

Spotlight

Celebrating Early Childhood Teachers

October 2021



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This Spotlight highlights that:

-  early childhood teachers are degree-qualified educators with specialist expertise in children's learning and development from birth to eight years of age.
-  quality early childhood education is critical in developing children's academic and non-academic qualities, supporting positive educational

experience, improving social inclusion, reducing disadvantage and improving transition to school.

- ⚡ early childhood education has its own philosophy, pedagogy and professional identity.
- ⚡ attracting and retaining qualified early childhood teachers to work with preschool children is a challenge in some parts of Australia.

Introduction

Early childhood teachers are an essential and growing part of the Australian teaching workforce. The early years of life are recognised as an important period for development and learning, and research highlights the contribution that qualified early childhood teachers make to children's outcomes in their school years and beyond.

The distinctive expertise held by early childhood teachers should be celebrated as well as the knowledge and pedagogical approaches that drive teaching practice in the early years. It is also important to recognise the complex landscape within which early childhood teachers deliver quality education and care. Early childhood teachers differ from early childhood educators in that:

- Early childhood teachers are university trained, eligible for teacher registration and hold a recognised specialist teaching qualification in early childhood education (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) n.d.).
- Early childhood educators hold a diploma or are Certificate III level qualified and have different responsibilities to early childhood teachers, such as assisting early childhood teachers with the delivery of an approved learning framework and supporting the daily routines of children (ACECQA n.d.). Diploma qualified early childhood educators may also be responsible for implementing approved learning frameworks to support children's learning and development.

There are approximately 47,900 ^[1] degree-qualified early childhood teachers working either full-time or part-time across Australia in pre-primary settings (Job Outlook n.d.). It is not known how many early childhood teachers work in primary schools, as national data on school teaching staff does not currently reveal the type of degree that teachers undertook.



📷 Across Australia there are approximately 47,900 degree-qualified early childhood teachers working in pre-primary settings.

Early childhood education in Australia

Early childhood is defined as the period from birth to eight years of age ^[2], and early childhood teachers may work across early childhood education and care services, preschool and the early years of schooling, in a range of settings.

- **Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services** (also referred to as childcare services) may include centre-based long day care, family day care, vacation and out of school hours care.
- **Preschool** (or kindergarten in some states, refer to Table 1) is a specific type of ECEC service that refers to structured, play-based, teacher-led early learning programs attended by children for about 15 hours per week in the year before they start school (PwC 2019).
- **Early school years** start with Foundation, the first year of formal schooling prior to Year 1, and ending at the end of Year 2, the year in which many children will reach their 7th birthday.

Pre-school programs are taught by early childhood teachers, whether they are based in long-day care centres, stand-alone preschools or kindergartens, or attached to schools. Some early childhood teachers choose to work in primary schools. There is some overlap between the three early childhood settings, for example, some ECEC services offer a preschool program, some primary schools incorporate preschool.

There is a range of state- and territory-specific terminology relating to the naming of the year prior to school and the first year of school, as well as age-related policies for entry, as seen in Table 1. Throughout this Spotlight, the funded year of education offered immediately prior to primary school will be referred to as preschool, as the term kindergarten is used varyingly between states and territories (Table 1).

Table 1: Preschool programs in Australia, 2019-2020 (Source: (Productivity Commission 2021), 3; 2019-20 Table 3.1)

State Territory	Preschool Program name	Age of entry to preschool program in the year before full time schooling	Foundation year name	Minimum age of entry to school
NSW	Preschool	Generally aged 4 and 5	Kindergarten	5 by 31 July
Vic	Kindergarten	4 by 30 April	Preparatory (Prep)	5 by 30 April
Qld	Kindergarten	4 by 30 June	Preparatory (Prep)	5 by 30 June
WA	Kindergarten	4 by 30 June	Pre Primary	5 by 30 June
SA	Preschool	4 by 1 May	Reception	5 by 1 May
Tas	Kindergarten	4 by 1 January	Preparatory	5 by 1 January
ACT	Preschool	4 by 30 April	Kindergarten	5 by 30 April
NT	Preschool	4 by 30 June	Transition	5 by 30 June

Along with the government-funded preschool program delivered the year prior to school, some states offer an additional funded year of preschool for 3-year-olds, for specified groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (NSW, SA, VIC), children at risk of vulnerability (NSW, SA, VIC) and children in remote areas. This additional year has beneficial effects, as research indicates that two-years of preschool is better for disadvantaged children than one (Fox & Geddes 2016). Victoria is piloting an additional funded year of preschool programs for all 3-year-olds. There are also integrated models of preschool and schooling, for example birth-12 schools (SA) and early childhood schools (ACT). Though preschool arrangements vary by state/territory, it is important to acknowledge that overall, early childhood teachers work with children from birth to eight years of age, not just preschool age children.

Where do early childhood teachers work?

There is a wide range of organisations that early childhood teachers work for, including private providers, corporates, schools, and community providers including faith-based organisations. The various settings early childhood teachers work in – ECEC centres, preschools, primary schools – can also be quite different from each other.

In 2020, there were 12,416 service providers delivering a preschool program to children aged 3 to 6 years, a 6% increase compared with 2018. Almost 34% of preschool program providers were dedicated preschools (including stand-alone preschools and preschools attached to both government and non-government schools), while nearly two-thirds (66%) were centre-based day care services (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2021).

Service delivery models differ across states and territories. New South Wales and Queensland have largely centre-based day care delivery models (accounting for 79% and 72% of the states' preschool program providers, respectively). Dedicated preschools made up the highest proportion of providers in Tasmania (63%), the Northern Territory (61%) and Western Australia (59%) (ABS 2021).

In 2017, there were an estimated 195,000 people employed in the ECEC and preschool environment (Social Research Centre 2017, p.14) serving almost a million children (note, children may attend more than one form of early childhood education and care, for instance, long day care and a separate dedicated preschool, school and out of school hours care). In government-approved childcare services ^[3] in 2016, 12.8% of staff held a bachelor degree or above (Productivity Commission 2020). There were 334,823 children aged 4 or 5 years old enrolled in a preschool program in 2020 (ABS 2021).



📹 Some early childhood teachers choose to work in primary schools and there can be overlap between settings. For example, some services offer a preschool program and some primary schools incorporate preschool.

The value of early childhood education

One economic assessment of early childhood education in Australia estimates that quality preschool delivers \$2 of value for every \$1 invested.

–PwC 2019, p.p6

The rationale for investment in early childhood education is centred on the value it provides to individual children, to society, and to the economy. These benefits include positive educational and developmental outcomes for children, better social inclusion, reduced disadvantage and improved transition to school (Fox & Geddes 2016).

International longitudinal research supports the notion that high-quality early childhood education is more likely to support optimal social, emotional and cognitive development, promote growth experiences, and facilitate positive interaction among teachers and children (Gordon & Browne 2014). In these early years it is crucial to lay the foundations for a child's future. This time provides the best opportunity to “plant the seeds for tomorrow's engaged and active student, productive and skilled worker, and confident and loving parent” (COAG, 2009).

Much of the evidence base on the impact of early childhood education comes from the United States, and consists of quite similar randomised controlled trials targeting children from low-socioeconomic status (SES) households, and incorporating other interventions such as parenting programs (CESE, 2018). Recently researchers have begun to investigate the impact of early childhood education in Australia. On entry to school, teachers use the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) to collect data in the domains of language and cognitive skills, physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, and communications skills and general knowledge (Productivity Commission 2020, ch.3.11). The AEDC shows a positive association between preschool experiences and children's development at school entry, especially for developmental domains related to learning (Warren, Daraganova & O'connor 2018). In 2015, children who received some early childhood education and care were less likely to be developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains of the AEDC (19.9%), compared to children who did not receive any early education (38.5%) (Productivity Commission 2020).

We find a significant positive association between preschool attendance and Year 3 NAPLAN scores, particularly in the domains of Numeracy, Reading and Spelling. Compared to children who did not attend preschool ... average NAPLAN scores were 20 to 30 points higher among children who had attended some type of preschool program.

–Warren & Haisken-Denew 2013

Other research notes that children who receive quality early childhood education and care are up to eight months ahead of their peers in learning, with the benefit persisting into adolescence (Jackson 2020a). It is likely that the value of quality early childhood programs is even greater for children at risk and those with disability. Research shows quality early childhood education is particularly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and can have a positive impact on school attendance, wellbeing and academic success (Australian Government 2020; Pascoe & Brennan 2017).

Investment in early childhood education

Quality early childhood education and care is best considered as an investment, not a cost. Investment in early childhood education provides a strong return, with a variety of studies indicating benefits of 2-4 times the costs.

–Pascoe & Brennan 2017, p.6

All Australian state and territory governments have made commitments to early childhood education in recognition of the connection between high quality early learning and positive outcomes throughout life (Education Council 2019). In 2015, Australia invested \$111.8 billion in education. At this time early childhood education expenditure ^[4] per student was \$10,477 for those in ECEC services and \$10,438 per child at preschool level. Table 2 shows this compares to \$14,234 for a primary school student, and \$19,052 for secondary students (Rice, Edwards & McMillan 2019).

Table 2: Total expenditure on education per student

Level	\$ per student
Childcare/ECEC	10,477
Preschool	10,438
Primary school	14,234
Secondary school	19,052
VET Certificates	15,640

As with schools, the funding of the early childhood sector comes from a combination of government and private sources such as parents and carers (Figure 1). The Australian government is responsible for around 80% of funding overall, with state and territory governments predominantly funding preschool services (Productivity Commission, 2020, 3.4). However, family contributions to the cost of early childhood can vary by jurisdiction, which suggests the current funding structure may not be equitable (Pilcher, Noble & Hurley 2021).

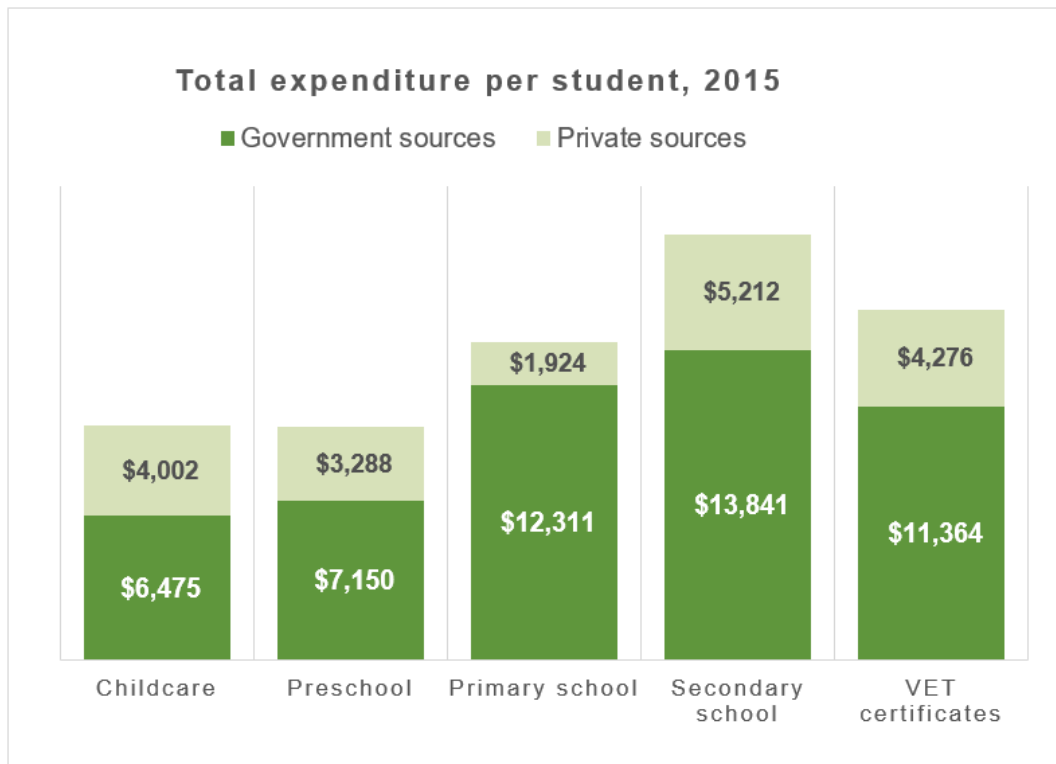


Figure 1: Expenditure on education per student

Quality in early childhood education

While research confirms that early childhood education can provide lasting cognitive and wellbeing outcomes for young children, that value is realised only when early childhood education and care services are high quality. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) sets out five policy areas of importance to improving quality in early childhood education and care:

1. Setting out quality goals and regulations
2. Designing and implementing curriculum and standards
3. Improving qualifications, training and working conditions
4. Engaging families and communities
5. Advancing data collection, research and monitoring (OECD 2012, p.9).

Australia has established strong regulation through the National Quality Framework (NQF), which is focused on improving quality in education and care settings. The NQF aims to lift process and structural quality across all early childhood settings (Education Council 2019). The NQF contains national regulations, the National Quality Standard (NQS), an assessment and quality rating process, and national learning frameworks. It sets a national benchmark for the quality of education and care services, and includes the minimum qualifications and educator/teacher-to-child ratio requirements for children's education and care services, including:

- long day care
- family day care
- preschool and kindergarten
- outside school hours care services (OSHC), before or after school, and vacation care.

Quality in Australian early childhood is measured formally and reported in the *Report on Government Services* (Productivity Commission 2020) according to three criteria: staff quality, NQF quality, and compliance and serious incidents. Staff quality is measured in terms of:

- The proportion of paid primary contact staff employed by Australian Government Child Care Subsidy-approved childcare services with a relevant formal qualification (at or above Certificate III level), or three or more years of relevant experience
- The proportion of teachers accessible to preschool programs who are at least three-year university trained and early childhood qualified.

In 2010, before the NQF came into force, only 14% of Australia's early childhood and care workforce had a bachelor's degree or higher (Jackson 2017). By 2016, in ECEC services (excluding standalone preschools), one quarter of paid contact staff were studying an early childhood qualification. "Around one quarter of long day care paid contact staff delivering preschool programs were bachelor's degree qualified in a teaching field in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and the ACT. This fell to around one-in-seven long day care paid contact staff delivering preschool programs in Northern Territory and Western Australia" (Social Research Centre 2017, p.49).

Becoming an early childhood teacher

In a study investigating pre-service teacher motivations and career intentions, preservice teachers at two Australian universities who participated in a survey rated the importance of the following reasons for choosing an early childhood teaching degree (from most to least important):

- enjoyment of working with children
- the career pathway suits their interests and skills
- the good hours of work
- that it fitted with having a family (Boyd & Newman 2019).

To be registered as an early childhood teacher, a qualification approved or recognised by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) is required. There are multiple pathways to becoming an early childhood teacher in Australia including (Boyd & Newman 2019):

- Teaching degree solely in early childhood education (to teach children aged birth to five years)
- Combined early childhood/primary teacher education degree for teaching children aged from birth to 8 years, or from birth to 12 years

- Teaching degree in primary or secondary education with a postgraduate qualification in early childhood education
- Postgraduate qualification in early childhood teaching following an undergraduate degree.

The majority of NQF approved early childhood teaching programs cover children aged birth to eight years or birth to 12 years of age, qualifying graduates to teach in both early childhood and primary school settings. These programs must meet both ACECQA's requirements and the *Accreditation of initial teacher education programs in Australia: Standards and Procedures*. Early childhood teaching programs that cover children aged birth to five qualify graduates to teach in early childhood settings only, with these programs only needing to meet ACECQA's requirements under the NQF.

Early childhood teaching programs recognised by ACECQA include curriculum and professional experience placements that cover, at minimum, the age range of birth to five years of age (including transition to school). Where qualifications span birth to eight or twelve, at least a third of all units need to be devoted to early childhood (five-years and under). Preservice early childhood teachers need to attend between 60 (post-graduate) and 80 (undergraduate) supervised professional experience placements in Australia, with a minimum number of days focused on each age-range (birth to three years, three to school-age). The remainder of placement days can be undertaken with school-aged children within the age-range of the approved program (ACECQA, 2020).

There are also requirements for the curriculum content that early childhood teaching programs contain. Early childhood teachers are specialist teachers who have completed a robust program that include the curriculum areas specified by ACECQA in Table 3.

Table 3: Early childhood teaching program curriculum content (ACECQA, 2020)

Child development and care	• learning, development and care • language development • social and emotional development • child health, wellbeing and safety • early intervention • diversity, difference and inclusivity • learners with special / additional needs • transitions and continuity of learning (including transition to school).
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Family and community contexts	• developing family and community partnerships • multicultural education • Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives • socially inclusive practice • culture, diversity and inclusion.
Teaching pedagogies	• alternative pedagogies and curriculum approaches • play based pedagogies • guiding behaviour / engaging young learners • teaching methods and strategies • children with diverse needs and backgrounds • working with children who speak languages other than, or in addition to, English • contemporary society and pedagogy.
Education and curriculum studies	• Early Years Learning Framework • the Australian curriculum • numeracy, science and technology • language and literacy • English as an additional language • social and environmental education • creative arts and music • physical and health education • curriculum planning, programming and evaluation.
History and philosophy of early childhood	• historical and comparative perspectives • contemporary theories and practice • ethics and professional practice.
Early childhood professional practice	• educational leadership • management and administration • professional identity and development • advocacy • research.

Qualifications boost quality

International evidence suggests there is a correlation between high quality early childhood teachers and improved student outcomes. In particular, some evidence indicates the education level of teachers may be positively correlated to the quality of early childhood program structure, language, and children's reasoning (Manning et al. 2019). Early childhood teachers have reported experiencing barriers to receiving recognition for the professionalism and qualifications they bring to the teaching profession (Gibson & Gunn 2020). The National Quality Standard (NQS) aims to professionalise the workforce and garner increased recognition and respect for early childhood teachers by ensuring high quality service provision in early childhood education and care (ACECQA n.d.).

Raising qualification levels is seen as a powerful lever for improving the professional status of the workforce (Standing Council of School Education and Early Childhood 2012). There is a growing body of research showing the impact of teacher qualifications in early childhood education. One of the largest early childhood studies conducted in Australia was the Effective Early Educational Experiences (E4Kids) longitudinal study. E4Kids followed 2,500 children over five years in Victoria and Queensland and measured their progress after attending a range of early childhood education programs. One outcome of this study was the positive relationship found between university level teacher qualifications and improved student outcomes. E4Kids concluded that degree qualified teachers had a greater understanding of pedagogical quality (Tayler et al. 2013, Cloney 2020).

Research conducted by Warren and Haisken-Denew in 2013 evaluated the impact of educator quality on preschool aged children by examining the results of the *2013 Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children* (LSAC) to matched Year 3 NAPLAN outcomes. In their landmark study titled 'The early bird catches the worm' Warren & Haisken-DeNew concluded that preschool teachers with high qualifications (at least diploma or degree level) significantly improved the Year 3 NAPLAN results of their students. The benefits of teacher quality were most significant among children whose teacher specialised in early childhood education and care. This research demonstrated the value of early learning experiences on long term student achievement.

Teacher registration

Registration is one of the most important mechanisms to assure the safety, competency and quality of a profession. Its design is underpinned by a clear intent to set and uphold high standards of professional practice.

–AITSL 2018, p.8

Teacher registration is an indicator of professionalism, and professional standards for teachers are seen as “complementary to and essential for the growth of the profession and effective registration of teachers throughout the country” (AITSL 2018, p.4). Early childhood educators outside the school setting have only been covered by the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Teacher Standards) since 2018. Prior to this there were regulatory variations between individual state and territory teacher registration authorities affecting the mobility of early childhood teachers across jurisdictions (AITSL 2018). Registration is not a requirement for early

childhood teachers under the NQF, but is a requirement in some states and territories (ACECQA n.d.). Current estimates from the regulatory authorities in New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia, state that early childhood teachers make up around 7% of the registered teacher workforce (ACECQA 2019a).

For registered early childhood teachers to progress their careers, like all school teachers in Australia, they must meet the career stage requirements referenced in the Teacher Standards. However, due to the Teacher Standards being developed before most jurisdictions required early childhood teachers to be registered (ACECQA 2019a), many early childhood teachers working with very young children don't necessarily see their experiences reflected in the school-centric language of the Teacher Standards (Gibson & Gunn 2020; McArdle, Gibson & Zollo 2015).

Resource List

Using the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers in early childhood education

Glossary for the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

This AITSL one-page glossary makes the Standards inclusive of all teachers. It supports teachers in early childhood services to use the Standards with definitions of key words.

🔗 <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/glossary-for-the-australian-professional-standards-for-teachers>

Illustration of Practice – Establishing a program inclusive of children with disability

This video captures the practice of a kindergarten teacher focused on Standards Focus Area 1.6 - Strategies to support full participation of students with disability.

🔗 <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/establishing-a-program-inclusive-of-children-with-disability-illustration-of-practice>

Illustration of Practice – How many syllables in hippopotamus?

This video captures the practice of a kindergarten teacher focused on Standards Focus Areas 2.5 – Literacy and numeracy strategies.

🔗 <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/how-many-syllables-in-hippopotamus-illustration-of-practice-illustration-of-practice>

Illustration of Practice – Ongoing informal assessment

This video captures the practice of a kindergarten teacher focused on Standards Focus Areas 5.1 – Assess student learning.

<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/ongoing-informal-assessment-illustration-of-practice>

To combat this issue jurisdictions such as Western Australia have proactively adapted the Teacher Standards for a local context (Teacher Registration Board of Western Australia n.d.) and Victoria in consultation with AITSL has provided early childhood specific Illustrations of Practice and an evidence guide mapping early childhood teacher (ECT) practice against the proficient level of the Teacher Standards to support provisionally registered ECTs applying for full registration (Victorian Institute of Teaching n.d.). Similarly, New South Wales has produced a Proficient Teacher Evidence Guide to help early childhood teachers provide the evidence they need to progress from graduate to proficient, in line with the Teacher Standards (NSW Education Standards Authority n.d.). As a national approach there is potential to amend the Teacher Standards to ensure its relevance and applicability to all early childhood teachers (AITSL 2018).



📌 To be registered as an early childhood teacher, a qualification approved or recognised by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) is required.

Early childhood teacher workforce supply

Early childhood teacher education programs have seen a high rate of growth in recent years, likely influenced by the introduction of minimum mandatory qualifications. It is estimated that 20% of this growth may be the result of current workers upskilling rather than new staff entering the sector.

The number of students commencing an early childhood teacher course increased by 61% from 2,753 in 2006 to 4,438 in 2017. However, this increase largely occurred from 2006-2012, as there was a 9% overall decrease in commencements from 2012 (4,871) to 2017.

In 2017, of students entering undergraduate early childhood teaching programs:

- 39% were admitted on the basis of VET qualifications
- 23% were admitted on the basis of secondary education qualifications
- 19% were admitted on the basis of higher education qualifications
- 16% were admitted on an 'other basis'
- 3% were admitted based on mature-age special entry provisions (AITSL 2020, p.49).

The number of students completing early childhood teaching programs grew by 41%, from 1,562 in 2006 to 2,206 in 2017. Of all students who completed early childhood education programs in 2017:

- 97% were female
- 53% studied full-time
- the average age of these students was 29 years
- 18% of all undergraduate students and 1% of postgraduate students studied outside their state or territory of residence
- 34% of undergraduate students and 5% of postgraduate students studied via external attendance (AITSL, 2020, p. 119 & Table 5-23, p.122).

Research conducted by Boyd and Newman in 2019 found that 70% of early childhood teacher graduates intended on applying to school based roles. Indeed in 2017, 59% of early childhood graduates were employed in schools, while only 43% were employed in an early childhood setting (ACECQA 2019a).

One of the key barriers to attracting qualified early childhood teachers to work in an early childhood setting was the pay gap between teachers in an early childhood setting and primary schools. The minimum starting salary for both 'graduate' and 'proficient' primary school teachers is higher than the starting salary for a four-year university-trained early childhood teacher with the same qualifications (ACECQA 2019a). The pay gap continues to widen over years of experience as primary schools offer greater career development and remuneration than early childhood settings (Gibson & Gunn 2020). However, the FairWork Commission is exploring a new classification structure under the Education Services (Teachers) Award for early childhood teachers based on the career levels in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (FairWork Commission 2021).

The National Skills Commission's five-year employment projections show that growth in the sector will continue to increase over the five years to November 2025, with employment expected to increase by around 16,000 educators (an 11% increase) and 8,000 teachers (a 17% increase) (Labour Market Information Portal 2021). Current shortages in the workforce are reported by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment. While currently there are reported shortages of degree qualified early childhood teachers in regional NSW and South Australia, and recruitment difficulties across Tasmania (Department of Education Skills and Employment, n.d.a), shortages are likely even more widespread.

A study of 121 pre-service teachers across two universities highlighted concerns about the generalist nature of some courses, with preservice teachers in a four-year combined early childhood/primary degree reporting that the degrees at their university were too focused on primary teaching at the expense of early childhood (Boyd & Newman 2019). These “findings demonstrate that the degrees are not fulfilling the government goals for increasing early childhood teacher numbers, nor are the degrees meeting student expectation for an early childhood teaching career” (Boyd & Newman 2019, p.19). However, overall the majority of participants believed their degree provided the necessary skills for early childhood work (Boyd & Newman 2019).

The specialist expertise of early childhood teachers

Teachers’ beliefs, knowledge, and actual implementation of developmentally appropriate practices are positively correlated with early childhood education and care, and early childhood coursework.

–Manning et al. 2019, p.375

Early childhood teachers have a strong knowledge base of professional competencies, abilities and specific teaching skills, and deliver high-quality learning programs that build children’s developmental and learning outcomes.

There are two nationally approved learning frameworks for use by early childhood teachers:

- Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, describes the principles, practices and outcomes that support and enhance children’s learning from birth to five years, and through the transition to school.
- My Time, Our Place – Framework for School Age Care in Australia, is linked to the Early Years Learning Framework and extends the principles, practices and outcomes to the contexts and age range of children and young people who attend school-age care settings.

The two frameworks, which have been in use for about a decade, are currently being updated.

Nationally approved learning frameworks for early childhood education and care in Australia

🔗 <https://www.dese.gov.au/national-quality-framework-early-childhood-education-and-care>

Both the early years (Belonging, Being and Becoming) and school aged (My Time, Our Place) learning frameworks convey high expectations for all children’s play and learning activities. These expectations are described by the following outcomes (a skill, knowledge or disposition that educators can actively promote in collaboration with children and families):

- Children have a strong sense of identity

- Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- Children are confident and involved learners
- Children are effective communicators

For various reasons, some states have their own learning frameworks (ACECQA 2016; Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority 2018):

- Curriculum framework for Australian Capital Territory schools preschool to Year 10 (Australian Capital Territory)
- The Tasmanian Curriculum, the Department of Education of Tasmania, 2008 (Tasmania)
- The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (Victoria)
- The Curriculum Framework for Kindergarten to Year 12 Education in Western Australia (Western Australia)
- The Queensland kindergarten learning guideline (Queensland).

Nationally there is additional support provided by ACECQA, in collaboration with regulatory authorities, for services to meet the requirements of National Quality Standard (NQS) Quality Area 1 – Educational Program and Practice, which focuses on ensuring that the educational program and practice of educators are child-centred, stimulating and maximise opportunities for enhancing and extending each child's learning and development. The *Early Childhood Education Toolkit* summarises the evidence on 12 areas of early childhood practice where interventions are commonly considered, noting the average cost, evidence of effectiveness or months' impact (Evidence for Learning 2018).

The pedagogical aim for all early childhood teachers is to provide an educational program and practice that is stimulating and engaging, enhances children's learning and development, and meets the children's individual learning and development needs by taking into account all children's social, cultural and linguistic diversity (including learning styles, abilities, disabilities, gender, family circumstances and geographic location) (*Early Years Learning Framework*, p.24; *Framework for School Age Care*, p.41).

Early childhood teachers may be employed in a setting that practises a particular philosophical or pedagogical approach, for example, in nature-based, distance or alternative education contexts. Each of these approaches share common elements and are underpinned by play-based learning (Evidence for Learning 2018). It is via play that children build the language of learning, hear and listen to others to make meaning, and build cooperative skills (Thunder, Almarode & Hattie 2021). Like schoolteachers, early childhood teachers use both practitioner-generated evidence (information generated through daily practice like observation of children's learning and development) and research evidence to inform their practice (AERO 2021).

Roles and responsibilities of early childhood teachers

- designing, planning, implementing and evaluating educational programs and practices, including following and implementing an approved learning framework
- leading and supporting the health, wellbeing, learning and development of children
- providing pedagogical leadership
- coaching, mentoring and supervising other educators
- building and maintaining strong relationships with children and their families
- ensuring compliance with service policies and national and/or state based legislation
- supporting families to be involved in the service
- leading the delivery of National Quality Standard (NQS) requirements
- working with community members and external agencies such as allied health professionals, and
- leading and managing a variety of education and care services (ACECQA n.d.).

Leaders in early childhood settings

As an early childhood teacher in a preschool setting, the pathway to leadership can be rapid. In small, standalone or community centres, a qualified teacher may assume the role of educational leader, which is a mandated role in children's education and care services.

The educational leader has an influential role in inspiring, motivating, affirming and also challenging or extending the practice and pedagogy of educators. The role is a collaborative endeavour involving inquiry and reflection, which can significantly impact on the important work educators do with children and families.

—ACECQA 2019b

Early childhood education and care settings with an early childhood teacher in the educational leader role are more likely to be rated as Exceeding NQS (the highest quality rating). Early childhood teachers in the leadership role are found to deliver a more systematic and embedded approach to leading the pedagogical program, mentoring educators and reflecting on their role (ACECQA 2019b) .

Table 4: National Quality Standard related to leadership

National Quality Standards related to leadership

Quality Area 4: Staffing arrangements

- 4.2 Professionalism - management, educators and staff are collaborative, respectful and ethical
- 4.2.1 Professional collaboration - management, educators and staff work with mutual respect and collaboratively, and challenge and learn from each other, recognising each other's strengths and skills
- 4.2.2 Professional standards - professional standards guide practice, interactions and relationships

Quality Area 7: Governance and leadership

- 7.2 Leadership - effective leadership builds and promotes a positive organisational culture and professional learning community
- 7.2.2 Educational leadership - the educational leader is supported and leads the development and implementation of the educational program and assessment and planning cycle.
- 7.2.3 Development of professionals - educators, coordinators and staff members' performance is regularly evaluated and individual plans are in place to support learning and development

Leaders in early childhood settings may perform a variety of roles and engage with a range of stakeholders. This variety in leadership responsibilities is related to both the type of early childhood setting and its place in the community. For example, the early childhood leader in community settings may be solely responsible for receiving, interpreting, and enacting policy, supported by a volunteer management committee. On the other hand, the early childhood leader in a large centre works with a diverse range of staff members, and a wide set of external stakeholders and agencies.

The Educational Leader Resource

Produced by ACECQA in 2019, [this resource](#) clarifies what is expected of educational leaders in early childhood settings. It provides practical advice on continuous improvement and personal development and reflection.

Being a leader involves

- leading others
- leading practice
- leading change

- leading professional learning, language and thinking
- leading and embedding ethical practice
- building a professional identity as an educational leader
- building respectful relationships with knowledge of power dimensions
- building relational trust with the educator team
- mentoring and collaborating with educators

Like school teachers, early childhood teachers can apply to become Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers (HALT) (AITSL 2012). To become a HALT, early childhood teachers in non-school settings are required to work with their setting's supervisor, the person taking responsibility for the day-to-day management of their work and assessing their performance. In the same way, school-based teachers work with their Principal (AITSL 2012).

Challenges facing early childhood teachers

Like all teachers, early childhood teachers face a raft of challenges – some common across the education profession and others unique to the specific settings and circumstances of early childhood education in Australia. For instance, professional isolation is a challenge faced by many early childhood teachers, who may be the only degree-qualified teacher in their workplace, and may take on significant responsibilities including supervising and mentoring other educators and leading educational programs in their setting. Early childhood teachers also face funding constraints, shortage of casual and relief teachers, lack of tailored professional learning, lack of collegial interaction and time constraints.

Regulatory framework for early childhood teachers

The flip side of the focus on quality in the early years is that the early childhood education sector is highly regulated (which can also be said of the education sector more broadly). While this is appropriate given the age and vulnerability of these children, it can lead to tension for early childhood teachers and leaders between prioritising learning and development and tasks related to compliance such as staffing ratios, record keeping, and the many guidelines that can dominate the daily mindset of staff. In addition, this form of quality (structural quality) is relatively easy to monitor or inspect, as opposed to the equally important focus on process quality, the “learning opportunities available to the children, and teacher-child and peer-to-peer interactions within the ECEC environment” (Manning et al. 2019, p.373). Both elements of quality, structural and process, are articulated in the NQF.

Lack of recognition

Like all professions recognition of a job well done is important to all early childhood teachers. Early childhood teachers report feeling they are not valued as full members of the teaching profession and that their wellbeing is not considered in the workplace (Jackson 2020b). Research by Press et al., conducted in 2020 suggests that the skills and knowledge of early childhood teachers is often underestimated and contested (Press et al. 2020). To fix these perceptions, the NQF aims to radically transform of the early childhood workforce in Australia, by increasing awareness that the work of educating young children is complex and requires enhanced qualifications and ongoing professional development (Standing Council of School Education and Early Childhood 2012; Jackson 2017).

One of the most tangible forms of recognition in any profession is salary. In many cases, early childhood teachers are paid less than teachers in primary schools with the same early childhood qualifications. Addressing this inequity and investing in the early childhood sector will reinforce the long-term value of high-quality early childhood education and care (Pascoe & Brennan 2017, p.8).



📌 Early childhood teachers are paid less than teachers in primary schools with the same early childhood qualifications – addressing this disparity will help to reinforce the value of quality early childhood education within society.

Attracting teachers to the workforce

Increased demand for university-qualified early childhood staff puts pressure on teacher training institutions.

–AITSL 2020

The quality initiatives implemented in the early childhood sector are all dependent on a strong professional workforce. Attracting and retaining qualified educators is a challenge for some areas of Australia with high turnover of early childhood teachers (Elliot 2016). It is possible that

qualification requirements in the NQF have made it more difficult for services to attract and retain sufficient staff (due to the increased education requirements and corresponding time/financial impact on individuals wanting to join the profession), which may create staff shortages in parts of Australia (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 2018; Productivity Commission 2015).

The shortage of qualified early childhood teachers is acute in areas where quality is most important, for instance, low socio-economic, rural and remote and special needs. This leads to inequity whereby children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to attend high-quality early childhood programs (Cloney et al. 2016).

Current data suggests a lack of diversity in the early childhood workforce, which has historically been female/volunteer driven (Gibson & Gunn 2020). Given the diversity of the students under their care, having a more diverse workforce can improve the learning outcomes of the students and help avoid discrimination (Buckskin 2016). For example, increasing the number of male teachers provides children and families with more role models, and challenges negative stereotypes of early childhood education as 'women's work' (Lucas 2020). Also increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in the early childhood workforce is particularly important given the potential for high quality early education to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, who are twice as likely as other children to be developmentally vulnerable when they start school.

There is a need for strong and enabled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander designed, managed and delivered early years services that is culturally grounded, holistic and responsive to the needs of children and families.

–SNAICC n.d.

Supporting Aboriginal children: Running a deadly service

Resources for early childhood and care services teaching Aboriginal children produced by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) and NSW Government.

☑ [Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children](#)

Resources to support Koorie-inclusive early childhood education and care services produced by the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc (VAEAI).

☑ [Aboriginal early childhood cultural protocols](#)

☑ [Walking Together: An inclusion support and protocols resource for generalist ECEC services](#)

Conclusion

Having quality early childhood education sets the foundation for a child's social, emotional, and academic development. Early childhood teachers contribute as full members of the teaching profession and have valuable expertise on how best to advocate for children and families, as well as child-centred pedagogy and holistic development. Early childhood teachers can enjoy rewarding and flexible careers spanning diverse settings and specialised contexts. Australia has many mechanisms to maintain high quality early childhood education, with an emphasis on quality early childhood teachers. While early childhood teachers face challenges, they are critical to the future of Australian education.

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Footnotes

1. Source: ABS Labour Force Survey. Please note that due to the unprecedented changes in labour market indicators as a result of COVID-19, the ABS ceased the publication of trend estimates in March 2020, which have in the past been a key component for the employment projections. Seasonally adjusted data, which are more volatile, have been used instead. This ongoing uncertainty and volatility in the labour market and the cessation of the ABS trend series introduce more uncertainty to the employment projections than existed in previous years. For more information, visit <https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx>
2. While the age range for 'early childhood' can vary, extensive research has shown that the period between birth to eight years is a critical and sensitive time for children's learning and development. Research underscores the importance of targeted, high-quality strategies and programs during this period for improving child development outcomes (DET, 2016; COAG, 2009).
3. A provider approved under the Family Assistance Law provides childcare in one or more of its services and receives and passes on Child Care Subsidy payments to eligible families to reduce the cost of childcare. For more information visit: <https://www.dese.gov.au/information-resources-child-care-providers>
4. Rice et al. used the early childhood categories as per the Eurostat data collection on education statistics (UOE 2018) which recognises two categories of International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level 0 programmes: a) early childhood educational development: younger children (in the age range of 0 to 2 years), and b) pre-primary education from age 3 years to the start of primary education (Eurostat 2016). For consistency with Australian terminology these categories have been re-labelled as a) early childhood education and care (ECEC) or childcare service; and b) preschool.