



ELDER STREET EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRE SUBMISSION

Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

Monday 8 May, 2023

SCOPE:

The purpose of this submission is to address the ongoing barriers of accessing qualified educators and teachers in the ECEC sector.

Furthermore, accessibility and affordability issues for families must be addressed as fees are needed to rise to cover budget costs within centres due to increasing staff wages to ensure educators and teachers are retained.

Our centre and many others are facing what Rogers (2021) has deemed to be "The Great Resignation". We must find sustainable ways for the ECEC workforce to be valued through higher remuneration and better working conditions. This cannot continue to come at the cost of families having to pay higher fees and already stretched child care operating budgets.

BACKGROUND:

Elder Street Early Childhood Centre has been in operation since December 2004. It is a privately owned 39 place centre located in Lambton, Newcastle, NSW. Our centre has a long waiting list and has been operating at full capacity since its inception. The centre is currently staffed beyond regulatory requirements and has been for many years to allow for continuity of care for children and families, extra time for educators and teachers to meet during operational hours to discuss curriculum and pedagogy and to allow for study time for staff members studying. Extra staffing beyond regulatory mandates allows for our teachers and educators to be treated as professionals.

Since 2020, it has become clear that there are less and less qualified educators available to maintain our higher levels of staffing. What will be lost from our centre due to a workforce shortage is the ability to continue our quality practices that ensure our team feel valued, cared for and that their emotional and eudamonic wellbeing is maintained through good working conditions. However we are aware that for other centres, it is the difference between being operational and non operational.

THE PROBLEMS:

This section will list four problems that our centre and many other centres are facing that need immediate attention by the Government.

These issues are: Lack of professional recognition and value of the ECEC sectors' professional knowledge; Quality Assurance Stress; Disparity between funding creating extra childcare places and availability of educators; and the rising costs of operating an ECEC setting in tension with offering higher wages for staff.

Without these issues being addressed the ECEC sector will simply not be able to continue to deliver any of the initiatives of any Government as we will not have a workforce.

1. Lack of professional recognition and value of the ECEC sectors' professional knowledge

It is clear from anecdotal evidence, lived experience and research that the Australian ECEC workforce is under great duress due to historic lows of qualified educators (Shaping Our Future Early Childhood Education Workforce Strategy 2022-203, Education Services Australia, 2023).

These shortages can be attributed to poor pay and conditions, stress and overburden of paperwork and poor public recognition of professional status. Whilst campaigns such as Thrive by Five and Federal Government funding for 'cheaper childcare' is highlighting the need and importance of our sector, the cost of the investments over many changes of Government and quality policy reform has resulted on further pressure on an already overburdened system and workforce.

Claiming and naming the importance of the ECEC sector for children's brain development in their first five years and to boost productivity for

our economic future and women's access to the workforce is moot if we do not have a sector to provision the education and care.

The practice experts within the ECEC sector who on a daily basis work with the complex and nuanced needs of families and children require their professional knowledge and wisdom to be recognised beyond economic means. Our society needs to reconceptualise their image of children and childhood and look to other hemispheres to see the example that can be used to create a sustainable ECEC sector that can provision the highest quality care and education for its children and its workforce. The ECEC sector needs to move inline with the broader Education system to achieve this recognition. Furthermore, a public campaign to explain what early childhood education and care is about should be driven by the voices of educators and media working together. A higher public profile will serve to educate the public on the importance of the work of the ECEC sector and entice others to join the ECEC workforce.

2. Quality Assurance Stress - it's time to lay down the paperwork and 'quality' measuring tools

Due to many iterations of Government policy reform relating to the ECEC sector over many decades, we find ourselves in a marketplace of not for profit and for profit ECEC operators. This has been described by Brenann (1998) as a time of opening up the ECEC sector as a "workforce oriented, market driven approach" (p. 25). The introduction of quality assurance measures in the early 1990s is a result of the Government funding private operators which changed the perception of the child within the ECEC sector to one of economic human capital.

What followed was the creation of a system that could measure the investment of this funding through quality assurance, today known as the Assessment and Rating system under the National Quality Standard. As a consequence over the last 30 years the performance and practices of educators within centres are what is measured through managerialism working within a neoliberally driven ECEC sector.

The measuring of educators' practices and professionalism is carried out through a flawed and unreliable system that holds the humans within the sector within homogenous performativity paradigms. The 'quality' designed to be produced from this system creates stress, discursively crafted practices that once deemed 'quality' through a high rating or PD session, are then reproduced in many other centres regardless of context. The current quality assurance system simply fails

to critically consider the daily roles and professional identity of the communities, leaders and educators within each setting. The paperwork and endless shifting grounds of quality policy reform is driving our ECEC sector into the ground. Approved Providers and ECEC teams do not want bad quality, however we want quality on our terms that reflect context and care for the humans in the process.

Please reinstate local Department of Education officers to form relationships with ECEC services who conduct regular compliance and safety checks and work with teams to understand the quality within their community context without the need for hours of time and effort in self assessment or mass produced ways to prove exceeding themes.

3. Disparity between the funding for families for 'cheaper childcare' and the number of ECEC qualified educators and teachers to meet the demands of places.

This is simple. There are not enough educators to support the extra places being generated through the Cheaper Child Care Package. This will continue to be a problem unless other issues are addressed. The voice of the ECEC sector workforce MUST be listened to. We need the Government to assist with wage costs to attract more educators to our sector.

4. The rising costs of operating an ECEC setting in tension with offering higher wages for staff

ACECQA (2022) reports that 51% of early childhood education and care services are private for profit, with single operators such as myself being the highest proportion of Approved Providers. I have one centre, one team and one community. I am an Early Childhood Teacher who has worked as a Director since 1994 throughout Australia. I have owned this centre for almost 20 years and have a team of specialist educators now operating that centre. The Nominated Supervisor and Director of my service began at the centre 17 years ago as a trainee. She is now an Early Childhood Teacher and Director. Her co-director also began as a trainee at our service 13 years ago. I have a team full of long term employees who are dedicated professionals. I want to pay them their worth and see them continue studying and remain at our centre.

However, with the rising costs of a commercial lease, insurances, associated wage costs, food, electricity etc, I am stretched to pay

them more and still maintain our budget. Our daily rates are high and I would prefer not to charge higher fees to the families. After 20 years of paying off a business loan for the purchase of this centre I am almost free of this debt. I know that the extra funds available after release of this loan will go into wages for my team. This is how many private operators manage their one centre business who are committed to ensuring their teams are valued and earn a good wage.

I feel strongly that the Government needs to meet the ECEC sector with a similar contribution. We can cope with the rising costs of interest rates and inflation costs for food and electricity if we are supported with wages for Early Childhood Teachers. At a minimum we need to pay our educators and teachers more to retain them. However a true reflection of the situation is that THEY DESERVE BETTER PAY.

My recommendation is that all Early Childhood Teachers working in Long Day Care settings and Preschools are absorbed into the broader Education system and are paid the same as teachers in schools. This would mean they are paid fairly, it would relieve wages costs for centres such as mine and I could then use the available funds to pay my other educators better wages.

These are simple retention and successive planning concepts. Basic strategic planning tells us that we need to act now. This sector can no longer afford partisan views on whether this system should be for profit or not for profit, it is too late for that argument. We need to stem the losses now before we have a far worse model in operation.

SUMMARY:

The issues faced by Australian society if the ECEC workforce crisis is not addressed have been lapping at our doorsteps for many years. There are huge social, economic and political implications if we get this right and if we get this wrong. Those who work within the ECEC sector are tired. They have much to say but little energy to speak. I speak on behalf of our ECEC centre in Newcastle and the many others that I have worked with and those that I know are struggling. We need these problems addressed by a Government that is contemporary in its thinking and actions. We invite the Minister for Early Childhood Education Anne Aly any member of Parliament to come and speak to our community, the educators, the children, the families at Elder

Street Early Childhood Centre. I feel highly hopeful that with Professor Brennan leading this inquiry we may see some changes occur.

References

Brennan, D. (1998). *The Politics of Australian Child Care. Philanthropy to Feminism and beyond*. Cambridge University Press, UK.

National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy. (2023). *Shaping our Future. A ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable high-quality children's education and care workforce 2022-2031*. Education Services Australia. March 2023.

Rogers, M. (2022). *Time, money, exhaustion: why early childhood educators will join the Great Resignation* [EduResearch Matters, AARE]. Retrieved from <https://www.aare.edu.au/blog/?p=11840>