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Articles in The Conversation

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Dear Productivity Commissioner

Thank you for your work on the Productivity Commission's 'Early childhood education and care' report which raised many valid points and proposed some excellent solutions.

My submission relates to strengthening some of your recommendations, and making new recommendations.

I make these comments and recommendations based on my research (early childhood educator work and wellbeing, children's wellbeing, family support and mental health), my 13 years of experience teaching undergraduate educator teaching degrees, and my role within the Commonwealth funded Manna Institute (mental health research and training for regional, rural and remote Australia).

1. There is a need to recognise the impact of low status on feelings of burnout in early childhood education (Ng et al., 2023). This plays out in many ways in early childhood services, including:
  - a. **Lack of cleaning staff** Educators, who have spent time and money to study find themselves cleaning in early childhood services (laundry, COVID safe cleaning and general cleaning) for a significant amount of their worktime. During the pandemic, the NSW Department of Education gave schools two

hours of extra cleaning a week, but ECEC services got no such support. Many had to do extra cleaning themselves as unpaid time (Rogers, Boyd, et al., 2023). This extra burden creates stress and a feeling that their time with the children is limited. In my teaching of undergraduate students in dual early childhood/primary school teaching degrees, they are quite shocked when they do practicums in ECEC services because of the amount of cleaning they are asked to complete. It is a waste of educators training to have them spending so much time cleaning when they could be better supporting children and families which they are passionate about, thereby improving their job satisfaction. By ignoring their qualifications as teachers and making them clean, we are lowering their status (Rogers, 2023).

- b. **Poor government and community recognition:** This has been a source of frustration for educators during the pandemic. They were frontline workers, essential, but at the same time invisible (Ng et al., 2023; Rogers, Boyd, et al., 2022; Rothe et al., 2022; Sims et al., 2022; Sims et al., 2023).
  - c. **Low wages:** The disparity between school teacher and early childhood educator wages causes low status and poor professional identity (Ng et al., 2023; Rogers, Doan, et al., In press). If they have the same qualifications, they need the same money. This is negatively impacting status, attrition, community perspectives, parental respect and attraction of new educators.
  - d. **Lack of government department respect:** QIP forms and other mandated requirements change so often the educators report they seem to be constantly filling in these forms due to changes in regulations. Additionally, during the pandemic, there was a lack of respect from the government departments who were changing the requirements for enrolments, isolation, cleaning and other matters on a daily or weekly basis (Boyd et al., 2023; Rogers, Boyd, et al., 2023; Sims et al., 2023). Services were regularly informed on Friday or Sunday afternoon of new rules that had to be implemented on Monday morning. This meant the director and educators needed to work over the weekend to implement these new requirements and communicate them to families. Additionally, Covid training was scheduled for time when it was a compulsory closure for holidays, so their annual leave was disrupted.
  - e. **Services expecting educators to work unpaid:** Many for profit services, and other services are expecting staff to buy, make and prepare costumes and craft items to celebrate certain events in their services so this can be promoted on social media. These events often have little meaning for children. This means educators are out of pocket and working for free outside of hours, despite being the 13<sup>th</sup> lowest paid workers in Australia. Educators also reported challenges with having to buy resources for the children that the service will not reimburse (Rogers, Doan, et al., 2022).
2. **Lack of administrative staff.** Similar to point a) above, educators report inordinate amounts of paperwork, data collection and general administrative burdens (Rogers, 2021e). These take away the satisfaction they gain in supporting children's learning and teaching (Rogers, 2022a; Rogers, Dolidze, et al., In press). If the agencies and state and territory departments really need that much paper work done, then they need to fund administrative officers.

3. **Assessment and ratings.** Similar to the point above, the systems are overwhelming for smaller services and those that are not owned by large chain corporations who have the administrative and legal staff to deal with the burden. For services in regional, rural and remote Australia, and community based services, it is unmanageable. In my research, educators shared the number of unpaid and unrecognised hours needed to get ready for these events (Rogers, 2021e), the negative impact on the children's education and care despite the system's claims to improve quality (Rogers, 2021c, 2021d), the poor morale within the service the added overtime and stress caused (Rogers, 2021a), and the impact of the unpaid overtime had on the educators' health and family relationships (Rogers, 2021b). Additionally, educators' reported their families working at the service on weekends and evenings to assist with this unpaid work to ready the service for accreditation.
4. **Educator burnout and efforts to support their wellbeing:** The sector is in crisis and staff are not able to support children's learning and care, and support families when they are constantly juggling a lack of staff. In addition to this, under the roof ratios being exploited to the detriment of educators and children's education and welfare. Educators have faced the added burdens of Covid and the extra burden of being short staffed. Educators are reporting the challenges of having time or the staffing levels to engage in professional development. Unless we support their wellbeing, it is difficult for them to stay. Supporting their professional development needs, providing counselling, peer mentoring programs or coaching has demonstrated to be effective in other countries (Doan, 2014; Ng et al., 2023; Rogers, 2022b; Rogers, Bhullar, et al., 2023; Rogers, Doan, et al., 2022; Rogers & Sims, 2023).
5. **Dual degrees:** Much is said about these degrees and how they provide a way for educators to escape the industry and go into school teaching. I have a different perspective. Educators will go to where they are respected and paid properly. They often have caring and family responsibilities and they need to pay for their rent or mortgages. Due to the current system, they gravitate towards schools. However, it should be noted that the students I teach in our dual say they want to teach early childhood to start, then move into teaching when they need better pay. Many educators I teach say they can't afford to stay in ECEC any longer. This is normally when a parent can no longer give them free rent, they need to take out a mortgage, or they break up with a partner who is being paid more. In rural and remote areas, having a dual qualified teacher is a bonus, because the preschools are often attached to the schools and the dual qualified educator can provide the knowledge and support for the children, families and school teachers during their transition to school.
6. **Attraction and retention:** The more I research the work and wellbeing of educators, the more I wonder that any educators are attracted to the job or stay there in a time of low unemployment. While I am glad the government is attracting new educators with reduced fees, scholarships and traineeships, the only way to make educators come and stay in the profession is to make it attractive. With poor status, poor wages, expensive degrees with little benefit in terms of pay, HECS debts, unpaid hours, overwork, cleaning and administrative burdens, I sometimes wonder if it would be better to fix the sector before spending more money to attract and train more.
7. **Training and Development, rather than Assessment and Ratings:** Many educators have told me what they would like to see the government do to improve the sector. They want the A & R to change into T & D (Training and Development). They want experienced, supportive, encouraging, successful directors to visit services to support

them with their quality improvement. They believe this will be a vast improvement on the procedures that they feel have turned from to 'ridiculous' (educator's descriptions).

- 8. Increasing needs of children and families:** Due to the pandemic, the cost of living crisis, more frequent and more intense climate disasters, children and families are presenting with higher needs in ECEC services. This means educators have to spend more time with them and more time planning and implementing ways to support their complex needs. This needs to be taken into account when staffing services, supporting educator's wellbeing and avoiding burnout attrition.

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