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Published

2020

Journal Title

Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education

Version

Version of Record (VoR)

DOI

[10.17206/apjrece.2020.14.2.135](https://doi.org/10.17206/apjrece.2020.14.2.135)

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Preschool Educators' Readiness to Promote Children's Emotional Competence

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Abstract

The development of children's emotional competence (EC) throughout the preschool period is critical for supporting their future social competence, transition to school and long-term academic success. This paper reports on survey responses of 78 Australian preschool educators to the scale *Preschool Educators' Readiness for Promoting Children's Emotional Competence* modified from Bouillet, Ivanec & Miljević-Ridički (2014) and a short open response section. This scale sought the views of educators regarding aspects such as their competence, willingness to promote children's emotional competence and the influence of institutional environment and conditions, with response variations explored across different locations, centre type and also respondent age. While responses indicated strong agreement regarding ability to successfully conduct activities to promote emotional competence and also respondent's prioritization of activities for emotional competence before cognitive skills, there also were differences observed across respondents. For example, almost half responded that they were not adequately prepared by their undergraduate education to promote emotional competence. A small number of open responses were supplied (n=24). Given the small sample, these were used as additional evidence to support and explain the findings from the quantitative analysis. Overall findings highlight the need for strategies to support these educators. These include additional information and practical strategies within undergraduate training, the development of a shared language that defines these issues, ongoing professional development in their workplaces and a greater availability of practical strategies and programs to support them in delivering this important role.

Keywords : Emotional competence, socialization, early childhood educators, preschool

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Introduction

The development of children's emotional competence throughout the preschool period is critical for supporting their future social competence, transition to school and long-term academic success (Denham et al., 2012a; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007). Emotional competence (EC) has three major components: emotion knowledge, emotion regulation and emotion expression (Denham, 1998; Saarni, 1999). During the preschool period, children (3-5 years-old), exercise their EC skills to build and maintain social relationships (Halberstadt et al., 2001). Those with well-developed EC are more likely to be judged as friendly and prosocial by peers and educators; these interactional processes providing a generative base for ongoing friendship and academic success (Denham et al., 2003). Thus, a focus on promoting children's EC in the early years has long term benefits for children and communities.

Recent evidence points to issues associated with young children's EC in the early years and the capacity of some children to satisfactorily cope with the social and emotional demands of their first year of formal schooling. The Australian Early Development Census reported the number of children developmentally vulnerable in the emotional maturity domain at around 8 % (7.6 % in 2012 and 8.4 % in 2015) (Department of Education and Training (DET), 2016). Additionally, the Queensland Government Department of Education (2018) recorded 1145 suspensions of Queensland Government preparatory children for behavioural issues in 2017, almost doubling the level in 2013. The preschool period before formal schooling encompasses a critical phase in the development of these fundamental emotional and social milestones (McCabe & Altamura, 2011).

Preschool children develop EC through a dynamic process of co-construction with others in their environment (parents, family, caregivers, educators and peers) (Denham et al., 2012b). The prime emotional socializer role, once predominantly enacted by parents, is now increasingly shared with educators as preschool children spend more time in education and care services (Ashiabi, 2000; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Preschool educators, in partnership with parents, are important agents for socialization of young children's EC. In a recent large-scale study of children's social and emotional behaviours Bassett et al. (2017) found a direct positive relationship between teacher behaviours and

children's social and emotional development, even when results were moderated for children's prior temperamental surgency. Additionally, educators' emotional socialization practices can positively benefit children from families at risk (Whitted, 2011). Early education settings therefore provide an important environment for formal and informal implementation of interventions that promote young children's EC.

Variations in Educator Practices

The implementation of formal and informal interventions that promote young children's EC is varied. Variations arise from unique differences in educators' knowledge and beliefs about EC, their own EC (Swartz & McElwain, 2012) and their teaching environment (Cassidy et al., 2017). Firstly, educators' existent knowledge and beliefs may influence their personal translation of pedagogical frameworks. In Australia early childhood education and care services are guided by the "National Quality Framework" (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2011) and the curriculum framework, *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (Department of Education and Training, 2009). Together, these support promotion of young children's EC as they require early childhood educators have the knowledge, skills and capabilities to identify, assess and implement strategies to achieve outcomes for social and emotional wellbeing, acknowledge their role in the socialization of social and emotional competency development, and value the development of warm responsive relationships with the children in their care (Temple & Emmett, 2013).

Though comprehensive in scope, the ELYF lacks specific detail for assessment and planning for promoting children's social and emotional development (Temple & Emmett, 2013). It allows flexibility within individual education contexts, but may also risk wide variability of EC practices depending on the proficiency of an educator's skills in this area. Temple and Emmett (2013) note, "there is a sizable gap that the profession must grapple with to ensure that the guidelines are translated into everyday practice" (p. 67). They suggest this lack of specificity may be in part linked to limited research and documentation of strategies and obstacles to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in preschool, a view also supported by Fler and Hammer (2013) who assert that a lack of research in some

areas of emotion competence contributes to ongoing confusion for early childhood educators.

Other factors that contribute to variations in educators' practices relate to changes introduced in the ELYF. Departures from traditional early childhood practices require educators find a new balance between traditional child-centred play-based approaches and intentional teaching and learning outcomes (specifically in communication, language and social and emotional development) (Grieshaber, 2010). For example, Australian daycare directors reported use of more traditional naturally occurring child-initiated strategies for SEL rather than intentional curriculum planning or policy driven strategies (Davis et al., 2010). Similarly, international researchers found the majority of early educators rely on traditional practices such as child-initiated play and informally responding to emerging issues for SEL rather than intentional instruction (Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013; Papadopoulou et al., 2014).

Jamison et al. (2012) assert that planned intentional teaching may be critical in the socialization of social and emotional competence for children at risk. Denham et al. (2012a) observed positive effects on children's EC within one academic year as a result of specific SEL programs. Most of these gains came from children who initially demonstrated behaviour problems and fewer school readiness skills. Despite this evidence hierarchical interventions are not often used by all early childhood educators (Brown & Conroy, 2011). The low reported use of formal SEL programs may result from a lack of core set of evidence-based practices in early childhood research (Han, 2012).

In Queensland, Australia, there is no prescribed SEL program for preschool use and few studies on available SEL programs. In Australia a free SEL resource support framework named KidsMatter early childhood (KMEC) has been available to long daycare centres and kindergartens since 2012 (Slee et al., 2012). Recently preschool SEL programs available in Australia were evaluated using KidsMatter SEL. Four were recommended for use, with only one studied in an Australian context (Gregory et al., 2018).

Lastly, variations in educators' daily practices such as their ability to respond to students and create warm classroom environments are also influenced by their own levels of social and emotional competence (Buettner et al., 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Bailey, et al. (2013) found "the consistency of teachers' emotional support related to children's

social-emotional functioning in the classroom” (p. 135). Centre conditions also influence variations in educator daily practices. Cassidy et al. (2017) found preschool educators who experienced teaching autonomy and perceived fair remuneration were more likely to create warm emotional classroom environments.

As a result of complex factors resulting from differences within children, families, educators and education environments, not all children receive uniform pedagogical delivery in this area (Barblett & Maloney, 2010). This is concerning, as further disadvantage may result for children already at-risk if time-critical opportunities for SEL and early intervention are not utilized. Researchers are calling for further studies to increase understandings of social and emotional pedagogy and educators' contributions to socialization (Denham et al., 2012b; Zinsser et al., 2015). This information could inform both undergraduate and professional trainings for early childhood educators and administrators to optimize SEL opportunities in this critical period before school.

Given the limitations identified in the literature, this study focused on educators' perceived readiness to promote pre-school children's emotional competence, thus responding to the formal research questions:

1. What are educators' thoughts and beliefs about promoting children's emotional competence?
2. What are educators' thoughts about their self-efficacy to perform the emotional socializer role?

While current learning programs in preschools are aspects that are mentioned in the research, the focus of this research included both structured and unstructured pedagogies thus formal programs are not the central focus of the research.

Method

This study formed the initial phase of a larger mixed methods research project designed to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of preschool educators from Queensland, Australia, about their emotional socializer role. Phase one fulfilled three important aims, firstly, to scope the perceptions of educators from a diversity of settings, secondly, offered

participants an avenue for private responses and finally, provided reflection preparation for those that participated in Phase 2 Focus Groups.

Survey Instrument

An online survey – including four attitude scales exploring aspects of preschool educators’ beliefs about emotions, readiness to promote children’s EC, as well as questions about demographics was used to access views on EC. An open response section was used to capture participants’ views and experiences regarding EC. This paper reports on the second scale; the *Preschool Educators’ Readiness for Promoting Children’s Emotional Competence* scale adapted by the author from *Preschool Teachers’ Resilience and Their Readiness for Building Children’s Resilience* (Bouillet et al., 2014). This 26-item self-rating five-point Likert scale (from completely agree to completely disagree), included items grouped into five themes; ‘competence’, ‘attitude’, ‘willingness’ and ‘institutional environment’ and ‘conditions’ (Bouillet et al., 2014).

Survey Participants and Planning

Responses were collected from early childhood educators working with 3 to 5-year-olds in a variety of early education and care services across Queensland, Australia. Queensland preschool services can be named preschool, pre-prep or kindergarten. The most common blend of service type is preschool within a long daycare centre (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2018). It was recognized that educators’ survey engagement could serve as a reflection task consistent with requirements for national quality standards (ACEQA, 2011) thus supporting educators to perform their role. The survey was piloted by an early childhood leader, with feedback used for survey modifications.

The survey was firstly distributed through one large Queensland early childhood provider, then individual contact with daycare centres, pre-prep centres and finally through social media. Fifty-six daycare centres and 33 preschool centres nominated to participate following individual contact. Educators were provided with information about the study, including background, confidentiality, privacy, research contacts, research intention and an

online link (URL) to the survey. Ethics approval was obtained through Griffith University and registered as GU ref no: 2017/122.

Data Collection and Analysis

Griffith University's LimeSurvey tool was used for survey administration, with SPSS v24 used for analysis. The survey was opened by 134 people, with 40 not responding to any statements. Sixteen responded to some statements in the first 2 scales but none in scale 3, leaving 78 usable responses for this study. Not all responded to demographic questions (for example, two to four responses missing for each) or statements (one to six responses missing for some statements).

Given the overarching aim was to build a descriptive picture of the views of educators, the first step was a descriptive analysis, profiling characteristics of participants and response patterns, and comparing response patterns against key demographic variables. While further analyses of this validated scale were considered, including comparison of response patterns and also assessment of the four subscales, inferential statistics were not progressed due to concerns regarding the small sample size. From the initial descriptive analysis a high level of item agreement/disagreement was apparent. More interesting, however, was the identification of items where response patterns varied across groups. It was felt that these responses provided a valuable insight into respondents' views on this relatively under-researched topic. The open response section was only completed by 24 participants. Given the small sample, these were used as additional evidence to support and explain the findings from the quantitative analysis.

Results

The study reports on the views of 78 participants. A summary of their demographic backgrounds, compared by centre type, is provided in Table 1, showing individual characteristics including their experience and work location.

All identified participants were female, the largest response coming from experienced

Table 1. Demographic Background of the Participants by Centertype and Percentage of Group

Variables		Daycare	Pre-Prep	Total Responses
Age	n	12	63	75
	20-29	8.3	3.2	4.0
	30-39	25.0	19.0	20.0
	40-49	33.3	25.4	26.7
	50+	33.3	52.4	49.3
Current Position	n	13	63	76
	Teacher	84.6	87.3	86.8
	Assistant Teacher	-	7.9	6.6
	Other	15.4	4.8	6.6
Location	n	13	63	76
	Major City	23.1	46.0	42.1
	Regional Area	76.9	49.2	53.9
	Remote Area	0	4.8	3.9
Highest Teaching Qualification	n	13	63	76
	Cert 3	0	4.8	3.9
	DipTeach/Assoc Dip	15.4	17.5	17.1
	B Ed	69.2	69.8	69.7
	M Ed	7.7	3.2	3.9
	Other	7.7	4.8	5.3
No. of Schools	n	12	62	74
	1	8.3	8.1	8.1
	2-4	41.7	43.5	43.2
	5-8	25.0	30.6	29.7
	9+	25.0	17.7	18.9
Experience	n	12	62	74
	1	8.3	0	1.4
	2-5	8.3	6.5	6.8
	6-10	8.3	12.9	12.2
	11-15	16.7	19.4	18.9
	16-20	16.7	6.5	8.1
	> 20	41.7	54.8	52.7

mature aged participants, with almost half (49.3%) aged fifty and above, and over three quarters (79.7%) had more than 11 years of teaching experience. The responses of this group therefore represent many years of combined experience of participants working with preschool children.

Most participants held a teaching position (86.8 %), while only a few (6.6%) held assistant teaching positions (all assistants from pre-prep centres). Interestingly, although all preschool educators were invited to respond (each early childhood class has two educators with at least one holding an assistant position) a far higher proportion of participants were teachers. Additionally, most participants (73.6 %) held a B.Ed. qualification or higher, with only 3.9% holding a certificate-three qualification, consistent with the small number of teaching assistants participating in the survey.

Participants from regional and remote areas were well represented (57.8 %), however, the greater majority came from community and private pre-prep centres (82.9 %), with only 17.1% from community daycare and private daycare centres. More daycare services were directly invited to the survey than pre-prep services due to higher number of services in each map location, however, fewer participants came from that sector.

Readiness for Building Preschool Children's EC Scale

Response patterns to the 26 scale statements are summarised in Table 2. Responses revealed some interesting patterns across items, with clearly different levels of agreement/disagreement shown.

A number of statements with very high level of agreement or disagreement across all participants were noted. These demonstrated the unified supportive attitudes of participants for promoting young children's EC. For example, there was almost complete agreement (97.5%) with statement 9 "*Working on EC development helps children with behavioural problems.*" This supportive attitude was also reflected by a high level of disagreement (94 %) to statement 19 "*It is more important to teach children' cognitive skills than to engage in activities for socio-emotional development.*" The overall importance in the EC role of educators was also clearly seen in their associated open response comments, for example:

Emotional and social competence is the foundation of all learning. I work in an Early Intervention setting supporting the early childhood sector. More than any area, teachers consistently express concern about children's social and EC. (P62)

Table 2. Summary of the Percentages Responses, and Mean and Standard Deviations of Attitude Statements under the five subscales

Item	Statements	n	% of responses					Mean	Standard Deviation
			Completely disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree		
Competences									
1	I consider myself sufficiently qualified to conduct activities focused on the development of preschool children's EC	78	0	3.8	12.8	55.1	28.2	4.08	.752
2	My education provided enough practical work in the field of preschool children's EC	76	5.3	38.2	25.0	22.4	9.2	2.92	1.093
3	I successfully implement activities aimed at the development of preschool children's EC	77	0	1.3	10.4	59.7	28.6	4.16	.650
4	My education adequately prepared me to encourage preschool children's EC	76	3.9	36.8	21.1	25.0	13.2	3.07	1.147
5	I think that the activities which I conduct in my educational group adequately contribute to development of preschool children's EC	78	0	2.6	9.0	64.1	24.4	4.10	.656
6	I understand the goals of preschool children's EC development programs	74	0	2.7	18.9	52.7	25.7	4.01	.749
7	I know the background of preschool children's EC	75	0	6.7	24.0	42.7	26.7	3.89	.879
8	Activities which I conduct help the children in my educational group develop their EC	76	0	0	6.6	61.8	31.6	4.25	.569
Supportive Attitudes									
9	Working on EC development helps children with behavioural problems	78	0	0	2.6	38.5	59.0	4.56	.549
10	It is important to share information about a child's EC with his/her family.	78	0	0	0	25.6	74.4	4.74	.439
11	My assessment methods for EC allow me to confidently share information with parents.	76	0	5.3	15.8	47.4	31.6	4.05	.831
12	My assessment methods for EC allow me to confidently share information with external professionals e.g. health specialists and school staff	75	0	4.0	18.7	46.7	30.7	4.04	.813
13	It is important to work on the development of children's EC even though their parents do not collaborate and even though they do not do the same at home.	77	0	1.3	3.9	36.4	58.4	4.52	.641

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Table 2. Summary of the Percentages Responses, and Mean and Standard Deviations of Attitude Statements under the five subscales (continued)

Item	Statements	n	% of responses					Mean	Standard Deviation
			Completely disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree		
Willingness									
14	My opinion is that preschool children's EC development programs are not sustainable	72	23.6	31.9	33.3	8.3	2.8	2.35	1.023
15	The development of the child's EC is solely parent's responsibility	77	49.4	46.8	2.6	0	1.3	1.57	.677
16	The development of children's EC is not my job	74	64.9	32.4	1.4	1.4	0	1.39	.593
17	Quality discipline is the best way to develop preschool children's EC	75	33.3	33.3	22.7	6.7	4	2.15	1.087
18	I do not have the time, neither in the day, nor in the week for conducting activities directed to children's EC development in my educational group	76	60.5	27.6	6.6	5.3	0	1.57	.838
19	It is more important to teach children's cognitive skills than to engage in activities for socio-emotional development	77	77.9	16.9	1.3	1.3	2.6	1.34	.805
Institutional Climate									
20	The programs for the development of preschool and school skills are more important than socio-emotional learning programs to the director of my preschool	74	74.3	14.9	5.4	4.1	1.4	1.43	.877
21	The director of my educational centre does not care if some special programs from the socio-emotional field are being implemented	72	62.5	16.7	11.1	6.9	2.8	1.71	1.093
22	The general attitude in my educational centre is that we have too much work already to deal with special programs	77	58.4	27.3	9.1	2.6	2.6	1.64	.945
23	Participants in the educational centre I work in think that special programs for EC will have no significant effect	76	59.2	26.3	9.2	1.3	3.9	1.64	.989
Conditions for Implementation									
24	EC development programs can only be implemented if they are supported by the centre's director	77	26.0	19.5	15.6	15.6	23.4	2.91	1.532
25	EC development programs can only be implemented well with preparation /training of the participants	75	2.7	2.7	17.3	40.0	37.3	4.07	.949
26	Good director's leadership and an expert team in the educational centre are needed for successful implementation of an EC development program	78	1.3	11.5	16.7	34.6	35.9	3.92	1.054

Note: CD=Completely disagree; D=Disagree; N=Neutral; A=Agree; CA=Completely Agree.

Many participants also saw their role as one shared with parents. In response to survey items 15 “*The development of the child’s EC is solely parent’s responsibility,*” and 16 “*The development of children’s EC is not my job,*” the high level of overall disagreement on these items (96.2% and 97.3%) indicated the strong recognition of this role, also seen in comments:

All parents need to be educated more on the importance of the emotional health within their own families. It has to be a two-way approach with school and home to be successful. (P33)

They also recognised that many parents are having difficulty performing their socializer role:

I wish I knew more about supporting families with children who experience high anxiety...I find many parents, particularly mothers, who are at breaking point on how to deal with their child’s behaviour. (P81)

One area of difference related to participants perception of their own practical undergraduate education for promoting EC. While almost a third of participants (31.6%) agreed with statement 2 “*My education provided enough practical work in the field of preschool children’s EC,*” a larger group (43.5 %) disagreed, and a further 25% were neutral to this statement. This difference between participants perceived educational preparation and current competence was clearly seen in comments:

If I didn’t have my Arts degree (majoring in psychology), there would be an awful amount that I wouldn’t know. (P8)

The only way I learned to help children with emotional needs from anxiety, anger to fear and even happiness was through professional development focussed on autism or sensory processing. (P12)

I completed a Grad Dip Ed and children’s EC was not really covered in the year long course. (P32)

Another area of difference regarded the need for director supported program implementation with 39% agreement and 45.5% disagreement. Similarly, statement 14 “*My opinion is that preschool children’s EC development programs are not sustainable,*”

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received a high neutral response (33%), and when juxtaposed against only 11.1% agreement may indicate uncertainty about programs that promote EC. Different views were also reflected in the open responses:

Would love access to an emotional program for kindergarten and in-service in this area. Huge need that takes up a large portion of our interaction. (P34)

Unaware of good programs to implement. (P45)

What we have achieved at our centre has been through self-directed learning and P.D. We utilize the Kidsmatter program and do a reasonable amount of P.D. (P33)

Given the variation in response patterns, it was also important to explore whether factors such as age, location or centre type might be linked to such differences. An initial exploration showed minimal variations between urban and rural educators. The following sections explores differences by age and centre type in Figure 1 and 2 respectively. Participants across all age groups, showed similar views related to perceptions of competency for undertaking the emotional socializer role (statements 1 and 3), supportive attitudes towards promoting EC (statements 9-13), and willingness to promote EC

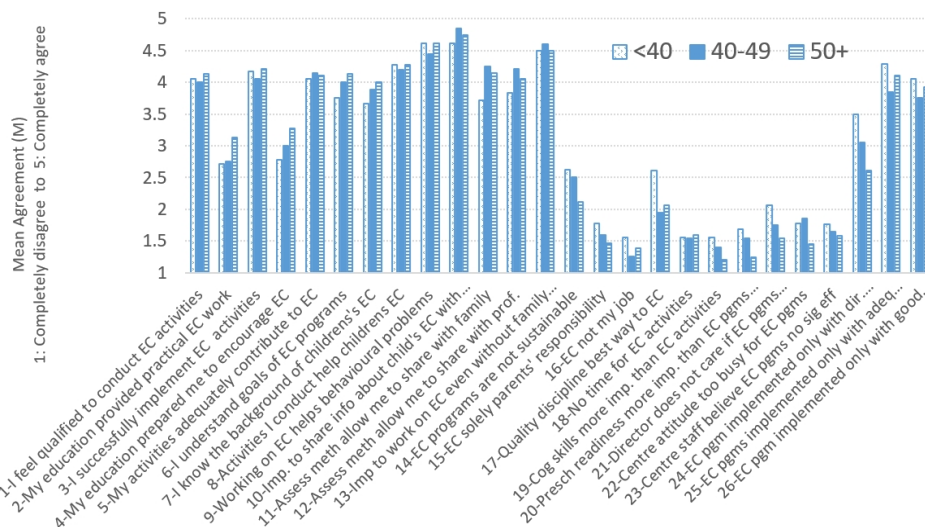


Figure 1. Mean Scores of the 26 Statements for Promoting Readiness from Participants by Age

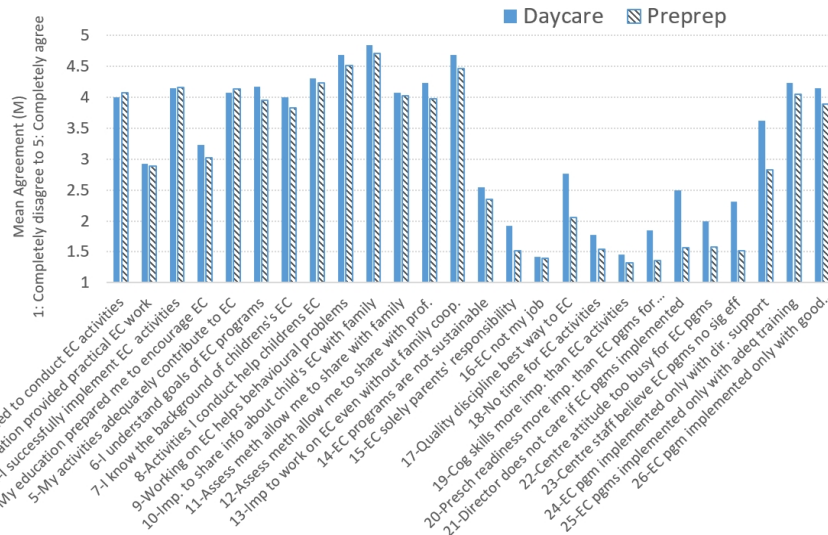


Figure 2. Mean Scores of the 26 Statements for Promoting Readiness from Participants by Centretype

(statements 14,15,16,18,19). However, there were items of response difference between age groups. For example, both participant groups aged over 40 more strongly disagreed with statement 17 “Quality discipline is the best way to develop preschool children’s EC,” reporting lower means (40-49 M=1.95 and 50+ M=2.06) than did those under 40 (M=2.61). In open responses, participants did not reference the term ‘discipline’ but often alluded to their pedagogical emphasis for promoting EC:

We’ve found the move to a more natural, outdoor curriculum with the incorporation of lots of open-ended loose parts play has made significant improvements to the children’s social/EC. (P81)

Teachers consistently express concern about children’s social and EC and how to support them. There is no quick fix, and no-one has a magic wand. ‘Being with’ children experiencing negative emotions can be uncomfortable. The absence of ‘negative uncomfortable emotions’ should not be a goal, nor evidence of success. (P62)

Two statements (2 and 24) showed some response differences across age groups. For example, on statement 24 “EC development programs can only be implemented if they are supported by the centre’s director,” the oldest participants reported the lowest mean score

(M=2.61) and thus average disagreement, while participants aged <40 (M=3.5) indicated greater overall agreement. Similarly for statement 2, the age group of 50+ reported a mean score just above 3 (M=3.13) compared to lower mean scores for the younger age groups (M=2.71 and 2.75 for age groups <40 and 40-49 years respectively).

Responses from participants were also explored in terms of centre types (Figure 2). The statements where marked differences between centre types occurred, were 17, and 20-24. For example on Statement 17 "*Quality discipline is the best way to develop preschool children's EC,*" pre-prep educators responded with stronger disagreement than daycare educators (M=2.77 and 2.05 for daycare and preprep respectively) and statements 20-23 relating to "Institutional Climate" (whole centre promotion of EC). For example, pre-prep participants disagreed more strongly than daycare participants with Statement 21 "*The director of my educational centre does not care if some special programs from the socioemotional field are being implemented*" (M=2.50 and 1.57 for daycare and preprep respectively).

In summary, regarding exploration of response variations for factors such as age and centre type, it is important to note more similarities than differences were found. In particular more mature educators more frequently gave responses of relative agreement or disagreement, rather than neutrality, likely showing increased self-efficacy in their role. Younger participants indicated a more positive desire for director support. The following open responses indicated developing self-efficacy from time and experience:

Learning is ongoing, and any new information and strategies are always worth hearing about to build on the current knowledge base utilized. We are all continually learning – children, parents, families and educators alike. (P29)

I am finding each year I am growing more confident with assisting children with an ASD diagnosis or social anxiety. (P81)

Discussion

The survey responses provide a snapshot of how one group of early childhood educators felt about their role in promoting children's EC, demonstrating strong and consistent views

of the importance of promoting children's EC and also of the partnership educators have with parents. While these comments cannot be generalised to all educators they do give insights into the views of one group of early childhood educators. Interestingly, while most study participants indicated they felt fairly capable in this role – noting the participants represent a group of largely experienced educators – it was clear that they did not feel their undergraduate training had prepared them well for this important aspect. Further, few participants identified available programs through which learning could be delivered.

These findings regarding respondents' views are consistent with previous research. First focussing on the importance of developing children's social and emotional skills, it is evident this is valued in early childhood education. Recently, Hollingsworth and Winter (2013), found early childhood teachers rated the promotion of SEL as more important than mathematics or literature. Similar views were seen in the survey responses with a high consensus amongst all participants that engaging in activities for socio-emotional development is more important than teaching cognitive skills.

Denham et al. (2012b) believe educators are significant emotional socializers in the lives of children as “they spend significant amounts of time with children, performing many emotion laden caregiving tasks, and have been shown to be sources of emotional security to young children” (p. 140). In this study, educators' responses suggest a strong belief in the importance of their emotional socializer role, as well as their confidence in their ability to undertake this role. Other researchers have also documented educators' expression of their unique and pivotal role in promoting preschool children's EC (Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013) and support to parents to enact their emotional socializer role (Boyer, 2013).

However, while these educators clearly believed in the importance of their role in this area and their partnership with parents, there was limited confidence expressed regarding their preparation for these roles. In this study, participants were clearly divided with regard to their preparation - although interestingly almost all responded that they are now able to perform the emotional socializer role, presumably having developed skills through subsequent training, practice and/or experience. Clearly for a group of educators at the upper end of experience it is not surprising they report an adequate capability. But this does raise issues with how prepared beginning educators would be in this role and the likelihood that some educators may not gain a full complement of these skills before exiting the

profession after an average term of five years. Consistent with the findings of this study, researchers have recognised such limitations of undergraduate courses for preparing teachers for SEL and suggest that improved teacher access to quality teacher driven and workplace facilitated professional development is necessary to support SEL post-graduation (Green, et al., 2012).

A related issue involves educators' thoughts about the use of EC programs. From the survey responses, the large percentage of neutral responses recorded for the sustainability of programs (statement 14) as well as division of opinion concerning the need for director driven implementation (statement 24) may reflect historically/past poor access to EC programs combined with limited research of long-term evidence-based outcomes of preschool EC programs (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). More recently, government funded programs such as Kidsmatter Early Childhood have actively promoted wellbeing programs for children. This program was positively referenced by some participants and may be more broadly adopted in the future.

Recent changes introduced in the ELYF shifted pedagogical focus to a balanced delivery of strategies between traditional child-centred play-based approaches and intentional teaching and learning outcomes (Grieshaber, 2010). Educators have adapted to meet these new requirements by adjusting their practices and adopting new strategies from professional EC programs. As observed internationally, the implementation of findings from further research may be needed before educators confidently integrate EC programs currently being made available (Slee et al., 2012).

Some differences were apparent among age groups. One pattern noted was that younger participants tended to give more neutral response for many statements. One area, however, where the younger respondents provided stronger responses was around the need for input from centre directors. Younger participants indicated a more positive desire for director support, reinforcing the skills development phase of their early period in the sector.

The self-efficacy of younger, less experienced staff in their emotional socializer role may be scaffolded by working alongside older more experienced staff. Research has shown that pedagogical practices of less qualified staff improve when they work with more qualified staff (Sylva et al., 2004). It appears likely that similar improvements occur when older experienced staff work with younger less experienced staff, especially as many in this study

acknowledged that their role efficacy occurred through professional experiences rather than undergraduate preparation. Mentoring between older and younger aged educators intentionally built into early career development could promote earlier role efficacy and increase retention, where currently many educators leave the profession after 5 years (Garner, et al., 2018).

Differences with regard to ‘quality discipline’ were also noted. The older groups more strongly disagreed regarding the importance of ‘quality discipline’ for the promotion of EC. This may result from differences in shared meanings for the term ‘discipline’ (original meanings of the word relating to ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’). Additionally, older participants may disagree because they may have formed a larger set of pedagogical strategies that includes ‘more’ than their current concept of ‘quality discipline,’ such as comprehensive program goals or the use of an outdoor curriculum. This also suggests further work is needed towards creating shared terms for EC – such as ‘quality discipline.’ Similarly, other researchers are calling for the establishment of shared terms for knowledge and approaches in regard to other aspects of EC pedagogy (Barblett & Maloney, 2010).

From the findings, daycare and pre-prep participants showed some difference in their responses related to institutional climate and centre conditions. Pre-prep participants more strongly agreed that their director highly valued SEL programs (as well attitudes that included EC programs having a significant effect, that EC was more important than school skills and time was available for these programs). Furthermore pre-prep educators had more confidence that they could use EC programs without their director’s support.

These differences might reflect some of the different staffing structure, staffing interactions and size of some daycare settings in comparison to pre-prep settings. Daycare centres often consist of 2-5 classrooms, large staff teams and a non-teaching director while pre-prep centres more frequently consist of 1-2 classrooms with a teaching director with non-contact periods. Educators in pre-prep with a teaching director may experience more regular informal teaching contact with the director than daycare educators with a non-teaching director. Among centre types, differences in educators’ perceptions about their director’s approach to EC may result from these differences. Zinsser et al. (2016) found that directors influence the SEL of their staff through the mechanism of modelling. Pre-prep staff who have opportunities to learn modelled SEL behaviours from their director

may perceive professional development as a collaborative process. Whereas, daycare educators with fewer opportunities for observing their director modelling SEL may perceive director input as necessary to implement EC programs.

Limitations

The survey attracted a relatively small sample that included a strong representation of older and more experienced early childhood educators, coming from both urban and regional centres. There are a number of factors to consider in looking at this representation. In addition to known factors such as survey fatigue, experienced educators in pre-prep teaching roles may have engaged more readily due to higher self-efficacy for promoting EC, more autonomous work roles and higher motivation to contribute to their profession. Buettner et al. (2106) found that educators with higher coping skills were more likely to be engaged in their profession. Further, Cassidy et al. (2017) propose that early childhood educators in positions with reduced financial well-being and who believe they are not fairly compensated through wages, may have higher stress levels, reduced self-efficacy and self-worth, and are less able to adequately enact the emotional socializer role in the classroom. These factors may also reduce motivation of some early childhood workers to engage in a reflective survey for promoting EC. Thus, while the response pattern does not provide data from which the views of educators can be generalised, it does provide a valuable snapshot of the views of a range of educators across a number of centres in the sector on a topical issue.

Conclusions

This survey allowed us to focus on several useful perspectives from a group of early childhood educators. From the responses there was a clear consistency in the value placed on the promotion of EC in young children, and that this now is increasingly undertaken in partnership with parents as children spend more time in education and care settings. Even

from the relatively small sample of this survey it was clear that preparation in developing the capability to develop these EC skills is not consistently well developed in educator training. For more experienced educators, such skills have developed through experience, as has the development and identification of tools and strategies that support this role. However, for many new educators also responsible for the emotional socializer role, such capacity is less assured.

These findings highlight the need for strategies to support these educators. These include additional material through their training, the development of a shared language that defines these issues, ongoing PD in their workplaces and a greater availability of practical strategies and programs to support them in delivering this role.

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