

Low-paid 'women's work'—why early childhood educators are walking out

March 23 2018, by Susan Irvine, Karen Thorpe And Paula Mcdonald



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Australia's early childhood educators, including those working in community and private childcare centres, will walk off the job on March 27 to demand [better pay](#). Some centres will be closed for the whole day and parents will be asked to keep their children at home.

This scale of action will no doubt come at a cost to the economy and cause substantial inconvenience to thousands of families. It's part of a long-running equal pay campaign.

Early [childhood](#) educators are among the lowest-paid Australians, with many taking on a second job for a supplementary income. Many leave the sector altogether – with low pay identified as the central reason for doing so. This means the sector [loses skilled workers](#) at a time when its workforce should be growing in size.

Many would agree current wage levels don't reflect the [importance of caring for and educating children](#). Positive outcomes for children's development and emotional security have significant implications for the welfare of families and future economic prosperity.

Low pay

Reasons for low pay in the early childhood sector include a high proportion of female workers, the dependency of educators on [modern awards](#) that set minimum standards of pay and conditions, and various funding models that operate in the sector.

Certificate III qualified educators [receive A\\$809 per week before tax](#), which is around half the [average weekly earnings for all occupations](#). There is little difference between educator pay rates under the Children's Services Award, which covers the majority of workers, and the Australian national minimum wage of [\\$18.29 per hour before tax](#).

Some educators leave for better paid and less challenging work elsewhere, often without the requirement for qualifications. For example, educators can earn more money doing night retail work than in the [work they are qualified to undertake](#). Low [wages](#) also contribute to early childhood work being viewed not as a long-term career path, but a

temporary employment solution.

Our [own study](#) of 85 educators in nine [long daycare centres](#) (places where children can be cared for throughout the full day) in Queensland showed educators got significant satisfaction from their work with children. But their continued employment in the sector relied on supplementary income to cover life's necessities.

For some, their wages were supplemented by a partner who earned a higher income. Others received financial assistance from their parents or worked a second job. Those without additional financial support struggled and were more likely to consider leaving the sector.

Women's work

Like many other countries, Australia's early childhood workforce is [female dominated](#), consisting of more than 90% women.

Working with young children is often perceived as similar to mothering and something instinctive and enjoyable to women. This view is [perpetuated by government](#), the broader community, and, sometimes, educators themselves.

There is a tendency to preference the needs of children and families above childcare employees. This has been seen in responses to calls for increased wages, where public and political concern has focused on the consequent [increased cost to parents](#) using early childhood services.

Industrial issues

More than 70% of early [childhood educators are award dependent](#), compared to only 20% of the broader Australian workforce. This means

most educators are paid close to the minimum wage, with low variability in pay.

Although some employers attempt to pay more, it's rare for wages to exceed the award by more than 10%.

The ability for educators to increase their earnings is further reduced by a relatively flat career structure. Length of service is not reflected in salary. Also, opportunities for collective bargaining are restricted by a fragmented sector characterised by numerous single operators with a small number of employees.

Degree-qualified early childhood teachers are particularly disadvantaged. In most states and territories, preschool teachers' pay is [comparable to that of school teachers](#), but the same teacher leading a preschool program in a long daycare centre could be paid A\$7-8 less per hour. This reflects a difference of more than A\$13,000 per year.

Funding models

Although educator wages are low, they represent around 70% of operating costs for providers. The ability to pay educators more depends on the the budget of a given service.

Early childhood services in Australia gain income through parent fees and government funding. Different financial models are used for different service types.

Standalone preschools receive "[supply-side funding](#)", where money flows to the service mainly from government and is linked to operational costs such as the wages of qualified teachers and educators.

In contrast, long daycare services are subject to "demand-side funding".

In this model, there is no [operational subsidy](#) for providers. Instead, funding is linked to parent fees and designed to [offset the cost of care for individual families](#).

These funding systems mean any wage increase in a preschool is largely funded by government, with reduced impact on parent fees. But in long day care, wage increases are more likely to require increased parent fees.

Where to next for the early childhood sector?

The current Australian government maintains that wages are a [matter for employers and employees](#). Unions and some employers argue there should be greater public investment in education and care to enable an urgent increase to wages.

Based on [our research](#), and an understanding of the Australian education and care sector, improving wages is a shared responsibility. Employers clearly have a significant responsibility toward their employees and some could do better. There is also a need for greater investment from government.

There are lessons to be learnt from national and international examples. In Queensland, the [Kindergarten Funding Scheme](#) offers a per-child subsidy to support the delivery of a quality preschool education program delivered by a qualified teacher in long day care.

Canada has [recently introduced](#) an early childhood wage enhancement program. In New Zealand, [funding incentives](#) have been rolled out for early childhood services with highly qualified educators.

What might be achieved from the proposed walkout is difficult to predict. At the very least, the action is likely to build awareness of longstanding challenges in [early childhood](#) education. It might also

secure broader community support for wages and conditions that reflect the importance and complexity of early education work.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Low-paid 'women's work'—why early childhood educators are walking out (2018, March 23) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-03-low-paid-women-workwhy-early-childhood.html>

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