

## Research priorities of early childhood professionals: Voices from the field

### Background

As a priority on launching in 2019, the REEaCh Hub established a Research Network of Early Childhood Professionals, to collaborate with colleagues on issues that are central to their professional practice. Practice-based research networks have been successful in other fields (e.g. medicine) for knowledge sharing, research programs and professional development.

Early childhood practitioners working in any role, in any type of setting, in any state or territory in Australia are invited to be part of the [Hub's Network](#). One of the aims in establishing the Network, in addition to providing professional learning and training opportunities, is to shape research foci for the Hub by asking Network Members to identify their research priorities in early childhood education and care (ECEC).

### Research context

Existing research points to the importance of understanding educators' experiences in leading quality programs for young children and to identify the challenges in creating optimal learning environments. High quality ECEC depends on educators' pre-service and ongoing professional learning, their beliefs about teaching and learning, and resources available to support their work (both relational and practical). Working conditions provide an essential foundation for ECEC programs, and professionals in different countries all point to the importance of ratios, improved salaries, opportunities for professional development, and support for children with additional needs in being able to meet the learning needs of children. Staff turnover in ECEC is high for a range of reasons; the insights of professionals working in the field are needed in order to effectively respond to real-world, everyday issues that directly influence teaching and learning in ECEC.

### The Study

A foundational project led by the REEaCh Hub was to invite Australian ECEC professionals to participate in a project to share their priorities for research, to shape the Hub's ongoing research agenda. Invitations to participate were distributed to existing members of the Network, and other professional organisations in ECEC.

The key questions framing the study were:

1. What are the current research priorities of a network of Australian ECE professionals?
2. What are network members' motivations for joining a research network?
3. How interested are network members in participating in various research methods?

The study used a modified Delphi survey technique to seek educators' input on identifying issues of key concern for professionals in ECEC. Delphi methods are used in social and health sciences where the questions themselves need to be formed by the experiences of experts in the field. Multiple rounds of interviewing, focus groups or surveys provide a recursive process to identify common issues. In this study, ECEC professionals — which includes all professionals working in education, research, higher education, and policy roles within the ECEC sector — were invited to respond to an initial online survey that asked about topics of interest: participants themselves directed what these topics might be, to identify practice, policy and professional interests that relate to teaching and learning with young children.



The free text responses from the 182 ECEC professionals who contributed to the first online survey were analysed to find recurrent themes. The codes identified by the research team used terms or concepts familiar in ECEC in Australia (i.e terminology in the Early Years Learning Framework). Frequency counts identified the 20 most common topics nominated as research topics.

In a second survey, eight months later, participants were asked to rank these 20 topics in order of importance, and if they would be interested in participating in research projects on these topics. 94 ECEC professionals from a range of services in metro and regional areas completed the second survey.

## Key findings

The most common reason for joining the Network was an interest in evidence-based practice. ECEC professionals also reported wanting to contribute, as part of a professional community, to research that improves the lives of children and families and strengthens the profession. Rankings varied for the 20 most common topics, but 97% of respondents in the second survey nominated the following three topics as important or extremely important: educator wellbeing and mental health; child wellbeing and mental health; and professional learning and development.

Professionals explained that educator wellbeing is fundamental to the quality of children's experiences in ECEC programs: educators need to be physically and mentally well in order to deliver high-quality programs. Issues of burnout were also raised, noting that educators leave the profession due to stressful and underappreciated roles in the community.

ECEC professionals also reported concerns about children's wellbeing, given the increasing incidence of mental health issues for children. Children's wellbeing was recognised by study participants as essential for learning and development, yet little training is provided in pre-service teacher education.

Access to ongoing training was reported as an important focus for ECEC professionals. Professional development opportunities need to be high-quality, and based on research evidence. Participants in our study felt that educators needed ongoing professional learning to ensure practice was informed by current theory and knowledge, to achieve best outcomes for children.

## Implications for policy and practice

Importantly, study participants nominated all 20 topics as important or very important, emphasising a range of issues for ECEC professionals. Key implications for practice and policy are the importance of ongoing access to evidence-based professional learning in areas educators themselves recognise as central to their work. Our second survey took place during 2020; educator and child wellbeing concerns were heightened during the pandemic, but reflect documented issues in the sector. Interventions, evaluations and program supports need to respond to the real-world concerns identified by those working in the field.

## Implications for research

'Building knowledge of evidence-based practice' was noted by almost half of our study participants as the motivation to join a research network. The range of issues reported in our study show that an effective evidence base must take into account the voices and expertise of ECEC professionals in shaping the direction of future research. Research designs that encompass co-design and practice-based interventions may provide more relevant and timely supports for ECEC professionals.

## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge Wurundjeri peoples as Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land where the research team is based. We give thanks to educators who took part in the study and shared their perspectives on research priorities for ECEC in Australia.

## To cite this Research Brief:

Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood (REEaCH) Hub (2021). *Research priorities of early childhood professionals: Voices from the field*. Melbourne: The University of Melbourne, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, REEaCH Hub.

## References

Eadie, P., Deery, B., Murray, L., Levickis, P., Page, J. & Elek, C. (2022) What are the research priorities of Australian Early Childhood professionals? Results of a Delphi style study. *International Journal of Early Years Education*.

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