

# Beyond workforce shortages: A call for holistic care and recognition in early childhood policy

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## Keywords

early childhood education, early childhood educators, early childhood teachers, preschool teachers, early childhood workforce

In many parts of the world the early childhood workforce remains under extreme pressure. Researchers have identified persistent challenges concerning workforce shortages, turnover and attrition, lack of professional recognition by community and government, pay inequality, and poor working conditions (Kwon et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). In addition, educators' well-being, inequitable access to professional learning and the loss of early childhood graduates transitioning into the sector remain ongoing challenges (Fenech et al., 2022).

In addition, COVID-19 was a catalysing 'final straw' that broke the resilience and resolve of many in the sector. This special issue of the *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* focuses on research that could help to move beyond identifying problems pertaining to workforce challenges in early childhood education and care (ECEC) to identifying potential ways forward. The call for papers for this special issue sought research responses that critiqued and engaged with existing strategies and thinking used to address workforce challenges, or that proposed alternatives to strategies already in place.

The collection of papers presented in this special issue make visible connections between macro-level policy (including its underpinning paradigms), and micro-level effects on lived

experiences of educators. White's paper critiques the approach to leadership in Australia's ten-year *National Workforce Strategy* (Education Services Australia, 2021). While leadership is identified as one of the six focus areas in the *Strategy*, White argues that the proposed initiatives are inadequate for addressing the specific challenges associated with attracting and retaining leaders. White contends that despite leaders being acknowledged as playing a key role in developing high quality pedagogical and educator work environments, silences in this key policy initiative may compromise the efficacy of the policy project overall.

Robertson, Bussey and Morrissey's paper similarly deals with an Australian early childhood policy context – in this case, policy reforms in the state of Victoria. Based on data from interviews and focus groups with early childhood teachers, and using Molla and Nolan's (2020) *Five Functionings of Professional Practice* (based on Sen's *Capabilities Approach*, 1993), Robertson et al. found that the implementation of the policy reforms had contributed to – rather than alleviated – feelings of being “undervalued, not respected and overburdened” (p. 290). Robertson et al.'s findings echo White's concerns regarding the silences in the *National Workforce Strategy* concerning leadership. Specifically, that

failing to include the voices of experienced senior early childhood teachers in policymaking is a lost opportunity for career fulfilment and progression. In this way, the Victorian case demonstrates how the early childhood leadership ‘pipeline’ may potentially stagnate rather than develop, thereby contributing further to attrition from the sector.

Papers by Richardson, Vickerson and Bader, and Quinones, Berger and Barnes grapple with the absence of ‘care for’ the early childhood workforce in macro-level policy. Richardson et al. contend that “as in other jurisdictions nationally and internationally, dominant professionalization discourses emphasize human capital through a child development frame (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2017; Langford & Richardson, 2022)” (p. 296). The imposition of this frame, they argue, means that educators’ voices “have been and continue to be largely absent at the public policy table...” In summing up their findings from the open-ended responses to an educator well-being survey, Richardson et al. state: “ECEs didn’t want decisions to keep happening to them. They wanted decisions to happen with them” (p. 303). This desire for voice at a policy-making level echoes that presented in both White’s and Robertson et al.’s papers – recognition and inclusion in decision-making not only within workplaces, but in the processes determining the shape of policies regulating everyday practices and processes.

Quinones, Berger and Barnes use Tronto’s (2013) feminist ethics of care framework and data from interviews with eight educators to argue for a holistic view of care in early childhood education. In this model, educators are ‘cared about’, ‘cared for’ and ‘cared with’ as well as giving care to others. This holistic rather than uni-directional (i.e., educators as care-givers only) approach would allow space for educators to see themselves as valid ‘care receivers’, and if given the “knowledge, skills, time and encouragement” (p. 316), to engage in necessary self-care practices. These changes would in turn enrich pedagogical practice, but also sustain, rather than drain, the early childhood workforce.

The final paper in this special issue by O’Hara-Gregan, also focuses on educators’ and self-care practices, specifically, the usefulness of mindful self-compassion for support during and resulting from their demanding work. Drawing on the work of Neff (2003), O’Hara-Gregan proposes that mindful self-compassion “supports a balanced integration between concern for others and concern for the self” thereby avoiding “falsely separating oneself from the rest of humanity” (Neff, 2003, cited in O’Hara-Gregan, 2024, p. 321). O’Hara-Gregan studied the effects of an eight-week mindful self-compassion course on 12 educators’ teaching experience and well-being. Among her findings was that “bringing mindful awareness to their thoughts enabled the teachers to take a mental step back from their challenging situation and notice the judgments, memories of past challenges, and predictions of the future, which flowed through their minds” (p. 325). The educators could then engage in self-kindness to emotionally support themselves in trying situations, and by “regulating their emotional state [were able to] respond more compassionately to others” (p. 327). O’Hara-Gregan is quick to note that in isolation these practices cannot “address the structural and procedural inequities...that impact on EC teachers” (p. 328). However, mindful self-compassion practices – and having the knowledge, skills and time to use them – could be a mechanism for the self-care that Quinones et al. call for as part of a more ‘caring’ system.

The five papers making up this special issue critique policy systems (and their underpinning neoliberal rationales) for not adequately ‘caring about’ educators, and not including educators in policymaking processes. Using qualitative data the papers offer insights into the impacts of these current policy approaches on workforce challenges. While the papers do not propose alternative policy strategies per se, they do propose a conceptual mindset shift that could help to address workforce challenges and achieve a more stable and sustainable workforce than is currently the case. This alternative view is

perhaps best summed up by moving beyond an underpinning logic in which educators are deployed as human capital to ‘care-for’ others in the early childhood system, while not being seen as part of a ‘common humanity’ (as discussed by O’Hara-Gregan) in which all of those in the system are equally valued and recognised. Recognition is a familiar appeal from the early childhood workforce, in particular, the public valuing of their work and the complexity, responsibility and professionalism it requires. However, beginning with systems predicated on the recognition of educators as equally worthy of being ‘cared about’ and ‘cared for’, coupled with space to contribute to shaping policy and practice, may help challenge the structures and assumptions that have to date contributed to their invisibility. Starting with a mindset shift and a commitment to including the early childhood workforce in decisions that will shape their work may then be a new route to helping to resolve the widespread and intractable challenges facing early childhood workforces.

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