

Submission to Early Childhood Development Workforce study

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This submission aims to illustrate child care practitioners' perspectives regarding some of the questions posed in the Childhood Development Workforce Issues Paper. The perspectives of child care practitioners were sought through a formal research process as part of the Learning Stories Project in November, 2010. Learning Stories was conducted as part of the Logan Beaudesert Health Coalition and Griffith University Health Promotion Program in partnership with Communities for Children.

Summary of the Learning Stories Project

The coordinators of Learning Stories aimed to enhance the understanding of the training and support needs of long day care practitioners and contribute to lived experience data and the lived determinants for community and practitioners in the Logan area. The project targeted practitioners working with children under three years of age in Logan City in Queensland. Logan City is a recognised area of "socioeconomic disadvantage" in Australia (ABS 2006). Local residents experience complex determinants of health such as low income, unemployment, crime, violence, and relatively high incidence of preventable chronic disease. The area is also one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse health service districts in its state. The district is known to function as a 'port' for refugees and migrants to Australia (ABS 2006). The Australian Bureau of Statistics attributes net migration into the area to the availability of relatively low or unskilled employment in the area, low income housing, and pre-existing culturally and linguistically diverse communities in the district (ABS 2006).

Selected child care centres within Logan City were approached and the director nominated staff who might be interested in being interviewed. Eleven group leaders and three assistants from 12 different centres were interviewed using a semi-structured interview technique.

The interview topics included:

- How participants came to be working in the child care centre
- Positive and negative issues regarding working in child care
- Attitudes to young children being cared for outside the home
- Relevance of training to everyday workday situations
- Longevity in the industry

The child care practitioners interviewed are hard working people who feel that they work under stressful conditions but genuinely like their jobs and are dedicated to providing the best possible outcomes for children. They were able to explain some of their frustrations with the early childhood industry and, in some cases, were able to provide suggestions for improvements.

LS2: I think no matter where I am I try to make a difference. And it's probably the best buzz - part of the job where you know that you've made a difference, or you've taught that child something, or you've helped that child in some way.

Findings and responses relevant for the Early Childhood Development Workforce study

Six key findings of the study are summarised in this section under the following headings:

1. Demand for early childhood education and care workers;
2. Supply of ECD workers;
3. Pay and conditions;
4. Regulatory burden;
5. Qualifications and career pathways; and
6. Professional status of the ECD workforce.

A summary of each key finding is provided followed by verbatim quotations from child care practitioners interviewed for the study.

Demand for early childhood education and care workers

What are some of the child development reasons families choose to use, or not use, different ECEC services?

Early childhood practitioners interviewed for the study were divided in their opinion of the developmental benefits of children under three years attending child care, especially on a full time basis.

The main benefits were seen to be for children's social development and for those children whose families "don't spend a lot of time with their children". Child care for young children was also seen as beneficial for getting children used to routines so they will be ready to move to other rooms and ultimately for school. Also developmental problems may be able to be diagnosed earlier than they might have been if the child did not attend childcare.

LS1:....and to a degree I think it's good for their development. Their social development and interacting with others and they are actually learning things.... . It really is setting those foundations down for them to set up for the other rooms. If you have a good start in the babies, by the time they get into toddlers you've got the group times, you've got them sitting at the tables, you've got the feeding happening.

LS3: I tend to think that a lot of the parents don't spend a lot of time with their children. Whether it be work commitments or family issues, or whatever the case may be, so I think, for those sort of families, childcare is really good and beneficial to the children.

LS6: I think it can be really worthwhile to get children used to other people, other settings; and I think just from observing children while they've been in care, they seem to learn so much and pick up on other things just by interacting with other children their own age and being free to explore.

LS9: The ones that have never been in care, it must be very hard for them for when they go to school; really hard.

LS14: Because really, one or two days, yes, a bit of a social thing with other kids, that doesn't hurt and they could be looking after their kids and spending time with them. But it's all good as well, because they do get that

interaction, and whatever they're not learning at home they can learn here, and that sort of thing.

LS1: And sometimes by having a child in care, we're able to pick up on things that parents don't notice, such as hearing, or speech, or developmental delays.

However, several of the practitioners believe that being in child care for extended periods can be exhausting for young children. They believe the use of extended child care may be necessary for parents who have to work for financial reasons but they generally do not approve of families who do not work using long hours of child care.

LS3: ...non-working families, and there's a lot of them within this area... But they drop their children off at 6:00am in the morning and pick them up late of an afternoon, where they could be spending a lot of family time. And to me, families are important, and I think a lot of them just dump them here for the sake of not wanting them at home, or not being able to care for them at home.

LS4: I just feel from experience, with having young children in childcare it can be quite wearing on them. If a child's here from 6:00am until 5:30pm in the afternoon, by Wednesday or Thursday they're exhausted, they're absolutely exhausted. Yes, five-day children ...it's a lot

LS6: I think it can be beneficial, but in saying that, it can be really hard seeing the little babies that are here from 6:00am in the morning until 6:00pm at night every day, and you can't help but think they're not really getting - there's only certain things that only a mother - families can give for the children.

LS14: I think the ones who, if they're not really working, so if they're just sitting at home basically, and they still get their 50 hours coverage, and they can bring them in five days and they're here all hours; I think those ones should be cut down.

LS15: Well my personal opinion is that if parents aren't working they shouldn't be in childcare five days a week. They should be in one day a week just for social interaction, but we've got kids that come here at 6:00am and are here until 6:00pm of a night time

Supply of ECD workers

How much of the shortage is caused by low wages or wage differentials? Are there other factors (such as working hours and conditions) that are important in attracting staff to the sector?

All the practitioners interviewed mentioned the low pay rates for child care workers. However, this was not the major issue for most of them regarding work in this industry. One of the biggest issues for many was the lack of recognition of the importance of the job they do and the lack of appreciation of their expertise in their field.

LS1: Probably the biggest thing is recognition. I find child care is still undervalued. While that [better pay] would be great, I think every job would say that. It's more about the recognition. It would just be nice to have a little bit of recognition, from I suppose, the Government and State bodies as well.

It's a very rewarding career in the fact that it's for children and the parents, but it's a very unrewarding career as value seen in the community, and I think that's a shame. I think we lose a lot of good staff.

LS2: The pay. Sorry, I hate to say that but it definitely is the downside of it. ... and being in other industries where you don't need to actually have a qualification, or any kind of study, but still be better paid for what you doing, and then to come to an industry where you're actually educating the children and it's actually an education, not babysitting. ... a lot of parents don't realise how much of your own time, your own money and part of yourself that you invest in this particular type of job. But the pay just does not reflect that level of commitment that you have to this kind of industry.your level of education and your level of experience should be reflected in your pay a lot better than what it is.....it's a job you can't do just for the money.

My sister was working in the laundry department for [a large company] and she was getting a better pay than I was when she was there, and she didn't have to have any kind of Degree, or any study or anything. She just got more appreciated, and the way I see it, she was more appreciated for what her role was, and her pay reflected for what she did.

Yeah, sometimes you're not as appreciated as much you'd like to be in this industry.

They've got no idea of the amount of time or all the paperwork you've got to do. I'm lucky I'm at that stage now where I've been doing it for so long now it's second nature, but I see a few people entering the industry and just not coping with it, and then leave the industry. And you're losing so many good people that could be in the industry. And a lot of people are leaving the industry because it's just not, not worth them. They'd rather go work at Coles and get a better rate of pay, or wherever they go.

LS8: I'd like a pay rise. I think we're very underrated. We're just classed as babysitters. I know a lot of parents do, but yes, the government has recognised us a bit more, and a lot of people just snub their nose and say, "A childcare worker," but they don't realise what goes into it.

LS9: I just think it's a hard industry too. And it's an important one that people don't seem to put the value on. This is the grounding, the first five years of these children's lives is their - so whatever support the centre can get and whatever they need, I think it would be a great help. And that would help the staff if they had more resources, or more support.

LS10: Well, you do a lot of work and you get very, very little pay. But, I'm not complaining about it, but it's just very, very hard. Like, even the Group Leaders get a low income. So, I think that needs to improve, but everything else is really, really good.... Yes. I love the job, but if the bills keep going up and up as everything's saying that they're going to, I don't know if I can hold my place; support myself and stuff. So I don't know.

LS15: All the paperwork you've got to do. The pay's all right but it's not that crash hot. For the amount of stress we go through a day, and the amount of stuff we put up with.

Pay and conditions

What are the key factors influencing an individual's decision to work in the ECD sector?

The early childhood practitioners interviewed for the Learning Stories project were specifically asked about their motivation and entry point for working in this sector.

Our interviews indicated that there are two main reasons for beginning to work in the early childhood sector. Some of the practitioners mentioned their love of children often beginning with babysitting as a teenager. These people often planned to work in the sector from the time they were at school.

LS1: I've always loved children, and I'd walk into where a child's crying, pick up the child and they would stop. And I just noticed I had that connection, I loved being around children and all that.

LS6: I did a lot of babysitting when I was younger. I really enjoyed that, and that's what I've wanted to do since I was in primary school; I wanted to be a childcare worker.

LS10: I just always wanted to do it. When I was at school I just thought it would be really, really good. And I left school after year 10 and thought, "well, I'll get into it now." But you couldn't start until you were 17, so I worked in Woolworths, and stuff like that, trying to just wait until I could get to that age. And then I moved down to the Logan area, and then I just got into it. I really, really enjoy it too.

LS14: I was interested in kids, liked looking after kids and being around kids when I was younger, and at school I chose the early childhood studies as a subject. I did work experience one day a week for one year, and then in the other year we actually ran our own playgroup from the school; where parents came into the school, to the playgroup set up, and we did all of that every week. From there I started working in childcare after school, and I'm still there now.

LS15: I've always wanted to do it since I left school, but then I thought of the hospitality side of it. I'd worked in hospitality before in a takeaway shop for a little while and it wasn't working out, and then I tried childcare, and I've been working in childcare for six-and-a-half years now.

There were also women who told us that they initially had a different career but once they had their own children they began to work in child care as it fitted in with their family commitments.

LS2: Because of my own kids. I was in marketing for a big corporation and I got..., married. So I had two children quite young, ... watching them learn and watching them develop and get new things, and I thought, "this is pretty cool." So one way I found to look after my kids, I started doing a night course at TAFE and I started studying my Diploma by night. I did my first placement ... enjoyed it even more, and just continued on doing my studies, and that's how I jumped into it.

LS3: I'd actually had a break from working. I had my own children, so I didn't work for about eight years. Because I'd been a restaurant manager and all the

rest, I had done lots of different things, I thought, "what am I going to do? I know I'm good with kids, let's go back to childcare." So that's where it started. I looked around the area and put my resume in everywhere, and yes, here I am.

LS4: I have children myself, so it's being able to be with your children through the day. And when I come to work I don't have to go and drop my children off and then rush to work or anything like that. We all go to the same spot. So yes, it's good, and it's handy to see how he's going, how he's developing and that kind of thing.

LS9: Well I had six children. I've always had things to do with children. My son and I managed a roller-skating rink for ten - fifteen years. I had a major fall off the roof and damaged my foot so I was out of work..... so I've always had a love of babies and children. Yeah, so I thought, "well," and I just applied, and they were happy to hire me, even at my age. They said, "Do your Cert III. I said, "Okay." "Do your Diploma." "Okay."

Regulatory burden

Does the regulatory burden have a significant impact on retaining staff in the ECD sector? What more could be done to reduce the regulatory burden?

The regulatory burden is the issue generally quoted as causing the most stress for child care practitioners. Having to record events such as nappy changes, sun screen application and five minute sleep charts continually interrupt their day, contribute to excessive busyness and keep them from providing children with quality care and attention.

LS1:...which I realise they're all there for a reason, but sometimes you feel like the paperwork is taking you away from the reason that you're there, for the children. I think it needs a bit of a better balance. When I first started there was none, and that was wrong too. But now it seems to be - in the baby's room I have five minute sleep charts, I have food diaries, I have nappy diaries, I have programming, I have observations. There seems to be a whole lot of the day where I'm pulled away doing paperwork.

LS3: The main issues at the moment, I think would be all the paperwork and things that we've got to do to perform the accreditation. Everything has to be documented, and I just think there's a lot of unnecessary paperwork, a lot of forms to tick off. And without being specific, a lot of different forms that you have to fill out that take you away from my purpose of being here - the children. You're spending more time doing paperwork than actually spending with the children, which is I guess, the way everything is going, but yes, I don't think it's very good.

LS8: It's a lot of paperwork, a lot of legal stuff, and you think, "well when do you have time to look after the kids?" Isn't that the main priority, is the kids? But it's a lot of paperwork, and do this and don't do that. I mean, I can understand you've got to have safety and everything like that, but gee, come off it.

LS14: Virtually everything you do you've got to write something. Whether you're doing nappy changes or you're just going outside to play, you've got to sign something for going out. For sunscreen, you've got to sign for you cleaning, you've got to sign for your nappies, you've got to sign for your breaks.

When you're programming on your tea-break, your lunch, you've got to do your observations, you've got to write in books every day for communication. Then you've got to evaluate your program every day and observations and your program, so really, it adds up. And you almost feel like every single thing you do in a day you've got to write something for, instead of just focusing on what they're doing and doing stuff with them, you spend half of that writing about something.

LS15: I'd rather be an Assistant because you don't have much paperwork, but with the Group Leader you've got heaps of paperwork, like the weekly program, daily evaluations, children observations, that's pretty much it.

Child care practitioners, especially the assistants often have to do all the cleaning in their room and this is also one of the tasks that takes them away from looking after the children.

LS12: It would be great to have some help with all of the cleaning. I find that the cleaning is the hardest thing about my job.

During the rest time I try and get as much as I can done, or if we finish our work early I try and do it then. It was all right when there was the three of us in the room, but when there's only two people it makes it very hard because the other Group Leaders are doing all of their programming and observations and all of that, whereas the assistant then has to do all of the cleaning and all of that sort of stuff. I find that it's a lot to do for one person, for such a big room, and there's just not enough time in the day, because we're usually outside by 3:30pm. But then I've got to try and get done the afternoon cleaning as well. So, yes, it makes it very, very hard.

LS3: More time; but you can't do that without extending your work hours taking you away from family. Maybe somebody else to come in and help, whether it be to do your general cleaning, to give you more time to do what we're here for, to be with the children. So yes, that magic fairy that comes in and does all of your cleaning and all of your fixing up, and everything else, would be a fantastic thing.

LS9: You've got a lot of paperwork to do, you've got a lot of cleaning time. A lot of the paperwork is just - that takes away time from the children. It does mine.

Another issue for child care practitioners is the lack of time to complete all that is expected of them in a day. Many are so busy during the day that they have to take work home to complete in their own time. There is often very little recognition given to this extra the work they put in.

LS1: And then I've never met any of my staff or co-workers that have done all of their paperwork in their work time. We've always taken work home.... a lot of the girls will even take half a day out on a weekend, or two hours twice a week at night. That's part of the job, and while I would never complain about that, it does impact on family life.

LS2: - a lot of parents don't realise how much of your own time, your own money and part of yourself that you invest in this particular type of job. But the pay just does not reflect that level of commitment that you have to this kind of

industry. As opposed to, say, working in sales and marketing, you're kind of at the end of the day - you shut off, you can hop in your car, you went home and that was it.

LS8: Half the women take home work to do because there's not enough hours in the day, and some of the girls come up on the weekends to do their work, and that's their free time, we don't get paid for that. It's not just a babysitters job.

LS9: A lot of the stuff you have to take home and do it, because you just can't do it all. If you're watching the children, you can't be writing out lots of stuff.

Having more staff in each room ie lower staff-child ratios was also suggested as a way to reduce stress and improve the care provided.

LS3: All I can say is maybe the paperwork side of it. It all keeps coming back to that; and lesser numbers in the room, or more staff in the room to actually focus on the children. I just feel that some of the children do miss out.

LS4: More support through extra staffing, that would be the big issue. Even though there's two of you in a room, two of you with 10 children, when three or four might want different things at the one time, it can be quite hectic.

LS6: We sometimes just need time to just do the extra jobs that we think we can really do. We need more staff, or more time away from the children so that we can prepare the room, prepare the programming of what we need to have done, and then just go in and be able to do it to have things running smoothly. Again, it's impossible just to pay for extra staff members all of the time to do that, but that would be ideal.

Qualifications and career pathways

Do newly-qualified ECD workers have the necessary skills and attributes to be effective in the workplace?

There are varying opinions as to whether training is more effective if it is delivered pre-service or alternatively as 'on the job' training.

LS1:.....going straight from high school into, what was originally then, the Associate Diploma. I did that for two years full-time at Logan TAFE and then came out as a qualified Group Leader at 19 years of age. I found I was very qualified but lacking experience, because there was not a lot of work-based experience when you were doing your course back then.

I do admit, a lot of the theory I found probably not as useful as the practical. Erikson and Freud and all of that, that's very important to say, "Okay, that's from our foundations work." In the everyday running of the Centre, I haven't really used a lot of the theorist's sides of things, I've used a lot more of the practical. I know now a lot of the girls do the Certificate IIIs and all of that onsite, and I think that's a lot better.

LS6: So I spent from 16 to 18 in TAFE full-time and I loved that. I did that because I think I got a much higher understanding of theories, and the theory side to childcare as well, which I think can be just as important as the practical side. When I work in childcare and I see people that have done their training

in-service, which is still very good also, but I can sometimes see that they take on what they learn from what they watch other carers do, and sometimes if they pick up bad habits it just follows through. Whereas I really liked going through TAFE, and I think it's really helped.

Are in-service training and professional development programs meeting workforce needs?

Important topics for professional development included team building, children's development and updates on accreditation. Sometimes in-service training provides inspiration but the reality of the very busy days and the lack of resources provide little opportunity to implement new ideas in the workplace.

LS2: Lucky I'm in that position where I can understand and interpret, but the hands-on is probably the best form of learning. That's like, what I did with the TAFE and you've got that placement that I learnt more hands-on if I was in a centre than I did just sitting down reading. When you can actually put it into action and see results and responses. And it does, with all kinds of training I've done, team building training, which I think is a big thing when you work with a bunch of women in the workplace. That building a big team and a good support network within the centre, it's kind of important. If you have happy staff you have happy kids, and if you've got happy kids you've got happy families. Those kind of training's good. Motivational ones to keep me interested, to keep you inspired in your job, because it's easy to fall into a rut and get mundane and bored and repetitious.

LS3: I guess in their development, even though I'd brought my own children up, I didn't really know the specific stages of development. So, I can tell whether a child now is within those certain ranges, or whether there's something actually missing, and whether they need that extra help.

Some behaviour development trainings have been quite good and multicultural ones. Being Australian myself, I find it difficult to incorporate the multicultural side of things. There are a lot of multicultural workshops and things that I found very beneficial.

It's been a while since I've done my training. I do believe though that we should update our training through a TAFE every three years maybe, because a lot of things change, especially with the paperwork side of it, and accreditation's changing... You get a lot of companies out there that offer this training and that training, and everything else, but you get there and sometimes it's not relevant to what you're doing.Especially with the paperwork, since I did my training, it has changed so much. And to learn how to do that along the way is quite difficult sometimes. So, I think if they had a two-week, or month training course of a night time, it would be very beneficial to have. It would be to me anyway.

LS4: If I didn't have my training then you wouldn't know everything that you know, and your training helps you with when you come across those incidents. Yes, it helps you in your day-to-day basic stuff like how to lift, how to handle children, your correct procedures for nappy changes, and nose wipings and all of that kind of stuff, and your workplace health and safety and everything.

LS6: Workshops that I've been to, have such great ideas. You always leave feeling really inspired and wanting to come back and do it. But again, once you get back, you have to look at the resources that we have available. And again in the nursery, where there's not really any time where we're not feeding or changing, or anything like that, it can be really hard to put into practice, and that can be really frustrating because you know there's so much more you could be doing.

LS14: I think in some ways [training helps] with some things, especially because of your program and that kind of thing, and knowing more about the different skills. But in other ways, I think some of it with just actually being with the kids and having that thing with them, them being calm, happy to be with you and just generally looking after them. ...Yes and no, there's probably a lot of stuff that we really didn't use afterwards, it's just sort of, yes you do it at the time and you don't really use it.

One person suggested a training course for child care centre owners so they are familiar with the regulations and requirements of the industry.

LS1: I don't know if there needs to be, maybe a sub-course in there for owners. Out of all the owners that have come in, that I've met, they've never had a day of experience at child care. Have absolutely no idea of what child care is about, yet they dictate how the Centre's run, where I think that is probably an area in study that does need to change. I think if there's people that want to buy child care centres, they must do a course before they can do it.

... the basics of the regulations and why some of those things are in place.

Are there barriers to ECD staff accessing training and development programs?

The lack of financial support, accessibility (often having to travel long distances) and the timing of much professional development (in their own time, after a full day's work) are some of the current barriers to accessing training programs.

LS14: Making training easier, cost wise as well and making it easier for staff; not so hard.

A lot of the ones [training] are basically like a 6:00pm-6:30pm at night during the week, when a lot of people may only finish at that time, or you've worked all day. Do you really want to sit there for another extra couple of hours after work, sitting there listening to that as well, before you even get home? Or the distance, we were given a thing for one that was at Caboolture, so there's an amount of travel. There were people interested, but then when it was called up about it, he goes, "Oh no, well that's actually for this area. We just sent it out to you as an extra thing, but we actually only accept this area first. So, it was just like, "Oh, okay."

...they want you more qualified, but making it a bit easier and affordable for staff to do it and it might get more people qualified then.

.... they've discussed about eventually wanting to maybe have all staff with a Bachelor's, nothing below that, which not everyone wants to be at Bachelor level. And also, the thing about studying is, it does cost, and some people affording to do the study for that just doesn't work. Because I know even just doing the Diploma, it was \$130 per book, because not everyone gets your Healthcare Card

discount, which makes it more expensive. So, when you're doing that virtually every month, they expect it to be on top of one module per month. Not everyone can afford that, and it makes it harder as well, as not everyone wants to be at a Bachelor teaching level. So, I think stuff like that might put more people off childcare as it's basically all being done as qualification-only...

Professional status of the ECD workforce

Do you consider professional status to be an issue for the ECD workforce? What factors determine professional status in the sector?

The interviews in the Learning Stories project indicate that child care practitioners do consider that there is a lack of professional status in this workforce (See also the response to **Supply of ECD workers** Page 3). These practitioners feel that they do an important, professional job but do not receive the recognition or the appreciation that they feel is their due.

LS1: It's where all the brain connections are made, it's where children can learn confidence and learn socialising and things. To me, it is a lot more important than what people realise, and as I said, it's a very undervalued career.

Will the workers who are required to upgrade their qualifications do so, or will they leave the ECD sector?

Many people who enter the child care industry are not well off financially and find it a struggle juggling families, full time work and study at the same time. Depending on the cost and logistics of further training, some practitioners could leave the industry.

LS2: I've just studied, I've been studying since 2001 because I'm on my Advanced Diploma now.....Still studying to better my education and to better my role so I can do my job well, and you just think, "why?" [It is] Extremely [hard to study while working]. My Cert. III was okay, it was nightshift, and it was only one night a week. But then, I was actually working in the industry while I was doing my Diploma and I found that extremely hard, even more difficult ... when I was running a centre and having to study at the same time.

LS6: I want to keep studying. I'm doing my Diploma at the moment, and I'd love to go on to do my uni Degree. The only reason I haven't really done that yet is because of the prac that you need to do in uni. I can't afford to take the time off work to go to prac and there's nothing I can do about that for a while. But yes, I definitely want to keep on studying.

For more information about the Learning Stories project or this submission, please contact: **Julie Appleton, Griffith University, j.appleton@griffith.edu.au**

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