

Early Childhood Resource Hub newsletter

Attracting and retaining staff

Maintaining a skilled early years workforce is challenging, particularly for services located in remote and very remote areas. Find out what you can do, according to the research, to achieve a stable and happy group of staff members.

Retaining staff: What does the research tell us?

While turnover rates in early education run at about 30 per cent, this 2018 [study](#) reverses the emphasis on why early childhood educators leave the sector and asks instead: 'Why do so many stay?'

Paula McDonald and Susan Irvine from the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), and their colleague Professor Karen Thorpe from the University of Queensland, set out to identify the factors that contribute to staff retention. Paula, whose expertise is in labour relations and employment, agreed to be interviewed for this newsletter about the research, which focused on the experiences of 80 early childhood educators from nine Queensland long day care centres. Read on to find out what makes people stay in the sector.



Source: Supplied by Paula McDonald

Paula McDonald

1. *Why did you focus on long day care centres for this research?*

We felt that this group of educators was working at the more disadvantaged end of the early childhood education sector in terms of employment. These educators tend to experience long, inflexible working hours and relatively low rates of pay, so we were particularly interested in their perceptions of what was important.

2. *Your study included the fact that about 60 per cent of educators have four or more years of experience in the sector. What did educators tell you about their reasons for staying, despite the low wages and low social status often cited as an issue?*

We found that there were three main reasons why people were prepared, despite the pay and long hours, to stay in the sector.

Firstly, educators identified the intrinsic rewards of the role as being a reason to stay. Participants talked about their enjoyment in working with children, and the sense that the job has meaning and contributes to society. Educators returned again and again to the word 'passion' for their work.

Secondly – and this relates to specific workplaces – educators said they were more likely to stay at services where they had a voice in how things were run. They might have input into their working hours or scheduling, where they felt acknowledged for the work that they did. The team was important to many – with mentions of teams where people naturally helped out or stepped in to solve problems or fix an issue.

The final reason is more external. Some educators were able to stay, despite being poorly paid, because they had access to other sources of finance or were still living at home, or had a second job. Having a better paid partner who is prepared to contribute more than his/her share of living expenses has also enabled some educators to remain in the industry.

3. *Is there anything that surprised you during the course of this research?*

It was the number of educators who said they would experience financial struggles if they were relying on their wage alone – the reliance on financial support from family members for example. Parts of society are propping up our childcare system through this kind of income support. There is a tension between the push to professionalise the sector and for people to work towards additional qualifications, but the financial rewards for this are problematic.

4. *While there are some contributing factors that centre directors may have limited control over, your study identifies leadership and management practices that can make a difference to churn of staff. What did participants identify as being important to them?*

Participants really helped us identify what a healthy local environment looks like. If I had to summarise what educators said, they emphasised:

- having a say in decision-making, having a voice
- some flexibility or input into working hours and schedules
- quality parent interaction and parents recognising/appreciating their specialist expertise
- a positive work environment and social interaction.



Almost without exception, educators said that their emotional investment was a central reason for continuing to work in long day care.

5. *Your work is across different industries, exploring labour relations and employment in a variety of settings. How similar is the early childhood industry in terms of these retention factors?*

Most workers want things like acknowledgement, work with meaning, a say in their work, job security, a fair day's pay for the work. It's broadly the same everywhere.

But there are some particular factors that the early years context (and long day care as a subsection of the sector) provides as an overlay. The work is demanding, physically and emotionally. There can be pressure from parents. Increasingly, they deal with risk factors – allergies, physical safety of children. They are likely to work in small environments with not a lot of bureaucratic support or time for training. It's a challenging environment!

6. *The early years workforce is 95 per cent female – what impact may this have on the way the workforce is perceived, and the way it operates?*

Early years education, like other areas where women predominate (aged care, disability) tend to be seen as something that women do 'because they like it/they are good at it/good with people'. Bankers like what they are doing too but they manage to be much better paid!

This research study is part of a larger Australian Research Council (ARC) study of the Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce led by Professor Karen Thorpe of the University of Queensland.

Money, love and identity: Initial findings from the National ECEC Workforce Study

This ARC Linkage project being undertaken by QUT is identifying the factors underlying positive and sustained engagement in the early learning and care sector workforce from the perspective of the early years educators. Preliminary findings in 2016 found that educators are more likely to stay if they:

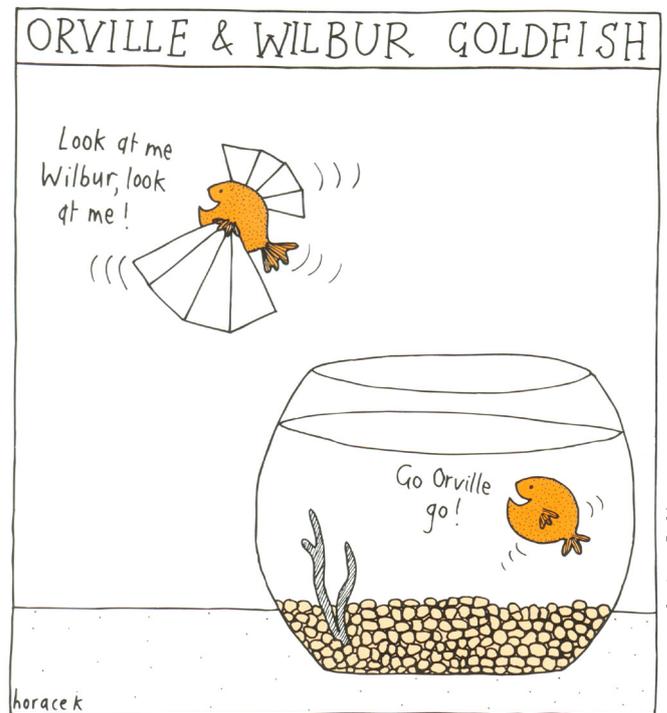
- have worked in the centre/sector for a longer time
- are working in a higher level/leadership role
- entered the sector for less positive reasons (eg no other option, or 'drifted in')
- are not intending to qualify further
- would recommend the work
- could leave if they wanted to.

The study also identified examples of high commitment and high performance in complex communities.



Source: Alice Springs 008

What helps motivate you? Is it the people you work with, the actual work, being valued for what you do, or having input into the way the place works?



Educators are more likely to leave if they:

- are studying for a higher qualification (evidence of training to exit ECEC)
- entered the sector because they (simply) like children (lack of understanding of complexity of work; mismatch between initial motivation and their experience at work).

Building a sustainable workforce in early childhood education and care: What keeps Australian early childhood teachers working in long day care? is a 2016 thesis by Sharon McKinley. Commissioned as part of the ARC research, it explores factors that help to retain educators in this type of work, including particular personal and professional qualities, a strong sense of professional identity, collegial relationships, and centre and organisational leadership.

Resources

Case study: Innovation in approaches to developing and retaining highly capable educators

'At Karana, we have built a strong staff team who are both highly competent and also have longevity of service. Our staff turnover is virtually non-existent. I credit this with the way we view our team ...' [Read](#) about why staff retention is not an issue at Eskay Kids in Karana Downs, Queensland.

Creating positive workplace relations self-guided learning package

The aim of this [package](#) is to assist you in developing skills in working productively and cohesively as a team member. It focuses on reflective practice, communication, and conflict resolution.

Ten tips for employee retention

This [document](#) offers strategies to retain employees, including recruiting the right people, professional and career development, managing expectations, keeping employees informed, equitable salaries and rewards, and listening and empathising.

Mentoring matters

This ACECQA [article](#) provides advice about the mentoring process and some links to useful resources.

New educator survival guide

Sally Burt, a recent teaching graduate and participant in the ACECQA Early Career Educators Program, [writes](#) about two key survival strategies for new educators to support their journey into the profession – teamwork and mentoring.

Attracting and retaining millennial professionals

This generic UK-based [report](#) is worth a read – based on research with hiring managers and professionals, it explores the motivations and attitudes of millennials.

What keeps Millennials engaged at work?

CAREER PROGRESSION	69%
OPPORTUNITY TO EXERCISE INFLUENCE	54%
RECOGNITION OF INDIVIDUAL ACHIEVEMENTS	32%
PERSONALISED TRAINING	28%

Professional learning

Two free online professional learning courses provide support for leaders who wish to build a healthy culture within their services. [Supporting emerging leaders in education and care services](#) and [Initiating and managing change in early years services](#) will give you support, direction and strategies for retaining a committed workforce.

