



# Childcare Inquiry Roundtable Summary

## **Educators**

Friday 11 August 2023

10:00am – 1:00pm AEST

Virtual using Microsoft Teams

This document is not a verbatim record of the roundtable, but a summary of the issues raised by roundtable attendees. The views and opinions expressed are those of the attendees and do not reflect the ACCC's views or position on the issues summarised here.

# Introduction

On 28 October 2022 the Treasurer, the Hon. Jim Chalmers MP, directed the ACCC to conduct a price inquiry into the market for the supply of childcare services (the Inquiry).

The ACCC carried out a wide range of outreach and information gathering activities for the Inquiry. These activities included roundtables with invited stakeholders from the following groups: Educators, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse peak bodies, providers and community groups, Childcare Providers, Parents and Guardians, First Nations families, communities, and other stakeholders, and In Home Care.

This document provides a summary of the issues discussed and raised during the Educator Roundtable, held virtually on Friday 11 August 2023.

Approximately 23 interested parties attended, comprising educators and those who teach, support, research, represent and/or advocate for educators.

ACCC Deputy Chair Catriona Lowe chaired the roundtable, supported by Nicole Ross, General Manager Childcare Inquiry Taskforce and other ACCC staff.

In this summary individual participants and organisations are de-identified.

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## Summary of issues

Attendees discussed the following topics.

### Topic 1 – Regulatory requirements and their impact on the workforce

#### **Qualifications**

- Qualifications are important. Qualified staff provide the best outcomes for children.
- It is important to recognise the professionalism of childcare educators and view their role as part of the continuum of a career in education.
- There is a shortage of qualified staff and action is needed to address this.
- Qualified staff (even at Certificate III level) are being employed immediately post-study. They are expected to 'hit the ground running', at times without good mentoring in place. This can put pressure on the workforce.
- Some universities are developing fast-tracked courses, but this could impact course quality. Students may not be equipped for the workforce, which would impact retention rates in the future.
- Qualification requirements are inconsistent across jurisdictions and would benefit from harmonisation.

- For out of school hours care, it is difficult to meet and maintain qualifications. Many of the staff are university students from diverse fields who do the job while studying then leave once they finish their degree. Recruiting would be challenging if qualification requirements were to change.
- It is challenging to complete qualifications due to:
  - the time commitment required to undertake unpaid study in addition to existing work commitments
  - financial pressure. Placements are unpaid and require time off paid work. Paid placements and scholarships would assist with this
  - a lack of mentors. Mentoring is necessary for trainees to fulfil course requirements. Mentoring also plays a critical role in motivating and supporting students, especially those studying online. However, experienced teachers find it challenging to accommodate mentoring on top of other roles. There are also very few mentors available in rural and remote areas
  - students do not always have a positive experience of early years education on their placements due to a range of factors. This can include a lack of good mentors able to assist with the practical skills required to be a good childcare educator.
- Meaningful micro-credentials may assist time-poor workers in upskilling, although concerns were raised regarding the impact of micro-credentials on providing quality education to children.
- Providers can apply for waivers of the regulations. Waivers can assist centres to operate where they are having problems attracting qualified staff. The use of waivers has increased, especially in regional/remote areas. However, some services have been refused waivers. At the same time, some diploma-qualified staff employed under waivers feel like they are being exploited by employers to bypass regulations.

## **Staff ratios**

- Educators generally support the ratio requirements, but there are issues with implementation.
- It is very difficult to meet ratios in the out of school hours care sector.
- Making it easier to obtain comparable information on compliance to compare different jurisdictions' practices would support a better understanding of the issues.

## **Regulatory compliance and the National Quality Framework (NQF)**

- The NQF is important but sometimes the focus on quality assessments, ratings, documentation and reporting means that educators cannot give enough attention to other important matters. Centre Directors should be focussed on compliance but often have to perform other roles due to staff shortages. Too many roles are expected of too few people, especially in small workplaces.
- The volume of information and the paperwork requirements can be overwhelming and there is insufficient non-contact time to complete paperwork.
- A sole focus on paperwork is not quality.
- Staff at small centres carry a high sense of personal responsibility for ratings. They do their best but may never achieve a high rating due to factors such as staff turnover. This can be demoralising and creates a significant emotional burden.

- There are differences between jurisdictions in application of the quality standards.
- The following steps may assist:
  - increase the understanding of the NQF and its application
  - better integration of early childhood services with other learning services within the educational continuum may assist in supporting quality outcomes
  - consider whether there are areas of compliance that could be streamlined
  - increase the culture of sharing resources, creating networks and building professional skills, particularly within close geographic areas. This may be challenging where providers are competing, but local councils could play a useful role here. Online options, including for mentoring, could also be further explored
  - quality standards should be realistic and objective, and assessment officers should be highly qualified, experienced in current practice and consistent.

## Topic 2 – Attraction and retention

- The workforce has drive and passion and cares deeply about educating and caring for young people.
- Workforce turnover is currently higher than ever. Issues with salaries and conditions are compounding to cause workforce attrition, for reasons including the following:
  - Burnout. For example, staff shortages mean that many roles are expected of fewer people. It is challenging to conduct ongoing recruitment efforts while fulfilling all the usual responsibilities of running a service.
  - Better pay, conditions, support and recognition are available elsewhere, such as in the school sector, administration roles or policy work in a peak body.
  - Lack of opportunities for professional development and career progression.
  - Lack of professional recognition, for example, there is a perception that early childhood educators are just babysitters.
  - Expectations not being met. For example, teachers graduating with a 4-year degree may find that they are expected to do things they did not expect an early childhood teacher to have to do, such as cleaning children's toilets or changing nappies.
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the workforce included:
  - staff shortages, for example, due to COVID-19 exposure/infection or overseas workers being unable to re-enter the country
  - distress at a range of factors including adequacy of personal protective equipment and divisiveness over vaccine mandates
  - cuts to work hours because parents were not taking their children to childcare
  - feeling unappreciated when income support was withdrawn from long day care centres prior to other industries
  - an exodus of educators from the Family Day Care sector when free childcare was introduced
  - a significant increase in early childhood educators leaving the profession overall.
- Many workers, including more experienced workers and new graduates, are now choosing casual employment instead of ongoing employment. Going casual means

more money, more control over workload and days worked, and relief from paperwork responsibilities.

- Some services in regional and remote areas spend a lot of money to attract educators only to find that the educators do not stay long in the job. Government support would be useful for rural and remote locations to build an educator workforce among the existing community.
- Some areas do not have affordable rental housing for educators. Affordable housing options would assist in attracting educators.
- Some childcare services rely on staff with visas, especially in areas that lack affordable housing. Some visa holders are required to perform a period of work in a specified industry and location (e.g. fruit picking). This means they must leave childcare services (which are desperate for staff) to fulfil their visa requirements. This is a missed opportunity to utilise their skills and abilities.
- Non-compete clauses in employment contracts are very common. This is especially the case with small to medium private for-profit operators, mostly in metropolitan areas. Some operators may not understand their compliance obligations with industrial law and some may receive poor advice from disreputable sources.

## Topic 3 – Pay and conditions

A more detailed discussion of pay and conditions occurred, including consideration of what additional supports would assist in improving conditions.

- The benefits of early childhood education services to families and society far outweigh what educators are paid in return. This has a gendered impact, as the sector is predominantly women.
- In general, early childhood educators are paid significantly below primary educators. However, some providers have above-award pay and conditions (for example allowing time off for programming).
- Rural and regional areas cannot pay the same salaries as metropolitan areas.
- To improve professional recognition, early childhood education should be seen as part of the schooling/education continuum. It is not 'just childcare' or 'just babysitting': it is about early education, children's learning and wellbeing.
- In out of school hours care there is a tension between increasing fees to pay educators more and keeping fees affordable for families. Increasing fees leads to a reduction in enrolments. But if educator wages stay low, then there are insufficient educators to offer the places that families want. This is an unsustainable scenario.
- Additional support (such as funding and hours) is needed for skilled staff to assist children with complex needs. For example, the existing funding may cover 5 hours of support for a child that is in care for 10 hours a day.
- The system is constrained by lack of resources, funding and time. In a constrained environment, professional learning and development can fall by the wayside. There is also very little paid time for professional development, so it is challenging for staff to undertake it on top of other commitments. This means, for example, that diploma-qualified staff may not progress to higher qualifications, which impacts their career opportunities.

- Career progression is also impacted by the way the award and the sector are structured. Educators cannot progress, regardless of how much experience they have, unless they decide to become an early childhood teacher.
- The critical importance of mentoring was reiterated.