years Workforce Strategy* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2012) clearly states that we must "support ECEC staff to work in a more integrated way with the broader early childhood development workforce including the range of professionals that work with children and their families across health and family services" (p. 1). Yet there remains the concern from pre-service teachers that they feel inadequate and require more support in teacher education programs in this area of their practice (Garvis et al., 2013; Kennedy et al., 2016). There is a need to change pre-service programs to include a pedagogical framework which supports reflection and a strong professional identity for those educators working with infants and toddlers (Davis & Degotardi, 2015; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Davis et al., 2015). Specifically, the failure of the EYLF to differentiate the needs of infants and toddlers in contrast to other frameworks such as New Zealand and Wales (Department for Children Education Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS), 2015; Ministry of Education Te Tahuhu o te Matauranga (MOE), 2017). Refinements are needed in curriculum documents to enable enactment of reflective intentional inclusive practices.

There should also be support for continued professional development for educators once qualified who are working with infants and toddlers. Chen et al. (2017) favour the model of professional learning being undertaken in the services where educators are employed where feedback could be regularly provided and individualised to enable growth in a meaningful way to increase educators' knowledge and improve practice. Such specific training for Professional Development that is tailored to local communities needs to understand and support children particularly when working with low SES communities (Jackson, 2020). Further attention to developing workforce skills for infant and toddler educators working with low SES families through not only attracting new educators but also providing targeted ongoing professional learning and support for their well-being while in the sector is needed. Raising the professional profile of the infant toddler educators would also be a strategy that benefits the early childhood sector (Davis & Dunn, 2019; Molla & Nolan, 2019; Gloria Quiñones et al., 2018).

8. Limitations and further research

In the interpretation of these research findings, it should be taken into account that the study was a small case study undertaken across one LGA in a low SES area in Sydney. The generalization of findings to other Western countries must be discussed with regard to contextual factors, including regulations and requirements for educator qualifications with infants and toddlers in different countries. Further research could extend the study by interviewing a larger number of educators, including directors and families across a number of low SES areas. A further study could examine an intervention with strategies to aim for promoting inclusion of low SES children and families.

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