

‘The more things change the more they stay the same’: Early childhood professionalism in Covid-19 times

Margaret Sims

University of New England, Australia

Marg Rogers

University of New England, Australia; Manna Institute, Australia

Wendy Boyd

Southern Cross University, Australia

For decades the early childhood sector has been pursuing recognition as a profession. In that time the sector in Australia has developed national legislation, an early childhood curriculum document and developed an extensive range of accountability measures. Simultaneously the international arena has been presented with compelling research that demonstrates the importance of children’s early years in terms of their own outcomes, and also in terms of national productivity. Despite this work, little has changed in the way early childhood work is perceived by community members and by governments. During the Covid-19 pandemic early childhood educators in Australia were identified as essential workers and were required, where possible, to keep their services operational. One might imagine that such an identification might lead to changes in the way in which the sector is perceived. This research, using an interpretive social constructionist approach to interview six early childhood service managers, coordinators, educational leaders, aimed to gain a shared understanding of their experiences and perceptions. The results indicate that they perceive little change in the way the sector is perceived, and they supported their perceptions with evidence of the lack of support received by them from government (in comparison to the support received by other essential work sectors). We suggest that an entirely new approach needs to be taken in order to pursue the professionalisation agenda and posit that values framing theory might provide a helpful direction on which to focus attention.

Introduction

For many years now, early childhood professionals have been attempting to improve the way their sector is perceived (Arndt et al., 2020; Bradbury, 2012; Cooke & Lawton, 2008; Oberhuemer, 2000; Urban, 2008). The aims, as we understand them, are to be perceived to be equal in value to other education sectors (primary, secondary and tertiary education), to receive the same pay, status and working conditions as these other education sectors, and to be perceived as a valued profession.

In attempting this project, the sector is somewhat at a disadvantage, given the work undertaken by early childhood professionals is perceived as closely linked to mothering (Pocock, 2005; Sims & Hutchins, 2020). Bown, Sumsion and Press (2011, p. 265) positioned this as the belief that mothers are “the ‘natural’ primary carers of children” which explains “the predominantly female ECEC workforce; and the continued policy nexus between women’s workforce participation and the provision of ECEC.” Under this discourse the role of early childhood educators is simply an ‘... "an easy option" that focus[es] primarily on nappy changing and sand play.’ (Ashton & Elliott, 1995, para 2;

cited in Mevawalla, 2011). Additionally, the work of caring for and educating young children was previously unpaid 'women's' work, similar to caring for the elderly and disabled. Society is loath to value work that was traditionally 'free' or value the emotional cost of caring (Burgess et al., 2022). In her seminal study, Stonehouse (1989, p. 62) referred to the 'Mary Poppins' image of early childhood educators: this perception sees them as "someone who frolics happily and effortlessly with children, who has an endless supply of stories and games to keep the little cherubs happy." Even in the development of the Australian early years curriculum framework *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Framework (EYLF)* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2019), Sumsion and Barnes (2010) warned that the maternal discourse influenced a large amount of feedback received and "discounted the intellectual work of educators and bought into the notion that ECEC pedagogy is primarily based on mothering" (Bown et al., 2011, p. 265).

Associated with this is the early evolution of the sector from social welfare/social intervention roots: child care in countries such as Australia and New Zealand was originally conceived as a way of getting poor children off the streets (because their mothers were working) and teaching them the necessary skills to fit them into their place in society (as waged workers and servants) (Sims, 2014). Maybanke Selfe-Wolstenholme-Anderson (1845-1927), a Sydney-based women's advocate and social reformer wrote (around 1886):

On a doorstep near, stood a woman who said she went out to work. "Every day?"
 "Yes'm, mostly every day. Either washin' or cleanin'. What do I do with the children?
 Well, yer see, it's like this. The lidies where I go won't 'ave no youngsters about the place,
 so I 'ave to leave 'em here." "Outside?" "Well, you know, I couldn't leave the door open,
 so I 'ave just to lock 'em out." And there they were, three grubby mites, sitting on the
 narrow curb, with their feet in the gutter. They were amongst our first children ... There
 is no doubt that in an ideal city, under an ideal government, there would be a free
 Kindergarten, within the reach of every child likely to be neglected. It is neither kind nor
 economical to allow children to become larrikins and criminals... (Roberts & Kingston,
 2001, p. 215).

Similar views persist into more recent times. For example, Mevawalla (2011) reported that early childhood educators were mainly perceived as simply child minders. The younger the children, the less likely those working with them are to be perceived as skilful and professional. This is evident in the legislated National Regulations where trained early childhood teachers are not required for children under three years of age (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2021).

For a long time, the early childhood sector was divided (Aslanian, 2015; Rockel, 2013; Sims, 1994). Child care, having evolved out of the welfare model above was seen to have a focus on health, hygiene and self-help skills. Early education services such as kindergartens or preschools for children whose mothers were at home and who could therefore manage sessional rather than full day care, were perceived to have a stronger educational focus. In a number of jurisdictions child care was administered through

government departments of social welfare/community and families, whereas kindergartens and preschools were administered through departments of education. The child care reforms of the Australian Labor Government from 2009 (Rudd, 2008; Rudd, Roxon, Macklin & Smith, 2007) brought the two sectors together, at least administratively, and heralded in a new era of increasingly neoliberal reforms including new national standards, state-based legislation based on national reforms, and the EYLF initiated in 2009 (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations; 2009) and updated in 2019 (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2019; Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2021]; Sims, Mulhearn, Grieshaber & Sumsion, 2015). The sector embraced these as stepping stones towards professionalism. However, over a decade has passed since their implementation and questions are still being asked about their impact on professionalisation (Hunkin, 2017; Sims, 2017; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015), let alone the ways in which these standards of professional (neoliberal) accountability have impacted public perceptions. Indeed, the impact on educators' work, wellbeing (Ng et al., 2023) and professional identity has been profound (Ng et al., 2023; Roberts-Holmes, 2015; Rogers et. al., 2019).

One might consider that the identification of early childhood services as essential services during the Covid-19 pandemic might be the trigger needed to generate changes in perceptions relating to the value of the sector. Margaret Sims et al. (2022) and Rothe et al. (2022) argued that government policies only entrenched long-held perceptions. Ng, Rogers and McNamara (2023) found educators were essential but somehow invisible at the same time. Certainly the pandemic has changed the service delivery landscape in many different ways and it has been suggested that it precipitated a "social disaster at the deepest level" (Connell, 2020, p. 3) to which we ought to respond with "forms of social action beyond those familiar today" and "more imaginative social thinking" (p.6). Perhaps some of this imaginative social thinking could be a new way of perceiving the early childhood (EC) years, and the status of those working with children in these years. Thus, the aim of this research is to investigate if those working in the sector perceived any changes in the ways their work was valued by various stakeholders: parents, community and government. We ask the question: In what ways did EC educators perceive changes in the way their role was valued by the wider community because they were considered essential workers during the Covid-19 pandemic during 2020-21?

Method

This work is underpinned by an interpretive ontology where we argue that reality does not exist as an independent entity, rather it is created by each human being. Alongside this we use a social constructionist epistemology where we posit truth is constructed by humans acting in a social world, interpreting their experiences. The social world influences how each human constructs the truth; both individuals and the social world influence the construction of each person's truth. This leads us (in pandemic times where face-to-face interaction is forbidden by our universities' ethics committees) to the use of in-depth interviews conducted remotely via videoconferencing software in order to attempt to come to a shared understanding with each participant of his/her perspectives. Each author undertook two interviews.

Participants

Our participants were six early childhood leaders purposively selected from as wide a range of services as possible (child care centres, preschools and a family day care service) using authors' networks. Participants were selected to meet the following criteria:

1. they operated as the manager/coordinator or educational leader of a New South Wales early childhood service that remained open during the lockdown period and continued to operate at the time interviews were undertaken; and
2. they were willing and able to spend at least an hour with one team member to undertake the interview and talk about their experiences over the past 16 months during the pandemic.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Southern Cross University. Participants were assured we would protect both their identity and that of their service, and were able to withdraw from the study at any time. We first developed a conceptual framework based on our experiences and the literature which identified what we believed to be the ways in which the pandemic impacted on the work of early childhood professionals. We then used this framework to guide the development of the semi-structured interview and the analysis. Interviews were recorded with participant permission and then transcribed. The transcribers were subject to the usual requirements of confidentiality. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their identity. The interviews were analysed by two of the three researchers using the conceptual framework as a guide for identifying themes.

We then undertook another analysis where each transcript was scrutinised for themes that were not identified in our initial conceptual framework. This then led us to amend the framework, adding new subthemes and grouping the subthemes into main themes. The grouping of subthemes into major themes was undertaken after the completion of the data analysis. Given the richness of the data, we then decided to report the results in three papers, each focusing on one of the key themes arising from the amended conceptual framework (Figure 1). This article focuses on the major Theme D in Figure 1. Other articles have addressed Themes F (Rogers, Boyd & Sims, 2023) and E (Boyd, Rogers & Sims, 2023).

Results and discussion

Participants expressed their disillusion with what they saw as a disjuncture between their recognition as essential workers and the lack of support they received to fulfil this role. Whilst a number of EC services closed during the pandemic, there was pressure for those who could, to remain open in order to provide a service to children of other essential workers. This often meant services that remained open did not accept only children who were enrolled prior to the pandemic, but also children of essential workers whose service was closed. Staff on occasions felt resentful as they felt their own health and wellbeing,

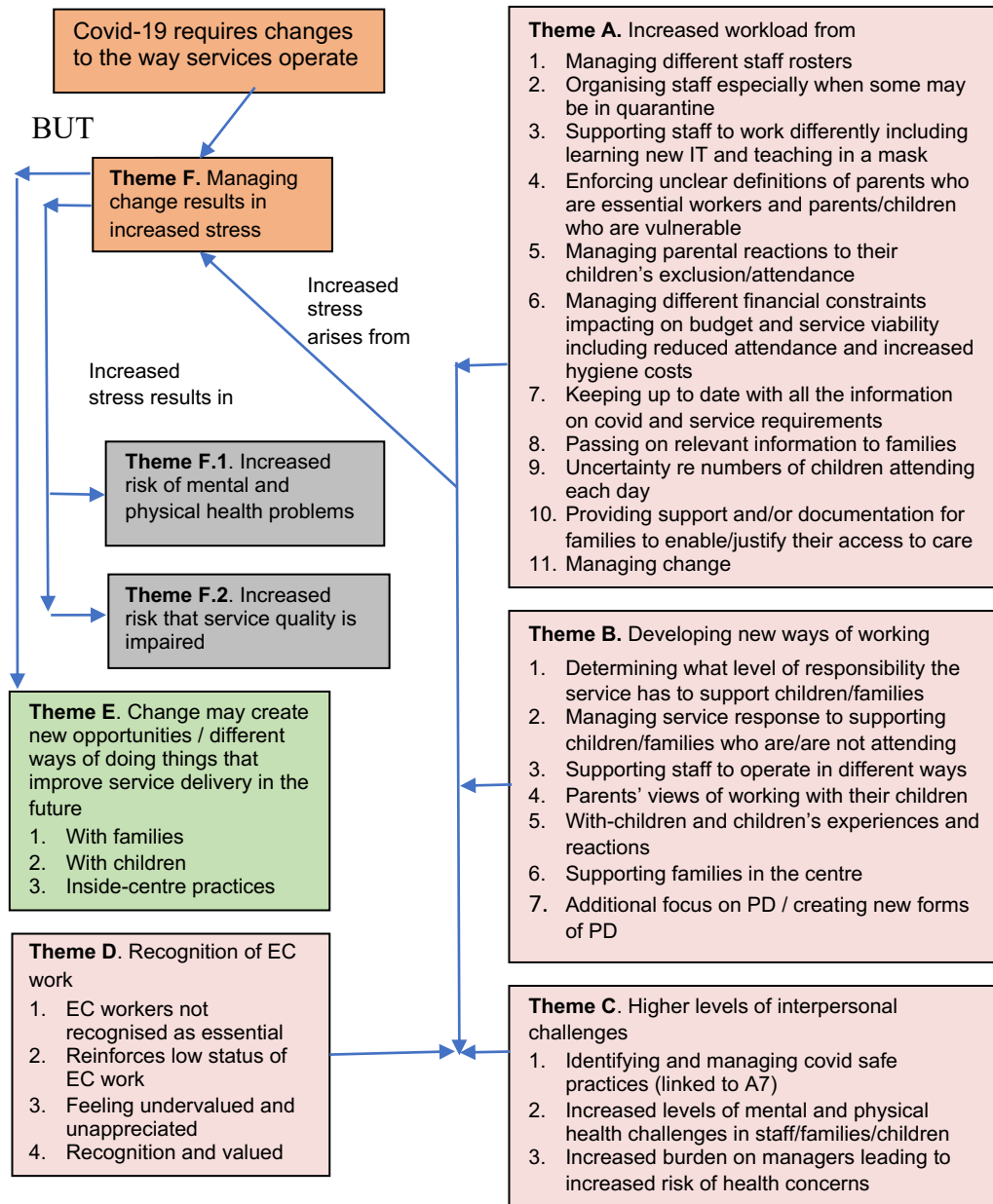


Figure 1: Conceptual framework arising from the literature and data analysis
 [This Figure is presented also in Rogers, Boyd and Sims (2023). The version here corrects errors occurring in the listing of Theme B items 5, 6 and 7 in Rogers, Boyd and Sims (2023)]

along with the health and wellbeing of their families, was compromised by the requirement that they continue to work. Dana said:

... they were saying “Oh no children can go back”, you know, “they're all fine”, whatever else that we were often going “Well yeah, that's fine but what about us?” Umm, you know, chi- they say children don't get Covid, but, you know, we could or, you know, they can bring it in and so, I don't think we were actually acknowledging the fact that, you know, we were out there with, everybody. (Dana)

Staff who had young children themselves experienced an additional dilemma as the EC service their child attended may have closed. One participant discussed how, because their numbers were down, they were able to accommodate children of staff who would not normally have attended. Dana said:

(it) was quite challenging for some of our educators because they actually had preschool educator- preschool age children, so they found it quite difficult to say, umm, you know, that we are frontline workers 'cause we have to come to work but we have to then go and put our children into care to do that, so that was difficult but we, we change-, umm, we allowed, you know, some of the educators to bring their children here. (Dana)

The fact that schools were closed and teachers were only teaching online, but EC services were expected to remain open for children of essential workers and, at the same time, reach out to families whose children were at home, caused a number of participants to feel the sector (and they themselves) were overburdened. Alice said:

We've always been often seen as almost the poor cousins to primary and secondary. Suddenly, we were being told that we were on the frontline... Suddenly, we're essential workers. We would have been a poor cousin - it's not always been like that, but as far as sometimes the department is concerned - but suddenly we were essential workers and we were - we needed to be there every day to keep the economy going. But no one was really checking in on us. Like, we never got a call from the department. No one really checked in... (Alice)

For a number of participants this expectation was not just something imposed upon them, but something they felt fitted with their values and philosophy as EC professionals. However, the additional workload naturally caused feelings of resentment, particularly when this additional workload did not seem to them to be recognised at the wider community and government level. For example, participants explained that even though they were essential workers they were not prioritised for vaccination. Alice said:

They were saying, go to work - be open. Keep your doors open, but actually we're not prioritising you to get a vaccine. So that - there's a bit of a resentment feeling there and I would - I can't speak for anyone else, but I would feel just on my other [sites] and colleagues, I would feel that it's a fairly common emotion that's going at the moment. A sense of this is fine. We'll step up again. Yep. We're happy to do that. But how about someone stop and go, well, what can we do to help support the [sector]. (Alice)

Dana said:

... we're frontline workers, but we didn't feel like we were acknowledged as being frontline workers ... Yeah you know we felt like doctors and nurses and all of those, they were getting the acknowledgement of being frontline... but we were frontline workers ... I don't think we were acknowledged and, umm, respected for what we were doing. (Dana)

There was considerable additional work required of EC professionals and there was no access to additional funding to pay the workers undertaking this work. Participants mentioned as examples, training to learn how to use *Zoom* videoconferencing software and other online platforms in order to reach out to families, and a range of additional cleaning and hygiene measures. One participant, part of a much larger organisation, shared how their EC service was required to host a flu vaccine clinic as they were the only large team of workers on the larger site. Cassie said:

So, all of a sudden, staff that had very little knowledge of *Zoom* or how to connect with families or each other so I spent a lot of time writing work plans for staff, in case all of a sudden, we weren't here. So that they would still, you know, that I was trying to advocate for staff so they would still get paid- and their value of their work would be valued - - and so I was having to write staff work from home plans as well as staff work at [organisation's name] plans, so I was doing this double thing at the initial stages, umm, to advocate for staff and to- for our value and for who we are and what we do. (Cassie)

Lack of presence in media reporting during the pandemic also signalled to participants that, despite being essential workers, this was not recognised at a wider societal level.

Along with the lack of recognition of their status as essential workers, participants identified their struggle with the confusing directions and lack of support provided to them through official channels. Dana said:

I don't think we were given very clear directives about it, umm, you know, you had to work your way through things. (Dana)

Franky went further claiming:

The Department of Education regularly sends SMS and email updates late on Friday afternoons or Sunday nights and then today ran a COVID webinar while community preschool educators and teachers are on annual leave (and according to awards annual leave has to be taken during Christmas shutdown). So, no wonder we are burnt out when even our weekends and annual leave are interrupted. (Franky)

Additional expectations laid upon educators were also interpreted as official lack of recognition and valuing of their role as essential workers. Franky said:

Oh, do this training, do that training, well no I'm too exhausted ... and talking to one of my other educators today and she said, I know that you've been really good not sending anything through that's around training [cause] I just can't deal with it at the moment ... People not understanding that some people are really at work they're not sitting at home waiting for someone to say 'Oh, would you like to do some training around something'. (Franky)

Despite the lack of recognition at this wider societal level, several participants mentioned the support (in most cases moral support) received from their Management Committee/Board of Management which was much appreciated. In one case a participant shared how the Management Committee approved a paid stand down day in recognition of the additional work required and this was very much appreciated. Evie said:

And I mean we are very fortunate that we've got an amazing board of directors sooner so supportive and they pretty much as long as we provide them with the figures, they will they will back [it up]. (Evie)

Others identified the support the staff gave each other. Bev said:

I'm very lucky that we've got likeminded people... the staff are very positive and supportive... the team is just a very cohesive team. That's not - it doesn't mean we don't have disagreements or dissention every now and then. But we also focus on having the professional conversation, and that any conversation is okay that's respectful and professional. (Bev)

Participants also claimed that they felt more valued than previously by their families. Both families of children attending, and those supported via online strategies expressed appreciation at the support received. Cassie said:

I think advocating for early childhood and the difference that we helped, you know, helped people get to work and continue doing what they needed to do and we made- uhh, we helped make that difference ... our conditions and the way we valued but during that period we did make a difference and I think that's what I kept saying to staff and- and they have such a commitment to their family- the families here and the children and those connections, it did make a difference. And families appreciated that, and we often got a lot of, you know, wonderful feedback. (Cassie)

Evie (running a Family Day Care Service) shared how this service developed their own interpretation of essential work, and were able to offer care to those children whose parents were working from home, a redefinition of essential work that was greatly appreciated by the parents impacted. Evie said:

In terms of families and the Community and 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... A lot of people that are putting their children into care are working from home but they still need to put the children in care. (Evie)

Participants shared the better understanding of their work expressed by parents when their children eventually returned to the service. Dana said:

I think they've always appreciated us but they just went "Oh you know, we've got two home and you've got 40 here!" and that sort of thing and then, you know, we did talk to them as well that environment is different in our more busy or in that sort of thing and we're not coping with other things this is, you know, our job and we're doing that together, so I think, you know, they understood a little bit more about what- what our job was. (Dana)

Other participants talked about how parents whose children were at home appreciated the resources shared with them.

Dana said:

Uhh, what we ended up doing is we actually did a, survey of all our families and it was, umm, sent to all families via monkey survey but also too, we did it as a, umm, so the responses that we came- we got back were actually identified from each family so we were able to look at when, umm, what the families wanted from us because a lot of families were saying “we've got three children at home, we have one revised. We are also working at home, we do not want to have much- have Zoom sessions with the children.” ... So we really listened to what our families wanted. We also at that stage was using an app called Seesaw, and so that became invaluable because we were able- educators took turns of uploading stories, songs. They actually, umm, uploaded things that they were doing with the children who were attending so we, umm, were able to share that programme. Umm, lots of families said they'd like an email with some ideas that they could do at whatever time they wanted ... You know we offered to do packs, we offered to, umm, open up our ... resources for them but, umm, nobody wanted any of that. So, we did give them that option. (Dana)

Participants thought that parental understanding of children's learning, and they ways in which learning happens through play was enhanced through parental participation in the remote options offered. Dana said:

I think from what some of the comments from our families, they could see how play was so important for their children and actually see the value of play and see the learning that was occurring, so I thought that was actually quite nice to hear, 'cause they often would say that their pre-schoolers were easier to accommodate for than those who were at school. (Dana)

Overall there was a sense of disillusionment that, although at a micro or local level participants felt that their EC services were highly valued, at a macro or community/government level, despite being named as essential services, they felt there was little or no change to the negative perceptions that have been held about EC work for decades.

Need for further research

In examining why the pandemic has resulted in minimal changes to the ways in which the early childhood sector is valued, we are led to theories around value change. In particular values framing, an approach used politically and in public health campaigns, which has generated considerable interest in recent years (Dobrowolski, 2021; Ophir et al., 2021; Rinaldi, van Schalkwyk, Egan & Petticrew, 2021). McLeod et al. (2022) proposed a complex model that links a range of mediators (belief importance and content, emotions, etc.) with frames (narrative, argument, assertion and concept frames), effect moderators (message characteristics, participant characteristics, social factors and framing contexts) to framing outcomes (perceptions, attitudes, emotions and behaviours). The complexity of this model suggests that changing perceptions of the early childhood sector, and ultimately behaviour (such as equity with other education sectors in funding, working conditions, pay) requires a lot more than a simple reframing of the narrative. As it is beyond the capacity of this paper to examine each of these elements in detail, the reader is referred to

McLeod et al. (2022), for a recent analysis of research to date and the issues to be considered in furthering understanding of the processes involved in values framing research. We can suggest that future research apply this promising perspective to the early childhood sector in an attempt to support the revisioning of the sector so that our young citizens of the future receive the best quality early learning experiences our society can provide.

Conclusion

Early childhood has for many years been characterised by a frame that locates the sector squarely within the discourse of motherhood. For over 20 years now the alternative narrative focusing on the importance of the early years in terms of lifelong adult outcomes and the significant and positive economic/social impact on society, has been accepted (Black et al., 2017; Heckman, 1998; Mustard, 2002), widely promulgated (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017; Strong Foundations, 2019; World Health Organisation and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2018), and included in government discourse (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2014) without changing perceptions and behaviour in relation to the sector. The early childhood sector has reframed the narrative excessively without appearing to change perceptions, and the changes to the way our world operates due to the Covid-19 pandemic appear not to have made much difference at all to these perceptions.

Acknowledgements and declaration of interests

There was no funding for this research. There are no conflicts of interest for this study.

References

- Arndt, S., Smith, K., Urban, M., Ellegard, T., Blue Swadener, B. & Murray, C. (2020). Reconceptualising and (re)forming early childhood professional identities: Ongoing transnational policy discussions. *Policy Futures in Education*, 19(4), 406-423. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210320976015>
- Ashton, J. & Elliott, A. (1995). Student teacher perceptions of early childhood care and education issues and services: A working paper. Presented at the *Australian Association of Research in Education Annual Conference*, Hobart, Tasmania. <https://www.aare.edu.au/data/publications/1995/ashtj95131.pdf>
- Aslanian, T. K. (2015). Getting behind discourses of love, care and maternalism in early childhood education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 16(2), 153-165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949115585672>
- Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (2021). *National Regulations*. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-law-regulations/national-regulations>
- Black, M. M., Walker, S. P., Fernald, L. C. H., Andersen, C. T., DiGirolamo, A. M., Lu, C., McCoy, D. C., Fink, G., Shawar, Y. R., Shiffman, J., Devercelli, A. E., Wodon, Q. T., Vargas-Barón, E. & Grantham-McGregor, S. (2017). Early childhood development coming of age: Science through the life course. *The Lancet*, 389, 77-90. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)31389-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)31389-7)

- Bown, K., Sumsion, J. & Press, F. (2011). Dark matter: The 'gravitational pull' of maternalist discourses on politicians' decision making for early childhood policy in Australia. *Gender and Education*, 23(3), 263-280.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2010.491792>
- Boyd, W., Rogers, M. & Sims, M. (2023). New ways of working and new opportunities: Early childhood leader's professional practice post-COVID. In K. Marsh-Davies & C. Burnett (Eds.), *Teachers and teaching post-COVID: Seizing opportunities for change*. [ships after 23 November 2023] Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Teachers-and-Teaching-Post-COVID-Seizing-Opportunities-for-Change/Marsh-Davies-Burnett/p/book/9781032399492>
- 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>
- Bradbury, A. (2012). 'I feel absolutely incompetent': Professionalism, policy and early childhood teachers. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 13(3), 175-186.
<https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2012.13.3.175>
- Connell, R. (2020). COVID-19/Sociology. *Journal of Sociology*, 56(4), 745-751.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783320943262>
- Cooke, G. & Lawton, K. (2008). *For love or money: Pay, progression and professionalisation in the 'early years' workforce*. London: Institute for Public Policy Research. Retrieved from <https://www.ippr.org/publications/for-love-or-money-pay-progression-and-professionalisation-in-the-early-years-workforce>
- Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (2009). *Belonging, being & becoming. The early years learning framework for Australia*. Canberra, ACT: Australian Government. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2009-08/apo-nid18428.pdf>
- Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (2019). *Belonging, being & becoming. The early years learning framework for Australia (EYLF)*. [V2.0, 2022] Canberra, ACT: Australian Government. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/media/35756>
- Dobrowolski, Z. (2021). The strategy of vaccination and global pandemic : how framing may thrive on strategy during and after Covid-19. *European Research Studies Journal*, 24(1), 532-541. <https://doi.org/10.35808/ersj/1978>
- Heckman, J. (1998). What should be our human capital investment policy? *Fiscal Studies*, 19(2), 103-119. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24437454>
- Hunkin, E. (2017). Whose quality? The (mis)uses of quality reform in early childhood and education policy. *Journal of Education Policy*, 33(4), 443-456.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2017.1352032>
- McLeod, D. M., Choung, H., Su, M.-H., Kim, S.-J., Tao, R., Liu, J. & Lee, B. (2022). Navigating a diverse paradigm: A conceptual framework for experimental framing effects research. *Review of Communication Research*, 10.
<https://digitalpromotioncompany.com/index.php/rcr/article/view/83>
- Mevawalla, Z. (2011). What you see is what you get? Early childhood educators' perceptions of professional status. *Macquarie Matrix*, 1, 85-107.
<https://studentjournal.mq.edu.au/Mevawalla.pdf>

- Mustard, J. F. (2002). Early child development and the brain - the base for health, learning and behaviour throughout life. In M. E. Young (Ed.), *From early child development to human development: Investing in our children's future*. Washington, DC: The World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/ba0b4cbe-ee4d-54b4-b839-80da3368f765>
- 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>
- Oberhuemer, P. (2000). Conceptualizing the professional role in early childhood centers: Emerging profiles in four European countries. *Early Childhood Research & Practice*, 14(2). <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v2n2/oberhuemer.html>
- Ophir, Y., Walter, D., Arnon, D., Lokmanoglu, A., Tizzoni, M., Carota, J., D'Antiga, L. & Nicastro, E. (2021). The framing of COVID-19 in Italian media and its relationship with community mobility: A mixed-method approach. *Journal of Health Communication*, 26(3), 161-173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10810730.2021.1899344>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2017). *Starting strong 2017: Key OECD indicators on early childhood education and care*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://www.oecd.org/education/starting-strong-2017-9789264276116-en.htm>
- Pocock, B. (2005). Mothers in Australia: The more things change the more they stay the same. In M. Poole (Ed.), *Families: Changing families, changing times* (pp. 113-134). Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Price Waterhouse Coopers (2014). *Putting a value on early childhood education and care in Australia*. [not found 9 November 2023] <http://www.pwc.com.au/industry/government/education/publications/early-childhood-education.htm> [see *PwC divests government consulting business*, <https://www.pwc.com.au/about-us/pwc-divests-government-consulting.html>]
- Rinaldi, C., van Schalkwyk, M. C., Egan, M. & Petticrew, M. (2021). A framing analysis of consultation submissions on the WHO Global Strategy to Reduce the Harmful Use of Alcohol: Values and interests. *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*, 11(8), 1550-1561. <https://doi.org/10.34172/ijhpm.2021.68>
- Roberts, J. & Kingston, B. (Eds.) (2001). *Maybank. A woman's voice. The collected works of Maybank Selfe-Wolstenholme-Anderson 1845-1927*. Avalon Beach, NSW: Ruskin Rowe Press.
- Rockel, J. (2013). "Swings or roundabouts?" Re-visiting changing views of care and education in the first years. *The First Years Nga Tau Tuatahi - New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education*, 15(1), 3-4.
- Roberts-Holmes, G. (2015, 2015/05/04). The 'datafication' of early years pedagogy: 'if the teaching is good, the data should be good and if there's bad teaching, there is bad data'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 30(3), 302-315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2014.924561>
- 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>
- 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.-J., O'Síoráin, C.-A., Quinn, M., Rogers, M., Silberfeld, C. & Bárbara 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. Jalongo (Eds.), *The impact of COVID-19 on early childhood education and care: International perspectives, challenges, and responses* (pp. 67-88): Springer. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-96977-6_4
- Rudd, K. (2008). *Australia 2020 - Setting our nation's sights for the future*. Address to the Sydney Institute Annual Dinner 2008. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-15873>
- Rudd, K., Roxon, N., Macklin, J. & Smith, S. (2007). *New directions. An equal start in life for Indigenous children*. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id:%22library/partypol/ISPO6%22>
- Sims, M. (1994). Education and care: Revisiting the dichotomy. *Early Child Development and Care*, 103(1), 15-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0300443941030102>
- Sims, M. (2014). Is the care-education dichotomy behind us? Should it be? *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 39(4), 3-11. <http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=936652015347402;res=IELHSS>
- Sims, M. (2017). Neoliberalism and early childhood. *Cogent Education*, 4(1), article 1365411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2017.1365411>
- 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. & Hutchins, T. (2020). *Program planning for infants and toddlers: In search of relationships* (3rd ed.). Castle Hill, NSW: Pademelon Press.
- Sims, M., Mulhearn, G., Grieshaber, S. & Sumsion, J. (2015). *Australian National ECEC reforms - with a focus on the National Quality Framework and the National Quality Standard. Expert report for the German Youth Institute*. Munich: Deutsches Jugendinstitut e.V. <https://www.dji.de/veroeffentlichungen/literatursuche/detailansicht/literatur/21409-australian-national-ecec-reforms-with-a-focus-on-the-national-quality-framework-and-the-national-quality-standard.html>
- Sims, M. & Waniganayake, M. (2015). The performance of compliance in early childhood: Neoliberalism and nice ladies. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 5(3), 333-345. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610615597154>
- Stonehouse, A. (1989). Nice ladies who love children: The status of the early childhood professional in society. *Early Child Development and Care*, 52(1-4), 61-79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0300443890520105>
- Strong Foundations (2019). *The first thousand days: A case for investment*. <https://www.aracy.org.au/documents/item/608>
- Sumsion, J. & Barnes, S. (2010). Images of early childhood educators in belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia. *Hong Kong Journal of Early Childhood*, 8(2), 34-43. https://www.academia.edu/981290/Sumsion_J_and_Barnes_S_2010_Images_of_early_childhood_educators_in_Belonging_Being_and_Becoming_the_Early_Years_Learning_Framework_for_Australia_Hong_Kong_Journal_of_Early_Childhood_8_2_34_43

- Urban, M. (2008). Dealing with uncertainty: Challenges and possibilities for the early childhood profession. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 16(2), 135-152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930802141584>
- World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, World Bank Group (2018). *Nurturing care for early childhood development: A framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential*. Geneva: World Health Organization. <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/272603/9789241514064-eng.pdf>

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

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 marginalised voices within families and education especially in regional, rural and remote communities. Specifically, she researches ways to support the wellbeing of military, first responder and remote worker families and early childhood educators. Marg is a Postdoctoral Fellow within the Commonwealth Funded Manna Institute, <https://mannainstitute.au/>.

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

Email: 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

Please cite as: Sims, M., Rogers, M. & Boyd, W. (2023). "The more things change the more they stay the same": Early childhood professionalism in Covid-19 times. *Issues in Educational Research*, 33(4), 1568-1581. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier33/sims.pdf>