



The rewards of **UPSKILLING**

BY CAROLIN WENZEL

There is urgent demand for educators to increase their level of qualifications to meet professional standards and rapid growth in workforce requirements. In addition, professional development is a necessary (and rewarding) part of a career in early education. However, most early educators and providers are challenged by limited time and budget to support career development.

Carolin Wenzel spoke with directors from a range of services to find out how they provide opportunities for their staff to participate in professional development, and to educators about the personal drivers and rewards they get from ongoing learning.

Early Childhood Educators are more qualified than ever before, yet more is needed – both in upskilling to Diploma and/or Degree qualifications, and in undertaking professional development courses. Our sector needs an additional **29,000 degree qualified Early Childhood Teachers**[1]. On top of this there may be even greater demand for qualified ECTs as more states support children to attend **two years** of preschool or kindergarten.

Many educators have upgraded their Certificate III to a Diploma in order to meet the new quality standards, and many are starting degree courses. However, research

commissioned by Future Tracks and The Front Project into the barriers and incentives for educators to upskill to a bachelor qualification found that 84 percent of educators surveyed considered upskilling but reported major barriers. These barriers included difficulties managing workload and family commitments with study, and finding University fees too expensive [Dandolopartners 2019][2].

The report recommends three ways service providers can support educators to upskill: provide information and encouragement on courses and career opportunities; provide financial support for their staff to do further study and

provide guaranteed jobs as ECTs for staff who undertake degree study.

With or without extra formal qualifications, there is an ever growing field of practical knowledge and skills that early childhood educators need to stay up to date with. These include: compulsory updating of vital knowledge, including First Aid and Child Protection certificates; non-compulsory courses in topics ranging from curriculum development to leadership skills and beyond, and additional sessions covering topics of professional interest or personal passion.

EMPLOYER SUPPORT CRUCIAL FOR THOSE PURSUING DIPLOMA AND DEGREE QUALIFICATIONS

It was encouraging to discover that some of the service providers we spoke with have found ways to offer significant support to educators who want to increase their qualification to a Diploma or Early Childhood Teaching Degree.

Carla Spitteri, Senior Coordinator (Education & Care) at Cumberland Council in NSW has had all of her professional training funded by the Council, starting with a Certificate III after leaving high school. She subsequently completed further study including the Diploma of Children's Services and Bachelor of Teaching (0-5yrs), all funded through Council's professional development program.

"Cumberland Council has an ongoing commitment to the professional development needs of educators, and views professional development as a critical component of recruiting and retaining educators," says Carla. "Working in a sector that promotes continuous improvement it is critical that organisations provide professional development opportunities for all staff in order to remain up to date with current trends and practices."

Not-for-profit provider [Froebel Australia](#) supports staff to further their qualifications through financial support and study time during work hours, also by accessing funding provided by the NSW Government's [Smart & Skilled](#) traineeship program. For staff who don't meet the criteria for this stream of support, Froebel have found other ways to support staff members wishing to undertake further study. As part of their commitment to an internal Future Leaders Program, Froebel will start a scholarship which covers the course fees to undertake an Early Childhood Teaching degree for eligible program graduates.

Community mobile preschool service [Galloping Gumnuts](#) in the NSW Central West provides study time at work for staff completing their Certificate III and Diploma courses. They have also explored scholarship support for educators to complete their Early Childhood Teacher degree.

While studying for her Diploma between 2016 to 2018, Co-director Jess Gearon made use of work-based study time and resources and was able to do her practical work placement at a Galloping Gumnuts service.

In each of these cases, having the support of their employer was crucial to being able to manage the triple load of work, study and family life.



SHARING TRAINING WITH THE TEAM CATERING FOR CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS

Dealing with transitions was an issue for educators at [South Coogee Out of School Hours Care](#) (SC OOSH), especially for special needs children. Director Zac Thomas organised for himself and many of the educators to do a course specifically on supporting children with special needs. He found that it made his team more aware of how to understand and cater better for children with special needs.

They were taught techniques to provide warnings so children could prepare for sessions to end. This included setting up a clock with a visual countdown zone so children could see how much time was left, and giving ample warning before the change-over.

They were also given new insights into why a child with autism regularly hid under a table. Instead of trying to get the child out, an educator joined him, and found out that this was the child's safe space, to get away from over-stimulation. So that educator created a bigger safe space for that child.

PERSONAL CHOICE IS THE KEY TO PD ENGAGEMENT

As all early childhood educators, directors and managers know, there is so much more that educators and directors need to stay on top of once their formal training is over.

Professional development in the form of short courses, seminars and conferences is vital and comes in two categories:

1. Compulsory requirements, like first aid certificates and child safety training where educators need to update their certificates regularly
2. Ongoing knowledge and skill development depending on the individual's preferences and motivation

For this second category, directors we spoke with said that it

is more effective to allow staff to choose a course that suits them, rather than directing them. Linking training topics to a discussion about professional goals in their performance review and their own motivations seemed to work best.

Supporting the professional development of her staff is a high priority for Galloping Gumnuts Co-Director Carol Drummond:

"The early childhood space is constantly evolving. If we expect that our educators are going to continue to work in this field, to feel invigorated and valued, and able to keep up with current research and practice, we need to invest in them. It's like having a car that's due for a service – if I say 'I can't afford to service it now', it still runs ok, but then eventually it will stop running so well.

"When I was in the room as a teacher, being sent to PD sent a message to me that the organisation values me and wants to invest in me, to give me fuel to be an educator."

Froebel Australia shows they value staff with generous Professional Development support. Every permanent educator is funded to take a minimum of two personal development units and can do a maximum of six– these can take the form of a short course or workshop, attending a conference or participating in a webinar.

Froebel St Leonards Director Geraldine Bykerk supports all staff to undertake professional development because it generates change and discussion.

Froebel educator Zixian values every training opportunity provided to her and urges colleagues to do likewise.

"Doing extra professional development makes your own life easier," says Zixian. 'If you're struggling, extra support from courses can build confidence. Some people might think 'why should I go?' If you focus on something you really care about, you can make a real difference in early childhood."

Zixian is receiving support from Froebel to study for a Masters in Special Education at Macquarie University. To help facilitate this, she has access to a computer at work, and is being rostered on shifts compatible with her university schedule.

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BENEFITS	BARRIERS
<p>▶ PAY</p> <p>Gaining higher qualifications may increase pay level.</p>	<p>▶ COST</p> <p>Need to seek extra funding and budget for staff to have professional development opportunities, or support higher study</p>
<p>▶ PERFORMANCE</p> <p>Required for Teacher Accreditation, greater knowledge and skills resulting in improved performance to meet KPIs.</p>	<p>▶ TIME</p> <p>Need to make arrangements to allow educators to take time for professional development.</p> <p>For educators, finding time for study on top of work and family commitments can be hard.</p>
<p>▶ CONFIDENCE</p> <p>Access to the right techniques to deal with issues like behaviour and self-regulation can improve educator confidence and the quality of teaching.</p>	<p>▶ INTEREST</p> <p>Educators need to be interested and motivated to undertake the extra study commitment or professional development course.</p>
<p>▶ QUALITY</p> <p>Training can mean that services have more effective employees who are better at caring for and educating children, understanding their needs and supporting them.</p>	<p>▶ LOCATION</p> <p>Educators in non-metro areas often need more time and financial support to cover transport and accommodation</p> <p>Training needs to be offered in more locations or available online as well.</p>
<p>▶ STAFF RETENTION</p> <p>Investing in staff has been shown to create higher job satisfaction.</p>	<p>▶ PLANNING</p> <p>Managers and directors need to plan and support educators to participate in professional development and upskilling their qualifications.</p>



SHARING TRAINING BENEFITS WITH PARENTS THE SLEEP NEEDS OF CHILDREN

Froebel educator Zixian was motivated to do a course about sleep needs of infants and toddlers by a registered nurse to help explain to parents why children need to nap during the day.

“We have a lot of parents who complain that their children are not sleeping at night, so they want to restrict children’s sleeping time at the service.

“In my degree I learnt that children need deep sleep to develop their brain functions – such as logical thinking and memory. We were taught that it’s wrong to wake the children, especially if they have a hard time waking up.”

“I feel really bad when I wake up the children before they are ready to wake on their own. If they don’t have enough sleep, it really impacts on their behaviour, they have more instances of meltdowns.”

“The nurse who gave the course stressed the importance of the sleep cycle – 45minutes for infants, 60minutes for toddlers and pre-schoolers and 90minutes for adults.”

“When parents tell us their children wake up during the night, I now have more information to explain that this is normal for children, because their sleep cycle is shorter – they have more chances to wake up during the light sleep phase. Children need reassurance from their parents to learn to be an independent sleeper.”

As is the practice at the service, Zixian shared her notes on the course with the other educators, but she wanted to go further and communicate what she had learned with the parents, so she shared her notes via StoryPark.

She received positive feedback from parents who felt it was useful. Although she still has parents who want sleep restrictions, she is motivated to keep trying. She sees her job as being about, “building a bridge between families and information or resources –to help release stress. We are the first point of contact –You just have to keep doing what you’re doing, and hope it will affect change one day.”

APPROACHES TO PLANNING PD

Directors and managers have a variety of approaches to offering and planning professional development to staff.

Key to professional development planning is to align individual and team goals to the organisation’s Quality Improvement Plan. Several directors told us that they include discussion of professional development needs and requests in regular performance review meetings, so it is formally included in staff development plans.

Cumberland Council sets an individual training plan with each educator annually and engages quality training organisations to deliver training and provide educators with the knowledge to support changes to practice.

“I would like to see all educators from centres, both commercial and not for profit, have access to a Professional Development Program every year. Ideally professional development should be a condition of employment and be funded,” says Catherine Zammit, Council Manager Children, Youth and Families.

Other directors take responsibility for researching professional development opportunities by visiting websites of sector training providers and signing up for newsletters that they receive by email.

At Froebel, director Geraldine Bykerk provides educators with all the information about available courses and helps them to book the right course after they have set their own development goals.

“Half of their PD activities can be in an area that they are particularly interested such as STEM, music, or art, the other half needs to be an area that they agree they need support with, for example documentation, or communication,” says Geraldine. “This makes them accountable. [It means that] they are doing training they are interested in.”

Froebel require educators to share what they have learnt at training sessions with the rest of the team, thereby creating a ripple effect from the training investment for the entire team.

EFFECTIVE PD MEANS FINDING WAYS TO BREAK THROUGH THE BARRIERS

There is wide-spread agreement that educators benefit from a professional development plan tailored to their needs and interests, and that supporting educators to increase their qualifications and professional skills and knowledge benefits children and families. However, the directors we spoke with also expressed frustration at a range of barriers that get in the way of providing professional development support.

Barriers include lack of funds to send educators to courses or support them to upgrade their qualifications as well as having enough staff to cover the roster for educators to take time to participate in training. For regional services barriers also include the extra time and money required to travel to courses which are offered mainly in metropolitan areas

Individual motivation is another factor - as Carol Drummond at Galloping Gumnuts says: “It’s no good just throwing your training budget into compulsory courses – too many will feel like they don’t want to be there. You really need to know your staff, where they’re at in their career, where they feel their strengths are.”

TOP PD TIPS FOR DIRECTORS

- ▶ Plan and budget for professional development for each staff member
- ▶ Subscribe to training provider email lists, collect calendars and share them with staff
- ▶ Make sure the staff member is interested in the topic, that they are the one who has asked to do the course
- ▶ Encourage staff who receive training to share it with colleagues and even parents
- ▶ Check with trainers if they can send someone out to your site and train multiple staff
- ▶ Schedule a staff development day for all staff to train together
- ▶ To supplement paid professional development, look for resources you can subscribe to or buy, and ask a staff member to compile interesting information into a presentation (these could include articles from CELA or ECA publications). ■

REFERENCES

[1] From 2020, new NQF standards will require each long day care and preschool service to have at least two degree-qualified ECTs in all services where 60 or more children are in attendance. ACECQA National Quality Framework www.acecqa.gov.au/qualification-requirements/additional-staffing-requirement-1-january-2020

[2] Upskilling in early childhood education: Opportunities for the current workforce by dandolopartners for Future Tracks and The Front Project, 2019 retrieved from: www.futuretracks.org.au/images/downloads/UpskillReport.pdf