Autoethnographic reflections: Countering early educator burnout and overwhelmment with emotional intelligence

Elysia Phillips
University of New England, Australia
Margaret Sims
Macquarie University, Australia
Nicola Schutte
University of New England, Australia
Marg Rogers
University of New England, Australia, and Manna Institute, Australia

Early childhood educators' work is emotionally challenging, often depleting their reserves of emotional intelligence (EI), which can lead to burnout and feeling overwhelmed. Despite this, there is little research linking the ongoing EI required to support young children and families, and the impact this has on educators' workplace flourishing. To address this gap, our autoethnographic study links the reflections of an experienced Australian educator and director (the lead author) to the literature about EI and workplace flourishing. Inductive thematic analysis revealed the impact of staffing, workplace culture, and quality of education and care provided to children, affecting their outcomes. This aligned with the literature that revealed a relationship between educators' EI and workplace flourishing. Additionally, EI has been linked to better problem solving, more cohesive social relationships and an increased capacity to understand and manage emotions effectively, all characteristics that contribute to workplace flourishing. This demonstrated the need to research educators' experiences of EI within the groups of children and families with whom they work, given that EI influences their interactions with others. Due to the high rates of attrition in the sector and the shortage of educators, this will be of interest to researchers, policymakers, and those who support educators.

Introduction

Educators play a crucial role in the functioning and quality of education (Rogers, Dolidze, et al., 2025); despite this, very little focus is on educators' ability to use emotional intelligence in challenging environments, and how this affects aspects of the educational experiences they deliver (Cumming & Wong, 2019; Logan et al., 2020). Educators are tasked with the enormous responsibility of using their emotional, mental and physical resources to care for young children (Andrew, 2015). Within the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector, the ability to provide high-quality education and care is directly tied to educators' ability to survive or thrive in their workplace (Rogers et al., 2023). Educators are responsible not only for assisting with the educational outcomes of children but also for their overall physical, mental, emotional, and social development (Andrew, 2015). The emotional and mental requirements of the sector are immense, despite the low status of the job: educators face documentation requirements (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016), expectations from parents and service leaders, and managing the daily operations and function of the learning environment (Sims et al., 2023). These pressures may lead educators to neglect their physical (Cumming, 2017), and social and

emotional health needs, further increasing their stress, leading to cycles of burnout (Ng et al., 2023).

When educators have feelings of being overwhelmed, their capacity to meet their own needs, let alone those of the children, diminishes, causing further strain on the educator (Andrew, 2015). Unfortunately, research reveals that while the social and emotional toll the sector can impose on educators is substantial, there is a significant gap in the provision of practical strategies and support to help educators manage these stresses (Andrew, 2015; Doan, 2019). Without the support or knowledge of practical strategies to help educators mitigate feelings of being overwhelmed and burnout, they may continue to face challenges in balancing their ability to cope with the demands of their role (Andrew, 2015). As the strain on educators continues to increase (Logan et al., 2020), its impact on children's learning and subsequent outcomes becomes more defined, highlighting the need for systematic changes to support both educators and children.

Educators' experiences of burnout and feeling overwhelmed are detrimental to children's learning and wellbeing, in addition to the impact of these feelings on educators (Thorpe et al., 2020). Research has shown the adverse impact of educators' stress and emotional reactivity on the quality of interactions, children's behaviour and education within the learning environment (Cumming & Wong, 2019; Kotaman, 2023). It has been found that burnout often stems from workplace factors, such as a lack of support, excessive workload, and social, emotional, and mental exhaustion, which can significantly impact an educator's ability to effectively engage with children (Li et al., 2025; Lummis et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2023). When educators are experiencing burnout or feeling overwhelmed, their capacity to create a positive and supportive learning environment for the children in their care diminishes (Ghosh, 2024). This diminished capacity means that educators tend to decrease their engagement with the children, which impacts the provision of learning opportunities.

In the longer term, children's overall development is negatively impacted (Puertas Molero et al., 2020). Furthermore, children are acutely aware of the educators' social and emotional states. Andrew's (2015) research suggests that children mimic educators' behaviour and stress levels, resulting in their disengagement from the program and heightened emotional reactivity. In addition, the social and emotional toll of burnout and feeling overwhelmed may lead educators to experience decreased job satisfaction, which can include a loss of passion for the sector, further contributing to challenges within the learning environment for the children in their care (Puertas Molero et al., 2020). As burnout and attrition have become a pressing issue in the ECEC sector, educator turnover due to these feelings contributes to the challenge of maintaining a secure and stable learning environment for the children (Rogers et al., 2023) and stability for families who rely on these services.

Educator burnout and feelings of being overwhelmed can have significant consequences, including increased turnover among educators, an issue that disrupts the daily operations of services and the quality of education and care provided to children (Bull et al., 2024). In addition to disrupting daily operations in a service, educator turnover represents a loss of

educator skill and experience (Thorpe et al., 2020). When educators leave a service, the impact is felt across many layers of the service's operations. Further pressure is experienced by directors and service managers responsible for recruiting and training new staff, budgeting for these activities, and ensuring adequate staffing levels. In turn, the absence of experienced educators places increased pressure and responsibility on the remaining educators (Ghosh, 2024). This leads to a cycle of other educators burning out, contributing to educator turnover which further exacerbates the social and emotional toll on all, leading to feelings of job dissatisfaction (Schutte & Loi, 2014). Figure 1 depicts this attrition cycle.

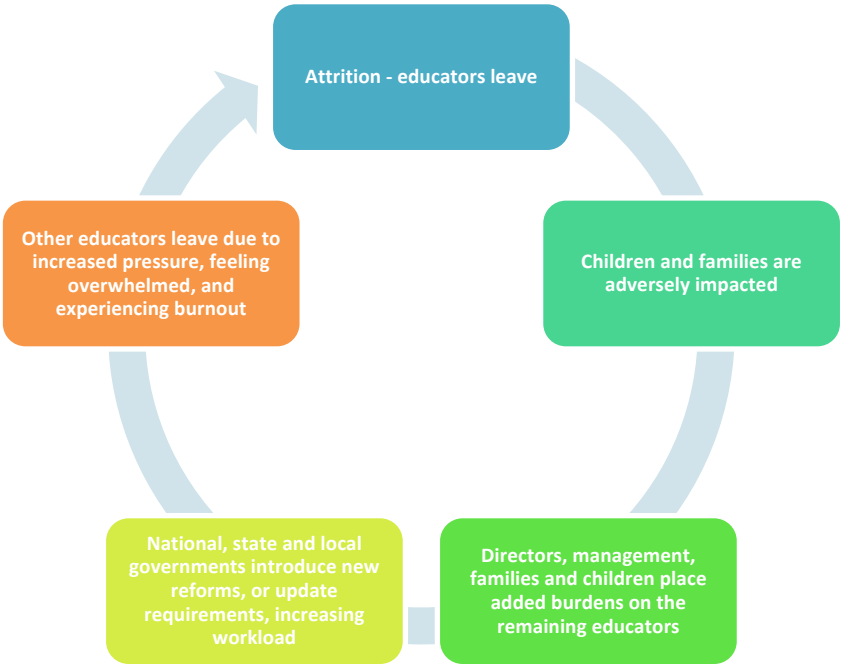

Figure 1: Cycle of attrition of ECEC educators

In the following sections, we define EI and describe various models of EI. We then examine how EI relates to workplace flourishing and the Australian ECEC research context. We then describe the autoethnographic methodology used to examine EI in the ECEC educator context.

Emotional intelligence

In 1990, Salovey and Mayer developed the term EI, derived from Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019). In Gardner's theory, intelligence was divided into two main aspects: intrapersonal (understanding the self) and interpersonal (understanding others) (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019). These components laid the foundation for the theory of EI (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019). By definition, EI is described as an individual's ability to monitor their own and others' feelings and emotions, to differentiate

between emotions and to use this information to guide their thinking and actions (Gayathri & Meenakshi, 2013).

Cognitive, affective and motivational elements play a crucial role in EI theory and its contribution to an individual's ability to navigate complex emotional experiences. The first component is cognitive intelligence, which involves the individual's ability to process and understand emotions (Gayathri & Meenakshi, 2013). This includes the ability to accurately perceive and identify emotions in oneself and others (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019). In addition, cognitive intelligence helps an individual understand the emotional complexity and how these emotions affect their behaviour and that of others (Gayathri & Meenakshi, 2013).

The second component is affective emotions, which refers to the experience and expression of emotions (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019). This involves an individual's ability to develop emotional self-awareness, which can lead to empathy. Educators with high emotional awareness can tune into children's emotions and are better equipped to meet children's needs in a timely and appropriate way (Gayathri & Meenakshi, 2013).

The last component is motivation, which focuses on how emotions are used to influence behaviour, often relating to the individual's goals (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019). This includes perseverance in the face of setbacks and emotional resilience (Mayer et al., 2004). Overall, these components form the foundation for the development of various models of EI, each model offering a distinct perspective on how emotional awareness, regulation, and motivation influence an individual's behaviour and decision-making in their personal and professional lives (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019).

EI promotes workplace flourishing by empowering individuals to manage their emotions effectively, navigate social relationships and cope with stress, all of which positively influence their overall health and happiness (Mayer et al., 2004). The term 'wellbeing' is also used in the literature (Cumming & Wong, 2019) to reflect how individuals appraise their emotional states (including stress management and social relationships). Social and emotional wellbeing represents positive functioning and allows the individual to progressively grow throughout their life (Carmeli et al., 2009). EI plays a significant role in supporting individuals' social and emotional wellbeing. Emotionally intelligent individuals can better maintain positive mental states as they can perceive, understand, and regulate their emotions, leading to a higher sense of social and emotional wellbeing (Carmeli et al., 2009). Individuals with higher levels of EI are more likely to experience better social and emotional wellbeing due to the positive relationship between EI and self-esteem and life satisfaction (Carmeli et al., 2009). In this paper, however, we discuss educators' ability to cope, rather than their wellbeing, as the latter term is nuanced and complex.

A framework for examining EI

Literature has shown that there are three models of EI, known as (i) the ability model, (ii) the mixed model, and (iii) the trait model, due to major theories of EI that define it in different terms (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019). Theorists Goleman (1995), Bar-On (2020),

and Petrides (2010) defined EI as a non-cognitive construct and posited that personal characteristics and competencies underlie EI, which is an inherent trait in an individual's personality. The original theorists, Mayer and Salovey (1990), described EI as the ability to perceive, understand, harness, and manage one's own emotions and the emotions of others. Their view of EI was focused on personal and social intelligence from a cognitive standpoint, thus creating the ability model, which viewed EI through the lens of four sets of emotional processing mental abilities, as highlighted in Figure 2 (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019).

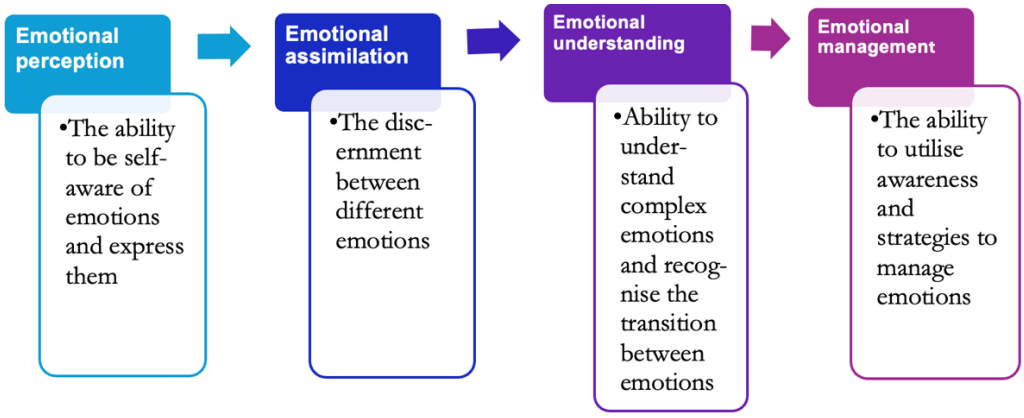

Figure 2: Four branch model of emotional intelligence
(adapted from Salovey & Mayer, 1990)

In contrast, Bar-On (2020) and Goleman (1995) viewed EI as an underlying personal characteristic. This non-cognitive capability influences an individual's ability to cope with environmental pressure and demands (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019). From this, a mixed model of EI was created that focused on the combination of the competency (ability) and general disposition (trait) of EI (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019). Lastly, Petrides (2010) argued that EI was a trait, not a form of intelligence, and believed it was related to the interconnectedness of self-perceived ability and the tendency to behave in a certain way (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019). As an extension of the ability and mixed models of EI, Petrides (2010) created a third model, which is represented by the self-perception of typical manifestations of emotional skills, as exemplified by the Assessing Emotions Scale (Schutte et al., 1998).

As represented in Figure 2, a four-branch model of EI shows EI as a cognitive ability and presents four levels through which an individual progresses (Gayathri & Meenakshi, 2013). In their review of the models of EI, Kanesan and Fauzan (2019) concluded that the ability model is the most suitable for enhancing EI. They viewed EI as a form of intelligence, meaning EI is an ability, not a personal characteristic or personality trait. Therefore, with the appropriate training and learning, EI can be developed within an individual (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019). Viewing EI as an ability helps educators perceive it as something they can improve or develop through appropriate training and practising

targeted skills. This aligns with the idea that EI can be cultivated over time, which may contribute to educators' motivation to engage with EI training programs or interventions.

The ability model of EI is well-suited for research purposes as it emphasises cognitive ability in processing emotions (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019). The four branches of EI provide a comprehensive framework that supports the understanding and development of important EI skills (Gayathri & Meenakshi, 2013). The ability model of EI enables researchers to assess individuals in terms of how they process and manage emotions in all contexts, including both personal and workplace settings (Mayer et al., 2004). Moreover, a strong correlation exists between emotional regulation and improved outcomes for individuals, including cognitive function, problem-solving, social functioning, and overall ability to cope (Lawrence et al., 2011; Mayer et al., 2004; Rogers, Dolidze, Mus-Rasmussen, et al., 2024). The ability model is important when examining the role of EI in enhancing educators' coping strategies and the organisation's success in supporting children's outcomes. This is particularly important within the Australian ECEC context, where burnout and attrition rates are notably high, and job satisfaction is concerning (Rogers, Dolidze, Mus-Rasmussen, et al., 2024; Zhang, 2025).

Australian ECEC context

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in Australian ECEC educators citing burnout and leaving the sector (Kirk, 2022; Rogers et al., 2023). All regional, rural, remote, and almost all low-income suburbs are part of 'childcare deserts' (Hurley et al., 2024; Rogers, Sims, et al., 2025), and it is now estimated that Australia needs over 21,000 more educators (Blandis, 2024). A longitudinal study conducted by Thorpe et al. (2020) on the Australian ECEC workforce tracked staff turnover in centres located in remote, regional, and urban areas. Using a national survey and stratified sampling, it was concluded that the annual staff turnover of ECEC services was 37%. This turnover was explained by various factors, including personal (e.g., starting a family) and workplace-related factors, both positive (e.g., receiving a promotion) and negative (e.g., dissatisfaction) (Thorpe et al., 2020). The highest turnover rates were observed in remote locations, where staff attrition was 10% higher (Thorpe et al., 2020).

While acknowledging significant systemic changes needed in the sector, especially pay and status (Bull et al., 2024), Thorpe et al. (2020) concluded that organisations must focus on workplace culture to retain and sustain educators within the sector in the short term. Within the study, it was noted that work conditions were the single most important factor explaining attrition (Thorpe et al., 2020). The results suggested that it is necessary to examine flexibility in terms of work-life balance, and provide appropriate compensation for the job requirements, adequate resources, supportive management and professional development, and allow educators proper recognition and reward for their knowledge and experience. The findings of Thorpe et al. (2020) indicated that educator attrition disrupted relationships within organisations and that educators' understandable struggles to cope threatened the quality of education and care provided.

In support of the findings by Thorpe et al. (2020), an educator survey, prompted by high educator attrition, conducted by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), concluded that the sector must investigate options for improved educator workplace supports to enhance coping strategies and retention (Roberts, 2022). Additionally, the literature contains links between job satisfaction and commitment to the organisation, as well as teacher efficacy, which is viewed as a moderator between workplace stressors and flourishing (Schutte & Loi, 2014; Yukselir & Ozer, 2022).

In the next section, we outline our methodology for examining the impact of EI on ECEC services, drawing on the lead author's autoethnographic reflections. The reflections are then analysed and discussed in relation to the literature.

Methodology

In this study, we employed an autoethnographic approach, combining elements of autobiography and ethnography, to explore and analyse individual experiences within a specific cultural context (Adams et al., 2017). This approach enables us to examine our own lived experiences through reflection and use those insights to reflect on broader cultural, social, or political issues (Stahlke Wall, 2016). Autoethnographers often integrate self-reflections into the context of personal narrative, supported by academic theory, thereby combining analysis of both to better understand individuals' experiences (Adams et al., 2017). Fundamentally, autoethnography uses narrative to construct an understanding of our lives, those around us, and our culture (Holman Jones, 2019). These features include personal reflections, cultural context, narrative style, and critical analysis, which work together to tell a story. The narrative blends personal anecdotes with critical analysis of the literature to illuminate challenging social or cultural dynamics (Stahlke Wall, 2016).

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of New England (HE-2025-2148-2741). For the researchers to protect the identity of places and people included in the reflections, composites have been created for the material presented in this paper. The researchers have blended different settings, people and times without compromising the themes being illustrated. The authors have made every effort to protect the privacy of individuals.

Using an autoethnographic approach, the authors' accounts were created by drawing on personal reflections regarding their roles as educators and directors within various early childhood services across a range of geographic locations. These autoethnographic accounts from the lead author have accumulated over many years of working in the early childhood sector, starting as a pre-service educator and progressing to a degree-qualified early childhood teacher, room leader, and director. These examples were chosen because they represent the practical experiences of educators who have been affected by high staff turnover, poor workplace culture, and a decline in the quality of education and care resulting from burnout and feelings of being overwhelmed.

We employ inductive thematic analysis to identify themes from the reviewed literature that relate to the personal reflections. The three reflections were the lead author's own

compositions, written as part of the autoethnographic process. The commentaries were developed to conceptualise these reflections within the EI literature. The thematic analysis emerged iteratively. The initial reflections were reviewed, and through robust discussion with co-authors, with consideration to current EI literature, three themes were constructed. The lead author reviewed and revised both the reflections and commentaries to align with the themes, ensuring the personal narrative remained. The lead author reflected on the preliminary themes and adjusted the commentaries as required. The revisions were guided with the intention of maintaining integrity to the reflections rather than fitting them into preconceived ideas. The thematic analysis was a combination of the lead author's reflections, the co-authors' insights and reference to current EI literature.

This enables us to identify patterns and themes in the literature reviewed, alongside personal reflections (Braun & Clarke, 2006), thereby providing insight into how educators' EI skills impact ECEC. It also allows us to look beyond the individual experience and explore how themes emerge within the broader social context, aligning with the constructivist view that knowledge and meaning are co-constructed through social interactions and shared experiences (Schcolnik et al., 2006).

Results

In the following sections, we present reflections from the ECEC sector based on the lead author's experience throughout her ECEC career, from the early days of practicum to the roles in leadership. Each reflection contributes to one of the themes, as illustrated in Figure 3.

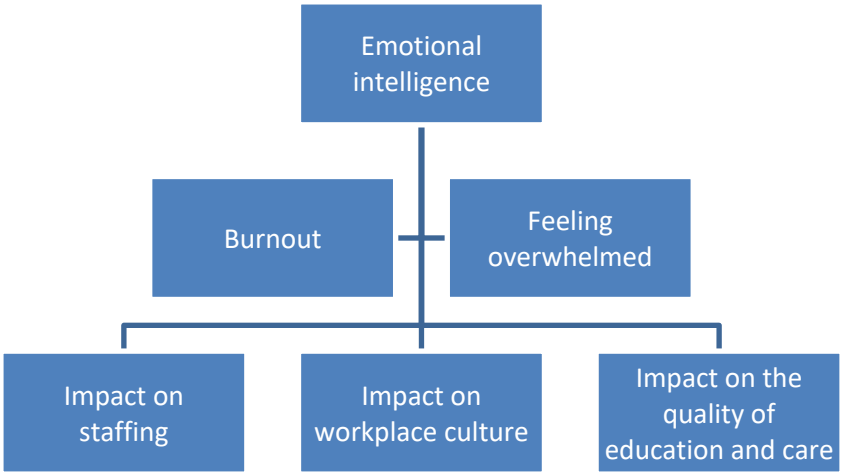

Figure 3: The connection between emotional intelligence, burnout, feeling overwhelmed, and the themes

For each of the three reflections, we provide an introduction, followed by a commentary, and then a discussion section that links the reflection and commentary to the relevant literature. The first reflection highlights the adverse effects of high staff turnover on

remaining educators, which can potentially lead to a decline in their ability to cope. The second reflection examines the detrimental impact of the limited ability to demonstrate EI skills on shaping workplace culture. The final reflection highlights how educator burnout and feelings of being overwhelmed affect the quality of education and care provided to children, ultimately impacting their learning outcomes.

Theme 1: Impacts on staffing

The first reflection illustrates the impact of EI on other educators and the service they provide. The example illustrates several key issues relating to EI, with a particular focus on the negative impact a high-stress environment can have on the individual educator's emotional ability to cope, and the organisation's overall functioning.

Reflection 1

> I have observed an increase in the attrition rates and subsequent burnout of educators within the sector. I have noticed a turnover rate of over 50% in some services. Due to this churn, I have observed a severe impact on the remaining educators' ability to cope. Notably, there were comments from other educators and families regarding attrition. As a result of losing qualified and trained educators, the remaining educators faced increased responsibility as they were tasked with training new staff. At one point, due to high educator turnover, for every new staff member starting, an educator was resigning, resulting in the remaining educators having to undertake additional documentation to compensate for the loss of trained staff. Educators remaining at the service expressed feeling overwhelmed at the loss of trained and experienced educators. They commented on being unable to engage appropriately with children due to feeling stressed and on the edge of burnout. Subsequently, as the attrition continued, I observed educator behaviours, including;
>
> - An increase in conflict between educators. Educators were curt when speaking to one another and quick to display frustration when things did not go well.
>
> - An increase in sick leave. Educators were requesting additional leave, citing various illnesses, and in some cases, requesting leave for mental health.
>
> - Educators' high emotional reactions to slight disturbances in their daily routine. For example, an educator receiving extra children for documentation purposes became visibly upset and distressed, expressing feelings of being overwhelmed and reporting that they could not manage their workload.
> - There was a significant decrease in attendance at special events such as dress-up days (St Patrick's Day and book week) due to attrition. Educators were visibly less motivated and less enthusiastic about engaging in such events.

Commentary

> These behaviours were attributed by myself and other staff members to the increased documentation, the additional responsibility in training new educators and the constant communication about educators resigning. At some services, the engagement of external casual agency staff placed additional pressure on the permanently employed educators. New and casual educators entering the services lacked practical experience and training. Additionally, they were unaware of the children's needs because these relationships require time to develop. This lack of familiarity, combined with unfamiliarity with the areas for learning, made it difficult for new educators to write the required observations. As a result, the pressure placed on the remaining staff increased.
>
> Additionally, the existing staff had the extra burden of training new and casual educators in the service's routines, systems and procedures, adding to the mounting pressure. Then, with the involvement of casual agencies, the new educators were unfamiliar with the daily operations and the specific needs of the children within their group. This further burdened the remaining educators by increasing their workload to instruct and guide the casual educators while also managing their roles and responsibilities.

Discussion

The first reflection supports the findings of Thorpe et al. (2020) regarding the role of educator attrition in disrupting the relationships within the organisation, between educators, as well as between educators and children. In addition, the reduction in educators' ability to cope, a direct result of the added workload and responsibilities, led to decreased educator responsiveness and engagement within the service. Educators were overwhelmed, experiencing burnout, which in turn had the potential to disrupt the continuity and consistency of education and care provided to children. The example of high staff turnover and the subsequent emotional strain on remaining educators highlights how inadequate emotional and mental support, as well as the implementation of ineffective stress management strategies, can lead to burnout, dissatisfaction, and a shift in workplace culture (Ghosh, 2024). When educators face ongoing challenges for an extended period without sufficient support, their ability to cope is potentially compromised, which can negatively impact their workplace performance and job satisfaction (Mayer et al., 2004), contributing to attrition cycles (Figure 1).

In environments with high staff turnover, the emotional and mental toll on the remaining staff is often increased as they take on more responsibilities, such as training new staff and increased documentation. This heightened social, emotional and mental demand can reduce educators' ability to effectively manage stress, leading to maladaptive behaviours and potentially reducing workplace performance (Ghosh, 2024). Without the support of management with a strategy that addresses the underlying issue including the social and emotional needs of educators, individuals are at a greater risk of burnout, and disengagement from their job which can lead to a decline in the overall ability of educators

to flourish in their services (Schutte et al., 2002), and the quality of education and care delivered by the service. Research by Lawrence et al. (2011) demonstrated that when organisations are unable to invest in fostering an emotionally intelligent workplace, they risk a continuous cycle of dissatisfaction and burnout, negatively impacting staff retention, workplace culture and the quality of the service provided to children and their families (Lawrence et al., 2011).

Ultimately, in the day-to-day operations of an organisation, as well as during times of change or crisis, EI plays a crucial role in supporting educators' ability to flourish in the workplace (Villa & Valle, 2025). An organisation that values and develops EI skills among staff and management is more likely to create an environment conducive to support, resilience, success and quality (Mayer et al., 2004).

Theme 2: Impact on workplace culture

The second reflection highlights the impact on educators who struggle with EI in the workplace. The educators in this reflection display a disproportionate emotional reaction to the situation, clear examples of individuals struggling with emotional regulation.

Reflection 2

> I observed that individual educators struggled with emotional regulation at times of high stress and a large workload. This included:
>
> - Educators in ECEC services during the assessment and rating process were under much greater stress than usual. This process involves the State or Territory government inspecting the service and rating its compliance with the Australian Government standards (this rating is made public). In one example I observed, the educator was responsible for the documentation for the visit. Before and during the visit, the educator demonstrated signs of burnout and feeling overwhelmed. Outwardly, they had tense bodies, used a curt tone, and showed frustration when explaining processes to other educators. This negatively impacted their collegial relationships. They were working late into the night to prepare the assessment and regulatory documentation. This is neither their regular hours nor paid work. The educator expressed feeling stressed and anxious over the process. As a result, they were unable to support the other educators at the service during the day when the inspectors were present. This impacted their ability to solve problems and prioritise tasks appropriately.
>
> - The responsibility of daily practice (mealtimes, nappy changes and sleep time) is something educators need to manage carefully. For example, during the daily routine of mealtimes, there is a lot for an educator to consider. Group time takes place to support the children as they transition from play to mealtimes, followed by the hygiene practice of handwashing, and finally, the children wait to be served their meal. As a result, it can be a moment of

heightened emotions as children struggle to be patient or follow the routine. In the examples I observed, various educators struggled with emotional regulation and became dysregulated when the transition was not smooth. These educators demonstrated behaviours such as purposefully ignoring their colleagues, slamming down the digital device used to input the required data into the childcare software, and storming off to another section of the room or the service. These behaviours impacted the remaining staff, as they were unaware of what went wrong and unsure of what to do following this behaviour. The children also witnessed this emotional reactivity.

- The large volume of required daily documentation creates pressure to help the service achieve a higher rating. It should be noted that meeting the standards is not enough; service managers aim to achieve an 'exceeding' rating, which requires stricter standards and additional documentation. The quality and quantity of documentation are increasing as services strive to meet the 'exceeding' standards to market their early childhood centres to parents in an increasingly competitive environment. Due to this pressure, I observed educators displaying high emotional reactions and stress-related symptoms when being asked to complete specific documentation tasks. This included crying, stomach aches, headaches, increased irritability and withdrawal from colleagues.

Commentary

Throughout my ECEC career, I have observed the impact of educators' EI on workplace culture. Educators with lower EI skills and poor emotional regulation impact team collaboration, cooperation, and the atmosphere in the learning environment. These educators have occasionally demonstrated highly reactive and maladaptive coping strategies. Behaviours such as throwing items down, raising voices, and slamming doors demonstrate that some educators struggle to maintain an emotionally healthy state in the face of stress and adversity. As a direct response to these behaviours, other educators have resigned, requested to move workspaces and/or increased their absenteeism to separate themselves from these situations. The flow-on effect to rostering and managing room requirements is detrimental to providing quality care and education to children.

Discussion

The second reflection highlights EI's crucial role in creating a positive and stable workplace culture, in which emotional regulation is key to individuals' ability to cope and work effectively in teams. The educators' behaviours described above illustrate low EI, especially regarding emotional regulation. This does not necessarily mean that the educators themselves have low EI, but rather that they were unable to use it in that situation, possibly due to the stressful environment. EI involves perceiving, understanding, managing and using emotions effectively with oneself and others (Mayer et al., 2004). An early childhood educator's role often involves moments of frustration and

high stress; therefore, educators need to manage their emotional reactions constructively to facilitate a de-escalation of the situation, and create models of behaviour for children to emulate. During these incidents, the educators' emotional reactivity exacerbated the stressful situation, creating a tense environment for both colleagues and children within the learning environment.

Research on EI indicates that individuals who exhibit high levels of EI are more effective in regulating their emotions, adapting to stressful situations, and performing better in high-pressure environments (Mayer et al., 2004). In contrast, individuals with lower EI skills may struggle to control their emotional reactions and be led by their feelings, leading to disruptions in workplace culture and negatively impacting team dynamics (Schutte et al., 2002). In the second reflection, the educators' emotional reactivity led to a breakdown in the functioning of the learning environment and team cohesion, creating a challenging work environment where other educators felt unsupported. The consequences of such behaviours sometimes escalate, leading to their colleagues' refusal to work with them, demonstrating that limited EI skills can erode interpersonal relationships and disrupt team functionality (Ghosh, 2024).

In these examples, various management teams attempted to provide external support and engaged in multiple conversations with the educators involved. As there was already significant damage to the culture in the learning environment, it suggests that developing EI skills requires more than just discussion and external support. While such support can be beneficial in some ways, EI must be cultivated within the individual. This might be achieved through professional development and training to ensure lasting behaviour change, improving workplace culture and team dynamics (Cherniss, 2000).

The impact of educators' behaviour on the team and environment is noteworthy. It highlights the importance of EI in fostering a consistent and productive workplace. In ECEC, educators must model appropriate behaviours and interactions with children, including emotional regulation, co-regulation with children, and implementing important regulation strategies. This supports creating and maintaining a positive, calm learning environment, demonstrating a high ability to manage emotional reactivity. These strategies are essential for educators to cope with and thrive, ultimately impacting the overall quality of education and care provided to children (Lawrence et al., 2011). Educators who demonstrate high EI contribute to a more encouraging and supportive team dynamic, which benefits the children they teach. Organisations investing in EI training and support for educators are crucial to creating a safe, stable, and predictable environment for both educators and children.

Theme 3: Impact on the quality of ECEC

The third reflection illustrates the impact of educators' ability to utilise EI on the quality of ECEC provided. When educators are emotionally and physically exhausted, overwhelmed and experiencing burnout, they struggle to provide the appropriate conditions for the holistic development of children, as revealed in the final reflection.

Reflection 3

Over the years, I have had instances where several educators have requested time off simultaneously, citing burnout and the need for a break. Additionally, many qualified and experienced educators reduced their hours, while others left the sector. Some educators have transitioned to other ECEC services, seeking a less stressful and less demanding work environment. Some examples included:

- A degree-qualified ECEC teacher struggled to provide an individualised plan for a child who required extra support due to feeling overwhelmed, even though this was something they had previously managed to do. As a result, that child was overlooked, impacting their engagement and learning progress.

- Due to the overwhelming stressors and competing priorities, an educator rushed through lesson plans, not planning effectively. This led to gaps in children's learning and increased problematic behaviour due to a lack of stimulation and child engagement.

- An educator distracted by stress and work-related issues had trouble maintaining focus within the room. This led to a more chaotic learning environment, where children were less engaged and struggled to stay on task due to a lack of clear boundaries and expectations. This inconsistency in the management of the learning environment made it difficult for the children to stay on task and engage appropriately with the learning materials.

- A stressed and overwhelmed educator found it difficult to be emotionally available to the children. This manifested as a lack of responsiveness to children's emotional needs. In turn, some of the children's behaviour declined.

Commentary

Within various services, I have observed firsthand the impact of burnout and feelings of being overwhelmed on educators' ability to cope in the workplace. Through observations, it was clear that the long hours, increasing responsibilities and limited support significantly impacted the quality of education and care provided to children. As a result of experiencing burnout and feeling overwhelmed, educators became physically and emotionally exhausted. This led to an observable decline in their ability to engage and interact with children, providing the nurturing and responsive care required for children's holistic development.

Educators are often distracted by their own stressors or varied workplace responsibilities, leaving children without much-needed attention and guidance. Some children have displayed behavioural issues relating to conflict resolution, resilience, persistence and frustration, which educators, struggling with their

> stress and being overwhelmed, are unable to address appropriately. Additionally, educators had limited modelling of strategies to assist children in developing their emotional skills. This further impacts the learning environment. I have observed that some educators struggle to co-regulate with children. This is evident when they have failed to use multiple strategies to assist children in emotional regulation. When I have engaged in conversations with educators, they have expressed a strong passion and desire for ECEC; however, despite this, there is a continual expression of the physical and emotional toll the job can sometimes impose.
>
> Through these conversations, educators have commented that they cannot spend meaningful time engaging and interacting with children, which drew them to the sector. They report routine tasks, daily operations, and documentation requirements are taking precedence. Furthermore, they have expressed guilt as they struggle to manage their time between documentation requirements and the quality of education and care they provide for children. Some even claim to have observed a reduction in the number of authentic and meaningful learning experiences for children in their practice due to job pressures.

Discussion

The third reflection highlights the impact that stress, burnout, and feelings of being overwhelmed can have on educators' emotional presence, engagement, and responsiveness to children in their care, all of which are essential for creating an environment conducive to learning. EI, particularly in terms of emotion identification and emotional regulation, is crucial for educators to support their ability to cope, enabling them to engage in positive interactions with children and foster their social and emotional development (Mayer et al., 2004). An educator's ability to stay present and calm while being attuned and responsive to the needs of the children diminishes when they are overwhelmed (Schutte et al., 2002). This has a direct impact on the quality of education and care provided. Therefore, burnout and feelings of being overwhelmed can affect educators' ability to cope, potentially impacting the quality of education and care provided to young children. During these formative years, interactions between adults and children, particularly with educators, significantly influence a child's overall development, encompassing social, emotional, and cognitive growth.

Despite overwhelming job pressures, these educators demonstrate a natural ability to co-regulate with children and implement effective strategies to support children's emotional regulation. Co-regulation involves the educator supporting and guiding children in managing their emotions through safe, calm, and supportive interactions. This is an important element of EI, as individuals with high EI are adept at regulating their own emotions and those of others (Mayer et al., 2004). These skills require emotional awareness and the ability to use emotions constructively. This further highlights the need for EI training and support to help educators acquire co-regulation skills.

In the next section, we draw conclusions and make recommendations.

Conclusion

This autoethnographic study has revealed what can happen when ECEC educators are unable to use their EI in potentially stressful situations within highly regulated work environments. This can be hampered by increased stress, burnout and feelings of being overwhelmed. This is significant because educators who can demonstrate higher EI are more likely to experience job satisfaction, better motivate children within their learning environments, and structure learning based on child-centred approaches (Türkmen & Ulutas, 2018). Therefore, it is significant to the early childhood sector to investigate educators' awareness about how they identify and adjust their personal development within their professional lives (Türkmen & Ulutas, 2018).

Currently, there is limited research on educators' understanding of EI and its impact on their job satisfaction, burnout, and feelings of being overwhelmed. A study by Türkmen and Ulutas (2018) examined the views of 15 preschool educators on EI and how this was used to support children's emotional development. The study concluded that preschool educators' awareness and skills in EI are limited, with most educators' definitions of EI primarily focusing on understanding emotions (Türkmen & Ulutas, 2018). Through the educators' views, the definition of EI is condensed into solely understanding emotions and does not effectively describe the comprehensive concepts of EI. Important additional skills are part of EI, such as identifying, understanding and managing emotions (see Figure 1). EI can link to various other skills, such as empathy, social skills, and motivation (Türkmen & Ulutas, 2018). The Turkman study suggested future directions, recommending that educators be supported in their understanding of EI with in-service training opportunities, including seminars or workshops (Türkmen & Ulutas, 2018).

A growing body of research highlights EI's pivotal role in promoting workplace flourishing, with studies demonstrating its positive impact on coping strategies, job satisfaction and workplace performance. A study conducted by Schutte and Loi (2014) surveyed 319 working adults to investigate the relationship between EI and workplace flourishing. It was concluded that higher EI was related to better mental health and increased job satisfaction (Schutte & Loi, 2014). While EI contributes to workplace flourishing, it also contributes to mitigating burnout and feelings of being overwhelmed, which are equally critical.

A study examining the relationship between burnout and EI in healthcare professionals found that EI acted as a protective factor against burnout and even contributed to reducing its severity (Vlachou et al., 2016). Through an individual's ability to leverage EI skills, such as emotional regulation, they can effectively navigate workplace challenges, manage higher demands, and maintain their own coping strategies, thereby reducing the likelihood of burnout. Conversely, those individuals with lower EI may struggle to manage and regulate negative emotions and stress, leading to burnout over a period of time (Vlachou et al., 2016). Unlike other professions, educators are in a caregiving role that requires continuous emotional engagement and atonement, making them particularly vulnerable to burnout. The emotional labour of educators, over time, can lead to anxiety

and exhaustion, particularly for educators with lower levels of EI, as they are not fully able to regulate their own emotions or seek out adequate support (Vlachou et al., 2016).

Workplace challenges for ECEC educators have accumulated over many years, as evidenced by the significant increase in studies examining burnout (Ng et al., 2023). The cumulative effects of burnout and feelings of being overwhelmed can contribute to a decline in the quality of care and education provided to children. Educators often struggle to balance routine tasks, documentation, and the emotional and physical demands of their role, leaving less time for authentic interactions with children and families (Ng et al., 2023; Rogers, Dolidze, Mus-Rasmussen, et al., 2024). These burdens can reduce the job status (Sims et al., 2023), negatively impact feelings of professionalism, and ultimately reduce job satisfaction (Rogers, Dolidze, Mus-Rasmussen, et al., 2024).

Educators who can utilise EI are better equipped to balance the diversity of job requirements while maintaining emotional regulation (Mayer et al., 2004). When an individual's EI skills are limited or depleted, emotional regulation is compromised, potentially leading to emotional exhaustion (Andrew, 2015). As a result, this may negatively influence their ability to engage with other educators, children and their families.

Burnout and feeling overwhelmed can impact the quality of education and care provided to children, including engagement, modelling appropriate regulation skills and the overall atmosphere of the learning environment. Educators' EI plays a critical role in identifying their own and others' emotions, managing stress, solving problems effectively, and displaying resilience in the face of adversity (Mayer et al., 2004). Organisations need to support and foster a workplace conducive to educators thriving and developing these vital EI skills. Prioritising EI training and providing educators with the proper tools and strategies to manage their stress and emotions are essential for improving the quality of education and care provided to children in ECEC settings.

References

Adams, T. E., Ellis, C. & Holman Jones, S. (2017). Autoethnography. *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0011

Andrew, Y. (2015). What we feel and what we do: Emotional capital in early childhood work. *Early Years*, 35(4), 351-365. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2015.1077206

Bar-On, R. (2020). *Emotional and social intelligence: Insights from the Emotional Quotient Inventory*. In R. Bar-On & J. D. A. Parker (Eds), *The handbook of emotional intelligence: Theory, development, assessment, and application at home, school and in the work place*. CA: Jossey-Bass.

Blandis, E. (2024). More than 20,000 extra early childhood educators urgently needed in Australia to keep up with current demands, report says. *ABC News*, 3 September. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-09-03/sa-early-childhood-sector-urgent-workers-needed/104303506

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bull, R., McFarland, L., Cumming, T. & Wong, S. (2024). The impact of work-related wellbeing and workplace culture and climate on intention to leave in the early childhood sector. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 69, 13-24. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2024.06.002

Carmeli, A., Yitzhak-Halevy, M. & Weisberg, J. (2009). The relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological wellbeing. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 24(1), 66-78. https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940910922546

Cherniss, C. (2000). Emotional intelligence: What it is and why it matters. In *Annual Meeting of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, New Orleans, LA. https://secure.tutorsglobe.com/Atten_files/237_What-it-is-and-why-it-matters.pdf

Cumming, T. (2017). Early childhood educators' well-being: An updated review of the literature. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 45, 583-593. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-016-0818-6

Cumming, T. & Wong, S. (2019). Towards a holistic conceptualisation of early childhood educators' work-related well-being. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 20(3), 265-281. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949118772573

Doan, L. K. (2019). Finding community: An exploration into an induction support pilot project. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 44(1), 68-79. https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs.v44i1.18778

Gayathri, N. & Meenakshi, K. (2013). A literature review of emotional intelligence. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 2(3), 42-51. https://www.ijhssi.org/papers/v2(3)/version-2/H234251.pdf

Ghosh, A. (2024). Emotional intelligence and burnout influencing work behaviours. *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology*, 15(1), 68-74. https://journals.indexcopernicus.com/api/file/viewByFileId/1950578

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ for character health and lifelong achievement*. Bantam Books.

Holman Jones, S. (2019). Living an autoethnographic activist life. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 25(6), 527-528. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418800755

Hurley, P., Tham, M. & Nguyen, H. (2024). *Mapping the deserts: Childcare accessibility in Australia*. https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchell-institute/childcare-accessibility-australia

Kanesan, P. & Fauzan, N. (2019). Models of emotional intelligence: A review. *e-BANGI Journal of Social Science and Humanities*, 16(7), 1-9. https://ir.unimas.my/id/eprint/28292/

Kirk, G. (2022). How can we address the wicked problem of university student attrition? A BEd (Early Childhood) case study. *Issues in Educational Research*, 32(3), 982-1000. https://www.iier.org.au/iier32/kirk.pdf

Kotaman, H. (2023). Improving early childhood teachers' emotional skills supporting children's academic socio-emotional development. *Early Child Development and Care*, 193(4), 574-586. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2022.2123803

Lawrence, S. A., Troth, A. C., Jordan, P. J. & Collins, A. L. (2011). A review of emotion regulation and development of a framework for emotion regulation in the workplace. In P. L. Perrewé & D. C. Ganster (Eds.), *The role of individual differences in occupational stress and well being*. Emerald Group. (pp. 197-263). https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-3555(2011)0000009010

Li, Z., Li, X. & Chen, J. (2025). Emotional intelligence of educators: A bibliometric review, 1998-2024. *Social Psychology of Education*, 28(1), article 99. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-025-10048-2

Logan, H., Cumming, T. & Wong, S. (2020). Sustaining the work-related wellbeing of early childhood educators: Perspectives from key stakeholders in early childhood organisations. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 52(1), 95-113. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-020-00264-6

Lummis, G. W., Morris, J. E., Ferguson, C., Hill, S. & Lock, G. (2022). Leadership teams supporting teacher wellbeing by improving the culture of an Australian secondary school. *Issues in Educational Research*, 32(1), 205-224. https://www.iier.org.au/iier32/lummis.pdf

Mayer, J. D., Salovey, P. & Caruso, D. R. (2004). Target articles: "Emotional intelligence: Theory, findings, and Implications". *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(3), 197-215. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1503_02

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. https://www.iier.org.au/iier33/ng.pdf

Petrides, K. V. (2010). Trait emotional intelligence theory. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 3(2), 136-139. https://www.psychometriclab.com/adminsdata/files/IOPS%20(2010)%20-%20TEI.pdf

Puertas Molero, P., Zurita-Ortega, F., Chacón-Cuberos, R., Castro-Sánchez, M., Ramírez-Granizo, I. A. & Gonzalez Valero, G. (2020). Emotional intelligence in the field of education: A meta-analysis. *Developmental and Educational Psychology*, 36(1), 84-91. https://doi.org/10.6018/analesps.345901

Roberts-Holmes, G. & Bradbury, A. (2016). The datafication of early years education and its impact upon pedagogy. *Improving Schools*, 19(2), 119-128. https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480216651519

Roberts, J. (2022). ACECQA's 2021 Family Survey provides new insights into key centre selection criteria and rating awareness. *The Sector*, 1 February. https://thesector.com.au/2022/02/01/acecqas-2021-family-survey-shows-jump-in-awareness-of-ratings-rise-in-importance-of-educator-skill-in-service-selection/

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

Rogers, M., Dolidze, K., Mus-Rasmussen, A., Dovigo, F. & Doan, L. (2024). Impacts of managerial systems on early educators' job satisfaction in five countries. *Issues in Educational Research*, 34(1), 219-234. http://www.iier.org.au/iier34/rogers.pdf

Rogers, M., Dolidze, K., Mus-Rasmussen, A., Dovigo, F. & Doan, L. (2025). Early childhood educators' understandings of quality in five countries: Similarities and differences to policy. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, online first. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2025.2484241

Rogers, M., Dolidze, K., Mus-Rasmussen, A. M., Dovigo, F. & Doan, L. K. (2024). Impacts of managerial systems on early educators' job satisfaction in five countries. *Issues in Educational Research*, 34(1), 219-234. http://www.iier.org.au/iier34/rogers.pdf

Rogers, M., Sims, M., Butler, M., Volpe, C. R., Gossner, M. & Bhullar, N. (2025). How 'childcare deserts' in rural Australia impact parent and child wellbeing: An analysis of parental voices. *Issues in Educational Research*, 35(3), 1116-1136. http://www.iier.org.au/iier35/rogers.pdf

Salovey, P. & Mayer, J. D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 9(3), 185-211. https://doi.org/10.2190/dugg-p24e-52wk-6cdg

Schcolnik, M., Kol, S. & Abarbanel, J. (2006). Constructivism in theory and in practice. *English Teaching Forum*, 44(4), 12-20. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1107896.pdf

Schutte, N. S. & Loi, N. M. (2014). Connections between emotional intelligence and workplace flourishing. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 66, 134-139. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.03.031

Schutte, N. S., Malouff, J. M., Hall, L. E., Haggerty, D. J., Cooper, J. T., Golden, C. J. & Dornheim, L. (1998). Development and validation of a measure of emotional intelligence. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 25(2), 167-177. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869(98)00001-4

Schutte, N. S., Malouff, J. M., Simunek, M., McKenley, J. & Hollander, S. (2002). Characteristic emotional intelligence and emotional well-being. *Cognition & Emotion*, 16(6), 769-785. https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930143000482

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. https://www.iier.org.au/iier33/sims.pdf

Stahlke Wall, S. (2016). Toward a moderate autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 15(1), 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406916674966

Thorpe, K., Jansen, E., Sullivan, V., Irvine, S., McDonald, P., Lunn, J., Sumsion, J., Ferguson, A., Lincoln, M., Liley, K. & Spall, 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

Türkmen, S. & Ulutas, İ. (2018). How do preschool teachers perceive the emotional intelligence? Teaching practices and emotional intelligence in early childhood. In I. Koleva, H. A. Başal, M. Tufan & E. Atasoy (Eds.), *Educational sciences research in the globalizing world.* (pp. 170-183). https://unipress.bg/image/catalog/1pdf/educational-sciences-research-in-the-globalizing-world.pdf

Villa, M. Y. & Valle, A. M. (2025). Teachers' emotional intelligence and their resiliency. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Analysis*, 8(4), 1645-1657. https://doi.org/10.47191/ijmra/v8-i04-19

Vlachou, E. M., Damigos, D., Lyrakos, G., Chanopoulos, K., Kosmidis, G. & Karavis, M. (2016). The relationship between burnout syndrome and emotional intelligence in healthcare professionals. *Health Science Journal*, 10(5), 1-9. https://www.proquest.com/openview/6a84e9cf20e772aa635626ae89844c39/1

Yukselir, C. & Ozer, O. (2022). Investigating the interplay between English language teachers' autonomy, well-being and efficacy. *Issues in Educational Research*, 32(4), 1643-1657. https://www.iier.org.au/iier32/yukselir.pdf

Zhang, K. C. (2025). ECE burnout: Early childhood intervention practitioners' sense of hope, life satisfaction, and meaning in life. *Issues in Educational Research*, 35(1), 442-460. https://www.iier.org.au/iier35/zhang.pdf

Author statements

Ethics:
Ethics approval was obtained from the University of New England (HE-2025-2148-2741)

Conflicts of interest:
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ms Elysia Phillips (lead author) is a Higher Degree Research candidate at the University of New England, Australia. She has a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education and a postgraduate degree in psychology. She has over 15 years' experience within the early childhood sector in positions ranging from teacher to director.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8166-4515
Email: ephilli8@myune.edu.au

Professor Margaret Sims is Honorary Professor of Early Childhood Education, Macquarie University, Australia. Margaret is an Australian early childhood and family researcher and has worked in family support and disabilities for many years.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4686-4245
Email: margaret.sims@mq.edu.au

Dr Nicola Schutte is an Associate Professor in the School of Psychology, University of New England, Australia. Nicola has researched positive psychology-based studies, including ones focused on adaptive emotional functioning. In her research she has used a variety of designs and statistical approaches.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3294-7659
Email: nschutte@une.edu.au

Dr Marg Rogers (corresponding author) is a Senior Lecturer and course coordinator in Early Childhood Education at the University of New England, Australia. Her research interests are in families, military families, professionalism and well-being. Marg is also a researcher with the Manna Institute, Australia [https://mannainstitute.au/].
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8407-7256
Email: marg.rogers@une.edu.au

Please cite as: Phillips, E., Sims, M., Schutte, N. & Rogers, M. (2025). Autoethnographic reflections: Countering early educator burnout and overwhelmment with emotional intelligence. *Issues in Educational Research*, 35(4), 1664-1684. http://www.iier.org.au/iier35/phillips.pdf