

## **"Burnout central": Australian early childhood educational leaders' experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic**

**Marg Rogers**

*University of New England, Australia*

**Wendy Boyd**

*Southern Cross University, Australia*

**Margaret Sims**

*Macquarie University, Australia*

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a major disrupter in the Australian early childhood education (ECE) sector. ECE educators had to respond quickly to frequent surprises and risky challenges. Their stressful, exhausting experiences as they constantly managed change are explored in this paper. The study used an interpretive social constructionist approach to interview six ECE leaders in order to construct a shared understanding of their beliefs and experiences during this time. The results indicate an increased risk of mental and physical health problems, and some impaired service quality. Although the results are indicative of historical treatment, the consequences of government neglect have resulted in a staffing crisis and closed services. Lessons need to be learned in how we treat educators and services if we want future generations of children educated and cared for by resilient educators who are not at risk of feeling they are in "burnout central".

### **Introduction**

Australian early childhood education (ECE) educators experienced major upheavals during the first 16 months (March 2020 - July 2021) of the Covid-19 pandemic when they became an essential service (Thorpe, et al., 2020). The constant surprises and unexpected challenges made the 16 months exhausting and not something they elected to endure. Government supports available for schools were often not afforded to ECE services, meaning their experiences were more difficult to endure.

Australian early childhood educators were not alone on this journey. Across the world research has shown that early childhood educators have been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic (Gromada et al., 2020; Hughes, 2020; Jalongo, 2021; Murray et al., 2022; OECD, 2020; Park et al., 2021; Pattnaik & Jalongo, 2022; Rothe et al., 2022). As an example: Jalongo (2021) identified that the pandemic threatened the wellness and quality of life of ECE educators as they struggled to develop different teaching approaches; and support families. Jalongo's study was conducted in 89 countries, March of 2020, when the pandemic was only three months old. Rothe et al. (2022) conducted an investigation of ten countries governments' responses to the pandemic. They found that governments mostly were unresponsive to the impact upon young children and ECE educators. A comparative study of five countries on the impact of Covid-19 recommended governments and early childhood educators focus on children's rights to ensure they are maintained throughout the pandemic (Park et al., 2021), while Murray et al.'s (2022) Australian study highlighted that educators were able to articulate how their wellbeing was

impacted as a result of the pandemic. While these studies highlight similarities of ECE educator experiences around the world, Australia had its own unique experiences leading up to the pandemic and in the way the government has responded to the sector. This is because the pandemic in Australia was preceded by a period of significant and, in places, catastrophic, droughts and bushfires which devastated livelihoods, resilience resulting in loss of lives, livelihoods and whole communities (Rothe et al., 2022; Sims et al., 2022). Thus, an examination of how the ECE sector experienced the pandemic as one more trauma in a series of traumas provides an opportunity to explore resilience and coping strategies.

## **Australian context**

Due the drought, bushfires and floods, ECE educators were supporting children, families and staff who had experienced trauma and many years of stress. While bushfires were still wreaking havoc, Australia got its first Covid-19 infection on 25 January 2020 (Hunt, 2020). Once community transmission started, Australia closed external borders on 20 March 2020 and quarantined those who came into the country. Community transmission meant social distancing measures came into effect on 21 March 2020, when much of the country was in lockdown or restrictions, depending on which jurisdiction they were in (Wahlquist, 2020). State borders closed, causing challenges for families, businesses and farms near the border, and interstate travel was only available with compassionate grounds or work permits. During this time, only workers who were considered by the government to be essential were allowed to go to work (*ABC News*, 2020). Many parents worked from home and removed their children from childcare and school (Wahlquist, 2020). Home schooling for school students occurred with the use of online resources (Gaipov & Brownhill, 2021) whereas children's education in ECE services varied greatly. Eventually restrictions were eased in many states, and then re-imposed during outbreaks of different virus strains. Most state borders were re-opened and closed again depending on infection numbers. Childcare and school attendance increased as restrictions eased in most areas of Australia, however, some families continued to keep their children at home when they could.

## **Australian EC education during the pandemic**

From the start of the pandemic, ECE education was viewed as essential, and services were told to stay open during the national lockdown that began in March 2020 (Logan et al., 2021; Mortimer, 2020). This was quite different to the treatment of schools and other educational institutions that were closed and moved completely to online learning, even though school teachers, too, had to pivot the way they taught to continue to provide education for their students (Davis & Phillips, 2020). Attendance in ECE services dropped because only essential workers were allowed to use childcare, meaning most casual educators were stood down.

Australia has a large pool of early childhood educators who are employed on a casual basis that services rely on to meet the child to staff ratio to deliver the early childhood program (Irvine, et al., 2016). In June 2020, most casual ECE educators were eligible to get a

government assistance payment called *Jobkeeper*. The lockdowns and restrictions impacted the availability of casual ECE educators in two ways. Firstly, many casual ECE educators left the sector entirely, and secondly, other casuals did not accept work when it was eventually offered for fear of losing the *Jobkeeper* payment because it was higher than what they normally earned. A survey of 747 educators representing 3,300 sites (mainly in Victoria and NSW) revealed 50% of services reported an increase in staff turnover caused 'predominately by a lack of access to casuals causing additional stress' (CELA et al., 2021, p. 5). Almost half of advertised positions in 2021 were unfilled which had an ongoing effect on existing staff as they tried to do extra work to compensate (CELA et al., 2021).

Despite the provisions of their Awards requiring agreements to alter working arrangements to be negotiated without coercion, and to be recorded in writing, many ECE educators experienced significant increases in their workload without receiving appropriate recognition (Rothe et al., 2022; Sims et al., 2022). For example, a survey of ECE educators by Berger et al. (2020) reported the following comments:

The extra work that has had to occur from behind the scenes with staffing and rostering and children's numbers lowering, ensuring staff morale is maintained and anxieties are addressed. It's all been overwhelming at times (p. 302).

The CELA et al. (2021) study revealed almost 40% of participants reported additional sick leave due to mental health and exhaustion, and 37% reported staff having time off to test for Covid and isolate for 14 days. Additionally, in a study of 4,000 Australian ECE educators revealed 73% of workers indicated that overwork and time pressure was a reason they wanted to leave the sector (United Workers Union, 2021). The United Workers Union (2021) survey of 4000 workers revealed 47% of educators felt undervalued, a finding echoed in the Murray et al. (2022) Australian study of early childhood educators' wellbeing. Exhaustion and feelings of being undervalued led many educators to feel they were in "burnout central". Being undervalued was evident in the different way ECE services and schools were treated during the pandemic, which for many ECE educators highlighted their feelings of being undervalued. Schools were closed and educators pivoted their teaching to online (Davis & Phillips, 2020) but ECE services were encouraged to remain open. Another challenge for ECE educators was their marginalised voice because they are not unified by a particular employer or union, unlike school teachers who have state-wide unions in public schools. Being underpaid and overworked reduces capacity to mobilise, speak out and be heard (Rogers, 2022; Sims et al., 2022).

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is the peak professional body for ECE educators. They provide professional development resources for ECE educators, publish Australian ECE research, and advise government. When the first pandemic lockdowns occurred in Australia, ECA consulted with the government, especially when subsidies for childcare were offered (ECA, 2020). During the pandemic, they published a special issue of their regular magazine for educators, *Every Child* (ECA, 2020), specifically to thank ECE educators working on the frontline during the pandemic. They published stories about how the sector had been impacted by the pandemic, and provided information for ECE

educators on how to support families during the pandemic. While these supports were welcome and useful, they did not carry the same weight as a sector wide union to protect workers conditions and rights.

Logan et al. (2021) found that ECE educators were psychologically affected, particularly in the anxiety involved with the perceived risks of being exposed to the Covid virus on the front line. These traumatic effects were particularly acute at the start of the pandemic, according to Logan et al. (2021). Additionally, moral injury was discovered when ECE educators were given government or management directives to operate the service in a way that went against their professional beliefs, for example, a lack of understanding of the physical closeness children need. Educators reported feeling betrayed and undervalued by those in authority (e.g. the government and policymakers). They were made to work on the frontline, but were not afforded protective equipment and Covid-safe trained cleaners. These feelings of moral injury were important considering the long term impacts 'include guilt, shame, anxiety, depression and anger' (Logan et al., 2021, p. 315).

Twice during the pandemic, the sector received government assistance because services were affected by low enrolments (Noble, 2020). At one stage, the government made childcare free, meaning some families were able to use childcare for the first time (Grattan, 2020). But this free access to childcare was withdrawn in mid-2021 (Department of Education, 2022). While this context is useful to understand what happened in the Australian ECE sector, further research was needed to increase our understanding of the experience of educational leaders during the pandemic. To address this gap, the authors designed a study to give voice to their experiences and beliefs.

## Method

This study uses an interpretive ontology that posits that reality does not exist independently. Instead, reality is created by each human being. We used a social constructionist epistemology to accompany this ontology, where we position truth as something that is constructed by humans in their social world. Within this world, humans interpret their experiences. Humans' social world impacts how individuals construct truth. Individuals and the social world therefore impact the construction of each person's truth. In order to understand our participants' truth, in-depth interviews with six leaders from their services were conducted individually via video conferencing due to the pandemic. The leaders from various regional NSW locations included directors of community preschools and long daycare services, and a business leader in a family daycare service (Table 1). In this way, we came to a shared understanding with each participant of their perspectives.

Our six participants (all women) were selected using the following criteria:

1. They were the leader of a New South Wales ECE service that operated during the lockdown periods and continued to operate from March 2020 to September 2021; and
2. They were willing to spend time with one research team member to undertake the interview.

Table 1: Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Service type	Position
Alice	Community preschool	Educational leader
Bev	Long daycare	Director
Casie	Long daycare	Director
Dana	Community preschool	Director
Evie	Family daycare	Business manager
Franky	Community preschool	Director

Human Research Ethics Committee approval was gained from the lead university, University of New England. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time and they were informed that their identity would be protected. Firstly, we developed a conceptual framework from the literature which identified what we believed to be the ways in which the pandemic impacted on the work of ECE professionals and our own experiences (Figure 1).

This framework was used to guide the development of the semi-structured interview questions and the analysis. Permission was gained from the participants to record the interviews, and transcription of the interviews occurred. Each interview was analysed by two of the three researchers, identifying themes by using the conceptual framework as a guide. A second analysis involved scrutiny by the third researcher to find themes not identified in our initial conceptual framework. The revised themes were grouped into main themes A to F, as identified at the end of the data analysis. The rich data from the interviews meant that we decided to write three separate papers to highlight different major themes within the framework. This paper explores *Theme F* that explores managing change. Two other papers examined *Theme D* and *Theme E* (Boyd et al., in press; Sims et al., under review).

## Results

The major theme explored in this paper is the increased stress and effort required to manage change during the first 16 months of the pandemic as shown as *Theme F* in Figure 1. In this section, this theme is divided into the subthemes of staffing, finances, parent partnerships, deciphering and communicating health requirements, Covid-safe practices, mental and physical health risks, and managing their own risks (see *Theme A* and *Theme C* in Figure 1). The interplay between *Themes A, C and F* is evident. Additionally, many of the stresses are caused by the themes depicted in *Theme B*.

### *Staffing*

A common experience shared by the leaders was the stress associated with managing constant changes of staffing. Leaders were required to change staff rosters, work they often had to do in their own time at home. Along with this was the stress associated with reframing the work that staff did (given all enrolled children were not attending) with the aim of both maintaining some kind of service, even to those families whose children were

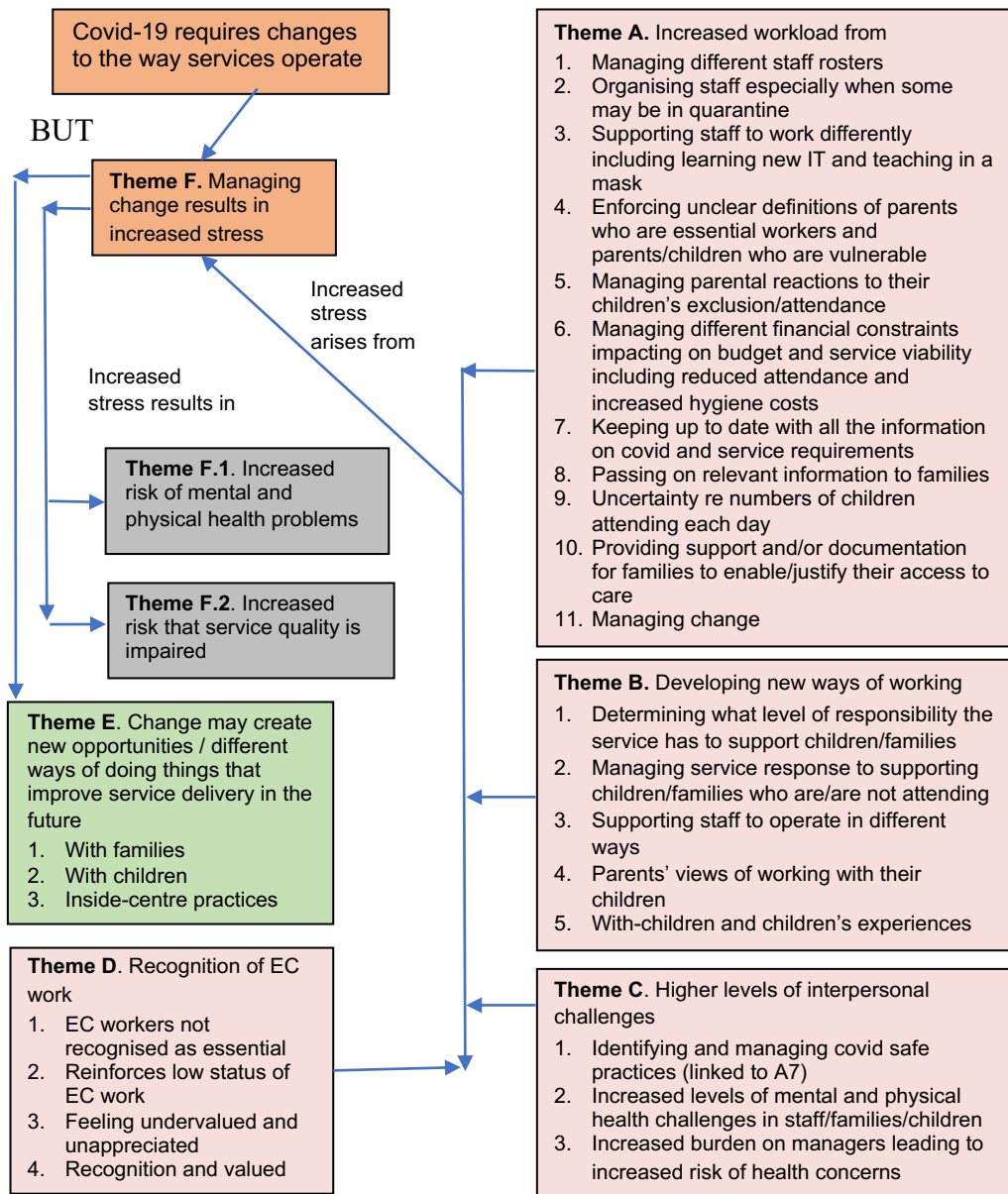


Figure 1: Conceptual framework arising from the literature and data analysis

not attending, and to justify keeping staff on the payroll. Cassie, who worked for a larger organisation said she had to work on plans to justify why she needed to keep her permanent staff employed. She said:

... I was having to write staff work from home plans as well as staff work at (the service) plans, ... to advocate for staff ..... for our value and for who we are and what we do.

Cassie further elaborated that extra work plans were needed in case they went into lockdown, and therefore needed to work remotely.

... that had to be submitted to my supervisor to justify if staff were working from home, what would they ... (be) doing....professional development ... possible Zoom meetings ... I filled in that seven-hour day.

The plans also needed to be detailed and changed to reflect the number of children attending, which varied dramatically during the various stages of the pandemic:

... that had to be kept up to date, in case at any time, things changed, and we were working from home.

...working from (the service), we actually had to plan - because ... at that initial stage [we had] 5 to 10 children. I still had to (even if they were here), ... allocate professional development, ...rotate staff... because I had to justify ... what staff (were) doing - why they were here.

Work for those staff who were delivering a service also changed and leaders experienced additional stress in managing that change. Alice identified extra rosters for cleaning as health requirements changed. Leaders identified their loyalty towards staff and shared how they tried to meet staff needs as well as the needs of children and families. For example, Evie commented on the complexity of the staff rosters regarding which staff should be working from home due to compromised health and family members who were vulnerable to adverse health risks from the virus. Clearly, the pandemic brought with it additional work for leaders who needed to manage new working conditions for their staff, new requirements for the work that staff performed and new ways of explaining and justifying the work that staff were doing. All of these changes added to the stress leaders experienced.

#### *Finances*

Managing staff was important owing to the financial fallout from the pandemic as most parents stopped sending their children to childcare during lockdowns and beyond, drastically reducing income from fees. For many services, fee income was essential to pay staff wages, and at a time of income uncertainty, the ability to cover wages for permanent staff was in jeopardy, making the position of casual employees even more precarious. Despite their goodwill, leaders were often unable to cover the cost of all their staff, increasing their own stress. Leaders reflected on the tension they experienced between their desire to support staff (particularly when they knew the devastating impact the loss of income meant for some of their staff) and the need to ensure the service did not go bankrupt. Cassie explained:

... we had this good group of casuals ... for a long time... it was very hard ... They didn't have work, so there were... some emotional times with staff, ...tears, ... "what am I gonna do now?" because we couldn't employ them.

Not all of the early childhood workers who lost their income were eligible for government payments meaning the decision making for leaders was, at times, particularly stressful. Alice shared:

We just ... stood down our casual staff, but ... most of them can access the Covid (*Jobkeeper*) payment anyway, ... but it's still difficult.

Financial planning often involved creative thinking around ways of keeping the service viable, at a time when no-one knew how long the lockdowns would be, nor how long it might be before the service was able to operate at full capacity again. Alice shared:

...we talked about how we could use different leave if we needed to, what kinds of things staff may or may not have been able to manage.

Leaders reflected on the impact of this uncertainty on them, the stress associated with not having a clear idea of numbers, of expectations and of financial stability. Dana spoke of the extra duties this financial uncertainty brought.

... when our numbers were low, ... I was constantly trying to find out what was happening, what we needed to do, what policies we needed, ... how we had to communicate with families, the board of management...

In this climate of uncertainty and financial stress, leaders identified the additional work required of themselves and their staff. For many, given financial hardship, the cost of meeting additional requirements, such as cleaning, seemed insurmountable. Alice, for example, asked for government support with the cost of cleaning:

I said (to the department)... We're actually forking out a fair bit for sanitiser and cleaning products and hand (sanitiser) ... How about ... the department ... donate some of those? ... they did.

Whilst Alice was successful in her request for additional resources, she had to experience the stress and use of her time associated with making the request and providing justification for it; an additional task added to the many extra tasks she had to face daily, increasing her stress.

Managing financial viability operated in contrast with supporting children and families. Leaders shared how they juggled these competing priorities. Alice sought support from the committee who governs the preschool to help her manage this tension:

We worked with our committee and we made a commitment .... before the state stepped in, that we would offer free preschool to our families ... even though it was going to make an impact on us ... Then ... (later) the State Government ... brought in... free preschool .... families were saying ... our space was great ...

### *Parent partnerships*

The pandemic brought with it a reduction in the numbers of children attending the service and a new expectation that services reach out to those families who were required to keep



their children at home. Whilst parent partnerships are a key element of early childhood work as identified in the *Early Years Learning Framework* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2019), reaching out to families in their homes was a new element in which few, if any, services had engaged prior to the pandemic. This new work required leaders to engage with their staff and identify what they could do, and how they could safely engage, with the resources and knowledge available to them. Again, for leaders, this reflected additional work in supporting their staff to change their thinking and practice and to ensure the relevant resources were available to engage in this new undertaking. There were many challenges and successes during this time.

Some services focused on sharing resources and information with families, mainly through online channels. Bev reflected:

... we sent them some resources for their children that we were being told about. ... (families) appreciate(d) staying connected.

Dana's service had a different response to an offer of physical resources:

A lot of our families ... didn't want us. You know we offered to do packs, we offered to ... open up ... resources for them but ... nobody wanted any of that.

Conversely, Franky's parents did appreciate different types of physical resources and communication:

... we'd send little videos and stories ... via email and ... the *Facebook* page... Last week we tried to put at least one experiment plus something else, so we had educators going around in their backyard looking for possums... Last (lockdown) it was (a)... bit of cooking, bit of science, we sent out packs of things like collage packs, play doh. We sent out packs last week with some tomato seeds to grow, some ... science experiments. ...

Alice shared the way her service was able to support parent's conversations with their children about the pandemic:

They were asking what ... we were talking (about) with the children .... We shared ... resources that we were using with them and we even supplied families with some of those ideas around how to talk to their children (about the pandemic).

In addition to managing contact with families in their homes, leaders were required to manage access for those families who met mandated participation requirements. In a sense, leaders were required to police access to ensure that those families still using the face-to-face service met the mandated participation requirements. This placed them in a different kind of relationship with parents than they had experienced previously and many reported this as particularly stressful. Bev commented on the challenges and strategies in making the rules clearer about inclusion and exclusion of children, then enforcing them:

Let's just make this line a bit clearer, let's just emphasise this. .. what if you've just got a runny nose? We've got no other symptoms...referencing Department of Health, Department of Education ... I'm not the police ... the government is... asking us to enact

[the rules]. I ... think staff were a bit heartened by that ... It's not me doing it to you because I want to be an awful person.

Bev's words identify the tension experienced by many leaders around their need to act in a policing role and their requirements in the *Early Years Learning Framework* to build trusting and respectful relationships with parents. Adding to this tension was their understanding of family circumstances and the difficulties they understood parents were facing trying to both work from home and care for their children. For example, Franky's service insisted on a strict definition of essential work:

Dad rang up and said he was getting a bit behind on his PhD, could he send his child... that doesn't count as essential work.

In contrast, Evie shared:

I got to a point where I thought, if I hear the word essential worker once more I will strangle someone.

Evie went on to say:

In terms of families and the community ... I don't believe that anyone is in a position to be able to say who does or does not need care it's not only the doctors and nurses.

Evie was different from the other leaders in taking this perspective, but this might have been an easier position to take given she was running a family day care service rather than a child care centre. Certainly, in taking this position Evie was demonstrating an ability to interpret the mandated requirements flexibly in order to support her commitment to children and families.

#### *Deciphering and communicating health requirements*

Another stress faced by leaders was the requirement to access, understand and share constantly changing advice and requirements coming from multiple sources. One key element of this was a large volume of constantly changing health requirements, shared through multiple government departments (Departments of Family and Community, Communities and Justice, and Health, for example) along with relevant peak bodies (such as Early Childhood Australia). Cassie said:

There (was) ... huge amounts of information to try and get your head around, to understand the implications and the changes in our practises. (I needed to) make sure it came from recognised authorities. .... (Initially, information was) ... through emails ... from recognised authorities ... but it's much ... more information than was (needed) ... Now ... information ... from the Department is very succinct ... "This is what you must do within this time period." ... policies, information ... I wasn't on top of it as I am now.

Information shared from departments such as Health was not always targeted specifically at Early Childhood services, thus leaders had to identify relevance, and develop their own

understanding of how the requirements applied to their service. This added to the additional work they were required to do, increasing their stress. Alice explained:

... it's difficult navigating what's happening ... We're going by what the Education Department and the Health Department are saying, but they're not necessarily specific to early childhood.

Leaders thus often sought additional information to that provided by government departments. For example, Dana reflected:

... the Department did send us emails ... I always found that they [arrived] later than the information that we had already received or gathered ourselves.

Other leaders attempted to manage the stress associated with this additional research work by approaching official sources directly. Alice revealed:

We spoke to the department early this time and said... we're getting a whole lot of different messages. What's required?

It is clear that leaders had the responsibility to seek out, understand, and often translate requirements to ensure their services were complying with changing requirements. Underpinning this, but not expressed, may have been a fear that incorrect application of unclear requirements might have jeopardised their accreditation and/or ability to operate. We argue this fear of failure added to their workload considerably, increasing their stress levels.

#### *Covid-safe practices*

Leaders were required to not only interpret Covid safe requirements not specifically designed for early childhood services, but to identify any of their normal practices that also needed modification to comply with the intention behind mandated requirements. Thus, they faced various challenges that added to their stress. For example, not mandated, but an interpretation of what was needed to operate in a Covid-safe manner was the way parents dropped their children off at the service; the aim was to avoid risks of transmission. Cassie explained how her service required parents to drop their children at the front door with an educator, rather than entering the service. She said:

.... the front door being locked (so) that we know who is in the centre, ... who they are and we (staff) can social distance.

Alice's service did something similar:

...we were fine to wear masks in and out of the service - greeting parents ... at the gate, they were handing over their children.

This is a major change from previous practice, where in many centres it was common to encourage parents to enter the service and participate in activities in the child's room in order to ensure a smooth transition from home to service. Managing this change thus

required a change in thinking for leaders who needed to share that change with staff, and support staff to enact the change. This also required a change in staff rosters as there needed to be someone available to meet the family at the door and take charge of the child. This was not able to be the child's key educator so, for the child, the transition may have become more difficult. This also meant that parents may not have contact with their child's key educator to share information. An alternative developed by some leaders was to allow parents to enter the service, but to ensure social distancing applied. Dana explained:

... one person (only) could come in, but we changed our environment so that ... we could keep that 2.5 metres away from each other.

This change in practice may seem minor but for leaders and staff it required a major shift in thinking about transitions and maintaining relationships with families, both key elements of good practice as identified in the *Early Years Learning Framework*. Such changes in practice are associated with higher levels of stress.

There were occasions when parents needed to enter the service and this required leaders to organise the state government QR code check in system; again, additional work for leaders to organise this and to ensure that compliance was monitored. Cassie shared:

... parents have to use that QR code and so do casual staff, unless you are a permanent staff member and use your staff card ...

There were other changes in practice required and leaders needed to identify what these were, and work with staff to make them happen in a way most efficient for their service. Cassie discussed handwashing:

Handwashing happens everywhere we've ... got the stations (to) encourage staff- ...signage ... (has) changed

One of the key COVID safe strategies required was mask wearing. Alice talked about the challenges of wearing a mask with young children:

It came in that you ... wear ... mask(s)... inside when you were working with children, unless there was a child with a hearing challenge or there was a specific need for a child to see your face moving. I said to staff ...that's all children all of the time. ... I felt it's really difficult ... having a mask covering your face. You can't see the nuances. ... [that's] really tricky for children.

...we were fortunate ... we've got a big outdoor area ... well-ventilated classroom(s), ... I sometimes wonder about the people making these decisions at a level that aren't ... on the floor ...

Such changes in practice were often experienced as stressful by all: children, parents and staff. All stakeholders were likely to feel anxious about the risks of transmission and the need to remain safe. Alice shared:

... you can never actually say a space is completely safe and we tried to ... share that...with families, that to the best of our ability we would follow all the protocols .... We shared that with children and we talked about the importance of ... hygiene practices...

...we ...look(ed) at the different needs of the team and ... make ... it so that it wasn't more work, but then (staff)... were actually getting what they needed out of that ... making sure that there was supplies ... of sanitiser or the materials that we used to clean ... non-toxic...so that ... they could visibly see ...we were prepared ... that made a difference.

Bev also highlighted the need to keep families and staff calm:

...we really tightened up our infection control policy ... (we are) very clear about children who can come and can't come when you're sick or not sick. I think that was good for staff.

... it took us about three or four goes to get the infection control, .... I'm actually redoing it again... there (were) ...so many reviews of that last year, every couple of months.

Dana talked about decision making as a team to keep staff safe as well as utilising extra staff doing jobs that volunteer parents had once done because ECE services were not given extra hours of cleaning services as NSW schools were:

.... as a team (we) ...looked at what strategies we might need to implement... regarding children coming back...the health guidelines, ... keeping ourselves safe ...how much change... to our daily routine as far as cleaning. How will we .... maintain that?

... we were really lucky... we have a very supportive board of management ... we looked (at)... how we were going to manage this...We needed to ... have extra staffing to do it, and so we were able to employ somebody, ... to start earlier so that ...there was a role, we shared the role, but we actually had the person that we could release to be able to go around (and) wipe surfaces ... and document all of that.

... we usually have ... families helping out so, ... we as educators took on those extra roles ... we used our washing machine and became washerwomen too.

All these changes in practice increased stress levels for all those involved but leaders were particularly susceptible as they carried the responsibility of ensuring the service operated legally, effectively and safely whilst still meeting the needs of children, families and staff. Along with this was the additional stress of needing to be prepared should a lockdown be imposed at little or no notice. Leaders shared their inability to relax. For example, Cassie talked about the need to be hyper-vigilant, to carry a list of phone numbers of staff, educators, families, cleaners, and the wider organisation in case of closure:

I now carry phone numbers with me (up to date) within the 24-hour period. If we got a...message tonight to say we can't come to work tomorrow 'cause there's a case. I would have to have that on me.

*Mental and physical health risks*

Anxiety about the pandemic, the risk of exposure, and the hardships associated with lockdown and restricted access to services increased stress levels for parents, children and staff. Leaders shared their feelings of responsibility in ameliorating this anxiety where they could. Alice revealed how she helped to reduce staff anxieties about risks to their health:

Staff members that wanted things cleaned twice a day, when normally... once... We were okay with that.

Dana talked of the need for two-way communication and trust with families:

... 'cause it was a long weekend, ... (I sent) an email out on Friday to say if you're travelling ... and you are going to a hotspot .... or somewhere please let us know.

Dana also said families were helpful in reducing risks:

... I've had families ring this week (and) say ... we're sick, going in to have a Covid test... I think it's because it's ... what society expects.

Cassie revealed the extra stresses some staff carried, especially those who were immune compromised or lived with vulnerable family members. This was highlighted when new families came to the centre when free childcare was introduced:

Yes, they were stressed - they were concerned about themselves, (and) their family. I had older staff, ... Indigenous staff ... trying to support ... and care for them.

Franky discussed the different way she approached the various lockdowns to minimise risks to staff:

The first time around, we asked parents to keep the children ... home and then started implementing some remote learning. This time it's been a lot different because the community's been locked down ... it was ... providing more remote learning and support, this time has been a lot more stressful ... a lot of parents were wanting to bring their children and didn't really get ... that we are trying to protect educators, as well as ... other children, as well as the community.

... last time we found people are just getting through the doors and while we can see them coming in once they're in it's harder to say well actually (you) can't come today, ... then you have meltdowns with the children.

Alice highlighted the risks for her staff and families:

Because we're a large service, there's capacity for transmission ... lots [of people] ... coming in and out. Children go home. They've got siblings at school. They've got other families ... and grandparents ... work people.

*Managing their own risks*

All of this additional work, responsibility and uncertainty impacted the leaders. Franky revealed risks to leaders' health and mental health through exhaustion:

The Department of Education regularly send SMS and email updates late on Friday afternoons and Sunday nights and then today ran a Covid webinar while community educators were on annual leave.... No wonder we are burnt out when even our weekends and annual leave are interrupted.

Cassie talked of her hyper-vigilance, worrying about the service going into lockdown and not having her list of contacts 24 hours a day, and other stresses with staff:

No, I'm still there (on high alert). (I) look at the news and see there's a case in Sydney, (and I think) OK, which parents (might have been there).

Franky shared:

I think it's just ... overload... it's just a matter of getting through to the other side .... climb through all the information ... hyper vigilance -what's going to happen tomorrow?... it's always a bit like that in this role, but it's amplified when you've got to be... the policeman.

Whilst acknowledging the additional stress they experienced, few leaders shared any positive strategies they used to manage this stress. An exception was Bev who reflected:

I guess it comes down to how we talk about dispositions ... you need to have your own good health and wellbeing or you're not going to be any good to anybody.

Thus, the data exposed the various themes encountered by the leaders. To bring *Theme A* and *Theme C* (from Figure 1) together, the next section discusses the risks they pose to mental and physical health, and the risk to the quality of education and care (*Theme F*).

## Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that the additional requirements imposed on ECE leaders to keep their services operating during the pandemic caused ongoing additional stress that posed a risk to their own health. There is considerable research identifying the high risk to health and wellbeing of chronic stress and the allostatic load that this stress generates in the body (see for example, Gustafsson, et al., 2010; Liu et. al., 2020; Arifi et al., 2022). For Australian early childhood leaders, the combination of the pandemic, bush fires and floods over several years have significantly increased the risk of chronic stress related physical and mental illness.

There is also evidence that chronic stress impacts on the ways in which females interact with babies (Scatliffe et al., 2019), suggesting that it is possible that the chronic stress experienced by leaders could reduce the quality of their practice with children. The health requirements associated with the pandemic also posed a risk to the quality of their service because of the extra time that was taken away from other tasks that are essential for

quality education and care. These requirements included cleaning, implementing Covid-safe practices, additional record keeping, rosters (justification of staff), and deciphering and disseminating information resulted in many doing additional ‘voluntary’ work. This work was necessarily ‘voluntary’ because many services were operating well below service capacity (many were open for children of essential workers only) and whilst there was some funding provided by government to enable them to remain open, many were struggling to retain their staff due to the financial constraints. This reinforces the findings of other studies that demonstrated for many the financial juggle was extremely stressful for leaders, as identified by Quiñones et al (2022): *‘I have worked many, many additional (unpaid) hours to ensure that my centre remains viable’* (p. 99).

The findings indicated that the mixed messaging about essential work and essential workers added to the stresses the ECE leaders faced. The government told the public that childcare services needed to stay open to care for healthcare workers’ children. This meant they were viewed as essential but did not benefit from the terminology of essential worker, and thus did not have a change in status of their work, nor their place in society (Jagers, 2020). This was shown in the continuation of low pay which is the 13<sup>th</sup> lowest in Australia (Indeed, 2022; Payscale, 2021). Indeed, there was no increase in pay or conditions despite the health risks to themselves and their family by working on the front line (Kerrissey & Hammond, 2020). This was echoed in other studies, such as Berger et al. (2022).

We as educators haven't been acknowledged as much as others in the media. Each night we hear about the “heroes” of the pandemic, such as medical personnel, cleaners, and now even courier drivers are considered heroes of the pandemic. And the attention that primary/secondary teachers have also received, again very well deserved, but we are also teachers. It would be nice to be acknowledged and celebrated as much as our primary/secondary counterparts (pp. 302-303).

Logan, et al.’s (2021) study of five ECE leaders discovered ‘educator well-being was negatively impacted by exposure to physical risk, fear and anxiety, financial stress and feelings of betrayal’ (p. 309). That sense of betrayal was echoed in the data from this study when leaders were having to decipher and disseminate government requirements in their own time. The lack of respect governments displayed in giving them information late on Friday afternoons, on Sunday evenings and during enforced leave periods reinforced the feelings of betrayal. There was an expectation that the changes needed to be read, understood and enacted by the next working day, so this meant extra work at home.

These feelings of betrayal were also evident when children were able to return to the EC services (encouraged by the provision of free child care whilst government Covid support funding remained available), EC professionals hoped that their work with children would be more highly valued. Craig (2020) pointed out: “The coronavirus crisis has made brutally clear that care work, both paid and unpaid, is fundamental to our economic and social survival” (p. 4), a sentiment also echoed by Burgess, Rogers and Jeffries (2022). However, many experienced a reversal of the hoped-for improved valuation of their work as parents struggled with the increased health restrictions and their need to continue



working. Children presenting with what were likely to be normal colds and seasonal allergies, for example, were usually sent home, requiring parents to make alternative care arrangements or remain home themselves. This was dependent on whether they had sufficient sick leave owing to them, the flexibility to take time off work or the ability to work from home – the latter not always possible particularly for parents in essential service sectors such as health care. The findings of this study that educators' wellbeing was impacted during the global pandemic echo other studies – see for example Davis and Phillips, (2020); Gromada et al., (2020); Hughes, (2020); Jalongo, (2021); Murray et al., (2022); Park et al., (2021); Rothe et al., (2022), Sims et al., (2022).

The educational leaders in this study found it stressful to balance the health risks of their staff, themselves, other children and families with the needs of the families who were wanting care. Having to act as quasi health professionals and police in these matters was very challenging to leaderships' ongoing partnerships with parents. This requirement forced changes in practice and a tension between what had previously been identified as good practice in parental relationship building and practices required as Covid-safe. Some leaders focused more strongly on compliance to Covid-safe requirements whilst one took a different view of required safe practices. Questioning practice and changing established patterns of practice are stressful as they require a re-imagining of understandings and priorities (Kern & Zapf, 2021). Leaders were required to not only manage their feelings around the changes but support their staff to manage their reactions to, and compliance with, the changes made to practices.

The frustration, anger and solidarity, echoed by Quinoñes et al., (2020) was summed up by Alice in this study:

... I think it's a good opportunity for the policymakers and the leaders to ... have a ... voice for us ... and ... show that we are out here. We're visible ....everyone's doing the best job they can ... my hat goes off ... to ... my colleagues.

### **Need for further research**

The results in this study reveal the toll the pandemic has taken on leaders in the ECE sector. Further research into ECE educators within these services who are not leaders would be interesting, to explore how their experiences differ to the leaders in this study. Research with larger numbers of leaders could potentially identify new themes and confirm existing ones raised in this paper. A larger study might be used to formulate a list of recommendations for government agencies and policy makers. Additionally, exploration of the pre-existing stresses ECE educators face that were exacerbated during the pandemic would be worthwhile.

### **Conclusion**

The work of all six ECE leaders was profoundly impacted by the pandemic in the 16 months covered by this study. The leaders had different experiences and beliefs within the various service types and communities during this time period; however, common themes

emerged. One theme was the constant and consistent need to manage change in the service as they scrambled to keep track of daily changes to the health requirements as their communities went in and out of lockdown. The constant changes affected their mental and physical health and that of their staff. At times, this also put the quality of their service at risk through this exhaustion, the impact of chronic stress on their capacity to deliver a quality service, and the extra work required that detracted from what they normally do. Overall, educators felt they were in “burnout central” with no clear idea of when the extreme stress and exhaustion would end. Early childhood educators are at significant risk of burnout that was heightened during the pandemic. A systematic review into the determinants of burnout and the effectiveness of interventions in early childhood education found that ‘weak or incoherent organisational structure, weak professional relationships, [and] low professional status’ were determinants of burnout (Ng, Rogers & McNamara, 2023, p. 173). During the pandemic an incoherent structure was evident due to constantly changing health requirements, and relationships might have been harder to maintain with staff in and out of the workplace due to lockdowns. Additionally, educators were subjected to constant reminders about their low status due to their invisibility in media reporting.

Despite attempts to professionalise the Australian early childhood sector, including efforts to improve educators’ qualifications (Thorpe, et al., 2020), the sector is in crisis. The plan to increase qualifications did not coincide with a plan for more pay and better conditions (Thorpe, et al., 2020). A brutally honest participant in the CELA et al. (2021) summarised this by saying

Who would want to work in a minimum paying job pay \$3000-5000 for ... a Cert 3. ... study again whilst working full time ... (pay) another \$5,000-\$10,000 .... (for more study).

Unfortunately, staff turnover has imposed cost on governments because they contribute to the training of educators. Importantly, it also has a toll on staff, family and children. As one educator from the CELA et al. (2021) study noted

When continuity of care is interrupted because of staff turnover, it is impossible to build this type of relationship ... children ... (and) families, ... (feel) insecure and anxious because of a lack of consistency and continuity of care ... their wellbeing is compromised (p. 17).

Early childhood ‘education and care services are considered vital as we move into the post-COVID economy’ (CELA et al., 2021, p. 10). The ongoing effects of the pandemic have taken their toll on ECEs with chronic staff shortages occurring across Australia. By 2022, Lucas (2022) reported on the doubling of early childhood job advertisements. The stresses have been ongoing because the pandemic has been with us for a number of years and are experienced post and concurrent with other traumas including bush fires and floods, and the impact of these traumas is unlikely to abate quickly. Ongoing neglect of the sector has had serious consequences that have worsened during the pandemic. Government departments, agencies and policy makers need to learn from these events so they are better able to support a sector that is in crisis. The government needs to offer fee

support to encourage people into the industry, and some state governments have done this already (e.g. NSW and Victoria).

However, to retain educators, the government needs to fix working conditions and award rates that value the emotional cost of caring and the risks it brings to educators' mental health (Rogers, Jeffries & Ng, 2022). There have also been calls for funded peer mentoring support programs available in Canada (Doan, 2016; Rogers, Doan & Bhullar, 2023). A systematic review found that intervention programs that included coaching and reflection were effective interventions to reduce educator burnout (Ng, Rogers & McNamara, 2023). Our educators need to have reasonable levels of wellbeing and be well-prepared in order to engage in high quality interactions with children, the hallmark of quality education. Our children deserve the best education and our educators deserve much, much more from our government to not only survive, but thrive. As Alice stated:

We have to stand up and really shout out to the policymakers and the government that it's fine to call on us, great, and we keep answering, but you'd better show us some respect.

## References

- ABC News (2020). Self isolation, quarantine, stay-at-home directions — what does each one mean for you? *ABC News*, 25 July. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-25/self-isolation-quarantine-stay-at-home-order-coronavirus/12488100>
- Arifi, D., Bitterlich, N., von Wolff, M., Poethig, D. & Stute, P. (2022). Impact of chronic stress exposure on cognitive performance incorporating the active and healthy aging (AHA) concept within the cross-sectional Bern Cohort Study 2014 (BeCS-14). *Archives of Gynecology and Obstetrics*, 305(4), 1021-1032. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00404-021-06289-z>
- Atilas, J. T., Almodóvar, M., Chavarría Vargas, A., Dias, M. J. A. & Zúñiga León, I. M. (2021). International responses to COVID-19: Challenges faced by early childhood professionals. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 29(1), 66-78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2021.1872674>
- Berger, E., Quiñones, G., Barnes, M. & Reupert, A. (2022). Early childhood educators' psychological distress and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 60, 298-306. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2022.03.005>
- Boyd, W., Rogers, M. & Sims, M. (in press). New ways of working and new opportunities: Early childhood leader's professional practice post-COVID. In K. Marsh-Davies & C. Burnett (Eds.), *Teacher identities and teacher practices post-COVID*. Taylor & Francis.
- Burgess, S., Rogers, M., & Jeffries, D. (2022). Empathy and narrative: A discussion of contemporary stories from education and health. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 14(5), 631-646. <https://www.iejee.com/index.php/IEJEE/article/view/1854/594>
- CELA (Community Early Learning Australia), ELAA (Early Learning Association Australia) & CCC (Community Child Care Association) (2021). *Investing in our future: Growing the education and care workforce*.

- <https://www.cela.org.au/CELA/Publications/Reports/Investing-in-our-Future-25-Nov-2021.pdf>
- Davis, S. & Phillips, L. G. (2020). Teaching during COVID-19 times - The experiences of drama and performing arts teachers and the human dimensions of learning. *Drama Australia Journal*, 44(2), 65-87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14452294.2021.1943838>
- Department of Education (2022). *COVID-19 and early childhood education and care*. Australian Government. <https://www.education.gov.au/covid-19/childcare>
- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2019). *Belonging, being and becoming. The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. [V2.0, 2022] <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/EYLF-2022-V2.0.pdf>
- Doan, L. K. (2016). The early years: Beginning early childhood educators' induction experiences and needs in British Columbia. *Journal of childhood studies*, 43-54.
- Early Childhood Australia (2020). *Every Child*. 26, 2. <https://shop.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/product/ec2002/>
- Early Childhood Australia (2020). *ECA Covid-19 response* [updated frequently, last updated 24/01/22] <http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/media/eca-covid-19-response/>
- Freund, M., Henley, B., Allen, K. & Baker, P. (2018). Recent Australian droughts may be the worst in 800 years. *The Conversation*, 2 May. <https://theconversation.com/recent-australian-droughts-may-be-the-worst-in-800-years-94292>
- Gaipov, D. & Brownhill, S. (2021). "I don't like English; I don't like writing": A case study of EAL learner support in a secondary school in England. *Issues in Educational Research*, 31(3), 760-781. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier31/gaipov.pdf>
- Grattan, M. (2020). Free childcare ends July 12, with sector losing JobKeeper but receiving temporary payment. *The Conversation*, 8 June. <https://theconversation.com/free-childcare-ends-july-12-with-sector-losing-jobkeeper-but-receiving-temporary-payment-140253>
- Gromada, A., Richardson, D. & Rees, G. (2020). *Childcare in a global crisis: The impact of COVID-19 on work and family life*. UNICEF, Innocenti Research Brief, 2020-18. <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1109-childcare-in-a-global-crisis-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-work-and-family-life.html>
- Gustafsson, P. E., Janlert, U., Theorell, T., Westerlund, H. & Hammarström, A. (2010). Socioeconomic status over the life course and allostatic load in adulthood: Results from the Northern Swedish Cohort. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 65(11), 986-992. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech.2010.108332>
- Hughes, J. (2020). A child care's response to COVID-19. *The Early Childhood Educator of British Columbia*, 35(1), 5-7.
- Hunt, G. (2020). *First confirmed case of novel coronavirus in Australia*. Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, 25 January 2020. <https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-greg-hunt-mp/media/first-confirmed-case-of-novel-coronavirus-in-australia>
- Indeed Editorial Team (2022). *20 Lowest-paid jobs in Australia (with salary information)*. <https://au.indeed.com/career-advice/finding-a-job/lowest-paid-jobs-in-australia>
- Irvine, S., Thorpe, K., McDonald, P., Lunn, J. & Sumsion, J. (2016). *Money, love and identity: Initial findings from the national ECEC workforce study*. Queensland University of Technology, Australia. <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/101622/>

- Jaggers, Z. (2020). We call workers 'essential' – but is that just referring to the work, not the people? *The Conversation*, 4 May. <https://theconversation.com/we-call-workers-essential-but-is-that-just-referring-to-the-work-not-the-people-137460>
- Jalongo, M.R. (2021). The effects of COVID-19 on early childhood education and care: Research and resources for children, families, teachers, and teacher educators. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 49, 763-774. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01208-y>
- Kern, M. & Zapf, D. (2021). Ready for change? A longitudinal examination of challenge stressors in the context of organizational change. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 26(3), 204-223. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000214>
- Kerrissey, J. & Hammonds, C. (2020). Low-wage essential workers get less protection against coronavirus – and less information about how it spreads. *The Conversation*, 3 June. <https://theconversation.com/low-wage-essential-workers-get-less-protection-against-coronavirus-and-less-information-about-how-it-spreads-138076>
- Liu, Q., Liu, Y., Leng, X., Han, J., Xia, F. & Chen, H. (2020). Impact of chronic stress on attention control: Evidence from behavioral and event-related potential analyses. *Neuroscience Bulletin*, 36(11), 1395-1410. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12264-020-00549-9>
- Logan, H., McFarland, L., Cumming, T. & Wong, S. (2021). Supporting educator well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study of leadership in early childhood education and care organisations. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 46(4), 309-321. <https://doi.org/10.1177/18369391211040940>
- Lucas, F. (2022). ECEC job advertisements have doubled since COVID-19, illustrating the depth of staffing crisis. *The Sector*, 31 May. <https://thesector.com.au/2022/05/31/ecec-job-advertisements-have-doubled-since-covid-19-illustrating-the-depth-of-staffing-crisis/>
- Mortimer, G. (2020). What actually are 'essential services' and who decides? *The Conversation*, 31 March. <https://theconversation.com/what-actually-are-essential-services-and-who-decides-135029>
- Murray, L., Eadie, P., Church, A., Levickis, P. & Page, J. (2022). Wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic: Perspectives of Australian early childhood educators. In J. Pattnaik & M. R. Jalongo (Eds), *The impact of COVID-19 on early childhood education and care: International perspectives, challenges and responses*. Springer. (pp.129-148). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-96977-6\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-96977-6_7)
- Ng, J., Rogers, M. & McNamara, C. (2023). Early childhood educator's burnout: A systematic review of the determinants and effectiveness of interventions. *Issues in Educational Research*, 33(1), 173-206. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier33/ng.pdf>
- Noble, K. (2020). Not much relief for parents, but new childcare measures will rescue providers (again). *The Conversation*, 28 September. <https://theconversation.com/not-much-relief-for-parents-but-new-childcare-measures-will-rescue-providers-again-146752>
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2020). *Combating COVID-19's effect on children*. OECD policy responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19). <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/combating-covid-19-s-effect-on-children-2e1f3b2f/>
- Park, E. H., Logan, H., Zhang, L., Kamigaichi, N. & Kulapichitr, U. (2021). Responses to coronavirus pandemic in early childhood services across five countries in the Asia-Pacific region: OMEP Policy Forum. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 52, 249-266. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-020-00278-0>

- Pattnaik, J. & Jalongo, M.R. (Eds.) (2022). *The impact of COVID-19 on early childhood education and care: International perspectives, challenges and responses*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-96977-6>
- Payscale (2021). *Average early childhood educator (ECE) hourly pay in Australia*. PayScale, Inc. [https://www.payscale.com/research/AU/Job=Early\\_Childhood\\_Educator\\_\(ECE\)/Hourly\\_Rate](https://www.payscale.com/research/AU/Job=Early_Childhood_Educator_(ECE)/Hourly_Rate)
- Quiñones, G., Barnes, M. & Berger, E. (2022). Australian early childhood educators' emotional support to families and children during COVID-19 pandemic. In O. N. Saracho (Ed.), *Contemporary perspectives on research on coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in early childhood education* (pp. 87-103). (Contemporary Perspective in Early Childhood Education). Information Age Publishing. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361518731\\_Australian\\_early\\_childhood\\_educators'\\_emotional\\_support\\_to\\_families\\_and\\_children\\_during\\_COVID-19\\_pandemic](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361518731_Australian_early_childhood_educators'_emotional_support_to_families_and_children_during_COVID-19_pandemic)
- Rogers, M. (2022). COVID chaos has shed light on many issues in the Australian childcare system: Here are 4 of them. *The Conversation*, 13 January. <https://theconversation.com/covid-has-shone-a-light-on-many-issues-in-the-australian-childcare-system-here-are-6-of-them-174404>
- Rogers, M., Doan, L., & Bhullar, N. (2022). How a Canadian program that helps educators 'thrive' not just 'survive' could help address Australia's childcare staff shortage. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/how-a-canadian-program-that-helps-educators-thrive-not-just-survive-could-help-address-australias-childcare-staff-shortage-193954>
- Rogers, M., Jeffries, D. & Ng, J. (2022). Why can't we value and pay for the emotional cost of caring? *Women's Agenda*, 2 March. <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/why-cant-we-value-and-pay-for-the-emotional-cost-of-caring/>
- Roth, P. (2020). How does bushfire smoke affect our health? 6 things you need to know. *The Conversation*, 31 January. <https://theconversation.com/how-does-bushfire-smoke-affect-our-health-6-things-you-need-to-know-130126>
- Rothe, A., Moloney, M., Sims, M., Calder, P., Blyth, D., Boyd, W., Doan, L., Dovigo, F., Girlich, S., Georgiadou, S., Kakana, D., Mellon, C., Opazo, M., O'Siorain, C., Quinn, M., Rogers, M., Silberfeld, C. & Tadeu, B. (2022). Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative study of government policies relating to the early childhood sector across ten countries. In J. Pattnaik & M.R. (Eds), *The impact of COVID-19 on early childhood education and care: International perspectives, challenges, and responses*. Springer. (pp.67-88). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-96977-6\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-96977-6_4)
- Scatliffe, N., Casavant, S., Vittner, D. & Cong, X. (2019). Oxytocin and early parent-infant interactions: A systematic review. *International Journal of Nursing Sciences*, 6(4), 445-453. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnss.2019.09.009>
- Sims, M., Calder, P., Moloney, M., Rothe, A., Rogers, M., Doan, L., Kakana, D. & Georgiadou, S. (2022). Neoliberalism and government responses to Covid-19: Ramifications for early childhood education and care. *Issues in Educational Research*, 32(3), 1174-1195. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier32/sims.pdf>
- Sims, M., Rogers, M. & Boyd, W. (under review). The more things change the more they stay the same: Early childhood professionalism in COVID-19 times. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*.

- Thorpe, K., Jansen, E., Sullivan, V., Irvine, S. & McDonald, P. (2020). Identifying predictors of retention and professional wellbeing of the early childhood education workforce in a time of change. *Journal of Educational Change*, 21(4), 623-647. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-020-09382-3>
- Thorpe, K., Staton, S., Houen, S. & Beatton, T. (2020). Essential yet discounted: COVID-19 and the early childhood education workforce. *Australian Educational Leader*, 42(3), 18-21. [abstract only] <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/INFORMIT.602031319978894>
- United Workers Union (2021). *Exhausted, undervalued and leaving: The crisis in Early Education*. <https://bigsteps.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Exhausted-undervalued-and-leaving.pdf> [not found 12 Dec 2022, see <https://unitedworkers.org.au/media-release/report-shows-early-education-workforce-in-crisis/> ]
- Wahlquist, C. (2020). Australia's coronavirus lockdown – the first 50 days. *The Guardian*, 2 May. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/02/australias-coronavirus-lockdown-the-first-50-days>

**Dr Marg Rogers** is a Senior Lecturer in the Early Childhood Education team within the School of Education at the University of New England, Australia. Marg researches military families and professionalism in early childhood education and care. She is a Postdoctoral Fellow with the Manna Institute which is supported by the Australian Government Department of Education through the Regional Research Collaboration Program.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8407-7256>

Email: [marg.rogers@une.edu.au](mailto:marg.rogers@une.edu.au)

**Associate Professor Wendy Boyd**, Southern Cross University, Australia, makes a significant contribution to early childhood education, internationally, and nationally, especially in the area of the early childhood workforce. Her research approach is grounded in achieving quality education delivered by effective teachers. She has a deep understanding of quality early childhood education having been a director of a large early childhood centre which was consistently assessed as providing high quality early childhood education and care.

Email: [wendy.boyd@scu.edu.au](mailto:wendy.boyd@scu.edu.au)

**Professor Margaret Sims** is a professor in Early Childhood Education and Care and has worked in the areas of family support and disabilities for many years. She researches in the areas of professionalism and the impacts of neoliberal policies in early childhood and higher education, families, disabilities, social justice and families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) backgrounds. She is an Honorary Professor at Macquarie University.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4686-4245>

Email: [margaret.sims@mq.edu.au](mailto:margaret.sims@mq.edu.au)

**Please cite as:** Rogers, M., Boyd, W. & Sims, M. (2023). "Burnout central": Australian early childhood educational leaders' experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Issues in Educational Research*, 33(1), 284-306. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier33/rogers.pdf>