Challenges and supports for educator wellbeing: perspectives of early childhood educators during COVID-19

Background
A qualified and stable early childhood workforce is essential to ensuring optimal early learning experiences for young children. However, multi-faceted work-related challenges are impacting the wellbeing of early childhood (EC) educators and their likelihood of remaining in the profession (Cumming, 2017; Thorpe et al., 2020). Educators are required to navigate work that is emotionally and physically demanding, and characterised by long working hours, poor pay, lack of public recognition, and limited opportunities for career progression (Irvine et al., 2016). High levels of burnout and staff turnover have significant implications for program quality and the consistency of educator-child relationships (Thorpe et al., 2020). As such, the wellbeing of EC educators has become a research and policy priority (State of Victoria, 2021).

Research context
The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of early childhood education and care (ECEC) as an essential service for families and communities. However, it also exacerbated existing vulnerabilities in the sector that impact the wellbeing of educators. Throughout the pandemic, ECEC educators were required to navigate changing rules and restrictions, while also providing advice and support for families and remote learning for many children at home. Research undertaken at the outset of the pandemic suggests the additional burden of remote learning and the pervasive personal and professional demands of the COVID-19 pandemic are taking a further emotional toll on educators (The Front Project, 2020). Identifying strategies that can support and sustain healthy educator wellbeing is essential to ensure a high-quality ECEC workforce, both during the pandemic and beyond.

The current study
In this mixed methods study, we aimed to explore educators’ wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the protective and risk factors associated with their wellbeing. In July 2020, members of a Research Network of Early Childhood Professionals were invited to participate in an online survey. The survey included the Early Childhood Professional Wellbeing scale (McMullen, et al., 2020) and the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (Pianta, 2001) modified for staff wellness (Whitaker et al., 2015). Open-text survey items about challenges and supports for educator wellbeing were also included. Of the 232 participants who completed the online survey, 15 participants also took part in follow up focus group discussions to share their experiences in more detail.

Key findings
Analysis of the survey and focus group data revealed the following key findings.

Educator wellbeing during the pandemic
- Over 85% of educators reported the pandemic had negatively impacted their wellbeing.
- Stronger educator wellbeing was associated with less conflict in educator-child relationships and lower risk of staff turnover.
- Supportive organisational structures were strongly associated with lower risk of staff turnover.
- Educators agreed that strong wellbeing is essential for preventing staff burnout, and for enabling educators to engage in meaningful work and to make a valuable contribution.
Challenges for educator wellbeing

- Threats to physical, emotional and financial health: “Every day we felt more anxious and stressed that we would just contract COVID,” and “we had staff losses and all took cut pay and days to stay in our jobs.”

- Reduced contact with children and families: “when I was forbidden to meet with [children], I felt I had lost my whole reason for being;” and “The majority of our families do fall under a vulnerable category...We know what their home environment is like, so I know that that has played havoc on my wellbeing and also the wellbeing of my colleagues.”

- Lack of acknowledgement and advocacy for the essential role of educators: “The lack of advocacy in this space has led to our sector feeling ‘essential’ but only as a child-minding service.”

Supports for educator wellbeing

- Self-care and access to wellbeing resources: “One of the great outcomes is just the emphasis that everybody is placing on their wellbeing.”

- Connection with children and families: “In early childhood...human connection is such a massive thing;” and “COVID has taught us that it’s the relationships we have with parents, with families, with everybody in our community that’s the most important thing.”

- A supportive professional community: “We found solace and support in each other;” and “feeling supported when things are tough whether at home or work.”

- Acknowledgement and appreciation from families: “It’s just that level of acknowledgement...that has just been one of the best things for my wellbeing;” and “I think families really, really appreciating the work that we do.”

- Improved professional recognition and status: “nothing speaks support like funding;” and “I really hope it means that more people are going to push for more recognition and rights.”

Implications for Policy and Practice

There are significant lessons to be learned from educators’ experiences during COVID-19. Future research and measures to support educator wellbeing should acknowledge: 1) the direct, lived experiences of EC educators; 2) the complexities of their work; and 3) the importance – as articulated by educators – of recognising their contribution to society. Policy initiatives should also account for the complex local and national parameters of governance and funding, as well as broader cultural attitudes towards the value of early childhood education. Crucially, effective supports for wellbeing need to prioritise the voices of ECEC professionals. These lessons are vital to ensuring educators are supported in the critical role they play in advancing young children’s learning and development.

Relevant resources

- Early childhood educators feel burnt out and undervalued
- Early Childhood Educator Wellbeing project
- Be You Wellbeing Tools

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References


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