Perspectives on Teachers' Work in Australian Early Childhood Education and Care Settings: Evidence and Ecology

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Abstract

ECEC educators play a vital role in educating and caring for children during the first five years of life, a critical period for learning, growth, and development. University-trained early childhood teachers make a particularly significant contribution to overall service quality. This exploratory interview study brings an ecological lens to the perspectives of nine Australian university-trained early childhood teachers on the nature and quantity of their work and workload. As part of the mixed methods Early Learning Work Matters project, this Phase II interview study supports findings from the prior international systematic review that work in ECEC is complex and demanding. Interviews yielded new findings indicating the potential changing nature of early childhood teachers' work, some of whom reported little to no capacity to focus on service quality. Concerningly, analysis revealed burdensome influences at all ecological levels, with only a few uplifting microsystems which were inconsistently experienced by participants.

Keywords Early childhood education · Teacher work · Ecological systems

Introduction

Educators working in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) are responsible for nurturing children's learning and growth through the most critical period of human development. However, growing interest in educator work and wellbeing over the last decade reports deeply concerning experiences (Cumming et al., 2021; Harper & Wilson, 2024; Thorpe et al., 2023). The highly contextualised nature of teaching, within the rapidly changing political and regulatory landscape of Australian ECEC, necessitates ongoing research in this field (McDonald et al., 2018). In Australia, all ECEC services are registered and approved under the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), the national authority for the implementation of Australia's National Quality Framework for ECEC. Additionally, all Australian ECEC educators must hold or be working towards an ACECQA-approved Certificate III (from a vocational education and training institute) or higher. In the Australian context, the term 'educator' refers to all those working directly with children, while 'early childhood teacher' (ECT) is reserved for educators with a university-level ECEC qualification. In addition to duties undertaken while working directly with children, known as 'contact' work, educators (including ECTs) frequently undertake duties working away from children, known as 'non-contact' work, including curriculum planning, communicating with families, and setting up the care environment.

This paper reports on an ecological exploratory interview survey of Australian ECTs, Phase II of the *Early Learning Work Matters* project. Findings support and extend those from the Phase I international systematic review of work in ECEC (Harper & Wilson, 2024). Key findings include the polarised and predominantly troubled experiences of work in ECEC, analysis of uplifting and burdensome ecological influences, and the potential changing nature of Australian ECTs' work, with some reporting a shift away from child- and education-focused work.

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Literature Review

The State of ECEC work in Australia

The nature of educator–child interactions is the most significant predictor of ECEC quality (Tayler et al., 2017). While the Australian ECEC workforce is comprised of educators with varying levels of qualification, the nationally accredited university-trained experts, known as ECTs, make significant contributions to the quality of educator–child interactions. ECTs contribute directly by providing high-quality instructional support in their interactions with children, and indirectly by raising the quality of all educator–child interactions across the service (Manning et al., 2017; Tayler et al., 2017).

Acknowledging the important role of ECTs, Australian ECEC staffing mandates require all centre-based services to employ an ECT. However, services are increasingly unable to meet this mandate, with 9% currently operating under a temporary staffing waiver (ACECQA, 2024). While government policy aims to increase the supply of ECTs, research shows that only 43% of new ECT-graduates enter the workforce (ACECQA, 2019). Meanwhile, recruitment and retention difficulties are increasing (Community Early Learning Australia et al., 2021), with a 37% annual turnover rate, 15% attrition, and 75% intending to leave the sector in the next three to five years (Rogers, 2021; United Workers Union, 2022). This instability diminishes quality relationships and interactions and undermines long-term efforts to build a quality workforce (ACECQA, 2019; Community Early Learning Australia et al., 2021; Thorpe et al., 2021). Despite a wealth of research on quality ECEC and outcomes for children (such as, National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000; OECD, 2020; Sammons et al., 2015; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), the comparatively small body of research on educators, which is even smaller for ECTs, is alarming. Prior research highlights heavy demands, limited time to complete tasks, and poor working conditions including low pay and rewards, resulting in high stress, excessive burnout, poor wellbeing, and feeling undervalued (Cumming et al., 2021; Fenech et al., 2022; Harper & Wilson, 2024; Thorpe et al., 2023). Harper and Wilson's (2024) systematic review suggests that while ECEC educators' (including ECTs) experiences of work and conditions range broadly, the average educator's experience is described negatively across multiple work and workplace variables, though this requires additional investigation.

Ecological Systems of Australian ECTS

This study is framed using Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory, which posits that an individual's development is influenced by multiple and complex interactions with layers of surrounding, inter-related ecosystems. The effect of these interactional and ecological influences on human development depends on individual characteristics, surrounding systems, and the type of development being examined (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Although typically applied to child development, Bronfenbrenner (1979) maintained that human development is lifelong. In Australia, ECT work is heavily influenced by environmental factors including socio-political and regulatory context (McDonald et al., 2018). Understandings of ECT work and professional development should be positioned within this wider context.

The microsystems (immediate environments) of an ECT are among the most influential (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, family attitudes towards educators, which range from total disrespect to high praise and appreciation (ACECQA, 2019; Harper & Wilson, 2024) (see Fig. 1 for further examples of influences across these system levels). The mesosystem (interactions between microsystems) can also have direct impacts on ECTs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, co-worker turnover may result in the Director diverting funds towards recruitment, and away from professional development and other resources for the team (ACECQA, 2019; Thorpe et al., 2023). Exosystems (peripheral environments that interact with the microsystem) indirectly influence ECTs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, Australian ECEC policy and regulation have both positive and negative effects on ECT work, as in school settings, by both protecting educators and, simultaneously, restricting decision-making and contributing to work intensification (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009; Bullough et al. Jr, 2014; Fenech et al., 2006; Thorpe et al., 2023).

In Australia, the macrosystem (wider socio-political and cultural context) is characterised by low levels of sociocultural valuing and understanding of ECEC alongside a historically maternalist discourse and the Australian government's linking of 'childcare' (that is, ECEC) to their economic productivity agenda. These attitudes perpetuate low rewards and benefits for educators and reduce mental wellbeing (Bown et al., 2011; Harper & Wilson, 2024). Finally, the chronosystem (major historical and personal events throughout time) is evident, for example, through the recent global pandemic, COVID-19, contributing to increasing turnover rates and spurring on the workforce crisis (Community Early Learning Australia et al., 2021).

Fenech et al.'s (2022) recent literature review depicted a comprehensive visualisation of what is currently known about educator ecology in ECEC, identifying a lack of ECT-focused research, unequal attention to specific service types, and the need for further research on how ecosystems relate to quality ECEC. While research on schoolteachers identifies
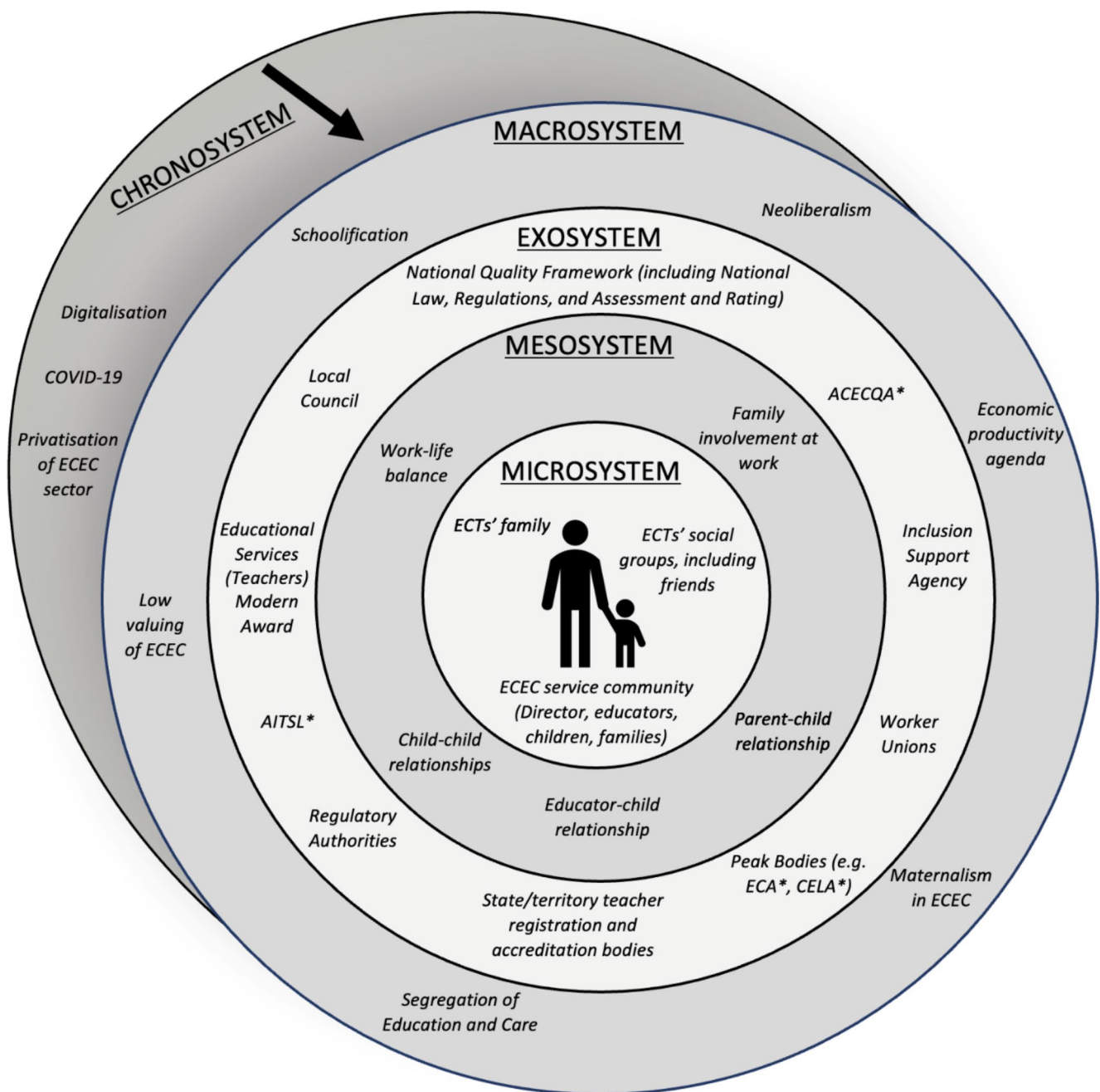
Fig. 1 Proposed ecological systems of an Australian ECT. *AITSL: Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. ACECQA: Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. ECA: Early Childhood Australia. CELA: Community Early Learning Australia

the destructive effects of heavy workloads on the provision of quality education (McGrath-Champ et al., 2018), Thorpe et al., (2023) identify similar effects in ECEC. Alongside the heavy demands identified in Harper and Wilson (2024), further investigation of the link between educator workload and quality ECEC, with a particular focus on ECTs, is critical.

The Present Study

This interview study is a targeted investigation of work and workload issues identified by Australian ECTs across preschool and long day care services in New South Wales, including their experience of work, challenges, rewards, resources, professional desires, and perspectives on the value and significance of their daily work in the context of quality ECEC. Findings are framed by Bioecological

Systems Theory. Phase I of the *Early Learning Work Matters* project (Harper and Wilson's [2024] systematic review) identified a paucity of research with significant gaps in our understanding of ECEC work; in-depth interviews may yield additional findings worthy of attention in the

Australian and international context. The interview findings reported in this paper expand on the research evidence from the Phase I systematic literature review, through confirmation, contradiction, and/or supplementation, with particular consideration of how ECT work relates to the provisioning of quality ECEC. This study addresses the following research questions:

How do ECTs in New South Wales (NSW) describe and explain their work and workload?

I.   How do ECTs describe what they do at work?
II. How do ECTs perceive and experience their workload?
III. How do ECTs perceive the value of different components of work that make up their workload?
IV. Do ECTs' responses indicate any significant ecological influences on their work and workload?

Oxford English Dictionary definitions of 'work' and 'workload' are adopted here:

- Work: *Action or activity involving physical or mental effort and undertaken in order to achieve a result, esp. as a means of making one's living or earning money; labour; (one's) regular occupation or employment* (Oxford University Press, 2020a).
- Workload: *The amount of work to be done by a person or group, esp. in the context of employment* (Oxford University Press, 2020b).

Adopting a social constructivist epistemology, this study accesses first-hand perspectives of Australian ECTs, recognising that knowledge and reality is socially constructed through interactions with others. The validity of multiple perceptions and experiences is thus accepted (Kim, 2014).

Methods

Sample Selection and Recruitment

Maximum variation purposive sampling resulted in a diverse sample (see Table 1), representing a range of ECT-perspectives. Due to regulatory and governance differences across states and territories, a single state was chosen, New South Wales, home to the largest number of ECEC services and ECTs in Australia. These interviews were exploratory in nature, thus a small single-state sample was considered reasonable. All participants held a university-level ECEC degree and are, thus, referred to as 'ECTs'. At the time of interviewing, participating ECTs were employed in an ACECQA-approved ECEC service in NSW (as evident in Table 1). Unsurprisingly, given the high over-representation

Table 1 Summary of sample characteristics ($n = 9$)

Characteristics	Total ($n = 9$)
Position	
Director$^\$$	3
Contact teacher*	2
Director and contact teacher*	4
Employment type	
Part-time (< 38 h per week)	2
Full-time (38 h per week)	7
Years of experience working in ECEC#	
5–9	1
10–14	0
15–19	3
20–24	3
25–29	0
30+	2
Service size (by number of children licensed to attend)	
< 39	2
40–59	5
60–79	1
> 80	1
Age in years	
20–29	1
30–39	2
40–49	3
50–59	3
Service type	
Preschool	3
Long day care	6
Management structure	
Private for profit	2
Private not for profit community managed	2
Private not for profit other organisation	2
State/territory government school	1
State/Territory and local government managed	2
Quality rating under the National Quality Framework	
Working towards	1
Meeting	6
Exceeding	1
Provisional	1
Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas	
Low	3
Medium	3
High	3
Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia	
Major city	7
Remote	1
Very remote	1

Note. *Contact teacher: the participant is employed to work directly with children.

#Ranging $9 - 32$ years.

$^\$$Although there are no legal qualification requirements in Australia for the position of 'service Director', it is typical that these positions are held by university-trained ECTs.

of women in ECEC, all nine participants identified as women.

Services were selected from ACECQA's publicly available service data, at first randomly, and then with increasing purpose to create a diverse sample. Participants were recruited by telephone, with subsequent email communication to organise consent forms and schedule interviews. During recruitment, researchers described the interview as being 30–40 min in length, with the intention to *'give voice to early childhood teachers'* and *'highlight the work and voice of educators'*. During initial contact, many ECTs indicated a strong interest in the study and seemed eager to discuss their experiences on the spot, however, of the 80 services contacted, only nine ECTs were successfully recruited for a formal interview, with some citing time and workload constraints and others simply never following through to schedule an interview. Although findings are not generalisable to the broader Australian context, these exploratory interviews focused on depth, and will be followed up by a validation phase aiming for generalisability.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviewing was conducted by two trained interviewers, including one telephone interview and eight video conference interviews, per participant's choice. The interview schedule was designed by an experienced ECT (the first author) and based on prior research, primarily, the Phase I international systematic review of work in ECEC (Harper & Wilson, 2024) and an interview study investigating schoolteachers' workload (McGrath-Champ et al., 2018). Interview questions explored the following topics: the nature and perceived sources of work; quantity of workload and how this relates to the provision of quality ECEC; changes to work and workload, and associated impacts; strategies or systems that support work and workload management.

Interviewers were open and responsive to unanticipated findings, lending authenticity and validity to the study. The interview schedule remained responsive to participants, with questions added or changed as appropriate, ensuring that valuable data opportunities were not missed. Interviews ranged from 30 min to 75 min in length. Data saturation was achieved, with no new findings or perspectives emerging in the final two interviews. Thus, an opportunity was provided for practitioners to comment on issues covered in Harper and Wilson's (2024) systematic review; and, perhaps more importantly, to identify issues beyond those evident in prior research. Interviews were audio recorded, with transcriptions sent to participants for validation. This study was approved by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee, approval number 2020/807.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006). The first phase of analysis occurred alongside data collection and transcription and was conducted by the two interviewers (one of who is also the first author), with regular discussion with the second and third authors, to coordinate ongoing data collection efforts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts were inductively and manually coded line by line by the first author. Codes were then organised into themes. Some themes were identified based on frequency of occurrence. However, Braun and Clarke (2006) state that "there is no hard-and-fast answer to the question of what proportion of your data set needs to display evidence of the theme for it to be considered a theme" (p. 82). Thus, additional 'significant' themes were identified for representing a minority voice or specific sub-context, or for conflicting with or extending on Phase I systematic review findings. A one-page summary of themes and findings was sent to respondents for validation; participants were invited to communicate changes or clarifications, but none were requested.

Findings

According to the four research questions, findings emerged across the following themes which are detailed throughout this section:

i. **Descriptions of work** – broad range of tasks, roles, and responsibilities; irregularity of tasks, roles, and responsibilities; primary work tasks.
ii. **Perceptions and experiences of workload** – heavy non-contact workloads and unpaid hours; work-life balance; feeling lucky.
iii. **Perceived valuing of work** – tasks that up 'too much' time; perceived shift away from education-focused work.
iv. **Ecological influences** – organisational climate and supervisor support; acknowledgement; COVID-19; other ecological influences; potential solutions.

Descriptions of work

Participants reported a broad range of tasks, roles, and responsibilities, and a sense of irregularity and even unpredictability around their work tasks, with some tasks taking up substantial amounts of time. These themes are detailed here.

Broad Range of Tasks, Roles, and Responsibilities

Despite equal or comparable qualifications, only six participants worked in direct contact with children, with four of those working in split roles (director and teacher), and the remaining three working as non-contact directors. Regardless of their position, participants reported overwhelming variation in their tasks, roles, and responsibilities at work, from menial tasks to complex high-level responsibilities (see Fig. 2), with one stating, *'I don't think I've given*

you everything that the role encompasses because it just… I don't know how it's humanly possible to be responsible for all these' (P1). Responsibilities often include oversight of all service operations, developing and implementing educational programs, health and safety for children and staff, funding applications, research engagement, recruitment, induction, supporting families and co-workers, business administration, cleaning and maintenance, marketing and social media engagement, enrolment paperwork, payroll, rostering, compliance, and Assessment and Rating

Fig. 2 Word cloud summary on the nature of ECT work

documentation (according to the Australian Education and Care Services National Regulations). Participating ECTs report meeting the needs of children, families, and co-workers (consistent with Phase I findings, reported in Harper & Wilson, 2024), and additional regulatory and compliance processes that can draw focus away from children: '*you're constantly trying to keep all these different parties happy, and that's before you even get to the kids, which really should be the number one, but aren't*' (P1).

Irregularity of Tasks, Roles, and Responsibilities

Most participants had difficulty outlining their work succinctly. This reflects the enormous number of tasks and responsibilities (as noted above), and the irregularity of tasks, being weekly, yearly, or less predictably such as specific funding applications. This irregularity, and the need for ECTs to be flexible and responsive, is reflected in Fig. 2, a word cloud, wherein frequent words include 'might', 'sometimes', 'at the moment', and 'depends', suggesting that ECT work varies and changes. Some participants described their work as perpetually unpredictable, '*I can give you a massive list of what I'm running behind in because something keeps popping up*' (P3).

Primary work Tasks

Primary work tasks were those that occupy the most time. Substantial components of ECT work included provisioning of education and care to children (as in Phase I), digital work, documentation related to Assessment and Rating, compliance, and Inclusion Support Services funding applications ('Inclusion Support Services' funding provides direct support to services to assist with meeting children's additional needs, however, in Australia, it is the service's prerogative to refuse enrolment of a child with additional needs and refuse to apply for this funding, if they perceive that they do not have the resources to adequately meet that child's needs).

Perceptions and Experiences of Workload

Most participants reported heavy non-contact workloads, with some reporting significant challenges with work-life balance. Surprisingly, the theme of 'feeling lucky' also emerged. These themes are detailed here.

Heavy Non-contact Workloads and Unpaid Hours

Seven ECTs report working unpaid hours every week, describing this as simply 'part of the job', citing excessive non-contact workloads compounded by insufficient paid

time, '*You always must spend time after, out of hours. You must. Or you just don't get the programming done*' (P2). One full-time non-contact Director (P3) estimated working 60 h per week to fulfil the basic requirements of her job. Additionally, some work was described as required but unpaid, '*meetings and fundraising activities… they're all part of my job but not a paid part*' (P1). Other unpaid hours were occupied by professional development and training, teacher accreditation responsibilities, fundraising, family events, staff meetings, committee meetings, networking meetings, curriculum documentation, replying to parent emails, and staff rostering.

Work-life Balance

Seven participants were employed full-time, with one explaining, '*We were a 20-place centre when I started, we're now a 60-place centre so, as we've grown, the need for me to be onsite has increased, so my days have increased… I'm not full-time by choice*' (P1). Despite 7 participants reportedly working unpaid hours every week, surprisingly, only four participants reported challenges with work-life balance, for example, '*that balancing act can be very tricky, often impossible*' (P8). Some described always being 'on show', representing their workplace during personal time in the local community. One described how her children help her with work on weekends, '*They're so familiar with being here that this is like a second home*' (P1), while another observed, '*[my husband] gets a little annoyed with how many hours I work*' (P6).

Feeling Lucky

Overall, two participants stood out as being satisfied with all aspects of their work situations (P4, P7), reporting high levels of work-life balance, manageable workloads, no unpaid work, and generally feeling professionally fulfilled and supported by their co-workers and supervisors. These two participants also acknowledged that such experiences are rare in the sector, describing themselves as 'lucky', and expressing a deep sense of gratitude, for example, '*I am very very lucky and grateful for working where I am*' (P4). These two participants cited evenly distributed workloads, access to regular non-contact time beyond the minimum mandated amount, high levels of professional recognition, and supervisor support. However, one expressed that their 'favourable' conditions may be temporary, as the service was new, with low enrolment numbers and temporarily diminished documentation requirements. Other reasons for feeling lucky included the ability to purchase equipment to support their work, and unimpeded access to staff leave and paid non-contact time (both of which are mandated under

Australian ECEC law). A further two participants (P2, P3) also used the word 'lucky' to describe a specific feature of their working conditions, mostly when comparing a current working condition to a previous challenging experience. For example, one part-time ECT (P2) reported receiving 75 min per week of paid non-contact time to oversee the educational program for 19 children – she described herself as 'lucky', given that the previous year she had received 75 min per week for 27 children. One non-contact Director (P3) described herself as lucky because she did not have to do menu planning anymore, explaining that the service's previous cook refused to undertake this responsibility.

Perceived Valuing of work

Participants identified several tasks as taking up 'too much' time in the context of providing quality ECEC. There were also indications that some ECTs may be shifting away from education-focused work. These themes are detailed here.

Tasks that take up 'too much' time

When asked to consider the significance and value of each work task, participants identified several as disproportionately time-consuming, including:

i. general administration including emails, phone calls, new child enrolments, maintaining child immunisation records (P5, P6).
ii. working with parent committees, including educating them, reporting to them, and completing work on their behalf (P3) – 'A lot of what, on paper is meant to fall to the committee, it doesn't, 'cause they're voluntary working parents, so I end up doing it' (P3).
iii. applications for Inclusion Support Services (funding to support the inclusion of children with additional needs in mainstream ECEC services) (P1, P6, P9) – 'this whole process is taxing' (P9).
iv. compliance and Assessment and Rating paperwork including curriculum documentation for individual learning and the programming cycle (P1, P3, P5, P8) – 'Paperwork has gone huge. It's huge now!' (P5); 'There's a huge focus on having all of the boxes ticked in terms of paperwork' (P1).

Teachers were most emphatic and conveyed greatest frustration when discussing iii and iv (above).

Perceived Shift away from Education-focused Work

Many participants expressed frustration that heavy non-contact workloads, particularly administration, hindered or prevented them from focusing on some aspects of their work that they consider to be more important and more aligned with their expertise as ECTs. Six participants expressed frustration that their educational expertise was under-utilised in their role. While Participant 5 accepts the importance of most non-contact tasks, she adds, 'someone else could have done them' and that her expertise would be better spent on educational mentoring. Others felt their time would be better spent on mentoring and leading teams, undertaking innovative quality improvement projects for educators and children, and engaging in meaningful connections and interactions with children. In many instances, non-contact workload relating to compliance, regulations, and Assessment and Rating was perceived to increase time away from children. Even while teachers were engaged in contact work, their non-contact workload was present, changing the way they engage with children by preventing them from 'being in the moment' or being responsive to meaningful play interactions. These signs of tension and potential conflict between the provision of quality care and regulatory and compliance-based workload are evident through participant accounts:

> 'I probably don't do much face-to-face teaching at all these days, which I miss, but there's no real time for that,' and later, 'the Director's role misses our qualifications a lot. We're not really trained to do the HR, admin, and all of that. But that's really what the role ends up' (P3).
> 'I think my time could be much better used being contact a lot more than what it is' (P8).
> 'You get caught up doing all the little daily tasks that you have to get done instead of sitting down and just interacting with them [children]' (P7).

Ecological Influences

Analysis of participant responses revealed numerous ecological systems as being significant to ECTs' experiences of work and workload. While burdensome ecological influences were identified at all system levels, interestingly, uplifting elements were concentrated in the micro-system, but their effect was inconsistently experienced (see Fig. 3). For example, supervisor support and appreciation from families were experienced positively by some ECTs and negatively by others. Ecological themes, including organisational climate and supervisor support, acknowledgement, COVID-19 and related policy, and other socio-cultural trends, are elaborated here.
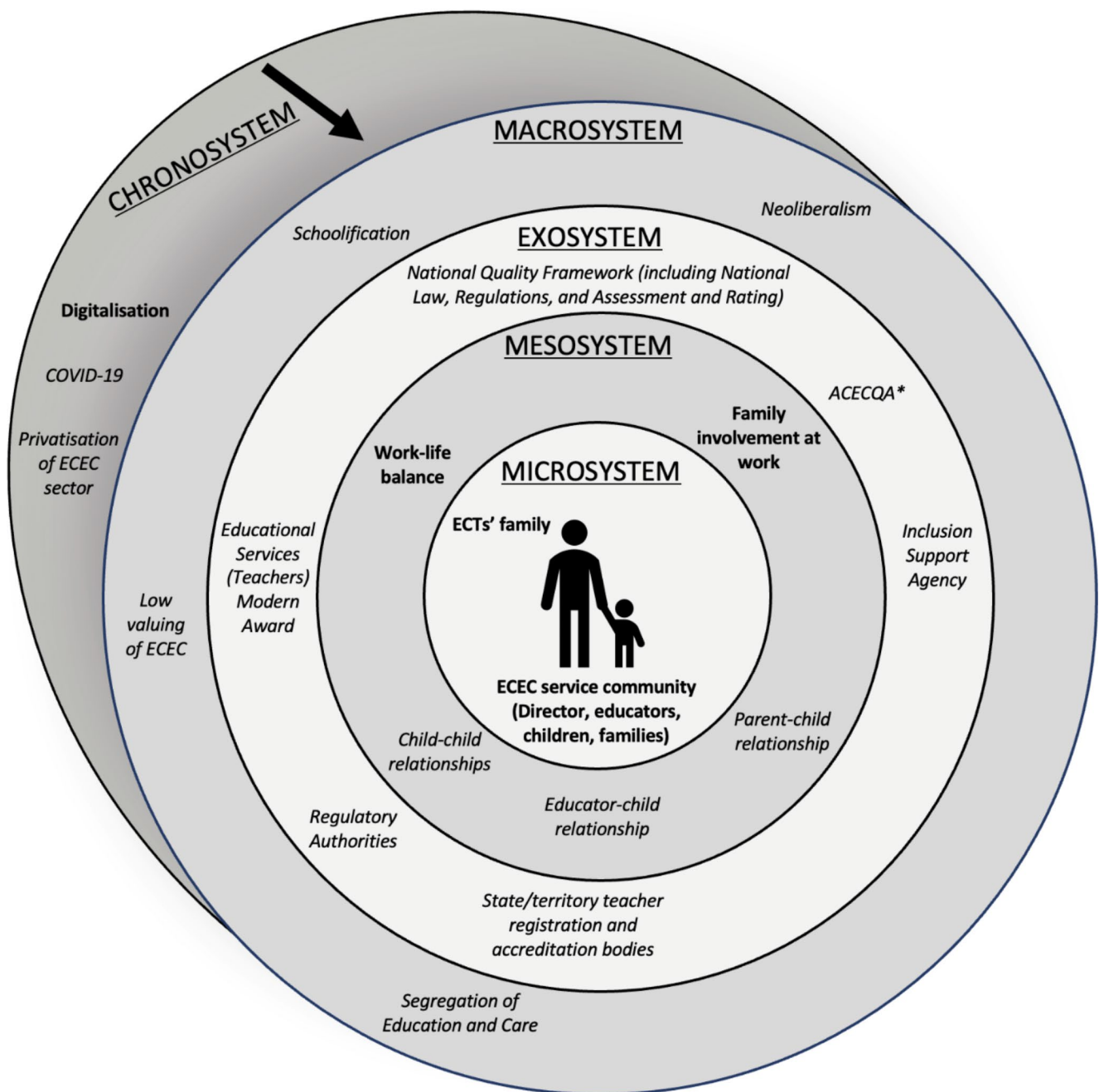
Fig. 3 Visualisation of positive and negative ecological influences on ECTs as identified in this study. Note: Italicised = described as negatively influencing ECT work. Bold = described as both positively and negatively influencing ECT work

Organisational Climate and Supervisor Support

Most participants identified the importance of organisational culture, describing the importance of finding *"the right fit"* (P7), and the benefits of supportive co-workers. Fair distribution and sharing of workload, and supervisors buffering non-contact workload pressures through the provisioning of additional supports and resources (P4, P6, P7), were included. One ECT who reported strong satisfaction

with her workplace, felt this was partly due to the service owner being experienced and qualified in ECEC, and consequently more understanding, empathetic and supportive:

> *'She's [the Approved Provider] one that will get in the trenches with you, will get in, change dirty nappies with you, is on the floor, genuinely cares about the kids, the families and the staff'* (P4).

Some ECTs expressed a disapproval of large services, particularly chains and multi-site providers, with a perceived desirability attached to small workplaces. These were deemed to be more supportive, with favourable conditions, smaller workloads, and positive co-worker and supervisor relationships, *'she really gets to know you on a personal level, that larger services don't really get'* (P4).

Acknowledgements

Participants frequently used the word 'acknowledgement', conveying the importance of professional recognition from co-workers, supervisors, families, and the wider community and society, with one explaining, *'I don't need to be praised and told I'm doing a good job. I don't need to be reassured. But to be acknowledged and just be respected as a person is massive'* (P7). Two ECTs desired more 'good news stories', expressing frustration with typically negative media coverage of the ECEC sector and subsequent impacts on retention.

COVID-19

Some participants reported reduced enrolment numbers due to COVID-19, leading to reduced employment hours and/or dismissal of educators. Others reported first a mass departure of educators, with ensuing difficulties in hiring and retaining educators. Some also described a shift away from face-to-face activities and towards non-contact modes including communication with families, incursions for children via video conference, and online professional development programs. Some participants described workload increases due to COVID-19, citing inadequate support from government bodies and lack of consultation and communication around frequently changing recommendations and policies, for example:

> *'Schools had definite guidance about how to manage the COVID situation… We were left to fend for ourselves and figure it out [as] best we could'* (P1).
> *'Our Prime Minister announced the childcare relief package in his statement, which I watched on Facebook in my office, rather than actually emailing services and telling us that we're going to have a childcare relief package and we had two days to wrap everything up before it. So we found out the same time as the rest of Australia, which then meant we all had to chase our tails to put that in place and figure out how that worked… I don't think anyone who was managing a service last year could switch off because everything was changing so much… I think probably a few of us are still trying to catch up from that'* (P3).

Socio-cultural Trends

Societal and sector-wide trends were perceived to influence ECT work, with one participant describing a shift towards natural play spaces, away from previous preferences for colourful plastic furnishings and environments. Eight ECTs described features of digitalisation in their work (the increasing use of digital technologies). One described pressure from parents, amounting to 'schoolification' (when school-like approaches to education infiltrate prior-to-school settings).

Potential Solutions

Despite expressing frustration, participants offered few suggestions to address workload challenges, accepting these challenges as part of the job and/or feeling that the required solutions are insurmountable. Desired changes included:

i.   additional paid time for documentation and paperwork (P2, P9) – *'Although I don't know if a whole day would even be enough!'* (P2).
ii. the removal of all clerical and administrative work from ECTs (P5).
iii. for ECEC services to be re-structured, with central distribution of resources, access to administrative workers, more direct support from state policy, and more education-focused roles for ECTs, as in schools (P1, P3).

It is noteworthy that the above suggestions span multiple system levels.

Discussion

Prioritising depth over generalisability, this exploratory study is indicative only, thus theory is posited rather than established, presenting considerations for both local and international contexts where ecological similarities may be drawn. Analysis of these exploratory interviews yielded three broad conclusions about the work and ecology of these nine Australian ECTs:

i.   Experiences and perceptions of work and workload are polarised and predominantly troubled (research questions 1 and 2).
ii. Some components of work are perceived to be 'low value' in the context of quality ECEC, with possible under-utilisation of ECTs' expertise linked to potential changes in the nature of ECTs' work (research question 3).

iii. Concentration of uplifting ecological influences within microsystems, with burdensome influences at all system levels (research question 4).

These findings are discussed below, in the context of Harper and Wilson's (2024) systematic review, with consideration of the current ECEC workforce crisis and literature on the significant contribution ECTs make to quality ECEC for children.

Polarised and Predominantly Troubled Experiences

Consistent with findings in Harper and Wilson (2024), ECTs in this interview study reported a broad range of mostly negative or challenging experiences at work. The tendency for most ECTs in this study to engage in sometimes excessive, unpaid non-contact work, typically to prioritise quality interactions with children, provides further evidence for the sacrificial tendency of educators (Cumming et al., 2021; Logan et al., 2020). The heavy workloads and irregularity described by some participants in this study may explain why so many ECTs expressed a keen interest in the study, with a tendency to 'offload' during the initial recruitment contact, but then never followed through by signing a consent form or booking an interview. As in this interview study, feeling 'lucky' at work was briefly identified in McDonald et al. (2018) where some educators identified themselves as 'lucky' to have access to basic employment entitlements, including paid non-contact time (p. 658). It seems little wonder that the ECEC workforce crisis persists, when only a minority report favourable working conditions, and those who have the supports and resources they need to fulfil their basic job requirements consider themselves 'lucky'.

The polarising experiences of these ECTs, consistent with Harper and Wilson (2024), indicates the need for national standardised data on ECEC employment and working conditions, (particularly organisational climate) which are identified in this study and the broader literature as critical to educator satisfaction, wellbeing, and retention (Logan et al., 2020; McKinlay et al., 2018). Internationally and in Australia, ECEC regulatory policy focuses on improving and standardising quality for children. This study reinforces suggestions by Cumming et al. (2021) that targeted efforts are needed to improve and standardise the quality of work experiences for educators.

Changing Nature of ECTs' Work

Exploratory interviews suggest that ECTs are at risk of undergoing a significant deviation in their professional development, due to the changing nature of their work.

Specifically, despite training to be a teacher, the content of ECTs work is shifting away from child- and education-focused tasks, with increasing compliance-driven administration that is not just restricted to those ECTs employed as service directors. According to ACECQA (2019), new graduates have 'unrealistic expectations and are not 'job ready',' subtly laying blame on initial teacher education programs and/or graduates themselves. However, this interview study reinforces suggestions that perhaps it is the work that needs to change to better reflect the role and expertise of an ECT (Cumming et al., 2021; Thorpe et al., 2023). It is not unusual for workers to advance into more managerial roles as their career progresses, despite their qualifications remaining the same. For some ECTs, these increasing managerial tasks may come with a pay increase (for example, those in a Director position) and/or a reduction in contact work which is physically demanding. However, in this study, even non-Director ECTs perceive increasing non-contact workloads, and report that much of this non-contact workload was not desired or sought. Of even greater concern, are reports that this increasing non-contact workload may be of little value in the context of quality ECEC, including overwhelming and cumbersome regulatory demands and low level day-to-day managerial tasks. Future research should investigate how Australian ECTs are currently being deployed, and consider how to maximise their value-adding potential for quality ECEC, including minimising and redistributing 'low value' tasks.

Interestingly, almost all participants perceived a strong link between administrative workload (primarily regulatory and compliance-related) and their ability to provide quality ECEC, both directly through their provisioning of quality interactions with children, and indirectly through their capacity for mentoring and leadership. Despite being noted in Thorpe et al.'s (2023) Australian workforce survey, this tension registered only tenuously in Harper and Wilson's (2024) systematic review, suggesting that this finding may be new and emerging, specific to the Australian context, or specific to ECTs as opposed to educators generally. Tayler et al. (2017) identify only 1% of Australian children as receiving high quality instructional support, typically delivered by degree qualified ECTs, while 87% of services were observed to provide low levels of instructional support. Given that most participants felt their expertise was currently underutilised, there seems to be great potential to substantially increase ECEC quality by supporting current ECTs to focus more on teaching, mentoring, leading, and innovating, and less on administration and management.

Ironically, this professional deviation could be an unintended consequence of Australia's Assessment and Rating system; similarly, Ballet and Kelcherman's (2009) review on the intensification of schoolteacher work observed

accountability demands resulting in an expansion of roles and responsibilities for teachers. This interview study, on the other hand, suggests not just an 'expansion' of roles, but a complete shift, with some ECTs no longer engaged in any teaching work at all. While this kind of critical discourse on regulation and compliance in Australian schools is increasingly abundant, more critical investigations are needed in the ECEC sector. Although the regulatory systems in this study are specific to the Australian context, many countries are implementing similar systems, with the intention of standardising and/or monitoring the quality of ECEC services (including Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, New Zealand, and Portugal). This study indicates the need for further investigation of such regulatory frameworks and processes, to ascertain how these systems are experienced by educators, and how they help and/or hinder the provision of quality ECEC.

Uplifting Microsystems and Burdensome Others

The inconsistent experiences of microsystem influences reported in this study are widely reflected in the literature, for example, Cumming et al. (2021) report that while some educators experience bullying and/or physical violence from children, families, and co-workers, others experience favourable and positive interactions and relationships. These inconsistent microsystem experiences may stem from differences in service management structures, which are widely varied due to Australia's open market context. The finding that some ECTs expressed disapproval of multi-site providers and large services was unanticipated, and somewhat incongruent with ACECQA's (2019) claim that multi-site providers can offer more opportunities for professional development and support, along with more 'sophisticated' retention strategies (p. 8). One UK-based study observed higher turnover rates in multi-service providers compared to single-service providers (Haux et al., 2022), indicating that educators' disapproval of these kinds of services and providers, although only conveyed by two ECTs in this study, is worthy of research attention. One participant felt that ECT-trained supervisors provided better workplaces, conditions, and supports for educators. Interestingly, prior research indicates that ECT-trained Directors are associated with higher service quality for children (Tayler et al., 2017). However, further research is needed to understand the potential link between Director/Supervisor qualification and working conditions, including resources, workload, and organisational climate, and the potential link between quality workplaces for educators and quality services for children.

Parallel to the predominantly troubled experiences of ECT work are the largely burdensome ecological influences, across all system levels, reported in this study and more widely throughout the literature (Fenech et al., 2022; Harper & Wilson, 2024). The prevalence of negative ecological influences prompts us to further consider how policy may reduce or restrict the professional success and satisfaction of ECTs. For example, the national Assessment and Rating system and funding available through Inclusion Support Services were both designed to improve service quality for children. Both, however, were described as having the unintended side effect of increasing ECT workload and stress. While there is some research on regulatory and compliance-based work (Fenech et al., 2006; Thorpe et al., 2023), more is needed in order to progress policy. Additionally, other components of non-contact work are yet to be investigated. For example, this study identifies non-contact workloads related to Inclusion Support Services and teacher registration as being particularly burdensome for ECTs, and thus worthy of research attention.

Despite there being several unions for ECTs in Australia, none were mentioned by participants, nor was Fair Work Australia's Modern Award, which sets out basic employment rights for ECTs. Although this study involved only a small sample, interviews were lengthy and in-depth, and data saturation was achieved, thus the absence of talk about unions and the Modern Award may indicate that these exosystems have little influence on ECT work. Indeed, while the Modern Award sets out the minimum pay and conditions required, the critical shortage of ECTs in Australia means that many services offer above award conditions (Thorpe et al., 2023). Regardless, employment conditions including pay are typically described as inadequate, pointing to wider systemic issues, indicating the need for more effective positive influences at these higher system levels (McKinlay et al., 2018; Thorpe et al., 2023).

Somewhat novel is the suggestion that microsystem agents such as supervisors or co-workers can shield ECTs from the burdensome effects of regulatory and compliance-based work, including Assessment and Rating, and may even reduce related workload. The incidence of uplifting supervisors and co-workers, described by two ECTs in this study, supports wider research on the potential for micro- and meso-system influences such as organisational climate and workplace culture, to improve job satisfaction, wellbeing, and retention in ECEC (Harper & Wilson, 2024; Logan et al., 2020; McKinlay et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the potential for supervisors and co-workers to buffer effects of or reduce regulatory and compliance-based workload requires further investigation.

Limitations

These interview findings have several limitations, primarily the small single-state sample, which is not representative of all Australian ECTs. However, the sequential design of the *Early Learning Work Matters* project lends strength to this study, which both confirmed and extended findings from the prior systematic review. Further, this interview study will be followed by a national questionnaire, intending to generalise findings. The interviews covered a broad scope, and only two participants expressed wholly positive perspectives; a larger sample or more targeted recruitment of highly satisfied educators would likely yield more depth on what contributes to these higher levels of satisfaction and professional fulfilment. Regardless, this study makes a key contribution to the literature, addressing gaps identified in Harper and Wilson's (2024) systematic review of ECEC work and Fenech et al.'s (2022) review of the ecological systems of educators.

Conclusion

While Australia, like many countries, has in place a National Quality Framework confirming its commitment to the provision of quality ECEC services for children, mounting research and union action indicates that policy should start attending to the quality of ECEC services for educators, to develop a sustainable workforce capable of delivering the quality ECEC we seemingly covet. Consistent with Harper and Wilson's (2024) international systematic review of ECEC work, the polarised yet predominantly troubled work experiences evident during these nine interviews suggest the need for policy-level efforts to standardise the quality of ECEC services as workplaces for educators and instigate processes for accountability. Ecological analysis of ECT perspectives in this study, revealed a scarcity of strong positive influences at the meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystem levels, suggesting the need for sector-wide intervention addressing the needs of ECTs. Emerging indications regarding the changing nature of ECTs' work and the sense of insurmountable non-contact workloads from some participants requires nationwide research to ascertain the frequency of these experiences on a wider scale. Whether this departure from child-centred educational and pedagogical leadership work is common or unusual for Australian ECTs, it is noteworthy and should trigger ECEC professionals, academics, and policy makers to reflect on the ideal role of ECTs within the context of quality ECEC.

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