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Exploring the Introduction of Mandatory Accreditation: The Lived Experiences of Australian Early Childhood Workers

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In fulfilment of PhD (Society and Culture)

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This thesis brings together a lifetime of learning gained through years of work, study and self-discovery from which I hope to contribute something of value to the field of educational research.

STATEMENT OF ACCESS

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To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made, nor has it been submitted for consideration of an award to any other higher education institution.

Signature:

Merryl May Ruth Sykes

Date: 1st September, 2020

ABSTRACT

The research study discussed in this thesis is situated within a policy context and research evidence highlighting early childhood worker qualifications and accreditation as a primary factor in the provision of high-quality early childhood education and care. Reinforcing the importance of having a highly trained and qualified early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce, the National Early Childhood Development Strategy, in conjunction with the Early Years Workforce Strategy (EYWS), set out a reform strategy for the ECEC workforce in Australia in the short term and into the future. Incorporated in the reforms was legislation making it mandatory for ECEC workers employed to educate and care for children between the ages of 6 weeks to 5 years to undertake formal training in ECEC provision, which became effective from 1 January 2014. Consistent with the research topic my research focuses on the introduction of mandatory accreditation for early childhood workers and the implications of this for early childhood workers who worked in the ECEC sector during or prior to its introduction.

This qualitative, in-depth study considers the participants opinions in relation to the perceived and real benefits attributed to ECEC workers of undertaking industry-specific training. Presenting evidence and interpretations on how ECEC workers have reacted to the introduction of mandatory accreditation and examining the participants' views and perspectives within real contextual conditions, an interpretive phenomenological qualitative approach enabled me to develop a comprehensive perspective of the subject matter. Assisting me to identify key themes within the dataset and to capture important issues related to the participants' meaning and realities regarding the introduction of mandatory accreditation.

My research findings suggest that for workers who participated in this study, mandatory accreditation in and of itself does not guarantee high quality childcare. Overall participants' experience of the accreditation process was of a 'one size fits all' approach, that failed to value the contributions of the experienced, untrained worker and their ability to connect to families at that desired personal level.

Addressing gaps in existing literature on early childhood workers' education and training, which previously concentrated only on the qualified early childhood teacher, the key findings highlighted in this study will assist policy makers and researchers in understanding the influence and ramifications of the introduction of a mandatory accreditation for unqualified ECEC workers throughout Australia. The findings from this study offer policy makers the unique perspective of workers in the field, who have lived the introduction of mandatory accreditation. Giving voice to those ECEC workers directly affected by the Commonwealth Government's decision to introduce mandatory accreditation, these findings encourage the early childhood sector to look beyond mandatory accreditation as the sole indicator of childcare quality to include areas already targeted by the Commonwealth Government as in need of reform including, curriculum development, rating and assessment and quality control.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Accreditation: the action or process of officially recognizing someone as having a particular status or being qualified to perform a particular activity.

Authorised supervisor/nominee: An adult nominated by the holder of an approval to operate a childcare service.

Centre-based: An education and care service providing long day care, preschool and kindergarten to children ranging in age from 6 weeks to 6 years for a minimum of 38 hours per week, Monday to Friday, for up to 52 weeks per year.

Children: Refers to babies aged 6 weeks to toddlers, children aged 3 to 5 years, and school-age children, both as individuals and as members of a group in the education and care setting.

Community: A group of people with common characteristics. The term can be defined by location, race, ethnicity, age, occupation or interest in a particular issue or other common bonds. In an education and care setting, the term 'community' may include children, families, educators, staff, other professionals, school staff and volunteers. It may also include members of the wider community and particular groups or organisations in the local area.

Continuous improvement: The process by which a service evaluates and seeks opportunities to improve its operations and daily practice.

Curriculum: All the interactions that occur in an environment designed to foster children's learning and development, including planned and unplanned experiences, activities, routines and events.

Documentation: The results from a process of recording information, discussions and decisions. Documentation of children's learning may include examples of children's writing, drawing, painting and construction; photographs of projects and works in progress; and transcripts of children's comments and conversations about their experiences.

Early childhood: The period from birth to 8 years of age.

Early childhood education and care: An internationally used term, 'early childhood education and care' was adopted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to describe the inseparable nature of care and education in the provision of educational programmes for younger children. It encompasses all early education and care service types, including centre-based long day care, family day care, occasional care, preschool/kindergartens and outside school hours care.

Early childhood worker: An early childhood worker is responsible for supervising the daily routine of children under care. Their responsibilities include assisting children with toilet breaks; teaching them how to wash their hands properly; supervising children in outside areas including while using play equipment etc. Preparing structured social activities and assisting them to develop their social and communication skills.

Early childhood education and care workforce: The early childhood education and care workforce comprises all staff involved in providing education and care in early childhood from birth to 5 years. It includes centre-based long day care, family day care, occasional care, preschool/kindergartens and outside school hours care (OSHC) services. These services are delivered through government or non-government (community or private) providers.

Educator: An individual who provides education and care for children. It may include qualified ECTs and Certificate III and Diploma qualified early childhood workers.

Experiences: The activities and routines provided for children. Experiences may be planned or spontaneous and should reflect children's needs, interests and abilities.

Family Day Care: A childcare service that provides small group care for children from birth to school age in the home environment of a registered educator who works in partnership with coordination unit staff and scheme management team.

Home-based services: Care provided in the home of the educator or the child's family, provided by an educator in a family day care scheme or by a registered individual who is not part of a family day care scheme.

Kindergarten: Used in this thesis to describe an educational programme that exists independently from long day care and education services. Kindergarten programmes in this context are usually sessional in nature.

Leader: A suitably qualified and experienced educator or coordinator who is a role model for other educators in the service.

Mandatory Accreditation: In the context of this thesis the term mandatory accreditation is used to describe the action or process of officially recognizing someone as being qualified to perform the duties of an educator and caring in the ECEC sector in Australia.

Outside School Hour's Care (OSHC): Provides care for school-age children before school, after school, on pupil-free days and during school holiday periods. Standalone facilities or shared facilities, such as community halls or school buildings and grounds, are primarily used.

Parents: The natural or adoptive parent of the child and their spouse.

Pedagogy: The educator's professional practice, which emphasises the active role played by the early childhood educator in achieving educational goals and focuses on those aspects of professional practice that involve building and nurturing relationships, programme decision making and facilitating children's learning outcomes.

Practitioner: Someone who is involved in a skilled job or activity.

Preschool: Used in this thesis to describe the programme attended by children in their year prior to starting school.

Profession: The early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector is defined as a profession by its characteristics which require a specialised body of knowledge and expertise, including control over the quality of service offered, a commitment to serving a significant social value, prolonged training and a code of ethics that describes the profession's obligations to society.

Professional identity: The professional identity of an educator encompasses the interaction between their personal experiences and the social, cultural and institutional environment in which they function.

Qualified: A person with a recognised degree or professional certificate who possesses extensive knowledge and experience in the subject field.

Staff member: In relation to an education and care service, a staff member is any individual employed, appointed or engaged to work in or as part of an education and care service, whether as a family day care coordinator, educator or otherwise.

Unqualified: In relation to an education and care service, this refers to any individual holding no formal qualification in early childhood education and care.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACECQA	Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority
AEU	Australian Education Union
AHPA	Allied Health Professions Australia
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
CA	Commonwealth of Australia
CCB	Child Care Benefit
CCR	Child Care Rebate
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
DET	Department of Education and Training
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECED	Early Childhood Education Directorate
ECT	Early Childhood Teacher
EYLF	Early Years Learning Framework
EYWS	Early Years Workforce Strategy
FDC	Family Day Care
ILO	International Labour Organization
IofM	Institute of Medicine
JCU	James Cook University
LDC	Long Day Care
NCAC	National Childcare Accreditation Council
NICHD	National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
NP UAECE	National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education
NQF	National Quality Framework
NQS	National Quality Standard
NRC	National Research Council
NSW	New South Wales
NESA	New South Wales Education Standard Authority
OECD	Organisation for Economic and Co-operation Development
OSHC	Out-of-school Hours Care

PC	Productivity Commission
PSCA	Professional Support Coordinator Alliance
PWC	Price Waterhouse Coopers
QAS	Quality Assurance System
QIAS	Quality Improvement and Accreditation System
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SCRGSP	Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision
SPRC	Social Policy Research Centre
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WWCC	Working with Children Check

CHAPTER 1: Early Childhood Education in Australia

Introduction

In this thesis I focus on key empirical research indicating that fundamental to ensuring the provision of high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) service provision is an industry-trained and qualified ECEC workforce (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009; Logan, Cumming, & Wong, 2020; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010; Tayler et al., 2013). The research study discussed in this thesis is situated within a policy context and research evidence highlighting early childhood worker qualifications and accreditation as a primary factor in the provision of high-quality early childhood education and care (Brennan, 2016; Tayler, Ishimine, Cloney, Cleveland, & Thorpe, 2013). Reinforcing the importance of having a highly trained and qualified early childhood education and care workforce, the Commonwealth Government introduced legislative changes designed to improve the structure and management of the early childhood education and care sector in Australia.

Informing the project are key Commonwealth Government efforts to professionalise the ECEC workforce. Incorporated in the reforms, the Early Years Workforce Strategy (EYWS) (2014) (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2014) included legislation introduced by the Australian Commonwealth Government on 1 January 2012 (ACECQA, 2014a, 2019; Boyd, 2012; DEEWR, 2013a), compelling unqualified early childhood workers in Australia to undertake industry-specific training in early childhood education. Effective from 1 January 2014, all early childhood workers employed to care for children ranging in age from birth to 5 years must have enrolled in an accredited course in ECEC provision at a University, TAFE or an accredited Vocational Education and Training (VET) organisation (Brennan, 2016; CA, 2015; DEEWR, 2014; O'Connell et al., 2016). Consistent with the research topic my research focuses on the introduction of mandatory accreditation for early childhood workers and the implications of this for early childhood workers who worked in the ECEC sector during or prior to its introduction.

In the context of this thesis the term early childhood worker mandatory accreditation is used to describe the action or process of officially recognizing someone as being qualified to perform the duties of an educator and carer in the ECEC sector in Australia (Accreditation, n.d.). In the case of early childhood workers, the term refers

to a person who has successfully completed an accredited course in early childhood education and care through a recognised TAFE or RTO.

Designed by industry experts to develop a workforce capable of meeting community demands and provide the best possible learning environments for children throughout Australia, the EYWS was implemented to assist early childhood workers to attain the skills and qualifications necessary to provide high-quality early childhood education experiences across all ECEC service types (ACECQA, 2014a; Brennan, 2016; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2014). Providing professional training opportunities for early childhood workers, the EYWS took a major step towards professionalising the ECEC sector throughout Australia (Tayler et al., 2013, p. 13).

1.1 Study Background

The quality of ECEC provision has been the subject of ongoing debate amongst educators and politicians in recent years (Brennan, 2016; Organisation for Economic and Co-operation Development [OECD], 2012a, 2015; Tayler, 2014). Based on concerns that early childhood education programmes do not adequately support children's early learning, researchers and policy makers turned their attention to improving early childhood education quality, with the hope that higher quality ECEC will better support children's early academic and social skills (Burchinal et al., 2016).

Informed by national and international research identifying the economic and social benefits of investing in children's early learning and development, the Commonwealth Government undertook a review of the ECEC sector in Australia (Fenech, Robertson, Sumsion, & Goodfellow, 2007; Jordan, Bratch-Haines, & Vernon-Feagans, 2018; Tayler et al., 2013). Supported by strong evidence from local and international studies identifying the need for 'a coherent policy and service delivery framework to adequately support children's early learning' (Russell, 2009a, p. 6), the Commonwealth Government acknowledged the need for improved ECEC programmes across all jurisdictions and ECEC service platforms (Burchinal, Magnuson, Powell, & Soliday Hong, 2015; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2014; Jordan et al., 2018; Tayler et al., 2013).

Through collaboration with state and territory governments, the Commonwealth Government introduced the National Quality Agenda in 2009, which included sweeping reforms designed to unify the ECEC sector under the control and administration of the ACECQA (2014) (Commonwealth of Australia [CA], 2009b; Fenech, Sumsion, & Shepherd, 2010; Schleicher, 2011; Tayler, Cloney, Adams, Ishimine, Thorpe, & Nguyen, 2016). Introduced to address inconsistencies identified within the ECEC sector and improve the quality of ECEC provision, the National Quality Agenda included initiatives to streamline the structure and nature of ECEC service provision within Australia (ACECQA, 2014a; PC, 2016; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision [SCRGSP], 2016; Tayler et al., 2016). Encompassing ECEC services providing education and care to children ranging in age from birth to 5 years and school aged children ranging in age from 6 – 12 years, the National Quality Agenda lay the foundations for a nationally controlled system of early childhood service delivery (ACECQA, 2014a; Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

The National Quality Agenda, the National Early Childhood Development Strategy 'Investing in the Early Years' ('the strategy') and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2014), introduced management guidelines for all early childhood service types throughout Australia (ACECQA, 2014, 2019; Fox et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2014). Designed by industry experts to accommodate the learning needs of children from birth to 12 years, the National Quality Agenda consists of two comprehensive national age-specific curriculum frameworks. Belonging, Being and Becoming - a comprehensive curriculum framework for children ranging in age from birth to 5 years (ACECQA, 2019; CA, 2009a; COAG, 2007; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013) and 'My Time, Our Place' - an age-specific curriculum framework developed to improve service delivery and provide a consist teaching framework for school-age children between the ages of six to 12 years attending out-of-school hours care services throughout Australia (ACECQA, 2014a, 2019; CA, 2009a; COAG, 2007). Through the integration of effective health, learning and wellbeing (ACECQA, 2014a, 2019), the National Quality Agenda included strategies designed to improve the outcomes for all children and their families, irrespective of gender or socioeconomic circumstance (ACECQA, 2014a, 2019; COAG, 2009a; PC, 2016; SCRGSP, 2016).

1.2 Research Context

The ECEC sector throughout Australia is responsible for the care and nurturing of thousands of children annually (Russell, 2009a). Despite the acknowledged importance of ECEC for children's development, the ECEC sector has a fragmented history (Elliott, 2006; Moloney, 2019). Early childhood education and care services historically fell under the jurisdiction of the respective state and territory governments (Cassells, Toohey, Keegan, & Mohanty, 2013; Jordan et al., 2018; Valentine & Hilferty, 2012), which resulted in an eclectic mix of policy and practice between the various states and territories (Tayler, 2014). Consequently, the quality of children's experiences across programmes and services was fragmented and offered significant barriers to the introduction of the National Early Childhood Development Strategy ('the strategy') (Cassells et al., 2013; Russell, 2009a). Having the potential to hinder the Commonwealth Government's reform agenda and the development of a nationally recognised educational curriculum (ILO, 2014; Jordan et al., 2018; Miller, Drury, & Campbell, 2013), the disconnect between the states and territories offered no uniform curricula framework or licensing regulations for ECEC service provision across the various jurisdictions (Cassells et al., 2013; Russell, 2009a). Research Rationale

Over the last decade, there has been increased emphasis on ECEC workers holding industry-specific qualifications (ACECQA, 2013; DEEWR, 2013b; Logan et al., 2020). The demand for industry-trained professionals, capable of delivering responsive care and education programmes, has become paramount in Australia's search for a high-quality ECEC service delivery platform (ACECQA, 2013; Jordan et al., 2018; Logan et al., 2020; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015b; Tayler et al., 2013). Seeking to reshape a complex mix of state, territory and commonwealth government jurisdictions (Brennan & Mahon, 2011), the Commonwealth Government's reform agenda included recommendations from national and international research examining best practice, current trends and professional advice for the future direction of the ECEC sector nationally (Jordan et al., 2018; Russell, 2009a; Tayler et al., 2013; Tayler et al., 2016). Providing a vision for the future of ECEC provision in Australia, the National Quality Framework (NQF), together with the EYWS (Brennan, 2016; Bretherton 2010; ILO, 2014), appears to be one of a number of steps in targeted reforms implemented by the Commonwealth Government to restructure and reconstitute the ECEC sector under the control and administration of ACECQA (2014) (Brennan, 2016).

The focus of the study detailed in this thesis, mandatory accreditation for early childhood workers, has resulted in the introduction of compulsory industry specific training for early childhood workers employed to care for children ranging in age from birth to 5 years (ACECQA, 2014). Implemented to develop an ECEC workforce capable of engaging in sensitive and responsive interactions with children, the EYWS will assist early childhood workers to attain the skills and qualification necessary to provide children with high-quality ECEC experiences (Brennan, 2016; Logan et al., 2017; Savage, 2020). Culminating with the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce through in-service training coupled with tailored training courses provided by Registered Training Organizations (RTO's) and TAFE, the EYWS provides status and recognition for early childhood workers through establishing an industry-specific worker qualification system (Logan et al., 2017; Moloney, 2011, 2019; OECD, 2012, 2015).

1.3 Biographical Context

I began my career in 1990 as the owner/operator of a for-profit centre-based long day childcare service located in the Sutherland Shire, Sydney, New South Wales (NSW). Like many of my contemporaries, I had no formal credentials in ECEC provision. This was considered inconsequential because, according to common belief at that time, centre-based childcare equated to a 'glorified form of baby-sitting' (Russell, 2009a, p. 6). My early success in business—specifically the successful establishment of my first early childhood service in NSW—led me down what could be termed the path to learning. The establishment of each new ECEC service brought with it added responsibility and the need for increased competency and knowledge. Having developed a belief that experience alone was sufficient to ensure competence, as my fledgling business grew and I was subject to the rigorous requirements of designing, developing and managing each new service, I became acutely aware of my shortcomings—particularly those relating to my knowledge of early child development and the theory behind early childhood education practice. Each of these factors influenced my desire to seek knowledge and gain credibility through study.

I began my formal studies in ECEC in Perth, Western Australia, completing Diplomas in Children's Services and Out-of-school Hours Care in 2007. I enrolled in a Bachelor of Social Science (Children and Family Studies) at Edith Cowan University, Perth,

Western Australia, and successfully completed the course in 2009. Following a break of a couple of years, I continued my studies by enrolling in a Master of Social Science (Human Services) at James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland, which I successfully completed in 2016. My master's thesis, titled 'Exploring Mandatory Accreditation of Early Childhood Workers in Australia: Implications for Practice, Provision of Care and the ECEC Workforce', investigated the effects and implications of the introduction of legislation by the Commonwealth Government requiring the mandatory accreditation of early childhood workers in Australia.

1.4 Topic Selection

Having straddled both sides of the educational divide, I am acutely aware of the emotional and physical forces affecting my journey. As a mature-aged student, I am familiar with the processes involved in the acquisition of industry-specific credentials. My life experiences—particularly those surrounding my journey from an unqualified early childhood worker to a qualified early childhood teacher (ECT) and university lecturer—strongly influenced my decision to select mandatory accreditation as the focus of my research (Pitard, 2016) and is the personal context that underpins the PhD study discussed here. Undertaking in-service training and professional development courses, while working within the ECEC sector, brought home the challenges faced having to juggle family and career, long working hours and lack of financial support which adversely affected my ability to study (Baglow & Gair, 2019, p. 276).

I have witnessed numerous administrative and legislative changes within the ECEC sector over the past 30 years that have affected the organisational and management structure of ECEC services throughout Australia. During this period, there have been significant policy and legislative changes introduced by all levels of government (ACECQA, 2019; Brennan, 2016) - changes sometimes introduced to enhance political capital and gain voter popularity, or due to state or Commonwealth government election promises (Bown & Sumsion, 2016) - or occasionally implemented in response to intense lobbying from action groups with a genuine desire to generate change within Australia's social and political system (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Bown & Sumsion, 2016).

My experience, operating centre-based long day childcare services during a pivotal time in the history of childcare in Australia, influenced my journey and the choice of my research topic (Creswell, 2008; Harvey, 2015; Russell, 2009b, 2009c). I acknowledge the role those experiences played in the development of my thesis topic (Harvey, 2015; Russell, 2009b, 2009c) and am grateful for the opportunity to extend on my previous research (Sykes, 2016). The forces, desires and needs influencing my journey fuelled my belief in the need for ongoing professional development and the value of a highly trained and qualified ECEC workforce (Bretherton, 2010; ILO, 2014; Logan, Sumsion, & Press, 2017; Tayler et al., 2013). This opinion is shared by other researchers, including Logan et al. (2017), who support the belief that early childhood workers with industry-specific training are better equipped to support children's early development and provide a structured early learning environment (Russell, 2009b, 2009c; Tayler et al., 2013).

1.5 National Early Childhood Development Strategy

'The strategy' was introduced in 2009 by the Commonwealth Government to ensure all children living in Australia receive the best possible start in life (ACECQA, 2014a; COAG, 2009a), and signalled a shift from the traditional divide between care and education (Miller et al., 2013). Research shows that children experiencing high levels of disadvantage achieve greater levels of success when exposed to high-quality ECEC experiences (Houng & Justman, 2014; Melhuish et al., 2015; Moloney, 2019; Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, & Siraj, 2015; Yazejian, Bryant, Freel, & Burchinal, 2015). According to Cloney, Cleveland, Hattie, and Tayler (2016), 'there is a significant difference in the quality of ECEC service delivery between the various socio-economic areas, with fewer high-quality ECEC services in the areas of most need' (pp. 384). The high cost of ECEC service provision in Australia has become a significant barrier to children from low socioeconomic communities accessing high-quality ECEC service (Baxter & Hand, 2013; Duncan & Sojourner, 2013). According to Brennan and Anderson (2014), although current ECEC reforms:

> provide an enhanced benefit to some sections of the community, there were several critical flaws within the design, which are likely to make the overall package more harmful than beneficial. (p. 12)

This belief was supported by Ireland (2019) in a *Sydney Morning Herald* article stating that:

> hundreds of childcare centres are charging more than the government's hourly subsidy cap for day care fees, with childcare operators saying families in Sydney and Melbourne are wearing the highest out-of-pocket cost (p. 12)

Designed by early childhood education industry experts to offer greater social inclusion and improved outcomes for children from birth to 5 years, 'the strategy' (ACECQA, 2014b; COAG, 2009a) places emphasis on the needs of preschool-aged children and children from Indigenous and disadvantaged backgrounds (ACECQA, 2014b; Cloney et al., 2016; Cloney, Cleveland, Tayler, Hattie, & Adams, 2017; Hatfield, Lower, Cassidy, & Faldowski, 2015). Embraced by all sectors of the ECEC community, 'the strategy' introduced consistency and predictability to foster children's early learning, development and wellbeing (Taggart et al., 2015).

1.6 Professionalisation of the Early Childhood Workforce

According to ECEC industry researchers, including Brennan and Adamson (2014), Australia has consistently demonstrated relatively poor performance in implementing positive measures to improve ECEC provision (Adamson, 2008). Characterised by a struggle for professional recognition and status, the ECEC sector in Australia previously consisted of a semi-skilled and poorly paid workforce (Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Sims, 2010; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013). Moreover, the stressful and physically demanding nature of the work (Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Sims, 2010; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013) has negatively affected the ECEC sector's ability to develop a professional identity (Bown & Sumsion, 2016; Russell, 2009b, 2009c).

Early childhood worker recognition and the accreditation of staff, have become central elements of the Commonwealth Government's drive to professionalise the ECEC service sector (CA, 2009b; Fenech et al., 2010; Schleicher, 2011). A factor even more relevant today, the inequities between early childhood workers' pay and working conditions, compared with primary and preschool teachers (O'Connell, Fox, Hinz, & Cole, 2016; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017), has negatively impacted the early childhood sector in Australia. According to Watson (2006), 'early childhood workers, working in the childcare sector, experience lower pay, less recognition and poorer working

conditions than their counterparts working in schools and pre-schools' (p. 14), a situation which has not changed in the last fourteen years.

1.7 The Early Years Workforce Strategy (EYWS)

Based on research evidence of educator qualifications as a key quality determinant in ECEC provision and public policy support for an increase in the numbers of ECTs in long day childcare services (COAG, 2009a), the Australian EYWS established a vision to build and support a sustainable, highly qualified and professional ECEC workforce. A workforce including workers holding Certificate III, Diploma and Bachelor level qualifications (COAG, 2012; Logan et al., 2020). Reinforcing the Commonwealth's commitment to develop a sustainable workforce equipped to deliver high-quality educational experiences across all ECEC disciplines (DET, 2014; Logan et al., 2020, the EYWS sought to enhance the professionalism of the ECEC workforce and increase the chances of attracting and retaining a diverse workforce, with a high level of experience and expertise in the field of early childhood education and care (Brennan & Adamson, 2014; Logan et al., 2020; Russell, 2009b, 2009c; Savage, 2020).

Providing 'professional training and accreditation opportunities for the early childhood worker' (Tayler et al., 2013, p. 13) has become a key factor in the Commonwealth Government's stated goal of providing 'universal access to quality ECEC programmes to all four-year old children attending preschool or kindergarten programmes' (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 1). Reinforcing the importance of having a highly trained and qualified ECEC workforce, the EYWS sets out a strategy for ECEC worker education and training in the short term and into the future (Brennan & Adamson, 2014; ILO, 2014; Logan et al., 2020). Research undertaken by researchers including, Press, Sumsion and Wong (2010), on behalf of the Professional Support Co-ordinator Alliance (PSCA), indicated a strong relationship between the levels of staff qualifications and outcomes for children. Studies emphasised the need for employers and government to support staff in ongoing formal study, thereby assisting to develop the capacity of early childhood services and ensure programme delivery is of the highest quality (Press, Sumsion, & Wong, 2010).

Introduced in 2012 by the Commonwealth Government in partnership with COAG, the EYWS 'guided government and the ECEC sector toward building and supporting a sustainable, highly qualified, competent and committed ECEC workforce' (Thorpe et

al., 2011, p. 85). According to Tayler et al. (2013), high-quality ECEC provision is 'an essential component in providing children with the best opportunities to succeed in school and life' (pp. 13–21). Designed to provide an agreed vision and long-term framework for the ECEC workforce, the EYWS was the first commitment by all levels of Australian government to the development of an immediate action plan, providing long-term policy goals (COAG, 2012), which will hopefully culminate with industry parity and remuneration consistent with qualifications and experience for the ECEC worker (Moloney, 2011, 2019; OECD, 2012, 2015). Better funded ECEC services offer improved employment conditions for staff and ensures increased resources are available for quality teacher programmes (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

1.8 Introduction of Mandatory Accreditation

Linking educator qualifications to improved educational standards for children has become fundamental to assess quality in ECEC provision (ACECQA, 2013; Tayler, 2011; Tayler et al., 2013; Thorpe et al., 2011). The importance of 'educator interactions with very young children and the way teaching strategies positively impact children's learning outcomes in the early years is well documented' (Cloney, Page, Tayler, & Church, 2013, pp. 13–21). According to Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, and Thornburg (2009), 'a professionally trained and qualified ECEC workforce requires an integrated approach to teaching that includes explicit instruction, sensitive and warm interactions, responsive feedback and verbal engagement' (p. 71). These factors have resulted in a strengthened focus on educators holding industry-specific qualifications and calls for ECTs to work with preschool-aged children in ECEC settings (Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013).

Teacher accreditation consists of participation in courses that are prepared, delivered and accredited in accordance with the standards of the profession (Irvine et al., 2016; Osgood, 2010; Sammons et al., 2015). A submission to the Australian Government Productivity Commission Inquiry on childcare and early childhood learning, supported the introduction of the mandatory accreditation of early childhood workers, emphasising the importance of professional learning and development for early childhood workers as essential for the delivery of high-quality ECEC (PC, 2014). According to Logan, Sumsion and Press (2020), acceptance of early childhood workers within the academic community as professional careers and educators is achievable. Through the

development of clear and precise guidelines for staff accreditation and the recognition of professional standards for the ECEC workforce we can professionalise the ECEC sector in Australia (Irvine et al., 2016).

According to Austin, Mellow, Rosin, and Seltzer (2012), Australia, in unison with other member nations of the Council of Economic Union—including countries such as India, Singapore and China—aimed to formalise and validate their systems of learning and the awarding of occupational certificates. Implemented to ensure that the credentials earned by the ECEC workforce are easily authenticated and transportable, from state to state and country to country, the EYWS and mandatory accreditation of early childhood workers aimed to streamline the accreditation process (Austin et al., 2012; Cumming, Sumsion, & Wong, 2015; DET, 2016). This would culminate in the awarding of a recognised credential in ECEC, making the EYWS and the mandatory accreditation of early childhood workers a positive step in the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce in Australia (Cumming et al., 2015; Moloney, 2019). National and international research emphasising the importance of the early years for children's development and future wellbeing has reinforced the need for increased public investment in ECEC education, consistent with policy provision and improved training and working conditions for ECEC workers (O'Connell et al., 2016).

1.9 Early Childhood Worker Accreditation Requirements

Early childhood worker accreditation refers to the attaining of formal qualifications in the field of early childhood care and education from a recognized RTO or TAFE. Credentials specific to the various ECEC service types are as follows.

1.9.1 Preschools, Kindergartens and Long Day Care Services

Effective from 1 January 2014, early childhood ECTs and workers employed to work with children ranging in age from 6 weeks to 6 years, attending centre-based early learning services, preschools and kindergartens, must hold a recognised credential in ECEC provision from an accredited Technical and Further Education (TAFE) organisation or registered training organisation (RTO) (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2011).

1.9.2 Out-of-school Hours Care Services ((OSHC)

Subject to state and territory licensing requirements, current accreditation requirements for staff working within the out-of-school hours care (OSHC) sector vary between states and territories (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2013a, 2013b). Unless stipulated otherwise in the national regulations, early childhood workers employed to work with school-aged children, ranging in age from 6 to 12 years, currently require no formal training in ECEC provision (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2013a, 2013b). In NSW, early childhood workers working with school-aged children in the OSHC sector must hold an Advanced First Aid Certificate, Working with Children Check (WWCC) and Certificate in Child Protection Training (ACECQA, 2014a). Consequently, the OSHC sector employs unqualified early childhood workers (ACECQA, 2019; COAG, 2014; DEEWR, 2013a).

1.10 Quality as a Concept

The early childhood worker's qualifications, professional development opportunities and personal characteristics—such as empathy, attentiveness and commitment—all contribute to educator quality and service delivery (PC, 2014; Tayler, 2014). Often described as 'the nature of the physical environment of the classroom, routines and programs' (PC, 2014, p. 8), high-quality ECEC provision relies on the quality of the early childhood worker as fundamental to the quality of the service (PC, 2014; Tayler, 2014).

An elusive concept high-quality ECEC provision is extensively debated in Australia and throughout the world (Fleer & Kennedy, 2006; Ishimine, Tayler, & Thorpe, 2009; Mathers, Eisenstadt, Sylva, Soukakou, & Ereky-Stevens, 2014). Many ECEC researchers and educators, including Logan et al. (2017), agree that 'quality' in ECEC exists, yet is difficult to conceptualise (Britto & Kagan, 2010; Scott-Little, 2010). According to Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart (2004), 'quality in ECEC education is not a universal concept, often relying on national curricula and cultural priorities to determine the level of quality attained' (p. 46).

1.11 Measuring Quality in Early Childhood Service Provision

Developing a reliable system for rating processes and pedagogy in ECEC service provision has become a significant challenge for the government and ECEC service sector (Barnett & Ackerman, 2006; Tayler, 2014). A reliable and consistent measurement of the concept of 'quality' is important (Dearing, McCartney, & Taylor,

2009; Duncan & Sojourner, 2013). Measuring quality in ECEC provision requires recognition and acknowledgement of the ECEC service operator and worker (Bown & Sumsion, 2016; Tayler, 2014). The skills of the ECT in respect to implementing innovative early childhood pedagogy and the nature of interactions between the child, early childhood worker, ECT and parents contribute to the quality of ECEC service delivery (Ishimine et al., 2009, p. 68). Warm and stimulating teacher–child interactions are a key component of high quality in ECEC settings and the foundation of a child's cognitive, social and emotional development (Cantor, Osher, Berg, Steyer, and Rose, 2018; Rose, Rouhani, & Fischer, 2013).

Previous research projects, including the Fostering Effective Early Learning (FEEL) study conducted by Siraj et al. (2018), suggest that focusing on strengthening quality in ECEC services will provide added benefits to the child, including enhanced wellbeing, improved learning outcomes and ultimately develop a foundation for lifelong learning (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013; Melhuish et al., 2015; OECD, 2012; Siraj et al., 2017; Siraj & Mayo, 2014; Tayler, 2014; Tayler et al., 2013). Researchers including Duncan and Sojourner (2013) argue that, children who attend high-quality childcare centres demonstrate higher academic and social achievement than do children who attend ECEC services deemed to offer lower quality care (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013; Ishimine et al., 2009; Mashburn et al., 2008; Tayler et al., 2013). According to Ackerman and Barnett (2009), with more infants and toddlers spending time in non-parental care, access to high-quality ECEC programmes is paramount to avoid negative outcomes for children. Supporting children's cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional development can interrupt the cycle of disadvantage and disengagement that currently exists around the world (Cantor et al., 2018; Duncan & Sojourner, 2013), which can lead to early school leavers and, if left unchecked, can perpetuate a cycle of poverty transmitted from one generation to the next (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013; Moloney, 2019).

1.12 National Quality Framework (NQF)

To achieve an effective system for monitoring the content and quality of ECEC service delivery, the Commonwealth Government implemented the NQF in 2012 (ACECQA, 2014b; DET, 2016). The NQF was introduced to provide a nationally legislated framework that created a standard approach to the regulation and quality assessment of

early childhood education services and included a national quality rating and assessment process known as the National Quality Standard (NQS) (ACECQA, 2014b). Based on international research, the NQS 'gives services and families a better understanding of a quality service' (ACECQA, 2012b, p. 5). According to the ACECQA (2019), in 2019, 79% of services assessed against the NQS were rated as Meeting the NQS or above. In addition, according to the report there was strong evidence that quality education and care makes a significant difference in improving children's future learning and developmental outcomes (p. 25). Through establishing a national benchmark for quality in education and care provision, the NQS sets a high national standard for ECEC services in Australia (DEEWR, 2013a, 2013b; PC, 2014).

1.13 Research Significance

My research has significance when considering the changing face of ECEC service provision throughout Australia. In this thesis, I discuss the forces instrumental in the ECEC sector's potential evolution from child minding to a fully integrated educational discipline (Russell, 2009a). Allowing participants to share their experiences, beliefs and perspectives regarding the introduction of mandatory accreditation provided me the opportunity to 'consider their thoughts and attitudes, while shedding light on the issues and challenges they face' (Hunt, 2009, pp. 1284–1292). Critiquing participant discourses on their experiences and emotional responses to the introduction of mandatory accreditation assisted me with identifying issues of concern (Bown & Sumsion, 2016; Russell, 2009b, 2009c).

The participants' insights contribute to academic conversation surrounding professionalism and the existing knowledge base, filling gaps in respect to early childhood worker training and accreditation, giving 'voice to those early childhood workers directly affected by the Commonwealth government's reform agenda' (Ryan & Goffin, 2008, p. 390). Through providing information and recommendations based on the views of participants, I hope my research will assist government and policy makers to understand the emotional and financial consequence of future policy decisions and the effect of those decisions on the ECEC workforce and sector (Logan et al., 2017).

A consequence of the push for early childhood worker accreditation and professional recognition, mandatory accreditation for early childhood workers will eventually have

to be extended to incorporate early childhood workers employed to care for school-aged children, ranging in age from 6 to 12 years. Consequently, I argue that the views and opinions expressed by the participants in this study, will have added relevance in the months and years ahead, especially for those early childhood workers employed in the OSHC sector, who will be required to undertake mandatory accreditation.

1.14 Research Questions

Emanating from a desire to investigate the impact of legislative changes introduced by the Commonwealth Government in respect of early childhood worker accreditation and training the main research questions were address:

- Understanding the introduction of mandatory accreditation from the perspective of unaccredited early childhood workers.

- Using the perspective of unaccredited early childhood workers to evaluate and contribute to early childhood mandatory accreditation policy.

1.15 Structure of Thesis

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 1 outlines the research aims and contains a brief biographical context and history of ECEC education in Australia. It includes an overview of Commonwealth Government initiatives to implement sweeping reforms to the ECEC sector, including the introduction of the NQF, NQS, EYLF, EYWS and legislation requiring the mandatory accreditation of early childhood workers in Australia (Tayler et al., 2013; Tayler et al., 2016).

Chapter 2: The Changing Face of Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia

The literature review details reform initiatives implemented by the Commonwealth Government. It provides a review of research literature, governance and policy documents relevant to state, territory and Commonwealth government involvement in current reforms occurring in the ECEC sector in Australia. It discusses relevant research articles and policy documents in regard to the evolution of the ECEC in Australia. It examines the early childhood worker’s roles and responsibilities, professionalism and

need for ongoing education and training (Irvine, Thorpe, McDonald, Lunn, & Sumsion, 2016; Logan et al., 2017; Moloney, 2019).

Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design

Chapter 4 discusses the use of interpretive phenomenological social science qualitative research and the selection and analysis of relevant research articles and governance and policy documents. Qualitative semi-structured, open-ended interviews are used to obtain participants' views regarding the implementation of mandatory accreditation and are described in the context of ethical research practice. The chapter also discusses the use of thematic analysis as a tool for analysing data and the manner in which themes are identified, coded, detailed and presented.

Chapter 4: The Lived Experiences of Early Childhood Workers

Section 1 of Chapter 4 details the participants' lived experiences of mandatory accreditation, including their opinions and perceptions regarding the introduction of mandatory accreditation and the effect of mandatory accreditation on their personal and professional lives. Section 2 of Chapter 4 explores the emotional responses of those early childhood workers who participated in this study, chronicling the participants' stories about their experience of mandatory accreditation and the emotional aftermath for the early childhood worker and sector.

Chapter 5: Mandatory Accreditation and its Envisaged Benefits

Chapter 5 provides critical insights and implications for the study, reflecting on the ramifications of mandatory accreditation for the unqualified early childhood worker and sector. It details the aims of the study, including lessons learnt and benefits gained.

Chapter 6: Where to from Here?

Recommendations: Based on participants' input, the study recommendations seek to improve the reform agenda implemented by the Commonwealth Government, with

specific reference to early childhood worker training, accreditation and professional recognition.

Conclusion: A summary of the chapter, the conclusion section of the recommendation and conclusion chapter provides detailed information regarding the participants' viewpoints, reflections and responses to the implementation of mandatory accreditation.

1.16 Conclusion

Despite efforts by the Commonwealth Government to overhaul the ECEC sector, a significant gap remains between international best practice and Australia's current policy direction in ECEC provision. Underscoring the value of ECEC education to the future growth and development of young people, researchers have linked high-quality ECEC service provision to a formally qualified ECEC workforce. This is particularly relevant considering the acknowledged loss to the sector of unqualified early childhood workers as a direct result of the introduction of mandatory accreditation and the emotional and financial strain placed on the early childhood worker and sector as a consequence.

Peak industry bodies, including Early Childhood Australia (2014), suggest that the EYWS has failed to address some core issues affecting the ECEC workforce. Offering the unique perspective of early childhood workers in the field, my research explores whether the perceived benefits envisaged by the Commonwealth Government in respect of the introduction of mandatory accreditation for early childhood workers have materialised. A consensus among the participants in this study and a topic of reflection throughout my research was poor pay and working conditions. These factors have created inequities within the ECEC sector, particularly for four-year-trained ETCs who historically receive pay well below the national standard for qualified four-year-trained teachers in other disciplines. Consequently, it has become increasingly difficult to attract university qualified ECTs to the sector, resulting in a sector affected by staff shortages and an undersupply of ECT qualified workers.

CHAPTER 2: The Changing Face of Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia

Introduction

There has been an ongoing debate in the ECEC sector in Australia in respect to professional accreditation of early childhood workers when compared with industry experience—particularly because most ECEC services have traditionally relied on workers with no formal qualifications in early childhood education to comprise the bulk of their staff. Focussing on the ECEC sector workforce, this literature review examines empirical and theoretical research investigating how early childhood educator learning, professionalism and participation in ongoing professional learning can improve learning outcomes for children and the quality of pedagogy for the ECEC sector. Including literature on the introduction of mandatory accreditation for early childhood workers, the historic and political nature of the ECEC sector in Australia and the political and social forces influencing the Commonwealth Government's decision to formalise ECEC, the review examines the development of regulations and policies to govern the sector and its workforce across state and territory jurisdictions.

A comprehensive review of relevant literature on the ECEC sector was undertaken to determine which data were relevant to the study and identify any inconsistencies or contradictions in research studies already undertaken in the field. Literature was selected from Commonwealth, state and territory community service departments, state-based and independent education authorities, industry journals and national and international research articles. Additionally, documents were sourced pertinent to professionalism and the development of high-quality early childhood education programmes (Irvine et al., 2016; Logan et al., 2020). I focussed on literature pertaining to the nature and structure of ECEC service provision in Australia (ACECQA, 2013; Choy & Haukka, 2010; Thorpe et al., 2011). The selection criteria for inclusion in the literature review were based on each document's relevance and significance to Commonwealth Government initiatives to implement a reform agenda within the ECEC sector and the legislative changes occurring as a consequence (COAG, 2009a; Sims, 2010; Sylva et al., 2010; Tayler, 2011; Tayler et al., 2013). The documents were selected 'based on their ability to answer the research aims as stated' (Jorgensen & Phillips,

2002, p. 173) —that is, to explore the effect of mandatory accreditation on the early childhood worker.

Paramount to my inquiry are academic articles, national and international research studies, and relevant state and Commonwealth government department documents regarding the introduction of the EYWS and mandatory accreditation for early childhood workers. I also explore literature regarding the implications of mandatory accreditation for the experienced unqualified early childhood worker employed long term in the ECEC sector, and the new unqualified early childhood worker entering the sector for the first time. Moreover, I discuss professionalism and participation in ongoing professional learning (Logan et al., 2020; Russell, 2009a; Sims, 2010; Tayler, 2011; Tayler et al., 2013) and investigated the ramifications for the early childhood worker of undertaking industry specific ECEC courses.

The literature review assisted me to identify variables relevant to the topic and identify the relationships between theory, concepts and practice (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). Offering an insight into identified areas of need or concern in respect to the current reforms within the ECEC sector, the literature review examined academic papers and research articles from various Commonwealth and state government departments (Tayler et al., 2016). I focussed on the claims by the Commonwealth Government regarding the perceived benefits for the ECEC sector of only employing a 'professionally trained and accredited ECEC workforce' (Tayler, 2011, pp. 211–225). Literature examined included, observations and argument from researchers and industry experts regarding the anticipated benefits mooted by the Commonwealth Government, for the early childhood worker undertaking approved training in the field of early childhood education and care such as, improved remuneration, credibility and recognition as ECEC professionals (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

2.1 Methodology

Drawing upon local and international literature and research pertaining to the ECEC sector, worker accreditation and professionalism, I undertook a comprehensive review of empirical and theoretical research articles; public policy documents; conference

papers; and Commonwealth and state government research papers, reports and submissions (Choy & Haukka, 2010; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010; Thorpe et al., 2011). Articles were sourced from electronic database searches using JCU Library, Safari and Google search engines (ACECQA, 2013; Choy & Haukka, 2010; COAG, 2012; Moloney, 2019; Thorpe et al., 2011).

The literature review included empirical, conceptual, policy and commentary literature investigating the early childhood sector in Australia. To identify relevant empirical studies the following criteria were used (James Cook University, 2020).

- Published and unpublished Doctoral or MA Studies relevant to the topic under research and available electronically;
- Studies conducted between 1972 – 2020 in relation to the changing nature of early childhood care and education in Australian and overseas;
- Empirical research studies published in peer-reviewed journals;
- Studies relating to ECTs training and accreditation;
- Studies conducted in an early childhood education context in respect of the care and education of children ranging in age from birth - 5 years and 6 - 12 years;
- Studies relating to early childhood worker training and professional development.

To investigate policy changes implemented by the Commonwealth Government in respect of the structure and management of the early childhood sector in Australia, national and international empirical studies were examined, using the criteria listed above. Using Google Scholar, Google, JSTOR, Sage and ProQuest databased, I sourced literature pertaining to the introduction of the NQF, NQS, EYLF and EYWS, in addition to research on early childhood development and education and worker training and accreditation in relation to the early childhood education and care sector in Australia.

I paired search terms including:

‘”Early childhood education and Care’ ‘Australia’”

‘” Early childhood education and Care’ ‘Policy changes’”

‘” Early childhood education and Care’ ‘Commonwealth Government’”

‘” Early childhood education and Care’ ‘COAG’”

‘” Early childhood education and Care’ ‘ACECQA’”

As a mechanism for applying quality standard to empirical literature and determine what would be included or excluded from my thesis, books, journal articles and chapters were evaluated. To broaden the scope of my search I included search terms to investigate literature pertaining to teacher qualifications, training and the professional development of early childhood workforce. The paired search terms listed below utilized the databased previously listed:

‘”Early childhood education and Care’ ‘teacher training’”

‘” Early childhood education and Care’ ‘professional development’”

‘” Early childhood education and Care’ ‘professionalisation’”

‘” Early childhood education and Care’ ‘unqualified early childhood work’”

‘” Early childhood education and Care’ ‘Registered Training Organizations’”

Literature explored about early childhood education supported the aims and research questions outlined in this thesis, leading me to investigate further using citation searching. Additionally, reading through the reference lists of relevant literature assisted in identifying further literature relevant to this thesis. The key themes expressed in this thesis repeatedly addressed issues identified in the literature, including: early childhood worker qualification and training; pay and equity, professionalism; the work of ECTs in early childhood education; the role of government in the early childhood sector; and the structural changes taking place in the early childhood education and care sector in Australia. Initially sourced through keywords highlighted in empirical journal articles the main ideas in each piece of literature were then identified through critical review

Broad themes identified in the literature review include: the need for a system of early childhood education delivery that is coherent, integrating all aspects of early childhood

including health, wellbeing and learning (Fox et al., 2015; Marmot, 2011; Moore et al., 2014); the lack of equity for ECEC workers compared with other education disciplines; the lack of recognition and professional identity in the ECEC workforce; the qualities essential for an ECEC worker; deficiencies in RTOs; the loss of experienced unqualified workers from the sector; and the need for further reforms. Having robust research methods, analysis and findings (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010; Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015) the studies assisted me to identify data relevant to the topic and develop an understanding of the relationships between theory, concepts and practice (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017; Mitchell, Wylie, & Carr, 2008; Yarrow & Newman, 2012; Yin, 2014).

2.2 The Complexities of the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Australia

The ECEC sector throughout Australia has been a topic for discussion and debate by researchers and governments for several years (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). Described by Elliott (2006) as ‘a patchwork quilt, having a confusing mix of different types of service provision, regulatory bodies and policy context’ (p. 39), the fragmented nature of ECEC provision offers competing theoretical frameworks linking profound differences in scientific and epistemological perspectives (Brennan, 2016). This opinion is shared by lobby groups, academics and researchers concerned with the lack of consistency between states and territories in ECEC service provision (Brennan, 2016; O’Connell et al., 2016; Russell, 2009a).

The Australian system of ECEC provision is complex because of the range of service types, different roles of each tier of government and diverse policy frameworks in which ECEC is located (Logan, Press, & Sumsion, 2016; PWC, 2011). Based on several different policy areas—including educational outcomes for children, women’s workforce participation, support for families and support for children’s development (PWC, 2011, 2014)—the divided government responsibilities have contributed to the complexity and fragmentation of the ECEC sector in Australia (Logan et al., 2016; PWC, 2011, 2014). To address these inconsistencies the Commonwealth Government introduced a range of ECEC policy reforms (Brennan, 2016; Tayler, 2011) designed to unite education and care service provision in Australia through models of integrated early childhood service delivery (Tayler, 2011). While the current reforms offer

increased access to high-quality ECEC services and support for parental workforce participation, their success is dependent upon the availability of a sufficient number of ECTs and workers (Irvine & Farrell, 2013; PWC, 2011).

In an effort to rectify inconsistencies in early childhood education and care provision and administration, the Commonwealth Government implemented policy reforms to overhaul the ECEC sector in Australia, including, but not limited to, a National Reform Agenda designed to address historic policy problems within the ECEC sector, with a national approach to regulation, standards and pedagogy (ACECQA, 2013; Tayler et al., 2016). Policy recommendations highlighted issues that, unless addressed, were significant barriers to achieving national consistency in the provision of high-quality ECEC for children from birth to 5 years (OECD, 2019). These issues include inequities in child-to-staff ratios, inconsistent licensing standards between states and territories, and the need for consistent policy provision and improved training and working conditions for the ECEC workforce (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Logan et al., 2020; OECD, 2019; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

2.3 Historic Context

The ECEC sector in Australia has evolved in response to social and economic factors, including changing state, territory and commonwealth government political agendas; the increased participation by women in paid work, resulting in the need for additional ECEC places; and the involvement of 'big business' in the ECEC market (Bown & Sumsion, 2016; Cheeseman & Torr, 2009; O'Connell et al., 2016). Historically, the ECEC sector in Australia consisted of two 'mixed markets' – for profit and not-for-profit providers, the licensing for which was administered by the respective state and territory governments (Elliott, 2006; PWC, 2011, 2014). Consisting of preschool/kindergarten services and centre-based long day childcare centres and preschools, operated by for-profit and not-for-profit providers (Elliott, 2006; PWC, 2011, 2014), early childhood education and care is provided through a market service model (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; CA, 2011; Sumsion, 2006a). In areas where the market would otherwise fail to deliver ECEC opportunities, the Commonwealth Government has historically intervened by directly funding a range of services for rural, remote and Indigenous communities, specifically referencing children with specified disabilities and families needing assistance with parenting in the home (Adamson &

Brennan, 2014; CA, 2011). Consequently, ECEC services range in size from small single-entity centres to large corporations, with multiple establishments nationwide, providing ECEC and OSHC services to children ranging in age from birth to 12 years (COAG, 2009a; DEEWR, 2014).

A comprehensive mix of ECEC service types, including family day care (FDC), kindergartens and out-of-school hours care (OSHC) services, provide early childhood programmes focusing primarily on play-based learning (ACECQA, 2014a; COAG, 2009a; DEEWR, 2014; Tayler, 2012). Many of these services were developed in line with government policy objectives and narratives, which include curriculum and pedagogy development, early intervention initiatives, improved school outcomes for children and the needs of the working parent (ACECQA, 2013; Woodhead, 2006). Offering competitiveness and the 'potential to deliver choice, flexibility, investment and efficiency' (PWC, 2011, p. 16), the diverse mix of service types provides 'a vibrant mix of providers and responsiveness to parents' changing needs' (PWC, 2011, p. 16).

The licensing of the various types of ECEC services throughout Australia is the responsibility of the individual state and territory governments, who oversee the operation and licensing of ECEC services through their respective licensing bodies (ACECQA, 2012a, 2017; Adamson & Brennan, 2016; DEEWR, 2014; Russell, 2009a). Primarily responsible for safety and hygiene issues, the different management systems resulted in inconsistency between states and territories in regulations and operational standards for ECEC service delivery (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Brennan, 2016; DEEWR, 2014; Russell, 2009a). There was little consistency or continuity between early childhood learning programme delivery from one early childhood service to another, with no agreed or desirable learning outcomes identified (Brennan, 2016).

Researchers and industry experts, including Logan et al. (2012), have identified the need for national consistency in government policy and professional development opportunities for early childhood workers (ACECQA, 2013; Choy & Haukka, 2010; COAG, 2009a; Press, Sumsion & Wong, 2010; Sims, 2010; Sylva et al., 2010). Parent and community groups added their voices to community demands, calling for the integration of ECEC systems and services under a national body that offered standardised ECEC worker qualifications and staff-to-child ratios, with a service delivery platform with 'clear goals, priorities and outcomes, that would be well funded,

managed and regulated' (Russell, 2009a, p. 6). Tayler et al., (2013) argued that Australia needs a national ECEC system offering subsidised childcare with standardised operational guidelines to enable access to high-quality ECEC services to families, irrespective of socioeconomic circumstances (ACECQA, 2013; Elliott, 2006; Tayler, 2011; Thorpe et al., 2011). Feminist women's lobby groups—including the Women's Electoral Lobby and Community Child Care—added their support, calling for the development and implementation of a long-term action plan to overhaul ECEC service delivery throughout Australia (Logan et al., 2012; Sylva et al., 2010; Tayler, 2011; Tayler et al., 2013; Thorpe et al., 2011).

According to the Australian Early Development Census 2018 (AIHW, 2018), one in five children start school developmentally vulnerable (Early Childhood Australia [ECA], 2016; Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2017). The 'Closing the Gap Report' (2018) was commissioned by the Commonwealth Government to determine attendance rates of Indigenous children in early childhood education programmes, and reported in 2018 that 86.4 per cent of Indigenous four-year-old children were enrolled in early childhood education programmes, compared with 91.3 per cent of non-Indigenous children (Australian Government, 2017a; ECA, 2016; Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2017). Further, the developmental vulnerability of Indigenous children steadily decreased from 47 per cent in 2009 to 41 per cent in 2018 (Australian Government, 2017a; ECA, 2016; Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2017).

2.4 International Perspective

International research suggests the way the ECEC workforce perceives themselves is significantly influenced by the social, political and economic contexts of the respective country in which they are located (Dalli & Urban, 2013; Moloney, 2010; Moloney & Pope, 2013; Nutbrown, 2012; Osgood, 2012). The need for higher levels of education and training for the early childhood worker has prompted several countries, including Australia, New Zealand and the United States, to develop and implement innovative policy and workforce initiatives to develop theoretical and pedagogical knowledge and promote critically reflective thinking within their workforces (Dalli & Urban, 2013; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

While there has been valuable reform and investment in early childhood education in Australia, when compared to other western countries such as the United States, England and New Zealand, there is still more to be done if we hope to bring Australia in line with our international counterparts.With the introduction of the National Quality Framework (NQF) and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) Australia has, over the past decade, introduced significant reforms in respect of the structure of early childhood education and care (ECEC) service delivery. Involving all levels of Australian Government and encompassing all ECEC and OSHC service types, the reforms have led to significant sector changes which have drawn Australia closer to an evidence-informed baseline international standards and frameworks when compared to international standards in respect of early childhood education and care (Pascoe & Brennen, 2017).

In respect of teacher qualifications and training, as with most other OECD countries, all early childhood, primary and secondary school teachers in Australia are required to hold a Bachelor level degree from a University or selected TAFE. In this regard, Australia together with other OECD countries including the Philippines, Singapore and New Zealand have been working towards creating a qualification framework for their labour forces to improve the education and skill levels of their populations (Austin et al., 2012; OECD, 2012). Considering different accreditation and qualification frameworks as a means of integrating the various educational disciplines, the development of a qualification framework specific to early childhood education and care services, would enable national qualifications, skills and competencies to be easily translated and readable. Supporting this goal Tayler (2012) recommended that ‘an integrated model of training needs to be designed to generate early childhood professionals who are child learning focused’ (p. 10) and capable of ‘working within play-based environments and using evidence to identify and meet the learning interests and capacities of individual learners’ (p. 10).

Ingvarson, Anderson, Gronn, and Jackson (2006) undertook a review of the training and accreditation systems for early childhood workers used by England, Canada, New Zealand and the United States to investigate the purpose of accreditation, professional registration and setting registration standards. They compared initiatives for improving the standard of teacher education, and the findings suggested that multiple factors

influence integration of learning as a means of raising the status of a profession (Ingvarson et al., 2006). Factors included the past learning experiences and knowledge of the student teacher; the clarity and effectiveness of the course design; and the degree of shared understanding of the roles of key participants, including teachers and students (Deed, Cox, & Prain, 2011; Ingvarson et al., 2006).

Based on these and other findings, a growing body of local and international research has concluded that early childhood educators need to develop a different set of skills in respect of their approach to early childhood education (McArdle, 2010). An approach which encompasses a more comprehensive knowledge of early child development to those currently provided in many vocational training courses and universities (McArdle, 2010; Sims, 2010; Whitington, Shore, and Thompson, 2014). Tayler (2012) having identified gaps in early childhood bridging programmes for primary teachers and suggested changes to existing training programmes, argued that:

> as a consequence of their limited understanding of the unique culture of the long day care sector, primary trained teachers need to develop a different approach to early childhood teaching (p. 10)

2.5 Socio-Political Context

Policy makers around the world are investing unparalleled effort into expanding and raising the quality of ECEC services through initiatives including improved pay, superannuation and other benefits for workers (Brennan & Adamson, 2015). In response to international reports revealing Australia's relatively poor performance in ECEC provision, alongside increased international interest in early childhood as a public policy responsibility, an initiative arose from the Commonwealth Government to overhaul the structure of ECEC provision in Australia (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). Hindered by the overlap of state, territory and Commonwealth government jurisdictions in the licensing and management of ECEC services, through incremental changes to the Constitution, the Commonwealth Government implemented initiatives to amend state and federal government legislation in the areas of social services policy and funding (ACECQA, 2013). Influenced partly by widespread community concern regarding the provision of quality ECEC

programmes and the viability of corporate childcare services, the changes introduced were subject to continuing demands (Cheeseman & Torr, 2009).

A principle aim of the Commonwealth Government's ECEC reform agenda is to provide early childhood education choices for families, children and the general community, whether parents work or stay at home (ACECQA, 2014a; Brennan & Adamson, 2015; DEEWR, 2014). Consequently, Commonwealth, state and territory governments are working towards developing policies to 'enable parents to balance paid employment and caring responsibilities' (Brennan & Adamson, 2015, p. 8). However, industry experts nationally and internationally argue that intervention by the government is creating an increasing presence of the state in young children's lives (Giroux, 2015; White & Wastell, 2017). According to White and Wastell (2017), this presence, 'in a neo-liberal context, can be seen as responsible for more coercive and controlling social engineering on the part of government' (p. 38). Giroux (2015) supports this statement claiming, 'under a neo-liberal state, the purpose of education is to create employable graduates through a pedagogy of ignorance, whose hidden curriculum is the teaching of political and intellectual conformity' (p. 15).

Although possibly overstated, comments such as these encourage consideration of political influence over education. Social disadvantage appears to have been 'recast as a biological effect, which can be cured through the implantation of early childhood services and education programmes administer by ECEC professionals' (White and Wastell, 2017, p. 46). According to Goodfellow (2003), alongside the professional development of the ECEC sector workforce is the concern that:

> the emphasis on the production and application of expert knowledge, may obscure those hidden dimensions of ECEC professional practice, that are so critical in the ECEC educator's ability to make sound judgements in the use of personal and professional theoretical and practical knowledge. (p. 48)

2.6 Socio-Cultural Context

Considered different to childcare, early learning and education have traditionally fallen under the responsibility of women (ILO, 2010). Shaped by biological and functional interactions, children's development and learning experiences enable or undermine the child's ability to successfully learn (Cantor et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2013). These

interactions are subject to environmental factors, including the relationships and learning opportunities the child experiences and the physical, psychological, cognitive, social and emotional processes that influence them (Cantor et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2013). According to Osgood et al. (2016):

> children are competent, knowing beings and ECEC educators need to treat them as knower's and doer's in the world and focus their approach to pedagogy, policy and practice around diversity and difference. (pp. 182–202)

Together with social awareness and responsibility, children need to become productive citizens with positive mindsets about self and school (Osgood, 2012; Osgood & Robinson, 2019; Robinson & Jones-Díaz, 2016; Stafford-Brizard, 2016).

Many education experts argue that ECEC is critical for early child's learning and development (Adamson and Brennan, 2016), however, according to Kendall-Taylor and Lindland (2013), many families perceive childcare simply as a safe place where their child can be cared for and socialise while they go to work. According to Spohrer, Stahl, and Bowers-Brown (2017), the role of early childhood education 'is to shape children and young people earlier in life, by instilling the right dispositions and attitudes, thereby ensuring there will be no need for later corrections' (p. 12).

Young children rely on parents and other primary caregivers, inside and outside the home, to act on their behalf to protect their safety and healthy development (Kennedy, 2018). Social competence intertwined with other areas of development—including cognitive, physical, emotional and linguistic development—influence a child's ability to get along with and respect others (Cantor et al., 2018; Kennedy, 2018). Providing stimulating, challenging and supportive learning environments assists children to develop their skills, serving as a foundation for healthy self-regulatory practices (Gottfried, 2013; Jorgensen, Kite, Chen, & Short, 2017). The amount of early stimulation to which a child is exposed can affect their cognitive ability. Learning opportunities and the quality of the environment in which the child interacts affect the child's socioemotional and physical development (Arcos, Holzinger and Biddle, 2015; Cantor et al., 2018; Fernald, Kariger, Engle, & Raikes, 2009; Myers, 2013) and can aid with the development of the type of commitment required for academic success (Gottfried, 2013).

Through offering improved learning outcomes for disadvantaged and Indigenous children (Baxter & Hand, 2013; Goldfeld et al., 2017, Goldfeld et al., 2018; Urbis Social Policy, 2011), access to high-quality ECEC provision is a direct strategy for maximising developmental outcomes for children (Goldfeld et al., 2017; Goldfeld et al., 2018; Urbis Social Policy, 2011). Unjust inequities within our society are often caused by entrenched and intergenerational sociodemographic circumstances and children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families have historically been denied access to quality early childhood services (Cloney et al., 2017; Hatfield et al., 2015; Varghese et al., 2018). Participation in early childhood education programmes assists children in developing critical skills (Cloney, 2018), 'improves school readiness, expressive and receptive language and positive behaviour by children' (Urbis Social Policy, 2011, p. 30).

The NQS has become an integral part of ECEC provision in Australia (ACECQA, 2019). Introduced as a means of ensuring high-quality ECEC service provision, irrespective of religion or ethnicity, the Australian NQS encourages multiculturalism and cross-cultural practices, including culturally specific childrearing techniques encouraged to familiarise children with the similarities and differences between the various cultural groups within Australia (ACECQA, 2019; COAG, 2009a; DEEWR, 2009a, 2019). A principal factor underlying the NQS (ACECQA, 2019, Tayler, 2012), culturally specific routines and play-based learning have been adapted and incorporated into age-appropriate early childhood educational programmes (ACECQA, 2019; COAG, 2009a; Tayler, 2012).

2.7 Feminist Perspective

According to Brennan (1998), childcare in Australian has 'evolved over the past hundred years, from an area of interest to predominately charitable groups comprising upper-class women' (p. 1) to a widely contested, politically manipulated area of concern (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Brennan, 2014, 2016). As part of 'the move for social reform, a group of educationalists and social reformers, including Maybanke, Wolstenholme and Anderson, inaugurated the Kindergarten Union of New South Wales and established the first free Kindergarten in Australia, located at Wolloomooloo in Sydney in 1896' (Brannan, 1998, p. 16). This initiative changed workforce options for

women, freeing them to seek employment knowing their children would be well cared for in their absence.

Osgood (2010) described professional childcare as hyper-feminine—a belief that supports the gender and mothering aspect of ECEC service provision. Professional childcare is not a substitute for parental care, but provides a supplement to parental care, offering age-specific early childhood education opportunities to young children. Unfortunately, these types of gender beliefs reinforce the idea that childrearing or childcare is 'women's work' (OECD, 2007, p. 170).

Pushed by women's lobby groups and stimulated by a new generation of policy makers interested in developing standardised national policies and regulations governing the ECEC sector, the focus of early childhood education moved from rhetoric to practice (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). Originally viewed as a women's issue, childcare is now a central focus of the women's movement (Harris, 2005). Through initiatives such as the Commonwealth Government's Fee Relief scheme in the 1970s and its expansion in 1990 to include for-profit ECEC services, the ECEC sector has undergone significant reforms (Bown et al., 2009; Harris, 2005; Logan et al., 2012; Russell, 2009a) which have significantly impacted women and their ability to pursue careers and gain an income. According to Bown et al. (2009), Logan et al. (2012) and Russell (2009a) these reforms are politically motivated and influenced by lobby groups, public opinion, researchers and the media.

2.8 Women in the Workforce

Workforce participation by women has been supported by government policy decisions and incentives in recent years, including tax relief for childcare fees, cash subsidies for families and paid parental leave (Logan et al., 2017; PWC, 2014; Ray, Gornick, & Schmitt, 2010). These incentives have contributed to Australia's national economic development, while reducing the number of families on welfare subsidies (Bennett, 2008; PWC, 2014). The provision of quality ECEC services occurs alongside the current debate on gender equality and the need to provide more quality support for working mothers and their children (Logan, Sumsion, & Press, 2015; Moore & McDonald, 2013; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018; Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013).

Women have experienced increasing pressure to join the workforce because of ongoing economic demands and the changing patterns of women's engagement in paid work after motherhood (PC, 2014; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018; Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013). This exists alongside the need to contribute to the economic security of the family and provides women with a level of self-sufficiency through paid employment (Thorpe et al., 2011). Influencing maternal wellbeing in the workplace, the quality of care provided in ECEC services can be an emotional barrier to a mother's decision to engage in paid employment and is therefore a crucial factor in ensuring the economic future of many families (PWC, 2011, 2014). Vernon-Feagans et al. (2018) argue that working mothers have subsequently become heavily reliant on ECEC services to care for their young children while they pursue their careers—particularly those women seeking to maintain skill levels and professional practice (Ackerman, 2006; PWC, 2011; Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013). Consequently, according to the OECD (2006):

> there is the risk that early childhood service provision may be seen to support female workforce participation, with the perception that children may be seen as an obstacle to women's work, with childcare considered a necessary evil. (p. 22)

Dominated by an emphasis on care arrangements for pre-schoolers the debate over childcare reform also needs to look closely at the shortage of before- and after-school care programmes in many densely populated parts of the country (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018; Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013). Of concern for parents with school-aged children, increased workforce participation has resulted in mothers and fathers having to work longer hours (Moore & McDonald, 2013; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018; Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013). As a result, many families have become reliant on OSHC programmes to care for their children before school from as early as 6.00 am, and after school until as late as 6.00 pm (Logan et al., 2015; Moore & McDonald, 2013; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018; Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013).

To alleviate this discrepancy and improve women's workforce participation, the Commonwealth Government has moved to increase the availability and accessibility to OSHC services for school-aged children (Logan et al., 2015; Moore & McDonald, 2013; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018; Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013). The related initiatives include increased Commonwealth Government funding for OSHC services

and increased cooperation from state and territory governments to make school facilities more available and affordable to OSHC providers (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018; Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013). According to Logan et al. (2015), Australia can expect an increased dependency on women to sustain business and the public sector workforce in the future and thus a continuing demand for high-quality ECEC services (Moore & McDonald, 2013; PWC, 2014). Vernon-Feagans, Bratsch-Hines, Varghese, Cutrer, & Garwood (2018) believe, this presents a compelling argument for the continuing involvement and increased investment, by the Commonwealth Government, in the future growth and development of the ECEC sector in Australia (Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013). As argued by Harris (2005), until we accept the ECEC sector as essential to Australia's productivity and reassess the way we value women in the workforce, the ECEC sector will continue to suffer (PWC, 2011, 2014).

2.9 Regulating the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Australia

Research evidence suggests that imposing standards on the ECEC sector can produce a higher quality of service delivery than in an unregulated environment (Cassells et al., 2013; Vernon-Feagans, Bratsch-Hines, Varghese, Cutrer, & Garwood, 2018). Moreover, the higher the standards set, the higher the quality of service delivered (Cassells et al., 2013; PriceWaterhouseCoopers [PWC], 2011, 2014; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018). According to the Productivity Commission (PC) (2014) enquiry terms of reference, the Commonwealth Government is:

> committed to establishing a sustainable, flexible, affordable and more accessible early childhood learning market, while helping to underpin the national economy and support parent's choices to participate in work and learning. (p. 4)

Considered 'primarily a family responsibility, early childhood education's perceived purpose is to allow parents to get back to paid work' (PC, 2015, p. 13). Irvine et al. (2016) argue that Australia is caught between varying community attitudes and difficult fiscal circumstances, given the perception it is not seen as reasonable for governments to fully fund child participation in ECEC programmes. Educators and researchers perceive ECEC as a service sector in which children can develop and learn in safe and supportive surroundings (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Kendall-Taylor & Lindland,

2013). Conversely, many families view childcare as a place where their child is cared for while they pursue work or study (Kendall-Taylor & Lindland, 2013). These differing attitudes towards ECEC have resulted in government, parents and educators often being at cross-purposes, to the detriment of the ECEC sector and the children in their care. Australian commonwealth, state and territory governments have traditionally supported primary, secondary, vocational and tertiary education through public funding, with minimal financial support for ECEC provision, except through private funding (ACECQA, 2019; DEEWR, 2014; Ohi, 2016). As a result, prior to the introduction of fee subsidies, the responsibility for the education and care of children, prior to entering school, fell primarily to the private sector and family (ACECQA, 2019; Stooke, 2012).

According to O'Connell et al. (2016), although Australia has lagged behind other Western countries in recent years, through the introduction of the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education (NP UAECE) (2019), Australia has reached a significant turning point in developing national consistency in ECEC service delivery. Consequently, irrespective of socioeconomic circumstances, children now have the opportunity to access preschool education in the year before entering full-time school (ACECQA, 2014a; DEEWR, 2014). This initiative has resulted in a significant increase in participation levels in early learning programmes, with 91 per cent of children enrolled in preschool for more than 600 hours per year in 2015—an increase from only 12 per cent in 2008 (Australian Government, 2017c).

Australia's current Commonwealth Government has taken a fragmentary approach to workforce sustainability (Brennan, 2016; Irvine et al., 2016). Concerns identified by COAG (2012) regarding the 'effectiveness of Australia's current workforce initiatives and their ability to deliver on the stated policy intent to build a sustainable, high-quality ECEC workforce remain' (p. 3). According to the PC (2011), previous initiatives to increase the supply of workers have often resulted in 'high staff turnover in industry, with many people being trained, but only a small proportion of those workers remaining in the industries in which they have studied' (p. 287). Researchers, including O'Connell et al. (2016) agree that, until the low pay, inferior working conditions and lack of professional status within the ECEC sector are addressed, both ECTs and early childhood workers in general will continue leaving the sector (Boyd, 2012; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; OECD, 2019; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013).

2.10 Role of Government in Early Childhood Education and Care Provision in Australia

The Australian system of ECEC provision is complex (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). Governed by various tiers of commonwealth, state and territory governments (CA, 2011; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; PWC, 2011, 2014; Russell, 2009a), ECEC is located within a complicated set of policy frameworks, offering a diverse range of service types (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; PWC, 2011). The absence of a clear Commonwealth- or state-based framework regulating ECEC service provision and the lack of consistency in approaches to curricula and programming resulted in each state and territory being responsible for the development of their own curricula framework (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Brennan, 2014; Cheeseman & Torr, 2009; Russell, 2009a). Divided responsibilities for ECEC service delivery have contributed to its complexity and fragmentation (Logan et al., 2016; PWC, 2011; Russell, 2009a). According to Brennan and Adamson (2015):

> childcare policies should be inclusive, not exclusionary. Any future proposal needs to ensure that there is high-quality early learning and care available for ALL children in order to create opportunity, reduce inequality and boost the educational achievement of the rising generation—a win for society AND the economy. (p. 14)

Provided through a market service model, many ECEC services owned by for-profit operators have created an oversupply of ECEC services in many affluent and profitable areas (CA, 2011). Conversely, there is often an undersupply of ECEC services in areas of greatest need. Consequently, there is an ongoing need for commonwealth, state and territory government intervention in the form of increased subsidies for not-for-profit ECEC service operators when the private sector fails to deliver affordable and accessible childcare opportunities (CA, 2011). This mix of a market-based approach and government subsidies for childcare has resulted in a system with considerable contradictions and inconsistencies (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; CA, 2011; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

The overlap in government policy areas was particularly evident with respect to policies and practices for licensing and accreditation of early childhood services (Tayler, 2011). Long day care (LDC), family day care (FDC) and OSHC services were assessed against licensing standards by state and territory government regulatory authorities, in addition to being assessed against quality assurance standards by the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) on behalf of the Commonwealth Government (COAG, 2009a). This duplication of effort resulted in an increased and unnecessary administrative burden on ECEC service operators, often resulting in less-than-harmonious relations between the respective commonwealth, state and territory government departments and the ECEC service provider (Dobozy, 2013; O'Connell et al., 2016).

Funding provided by the Commonwealth Government for childcare offers rebates and subsidies to the family, rather than to service providers (DET, 2018; Harris, 2005). On a per-child basis, funding for childcare has reached an all-time high, with a further $440 million being allocated by the Commonwealth Government for preschool education for children ranging in age from 4 - 5 years in 2019 (ACECQA, 2019; DET, 2018; PC, 2013a). As a result of an overlap between commonwealth, state and territory government initiatives, a range of policy developments have been implemented by the Commonwealth Government and supported by the relevant state and territory governments to alleviate this problem (Logan et al., 2016; PC, 2013a). These initiatives have been explicitly defined through linking policy areas within government—including economic, family and education policies— with a primary focus upon children (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; PC, 2013a; PWC, 2011).

2.10.1 Role of Commonwealth Government in Early Childhood Education and Care Sector

Australian state and territory governments have different roles in supporting the provision of ECEC services. Both levels of government contribute funding to services, provide information and advice to parents and service providers, and assist with planning and maintaining operating standards (ACECQA, 2014a; DEEWR, 2014). The role of the state and territory governments in ECEC service provision is 'broadly consistent across jurisdictions and covers responsibility for the licensing of ECEC

services, in addition to providing funding to eligible families for access to selected preschools' (SCRGSP, 2009, pp. 3–4).

The Commonwealth Government's current responsibility within the ECEC sector lies with providing subsidies and benefits for families with children enrolled in 'approved' childcare facilities throughout Australia (ACECQA, 2019). A subsidy package consisting of a payment known as the Child Care Subsidy was implemented on 2 July 2018 (ACECQA, 2019), replacing the Child Care Benefit (CCB) and the Child Care Rebate (CCR). Under the new Child Care Subsidy system, ECEC services needed to consider different session types or models to better meet the needs of their families and to ensure their service remains financial and viable, particularly as the subsidies are paid directly to ECEC services and passed onto families in the form of reduced fees (ACECQA, 2019). They also fund organisations to provide information, support and training to approved service providers and operational and capital funding to selected ECEC providers (ACECQA, 2019).

2.10.2 Role of State and Territory Governments in Early Childhood Education and Care Sector

Commonwealth Government legislation enacted in 2017 established uniform standards of operation for ECEC services throughout Australia, outlining the role of the state and territory governments to include the provision of a legislative framework in which ECEC services not approved under the NQF are licensed or registered; the licensing, monitoring and quality assessment of services in accordance with the NQF; and the provision of training and development opportunities for ECEC providers (ACECQA, 2019; COAG, 2014). State and territory governments are also responsible for providing policy support and advice, providing training and development opportunities for management and staff of ECEC services, and ensuring that an appropriate mix of services is available to meet the needs of the community (ACECQA, 2019; COAG, 2014).

In addition to providing information and advice to parents about operating standards and the availability of services, state and territory licensing boards also provide dispute resolution and complaints management processes (ACECQA, 2019; COAG, 2014). Comprising a set of standards of operation and governance for ECEC service providers,

many of these licensing standards vary across jurisdictions, resulting in a lack of uniformity throughout the various states and territories (COAG, 2014; PWC, 2011; SCRGSP, 2016).

2.11 Australian Commonwealth Government Intervention

The principle drivers responsible for the philosophical change in the Commonwealth Government's attitude towards childcare and childcare funding were the rise of neoliberalism and the 'broad societal changes occurring at the time' (Parliament of Australia [PA], 2002, p. 1). These societal changes included:

> the expansion of the corporate sector into ECEC provision in Australia, better educational opportunities for women, more women entering the workforce and an increased demand for affordable, high-quality early childhood service provision. (PA, 2002, p. 1)

Prompted partly by recommendations from the OECD (2006) report 'Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care', the Commonwealth Government implemented policy reforms to overhaul ECEC provision and administration in Australia (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; Tayler et al., 2016). These policy and societal changes were driven partly by the second-wave feminist movement and increased demands from employers and the public for more government involvement and funding in areas of health, education and childcare (Fox et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2014; Sims, 2015a).

The policy recommendations highlighted issues that, unless addressed, were significant barriers to achieving national consistency in the provision of high-quality ECEC for children from birth to 5 years (OECD, 2015). Issues included the need for increased public investment in early childhood education, consistent policy provision and improved training and working conditions for the ECEC workforce (OECD, 2015). Reinforced by national and international research, the need for such initiatives emphasised the importance of the early childhood years to children's development and wellbeing (O'Connell et al., 2016) and 'the future economic prosperity of the country' (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2017, p. 8).

2.12 Rationale behind Commonwealth Government Intervention

As early as 1973, the Commonwealth Government considered the idea of 'professionalised' educators and education system in Australia (Gore & Morrison, 2001; Schleicher, 2011). The 'Karmel Report' (1973), presented by the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, advocated that teachers be afforded the responsibilities of a profession and be required to 'reach a level of preparation in accordance with standards set by workers themselves, with continuing professional development becoming the responsibility of the profession' (p. 123). Unfortunately, the ECEC sector was not included as part of the mandatory teacher professional development initiatives presented at the time, partly because of the communal perception of ECEC services as simply being 'babysitting' or 'child minding' services (Russell, 2009a, p. 6).

The structure of governance of the ECEC sector in Australia has contributed to the limited perception of ECEC service provision and been instrumental in delaying its evolution into a 'formalised' educational discipline. Consisting of two levels of government (state/territory and Commonwealth), in addition to various stakeholders, including local council, community groups and the private sector, the expansion of the ECEC sector has been inhibited (ACECQA, 2014a; PC, 2014). In an effort to expand the supply of ECEC services, the Commonwealth Government 'adopted policy tools to expand the supply of ECEC provision, embracing neo-liberal market principles to included private sector ECEC services' (Woodrow, Logan, and Mitchell (2018), p.p. 328-339).

The OECD (2007) report titled, 'Indicators of Investment in Early Childhood Education' highlighted the fragmented nature of ECEC service provision in Australia and the inconsistent system and regulations by which the ECEC sector was governed (Logan et al., 2016). Offering compelling evidence of the importance of early childhood education in supporting positive outcomes for children, the report highlighted Australia's poor performance compared with other OECD member countries (Logan et al., 2016; Moloney, 2019; OECD, 2007). Recommending the need for a professionally trained workforce, the OECD (2012a) report highlighted the need for standardised 'stackable' credentials for early childhood workers that are recognised nationally. It also highlighted the need for a comprehensive age-specific education curriculum and nationally administered management guidelines, which include accountability measures

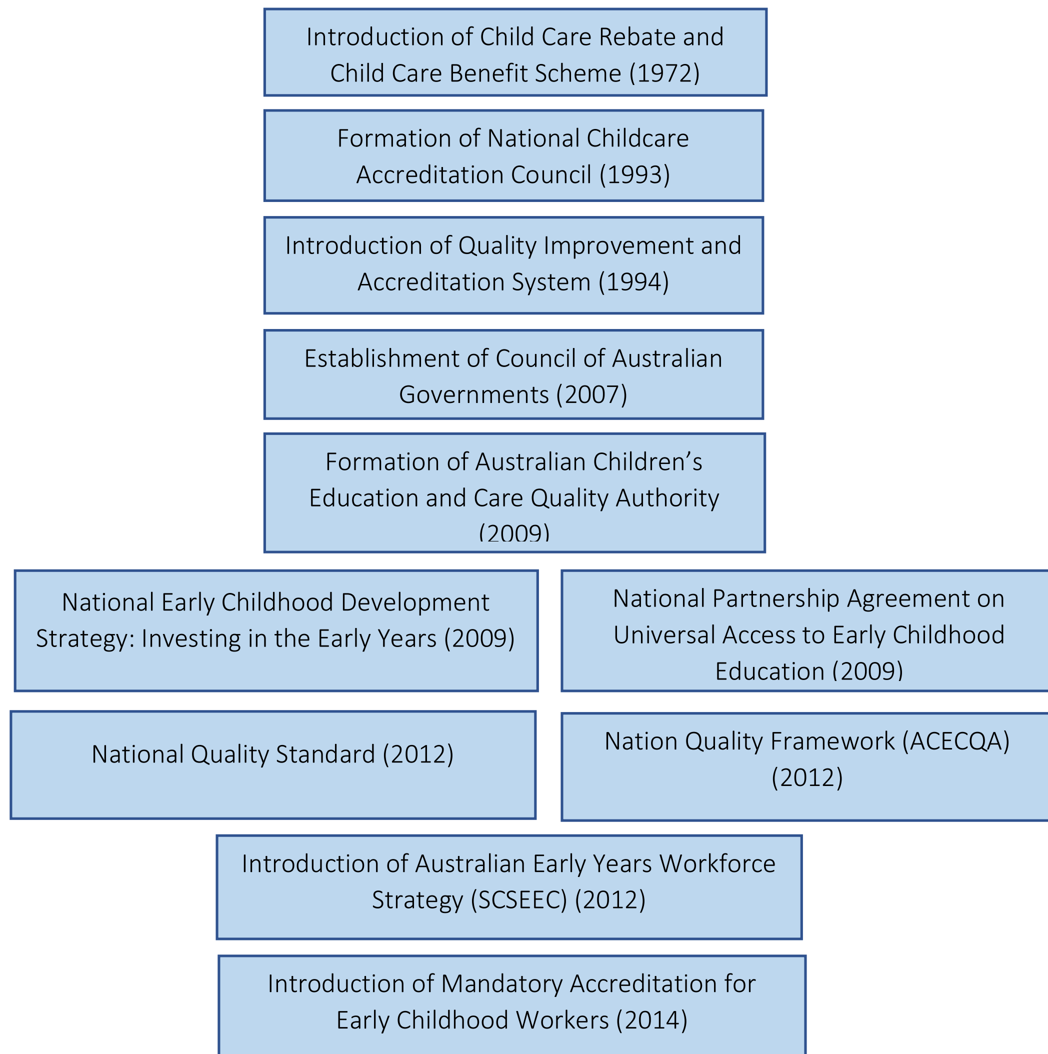
to ensure the ethical administration and management of the sector (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2014; OECD, 2007).

The philosophies underpinning the development and implementation of ECEC programmes in Australia are evident in several different ways, particularly as the Australian Constitution enshrines the rights of the states to govern education (PWC, 2011). Over recent years, there have been repeated attempts by consecutive Commonwealth Governments to take control of not only primary and secondary school education in Australia, but also the ECEC sector, through policy reform and legislation (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Brennan, 2016; PWC, 2011). Until the election of the Kevin Rudd Labor Government in 2007, and the change from a conservative to more progressive Commonwealth Labor Government, these recommendations had been discounted (Brennan & Mahon, 2011). The election of the Rudd Labor Government in 2007, led to the reform agenda currently underway and a renewed commitment to social investment in the ECEC sector by successive Commonwealth Governments (Brennan & Mahon, 2011; Harris, 2005; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2015).

Summarised below is a timeline of policy developments which have taken place in the early childhood sector in Australia over the past 50 years.

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1. Timeline - History of Changes within the Early Childhood Sector in Australia 1972-2014



2.12.1 Introduction of Child Care Rebate and Child Care Benefit Scheme (1972)

In 1972, the Commonwealth Government became financially involved in childcare in Australia with the introduction of the *Child Care Act 1972* (DEEWR, 2009a; Sumsion, 2012). Directed at not-for-profit organisations, funding was provided to local government bodies, community groups and not-for-profit organisations to operate

centre-based day care facilities for children of working parents (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Harris, 2005; Sumsion, 2012). Additional funding was available in the form of capital grants for building works and recurrent grants designed to help childcare services with providing care for children with special needs, or additional funding towards the cost of qualified staff (Brennan, 2014; Fox et al., 2015; Sumsion, 2012). In 1974, the Commonwealth Government extended the CCB scheme (DEEWR, 2009a) to include children attending for-profit centre-based day care facilities and preschools (Adamson & Brennan, 2014).

As a result of ongoing lobbying from the private sector and increased pressure for additional childcare places, Commonwealth funding was extended to include children attending OSHC, playgroups and FDC by the 1990s (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Brennan, 2007; Harris, 2005). According to Harris (2005):

> childcare subsidy is the primary mechanism for public funding of childcare and is central to the state's relationship with childcare—it is a point of articulation between childcare services and the state. (p. 18)

Referred to early in this chapter as a pivotal policy moment in ECEC reform, the introduction of fee subsidies for eligible families, considered a positive step by some, was contested by others (Brennan, 2014; DEEWR, 2014). Causing complications for ECEC service providers, Fee Relief was only available to centre-based long day ECEC services operating for eight hours per day, Monday to Friday, for a minimum of 48 weeks per year (Brennan, 2014; DEEWR, 2014). Moreover, having to master state and Commonwealth government licensing and accreditation regulations added to the stress (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Gammage, 2006; Sumsion, 2006b).

Responsible for the philosophical change in the Commonwealth Government's attitude towards childcare and childcare funding was the 'broad societal changes which were occurring at the time' (PA, 2002, p. 1). Aided by a growing feminist movement, demands for enhanced government involvement and funding in the areas of health, education and childcare saw the injection of additional funding into the ECEC sector. This marked the beginning of an era of participation by citizens in the social policy process (Brennan, 2014; Harris, 2005; O'Connell et al., 2016). According to Harris (2005), '[t]he provision of childcare subsidies by government, assumes that the role of

the state is to assist women with their responsibility to meet the cost of childcare' (p. 19).

The introduction and expansion of Commonwealth Government funding in the 1990s provided access to ECEC services to innumerable families who were previously prohibited from accessing such services because of cost (Fox et al., 2015; Harris, 2005; Marmot, 2011; Moore, 2008; Moore et al., 2014; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). Childcare suddenly became the 'flavour of the month', with families accessing ECEC services in increased numbers, stretching services to their capacity and resulting in the private for-profit ECEC sector growing exponentially (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Harris, 2005; Sumsion, 2006a). According to Harris (2005), 'mothers were now genderless childcare consumers who, with the tool of childcare subsidy, could choose the childcare arrangement that best met their "individual" need' (p. 72). Through initiatives such as the introduction of the Fee Relief scheme, the Commonwealth Government changed the direction and composition of ECEC provision, which resulted in a major increase in the number of Commonwealth-funded centre-based long day ECEC places available throughout Australia (Fox et al., 2015; Marmot, 2011; Moore, 2008; Moore et al., 2014). Leading to the need for a professionally trained and accredited early childhood education and care workforce capable of providing age specific educational curriculum in a caring and nurturing environment.

2.12.2 Introduction of Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (1994)

The introduction of the QIAS lead to the establishment of adequate standards of care for children attending ECEC services throughout Australia. Linked to the NCAC the QIAS was designed to improve the affordability of childcare by offering additional fee subsidies to families in the form of the CCR (ACECQA, 2014b; Brennan, 2008a, 2016; Harris, 2005; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017)—a payment made to eligible families to help with the cost of work-related childcare expenses (Brennan, 2007, 2016; Harris, 2005). Linking eligibility for CCB and CCR benefits with the NCAC QIAS (1994) made satisfactory participation in the NCAC QIAS a condition of approval for CCB and CCR funding (ACECQA, 2014b; COAG, 2009a; NCAC, 2009). Designed by the Commonwealth Government to improve the quality of ECEC provision in Australia and crucial to the development of the sector, the introduction of the NCAC QIAS aimed to ensure consistency in the quality of ECEC service delivery (NCAC, 2011; Tayler, 2011.

through aligning Australia with other OECD countries in ECEC service provision (COAG, 2009a; OECD, 2015).

2.12.3 Establishment of Council of Australian Governments (2007)

As evidenced by the formation of COAG in 2007, successive Commonwealth Governments had been involved in the development of a nationally provided range of ECEC services (COAG, 2007, 2012, 2014). To amalgamate ECEC services throughout Australia under one administrative body, the Commonwealth Government formed a partnership with the six states, two mainland territories and Australian Local Government Association to introduce models of integrated early childhood services (Tayler, 2011). Through signing agreements with the respective states and territories, the Commonwealth Government placed ECEC reform under the control and governance of COAG (Hunkin, 2016). Consequently, the policy problem of quality in ECEC was confirmed as an economic one (Hunkin, 2016), resulting in the linking of funding agreements to inter-governmental agreements on policy initiatives (Bown et al., 2009; Tayler et al., 2016). This created a jointly governed national approach to the regulation and quality assessment of ECEC services throughout Australia (DEEWR, 2013a), with the aim of developing a fully integrated education discipline with qualified early childhood educators and a quality improvement system, and the goal of developing 'high quality and integrated ECEC services' (COAG, 2009a, p. 1). Through this collaboration, the control, administration and management of the ECEC sector became shared between the Commonwealth Government and respective state and territory governments, under the control and administration of the ACECQA (2014a; DET 2018).

Designed to increase access to high-quality ECEC services and support parental workforce participation, the reform agenda implemented by the Commonwealth Government drew upon the dual discourse of starting strong and investing in the early years. The reform agenda aims to promote preschool aged children's development and learning and improve outcomes for target groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children living in low-income households and communities (ACECQA, 2017; COAG, 2009a; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Sylva et al., 2010). The formation of COAG and the resulting cooperation between the Commonwealth Government, states and territories resulted in structural and policy changes, designed to enhance the level of cooperation between the various portfolios concerned with ECEC

in Australia (COAG, 2009b). Initiatives include ensuring the availability of affordable, high-quality ECEC services by supporting families' workforce participation; improving the availability of high-quality ECEC services; and assisting parents to make well-informed choices regarding ECEC by addressing information asymmetries and supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Cloney et al., 2017; Hatfield et al., 2015).

2.12.4 Formation of Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (2009)

The ACECQA (2017) is a national authority established under the *Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010* (*National Law*), consisting of a governing board of 13 members, nominated by the respective state, territory and Commonwealth governments (DEEWR, 2013a). Instituted to guide and support the NQF (DEEWR, 2013a), the ACECQA (2017), through the formulation of strategies, provided direction for the implementation of the NQF. Ensuring consistency across all states and territories, the ACECQA (2012a, 2017) is responsible for developing effective and efficient policies and procedures for administering the NQF, including determining approved qualifications for educators and authorised officers, assessing qualifications and new courses, setting and awarding rating standards, and fostering continuous quality improvement.

2.12.5 National Early Childhood Development Strategy: Investing in the Early Years (2009)

A key factor in the Commonwealth Government's reform agenda was the introduction, in 2009, of the National Early Childhood Development Strategy: Investing in the Early Years ('the strategy') (COAG, 2009a; Tayler et al., 2016). A collaborative effort between the Commonwealth, state and territory governments, 'the strategy' (COAG, 2009a) was established with a vision that, by 2020, all children in Australia would be afforded the best possible start in life to enable them to create a better future for themselves and the nation (AIHW, 2018; COAG, 2014; Pianta et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2010). To assist with the introduction and implementation of 'the strategy', the Commonwealth Government, in consultation with the various state and territory governments, instituted the ACECQA (2017; DEEWR, 2013a). Developed as part of the

Commonwealth Government's reform agenda, 'the strategy' effectively wrested control of the ECEC sector from the states, placing it firmly in the hands of the ACECQA in 2014 (DEEWR, 2013a; O'Connell et al., 2016). Through the development and implementation of a curriculum framework and quality improvement system, the ACECQA has implemented initiatives to reduce inequalities between disadvantaged and mainstream groups within the community and improve outcomes for all children and their families (AIHW, 2018; COAG, 2014; Pianta et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2010). Through integrating a complex range of early childhood education, health and family services, 'the strategy' offered targeted reforms to families including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children from disadvantage backgrounds (AIHW, 2018; COAG, 2014). Proposing six priority areas for change within the ECEC sector, 'the strategy' acknowledged the different starting points of the various states and territories and the resources available (DEEWR, 2011, 2014, 2016). Strategies were designed to strengthen child and family health services, provide support for vulnerable children, improve early childhood infrastructure and strengthen the workforce across the ECEC sector and family support services (DEEWR, 2013a).

The NQF (COAG, 2009a; Tayler et al., 2016) offered a comprehensive national age-specific curriculum framework catering to children ranging in age from birth to 12 years. Divided into two age-specific curricula frameworks, the NQF offers a streamlined approach to regulatory requirements for ECEC provision through the development of a set of administrative guidelines and a standardised age-specific curriculum (ACECQA, 2012a; DEEWR, 2013a). Catering for children from birth to 5 years and 6 to 12 years, each curriculum framework offers high-quality learning experiences responsive to the needs, interests and choices of the individual child. Titled 'Belonging, Being and Becoming', the EYLF provides a learning framework offering 5 high-quality learning outcomes for children from birth to 5 years (ACECQA, 2019; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013). Specifically designed for school-aged children ranging in age from 6 to 12 years, the national curriculum framework titled 'My Time, Our Place' is implemented for children attending OSHC services. The OSHC curriculum framework provides opportunities for school-aged children to participate in leisure and play-based activities before and after school in a safe and caring environment (ACECQA, 2017; CA, 2009a; COAG, 2009a)

2.12.6 Introduction of National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education (2009)

Linked to the COAG Communique (2009), the NP UAECE was introduced in 2009 (DEEWR, 2009a). Including a range of long-term national reform initiatives in the areas of education and care, health, protection, family support and housing, the NP UAECE covered ECEC service delivery in 2019 (replacing the NP UAECE 2018 and the NP ECE 2016 to 2017) (Australian Government, 2017c, 2018). The NP UAECE supports access to preschool programmes in the 12 months prior to full-time schooling (Australian Government, 2017b, 2017c, 2018).

Introduced in conjunction with the NP UAECE, the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (2009) (Australian Government, 2017a) included a target to ensure all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children 4 years, in remote communities, would have access to early childhood education within 5 years (Australian Government, 2017c, 2018). The National Partnership Agreement and National Quality Agenda for ECEC incorporate the NQF and NQS to ensured high-quality and consistent ECEC across Australia (Australian Government, 2017b, 2017c, 2018). Initiatives included a streamlined regulatory approach, an assessment and rating system, and an EYLF and Framework for School Age Care (Australian Government, 2017b, 2017b, 2018; COAG, 2009a; DEEWR, 2014).

2.12.7 Introduction of National Quality Standard (NQS) (2012)

To achieve a level of national consistency in ECEC service provision, through the Community Services Ministers' Conference mechanism, state and territory governments developed and endorsed National Quality Standards (NQS) (2012) for LDC, OSHC and FDC services (COAG, 2009a). The NQS was incorporated in these initiatives and came into effect from 1 January 2012 (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2014). Updated in 2018 (ACECQA, 2017), the NQS sets a national benchmark for the quality of education and care services throughout Australia and includes seven quality areas that are important to outcomes for children. Designed to assist children to develop self-esteem, resilience, healthy growth and a capacity to learn, the NQS promotes learning and education for the young, while focusing on achieving positive outcomes for children through fostering

safety, health and wellbeing within high-quality educational programmes (ACECQA, 2017).

The NQS has seven quality areas: educational programme and practice, children's health and safety, physical environment, staffing arrangements, relationships with children, collaborative partnerships with families and communities, and governance and leadership (ACECQA, 2017). A joint government initiative to 'improve the supply and integration of ECEC services, including childcare and early learning and development' (COAG, 2009a, p. 3) the NQS was established to 'ensure universal access to 15 hours of quality early childhood education in the year before school' (COAG, 2009a, p. 1). Given the need for appropriately qualified educators to meet the increased demand that the change in policy has generated, the NQS is closely connected to workforce sustainability (Brennan, 2016; Irvine et al., 2016; Logan et al., 2017).

The NQS focuses on the importance of qualifications and higher staff-to-child ratios as 'key influences on the quality of care' (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 5), while the EYLF provides a guide to assist educators to provide 'quality teaching and learning' (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 5). Having implications for workforce sustainability (Brennan, 2016; Irvine et al., 2016; Logan et al., 2020), the NQS is actively working towards making national qualifications, skills and competencies easily translated and readable, thereby promoting the mobility of the workforce between states and countries (Austin et al., 2012; Logan et al., 2020).

According to Clarke (2012), 'the education revolution within the ECEC sector actively sought to align revolution and quality with key policy priorities of privatization, accountability and competition' (p. 175). Designed by industry experts to guide the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009b), the NQS replaced the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) in 2012 (ACECQA, 2014a; Brennan, 2014; DEEWR, 2014). Implemented by each of the states and territories (COAG, 2009b, 2009c) the NQS focuses on the importance of:

> qualifications and higher staff to child ratios as key influences on the quality of care. While the EYLF provides a guide to assist educators to provide quality teaching and learning opportunities. (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 5)

The NQS provides advice, policy and curriculum support, training and development for service staff and management. It also provides a complaints management and dispute resolution processes for service operators, staff and parents (SCRGSP, 2016).

2.12.8 Introduction of National Quality Framework (NQF) (2012)

Considered an important factor in the provision of high-quality care in the ECEC setting, staff qualifications for early childhood workers employed to care for children ranging in age from 6 weeks to 5 years were included in the NQF as part of the EYWS (Advisory Panel on Quality Early Childhood Education and Care, 2009). The NQF applied to LDC, FDC, OSHC and preschool services throughout Australia, providing details on the various operational requirements for accredited ECEC services. The NQF also provides details regarding the laws and regulations by which ECEC services must operate (ACECQA, 2014a). A significant achievement, the NQF provides a long-overdue overhaul of Australia's ECEC sector, bringing Australia closer to the research-informed baseline standards and frameworks that characterise other ECEC systems internationally (O'Connell et al., 2016). Responsible for the design and implementation of a national curriculum framework to 'improve the supply and integration of early childhood services' (COAG, 2009a, p. 3), the NQF was developed to promote high-quality early learning opportunities to children ranging in age from six weeks to 12 years (ACECQA, 2019; Adamson & Brennan, 2016, Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). The NQF linked early childhood funding through the early childhood rebate system administered by Centrelink (ACECQA, 2014a; DEEWR, 2014; NCAC, 2011). Aimed to ensure high-quality early childhood service delivery becomes a standard, the NQF requires the registration of ECEC service providers and includes quality assurance assessment of early childhood programmes and services throughout Australia (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2014; NCAC, 2011). Key elements of the NQF and NQS include the need for better early childhood educator qualification, lower educator-to-child ratios and the streamlining of regulatory arrangements.

According to Miyahara and Meyers (2008), 'guidelines, standards and frameworks to monitor developmental readiness are critical for early childhood programming to succeed' (pp. 17–31).The benefits of investing in the provision of high-quality ECEC for disadvantaged children extend far beyond the individual child, with social and economic benefits for the entire community (Yazejian et al., 2015). When given the

opportunity to participate in high-quality early learning programmes, children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit from increased participation and retention in education (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013; Yazejian et al., 2015). Offering greater social inclusion and improved outcomes for children from Indigenous and disadvantaged backgrounds has the potential to elicit positive social behaviours in school and higher educational achievement (COAG, 2009a; Yazejian et al., 2015).

2.12.9 Introduction of Australian Early Years Workforce Strategy (2012)

The EYWS is a commitment by all Australian governments to an agreed vision and long-term framework for the 'professionalisation' of the ECEC workforce in Australia (Boyd, 2012; COAG, 2012; DET, 2014; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Sims, 2010; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013; Tayler et al., 2013; Thorpe et al., 2011). The EYWS was designed by industry experts to promote mobility within the ECEC workforce and ensure that national qualifications, skills and competencies are easily translated and readable in respect of courses completed and qualifications attained (Austin et al., 2012; Logan et al., 2020). The Early Years Workforce Strategy ('the strategy') focuses on immediate priorities for the ECEC workforce, complementing existing Commonwealth, state and territory government measures, while establishing a long-term strategy that focuses on supporting more integrated ways of working across the ECEC sector (COAG, 2012). Designed by industry experts to help build a highly skilled and capable workforce, 'the strategy' is essential in fostering high-quality services and achieving the best outcomes for children (ACECQA, 2014a; COAG, 2012; DEEWR, 2014; Logan et al., 2020).

The 'Childcare and Early Childhood Learning Overview Inquiry Report' (PC, 2015) recommended reforms to Australia's ECEC sector. Reflecting available literature on the benefits of participation in preschool for children's development, learning and transition to school (ACECQA, 2013; COAG, 2009a; PC, 2015; Sylva et al., 2010), the research showed that investing in the early years of a child's life can be the most cost-effective investment in their future (AIHW, 2018; PC, 2015; Silburn, Nutton, Arney, & Moss, 2011). The report recommended reforms to support the development of a simpler and more accessible ECEC system by improving flexibility, affordability and accessibility to high-quality ECEC service (AIHW, 2018; PC, 2015) and offering greater support and diverse early learning opportunities for children with a disability or from disadvantaged or vulnerable families (AIHW, 2018; Chen & de Groot Kim, 2014).

A paramount consideration for the government and ECEC sector is the education, safety, health and wellbeing of children attending ECEC services nationally (Stooke, 2012). The EYWS sought to ensure improved educational and developmental outcomes for children and the continuous improvement of ECEC service provision (ACECQA, 2019; Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Stooke, 2012). Future efforts to support and sustain educators and the ECEC workforce must be premised on attracting and retaining adequate numbers of appropriately qualified and capable educators (ACECQA, 2013; COAG, 2009a; Cumming et al., 2015; DEEWR, 2013b).

2.12.10 Introduction of Mandatory Accreditation for Early Childhood Workers (2014)

Included in the EYWS is legislation requiring the mandatory accreditation of early childhood workers employed to care for children ranging in age from birth to 5 years (COAG, 2009a; DEEWR, 2013a; Logan et al., 2020). The EYWS aims to improve the 'quality and supply of the ECEC workforce' (COAG, 2009a, p. 5). Through establishing links between professional practices and the regulatory environment, the EYWS will support the early childhood worker, providing clear guidelines for reporting, curriculum development and staff accreditation.

The 'Consultation Report' of the Queensland Government Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Action Plan, 2016–2019 (Qld) (DET, 2016) identified priorities for future workforce development, including the need to upskill the ECEC workforce to meet qualification requirements and to improve educator-to-child ratios, especially in rural and remote locations (DET, 2016). The economic and community benefits for young children of having experienced high-quality early learning and development experiences cannot be understated (Harrison, Goldfeld, Metcalfe, & Moore, 2012; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). These benefits include increased economic wellbeing for all communities, improved graduation rates and the development of a high-quality professional workforce (Harrison et al., 2012; Lally & Mangione, 2017; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

2.12.11 Formation of National Childcare Accreditation Council (1993)

In 1993, the Commonwealth Government established the NCAC (2009, 2011) to administer a national accreditation system for ECEC services. The Commonwealth

Government provided funding to the NCAC to administer, monitor and regulate quality assurance systems for approved ECEC services throughout Australia (ACECQA, 2012a). Designed to measure 'quality' in early childhood service delivery, the NCAC (2011) system linked service quality with fee subsidies for families (Sumsion, 2006a). Through the introduction of the national accreditation system, families of children attending 'accredited' centre-based long day childcare services gained access to the Fee Relief subsidy in the form of the CCB subsidies (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Brennan, 2007; Harris, 2005; Sumsion, 2012). This system allowed the Commonwealth Government to assume responsibility for the continual improvement of ECEC service provision throughout Australia through the formation of COAG and establishment of ACECQA (ACECQA, 2019).

2.13 Corporatisation of the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector

The expansion of the Child Care Assistance Funding Scheme (Fee Relief) in 1990, to include commercial for-profit childcare centres (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Harris, 2005; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2015) resulted in a fee subsidy being available to eligible families with children attending not-for-profit and for-profit ECEC services throughout Australia (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2014; Harris, 2005; PWC, 2011). This initiative offered accessibility and affordability to numerous families, with an increased number of subsidised LDC places funded under the Fee Relief scheme, leading to an unprecedented increase in privately owned and operated ECEC services throughout Australia (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Gammage, 2006; Harris, 2005; Sumsion, 2006b). The expansion of the Fee Relief scheme heralded a new era in early childhood service provision in Australia—the era of corporatisation and big business (Sumsion, 2012). Providing a steady platform for cash flow and earnings, the ECEC sector became the target of big business (Sumsion, 2012). The emergence of ABC Developmental Learning Centres (ABC Childcare)—Australia's largest public childcare company—brought with it increased access to ECEC services for families throughout Australia (Rush & Downie, 2006; Sumsion, 2012; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2015). Listed on the Sydney Stock Exchange in 2001, ABC Childcare became the largest single childcare provider in Australia (Brennan, 2007, 2008; Rush & Downie, 2006; Sumsion, 2012). ABC Childcare's vision to corporatize childcare in Australia, underpinned by the large government subsidies offered to families through the Fee Relief scheme, offered

opportunity for expansion (Sumsion, 2012; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2015). This factor, according to Harris (2005), resulted in childcare becoming a 'commodity, a private enterprise, where Commonwealth childcare subsidies are used to fuel the record profits of childcare companies' (p. 1).

The creation of economies of scale caused by ABC Childcare's acquisition of large numbers of childcare centres fuelled the drive towards corporatisation and encouraged other corporate players to enter the sector (Brennan, 2008b; Harris, 2005; Sumsion, 2012; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2015). The combined lobbying power of ABC Childcare, Peppercorn Childcare and the Hutchinson Group, together with other industry associations and lobby groups, offered the ECEC sector a corporate voice that could not be ignored (Brennan, 2007, 2008; Sumsion, 2012). Although ultimately detrimental to the ECEC sector—due to the failure of ABC Childcare as a consequence of poor corporate governance, overexpansion and overestimation of the profitability of childcare in Australia—according to Brennan (2007) and Sumsion (2012) corporatisation offered credibility to the ECEC sector that had previously been lacking. Highlighting the need for a more formalised educational platform, ABC Childcare offered unity of purpose, affording the ECEC sector the ability to exert enormous influence over government in regard to policy decisions (Logan et al., 2017; Rush & Downie, 2006; Sumsion, 2012; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2015).

2.14 Types of Early Childhood Education and Care Services

The ECEC sector in Australia delivers a diverse range of services for children from birth to 12 years. While the models of service delivery and terminology used to describe ECEC services differ across the states and territories, the main ECEC service types are described below:

- **Long day care service:** A centre-based childcare service providing all-day or part-time care for children from birth to 5 years.
- **Family day care service:** Services where an individual carer provides care typically in their home, as part of a coordinated home-based care scheme licensed by the relevant state or territory government.
- **Outside school hours care service:** Provides before- and after-school care from Monday to Friday during the school year and vacation care during school

holidays and pupil-free days, for primary school-aged children ranging in age from 6 to 12 years.

- **Preschool/kindergarten services:** Provide early childhood education programmes for children ranging in age from 4 to 5 years. Some traditional Preschool/kindergarten programs offer a readiness-for-school component.
- **In-home care services:** Often provided in the child's own home, these services consist of professional care funded by the Commonwealth Government.
- **Occasional care service:** Occasional care services do not operate within the scope of the National Quality Agenda.
- **Non-mainstream services:** Provide access to ECEC where the market is unable or fails to deliver an adequate service. Types of non-mainstream services include flexible/innovative services, multifunctional Aboriginal children's services and mobile ECEC services.

The variety in ECEC service types and their operational structures has contributed to the fragmentation of the sector, resulting in a wide variety of interested lobby groups competing in the ECEC policy debate (Bown & Sumsion, 2016; Bown, Sumsion, & Press, 2009; Logan, Press, & Sumsion, 2012; Russell, 2009a). With the involvement of diverse groups—such as non-profit, for-profit and corporate childcare providers; employers; early childhood workers and unions—debate has continued over jurisdiction in ECEC provision and the funding of the ECEC sector in Australia (Fox et al., 2015; Marmot, 2011; Moore, 2008; Moore et al., 2014).

2.15 Early Childhood Worker Accreditation - Practice and Provision of Care

Early childhood worker accreditation and education is an important part of developing a professional system to control standards of entry to the early childhood profession (COAG, 2009a). Mandatory accreditation of early childhood workers has resulted in the streamlining of industry specific ECEC courses offering a standardised curriculum for the education and accreditation of early childhood workers throughout Australia (ACECQA, 2019). Courses range from a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care (an entry-level course mandatory for early childhood workers in Australia employed to care for children ranging in age from six weeks to 5 years) to the Diploma of Children's Services, Bachelor of Children's Services and Bachelor of Early Childhood Education degrees (ACECQA, 2019).

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009b), identified eight practices that early childhood educators should consider when implementing a teaching programme, including implementing a holistic approach to teaching, demonstrating responsiveness to children, implementing learning through play and intentional teaching, developing positive learning environments, ensuring cultural competence, and encouraging continuity of learning while undertaking assessment for learning (EYLF, 2009, pp. 14–17). Research from the school sector emphasises the importance of quality pedagogical practices, acknowledging that teacher effectiveness, student engagement and academic achievement are underpinned by teacher quality and are synonymous (ACECQA, 2013; Hayes et al., 2006). Qualified staff positively influence their peers, thereby improving the overall pedagogy and the service in which they are employed (Brennan, 2016; Moloney, 2019).

2.16 Contextualising the Qualified and Unqualified Early Childhood Worker's Role

As a result of the rapid development of the ECEC sector in Australia, the attraction and retention of early childhood workers has become of vital concern nationally (PC 2011). The early childhood worker has become an important factor in ensuring high-quality ECEC provision (Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006; Moloney, 20121, 2019). Consequently, there is increased emphasis on early childhood worker professionalism and recognition of the early childhood worker as imperative to enhancing children's overall development (Logan et al. 2020; Moloney, 2019).

Literature examining the early childhood worker's education and training has historically concentrated on the qualified ECTs role in the early childhood service and their education and training (Boyd, 2012; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Nolan & Rouse, 2013). Consequently, limited research has been undertaken on the role of the unqualified early childhood worker, early childhood workers holding a Certificate III or IV in Children's Services and diploma-level credential (Boyd, 2012; Dalli & Urban, 2013; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Nolan & Rouse, 2013). The variability of staff qualifications and competence within and between ECEC services, and the different skills and qualifications held by staff working in those services (PSCA, 2014; Tayler, 2012). A qualified early childhood worker is a person who has completed formal training in the field of early childhood education and is qualified to 'teach' children

(ACECQA, 2014b; Brennan, 2016; DEEWR, 2009a, 2014). The unqualified early childhood worker could be anyone aged 18 years or above who has not undertaken any formal studies (ACECQA, 2014b; Brennan, 2016; DEEWR, 2014; Russell, 2009a). Unqualified early childhood workers were historically employed to undertake supervision and care duties, including cleaning, laundry duties and generally assisting qualified ECTs working at the service. These unqualified workers were integral to the success of any ECEC service (Brennan, 2014; Russell, 2009a). Even with these clearly defined roles, there is ongoing confusion in Australia and elsewhere in the world regarding what constitutes a qualified early childhood educator, resulting in the misconception by parents and the general public regarding the 'qualified' status (PSCA, 2014; Tayler, 2012).

Adding to this confusion were statements made by the New Zealand Education Minister in response to questions asked in the New Zealand Parliament regarding early childhood education and the status of the unqualified teacher (Elliott, 2006, p. 37). According to the minister:

> the unqualified ECEC already employed long term in the sector has, by virtue of their age and life experiences, sufficient knowledge and experience to be conferred the status of a qualified teacher (New Zealand Government Hansard, 2004).

The minister stated that 'it is common sense to recognize the ability of older early childhood workers given the shortage of qualified early childhood teachers' (New Zealand Government Hansard, 2004). This meant that almost any early childhood worker could be considered a teacher, including degree-level ECTs, people holding a diploma or a TAFE certificate in ECEC, and people with no qualifications other than long-term employment in the sector (Elliott, 2004, 2006; Russell, 2009a). This misconception, has increased the view that experience alone is sufficient for awarding an ECT credential, thereby undervaluing early childhood educator professionalism and the status of university-trained ECTs (Elliott, 2006, Russell, 2009a).

Historically, there was no national agreement about the content or focus of courses designed to prepare early childhood workers (Rowley et al., 2011), with licensing and governance of childcare services the responsibility of the states (Brennan, 2014;

Russell, 2009a). The changing face of ECEC, both in Australia and around the world, has resulted in an increasing need to ensure that all staff members, regardless of education standard or personal values, beliefs and attitudes, are responsible for their own professional learning (DEEWR, 2014; PC, 2014). Elliott (2006) examined staffing qualifications, the variability of those qualifications and the pressure on unqualified staff to undertake formal training, and asked '[w]ho would be an early childhood worker?' (p. 40), emphasising the importance of well-qualified staff as central to quality provision of care and quality outcomes for children.

Research shows that when staff have inadequate or incorrect content knowledge, their ability to create rich, stimulating learning environments is compromised, particularly in the areas of early language and literacy (AIHW, 2015; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; PC, 2014). Opportunities to scaffold learning and extend children's thinking and problem-solving ability are often lost as many ECEC staff lack the relevant qualifications in early literacy, mathematics and science (AIHW, 2015; PC, 2014).

Common in highly feminised occupations, many early childhood workers have developed a propensity to subjugate their needs to accommodate the needs of the child and his or her family (Jovanovic, 2012; McDonald, Thorpe, & Irvine, 2018). Without dedicated workers, most ECEC services would have been unable to operate, particularly when considering the financial and regulatory implications for the service owners and operators (Jovanovic, 2012; Adamson & Brennan, 2016; McDonald, Thorpe, & Irvine, 2018).

2.17 Contextualising University-Qualified Early Childhood Teachers' (ECTs) Contribution

Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) have strong professional identities as educators (Russell, 2009a; Shpancer et al., 2008). Understanding the contribution of the early childhood worker and what that entails is embedded in discourses about the nature of the work and the caring role they play in the education and nurturing of children (Boyd, 2012; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Sims, 2010; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013; Thorpe et al., 2011). The national policy goal of the Commonwealth Government to recruit university-trained ECTs to work in LDC centres is hampered by reduced interest in teaching as a career, particularly in prior-to-school settings, such as LDC services

(Boyd, 2012; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Sims, 2010). According to Manning-Morton (2006), the skills required by infant and toddler caregivers are highly specific and include ‘a broad theoretical knowledge, deep understanding of individual children and a high level of self-awareness’ (p. 45). Additionally, Manning-Morton (2006) argued that ‘early childhood teacher preparation courses for teachers working with infant and toddlers, should take place in a process-oriented environment and cannot be adequately addressed through standard content-focused training’ (p.46).

The requirement to have a degree-qualified ECT working in LDC services may be at cross-purposes when considering current policy reforms, particularly as current policy reforms recommend that degree-qualified ECTs should work with children under 3 years of age through a leadership and mentoring role (Rouse et al., 2012). Research into ECEC training suggests that qualified ECTs in childcare centres predominately work with older children, while diploma- and Certificate III-qualified educators and unqualified staff work with younger children (Ohi, 2016; Sims, 2010; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013). This belief was supported by researchers including Irvine and Farrell (2013) and Nolan and Rouse (2013) who argued that qualified ECTs prefer to work with older children, as opposed to younger children. Reflecting the low professional status of ECTs working in childcare and the disparity regarding salary and industrial conditions when compared to the school sector, is the widespread perception that ECTs in childcare settings are not ‘real teachers’ when compared with teachers working in school settings (Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Sims, 2010; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013).

Emerging concerns regarding the development of literacy and numeracy skills in preschool-aged children and a desire to enhance later educational outcomes for children have focused additional attention on the role of ECEC in the overall development of the child (AIHW, 2015; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; PC, 2014). A systematic review of research of teacher qualifications and ECEC quality by Manning et al., (2019) has demonstrated that the higher the qualification of ECTs the better the quality of ECEC service delivery. High turnover of ECT staff can have a deleterious effect on relationships between teachers, children and families. Frequent turnover among early childhood workers and ECTs prevents children from developing a secure attachment with their carers (Cassidy et al., 2011; Korjenevitch & Dunifon, 2010; Lally & Mangione, 2017) and has a negative effect on children’s learning and social, emotional

and language development (O'Connell et al., 2016; Sroufe et al., 2010). The lack of recognition of the contribution of the ECT, particularly in LDC, reflects some enduring perceptions within the community with regard to the distinction between 'care' and 'education' (Bretherton, 2010; ILO, 2014; Sezgin & Erdogan, 2015; Tayler et al., 2013). Many new university graduates find working conditions in the ECEC sector difficult, with remuneration low and policy and practice much more complex than anticipated (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; Sumsion, 2014), resulting in disillusionment, dissatisfaction and ongoing staff turnover (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). To ensure we maintain a high level of ECT commitment to the ECEC sector, we need to ensure the working conditions and pay offered is equivalent to that available from the primary school sector. Unfortunately, the higher the early childhood educator's credential, the greater risk to staff retention (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017)

2.18 Mandatory Accreditation

The ECEC sector is one of the last educational forums to recognise the need for all early childhood workers to hold a minimum credential in the educational field (Elliott, 2006). Australia and other Western countries have realised the need for a formalised ECEC service delivery platform and are actively taking steps to rectify the problem (Brennan & Adamson, 2014). The mandatory accreditation of ECEC workers involves the compulsory completion of a course in early childhood education. Requiring ECEC workers to undertaking formal studies, is one commitment by the Commonwealth Government to quality improvements within the ECEC sector. Other initiatives include lower teacher–child ratios; professional development for early childhood workers; small group sizes and creating an environment supportive of ECTs and ECEC professionals in general (ACECQA, 2017). Only through sustained dialogue about educational goals and pedagogy (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016); focussed initial professional preparation; in-service training and on-going professional development courses can Australia succeed in developing a highly trained and skilled workforce (DET, 2014; Logan et al., 2020). According to Choy and Haukka (2010), there is a need to develop effective employment-based training models to 'meet future growth in employment at the paraprofessional level' (p. 142)—particularly when considering the ongoing shortage of qualified ECEC educators and emphasis on the need for high-quality ECEC provision (Choy & Haukka, 2010; O'Connell et al., 2016). Through

developing a paraprofessional workforce, in the form of Certificate III trained workers, we can bridge the gap in respect of staff shortages, freeing our qualified ECTs to concentrate on developing educational programmes to meet the needs of our young.

In early childhood services with high staff turnover, the quality of professional practice and professional culture can be undermined by recurrent changes in or the loss of pedagogical leadership (IofM & NRC, 2015; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). When considering the success of any teacher education programme, we must look at how well it is aligned to the realities of the world in which we function (Lehesvuori, 2013). Studies have found a positive relationship between developmentally appropriate practice and the level of teacher education and professional training experiences (Buchanan, Power, & Verity, 2014; Lehesvuori, 2013). A poorly trained ECEC workforce has become a worldwide concern—not only in Australia, but also in other Western countries, such as the United States, United Kingdom and New Zealand—resulting in staffing problems that have negatively affected the ECEC sector globally (Logan et al., 2020; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; Tayler, 2014).

2.18.1 Implications of Mandatory Accreditation

Historically, no national agreement existed for the content or focus of courses designed to prepare early childhood workers in Australia (Rowley et al., 2011; Russell, 2009a). A key consideration in ECEC training and course design was the extent to which workforce planning, development and practice were limited by sectoral boundaries dictated by the various state and territorial jurisdictions (O'Connell et al., 2016; PC, 2015). A report commissioned by the PC (2011) sought to consider the current and future needs of the ECEC workforce in Australia, including working conditions, remuneration and training and professional development opportunities. The introduction of mandatory accreditation resulted in the need for all unqualified ECEC staff, employed in the ECEC sector to care for children ranging in age from birth to 5 years, to undertake formal study in ECEC provision through a TAFE facility or equivalent RTO (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2014). Specifically targeting early childhood workers employed in or wishing to work at centre-based long day childcare services, preschools or kindergartens, the mandatory accreditation legislation stipulated that early childhood workers must have either completed or be enrolled in a minimum Certificate

III in Early Childhood Education course effective from 1 January 2014 (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2012, 2014).

Offered from a variety of sources, early childhood education courses for unqualified staff are placed into two main categories (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2014; PC, 2011). The Bachelor of Early Childhood Education degree is a four-year course, offered through various Australian universities and selected TAFEs (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2014; PC, 2011). Certificate- and diploma-level courses are offered through TAFEs and RTOs, with courses covering the advanced diploma, diploma and Certificates III and IV in Early Childhood Education and Care (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2014; PC, 2011). Mandating specific course subjects and units of competency, early childhood education courses may be undertaken as internal or external studies and online or face-to-face, and must comply with ACECQA guidelines (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2014; PC, 2011).

Commonwealth Government legislation stipulates that teachers in primary schools must hold a university degree qualification in primary school education, qualifying them to teach children ranging in age from 6 to 12 years. This ensures that they hold the necessary skills and knowledge to meet the regulatory requirements of the various states and territories (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2014; DET, 2019). Current ECEC reforms stipulate that a university-qualified ECT, employed to work in the ECEC sector, is required to hold a degree specific to teaching children ranging in age from either birth to 3 years or 3 to 8 years (ACECQA, 2014b; DET, 2019; O'Connell et al., 2016). Unfortunately, even though both teachers hold a university degree, opportunities within their profession are limited by the sector in which they are employed (Brennan, 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016).

There is broad agreement among scholars that higher quality ECEC provision produces positive outcomes for children (COAG, 2009a; Sylva et al., 2010). This opinion was borne out in quality-specific research undertaken by Sylva et al. (2010), which linked the quality of ECEC provision with the quality of staff. The report emphasised that the most effective staff were those holding graduate-level teaching credentials, and supported the assertion that participation in ECEC programmes can help children achieve a higher cognitive ability and level of sociability, which can better prepare them for school (Sylva et al., 2010).

Linked to mandatory accreditation and part of the Commonwealth Government's reform agenda are a set of operational guidelines specific to staff credentials. They stipulate that under regulation 126 of the Education and Care Services National Regulations, 50% of educators required to meet the relevant educator to child rations in centre-based ECEC services, catering to children of pre-school age and under, must have, or be actively working towards, an approved diploma level education and care qualification (or higher). A person is considered to hold a diploma-level qualification if they:

- Hold an approved diploma level qualification;
- Hold a former approved diploma level qualification completed prior to 1stJanuary, 2012; or
- Hold a qualification that ACECQA has assessed as equivalent to an approved diploma level educator qualification (ACECQA, 2020).

All other staff members must hold or be working towards a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care. All LDC services or preschools licensed for 25 children or more must employ an ECT and have a co-ordinator responsible for the day-to-day running of the service who holds a Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care, while FDC providers must hold or be working towards a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care (ACECQA, 2014b). Currently, early childhood workers who are employed to care for school-aged children between the ages of 6 and 12 years in an OSHC service or centre-based LDC service, do not require any credentials beyond those stipulated by the relevant state or territory government licensing board (ACECQA, 2019).

2.18.2 Perceived Benefits of Mandatory Accreditation

Research acknowledges that teacher effectiveness and academic achievement are underpinned by the combination of teacher quality and quality pedagogical practices (Boyd, 2012; DEEWR, 2014; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013; Tayler et al., 2013; Thorpe et al., 2011). However, a review of the ECEC sector by the PC (2014) stated that 'ECEC for children from birth to 3 should not include a significant educational component but focus primarily on quality care' (p. 227). Irvine et al. (2016) identified that better funded ECEC services—offering improved employment conditions for staff, with increased resources for quality teacher programmes—have lower staff

turnover and higher staff satisfaction. The introduction of mandatory accreditation offered perceived benefits for the early childhood worker and ECEC sector, in line with those enjoyed by other educational service types throughout Australia. These benefits had the potential to included:

> improved pay and working conditions; improve recruitment and retention of the ECEC workforce; development of pathways to reward and support the best workers; and a professional training system designed to raise the level of qualifications (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 1)

In a research report on education, skills, training and early childhood development, the COAG (2009c) supported a NQF for ECEC, restating the view that teacher registration and education is an important part of developing a professional system to control standards of entry into the ECEC profession (Brennan, 2016; Brennan & Adamson, 2014; Tayler et al., 2016). The NSW Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) report, 'Early Childhood Teachers and Qualified Staff' (SPRC Report 4/04) (2004) (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Warrilow et al., 2004), recommended the inclusion of ECTs working in the children's services sector as qualified teachers within the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) (Irvine et al., 2016). Moreover, the report further recommended that staff with two years of training in early childhood education through a TAFE or RTO be granted associate membership with the NESA or equivalent accrediting bodies (Irvine et al., 2016).

In support of this recommendation, Andrew Piccoli the former NSW Minister for Education, announced in an annual report that:

> in the future, ECTs will be accredited alongside their peers in NSW schools, further recognising them as professionals, who are making an important contribution to the education of our children. (DEEWR, 2013a)

Piccoli went on to say:

> ECTs will be subject to stricter standards to gain teaching accreditation and will be required to have qualifications from government approved universities and complete ongoing professional development to maintain their accreditation. (DEEWR, 2013a)

Recognition of teachers holding a university degree in early childhood education, as qualified professionals and their admission into the relevant teacher accreditation organisations such as the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) (ACECQA, 2017; DEEWR, 2014) was a positive step towards legitimising the ECEC sector and achieving the Commonwealth Government's goal to 'professionalise' the ECEC workforce (CA, 2009b; Fenech et al., 2010; Schleicher, 2011), Unfortunately, Piccoli did not implement his recommendation to extend associate membership to NESA to two-year-trained early childhood workers, thereby excluding diploma-trained ECEC workers from inclusion and recognition as ECEC qualified educators.

2.19 Recognition of Prior Learning

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) for early childhood workers was introduced in 2009, by the Commonwealth Government, as part of the NQS (DEEWR, 2009a), as a means by which unqualified early childhood staff already employed in the ECEC sector could be encouraged to enter formal studies. The RPL scheme provides a means by which unqualified early childhood workers employed in the ECEC sector for a period of 5 years or more may apply to a TAFE or RTO to have their skills and knowledge vetted through a process of external assessment (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2009a, 2014). The RPL system allows individuals to use existing knowledge to attain a Certificate III or IV or Diploma in Early Childhood Education and Care, with successful completion of RPL resulting in the participant being awarded a recognised credential in children's services, without having to undertake a full course of study (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2009a, 2014).

2.19.1 Shortfalls in the System

The work of caring for and educating young children is complex and requires industry-specific qualifications and ongoing professional development. Early childhood education has often concentrated on children's development and progress, rather than on the adult's role. Explicitly linked, adults influence children's development and learning throughout the child's life. Programmes designed and delivered by qualified educators are more effective in improving outcomes for children, particularly vulnerable or disadvantaged children (AIHW, 2018; COAG, 2012).

The tension between fast and flexible education and training programmes and the need to ensure depth and quality of learning have led to a Senate inquiry into the operation, regulation and funding of VET providers in Australia (CA, 2015; Tayler et al., 2015). Shortcomings in the training of students for employment in the ECEC sector is now a topic of media and public interest—particularly in view of the recall of VET substandard qualifications issued in Victoria (Taylor et al., 2015). Taylor et al. (2015) argued that a consequence of poor or insufficient training is that students are finishing their course without the skills necessary to work in the ECEC sector. Further, as noted by Cumming et al. (2015), it is important to ensure that older early childhood workers or those from ethnic or minority groups are given access to higher education and other professional development opportunities. Only by raising the competencies of early childhood workers in general and ECTs in particular can we hope to improve the overall quality of ECEC provision in Australia.

2.20 Professionalism

All professions, including the medical, legal, teaching and engineering fields, together with many trades, such as electrical, plumbing, building and carpentry trades have developed a set of standards of practice and code of ethics by which their industry or profession is governed (ILO, 2010; Mizell, 2010). A code of ethics contains criteria by which members are accredited or licensed to work in their field of expertise (Mizell, 2010). The primary purpose of professional accreditation is to ensure that graduates from specific tertiary or higher education programmes are professionally qualified and competent in their chosen field of endeavour (Ingvarson et al., 2006). Professional accreditation consists of a set of professional values and beliefs and a consensus about definitions of quality learning and development—what educators should know, believe and be able to do (Brennan & Adamson, 2015; Russell, 2009a). While experts view early childhood education as critical to a child's development and learning, many families view childcare simply as a child-minding service (Kendall-Taylor & Lindland, 2013).

Accreditation standards should include a minimum level of education and a standard of expertise within the profession that can be guaranteed, thereby ensuring the validity of training and ensuring the student is eligible for membership in any relevant professional organisation governing that industry (Brennan & Adamson, 2015; Russell, 2009a).

According to Black and Gruen (2005), graduates should possess ‘the necessary skills and judgement that allows them to draw on and apply their theoretical knowledge and evaluate and make decisions about problems and develop strategies for addressing them’ (p. 44).

This is no less true for the ECEC sector, where the introduction of the NQF and EYWS has raised the need for the professionalisation of the early childhood worker and sector (Logan et al., 2012). Traditionally, professionalism has been confined to objective, technical practices which is a limited view compromising children’s rights and interests and impacting the sectors ability to provide high quality ECEC services (Fenech, Sumsion & Shepherd, 2010). Re-examined and re-defined the term professionalism in the early childhood sector, we need to resist the concept of professionalism as simply defined in terms of technical practices and choose instead to exercise agency in ways that uphold our ‘ethics of care’ (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 73). Consequently, early childhood workers have adopted resistance-based professionalism which promotes the idea that early childhood educators are fundamental to the provision of high quality care and education, upholding the belief that ECEC is a specialist and complex field requiring a level of expertise far beyond mere babysitting.

Ongoing professional training provides individuals with a shared knowledge base, an improved work ethic, increased motivation and the incentive to succeed (ACECQA, 2013; Brennan & Adamson, 2015; Russell, 2009a). Pre-service and in-service training is an effective form of professional development because it offers the worker extrinsic motivations, such as additional time with family, secure income and opportunities to travel, as well as intrinsic motivations, such as a love of the job and a true interest in the welfare of children (OECD, 2014; Tayler et al., 2013; Watt et al., 2012).

2.21 Professionalisation of the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector

Reviewing literature with discourses on professionalism, the professional identity of the early childhood worker and mandatory accreditation helped me identify the benefits of early childhood educators’ participation in ongoing professional development (Jordan et al., 2018; Logan et al., 2020; Moloney, 2019; Tayler et al., 2013). The increased demand for accountability within the ECEC sector has resulted in early childhood workers being required to gain increasing expertise and credentials (Fenech et al., 2007; O’Connell et

al., 2016). Working within a complex legislative and regulatory framework, to meet these increasing regulatory requirements, early childhood workers must undertake ongoing professional development to maintain currency (Jordan et al., 2018; Logan et al., 2020). A report published by the ILO (2010) titled ‘A Skilled Workforce for Strong, Sustainable and Balanced Growth’ stated that:

> basic education gives each individual a basis for the development of their potential, laying the foundation for employability … [and] lifelong learning maintains individuals’ skills and competencies as work, technology and skill requirements change.

The adequate training and professional development of the workforce leads to the professionalisation of the sector (Irvine et al., 2016; Logan et al., 2020). Aligned with technical skills and specialist knowledge, qualifications must meet the high standards and regulations specific to that sector (Irvine et al., 2016; Sammons et al., 2015; Osgood, 2010).

Linking higher-level qualifications of staff to positive adult–child interactions is an integral component in the creation of quality environments for children (Irvine et al., 2016). Public respect and recognition are founded upon our confidence in qualifications and professional education and necessary conditions for building quality and establishing a profession. Enriched, stimulating environments and high-quality pedagogy are fostered by qualified staff, which leads to better learning outcomes for children (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Litjens & Taguma, 2010; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). According to Dyer (2014), ‘the qualities necessary to develop a professional are choice, flexibility, small steps, collegial support, accountability and resources’ (p. 1).

Vital to the delivery of safe, effective early childhood service delivery, early childhood worker accreditation creates a professional standard within the profession and ensures that community members have access to appropriately trained professionals (Allied Health Professions Australia [AHPA], 2013). Maintaining high standards through appropriate accreditation is essential to the credibility of any profession. Through identifying adequately trained individuals who are qualified within their field of endeavour, accreditation demonstrates a commitment to high-quality education and certification within that profession (AHPA, 2013; Uhlmann, Schuette, & Yashar, 2009).

A code of ethics assists early childhood workers by setting boundaries regarding acceptable behaviour, thereby ensuring that practice is grounded in evidence (CECDE, 2006; JCU, 2017). The Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics (ECA Code of Ethics – Early Childhood Australia, 2015) is based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1991) and is a commitment to action for all ECEC workers in Australia. It relates to how we interact ethically and professionally with children; our colleagues; families; our community and society.

2.22 Professional Development of the Early Childhood Workforce

Professional development is an essential component by which educators can maintain and improve their skills (Dyment et al., 2013; Elliott & McCrea, 2015; Hill et al., 2014; PC, 2014). Professional development for early childhood workers requires self-awareness and an ability to identify what they need to learn (Irvine et al., 2016; Osgood, 2010; Sammons et al., 2015). Professional learning is individually based, with a 'social' aspect allowing the participant to develop within a community (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Irvine et al., 2016; Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2010; Sammons et al., 2015). Professional learning provides opportunities to gain an understanding of the theory underlying the knowledge and skills being learned and should be 'part of a comprehensive change process, focused on improving student outcomes and learning (Hawley & Valli, 1999, pp. 137–143).

Literature supporting professional development emphasises the importance of developing subject matter or content knowledge with active learning opportunities, allowing the participant to implement their learning in practice (Irvine et al., 2016; Sammons et al., 2015; Timperley et al., 2007). Professional development traditionally consisted of workshops, seminars and in-service training, which comprised part of the professional development experience (Irvine et al., 2016; Osgood, 2010; Sammons et al., 2015) and should involve the evaluation of multiple sources of information on learning outcomes for students (Irvine et al., 2016; Osgood, 2010; Sammons et al., 2015). By gaining increased experience in one's teaching role and examining and critically reflecting on teaching ability, it is possible to gain increased experience and professional growth (Irvine et al., 2016; Osgood, 2010; Sammons et al., 2015).

Early childhood workers should be responsible for their own professional development through their participation in further technical and tertiary education course (Russell, 2009a). Professional development for ECTs and early childhood workers ‘will not change instructional practice, especially across an entire system’ (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007, p. 192)—particularly because the ECEC sector has professional development needs influenced by the nature and composition of the workforce, the variability of ECEC service locations and structure, and the accountability standards mandated by licensing and accreditation (O’Connell et al., 2016; Raban et al., 2007; Timperley et al., 2007). Ideally professional development should be supported by employers and the ECEC sector at large and incorporate in-service courses and industry specific training.

2.22.1 Lack of Professionalism

A strong sense of professional identity is seen as an important factor affecting the early childhood worker’s sense of professionalism (Lightfoot & frost, 2015; Logan et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that early childhood workers are not afforded adequate opportunities for constructing a meaningful and coherent professional knowledge and belief system (Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). A factor which has undermined the early childhood worker’s capacity to provide high-quality practice and service provision, and thus seen as having negatively affected the early childhood worker both personally and professional.

The fact that early childhood services operators, coordinators and ECTs lack the professional recognition and status equal to that of primary and secondary school teachers has affected their ability to generate positive change (Irvine et al., 2016). This issue has inhibited the recognition of the ECEC sector as a viable educational discipline and contributed to the current inequities. According to Naudeau, Kataoka, Valerio, Neuman, and Elder (2011), ‘high staff turnover and high child to staff ratios, can negatively impact a child’s development and wellbeing’ (p. 37). Early childhood workers (mainly women) spend most of their day guiding and teaching our children, receiving low pay and poor working conditions in return (Irvine et al., 2016; OECD, 2019; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013).

2.23 Curriculum Development

A curriculum is defined as ‘all the interactions, experiences, activities, routines, events, planned and unplanned, that occur in an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development’ (CA, 2009a, p. 9). ECT practice is informed by a range of theories—including developmental, postmodern, behaviourist and sociocultural theories—and is the foundation of curriculum development (Hand et al., 2014; Irvine et al., 2016).

2.23.1 Development Theorists

Developed from a range of developmental theorists, the EYLF draws upon ‘different theories about early childhood to inform approaches to children’s learning and development’ (DEEWR, 2009b, p. 11). Some theorists have sought to awaken society to the discrepancies in traditional education, advocating a progressive approach to education that views children as individuals, with their own strengths and drive to learn (Nutbrown & Clough, 2014; Pancare, 2017). Our understanding of early childhood and the way humans learn and develop is based on ‘recognizing both consistencies and variability in child development’ (DEEWR. 2010, p. 2).

Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852)

Prominent among development theorists, Friedrich Froebel (Froebel and Hallmann, 1891) is best known for his kindergarten system, and argued that ‘the purpose of education is to encourage and guide man’ (p. 2). Believing humans are inherently creative beings and that play helps facilitate creative expression, Froebel developed the kindergarten as an environment in which children can reach their full creative potential, under the protective and interactive guidance of an adult (Nutbrown & Clough, 2014). This educational system uses play-based materials and activities to engage children in meaningful and developmentally appropriate ways (Nutbrown & Clough, 2014; Pancare, 2017).

John Dewey (1859–1952)

The founder of the philosophical movement of pragmatism, John Dewey, like Froebel, believed that children’s daily experiences are critical to their learning and that curriculum should relate to children’s lives, suggesting that a child’s mind grows via social participation, which is the primary purpose of school (Bonnay, 2017; Pancare,

2017). Dewey believed that children do not need activities to learn because they have their own internal tendencies towards action (Bonnay, 2017; Pancare, 2017). Moreover, Dewey (1958) argued that education should not be solely about preparing for the future but should focus on the importance of living in the present.

Maria Montessori (1870–1952)

Maria Montessori believed in the importance of the senses in cultivating the independence of the child (Pancare, 2017). She believed children have a natural inclination to learn and that only by developing the intellect can the imagination and social relationships emerge. She emphasised freedom within a structured environment (Bonnay, 2017; Isaacs, 2015; Pancare, 2017) and argued that the educator should never help a child with a task that the child feels he or she can successfully complete (Montessori, 2014).

Erik Erikson (1902–1994)

Erik Erikson (1994) argued that the individual develops on three levels at the same time: biological, social and psychological. Erikson's psychosocial theory of development considers the effect of external factors, parents and society on personality development from childhood to adulthood (Pancare, 2017). Focusing on identity formation, Erikson's psychological theory of personality development includes trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry (competence) versus inferiority and identity versus confusion. Erikson believed that all people pass through these stages as they grow into adults, learn about the world and form their personalities (Pancare, 2017).

Summary

Influenced by development theorists, many Australian early childhood educators use play-based and child-centred pedagogy as part of the educational practice (Hand et al., 2014; Irvine et al., 2016).

2.24 Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Harcourt and Conroy (2005) described young children as 'sophisticated thinkers and communicators, capable of communicating ideas and issues they encounter through

interaction with early childhood educators and other children in their everyday' (p. 567). Pre-schoolers rely on acquiring much of what they learn from others and are astute in distinguishing adult speakers who are likely to provide them with reliable information from those who are not (Harrison et al., 2012; Jaswal, 2010; Koenig & Doebel, 2013). The dynamics of the classroom, which includes the environment of the classroom, all work towards supporting quality learning opportunities for young children (ACECQA, 2017; Hand et al., 2014; Irvine et al., 2016; Sammons et al., 2015).

ECEC is seen by educators and researchers as critical in laying the foundations for a child's future learning (PWC, 2014). Seen as a way of increasing the capacity of our next generation of learners, participation in ECEC programmes assists children to cope with the challenges they face and the development of skills for the management of their future lives (Brennan & Adamson, 2015; PWC, 2014).

Staff interaction styles and use of developmentally appropriate practices all influence programme quality when implementing educational programmes (Early et al., 2016; Hamre et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2017; Piasta et al., 2012). Assessed against age-appropriate activities, developmentally appropriate practice is the process by which the individual child's developmental levels are measured against activities implemented by the early childhood educator (Early et al., 2016; Hamre et al., 2012; Johnson, Burke, Brinkman, & Wade, 2017; Piasta, Justice, McGinty, & Kaderavek, 2012). Influenced by the quality of the early childhood educator and child's interactions child-centred practice has been recognised as a process whereby teachers create an environment designed to foster children's learning through play, while making developmental assessments and observations of the child's behaviours and interactions (Hand, Baxter, Sweid, Bluett-Boyd, & Price-Robertson, 2014).

2.25 Early Childhood Curriculum Development

Early childhood systems have developed and continue to develop in ways that focus strongly on an education discourse (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2017). Aligning early childhood educators' work with their colleagues in schools has assisted the ECEC sector in gaining recognition as a valuable profession and was a positive step towards legitimising early childhood educators as professionals (Sims & Pedey, 2015; Sims & Tausere-Tiko, 2016; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015a, 2015b). The alignment of 'early

childhood education with education discourse, is supported by a variety of economic evidence demonstrating intervention early in a child's life shows economic pay-offs in the longer term' (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2017, p. 8). In this discourse, early childhood education is 'considered valuable, because of its alignment with national economic prosperity' (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2017, p. 8).

The curricula drawn upon by early childhood educators to support programme development in the ECEC setting has a huge effect on the quality of service provision experienced by the children in those services (COAG, 2012; Tayler et al., 2016). It is important to highlight the significant social benefits for children experiencing neglect or from families with a history of family violence or drug and alcohol use. The AIHW (2018) argues that there are specific advantages to children attending high-quality ECEC services (Sylva et al., 2010)—particularly if combined with access to additional services, such as family support and therapeutic services (AIHW, 2018; Sylva et al., 2010). Research shows that children under the care of more highly educated workers perform significantly better in tests of language and cognitive development (Arcos Holzinger & Biddle, 2015; AIHW, 2015; Jorgensen et al. 2017; PC, 2014).

There is a widely acknowledged need for a coherent policy and ECEC service delivery framework that integrates effective health, learning, wellbeing and parenting support for children and their families (Fox et al., 2015; Marmot, 2011; Moore et al., 2014). The introduction of the EYLF and the NQF has clarified our understanding of ECEC policy and the need for a coherent curriculum framework. Depending largely on the extent to which staff are monitored, implementing set policies and procedural guidelines for an early childhood education curriculum may not necessarily reflect the full extent to which the realised curriculum is delivered. Staff qualifications and ability to adhere to guidelines and implement the procedures necessary to provide high-quality ECEC service provision all affect programme and curriculum delivery (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj, & Taggart with Smees, Toth, & Welcomme, 2014).

2.26 Child-centred Practice

The introduction of the curriculum frameworks of 'Belonging, Being and Becoming' and 'My Time, Our Place' heralded a new direction curriculum development in Australia (CA, 2009a). Consequently, educational pedagogy has moved from the

traditional academic model of education that is teacher-directed to a child-directed curriculum, where children are given the opportunity to learn through play and discover and explore their world (Hand et al., 2014; Irvine et al., 2016; Sammons et al., 2015).

Child-centred practice has been recognised as a process whereby teachers create an environment designed to foster children's learning through play, while making developmental assessments and observations of children's behaviours and interactions (Hand et al., 2014; Irvine et al., 2016; Sammons et al., 2015). Receiving quality ECEC has a positive effect on children, with a substantial benefit for their social and cognitive development (Cantor et al., 2018; Moloney, 2019; Watamura, Kryzer, & Robertson, 2009). Responsiveness and sensitivity of caregivers 'has become a central determinant when assessing quality in ECEC provision' (Watamura et al., 2009, p. 476).

2.27 Perspectives on Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care

The concept of quality in ECEC provision has been recognised as shaped by the national, economic and political contexts in which ECEC services operate and the social and cultural values held by the society in which they are located (Woodhead, 2006). According to Moss (2016), 'quality is a constructed concept often used as a proxy for good education. Ill-defined, quality can only be evaluated by first deciding what we think is good education' (p. 12). The concept of quality referred to in terms of 'structural quality' and 'process quality' (Howes et al., 2008; Ishimine et al., 2009; OECD, 2019) is, according to Moss (2016), a contested concept that 'often depends on political questions which will never be unanimously agreed' (p. 12) 'Structural quality' is defined in terms of facilities, resources, staff-to-child ratios and qualifications, while 'process quality' is defined in terms of the quality of the early childhood worker and the quality of interactions between the child, early childhood worker, parent and early childhood service (Howes et al., 2008; Ishimine et al., 2009; Lally & Mangione, 2017).

The available evidence suggests that the most important aspect of quality is the nature of interaction between the teacher and child (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). Traditionally defined by Western benchmarks, quality in ECEC service delivery sees young children as individual agents in their own development (Mathers, Singler, & Karemaker, 2012). The idea of the individual child being socialised for independence and individualism

has guided the understanding of quality in early childhood, particularly in programming (Mathers et al., 2012).

Key aspects of quality in ECEC provision include higher qualifications and standards of training for ECEC workers, improved staff-to-child ratios and a nurturing relationship between the child and a stable caregiver (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). Research into the importance of ECEC participation for young children has substantiated the importance of early childhood educators in advancing the learning and development of young people (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Cloney et al., 2016; Zimmerman et al., 2009). The effectiveness of the early childhood educator depends on a number of variables including caregiver, programme and process variables. Caregiver variables include the relationship between the ECEC provider, the child and the child's family (Early Childhood Education Directorate [ECED], 2016). Combined with programme variables—the way that care and education integrate into day-to-day pedagogic practice (ECED, 2016) they assist staff to implement developmentally-appropriate education activities that incorporate play (ECED, 2016). Process variables determining 'quality' in early childhood service delivery and include the seven quality areas as set out by the National Quality Standard including children's health and safety, the educational programme and practice, staffing arrangements and their relationship with children (NQS, 2016).

Structural quality in ECEC service delivery includes the associated regulations by which the Commonwealth sector administers, governs and organises the various components that comprise the ECEC sector (ECED, 2016). In NSW these include an age-specific curriculum, professional training for staff, child-to-staff ratios, health and safety requirements and the issues of financing for ECEC provision (ECED, 2016). Different quality assurance systems are in place for LDC, FDC and OSHC providers (ACECQA, 2014b; DEEWR, 2014; ECED, 2016). To be eligible for approval for CCB purposes, LDC, OSHC and FDC services must register for and satisfactorily participate in the QAS (ECED, 2016).

2.28 Quality Assurance

Offering a perspective regarding what constitutes quality and how quality can be assessed (Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010), the NQF highlighted the

complexity of defining and measuring quality in ECEC settings (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). The NQF aims included (ACECQA, 2017):

- To ensure better qualified staff and improve staff-to-child ratios that enable more quality time to focus on individual children;
- To provide national uniform standards in education, health and safety, physical environment and staffing;
- To introduce a new transparent assessment and ratings system that enables parents to compare services easily and make informed choices about which service best meets their child's needs (p. 26).

The NQS (ACECQA, 2017) established agreed indicators of quality, including: staff qualifications and training; the quality of interactions and relationships between children and ECEC professionals; group size and child-to-staff ratios; the physical environment; and the programmes or curricula that support children's learning and development (p. 26)

According to the Mitchell Report (O'Connell et al., 2016), almost 5 years after the introduction of the NQS, one-quarter of ECEC services throughout Australia were yet to complete assessment against the NQS. Further, almost one-third of those assessed were failing to meet the required standard, with over 60,000 children starting school with poor emotional wellbeing and social skills, resulting in their experiencing behavioural problems throughout their school life (O'Connell et al., 2016).

2.29 Increased Access to Early Childhood Education and Care Services

Access to at least 30 hours of quality early education from age 3 is optimal for children experiencing significant disadvantage (O'Connell et al., 2016). Researchers and educators, such as Varghese et al. (2018) and others, agree that all children have the potential to benefit from access to high-quality early childhood education services, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefitting even more (Cloney et al., 2017; Harrison et al., 2012; Hatfield et al., 2015; Heckman, 2011). Research shows that children from disadvantaged backgrounds can face significant barriers to accessing

high-quality early childhood programmes (Cloney et al., 2016; Cloney et al., 2017; Hatfield et al., 2015). A report by the Australian Institute of Family Studies stated that:

> children in the greatest need for early childhood education opportunities such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from, non-English speaking backgrounds, or socio-economically disadvantaged families, are most likely to miss out on care. (Baxter & Hand, 2013, p. 17).

Children experiencing abuse or neglect or families experiencing violence or drug or alcohol abuse are most at risk of poorer outcomes when denied access to high-quality early childhood education (AIHW, 2018; Baxter & Hand, 2013; COAG, 2014; Moloney, 2019; Niklas, Tayler, & Gilley, 2017; Sylva et al., 2010). As argued by Fulu, Warner, Miedema (2013) and others, when a child is exposed to family violence, alongside multiple risk factors (such as socioeconomic disadvantage, parental mental ill health and parental substance abuse), more extreme negative outcomes are likely (Campo, 2015; Casey, Beadnell, & Lindhorst, 2009; Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood, 2006). However, exposure to family violence alone does not mean that a child will necessarily experience negative outcomes. With the appropriate support, children exposed to family violence may develop greater resilience in later life (Alaggia & Donohue, 2018; Campo, 2015; Jaffe, Wolfe, & Campbell, 2012). Daily access to high-quality ECEC programmes for children from a young age—particularly when combined with access to family support and therapeutic services—offers increased benefits to the child (AIHW, 2015; Sylva et al., 2004; Sylva et al., 2010).

According to a report published by the ACECQA (2017) a total of 440 ECEC services had been rated more than once under the NQS, with less than half of these services progressing from 'working towards' the NSQ to 'meeting' the NQS, and the remainder moving from 'meeting' to 'exceeding' the NQS. High and consistent levels of emotional support across socioeconomic groups were found; however, generally, low and inequitable levels of instructional support were provided within the early childhood services reviewed (Cloney, 2018). Many services assessed found it difficult to provide appropriately creative and responsive learning environments that built on children's knowledge, interests, cultures and capabilities in accordance with the EYLF (ACECQA, 2017; Hand et al., 2014; Irvine et al., 2016; Sammons et al., 2015).

In the NQF Annual Performance Report published in 2020, there had been a marked improvement in the overall performance of all types ECEC services throughout Australia, with more than 16,100 ECEC services having been approved to operate under the NQF. Included in this number were 8,035 long day care services, 4,504 OSHC services, 3,058 preschools/kindergartens and 507 family day care services. Of those services originally assessed as Working Toward the NQF, when re-assessed almost 65% of those services achieved Meeting the NQF (ACECQA, 2020).

2.30 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and Early Childhood Workforce Participation

An Australian Education Union (AEU) (2014) report highlighted the need for annual in-service training for early childhood workers. The report emphasised the need for all ECTs and early childhood workers to become cross-culturally aware by undertaking professional development courses in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies (AEU, 2014; Waniganayake et al., 2008). The report stressed the need for early childhood workers to maintain and improve their skills, while ensuring they remain up to date with emerging research surrounding children's learning and development (Dyment et al., 2013; Elliott & McCrea, 2015; PC, 2014). A point highlighted and discussed in this thesis.

The benefits for children of having professionally qualified early childhood workers (Sammons et al., 2015) has relevance, in view of data issued by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016 Census on Population and Housing. These data indicated that only 1.4 per cent of the education workforce in Australia identify as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent (ABS, 2016) and highlight the need to encourage people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to seek employment in the ECEC sector (ACECQA, 2019; COAG, 2012). In areas with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island populations, finding suitably trained and qualified early childhood workers is difficult (Cloney et al., 2016; Gangari, Bomford, Maguire, & Associates, 2009). Cultural competence for early childhood workers in Indigenous services must be encouraged (Cloney et al., 2016; Hutchins, Frances, & Saggers, 2009). Training that prepares educators for this complex yet necessary response is an important recommendation for change.

Encouraging Indigenous secondary school graduates to enrol in traineeships or undertake industry-specific training courses will help compensate for the lack of cultural awareness in mainstream early childhood services, which remains a concern and a barrier to attracting and retaining Indigenous staff (Hutchins et al., 2009). According to Gair, Miles, Savage, and Zuchowski (2015):

> the need for additional practical support in the face of material disadvantage is required and an embracing attitude must be fostered, where students are recognised as both learners and holders of knowledge. (p. 23)

An initiative of the Commonwealth Government, the Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy (2009–2012) focused on the role of schools, colleges and RTOs in encouraging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to participate in industry-specific training courses.

2.30.1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Service Provision

The unique cultural background and significant differences in life experiences and outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have resulted in a commitment by the Commonwealth Government to improve access to integrated, inclusive ECEC services for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (ECED, 2016). Stressing the need for suitable programmes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with additional needs, the Early Childhood Education Workforce Capacity Project Team 2011 (ECED, 2016) emphasised the need to prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island ECEC programmes. Based on the need to close the gap between the different socioeconomic communities throughout Australia—particularly poorer, Indigenous and disadvantaged communities (ECED, 2016)—researchers and academics such as Cloney, Cleveland, Hattie (2016) and others have recommended the need for improved ECEC services and teacher education programmes (Cloney et al., 2017; Hatfield et al., 2015).

The AEU submission to COAG in 2014 emphasised the need for free and public ECEC services, improved teacher-to-child ratios and prioritisation of ECEC programmes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (DEEWR, 2009a; Hatfield et al., 2015). Included in the submission was a recommendation for improved teacher training and in-service professional development courses for early childhood workers, with an

emphasis on additional services for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and with additional needs (Cloney et al., 2016; Cloney et al., 2017; DEEWR, 2009a; Hatfield et al., 2015). In response, COAG agreed to target areas of need with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood development. COAG (2014) offered the assurance that, within 5 years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in remote communities throughout Australia would have access to early childhood education by the time they reach four years of age (AEU, 2014; DEEWR, 2014). In addition, they sought to ensure that every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child has access to a preschool programme in the 12 months prior to entering full-time schooling (AEU, 2014; COAG, 2014; DEEWR, 2014). Each of these factors has contributed to the reforms currently occurring in the area of ECEC provision and early years in general (PWC, 2011), resulting in an increase in enrolments by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in early childhood services (COAG, 2014).

Nationally endorsed training organisations and improved early childhood education training packages that incorporate Indigenous knowledge and practices should be a priority and be developed through critical reflection on behalf of the government and through consultation with the Indigenous community (Cloney et al., 2016; Gangari, Bomford, Maguire, & Associates, 2009). Unfortunately, despite these initiatives and the ongoing debate at a state and Commonwealth level regarding the role of early childhood education in improving opportunities for young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be significantly disadvantaged with regard to participation in quality education programmes (Cloney et al., 2017; Hatfield et al., 2015).

2.31 Information Asymmetry

To ensure appropriate information and advice is available to parents and the community in respect of the various type of ECEC services available, ongoing communication with families is essential. Through improved awareness of research findings, families can develop an understanding of early childhood development and the effect of differing childcare arrangements and hours of attendance on the child (COAG, 2009a).

While parents can gather information about the quality of care at a specific ECEC service—including seeking recommendations from other parents, meeting with staff, inspecting premises or observing a session—they may view the benefits of childcare

differently to experts in the field. This differing view may result in an unwillingness or inability on behalf of the parent to pay a premium for ECEC services (Blau & Mocan, 2002). Parents should be able to rely on a system of quality assurance that provides them with 'clear and reliable information on the quality of the service they have chosen for their child' (PWC, 2011, p. 21). All parents should have the opportunity to access information about the quality of care available to their children. To facilitate informed choices, it is necessary to ensure that families are well informed and have confidence in the quality of care that their children are receiving. Providing formative feedback and regularly communicating with parents regarding their child's progress enables parents to make well-informed choices regarding the enrolment of their child at a specific ECEC service (Sylva et al., 2010). Encouraging the involvement of parents in the day-to-day interactions of the ECEC service may become a source of resources, acting as a connector between the family and forming a social network between parents and the ECEC service (OECD, 2012).

2.32 Conclusion

Chapter two provides a summary of measures implemented by the Commonwealth Government to restructure the ECEC sector in Australia. Offering a rationale for the Commonwealth Government's increased involvement in the ECEC sector in recent years, chapter two details initiatives implemented by the Commonwealth Government ranging from the introduction of the Child Care Rebate and Child Care Benefit Scheme in 1972, the introduction of the National Quality Standard in 2012, through to the introduction of mandatory accreditation for early childhood workers in 2014. In acknowledging the importance of affordable high-quality ECEC services in supporting workforce participation choices of families, the Commonwealth Government recognized the need for an overhaul of the ECEC sector in Australia. In recognising clear links between high-quality ECEC and children's success at school and in their future life, state and territory early childhood education ministers called on the Commonwealth Government to increase its financial commitment to the childcare sector in Australia. Ensuring taxpayer money is directed towards accessible and affordable ECEC services will alleviate concerns regarding the care and education of our young people, particularly in view of research evidence supporting the assertion that

high-quality preschool provision contributes to enhanced intellectual development, independence, concentration and sociability for children.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology and Research Design

SECTION ONE

Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a detailed description of the research design and methodology for this study, including ethical considerations; data collection, analysis and protection; and research rigour, dependability, generalisability, reliability and transferability (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017; Yarrow & Newman, 2012). Consistent with my research topic, 'Exploring the Introduction of Mandatory Accreditation: The Lived Experiences of Australian Early Childhood Workers', my research focuses on the introduction of mandatory accreditation for early childhood workers and the implications of this for early childhood workers who worked in the ECEC sector during or prior to its introduction.

Aligning my research methodology with the research questions as stated in chapter 1 and topic under investigation, I selected an interpretivist phenomenological framework to explore the respondents' perspectives on the introduction of mandatory accreditation for early childhood workers. This qualitative in-depth study presents evidence and interpretations in respect of how early childhood workers reacted to the introduction of mandatory accreditation (Merriam, 2014; Willig, 2013; Yin, 2011, 2014). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the phenomenological study focusses on what everyone "has in common as they experience a phenomenon" and describes the everyday lived experiences of multiple individuals (p.75). Examining the participants' views and perspectives 'within real contextual conditions' (Merriam, 2014, p. 8) assisted me to understand the perceived and real benefits attributed to early childhood workers undertaking industry-specific training. My primary interest in this study was to achieve an understanding of a particular situation or group of individuals, rather than to explain and predict future behaviours (Merriam, 2014).

3.1 Research Design

A research paradigm is defined as "a set of common beliefs and agreements regarding how problems should be understood and addressed" (Kuhn, 1962). Used to underpin qualitative research, an interpretivist phenomenological paradigm is an ontological

disposition concerned with identifying the overall nature or existence of a particular phenomenon, which assumes that, embedded in contexts, the data, interpretations and outcomes provide varying meanings from one participant to another (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Ryan, 2018). Phenomenological research is a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and social world (Hughes, 2010; Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2014; Willig, 2013). Using an interpretivist phenomenological approach allowed me to undertake a systematic approach to the research design to achieve a logically organised inquiry (Gray, 2014; Neuman, 2012; Ryan, 2018). Utilizing phenomenology as a methodological framework allowed me to seek reality in individuals' narratives of their lived experiences of the introduction of mandatory accreditation (Cilesiz, 2009). Using the research design to link my research purpose and questions provided a pathway for planning the research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Yin, 2014). Consequently, the research design and phenomenological framework informed my exploration of the data collection, organisation, analysis and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2012; Taylor et al., 2015), enabling me to reach conclusions drawn directly from the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Neuman, 2012; Yin, 2014).

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework informs the research focus and design (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Maxwell, 2012; Taylor et al., 2015). Informing this qualitative study, an interpretivist phenomenological paradigm and the assumptions in that paradigm (Musa, 2013) encouraged me to examine the perceptions and experiences (the lived reality) of the participants (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017; Merriam, 2014). According to Merriam (2014), 'multiple realities or interpretations surround a single event' (p. 14). Moreover, realities are 'constructed both individually and socially' (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 72) from an interplay between the participants' 'experiences and views of the situation being studied and the researcher's interpretation of those experiences' (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). A phenomenological framework requires a relatively homogenous group of participants who have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). A qualitative research methodology emphasised the value of the individual participants' experiences (Baxter & Hand, 2013, p. 17; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Maxwell, 2012). An interpretivist

phenomenological paradigm informed the way I gathered data, helping me develop themes within the various datasets (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano-Clarke, 2017) enabling me to organise common elements or categories within the dataset (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017).

In qualitative research, the perspectives of social actuality can be understood through either a subjective or targeted approach (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2017). Described by Stake (2010) as an essential element in understanding human activity, the subjective views of early childhood workers who lived the implementation of early childhood worker accreditation assisted in capturing the individual participants' story (Merriam, 2014, p. 8).

3.3 Qualitative Research Methodology

An inductive style of research with a naturalistic approach to its subject matter (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2014; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Patton, 2015), qualitative research methodology shed light on the issues and challenges faced by early childhood workers at a personal level (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017; Hunt, 2009), providing me with the opportunity to consider the thoughts and attitudes of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017). Often used by researchers in the discipline of social science to address issues or topics overlooked or under-researched in the literature (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015; Padgett, 2016), a qualitative methodology assisted me in identifying and examining the various aspects of the issue under discussion (Collis & Hussey, 2014; Myers, 2013; Willig, 2013). Based on the idea that 'our knowledge of reality is gained only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings and documents' (Kaplan & Maxwell, 2005, pp. 35–50), using a qualitative methodology provided me with a clearer understanding of my research topic.

An interpretive phenomenological qualitative approach enabled me to develop a comprehensive perspective of the subject matter (Clarke & Braun, 2013), identify key themes within the dataset and capture important elements of the participants' meanings and realities regarding the introduction of mandatory accreditation for early childhood workers (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Richly descriptive in nature and multi-method in focus (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 2014; Miles et al., 2014;

Patton, 2015), a qualitative research methodology endeavours to develop an understanding of our social world and how it is constructed (McLeod, 2011; Merriam, 2007). I sought to interpret the data in terms of the meanings that participants brought to them (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 2014; Yin, 2011, 2014) to produce a 'comprehensive and insightful research report representative of the responses of the participants' (McLeod, 2011, p. 36).

SECTION TWO

3.4 Ethical Considerations

My research project received ethic clearance from the James Cook University (JCU) Human Research Ethics Committee guidelines—Approval No. H6775. Consistent with JCU's ethical standards, informed consent and confidentiality were of paramount concern in preparing for this study. Having de-identified all data, the necessary steps were taken to ensure participants' privacy, anonymity and confidentiality (Elo et al., 2014; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Surmiak, 2018). To address the ethical considerations of my research, I sought informed and voluntary consent from participants, ensured privacy and confidentiality, avoided conflicts of interest and minimised the risk of harm to the participants.

To initiate initial contact with prospective participants in the study and elicit participant interest, I called upon contacts established within the sector over a period of years. Public notices and flyers were placed in selected early learning centres and snowball sampling was used (The Academic Triangle, 2017). The voluntary enlistment of participants involved no coercion (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Distribution of relevant documentation involved the emailing of data sheets, consent forms and general information sheets to ensure informed consent was attained prior to each participant entering the interview process (Cohen et al., 2017; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013).

3.4.1 Potential Conflict of Interest

Although I had not worked in the ECEC sector for almost 8 years, I was acutely aware of the possibility of conflict of interest. Given my previous involvement with workmates and colleagues, I took all necessary steps to ensure impartiality.

Endeavouring to avoid the possibility of any potential influence I could exert over participants, I recognised the need to maintain a level of analytic self-awareness of my experiences in respect of the subject matter and the overall effect that could have on the research process (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). I monitored my experiences regarding the introduction of mandatory accreditation legislation, reflecting on the effect they may have on the participants. I was careful to 'identify any potential effect my philosophy, beliefs and feelings may have on the research process and outcomes' (Manohar et al., 2017, p. 2).

3.4.2 Culture in Qualitative Research

In undertaking qualitative research it is important to be aware of any cultural difference which may exist between the participant and the researcher (Vandenberghe, 2008). Given that:

> culture can influence the way in which a specific phenomenon or behaviour is interpreted, I remained mindful of the need to recognise that my origin culture could affect how I analysed and interpreted data (Sugai et al., 2012, p. 200)

I remained conscious of the need to consider any socially or culturally influenced behaviours or perceptions that could influence my interpretations or interactions with the participants (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015), knowing that my own cultural background and beliefs could influence how I interacted with the participants (Sugai, O'Keeffe, and Fallon, 2012). As a result, an understanding of my own cultural system became an important first step towards correcting personal bias, particularly when considering how it could affect my interactions with the participants (Lillis & Hayes, 2007). Identifying with the predominate participant group through distinguishable responses based on shared cultural values, beliefs, characteristics and preferences assisted me throughout the interview and data collection and analysis phases (Elo et al., 2014; Sugai et al., 2012).

3.5 Ethics Approval

When considering social research, I was aware that the researcher must use professional judgement when making decisions regarding the conduct of their research, be able to recognise the complex social settings in which such research is conducted, and ensure

the accuracy of the data collected. It was important to ensure that all participants in this study understood the nature of the study, the processes involved and why their participation was necessary and valuable. As a result of ongoing health issues, an ethics approval extension was granted from 28 October 2016 to 28 October 2018. To complete additional interviews, as theoretical saturation was not reached, a further ethics approval extension was applied for and lasted from 25 October 2016 to 31 January 2019 (see Appendices H, I and J).

Informed by ethical research practice principles, I remained mindful of my role as a researcher in the research process (Miller et al., 2012). Having worked in the ECEC sector for over 29 years, my previous experience, although valuable during the interview process, had the potential to affect participants (JCU, 2017). Therefore, I was mindful of the need to ensure the physical and psychological safety of the participants involved in the study (Miller et al., 2012). Conscious of the need to ensure that my personal beliefs did not affect the participants or the research findings (Elo et al., 2014; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015), I considered the way I posed questions and any possible unconscious filtering of information gathered (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, 2015). The ongoing critical self-evaluation and monitoring of any potential bias on my behalf enabled me to assess the effect my beliefs had on shaping the research findings and conclusions (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017).

3.6 Research Site Selection

To convey a balanced, multidimensional representation of ECEC service types, I undertook a purposive sampling of both LDC and OSHC service types with varying management structures (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The purposive selection of data sources involved choosing people, documents or service types from which I could substantially learn about the question under discussion (Uprichard, 2013). Thereby ensuring the likelihood of the study findings reflecting the different perspectives of the participants (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017). The mix of service operational types included for-profit and not-for-profit OSHC and LDC services located in metropolitan and regional NSW. Staff employed by privately and corporately owned OSHC and LDC services offered a sufficiently diverse mix to support the study. Choosing to included staff working in the OSHC sector in the study, allowed me to examine the views of ECEC workers not yet required to hold any

formal credential in ECEC provision, as compared to those ECEC workers employed to care for children ranging in age from birth to 5 years, who are required to have completed an accredited course in ECEC training.

Given that my professional experience in the ECEC sector occurred in NSW and Western Australia and I was living and working in NSW when I enrolled in the PhD, NSW became the focus for my research. Additionally, the networks I have established throughout the ECEC sector are primarily located within NSW, offering me ease of access to services and staff. By using a strategy of purposive sampling, I was able to call on my existing networks to identify suitable participants and thereby enhance the richness and credibility of the data (Patton, 2015; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Early childhood workers employed in the OSHC sector offered the diversity of experience required to ensure credible results (Emmel, 2013). As identified below, the study included staff from corporately owned and privately owned and operated ECEC services operating on a not-for-profit or for-profit basis:

- **Service Type 1—independently owned chain of for-profit OSHC services:** Located in metropolitan Sydney and owned and operated by a sole trader, this OSHC service operates within a primary school and caters for up to 60 primary school-aged children per day.

- **Service Type 2—three independently owned for-profit OSHC and LDC service chains:** Study participants were staff from three for-profit OSHC and long day childcare services, operating in state primary schools and privately owned or leased premises, located in regional and metropolitan NSW.

- **Service Type 3—corporately owned chain of not-for-profit OSHC services:** One of the largest not-for-profit OSHC chains in Australia, with services located in every state, this company caters for as few as 20 children per day and up to 150 per day, ranging in age from six to 12 years.

- **Service Type 4—corporately owned chain of not-for-profit centre-based LDC and OSHC services:** One of the largest not-for-profit combined OSHC and centre-based LDC service chains in Australia with services located in every state, this company operates childcare services catering for children as young as

six weeks to school-aged children up to 12 years. Catering for up to 200 children per day in each service, across various sites throughout Australia, staff work in either or both the centre-based long day childcare service or OSHC services owned and operated by this organisation.

3.7 Recruitment of Participants

Sample size for thematic analysis, although often nonspecific, should reflect the needs of the study (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Burmeister & Aiken, 2012; Clarke & Braun, 2013). Bowen (2008) argued that 'sampling size relates to saturation and saturation occurs when all data is successfully coded into categories and no additional themes emerge from new data' (pp. 137–152).

Twenty-two participants were recruited for the study, ranging in age from 18 to 76 years. Participant selection criteria included workers' lived experience working in the ECEC sector and their relationship with the implementation of mandatory accreditation. Participants included four men and 18 women, primarily from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds. Compared with the national average of male to female early childhood workers of only two per cent of the early childhood workforce, the number of male participants in this study represented almost 20 per cent of the participants (Paton, 2018).

Participant recruitment followed a telephone call to the selected service managers, seeking consent to display a poster detailing relevant information about the research project. Following responses from interested parties, information letters and a 'consent to participate' form were distributed. Upon receipt of the signed consent form, I contacted participants via email or telephone to discuss the research project and request their cooperation and participation (see Appendices A, B, C, D, E, F and G).

Aligned with the recruitment criteria, recruitment occurred based on the type of service in which the participant worked, whether the service operated within a for-profit or not-for-profit structure and the type of management system in place. The majority of participants' involvement in the study emanated from snowball sampling. Snowball sampling consists of asking existing participants to recommend other people that they believe may fit the selection criteria and thus be able to contribute to the research study (Cohen et al., 2017; The Academic Triangle, 2017). Given that the majority of older

early childhood workers employed in the OSHC sector have worked for a variety of ECEC service types, including LDC services, preschools and kindergartens, in considering the most beneficial criteria for inclusion in the sample for this study and to meet the study aims, I believed workers from the OSHC sector would contribute significantly to the topic under discussion. Therefore, I encouraged early childhood workers employed by LDC services and the OSHC sector to participate in this study (ACECQA, 2014a; DEEWR, 2013a). Participants names were changed to ensure anonymity and pseudonyms used.

3.7.1 Participants from Service Type 1: Staff from Chain of for-Profit Privately Owned Services

Eight participants derived from Service Type 1—a for-profit independently owned service consisting of 10 staff and catering to 60 children per day. Participating staff members included:

- Lee: a service manager with a Diploma of Children's Services and Diploma of OSHC Care and over 20 years of experience in the sector
- Asha: an accredited teaching assistant with a Diploma of Community Services and 6 years of experience in the sector
- Marty: an unaccredited teaching assistant enrolled in a Diploma of Children's Services, with 3 years of experience in the sector
- Darrel: an accredited teaching assistant with a Certificate III in Children's Services and over four years of experience in the sector
- Erin: an accredited teaching assistant with a Certificate III in Children's Services and over 5 years of experience in the sector
- Shaz: an unaccredited service coordinator with no credentials and 20 years of experience in the sector; left the sector rather than undertake mandatory accreditation
- Tash: an unaccredited assistant with no credentials and not yet undertaking accreditation, with two years of experience in the sector
- Coop: an unaccredited assistant with no credentials and 18 months of experience in the sector; left the sector rather than undertake mandatory accreditation.

3.7.2 Participants of Service Type 2: Staff from Three Independently Owned for-Profit Out-of-school Hours Care and Long Day Care Service Chains

Working within for-profit independently owned services, 3 early childhood workers participated in the study. All had extensive experience in the management of centre-based early learning and OSHC services. The participants included:

- Connie: service owner/operator with a Diploma of Children's Services and over 39 years of experience in the sector
- Nickie: service owner/operator with a Diploma of Teaching and over 23 years of experience in the sector
- Kris: service director working towards ECEC credentials with nine years of experience in the sector.

3.7.3 Participants of Service Type 3: Staff from a Chain of Corporately Owned and Operated Out-of-school Hours Care Service

Five participants were recruited from one of the largest corporately owned and operated OSHC services in Australia. The participating staff members included:

- Pat: area manager with an Advanced Diploma of Children's Services and over 25 years of experience in the sector
- Mick: service coordinator with an Advanced Diploma of Children's Services and 16 years of experience in the sector
- Erica: unaccredited service coordinator working towards a Diploma of Health Sciences, with two years of experience in the sector
- Rochelle: unaccredited assistant with no credentials and not yet undertaking accreditation, with 12 months of experience in the sector
- Ty: unaccredited assistant with no credentials and not yet undertaking accreditation, with 3 years of experience in the sector.

3.7.4 Participants of Service Type 4: Staff from Corporately Owned and Operated Centre-based Early Learning and Out-of-school Hours Care Service

Four participants were recruited from one of the largest corporately owned and operated centre-based LDC services in Australia. The participating staff members included:

- Lauren: service coordinator with a Diploma of Children's Services and over 15 years of experience in the sector
- Kirsty: accredited teaching assistant with a Certificate III in Children's Services and two years of experience in the sector
- Carol: accredited teaching assistant with a Certificate III in Children's Services and 12 years of experience in the sector; chose to leave the sector after undertaking mandatory accreditation because of no improvement in pay or working conditions
- Jude: unaccredited assistant with no credentials and 6 years of experience in the sector; chose to leave the sector rather than undertake mandatory accreditation.

3.7.5 Participants of Unspecified Service Type

The participating staff members from an unspecified service type included:

- Kalie: unaccredited assistant with no credentials and four years of experience in the sector; chose to leave the sector rather than undertake mandatory accreditation
- Alice: unaccredited assistant with no credentials and two years of experience in the sector; chose to leave the sector rather than undertake mandatory accreditation.

3.8 Early Childhood Worker Accreditation Requirements

OSHC services in Australia are administered through the ACECQA and must adhere to the *Education and Care Services National Law* (*National Law*) and *Education and Care Services National Regulations* (*National Regulations*) (ACECQA, 2014b). These same regulations cover centre-based LDC centres, preschools and kindergartens, with the exception of early childhood worker accreditation requirements (ACECQA, 2014b). There are currently no regulations covering the accreditation of early childhood workers employed to work with school-aged children in OSHC services, beyond those laid down by the relevant state or territory government licensing boards, which vary between the states and territories (ACECQA, 2017). Regulated by state and territory licensing rules,

the OSHC sector can employ workers with no formal credentials in early childhood educational practice (ACECQA, 2017). For work with school-aged children from six to 12 years, staff require no formal training in ECEC provision (ACECQA, 2017; DEEWR, 2014), with the exception of a mandatory First Aid Certificate, WWCC and Certificate in Child Protection Training (ACECQA, 2017).

As one of the only ECEC service types in Australia exempt from mandatory accreditation legislation, the OSHC sector seemed an appropriate group from which to select participants for this study. Given that the majority of participants in this study had worked in a variety of ECEC service types, with most having experienced first-hand the effect of the introduction of mandatory accreditation legislation, I felt that the OSHC sector would provide a diverse mix of experienced, accredited and unaccredited early childhood workers to choose from. Unlike centre-based LDC services, preschools and kindergartens, who must employ accredited early childhood workers, the OSHC sector employs a diverse group of workers, both accredited and unaccredited, who I believed were capable of shedding light on the subject from all perspectives.

3.9 Participant Profile

As detailed above, this research study used a qualitative methodology to gain insights from early childhood workers. Data were gathered through semi-structured, open-ended interviews, face-to-face interviews, offering a diverse knowledge base from which to choose (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017). Designed to introduce the participants, the participant profile highlights the diverse qualifications and career pathways of the early childhood workers who participated in this study. Included in the participants' profiles are details regarding gender, age, qualifications and years of teaching and professional experience. Most other details were generalised to provide as much anonymity as possible for the participants and the early learning service at which they were employed (see Table 4.1).

The early childhood workers listed above were representative of the diverse composition of early childhood workers found throughout the sector. Each participant profile portrays the dedication and commitment historically demonstrated by early childhood workers in Australia—workers without whom the ECEC sector would not exist

Table 1.1: Participant Profile

No	Gender and Pseudonym	Age	Qualifications	Experience	Years worked
1	Female: Pat	59	Advanced Diploma/Diploma of Children's Services, Certificate IV Trainer and Assessor	Service coordinator—ECEC and OSHC/Owner/operator—ECEC TAFE lecturer—ECEC/RTO area manager—ECEC Diploma 'teacher'—ECEC and OSHC	25
2	Male: Mick	68	Advanced Diploma/Diploma of Children's Services	Service coordinator—OSHC Owner/operator—ECEC Diploma 'teacher'—ECEC and OSHC	12
3	Female: Lee	43	Diploma of Children's Services Certificate III and IV Business Management	State manager—OSHC National Director—ECEC Diploma 'teacher'—ECEC and OSHC	25
4	Female: Lauren	48	Diploma of Children's Services	Service coordinator—OSHC Diploma 'teacher'—ECEC and OSHC	23
5	Female: Connie	62	Diploma of Children's Services	Service owner/operator—ECEC and OSHC Diploma—ECEC and OSHC	39
6	Female: Nickie	42	Diploma of Teaching	Service owner/operator—ECEC and OSH Diploma—ECEC and OSHC	23
7	Female: Kris	44	Working towards credential in early childhood education management	Service director—ECEC and OSHC	10
8	Male: Darrel	22	Certificate III in Children's Services	Teaching assistant—OSHC	6
9	Female: Kristy	38	Certificate III in Children's Services	Teaching assistant—OSHC	3
10	Female: Asha	53	Certificate III in Children's Services Diploma of Community Services	Teaching assistant—ECEC	6
11	Female: Carol	76	Certificate III in Children's Services	Teaching assistant—ECEC and OSHC	22
12	Female: Erin	24	Certificate III in Children's Services	Teaching assistant—OSHC and ECEC	6
13	Female: Erica	23	Enrolled in Diploma of Health Sciences	Service coordinator—OSHC, Teaching assistant—OSHC and ECEC	2
14	Male: Marty	21	Enrolled in Diploma of Children's Services	Teaching assistant—OSHC	3
15	Female: Ty	20	Enrolled in Certificate III in Children's Services	Teaching assistant—OSHC	2
16	Female: Tash	28	Unaccredited	Teaching assistant—OSHC	2
17	Male: Coop	20	Unaccredited	Teaching assistant—OSHC	1
18	Female: Shaz	56	Unaccredited	Service coordinator—ECEC and OSHC	25
19	Female: Rochelle	21	Unaccredited	Teaching assistant—OSHC	1.5
20	Female: Alice	21	Unaccredited	Teaching assistant—OSHC	2
21	Female: Kalie	43	Unaccredited	Teaching assistant—ECEC and OSHC	4
22	Female: Jude	66	Unaccredited	Teaching assistant—ECEC and OSHC	10

3.10 Participant Groups

As detailed above, this research project used qualitative methodology to gain insights from early childhood workers about the implementation of mandatory training and accreditation (Willig, 2013). According to Kazmer and Xie (2008), the interview produces ‘the most direct, research-focused interaction between research and participant’ (p. 258). Using a face-to-face interview style assisted me in identifying non-verbal language and cues; moreover, it provided additional information that could be added to the verbal answers of the interviewee (Opdenakker, 2006). Recruitment of participants was contingent on the participants’ ability to inform important facets and perspectives related to the topic being studied (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017). To remove the potential influence of external variables and ensure elements of the phenomenon were included, a variety of early childhood workers were recruited (Sargeant, 2012).

3.10.1 Group A: Early Childhood Workers with Credential Prior to Introduction of Mandatory Accreditation

Representative of Group A: Pat

Pat was a 59-year-old mother of three, with over 25 years of experience in the ECEC sector. Pat worked as an unaccredited teaching assistant and administrator for over 10 years. By working her way through the system, Pat became the owner and operator of a centre-based LDC service located in Adelaide, South Australia. The service catered for 35 children per day, ranging in age from six weeks to 6 years. During this time, Pat attained a Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care. Over the past 15 years, Pat had continued her studies, gaining an Advanced Diploma of Children’s Services and a Certificate IV Trainer and Assessor credential in early childhood worker training and accreditation, in addition to other relevant certificates.

Pat had extensive experience working in the field of ECEC education, training and accreditation. Employed by TAFE South Australia as an ECEC trainer and assessor, she was responsible for training prospective early childhood workers. Pat currently held the position of regional manager with one of the largest for-profit OSHC chains in Australia. She was responsible for the operation and management of 15 OSHC services operating throughout NSW.

3.10.2 Group B: Accredited Early Childhood Workers Who Attained Credential as Direct Result of Implementation of Mandatory Accreditation

Representative of Group B: Carol

Carol was a 76-year-old mother of two, with two grandchildren, who had worked in the ECEC sector for over 20 years. An unaccredited teaching assistant, Carol had worked for the same service for the duration of her working career. With the implementation of mandatory accreditation on 1 January 2014, Carol was instructed by her employer to undertake the Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care. She was informed that, unless she undertook industry-specific training, her eligibility to work in that service would cease. Carol reluctantly agreed to undertake the training, and successfully attained a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care.

3.10.3 Group C: Unaccredited Early Childhood Workers Who Chose to Leave Sector Rather Than Gain Mandatory Accreditation

Representative of Group C: Shaz

Shaz was a 52-year-old mother of two, who had worked in the ECEC sector for over 22 years as an unaccredited teaching assistant, administrator and OSHC coordinator.

3.10.4 Group D: Unqualified Early Childhood Workers without Credentials

Representative of Group D: Rochelle

Rochelle was a 22-year-old unaccredited ECEC teaching assistant, who had worked in the sector for 18 months. Rochelle had no formal credentials in ECEC provision, having only completed her WWCC, an Advanced First Aid Certificate and the mandatory Child Protection Certificate, all of which are a minimum requirement to enter employment in the OSHC sector. Rochelle had recently commenced studies for the Bachelor of Primary Education at Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW.

SECTION THREE

3.11 Data Collection

This study employed data gathered from workers with diverse educational backgrounds using open-ended, semi-structured interviews (Silverman, 2011; Yarrow & Newman, 2012). An essential source in qualitative studies, participants provide important insights into the subject under study (Willig, 2013; Yin, 2014). I conducted concurrent data collection and analysis, consisting of interrelated processes linking the research purpose and questions and focusing on the attitudes, perceptions and intentions of the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Elo et al., 2014; Yin, 2009). To build coherent interpretations of the data, I identified and developed emergent themes by transcribing interview data, reading transcripts several times and using a colour-coding system to identify common threads (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017; Merriam, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). I rearranged categories and compensated for any gaps appearing between data collection (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017; Merriam, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). The identified themes and interpretations enabled me to draw conclusions regarding the data collected (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Interacting with the research participants provided the opportunity to record their insights into the subject under discussion (Yarrow & Newman, 2012). Engaging in conversations regarding their background and experience provided the participants' unique perspective (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2011). The semi-structured, open-ended interview became particularly useful in ascertaining participants' feelings and retrospective accounts of events (Rossman & Rallis, 2011), offering flexibility and affording me the opportunity to seek clarity and explore issues that arose spontaneously (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Consequently, this process provided me with the opportunity to reflect on new directions raised by the interviewees that may not normally be considered (Doody & Noonan, 2013).

3.12 Qualitative Interview Schedule

Qualitative in-depth, open-ended interviews captured detailed evidence regarding the participants' perceptions of the introduction of mandatory training and accreditation (Myers, 2013). The qualitative in-depth, open-ended interview facilitates exploration beyond the superficial layers of the participants' social realities, gaining insights into the phenomenon of interest (Schultze and Avital, 2011). Formulated to ensure the same general areas of information were covered, a qualitative interview schedule provided

data collection consistency from participants (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017), consisting of a list of topics and questions designed to explore each participant's work, education, career and family background. The interview schedule provided a focus for the interview and allowed me the freedom and adaptability to conduct my research (McNamara, 2009). Minor changes made to the interview schedule following initial interviews ensured the inclusion of additional questions. These types of changes are common with effective qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017).

Each interview took approximately 45 to 60 minutes to complete (see Appendix B).specific to the early childhood workers included previous work experience; current position and duties within the ECEC service; perceived benefits for the ECEC workforce from the implementation of mandatory accreditation; and effect of mandatory accreditation on the early childhood worker, ECEC service provider and sector.

3.13 The Interviews

Twenty-two early childhood workers provided an in-depth view of the issue of mandatory accreditation at a critical time in the implementation of childcare policy reform in Australia. To relax the participants, interviews took place in a natural or familiar setting (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017; Merriam, 2007). Consequently, participants had the freedom to express their feelings and views in a non-judgemental setting (Neegaard & Ulhoi, 2007). The participants discussed at length their past experiences, present situation and expectations for the future. To capture details, enhance realism and encourage mutual exploration of the topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), I encouraged participants to share details regarding their perceptions and experience of mandatory accreditation (Myers, 2013).

According to Jones (2004), interviewing 'probes points of interest; elaborating on a question; modifying questions; asking more questions and making choices' (pp. 94–111). Engaging with the participants provided insights into the individual participants' perceptions of the changes occurring throughout the ECEC sector in Australia (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2014). Talking openly with the participants, unconstrained by my perspectives of the topic under discussion afforded me an understanding of how these changes affected the individual participants (Jones, 2004; Myers, 2013). Guided

by a set of in-depth, open-ended questions, the semi-structured interview format allowed flexibility during interviews, while facilitating two-way communication (Bryman, 2016). Designed to obtain the perceptions of accredited, newly accredited and unaccredited early childhood workers (Boyce & Neale, 2006; Keeley & Browne, 2011), the semi-structured interviews helped me elicit detailed facts from the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2014, 2016; Patton, 2015). More focused than the unstructured interview, the in-depth interview elicits rich and extensive material (Boyce & Neale, 2006; Browne & Keeley, 2011), and allowing participants to speak freely and openly when elaborating on areas of interest or concern provided noteworthy insights into the topic (Roberts-Holmes, 2005; Taylor et al., 2015). Implemented on a one-on-one basis, the semi-structured interview provided the participants with the opportunity to describe complex situations or clarify questions in a non-judgemental manner (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Taylor et al., 2015). The individual interviews assisted me to obtain detailed information on the participants' personal feelings and opinions (Boyce & Neale, 2006; Browne & Keeley, 2011; Taylor et al., 2015).

The interviews occurred at a time and place agreed upon by each participant to ensure a level of confidentiality (Creswell, 2012; Elo et al., 2014; O'Leary, 2010; Surmiak, 2018). I chose a neutral and distraction-free location to increase participant comfort, with some interviews conducted off site or via Skye, at the request of the participants. Allowing the participants to express their thoughts comfortably, without the influence of the other participants (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Plano-Clarke, 2017; O'Leary, 2010), helped me obtain heartfelt responses to my questions (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011, 2014, 2016). The audio recording of interviews occurred using a voice recorder and iPhone for backup. To build rapport with the participants and elicit their full cooperation, I expressed my gratitude for their involvement in the study and reassured them of the value of their contribution.

3.14 Transcription of Data

I transcribed all recorded interviews. To ensure confidentiality, I removed all identifying information from the interview transcripts and assigned pseudonyms for each of the 22 participants (Elo et al., 2014; Surmiak, 2018). Although a tedious and time-consuming process, transcribing the recorded interviews provided the best database for analysis

(Bird, 2005; Krippendorff, 2013). The transcripts constituted the main data source for the study, together with the literature reviewed.

3.15 Data Analysis

Analysis of qualitative data is an inductive process, where themes, concepts, theories and hypotheses emerging from the data are identified, recorded and categorised (Creswell, 2014; Davies & Hughes, 2014; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Silverman, 2011). Data analysis brings together the 'technical expertise of data collection, theoretical insight and creative aspects of writing' (Pole & Lampard, 2002, p. 209). Through using thematic analysis, data analysis in this study consisted of holistically analysing, identifying and describing patterns, themes and categories (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017; Silverman, 2011), seeking similarities and differences within and between participants' experiences (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Creswell, 2008; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). To familiarise myself with the data and capture a detailed picture, I read and reread the data several times while listening to the recordings (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017; Guest et al., 2012). I prepared a reflective report soon after each interview, documenting key themes, ideas, concepts and perceptions emerging from the participants' responses to the interview questions (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2014). Excerpts from the reflective report included perceptions and observations from the participants and reflections contemplating the deep-rooted traditional views surrounding ECEC provision that affect the growth and professionalisation of the sector in Australia. 'Rearranging, examining and discussing the textual or visual data in a way that conveyed an authentic voice of the participants' enabled me to assign significance or coherent meaning to the data' (Yarrow & Newman, 2012, p. 14). Focusing on the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yarrow & Newman, 2012) assisted me to gain a holistic understanding of the contextual unstructured, non-numeric data identified (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017; Taylor et al., 2015).

A code in qualitative inquiry can consist of a word or short phrase that, for part of the language-based or visual data assigns a salient or summative attribute (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017), adding 'an essence-capturing or evocative meaning to that data' (Saldaña, 2009, p. 3). Coding refers to an analytical process in which data, in

quantitative form, are categorised to capture meanings, occurrences, emergent patterns and key themes to facilitate statistical analysis (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2009). The product of analysis, the research findings 'allow the researcher to contribute to the knowledge base in his or her chosen field' (Pole & Lampard, 2002, p. 209).

Creswell (2014) described thematic data analysis as a systematic process for coding data in which specific statements are analysed and categorised into themes that represent the phenomenon of interest. Qualitative thematic analysis allowed the analysis and synthesis of large amounts of data from multiple participants, enabling me to 'go beyond mere description at a generalisable level in empirical investigations' (Neegaard & Ulhoi, 2007, p. 5). A method rather than a methodology (Clarke & Braun, 2013), thematic analysis is commonly used where there are no previous studies dealing with the phenomenon (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Deemed appropriate in view of the complex nature of the identities and topic under investigation (Worthington, Salamonson, Weaver, & Cleary, 2013), thematic analysis provided a purely qualitative, detailed and nuanced account of the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

The term 'theme' has been associated with many definitions and is often used interchangeably with a vast number of other terms, such as 'category', 'unit of analysis', 'process', 'consequence' and 'strategy' (Sandelowski & Leeman, 2012; Vaismoradie, Jones, Turnen, & Snelgrove, 2016). A theme presents a coherent integration of disparate pieces of data, which constitute the findings and represent some level of response pattern or meaning within the dataset (Sandelowski & Leeman, 2012). The theme 'captures something important defined in the data in relation to the research question' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 84–87). The frequent occurrence of different themes indicates that the subject under discussion has greater importance for the participant (Shields & Twycross, 2008; Vaismoradie et al., 2016).

Abstract in nature, themes are sometimes difficult to identify (Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis, & Dillon, 2003). Rather than concentrating on thematic information within the data, which only looks at the 'explicit or surface meanings of the data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84), I focused on the latent content of the interview transcripts and looked beyond mere rhetoric to 'identify the underlying ideas or assumptions of the participants' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 84–87). Following Creswell's (2008)

framework of ‘ordinary themes’, ‘unexpected themes’, ‘hard-to-classify themes’ and ‘major and minor themes’ (p. 257), I used the following prompts as a strategy to ask some basic questions about emerging and identified themes (Ryan, 2006, pp. 92–108): What am I learning about the participants’ experiences of the mandatory accreditation process? What themes are emerging from the initial ‘raw’ data? What initial conclusions am I coming to? How have participants’ attitudes, values or interpretations influenced the conclusions reached?

To familiarise myself with the data and identify relevant themes within the different data sets, I read and reread the interview transcripts while noting initial ideas. I explored thematic patterns across interviews and assessed the degree to which each code recurred. According to Beutow (2010), ‘codes of high importance are the ones that advance understanding or are useful in addressing real world problems’ (pp. 123-125).

Data coding ‘represents the transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis’ (Saldaña, 2009, p. 40). According to Creswell (2007), ‘codes can emerge in response to not only expected patterning, but also what is striking, surprising, unusual or conceptually captivating’ (p. 153). Coding seeks repetitive patterns or consistency and can proceed by grouping items together based on similarity (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2009). According to Hatch (2002), patterns have varying forms and are characterised by: (i) similarity (if they occur in the same way); (ii) difference (if they are predictable or different); (iii) frequency (how often they occur); (iv) the sequence in which they occur; (v) how they correspond to other activities or events; and (vi) whether they cause one another to occur (p. 155). Charmaz (2006) believed that coding ‘generates the bones of data analysis’ while ‘coding integration develops those bones into a working skeleton’ (p. 45). The primary function of coding is to ‘capture a datum’s primary content and essence’ (Saldaña, 2009, p. 4). It can condense data, not simply reduce them, and summarise the data into discernible information. Coding helped me find ‘ideas or patterns within the data, ultimately assisting me to understand why specific data exists’ (Bernard, 2006, p. 452).

Although large, the volume of data appeared manageable. Consequently, I analysed the data manually using transcripts, instead of using an electronic database analysis system. From the interview transcripts, excerpts relevant to the topic and research questions assisted in the identification of emerging themes. The extraction of condensed data

resulted in the exclusion of unnecessary discussion (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017). I systematically coded interesting features of the data across the entire dataset, collating data relevant to each code (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017). Using coding, data were tagged and colour-coded through the process of manual coding (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017). Relevant datasets were 'colour highlighted red' to identify patterns, themes and interesting aspects of the data (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2009). I sorted the colour-coded data according to identified categories and then re-sorted, again according to identified categories, and then linked them together to form a pathway through the data (Mertens, 2014; Sarantakos, 2013). During this process, I highlighted relevant phrases, ideas, perceptions or concepts (Mertens, 2014; Sarantakos, 2013). I then made notes about any potential themes emerging from the data (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014).

Through formulating a general description of the research topic, creating categories and grouping codes under higher-order headings, I collated codes into potential themes and gathered all data relevant to each potential theme (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2009). Saliency analysis 'exposed what was non-recurrent but potentially important to the aims of the study which assisted me to identify the frequency or recurrence of a specific theme; the explanatory capacity of that theme; and the emphasis placed on a theme by the participants' (Beutow, 2010, pp. 123–125).To identify important categories, commonalities, differences and the relationships of the themes to one another, I immersed myself further in the highlighted data (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017). I held a number of discussions with my supervisors about qualitative data analysis prior to theorising the data patterns and relevant themes, and periodically shared transcripts with my supervisors during the process of analysis to identify any regularities in addition to any contrasts, paradoxes and irregularities (Mertens, 2014; Sarantakos, 2013).

Key concepts were identified from the literature review, research questions and raw research data (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017; Mertens, 2014; Sarantakos, 2013). I regularly checked and reviewed themes to confirm if they worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset (Mertens, 2014; Sarantakos, 2013). Through defining and naming themes, I continued to analyse and refine the specifics of each theme, generating clear definitions and names for each theme, while conceptualising the

story the analysis told (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017; Mertens, 2014; Sarantakos, 2013). I supported specific themes through direct quotations from participants (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017). By 'refining and defining' the themes and subthemes, I produced a report using a selection of vivid, compelling extract examples (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 87). Relating the analysis to the research question and literature review allowed me to identify the rich, qualitative information within the interview data (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017). I worked on each interview separately and reflected deeply on the transcript to discover what participants were divulging about their work (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017).

Having a broader understanding of the context influencing the participants' stories enabled me to develop a 'wider understanding of what the participants' wished to share' (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, pp. 313–321). Examining the participants' perceptions of the topic under discussion and focusing primarily on their emotional responses allowed me to identify and code latent themes 'laying beneath the rhetoric, at a deeper level than their thoughts and views' (Patton, 2015, p. 21). The product of data analysis, the research findings, 'allow the researcher to contribute to the knowledge base in his or her chosen field' (Pole & Lampard, 2002, p. 209). The creativity of the researcher in reporting the analysis process and the results of the research through models, conceptual systems and conceptual mapping is of particular importance (Clarke and Braun, 2013). Scientific qualitative research must yield valid results and welcome careful scrutiny. Additionally, validity must defy scrutiny in the face of independently available evidence (Krippendorff, 2013).

3.16 Data Protection

To maintain integrity and adhere to ethical interview protocols, I implemented steps to ensure participants received all necessary information regarding the consequences of their involvement in the study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Prior to the interview, I assured the participants that their identity would be kept confidential, apprised them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and provided explanations regarding the research methods used and my requirements in respect of their contribution (JCU, 2017). The protection of data remained a paramount consideration throughout this research study, with all data derived from the study locked in a secure location (JCU, 2017). Data presented in a transparent style ensured that the study investigated what it

says it investigated (Elo et al., 2014). Supervisor review ensured that the collection, analysis and presentation of data maintained ethical standards (Elo et al., 2014). Throughout my research, I endeavoured to anticipate any negative outcomes before they arose and communicate the findings in an honest and accurate manner (JCU, 2017).

3.17 Reflectivity

Reflectivity in qualitative research must 'monitor the extent to which the researcher identifies and explicates their involvement in the research study' (Horsburgh, 2003, p. 309). Through focusing on the role of 'the self' in the creation of knowledge and its effect on the analysis process, I reflected on the implications of my thoughts and decision-making processes (Bryman, 2012, 2016). I regularly took notes to monitor possible beliefs, attitudes or behaviours that could influence the study (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015). Using reflexivity in research allowed me to examine and reflect on my own subjective position on the topic under investigation (JCU, 2017; Mortari, 2015). For me, some key emerging issues from the interviews included ECEC worker accreditation, the introduction of mandatory accreditation, the perceived benefits of an industry-trained and accredited workforce, and questions of equity for the ECEC worker. Pondering these key issues, I realised that they affected both accredited and unaccredited ECEC workers equally, including their ability to work in the ECEC sector, prospects for future employment, working conditions and pay.

Some other points of discussion challenged my own established views on unqualified workers' experience and contribution to the care and education of the young. I believed that experience alone was sufficient to ensure worker credibility, yet the views expressed by the participants challenged that belief. Equally, I found myself completely agreeing with other details shared by participants—particularly those surrounding the process of RPL, worker wages, conditions and professionalism—because they reflected my own experience of working in the ECEC sector. The use of a qualitative research approach allowed me to embed myself in the social worlds explored and how they may have influenced me (Hatch & Barclay-McLaughlin, 2006; McLeod, 2011; Merriam, 2007). As noted in the introduction, the selected research topic linked with my own professional career and lived experiences regarding the ECEC sector and the implementation of mandatory accreditation.

3.17.1 Establishing Credibility and Conformability in Qualitative Research

The reviewed literature and raw data from interviews with the participants enabled a comprehensive picture to emerge (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 72). Illuminating common themes within the data sets assisted me with checking the consistency, value and believability of the data analysed (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Collecting data from different respondents using the same methods allowed me to consider each participant's unique and valid view (Carter et al., 2014) leading me to a deeper, fuller understanding of the data being analysed (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017) and helped me test whether the 'assumptions and conclusions drawn from the data were comprehensible and tallied with the initial research problem' (Babbie, 2015, pp. 143–149).

3.18 Limitations

The participants in this study were representative of a cross-section of workers historically employed in the ECEC sector in Australia. Characteristic of the wide variety of ages and backgrounds of people working in the OSHC sector, the majority of the participants began work in the ECEC sector as unaccredited teaching assistants. Working in a variety of ECEC service types during their working careers provided the participants with a sufficiently diverse work experience desirable in a study of this kind. According to Gable and Halliburton (2003), the types of centres or schools in which study participants work can influence their perceptions (pp. 173–193). The ECEC service types involved in this study were limited to specific OSHC and LDC services in metropolitan Sydney and regional NSW, and I acknowledge any lack of variation in service types selected (Merriam, 2014, p. 8).

The sample size and purposive nature of the sampling method used in this study yielded valuable and relevant data. Although nonspecific for thematic analyses, the needs of the study determine sample size (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Green and Thorogood (2009) stated that, in the experience of some qualitative researchers, 'little that is new comes out of transcripts after you have interviewed 20 or so people' (p. 120).

SECTION FOUR

3.19 Conclusion

As part of my Master of Social Science thesis, ‘Exploring Mandatory Accreditation of Early Childhood Workers in Australia: Implications for Practice, Provision of Care and the ECEC Workforce’, I undertook research into early childhood worker accreditation, which has continued into my current research topic. Throughout my research, I remained conscious of how my insider positioning could inform and transform my thinking on the research topic. Consequently, I monitored for any potential bias I may have, remaining mindful of the need to consider my transformation from my previous master’s research into the topic.

To elicit information from participants on their experiences, attitudes, perceptions and viewpoint regarding the introduction of mandatory accreditation, I employed the assistance of an experienced group of early childhood workers employed within the ECEC sector in NSW. The participants were a diverse group of workers who, although currently working in the OSHC sector, had worked in a variety of service types during their careers, thereby enhancing the quality of their contributions to the study.

CHAPTER 4: The Lived Experiences of Early Childhood Workers

SECTION ONE

Introduction

My research explores the Commonwealth Government's reform agenda through targeted questions directed to participants in respect of their' lived experiences' of the introduction of mandatory accreditation for early childhood workers employed to care for children from birth to 5 years, which came into effect from 1 January 2014 (ACECQA, 2014a; DEEWR, 2014) (see Appendix B attached).

Addressing issues and concerns identified by participants in the study and in the literature review including: early childhood worker qualification and training; pay and equity, professionalism; the work of ECTs in early childhood education; the role of government in the early childhood sector; and the structural changes taking place in the early childhood education and care sector in Australia. I present key themes identified in the qualitative data reviewed and discuss the 'lived experiences' of early childhood workers personally affected by the introduction of mandatory accreditation. Initially sourced through keywords highlighted in empirical journal articles the main ideas in each piece of literature were then identified through critical review.

Identifying emerging key themes from participant experiences, and examine the emotional responses expressed by early childhood workers regarding the effects of the changes they experienced as a result of the introduction of mandatory accreditation, provided an insightful look, from various perspectives, at the ramifications of such changes. Changes, effecting not only ECEC workers employed to work with children ranging in age from birth to 5 years, but the potential impact such legislation may have for ECEC workers currently employed to work with school aged children ranging in age from 6 – 12 years, attending OSHC programs, who are still unaccredited.

4.1 Attaining Qualifications

The primary reason for the implementation of mandatory accreditation was to upskill the Australian ECEC workforce through the introduction of industry-specific training and a standardised accreditation and qualification system. The participants in this study extensively discussed mandatory accreditation, including the manner of its

implementation and the ramifications for the early childhood worker. Some participants discussed the positive benefits of gaining a qualification. According to Pat, an ECEC educator, trainer and assessor with an Advanced Diploma of Children's Services and over 20 years of experience in the sector, 'being trained, gaining a benchmark qualification, the Cert. III, is great. It gives a pathway [and] it can lead to undertaking further study and doing a diploma'. Similarly, Connie, an ECEC service owner/operator with a Diploma of Children's Services and over 39 years of experience in the sector, saw positives in support of a competent, qualified workforce, 'only by introducing ECEC training courses into the school curriculum can we ensure an ongoing supply of competent early childhood workers'. Kris added:

> it's all very well concentrating on the education of children, but without a good quality staff all the good programming isn't going to do a thing unless they can implement it.

Adequately trained and qualified early childhood workers are better prepared to support children's early academic and social skill development, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Cloney et al., 2017; Hatfield, Lower, Cassidy and Faldowski, 2015; Niklas et al., 2017; Varghese et al., 2018). This belief was supported by participants in this study, including, Pat, Connie and Asha. According to Asha, 'it is important employees have knowledge and an understanding of early childhood developmental theories and play based learning'.

Darrell, a teaching assistant with a Certificate III in Children's Services and 6 years of experience in the sector believed, 'getting a credential is definitely handy—it gives you a bit of knowledge behind you and makes it easier to go and find another job'. This view was echoed by Erica, an unqualified OSHC service coordinator working towards her Diploma of Health Sciences, with two years of experience in the sector: 'I think it's great. It is probably something that is really needed, as children are so very important'. Supporting Erin's comments, Kalie, a 43-year-old unqualified teaching assistant, believed that learning gained through obtaining a qualification is valuable: 'workers undertaking accreditation have gained greater knowledge and understanding of childcare. Gaining currency in the ECEC sector has brought them up to date with current trends and procedures.'

According to Lauren, an ECEC service coordinator with a Diploma of Children's Services and over 15 years of experience in the sector, 'having everyone with a credential means the workload is probably spread more evenly across the centre because everyone is expected to pull their weight and contribute'. Marty, an unqualified teaching assistant undertaking the Diploma of Children's Services, supported the thoughts expressed by Lauren: 'you need to know the basics of the job and have that knowledge behind you. If you are working in the industry, it is only fair'.

Other participants felt that they were already well 'qualified' in the sense that they were highly experienced in childcare, with significant practice wisdom. Asha stated:

> I do not think the families even know who has a qualification unless they did their research and I don't think that would affect who they would want to look after their children, as long as they know they have caring, supporting, nurturing staff looking after their children.

Moreover, Shaz asserted:

> I've been working without a Certificate III credential for 20 years and it has not hindered me in anyway. I still do my job the same way and no one seems to object. Why bother wasting my time doing courses when I would receive no extra benefits? I don't believe I could get any more benefits than I already do, particularly as I am well above award and hold the position of coordinator. It did not really affect my job prospects, as I worked my way up through the company from a simple assistant to service coordinator and eventually service manager.

4.1.1 What Perceived Benefits?

Extending the above theme regarding the value of qualification in ECEC, the participants questioned whether the perceived benefits of undertaking accreditation had been forthcoming. According to Ty, a 20-year-old unqualified early childhood worker with 3 years of experience in the sector, 'there has been little benefit with mandatory accreditation.' According to Lee, an ECEC/OSHC service manager with a Diploma of Children's Services and Diploma of OSHC and over 20 years of experience in the sector, '[t]he wages have stayed the same. All they have done is gained a piece of paper

that says they are now qualified to work in our industry.' Elaborating further, Tash, a 29-year-old unqualified early childhood worker, stated: 'I've been working in this field for 5 years and I know more about the work than most of them [qualified ECEC workers]'. Shaz supported the perceptions expressed by Tash, explaining:

> If you are not a good worker or don't do the right things, you will not be employed for long and all the education in the world will not give you the natural quality needed to work in early childhood.

Because of the lack of investment by government early childhood worker pay and working conditions have not change significantly in recent years. A responsibility of employers, the cost of sustaining the ECEC workforce, is in the main, reliant of parent fees which are already perceived as excessive.

4.2 Experience Does Not Count

A number of participants believed that older experienced yet unqualified early childhood workers were the most affected by mandatory accreditation. Lee stated:

> it has been very hard on those workers who have worked in the industry for a long time—women who are not qualified but [are] dedicated, trustworthy professionals, good at their job [and] who, in a lot of cases, rather than undertaking accreditation, have chosen to leave their job.

According to Erin, a qualified teaching assistant with a Certificate III in Children's Services and over 5 years of experience in the sector, 'it could have been done differently. Maybe take into consideration the experience of the older worker'. Shaz elaborated:

> I have worked in childcare for over 20 years. I started as an unqualified assistant and worked my way up to my current position. I was basically a housewife and looked for a job in childcare to see if it may be an option. If I am expected to do any studies, I will be looking for another job or thinking seriously about retiring.

Pat believed:

> The older unqualified ECEC worker is more experienced, life skilled and focused and were already efficient and competent before the introduction of accreditation

4.2.1 Loss of Older Workers

Other participants, such as Mick, discussed specific factors, such as age of the worker: 'accreditation in the form introduced was inadequate [because] it didn't take into consideration the older worker'. Moreover, according to Kalie, 'the loss of experienced older workers caused a lot of friction between staff members. Sourcing suitably trained and experienced early childhood workers to replace them was difficult'. Kris, a qualified early childhood worker with a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care and two years of experience in the sector, stated: 'we had a couple of older untrained workers who decided to leave, simply because the company was putting pressure on them to do the Cert. III'. Kalie reiterated this view: 'the loss of our unqualified workers was quite disruptive—there was no closure, they just left'.

4.3 Qualities of Caring

Xu and Gulosino (2006) stated that quality in ECEC provision is a function of several variables, including parent–teacher–child interactions and process-related variables. According to Mick, 'families experience childcare provision and quality on a personal level, responding to early childhood workers who display empathy and understanding'. The personal qualities of early childhood workers were paramount in participants' reflections of working in the ECEC sector. According to Pat, 'the caring, nurturing nature of the early childhood worker is essential in ensuring high-quality care provision'

According to Kalie, the personal qualities of the early childhood worker in enhancing quality interactions with children cannot be understated. Kalie believed:

> it is important that early childhood workers have knowledge of children's services, theories and play-based learning, although I believe the personal qualities of the early childhood worker outweigh their professional qualities.

High-quality ECEC provision is characterised by warm, responsive interactions between the ECEC educator and child (Burchinal et al., 2016). This belief was supported by the majority of participants in this study, including Lee, who asserted that

'the educator–child relationship is paramount in developing high-quality interactions and learning opportunities for the child'. According to Connie:

> without a natural empathy on the part of the educator and an approachability far beyond the primary or secondary school teacher, lasting bonds with the child and family cannot be adequately forged.

. Tash reinforced this statement saying:

> When it comes to teaching, especially younger children, it depends on personal skills and attributes. You need to be able to play with the kids, involve the kids, enjoy the kids.

4.3.1 Professional Qualities of the Early Childhood Worker

The ECEC sector has attracted many different and varying workers over the years. These workers were traditionally unqualified and ranged in age from 18 years to well over 70, with the common factor being a love for and an interest in children. Those who lasted in the sector had a genuine empathy for children and 'love of the job', but also a keenness to be professional in their role through advancing their skills, experience and knowledge. Often, parents and grandparents seeking to contribute to the care of children joined the workforce and were valued for the experience and knowledge they brought to their role. According to Pat:

> having older people, particularly parents and grandparents, working in the sector is a good thing. Having brought up their own families and gone through two or three generations, with children coming and going, they are more experienced.

Lauren supported Pat's view: 'A lot of the people I worked with started off as parents at a centre, volunteering, and ended up becoming staff'. Ty reinforced Pat's assertions: 'I believe experience is a big part of what makes you a good teacher. You need to know how things work—that comes with experience'. According to Nickie, an ECEC service owner/operator with a Diploma of Children's Services and over 23 years of experience in the sector:

> you know, at the end of the day, it's good to have knowledge behind you, especially if you are working with kids. If something happens, you know what to do.

The ECEC sector has also attracted many younger people just starting their careers. According to Kris, 'for me, it's all about the relationship, looking after the children—not spending time on the iPad writing kids' stories. Kalie believed:

> most families don't know who has a qualification and who doesn't. I don't think it affects who they want to look after their children—as long as they have caring, nurturing staff, it doesn't matter what credential they have.

4.3.2 Personal Qualities of the Early Childhood Worker

The participants believed that the personal qualities of the early childhood worker are a key factor in the quality of interactions (Pakarinen et al., 2010; Sezgin & Erdogan, 2015; Waniganayake & Semann, 2011). These qualities were discussed by participants. For example, Lauren believed it is important that children feel comfortable with workers and workers are happy and enjoy their work:

> it's the personalities children gravitate to—which carers they feel more comfortable with. You need to be able to play with the kids. Involve the kids. Enjoy the kids.

Tash similarly stated: 'When it comes to teaching, especially younger children, it depends on personal skills and attributes.' This sentiment was echoed by Connie, who believed that as 'a natural teacher, [a] childcare worker is able to relate to the children, show empathy and natural understanding'. Moreover, Mick stated: 'a person, young or old, their personality with children is more important. Some people can interact with kids and some can't'.

According to Kristy, an accredited teaching assistant with a Certificate III in Children's Services and two years of experience in the sector, 'it's more about nurturing and caring, not the qualifications of the worker'. This view was shared by Shaz, who believed that 'all the education in the world will not give you the natural quality needed to work in early childhood'. Asha reiterated this view, saying that the 'personal qualities of the worker far outweigh the professional qualities.' Shaz further stated:

> you need to be patient and understanding, be able to interact with the children, get down and play with them, show understanding, be interested in what they are doing.

A consensus among participants was that the personal qualities of the early childhood worker include sensitivity, empathy and the ability to create a positive environment and enhance worker performance (Pakarinen et al., 2010; Sezgin & Erdogan, 2015; Waniganayake & Semann, 2011). According to Kalie, '[t]hey need to have the personality to work with children. That can't be taught'. According to Connie, 'the personal qualities of workers impact on the way parents and children respond to them'.

4.4 Staff Retention

A lack of professional status and limited carer development opportunities, together with socioeconomic forces within the ECEC sector, negatively affect the retention of early childhood workers (Choy & Haukka, 2010; Tayler et al., 2013; Thorpe et al., 2011). According to Kris, 'if you need to get a credential, you really need to get above award wages. It would attract good people into the industry'. As stated by Irvine et al. (2016), recruitment and retention of staff—particularly in the remote and rural areas of Australia—will continue to be a concern, particularly if low pay and a lack of recognition or career advancement continue to characterise the ECEC sector. This belief was shared by Kristy:

> having gained a Diploma in Children's Services has not accredited me as an ECT or professional. I still have no formal recognition and am unable to register through NESA. I do the same job as an accredited teacher, but I'm treated differently.

Emphasising the need for recognition of the early childhood worker's status as an early childhood educator (AEU, 2014; PSCA, 2014), the participants in this study voiced their concern over the lack of recognition of their contribution to the care and education of the children attending their services. According to Kristy:

> the majority [of early childhood workers] are still doing the same job in the same way. No increase in pay. No recognition from parents or the bosses. In fact, most parents don't know or care who has a credential and who doesn't.

High staff turnover, attrition and inequities within the ECEC sector present far-reaching and long-lasting consequences (Brennan & Adamson, 2015; Irvine et al., 2016), ultimately inhibiting the development of a sustainable, well-trained workforce (Bown & Sumsion, 2016; Russell, 2009b, 2009c). This belief was voiced by Asha, who shared a story relating to two co-workers at her ECEC service:

> I have been witness to two staff members who were very skilled and knowledgeable in the industry. One staff member had been employed for about 30-odd years, was trained in primary education, but her skills and experience were not recognised and she had to upskill and was not happy to do that. There was another staff member who had been in childcare service for 25 years, had no qualifications and her experience wasn't recognised. She also had to upskill and train. She decided that she would do her diploma and successfully completed it within two years online. The other staff member who was trained in primary education decided to leave the industry because of all the pressure and stress they put on to her to study, particularly when she knew she was qualified and experienced enough to work in the industry after 30 years.

4.4.1 Low Pay and Poor Working Conditions

Pay inequities and poor working conditions are outcomes of the divide distinguishing how work in ECEC services is regarded. Compared to university qualified teacher's working in preschools and kindergartens, early childhood worker's experience poor working conditions and limited opportunities (Boyd, 2012; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Irvine et al., 2016). According to Brennan and Adamson (2014), 'the strategy' specifically excludes universal improvement in pay and working conditions, while directing attention to a range of supports for training and improved performance of ECTs' (p. 8). Poor working conditions have affected the growth of the ECEC sector in Australia. According to Kirsty, a 32-year-old early childhood worker with a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care:

> for me, being a Cert. III, I am so underpaid it is ridiculous. I could go out and get a job at Coles for the same money. I've had to do all this study. I didn't

> realise how hard the job would be. If I had to make that decision again, I don't know that I would do it, in all honesty.

Traditionally, paid minimum award rates, pay and equity for early childhood workers is in urgent need of reform (Boyd, 2012; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Russell, 2009a; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013). Asha stated that 'pay has not changed. Workers have gotten their Cert. III and nothing has changed. They are still working in the same way they always did'. Kalie added: 'Pay did not go up as a result of accreditation. Gaining a credential did not change the way staff undertook their duties'. This view is supported by United Voice (2011)—the pre-eminent miscellaneous workers union in Australia—who believe that early childhood workers' wages are well below those received by workers holding comparable skills and experience in other sectors. This sentiment was echoed by Kristy:

> I am doing more than a diploma and sometimes as much as a teacher and not getting the remuneration for that. I'm not getting paid. That's the part that I find quite difficult. I think what I get paid doesn't reflect what I do and what I put in.

How society values the contribution of our early childhood workers and sector is a reflection on how much further we have to go in respect of gender equity. No longer a problem for the employer, staff retention and pay are also a problem for government. Ongoing policy review needs to be undertaken, taking into consideration the status of the early childhood worker, particularly in comparison to other education providers. A further example of how neo-liberal economies consistently fail our most vulnerable members, while ever our society fails to value our carers and educators and leaves this social support issue to the market, we will continue to experience discontent and disruption within the ECEC sector.

According to Pat, 'people leave the industry because the level of income, the wage is such that they can find a better income elsewhere'. Darrell reiterated:

> Low wages have forced so many workers out of the sector. As a man, the idea of trying to support a family is out of the question. I have nowhere to go. There are no advancement opportunities.

According to Jude, an unqualified teaching assistant with over 20 years of experience in the sector, 'wages and working conditions have not changed, everyone is still doing the same job in the same way'. An opinion shared by Boyd (2012), Irvine et al. (2016) and Sumsion & Barnes (2013) who believe compared with university-qualified teachers working in preschools and kindergartens, early childhood workers experience poor working conditions and limited opportunities.

4.5 Worker Accountability

Aimed to measure 'output and compliance against externally imposed levers, and internally reinforced targets' (Olssen & Peters, 2005, pp. 319–320), the NQS has resulted in the 'need for early childhood educators to constantly record and report practice in respect of children's interactions and progress' (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 90). According to Erin, '[f]or the staff, all the extra paperwork is too much. It's not just looking after the children anymore'.

This requirement received negative comments from a number of participants in this study, including Ty, Tash and Mick. According to Tash,

> the additional workload has severely hindered their ability to adequately perform their duties, creating additional workplace stress.

This situation has created additional paperwork and the need for early childhood educators to devote valuable time to recording and justifying observations of each individual child, leading to loss of quality time with their students. According to Connie:

> An early childhood worker's job does not stop at minding the children—it also encompasses coordinating staff, liaising with parents and working with the school itself to maintain standards [and] compliance. To try to undertake accreditation courses at the same time is difficult.

Russell (2009a) discussed the importance of sustaining high-quality ECEC programmes and the importance of early childhood workers developing their own professional learning through reflective practice. Inadequate training, insufficient knowledge and experience is a problem for early childhood workers, service coordinators and managers. Many early childhood workers develop burnout as a result of being

prematurely promoted into positions of leadership, with insufficient training and experience (Bretherton, 2010; Buettner et al., 2016). According to Buettner et al. (2016), unmotivated or inexperienced ECEC workers are less able to provide high-quality early childhood education care experiences. A point emphasized by comments from Mick who stated:

> I found the ones [early childhood workers] with Diplomas sat on their bums and wanted the others to do the work because of their qualification and it was an excuse to sit down while the young girls, not qualified, were expected to do all the hard yakka.

4.6 Appropriate Combination of Professional Qualifications, Skills, Knowledge and Experience

Mandatory training of ECEC workers equates to increased costs to the employer, with increased wages and in-service training expenses. According to Mick, a 68-year-old early childhood worker with an Advanced Diploma of Children's Services, 'workers haven't seen an improvement in their wages or working conditions for getting their Cert. III'. An issue of contention among participants in this study was the belief that ECEC workers with a formal educational background and specialised early childhood training are better able to provide warm, supportive interactions with children (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; OECD, 2014; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). Many participants in this study who had worked long term in the ECEC sector challenged this belief, maintaining that the same richness and appropriateness of staff interactions with children can be attained, irrespective of credentials (Cloney et al., 2016). Although they acknowledged that there are additional benefits to children when early childhood workers are professionally accredited, many of the study participants, including Pat, Lee and Kristy, believed that unqualified early childhood workers, through years of experience, have developed the skills necessary to meet children's needs (COAG, 2009a; Sylva et al., 2010).

According to Kris, '[t]here is not much difference in pay between a Cert. III and a diploma, although we are getting paid higher than the award wage in our centre'. Pat believed, 'the early childhood worker is doing highly responsible and highly accountable work and not getting acknowledged'. Erin reiterated that:

> there has been little change in the status of anyone. Our pay and working conditions have not really changed. I am now on a contract, so maybe I am being paid a little more, but I don't think so.

4.7 Educator Quality: Factors Constituting a High-quality Early Childhood Educator

Researchers acknowledge that greater child-focused practice by educators can be associated with higher ratings for social relatedness and overall competence (ACECQA, 2013; Brennan, 2016; COAG, 2009a; Houng & Justman, 2014; Melhuish et al., 2015). Previous research has emphasised the value of educators and what they do in ECEC settings, with studies by Burchinal et al. (2016) and others highlighting the importance of a professionally prepared and skilled ECEC workforce (ACECQA, 2013; Brennan & Adamson, 2015; Bretherton, 2010; Tayler et al., 2013).

Different ECEC settings can differently affect children's cognitive, social and behavioural outcomes, particularly if they are of high quality (Melhuish et al., 2015; Sammons et al., 2015; Sylva et al., 2014). Child outcomes may vary even in the same ECEC setting, depending on such factors as the quality of the interactions between the educator and child and the quality of the educational programme (Early et al., 2016; Tayler, 2011; Thorpe et al., 2011). Regardless of the setting in which the child is located, an important indicator of quality can be found in the skills and qualifications of the educator involved (ACECQA, 2013; Brennan & Adamson, 2015). Imperative to providing children with the best opportunities to succeed in school and life is an empathetic, understanding and approachable workforce offering high-quality play-based early childhood educational experiences in a warm and nurturing environment (Houng and Justman, 2014; Melhuish et al., 2015; Taggart et al., 2015; Tayler et al., 2013).

Empirical research on ECT qualifications and training provides conflicting data regarding the belief that higher levels of teacher education predict better classroom quality or greater gains in school readiness among children (Early et al., 2016; IofM & NRC, 2015; Mashburn et al., 2008). A meta-analysis undertaken by Early et al. (2006) into the benefits of higher-qualified ECEC workers working with preschool-aged children found no relationship between the education standard of the ECEC worker and improvement in children's language skills. More recent studies have found a positive

relationship between higher teacher qualifications and higher quality teaching programs (Pugh & Duffy, 2009)). According to Pugh & Duffy (2009), teachers with higher educational backgrounds demonstrated greater knowledge of child development and age-appropriate early childhood education practices. Consequently, they were considered better equipped to respond to the educational and developmental needs of the children in their care. This argument was further supported by a study undertaken by Wong, Fleming and Garvis (2019), who showed 'a significantly positive correlation between higher teacher qualifications and higher quality in early childhood education and care service delivery, including improved program structure, language and reasoning' (p.13).

A study by Vandell et al. (2010) on professional development found that early childhood educators holding a diploma or bachelor-level qualification and unqualified early childhood educators simply attending professional development workshops or in-service training courses were associated with significantly higher classroom quality. Further, studies using data collected from pre-kindergarten and Head Start programmes found that having a teacher with a higher education level, including a bachelor-level qualification, is not necessarily associated with higher observed classroom quality, with just a few exceptions (Early et al., 2016; Mashburn et al., 2008; Whitebook & Austin, 2015). A possible explanation for the null association between classroom quality and teacher qualification in recent studies is that ECT preparation programmes in and between the different states and territories reflect varying education and credential requirements (Whitebook & Austin, 2015). Scholars such as Whitebook and Austin (2015) have suggested that varying standards and differing course content between higher education institutes may have contributed to courses failing to teach all the necessary skills required by teachers to work with younger children (Hyson, Tomlinson, & Morris, 2009; IofM & NRC, 2015; Whitebook & Austin, 2015)—particularly regarding promoting academic and social skills and the assessor's ability to determine whether the student 'teacher' meets the required competencies (Hyson et al., 2009; IofM & NRC, 2015).

4.8 Professional Identity of Early Childhood Workforce

The NQF and EYWS introduced regulations requiring ECEC staff to work within complex legislative and regulatory frameworks (Fenech, Robertson, Sumsion, & Goodfellow, 2006; Fenech, Robertson, Sumsion, & Goodfellow, 2007). Linked to:

> the development of a set of measurable professional standards and improved nationally consistent qualification requirements, the early childhood worker's professional status and identity are implicit in the development of high-quality educational service delivery (COAG, 2012, p. 4)

A person's identity operates at an individual, group and organisational level (Hallier, & Cascón-Pereira, 2012). Developing a psychological connection with a profession provides the individual a sense of attachment or belonging to a group defined by the characteristic of that profession, thereby assisting the development of the individual and profession (Brooks, Riemenschneider, Hardgrave, & O'Leary-Kelly, 2011; Hallier & Cascón-Pereira, 2012). Some participants believed that mandatory accreditation has negatively affected the ECEC workforce and sector, leading to concerns from early childhood workers, service owners and operators regarding their professional identity as ECEC workers and the quality of worker training and accreditation. According to Kalie:

> Unfortunately, without a qualification, people don't even have a look in when trying to get work. We had a worker who was pressured to do her Cert. III to keep her job.

Accreditation is a crucial part of an individual's professional development and should enhance practice (Carrington and MacArthur, 2013). According to a number of participants in this study, having worked long term in the sector and having to undertake formal training cast doubt on their ability to perform their duties.

Training and professional development should empower the worker (Liasidon, 2012). For example, according to Lauren:

> every now and then there is a parent who just needs to be made aware that it is really a profession, that we are all trained. It was kind of interesting to have the parents know that we are doing something professional, not just babysitting.

The primary purpose of industry-specific accreditation is to ensure that educators are equipped with the skills necessary to work within their chosen field of endeavour (Irvine et al., 2016; Logan et al., 2020). According to Tash, ‘I have met people who have been fantastic at their job without any qualifications, who have gone for their qualifications later’. Tash also stated: ‘I have found that numerous people who have got their credentials are not necessarily as good with the children as the unqualified people’. These concerns were with particular reference to early childhood workers graduating from RTOs and training organisations offering questionable training practices. According to Pat, ‘RTOs are producing new graduates with little or no experience and inadequate knowledge’.

Professional identity is shaped by our life experiences within our chosen profession, with our beliefs, attitudes, motivations, values and experiences all shaping our professional identity, or how we perceive ourselves within our profession (Johnson, Cowin, Wilson, & Young, 2012; Sutherland and Markauskaite, 2012; Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2012). As such, professional qualifications, or the lack of such qualifications, do not fully explain professional identity as embraced by many childcare workers. This sentiment was expressed by Erin:

> Most of them [parents] don’t even know what our credentials are. If I said to the parents [that] I have a credential in youth work, I don’t think they would treat me any differently.

According to Senator David Leyonhjelm (2018), the state member for NSW, early childhood workers require no formal training. During a presentation at the International Early Childhood Symposium in Sydney in 2018, Senator Leyonhjelm stated that ‘the introduction of the NQF and the EYWS was responsible for effectively losing valuable unqualified early childhood workers from the sector’. Leyonhjelm (2018) further stated:

> a lot of women, mostly women, used to look after kids in childcare centres and then they brought in this national quality framework. They had to get a Certificate III in childcare in order to continue the job they were doing—you know, wiping noses and stopping the kids from killing each other.

Moreover, Leyonhjelm (2018) stated:

> a lot of women just quit. The ones who got Certificate III's said OK, I want more pay now that I am more qualified. All we did was drive up the cost because of this credentialism.

Other participants in the study pointed to changes needed to improve the professional identity of childcare workers, including raising the awareness of qualified workers. Lauren believed:

> Centres need to spend more money on wages now, so that means there is less money to go around elsewhere. Prices must rise and parents need to pay more because all the staff are qualified.

4.9 When Qualifications Do Not Matter

Participants noted that gaining an ECEC qualification did not necessarily change the way they worked with children. Rochelle, an unqualified teaching assistant, stated that '[g]aining a credential has not changed the way early childhood workers interacted with the children or the way they performed their duties'. According to Erin, 'early childhood workers employed at her service are still doing their job the same'. This belief was reinforced by Ty: 'the Cert. III credential is simply a name change, offering little or no additional benefits to the early childhood worker'. Erica also stated: 'the majority of early childhood workers are still doing their job the same, with no change in status or the way we are treated by the parents or our bosses'.

Kris believed that 'most parents don't care about the qualifications—they just care about the relationships you have with their child and whether the child is happy'. Kalie reiterated:

> most families don't know who has a qualification and who doesn't. I don't think it affects who they want to look after their children—as long as they have caring, nurturing staff, it doesn't matter what credential they have.

According to Jude, an unqualified teaching assistant, '[t]he parents don't seem to know or care [who is qualified], as long as their children are happy and cared for. The kids just want to have fun'. Kristy added:

> credentials have nothing to do with it. Having your child in primary and high school, of course those things would matter, but not really in the one- to five-year age group. Workers who do not display those qualities [empathy and understanding] and only teach by rote are unable to relate to the children and parents.

Given the plethora of research supporting the belief that a child's early years shape their lifelong learning, it is important to consider not only the qualifications of those early childhood workers who teach and care for our children, but whether they have those personal caring qualities considered so important by participants in this study.

Limited professional advocacy, limited access to effective training and a lack of ongoing professional development opportunities contribute to the low status and limited opportunities afforded early childhood workers in Australia (Boyd, 2012; Irvine et al., 2016; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013). Upskilling the Australian ECEC workforce must become a priority for current and future Australian governments (Logan et al., 2020; Tayler, 2012; Waniganayake et al., 2008).

There are numerous challenges to improving education and training for early childhood workers. For some participants, the key point has been the lack of recognition of the required qualification and the lack of clear, supported pathways and building blocks to an advanced qualification. Jude stated:

> had they distributed a lot more public information and given the workers a bit more time, maybe some of them would have graduated by this time. It would have worked a bit better.

Currently, a diploma-level credential is not recognised by the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) or other equivalent licensing and accreditation bodies throughout Australia. Lauren stated:

> the recognition of industry-specific credentials has not gone far enough. I understood we were being recognised as an ECT, but when I examined it and checked on the NESA website, I'm still not recognised as a teacher.

According to Kris:

> There is not much difference in pay between a Cert. III and a diploma. Like, it's nothing. There is no incentive for me to go and get my diploma. Why would I bother?

Logan et al. (2020) argue, improving early childhood worker pre-service education and training is necessary to equip the ECEC workforce with the necessary skills and knowledge to provide children with high-quality ECEC care opportunities (Tayler, 2012). This sentiment was echoed by Mick, 'getting a piece of paper is not enough. Just saying you are a childcare worker does not make it so. I believe you have to be able to teach'. Connie reiterated this view:

> training for prospective early childhood workers should start at secondary school. Students should be provided the opportunity to undertake approved ECEC courses, specifically the Certificate II in Early Childhood Education and Care, to prepare them for what to expect.

According to Pat:

> It's just another title. I've seen instances where you have the Certificate III educator doing the work of a diploma and they're not necessarily being paid the level of a diploma—it is just a piece of paper.

Supporting the assertions made by Pat, Lauren stated:

> we have a teacher at work who is very academic, and she is focusing on that more so than any other part of the job, making it hard for the other people in the room. For her, it is all about the paperwork, all about getting those stories online for the parents to see. She can't see what's going on right in front of her eyes.

4.10 Registered Training Organisations

The participants voiced concerns over the inadequate, sometimes questionable, training practices of some RTOs, which often resulted in unprofessional practices. According to the participants, many students graduating from RTOs have little experience and inadequate knowledge of early child development and pedagogy. According to Connie, Certificate III graduates had 'insufficient training and experience working within the

ECEC sector, resulting in their inability to undertake basic supervision duties and implement lesson plans or record observations correctly'. According to Pat, 'ECEC services are experiencing problems with new graduates' credibility and work performance'. Ty agreed:

> I don't believe childcare workers are coming out properly prepared, it's so easy to get accreditation. Many people have gone through the process of accreditation and come out not knowing anything, not having the experience. All these different centres have so many inexperienced staff who are not monitored, who are not up to date.

Delivered by the higher education sector through universities and selected TAFEs, formal teacher training for ECEC professionals equates to completing a four-year degree. Delivered by the VET sector through government and private providers, including RTOs and TAFEs, Certificate III courses typically take up to 12 months to complete while diploma courses range in duration from 18 months to 2 years (ACECQA, 2014b; CA, 2015; DEEWR, 2014). Educator shortages and a competing need for fast, flexible and compliant education and training programmes have resulted in shortcomings in the training of students for employment in the ECEC sector. For example, Connie stated: 'going through mandatory accreditation has not given them [the early childhood workers] the experience or the normal teaching skills necessary for looking after children'. According to Pat:

> If I put my trainer/assessor hat on here, I will respond to your question. Visiting students on placement in their host service organisations, doing their six- or seven-week practical skills development, I have come across a range of students. Some of them already work very well in a group and work very well in a face-to-face classroom setting, but without adequate training in respect of curricula development and implementation, their effectiveness is limited.

Ty reinforced this statement by saying, 'there needs to be a better system with the way people can get qualified—they need to be more hands on with their work'. Kristy elaborated:

> it's all very well concentrating on the education of children, but without a good quality staff, all the good programming isn't going to do a thing, unless they can implement it.

If we hope to ensure the Certificate III and Diploma level courses offered within our TAFEs and RTOs have creditability, we must ensure they are delivered by reputable training organizations, offering appropriate in-service training in addition to face-to-face teaching. Looked upon by many participants in this study as simply a 'name change' or 'piece of paper', unless steps are taken to provide sufficient oversight of RTOs, there will continue to be apprehension on the part of unqualified workers, as to the value of enrolling in the Certificate III and Diploma courses offered.

4.10.1 Recognition of Prior Learning

A range of qualification pathways is important in ECEC workforce development, but some participants thought that RPL processes were cumbersome, creating unnecessary documentation and complicating the accreditation process. According to Lauren:

> RPL means you must produce a cacophony of documents to prove that you are capable of meeting each of the criteria of accreditation. By the time you fill in about 500 pages and produce documentation to support that claim, you might as well have done the course.

Darrel believed that 'RPL is really time consuming and repetitious'. According to Kalie:

> there needs to be a better way to undertake RPL. An in-service system of assessment needs to be implemented where workers can be assessed and monitored while working in their service.

Used by workers seeking to obtain a qualification in their current area of work, RPL effectively reduces the time taken to achieve a recognised credential (ACECQA, 2014b; CA, 2015; DEEWR, 2014). Offering a career pathway for educators, RPL has the potential to improve retention within the ECEC sector and strengthen the future supply of qualified early childhood workers and ECTs (Choy & Haukka, 2010; COAG, 2009a). RPL involves using a student's existing skills and knowledge as credit towards a VET credential (ACECQA, 2014b; CA, 2015; DEEWR, 2014). According to Erin:

> RPL should have had them [workers] do in-service assessment over, say, six months, rather than have to do a course in childcare. It would have helped a lot and we would not have lost so many people.

4.10.2 Traineeships

Traineeships have the potential to build a viable ECEC workforce. According to Coop, an unqualified teaching assistant, '[t]raineeships can be really good [because] they [the trainee] get really good on-the-job training'. Lauren also believed that 'traineeships can be good, with trainees getting on-the-job training, but some of them are taken advantage of by employers.' Lauren continued:

> Traineeships could have been a wonderful thing, except our trainee was only getting $9.00 per hour because her employer wasn't making up the rest of the hourly rate. You can't live on that. You can't pay rent. The trainee system could have been brilliant, but it needs to be fixed.

Introduced to encourage young people into the ECEC sector, traineeships offer a secure pathway to gain a qualification in ECEC provision, while guaranteeing ongoing employment in the sector. According to Pat, 'you have young people being trained, gaining a benchmark qualification—a pathway which can lead them to do further study and doing their diploma'.

4.10.3 Need for Accountability of Registered Training Organisations and Vocational Education and Training Providers

A consensus among participants was the need to make RTOs accountable. According to including Connie, 'there is a need for an improved system of early childhood worker accreditation—a need for oversight in respect of RTO service delivery and credibility' According to Lauren:

> I have dealt with some really dodgy RTOs, really dodgy, I know someone who hadn't even finished her assignment and was sacked by the centre and still came away with a credential because her mother was a good friend of the owner of the RTO. Just doing it through the private colleges, you know, some of them [the workers] are not quite as good as people from TAFE. My observation is that they are coming out badly trained.

The need to ensure that RTOs provide quality teaching practice as part of their curriculum has led to a Senate inquiry into the operation, regulation and funding of VET providers in Australia (ACECQA, 2014b; CA, 2015; DEEWR, 2014). According to Lee, staff having to undertake industry-specific training in ECEC provision 'has not changed the way in which they perform their duties'. Lauren stated:

> we're looking after these people's children the first 5 years of a child's life—we need to know what we are doing. People need to be watching the centres and see what we're doing and what we should be doing.

4.11 Committing to Further Study

Professional development is a key factor in a service's ability to retain staff (Cumming et al., 2015; Walter & Briggs, 2012). In her article, 'Staff Retention: How Can Professional Development Help? Child Care Staff: Learning and Growing through Professional Development', Russell (2009c) considered the importance of retaining staff in the ECEC sector and emphasised the importance of staff continuity in establishing supportive attachments with children. Professional learning improves ECT performance, with the main objective being to achieve visible, measurable and improved outcomes in children's learning (Gomez, Kagan, & Fox, 2015; Walter & Briggs, 2012). The cost associated with undertaking industry-specific training in ECEC provision is a barrier to prospective early childhood workers, discouraging many from seeking to enter the sector—particularly early childhood workers seeking casual or part-time employment. Working to overcome these barriers would maximise the investment made to train the highly skilled ECEC workforce (Logan et al., 2020). Well-trained and qualified staff are central to quality outcomes for children (Elliott & McCrea, 2015; Hill et al., 2014; PC, 2014). Pat believed:

> although the initiatives implemented by the Commonwealth Government were a positive step forward, unless immediate steps are taken to address inequities in the ECEC sector in respect of access and affordability, the reforms implemented will fall short of their goal.

An opinion supported by other participants who voiced concern regarding the current system of accreditation, highlighting the need for improved regulations for worker

training, accreditation and ongoing professional development (DEEWR, 2014). According to Connie:

> the current system of accreditation has led to inappropriate practices within the RTO sector—a situation resulting in inadequately trained early childhood workers graduating from these organisations.

Osgood (2010) believed that the way early childhood workers perceive their role is fundamental to the professionalisation of the sector and in gaining respect for the early childhood worker. Ongoing professional training experiences are an invaluable tool through which staff can learn new skills to apply in the ECEC care environment, thereby promoting child development (Bretherton, 2010; ILO, 2014; Logan et al., 2020; Tayler et al., 2013). This opinion was shared by participants including Lauren, Marty and Darrell. According to Lauren, 'attaining a credential in ECEC is valuable, as it gives you the skills and knowledge needed to understand the children in your care'.

Improving educator qualifications is imperative to Australia's effort to support children's early learning and development (Jordan et al., 2018; Tayler et al., 2013). Erica wondered what difference the childcare qualification would make, as she was already studying:

> I don't believe it would be of any advantage for me to undertake a course in childcare, particularly as I am currently doing my course in youth work. It would be too much for me to start another course when I am already committed to my current one.

Shaz believed:

> It isn't fair to make me do a course after all the years I have been working in the industry. I do not believe I would be able to cope, particularly as I did not finish high school. I'm too old to go back to school and I think the cost is unjustified.

For Erin, the introduction of mandatory accreditation meant that 'I and the other staff members in my position had to leave our job, as we were not prepared to do further studies'. According to Kalie:

> a co-worker with 30 years' experience in the ECEC sector, required to upskill, was not happy and decided to leave the sector. She had a teaching credential, but not specific to childcare. It was disruptive for the children and caused a lot of problems within the service.

Kalie further stated that, 'qualified workers' experience and skills were called into question. It also reflected on the programming and the way in which programmes were evaluated'. The need for continuous professional development in the ECEC sector is identified as a 'key' factor in developing a professional ECEC workforce (ILO, 2014; Jordan et al., 2018; Tayler et al., 2013). Some participants in the study voiced their concern about committing to early childhood studies if they were not planning to remain in the sector. According to Lauren:

> a lot of the young ones don't want to commit to a course because they don't know if they will like the job. That puts a lot of them off. They don't want to pay out all that money.

As more ECEC centres offer longer hours for their services, there is a need to reflect on children's experiences in such settings and determine whether the service they receive is appropriate to their needs (Pugh & Duffy, 2009). Identified as a crucial factor affecting early childhood worker motivations, workplace stress has been associated with early childhood worker characteristics regarding care quality (Buettner, Jeon, Hur, & Garcia, 2016; Forry, Daneri, & Howarth, 2013; Susman-Stillman, Pleuss, & Englund, 2013; Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2015). According to researchers and educators, including Logan et al. (2020), ensuring an effective partnership with families and other stakeholders supports workers to deal with work-related stress, which can affect personal wellbeing and worker recruitment and retention.

SECTION TWO

4.12 Sector Most Impacted by the Introduction of Mandatory Accreditation

Most impacted by the introduction of mandatory accreditation were those early childhood workers employed in the long day care sector and responsible for the care and education of children ranging in age from birth to 5 years. A consequence of the introduction of mandatory accreditation an unspecified number of unqualified early

childhood workers employed in kindergartens, pre-schools and long day care services, abandoned the sector to seek alternate jobs. Overwhelmed by the process they sought positions offering better pay, working conditions and less stress, believing mandatory accreditation too great a challenge.

Premised on the assumption that training the ECEC workforce will ultimately lead to retaining more early childhood workers (Boyd, 2012; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013; Tayler et al., 2013), some participants questioned whether the EYWS achieved the stated purpose of 'building and supporting the ECEC profession in the short term and into the future' (COAG, 2012, p. 2). Lauren stated, 'I don't think it's right that they had to do it [accreditation]. They really should have done it as a gradual sort of thing'. Lee supported this view: 'It has been very hard on those workers who have worked in the industry for a long time'. Lauren further stated:

> I think about some of the people I used to work with who were lost [to the sector]. All of these people were really worried about undertaking mandatory accreditation. It was just fear.

The lack of recognition for the personal and professional qualities of the unqualified early childhood worker played a key role in responses from participants in this study. These factors were recognised by participants as central to the quality of interactions with children (Parkarinen et al., 2010; Sezgin & Erdogan, 2015; Waniganayake & Semann, 2011). Kristy believed that 'older workers were already efficient and competent before the introduction of accreditation'. In considering the benefits gained, Shaz stated:

> I've worked too long in the industry, for over 20 years—I don't believe I could get any more benefits than I already do. Why bother wasting my time doing courses when I receive no extra benefits?

According to Kris:

> there's not much difference in pay between a Cert. III and a diploma. Like, it's nothing. There's no incentive there for me to get my diploma. Why would I bother? What I get paid doesn't reflect what I do and what I put in.

4.13 Emotional Consequences of Mandatory Accreditation

Heavy workloads, low wages, poor working conditions and benefits have negatively affected the working lives of many early childhood workers who, due to circumstance or desire, held no formal credential in ECEC provision. Believing mandatory accreditation legislation to be ill conceived, the reaction of a number of early childhood workers, who participated in this study, brought forth mixed emotions and cause for concern. According to Mike an experienced early childhood worker, 'mandatory accreditation is a bit over the top, a bit intimidating'. Supporting Mick, Lee stated that '[t]he process of accreditation was difficult for many workers, particularly older workers'.

Consequently, the sector now experiences high staff turnover and loss of skilled workers, resulting in a lack of continuity for employers and children (OECD, 2012). Lauren stated that some workers feared the accreditation process: 'Older workers were frightened by it [accreditation]. They didn't think they could do the job because they didn't have the education'. Elaborating, Lauren stated that accreditation 'put too much pressure on them [early childhood workers]. Some [workers] have left as a result'.

4.13.1 Confusion

Confusion regarding mandatory accreditation caused resentment within the ECEC workforce. Lauren criticised the current accreditation system:

> teacher accreditation has been the subject of much staff room b*tching and moaning. They really should have done it as a gradual sort of thing. People were really worried about it.

Kalie agreed: 'It caused a lot of confusion. It was not thought out, particularly in respect of retaining staff and supporting knowledgeable experienced people'. Lauren elaborated:

> I knew some excellent unqualified people, doing a wonderful job. It was a big thing for them to have to get qualified. What they should have done, instead of introducing mandatory accreditation, was introduce a better system to recognise workers' experience'.

4.13.2 Pressure to Conform

A consensus among participants was that unqualified workers had been pressured to conform to the new changes and felt disadvantaged, rather than advantaged, by the new requirements. This belief was supported by Erica: 'Many older workers [were] frustrated [and] left due to the demands of RPL of having to undertake a course in ECEC to keep their jobs'. According to Pat, a qualified ECEC educator with an Advanced Diploma of Children's Services and over 25 years of experience in the ECEC sector:

> the Cert. III does not necessarily give them [the childcare worker] any benefit. The majority of unqualified early childhood workers have been more or less forced or coerced into taking a study course to gain the Cert. III to maintain their job.

This point was confirmed by Lauren:

> a lot of them [unqualified early childhood workers] were told if you don't do it [undertake mandatory accreditation], you will lose your job. It was overwhelming—a lot have been lost to the industry as a result.

Kalie supported these statements:

> we had a worker who was pressured to do her Cert. III to keep her job. Unfortunately, without a qualification, people don't even have a look in when trying to get a job.

Carol, a qualified teaching assistant who was required to undertake mandatory accreditation or lose her job, expressed her resentment in having to resign from her position after 12 years in the sector: 'it made no difference to the way I work and of no benefit to me beyond keeping my job—in the end, I had to resign'. Jude, an unqualified teaching assistant with over 20 years of experience in the sector, believed:

> had they distributed a lot more public information and given the workers a bit more time, maybe some of them would have graduated by this time. It would have worked a bit better.

4.14 Love of the Job

Research into early childhood worker motivation indicates that most ECTs and early childhood workers teach for intrinsic reasons, such as the desire to make a difference and a passion for the job. According to Rochelle, ‘I loved working in the industry—it’s not just the kids, but parents as well’. Coop stated: ‘Working in a job you really like is great, makes it worthwhile’. Marty agreed: ‘I love working with the kids. Getting down, kicking a ball, it’s great. The positive feedback from the parents is really appreciated—it makes it worthwhile’.

The rationale for choosing ECEC as a career goes beyond quality-of-life issues. According to Watt et al. (2012) the reasons for choosing to work in the ECEC sector ultimately equate to the early childhood worker developing a sense of worth and the idea that they make a difference. This opinion was shared by Rochelle, who stated ‘I got a lot of respect’. According to Mick, ‘the feedback I got from the staff and parents was always positive’. According to Tash:

> parents and families just want childcare to be somewhere their children can go to learn, be safe and be happy. If you’re providing that, they don’t necessarily mind if you haven’t completed your diploma.

The participants asserted that the primary reason for continuing to work in the ECEC sector was their investment in the care and education of the children and equated to a passion for the job. Rochelle stated:

> I loved working there—it is a good workplace and it’s fair. You get to know how to work with all different kinds of people—not just kids, but parents as well.

Darrell, a Certificate III teaching assistant with over 6 years of experience in the sector, stated, ‘I definitely love working in the industry’. This view was supported by Mick, who enthusiastically proclaimed, ‘[i]t’s the best job I’ve had. I love dealing with children. Love it’. Tash agreed:

> a big part of doing it [childcare] is getting to know the families. People I have worked with have all tried to become an extended part of the family. So everyone felt comfortable with them and they could do their job to the utmost

> efficiency. Carol also stated: ‘It’s really the relationship with the children and staff that keep me there, not the money’.

Moreover, the participants believed that their role as educators was fundamental in providing the foundations necessary to assist children with their future learning (Dyment et al., 2013; Elliott & McCrea, 2015; Hill et al., 2014; PC, 2014). According to Coop, ‘parents don’t care about your credentials. It’s more about how you interact with them and their kids that matters’. Asha confirmed this opinion:

> I enjoy working with the children. Even without a credential in ECEC, I still believe I contribute positively. The children respond to me well and the parents are very appreciative.

This sentiment was echoed by Tash: ‘a big part of doing it is getting to know the families, the children. With or without credentials, you can do that’.

According to participants in this study, the introduction of mandatory accreditation negatively affected qualified and unqualified early childhood workers equally, resulting in the disruption of ECEC service delivery as a result of the resignation of many unqualified workers. The loss of valuable unqualified ECEC workers impacted the participants in this study in profound ways. Mourning the loss of colleagues and co-workers had repercussions far beyond the simple loss of a staff numbers. Many of those long-term staff who resigned had become integral members of the service in which they were employed, with many having cared for multiple generations of children. Not only staff members, but children and parents all felt the impact of their leaving. Particularly those who left unceremoniously, without providing an adequate explanation for doing so. According to Asha:

> I think it [accreditation] definitely has impacted [the sector]. It’s taken 3 years for the centre to actually calm down a little. The staff have always been very supportive and approachable, but you can see the underlying tension within the workplace. Not only was their [the unqualified workers’] skills and experience questioned, but it also impacted on the programme and the evaluation of the programme. It wasn’t really happening. There was a lot of stress and pressure put on the staff to over-perform as a result of the loss of such valuable staff members. I think they lost their passion.

4.15 Attrition of Valuable Unqualified Early Childhood Workers

A major concern for the ECEC sector is the sense that experience has no value—a factor resulting in the loss of experienced unqualified early childhood workers as a direct consequence of the introduction of mandatory accreditation. According to Shaz:

> I started working in LDC after my children were off my hands, and I remained there for about seven to 8 years, after which time, my employer asked if I would help set up and run an OSHC service in one of the local primary schools. I was very happy to do this, as I took on the role of centre manager/coordinator and received an increase in pay. I have continued to work at this service for the past 15 years.

Policy efforts targeting high-quality in-service professional development may be effective in improving classroom practices and quality, but only if the question of parity within the ECEC sector is addressed (Early et al., 2016; Hamre et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2017; Piasta et al., 2012). Socioeconomic forces, including incommensurate pay and workplace stress (Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Sims, 2010; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011), have consistently worked in combination to influence which people remain working in the ECEC sector (OECD, 2019). Andrews (2012) suggested that the emotional and personal commitment invested by early childhood workers in the care and nurturing of children creates a conflict when dealing with the challenges faced. Poor working conditions, the need for upskilling and the acquisition of formal industry-specific qualifications all affect early childhood workers' emotional wellbeing (Andrews, 2012). This point was stressed by a number of participants in the study, including Pat, who stated:

> I've seen people leave the industry because the level of income is such that they can find a better income elsewhere than doing hands-on, manual, highly responsible and highly accountable work.

This opinion was also shared by Lee:

> we had a lady that had been working with us for more than 10 years—a wonderful lady, the children and families loved her, but she was not prepared

> to go on and get qualified. She gave up her career because of mandatory accreditation—a great worker who is missed within our service.

Jude, an unqualified teaching assistant working in the ECEC and OSHC sector for over 10 years, stated:

> if you're not a good worker or don't do the right thing, you will not be employed for long and all the education in the world will not give you the empathy and natural qualities needed to work in early childhood.

Believing that the role of educator is an important factor in making a difference in the lives of children, the participants felt disillusioned over the introduction of mandatory accreditation and regretted the loss of colleagues. According to Pat:

> not being back at school for so many years has been challenging for some of those older educators. I have seen many who have opted not to undertake [mandatory accreditation] out of fear and therefore lost their position.

Echoing Pat, Ty stated:

> we have staff members leaving the industry with 20 years plus experience because they haven't done the Cert. III accreditation. They just don't want to because they believe they have much better experience than the people who come from the system and are intimidated by the process.

4.16 Conclusion

The early childhood worker has become one of the most important factors in ensuring that high-quality ECEC provision provides positive outcomes for children. The backbone of the ECEC sector, the unqualified early childhood worker has traditionally constituted the greatest number of workers employed in ECEC services throughout Australia. Motivated by a need to make a positive difference to the lives of children or simply to secure a job, many older men and women choose ECEC as a career. The high attrition and shortage of suitably qualified early childhood workers have impeded the reforms initiated by the Commonwealth Government.

According to Nicki, ‘if we hope to continue to develop the ECEC sector, we have to address the poor pay and working conditions common throughout the industry’. The participant narratives relating to the lived experiences of early childhood workers affected by the introduction of mandatory accreditation highlighted the need for fuller, open discussions with government, industry leaders, workers and employers. According to participants including Pat:

> in order to ensure recognition for the early childhood worker, now considered integral to the future development of the ECEC sector in Australia, further reforms will need to be undertaken

Without dedicated workers, most ECEC services would be unable to operate, particularly when considering the financial and regulatory implications for service owners and operators. The success of the Commonwealth Government reforms is dependent upon the availability of suitably trained and qualified early childhood workers. Appropriate recognition of all early childhood workers must become a high and urgent priority if the ECEC sector hopes to flourish and grow.

According to participants, the perceived benefits for unqualified staff of undertaking a training course in ECEC are yet to be realised. Participants expressed the need to extend the current system of teacher accreditation, which currently only offers recognition to ECTs holding a university degree, to include Certificate III and diploma credentials. Connie believed: ‘A greater sense of professional identity within ECEC workforce would be achieved through the recognition, by NESA, of all levels of ECEC accreditation’.

Experience alone proved insufficient for the majority of unqualified early childhood workers to retain employment in the ECEC sector. Forced from the sector through no fault of their own, many early childhood workers have become disillusioned with the system. According to Erica:

> We have both genders working within the services that were not, as I say, necessarily trained, but had a wonderful array of experience and skills to bring to the team. All lost now due to the introduction of accreditation.

Many older early childhood workers were resistant to undertaking a formalised course in ECEC and resigned because of external forces and the emotional pressure exerted by their employers. Despite being introduced to simplify the process of accreditation, RPL became a cumbersome and emotional process for many older early childhood workers and an option that most chose not to undertake.

Early childhood workers, mainly women, spend most of their day guiding and teaching our children, receiving low pay and poor conditions in return. Government recognition of the ECEC sector has gone some way towards changing people's perceptions of the type of work undertaken by the early childhood worker; however, the complexity of the legislative and licensing regulations governing the ECEC sector has added to confusion regarding early childhood service type and delivery. However, this study's participants believed that the intrinsic rewards of working in the ECEC sector far outweighed the negative aspects of the job, including lack of recognition and burnout. Many participants believed that the respect and appreciation received from parents and the love and affection conveyed by children gave meaning to their work.

CHAPTER 5: Mandatory Accreditation and its Envisaged Benefit

Introduction

The intent of this chapter is to present how the 'lived experience' of the introduction of mandatory accreditation has impacted the unqualified early childhood worker, the service in which they are employed and the sector in general. Comments from the participants have brought to life the issues explored in the literature review, bringing context and clarity to the research findings. Exploring the rationale behind the Commonwealth Governments involvement in the ECEC sector and the effect the introduction of mandatory accreditation had on the ECEC workforce (Pakarinen et al., 2010; Sezgin & Erdogan, 2015; Waniganayake & Semann, 2011), has provided a clear understanding of the intent behind the Commonwealth Government reform agenda to provide 'quality childcare to all children in Australia irrespective of socio-economic circumstances'

Community opinion has historically dismissed the full value of ECEC service provision for young children, assuming that anyone can look after a child (Russell, 2009a; Shpancer et al., 2008).This chapter discusses the implications of the study findings within the current context of national reforms, identifying the need to build a sustainable, highly qualified and professional ECEC workforce (COAG, 2012; Logan et al., 2020). Incorporated in these reforms, the EYWS and mandatory accreditation appear to be, one of a number of initiatives in targeted reforms, implemented by the Commonwealth Government designed to restructure and reconstitute the ECEC sector, under the control and administration of the ACECQA (2014; DEEWR, 2014).

The introduction of mandatory accreditation for early childhood workers is a positive step towards legitimising the ECEC sector, galvanising early childhood workers into a professional, well-disciplined body. Regrettably as a consequence of the major social, economic and political changes taking place, complex and competing forces have influenced the implementation and outcome of those reforms (CA, 2011; Cassells et al., 2013; PWC, 2011, 2014; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018). The findings discussed here have relevance in light of pertinent literature on the research topic, identified in the literature review and the participants' lived experiences of the introduction of

mandatory accreditation. The data collected during participant interviews support concerns identified in the literature.

5.1 Crisis in Early Childhood Education and Care Sector

Throughout Australia and the Western world, early childhood education systems have developed in ways that focus strongly on an education discourse that 'emphasises early childhood education as valuable, in as much as it aligns with national economic prosperity' (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2017, p. 8). According to Sims and Waniganayake (2015a, p. 336), the idea of children as an investment for the future is a justification for investment by government in early childhood education. No longer valued for 'who they are now, children are assessed on who they will become, with the ultimate aim to create a compliant and productive citizenry' (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015a, p. 336). This in turn devalued the work of the educator, who rather than being a mentor and guide, has the potential to become an overseer, responsible for implementing standardised doctrine which can distort the opinions of the child. According to Erin:

> the regimentation, having to do set tasks, not being allowed to have some freedom after a long day at school and not being left to be creative in their own way, has created a problem for the children [attending OSHC services].

Over the past two decades, there has been a sustained policy-driven agenda to professionalise the ECEC workforce (Irvine et al., 2016; Logan et al., 2020). Shaped by, 'political, public and media discourse, early childhood workers are losing the ability to engage in professional debate and are instead focusing on how to best be compliant' (Sims, Forrest, Semann, & Slattery, 2014, p. 338). According to participants in this study, this increased presence of government in the management and oversight of the ECEC sector has resulted in disorganisation and disruption throughout the ECEC sector. Authors, including Bown and Sumsion (2016), have identified inequities in power among stakeholders that create friction and cross-purposes, culminating in various factions supporting different ideologies and objectives. According to Kris, the Commonwealth Government is 'trying to professionalise the industry, but they are only doing it piecemeal and part of the way'. Erin stated that 'confusion could have been avoided had greater consideration been paid to the contribution of the unqualified early childhood worker'. This prolonged period of policy-led reform has brought into question the role of the state in education. According to Spohrer et al. (2017) teachers

and educational institutions should be responsible for supporting and nurturing the children in their care by assessing their attributes and skills, which in turn will maximise our human capital and be instrumental in increasing Australia's overall productivity and competitiveness (p.3). Instead, placing an emphasis on the superiority of specific qualifications and training, the Commonwealth Government's agenda to raise 'quality' through the upskilling of the ECEC workforce has developed a hierarchy within the ECEC sector. This emphasis is 'reflected in the perceived lower status of early childhood educators working primarily with infants and toddlers, who have been characterized as less educated, uncomplicated, or unsophisticated' (Shin, 2015, p. 497). This comment was shared by Pat:

> Workers are at a disadvantage. The Certificate III credential is considered by many as simply a name change. No increase in pay or working conditions. I have seen instances where you've got the Certificate III educator doing the work of a diploma. It goes the other way and they're not necessarily being paid the level of a diploma.

A decline in levels of qualifications and high staff turnover has created a crisis within the ECEC sector over the past two decades in terms of recruitment, retention and career progression (Osgood, Elwick, Robertson, Sakr, & Wilson, 2017; Whitebook, King, Philipp, & Sakai, 2016). Fuelling this crisis is the inequity in pay and working conditions for qualified ECTs, particularly when compared with teachers working in the primary and secondary school sector (Cumming, 2017; Irvine et al., 2016; Osgood et al., 2017; Whitebook et al., 2016). This point was supported by Kristy, who stated that 'gaining a credential in ECEC has been of no benefit. I am still being paid the same but doing the work of a qualified teacher'.

5.2 Commonwealth Government's Reform Agenda

Early childhood education and care has become deeply rooted in Australia's educational framework, with almost all of Australia's 3.8 million children under the age of 12 having experienced some form of formalised childcare (PC, 2015). A principal driver in the Commonwealth Government's philosophical change towards childcare and childcare funding were broad societal changes occurring in Australia in the 1990's (Harris, 2005; Hewitt & Walter, 2014; PWC, 2011, 2014)—societal changes driven partly by a

growing feminist movement and increased demands for more government involvement and funding in areas of health, education and childcare (Harris, 2005). According to Harris (2005), these changes offered better educational opportunities for women, culminating in more women entering the workforce and an increased demand for affordable, high-quality early childhood service provision (Hewitt & Walter, 2014; PWC, 2011, 2014).

The 'Childcare and Early Childhood Learning: Overview Inquiry Report' (PC, 2014) recommended reforms to Australia's existing ECEC sector. Of interest were recommendations highlighting the positive contribution that access to affordable, high-quality ECEC services can make to children's learning (PC, 2014). This report recommended reforms supporting an ECEC system that is simpler, more accessible and more flexible, offering greater support and early learning opportunities to children with a disability or from disadvantaged or vulnerable families (Cloney et al., 2017; Niklas et al., 2017; Speight & Smith, 2010). The report reflected existing literature on the benefits of participation in preschool for children's development, learning and transition to school, and echoed the views of other researchers in the field, including Jordan et al. (2018), Tayler et al. (2013) and others (ACECQA, 2013; Adamson & Brennan, 2016; COAG, 2009a).

Keys findings from this thesis support the Productivity Commissions Report (2014) in respect of the acknowledged shortfalls in appropriately trained and qualified ECEC workers; the need to support increased workforce participation, particularly for women; and the need to address children's learning and development needs. Acknowledging the nature of interactions between a child, adult and the environment all contribute to the child's early learning and development, participants in the study echoed the finding of the Productivity Commission Report (2014). The comments by participants regarding the benefits of quality early learning for children and the benefits of having warm, reciprocal relations with the child and family all supported the belief that caring early childhood educators enhanced the socialisation of the child and aid their overall success in school and their future life. According to Ty, 'experience is a big part of what make you a good teacher. You need to know how things work, that comes with experience. Tash supported Ty stating, 'I believe when it comes to teaching, especially younger

children it depends on personal skills and attribute [of the worker]. You need to be able to play with the kids, involve the kids, enjoy the kids.

5.3 Factors Influencing the Commonwealth Government's Reform Agenda

The government plays a significant role in the ECEC sector in Australia, including the establishment of regulations to govern ECEC service provision (ACECQA, 2012a, 2013, 2014; COAG, 2009a; DEEWR, 2009a; DET, 2014). A major political concern nationally (Brennan, 2014; Gammage, 2006; Sumsion, 2006b), the ECEC sector operates within local, state, territory and Commonwealth government jurisdictions (ACECQA, 2013). Influenced by various employing organisations, professional associations, educational institutions and government, current administrative, policy and structural changes occurring within the ECEC sector have markedly changed ECEC service delivery in Australia. In this context, it is important to acknowledge multiple stakeholder perspectives in the decision-making process in respect of ECEC policy decisions (Bown & Sumsion, 2016; Brennan, 2014; Gammage, 2006; Sumsion, 2006b), including politicians, researchers, early childhood educators and parents (Bown & Sumsion, 2016; Brennan, 2014). Without a technical and social infrastructure reinforced by productive relations between early childhood institutions, employers and professional associations, many working within the ECEC sector have found it difficult to adequately resist change imposed by these external bodies (Hordern, 2016).

Expressing cynicism with the ECEC system in Australia, Chomsky (2013) stated 'these inequities aim to make the population ignorant and irrational enough to safeguard short-term profit for the wealthy' (p. 9). According to Chomsky (2013), 'there are extremely unfortunate consequences for democracy as a result of our current education system' (p. 9). Bown and Sumsion (2016) and others including O'Connell et al. (2016) have argued that steps taken by the Commonwealth Government to reform the ECEC sector reveal weaknesses in the system and negatively affect the ECEC sector and workers, leading to educators and ECTs becoming technicians (Jovanovic & Fane, 2016) who are required to 'produce learners who become earners and consumers' (Brown, 2015, p. 237).

Ideological differences regarding ECEC service delivery and what is best for the child have hindered the overall process of ECEC reforms nationally (Hunkin, 2016, O'Connell et al., 2016). Approval from the various Commonwealth, state and territory

government bodies and ministerial portfolios, including education, health and community services, have become an integral part of current and future reform initiatives (Bown & Sumsion, 2016; Bown et al., 2009). The financial involvement of the Commonwealth Government in the ECEC sector in Australia has created inequities between the states, territories and Commonwealth Government (Hunkin, 2016; Bown et al., 2009). These inequities have resulted in undue pressure being exerted on the various state and territory governments by the Commonwealth Government (Bown & Sumsion, 2016; Hunkin, 2016; Ryan & Ackerman, 2005). Such pressures have negatively influenced the decision-making process and direction of childcare reforms in Australia (Hunkin, 2016; Ryan & Ackerman, 2005; Bown et al., 2009).

Placing the onus on the government to ensure 'appropriate services are available and accessible to all children' (Brennan & Adamson, 2014, p. 36), O'Connell et al. (2016) have identified the need for an improved ECEC system in Australia and around the world. This point has been repeatedly stressed in research articles and industry journals (Brennan & Adamson, 2014; Russell, 2009a; Woodhead, 2006). According toWoodhead (2006), '[e]nhancing the quality of young children's lives is now a national and international priority, expressed through research and policy initiatives, programme development and advocacy' (p. 4).

5.4 Rationale for Change

A key rationale for the Commonwealth Government's involvement in the ECEC sector is the potential for increased benefits for the community (Bennett, 2008; Hewitt & Walter, 2014; PWC, 2011, 2014). These benefits include overcoming disadvantage within society, reducing risk of harm to vulnerable children, enhancing healthy child development, increasing the workforce participation of parents and reducing long-term unemployment and reliance on welfare support (Hewitt & Walter, 2014; PWC, 2014). A consequence of the Commonwealth Government's increased involvement in the ECEC sector, is an overlap of Commonwealth, state and territorial government jurisdictions, which has resulted in the development of inter-departmental collaboration and exchange (Logan et al., 2015). This collaboration has resulted in increased support for families in the areas of educational outcomes for children, women's workforce participation and support for children's development (Logan et al., 2015; Moore & McDonald, 2013; PWC, 2011, 2014; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018; Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013).

Unfortunately, according to the participants in this study, this collaboration has also resulted in increased paperwork and a level of administrative accountability that has further complicated what was already an over-regulated industry. According to Erin:

> the childcare sector is very demanding and a lot of paperwork. Far more than most people imagine. We are monitored by a lot of government departments, which puts a lot of pressure on the staff.

Introduced as part of the Commonwealth Government's reforms, 'the strategy' was designed to replace the disparate licensing and regularity systems previously administered by the state and territory governments—systems that negatively affected the overall structure of early childhood service provision in Australia (Brennan & Adamson, 2014; DEEWR, 2013a). Unfortunately, according to Senator Leyonhjelm (2018), the NSW Federal Liberal Democrat Senator and chairperson of the 'red tape' committee, in comments made to me and others during a discussion at the International Early Childhood Symposium in Sydney in April 2018, '[i]nstead of improving ECEC service provision, the introduction of mandatory accreditation has further complicated a system already over-burdened with regulations' (CA, 2018).

Policy makers are investing unparalleled effort into expanding and raising the quality of ECEC through initiatives such as extending parental leave entitlements and introducing benefits, including superannuation and pension credits for parents and other carers (Brennan & Adamson, 2014; Cloney et al., 2017). Reflecting a disconcerting attitude towards ECEC, successive Australian governments have positioned ECEC policy in different ways. According to Sims and Waniganayake (2015a), neoliberal thinking within governments has created a situation whereby marketisation is valued above citizenship and human rights. Further, linking ECEC policy to different policy goals, such as social welfare or education, could create a division between childcare and high-quality ECEC provision (Heckman, 2011; Ishimine, Tayler, & Bennett, 2010; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). This narrowing focus on ECEC service provision could result in the government sacrificing quality to economic gain, particularly in the case of increased parental workforce participation (Heckman, 2011; Ishimine et al., 2010).

Despite attempts to move from rhetoric to best practice, the ECEC service system as a whole remains characterised by fragmentation and a lack of clarity about which outcomes are being achieved, with uncertainty on behalf of the government regarding

where to target investment to optimise outcomes (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018). The diversity of ECEC service provision and the complexity of service providers and interest groups—such as lobby groups, politicians and bureaucrats—has historically resulted in an inability of the government to effectively negotiate the various factions (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018). Consequently, there appears to be no coherent or equitable policy framework or service delivery platform for children and their families in the early years (Hordern, 2016; Irvine et al., 2016). This point was clearly articulated by participants in this study who believed the variety of service types, there management structure and the different licensing requirements between the various states and territories had added to the confusion and lack of trust on the part of the ECEC worker. Although mixed feelings were expressed by the various participants in the study in respect of the introduction of mandatory accreditation, the majority supported the need for a coherent policy framework in respect of ECEC service provision. According to Mick:

> understanding the educational side, the philosophy all that kind of thing just made me understand the teacher's perspective, the principals. The programme really helped and if you've got individual children with individual needs it certainly helps.

Supporting the implementation of the NQF and the EYLF, participants questioned the way in which the EYWS was implemented and whether a more flexible system could be considered in respect of the mandatory accreditation of early childhood workers, particularly in view of mooted changes in accreditation requirements for early childhood workers employed in the OSHC sector. Rochelle stated that:

> at the end of the day it's good to have knowledge behind you, especially if you are working with kids. I think honestly, the only disadvantage I can think of [in doing a course] is the cost, particularly when someone is not in a position to pay for it.

Erin supporting Rochelle stated:

> I don't think it's right that they [workers] had to do it [a course in ECEC]. A lot of them were really experienced. It put too much pressure on them. Some have left as a result. I don't like the idea that I may have to do an early childhood course in the future. Erin reiterated saying:

> They should have taken into consideration the experience of the old workers. They should have had [unqualified worker] do in-service assessment over say 6 months rather than having to do a course in childcare. It would have helped a lot and we would not have lost so many people.

5.5 Political Decision Making in Early Childhood Education and Care Policy

Many researchers are beginning to argue that intervention by politicians and the government has created an increased presence of the 'state' in young children's lives (Sims & Brettig, 2018). Underpinned by policy discourses and how we understand the way the world operates, early childhood education is influenced by what is required to drive national prosperity and economic development (Cook, Corr, & Breitkreuz, 2016). It is important to consider that when external pressure is brought to bear and government attempts to set the terms by which members of a professional community must behave, we risk a situation where the professional structure of that organisation or profession begins to mirror the political agenda of that government (Hordern, 2016).

A report compiled by O'Connell et al. (2016), on behalf of the Mitchell Institute, appears to support the belief that, as a consequence of the Commonwealth Government's increased investment in ECEC, considerable influence and pressure has been exerted on state and territory governments regarding the direction of ECEC provision in Australia (O'Connell et al., 2016; PWC, 2011). According to Giroux (2015), 'the current purpose of education is to create employable graduates through a pedagogy of ignorance whose hidden curriculum is the teaching of political and intellectual conformity' (p. 15). This belief was reinforced by policy statements through which the Commonwealth Government established the direction of early childhood governance and curriculum development and included changes in the portfolio areas under which ECEC control falls (Bown & Sumsion, 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016; PWC, 2011).

A discursive analysis of research undertaken by Bown and Sumsion (2016) revealed evidence of this political direction and supported my own research and understanding of the political influences underpinning recent changes in ECEC policy in Australia. According to Bown & Sumsion (2016), 'a series of singular but interrelated events termed, "plays of forces" generated opportune political moments that were catalysts for

politicians to take particular policy action' (p. 11). They found that 'the normalising discourses of neoliberalism, materialism and neuroscience have a gravitational pull on Australian politicians' conceptions of ECEC and their subsequent decisions for policy' (p. 11). Bown and Sumsion (2016) argued, the 'use of tactics by politicians, public servants, advocates and activists can influence politicians' policy decision making' (p. 11). Policy decisions by the government have 'guided the direction of ECEC provision in Australia' (Bowen and Sumsion, 2016, p. 11). The study found that limited or narrow conceptualisations of the possibilities for the future direction of ECEC provision had influenced politicians' understandings of the ECEC sector (Bown & Sumsion, 2016).

The issue of external influences on politician decision making was highlighted by remarks from Senator Leyonhjelm, made at the International Conference on Childcare, hosted by the Australian Childcare Association in Sydney on 21 April 2018. Leyonhjelm (2018) stated:

> an early childhood worker does not need a Cert. III and eighteen months of study to be a childcare worker, particularly with the cost of childcare in Australia being too expensive.

According to Senator Leyonhjelm (2018), the reason childcare is so expensive is because:

> we are requiring childcare workers to get certificates to do things that they already know how to do. I do not believe a lack of formal qualifications would see a reduction in childcare standards.

These comments were significant, given Senator Leyonhjelm's membership in the Senate Select Committee on 'red tape'. Formed in 2013, the select committee investigated allegations that bureaucracy within the government has effectively placed unnecessary restrictions and prohibitions on business, the economy and community through the overuse of 'red tape' (CA, 2018). According to the Australian Government Department of Social Services (2018) article, 'Reducing Red Tape', the 'red tape' committee offers an independent evaluation of the ECEC sector in Australia. Established to investigate areas of concern within the community services sector, the 'red tape' committee has offered recommendations regarding health services, childcare, occupational licensing and FDC.

Linking the recommendations made by the 'red tape committee' in respect of ECEC service provision to my research provides further evidence for the need to examine the current involvement of the Commonwealth Government in the administration of ECEC service delivery in Australia. Particularly in view of such recommendations as: the removal of limits on the number of educators in each service; the development of an evidence base for staffing ratios and staffing qualification; and that recognition be given by the government that formal qualifications are not the only prerequisite for the provision of high-quality childcare (CA, 2018; PWC, 2014). Additional recommendations specified the DET provide a detailed annual report to the Department of Jobs and Small Business to provide greater transparency around 'red tape' reductions in ECEC. Additionally, the committee recommended the Australian Government be required to undertake a review of the objectives of fee assistance to ensure that it is actually targeting maternal workforce participation and children from disadvantaged backgrounds (CA, 2018; PWC, 2014).

5.6 Australian Early Years Workforce Strategy

As evidenced by the formation of the ACECQA, the involvement of successive Commonwealth Governments in the development of a nationally administered range of ECEC services guarantees the ongoing development of the ECEC sector in Australia (ACECQA, 2014a, 2019; DEEWR, 2013a; PWC, 2011). Through forming a partnership with the relevant state and territory governments, the Commonwealth Government created a jointly governed national approach to ECEC regulation, quality assessment and service delivery (ACECQA, 2014a, 2019; DEEWR, 2013a). Through establishing a vision to build and support a sustainable, highly qualified and professional ECEC workforce, the EYWS sought to streamline qualification and accreditation requirements for the ECEC workforce and attract and retain suitably qualified workers (Boyd, 2012; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Logan et al., 2020; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013; Tayler et al., 2013)

To overhaul ECEC service provision in Australia, all levels of government have worked to 'develop a range of measures designed to improve educators' qualifications, service delivery and curriculum content, in order to ensure high-quality service delivery' (COAG, 2012, p. 3). The professional development of the ECEC workforce has resulted in the acknowledgment of the ECEC worker and sector, as a valuable educational

resource, by other educational institutions including, NESA in NSW and the Victorian Institute of Teaching, Victoria (DEEWR, 2014; Moloney, 2011).

Research evidence suggests that ECEC services employing qualified ECTs to work with preschool-aged children, ranging in age from 3-5 years, have the potential to exert the greatest influence on children's learning outcomes and transition to a formal school environment (ACECQA, 2013; COAG, 2009a; DEEWR, 2013b; McCartney et al., 2010; Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg, & Vandergrift, 2010). Given the roles of early childhood workers in ECEC settings, the idea that training the workforce will lead to its retention is problematic, when making connections between workforce development strategies and staff retention (DEEWR, 2014; Moloney, 2011, 2019; Sylva et al., 2010; Tayler, 2011; Tayler et al., 2013; Thorpe et al., 2011). Although higher staff qualifications in ECEC are generally thought to be beneficial when considering higher quality learning outcomes for children (DEEWR, 2014; PC, 2014; Ryan & Ackerman, 2005), according to Bretherton (2010), they are not necessarily predictive of retention. Retention problems in the ECEC sector are exacerbated because university qualified ECTs, trained to work with children ranging in age from birth to 8 years, are enticed into accepting alternate careers in the primary school sector, where pay and working conditions are superior (Bretherton, 2010; PC, 2014).

5.7 Effect of Mandatory Accreditation on Early Childhood Workers

Key researchers, such as O'Connell et al. (2016) and (Logan et al. (2020) have demonstrated that continuing professional learning is required to build early childhood workers' professional understanding and skills. Early childhood educators' varying levels of qualifications and diverse backgrounds, experiences and philosophies all compete in their individual approaches to the care and education of young children (Elliott, 2015; Raban et al., 2007). These factors resulted in mixed findings regarding the effect early childhood educator qualifications have on the quality of service delivery in early childhood educational settings (Elliott, 2015).

According to a number of participants, the introduction of mandatory accreditation exacerbated the problem of attracting and retaining experienced early childhood workers, creating a dilemma for older unqualified early childhood workers, who were

required to undertake formal training in industry-specific ECEC courses. According to Shaz:

> so far, it [accreditation] hasn't really affected me, as I am working in an out-of-school hours centre and the legislation has not yet affected after-school services, although I have decided that, if it becomes necessary for me to do or undertake accreditation, I will look for another job or simply retire.

Lauren also stated that:

> for a lot [of unaccredited workers], it was over-whelming and a lot have been lost to the industry as a result. A lot of them were actually told if you don't do it, you will lose your job.

Key findings from this study emphasis the lack of voice or recognition in the literature about how staff attrition has affected staff members motivation, job satisfaction or their intent to remain in their roles, particularly in view of the additional workloads imposed upon them. Pointing to major systemic issues at play in respect of the introduction of the NQF strategy, continuing poor pay and working conditions for early childhood workers, points to a failure in the strategy. Having failed to improve the professional standing of the early childhood worker, despite many attaining a qualification in the form of a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care, the strategy has resulted in increased workloads for Certificate III, Diploma and Bachelor level ECEC workers. Further, those workers holding a Diploma level credential have received no formal recognition as early childhood educators. Additionally, ever-increasing quality assurance and compliance documentation requirements have meant an increased workload for existing staff which policy makers have failed to address. Overlooked in the rush to credentialism, the early childhood workers contribution remains largely ignored, with little training or support offered to assist workers to meet their mandatory reporting requirements.

A consensus among participants was that having unqualified experienced staff who guided or mentored younger staff members provided stability. According to Pat, the resignation of many older unqualified early childhood workers has meant this aspect of ECEC practice has now been lost, 'many unqualified early childhood workers have

opted not to undertake mandatory accreditation—a factor which has been detrimental to the sector and has put the early childhood worker and service at a disadvantage'.

5.8 Need for Improved Early Childhood Worker Training

Universities and RTOs are responsible for the development of specific courses to prepare early childhood educators to work in the ECEC sector (ACECQA, 2019; DEEWR, 2013a). Although these courses are intended to improve the quality of ECTs and early childhood educators (Bretherton, 2010; Gibbons & Farquhar, 2014), a number of participants in this study—including Connie, Pat and Lauren—were concerned that a number of for-profit privately owned and operated RTO are failing to monitor course content, providing inadequate training and oversight, producing graduates with insufficient content knowledge and experience. Ty stated:

> I don't believe there has been much of a benefit with mandatory accreditation. The staff members I have worked with who have gone through the process don't seem to know what they are doing.

Research suggests that, although there has been significant progress in the development of a standardised curriculum and the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce, both nationally and internationally, the sector is still characterised by semi-skilled, unskilled and poorly paid women (Moloney, 2011, 2019; Moloney & Pope, 2013; O'Connell et al., 2016). This situation highlights the need for early childhood worker accreditation, with standardised and transportable credentials recognised nationally (Austin et al., 2012). A growing body of international research has concluded that educators need a different toolkit of skills than those currently provided by many VET and higher education early childhood courses (McArdle, 2010; Sims, 2010; Tayler, 2012; Whitington et al., 2014). According to Tayler (2012), improving early childhood pre-service education and training is necessary for educators to provide high-quality ECEC service provision. A belief supported by Ty, 'students are completing their course without the necessary skills to adequately support children's needs'. Supporting Ty's comments, Lauren stated that 'the quality of the people coming out of the RTO, having graduated from private colleges, is not quite as good as people from TAFE'.

In view of the negative publicity received by a number of private, for-profit RTOs throughout Australia, with specific reference to over-charging for VET courses,

inadequate supervision and course oversight (CA, 2015; Tayler et al., 2015) a number of participants, including Tash, Ty and Mick, voiced concerns regarding the veracity of the private RTO sector. According to Tash, 'the lack of accountability throughout the VET sector has impacted on the credibility of credentials awarded and the quality of students graduating from these organisations.'

Tayler's (2012) study into professional practice and pre-service preparation of early childhood educators also identified gaps in higher education and VET early childhood courses—gaps specifically related to understanding the unique culture in the context of LDC services. Taking a broader view of early childhood professionals working in LDC, Tayler (2012) suggested:

> an integrated model of training needs to be designed to generate early childhood professionals who are child-learning focused and interventionist practitioners, who can work within play-based environments and who are capable of using evidence to identify and meet the learning interests and capacities of individual young learners. (p. 10)

According to Sims (2010), the introduction of an integrated model of early childhood educator training into the community work, early childhood and family work courses offered by VET and higher education ECEC will improve outcomes for student educators. To achieve the goals outlined in the Commonwealth Government's reform agenda, a professional learning culture needs to be cultivated, starting with initial ECEC educator training which should continue through the early childhood worker's entire professional life.

The Australian Skills Quality Authority is responsible for co-ordinating the registration process of RTOs in Australia. Determining the scope of training and assessment services is a critical strategic, business and organisational function that is instrumental in establishing the focus, breadth and type of training and assessment to be provided by any registered training and assessment organisation (Australian Government, 2011). Only through ongoing oversight of such organisations and ensuring they adhere to the performance criteria, as set down within the 'modius operandi' of the Australian Skills Quality Authority, can we guarantee the quality of new graduates to the sector. By investigating the scope of training and assessment service delivered; identifying

organisational capacity and appropriateness for providing training and assessment services; and ensuring legal and organisational requirements are co-ordinated appropriately can we monitor the scope and quality of training and assessment services provided and thereby ensure compliance with and by these organisations (Australian Government, 2011).

This study's findings suggest a need to rethink what constitutes an ECTs professional identity and encourage educators to engage in critical reflection and debate on the issue of quality in practice (Baltodana, 2012). It is insufficient for the government to merely demand high-quality education for young children—according to the participants in this study, it is also the responsibility of the government to provide educators with affordable, accountable, high-quality training and education opportunities. An analysis of data from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care (Vandell et al., 2010) commenced in 1990, found that early childhood care providers who achieved higher levels of educational attainment and standards of training were better able to provide improved learning environments and sensitive care.

An AEU (2014) report also discussed workforce issues, stressing the need for all staff to be appropriately qualified and emphasising the need for adequate support and resources for the EYLF and ongoing consultation with stakeholders (COAG, 2009). The report advocated the need for funded professional development courses for early childhood workers, in addition to improved salaries and working conditions (AEU, 2014).

5.9 Staff Shortages

The struggle to gain status and parity with ECTs working in the school sector is reflected across the early year's workforce in a number of different countries. The United Kingdom was one of the first countries to question the quality and status of the early year's workforce (Simpson, 2010). However, the disparities between the salaries and working conditions of primary and secondary school teachers in the United Kingdom, compared with early childhood workers, remains in question (Lewis & West, 2016). To ensure a continuing supply of highly qualified ECEC educators, Australia may need to offer ongoing professional development opportunities to the ECEC workforce and address the issues of pay parity within the sector (DET, 2014; Logan et al., 2020).

Highlighted in findings from the literature review, retaining high-quality staff is of utmost importance to the future of the ECEC sector. ECT turnover in early education is high, with low pay a primary factor in ECTs' decisions to leave the sector (Brennan & Adamson, 2014; OECD, 2019; Whitebook et al., 2016). Increased staff turnover, the problem of attracting and retaining high-quality ECEC workers, particularly for Indigenous-focused services, is now widespread and a major concern in metropolitan, regional and remote areas of Australia (PC, 2014). In the early childhood setting, early childhood educators' wellbeing is increasingly recognised as an important factor in providing high-quality education and care (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014). Heavy workloads, low wages and benefits have negatively affected the working lives of many early childhood workers, resulting in high staff turnover rates that discourage dedicated and skilled workers from entering the sector (Cumming, 2017; Irvine et al., 2016; OECD, 212b; Osgood et al., 2017; Whitebook et al., 2016). Only by addressing the inequities currently plaguing the ECEC sector can we attract more workers (DET, 2014).

5.10 Inadequate Pay and Working Conditions

The ECEC sector has become one of the largest employment sectors in Australia. The rapid development of the ECEC sector has resulted in an increased emphasis on ECEC educator professionalism, with early childhood workers considered crucial in ensuring the delivery of quality pedagogical practices (Cloney et al., 2016; Logan et al., 2020). A lack of parity between education sectors throughout Australia has led to early childhood workers feeling undervalued, which has contributed to a growing shortage of ECEC trainees, and retention issues within the sector (Cumming, 2017; Irvine et al., 2016; Osgood et al., 2017; Whitebook et al., 2016). According to COAG (2012):

> given the limited focus of the workforce strategy and the problematic premise underpinning its focus on qualifications, the omission of measures to improve wage equity may result in the long-term sustainability aimed for not being delivered. (p. 3).

The attraction and retention of early childhood workers is a national concern and priority (Choy & Haukka, 2010; COAG, 2009a; PC, 2011). Consequently, there is an urgent need for a reform agenda to address the issue of retention of skilled early childhood workers (Boyd, 2012; Irvine et al., 2016; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Moloney,

2011, 2019; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013). By developing childcare policy that allowed ECEC services to employ primarily unqualified staff, state and territorial governments in Australia condoned the belief that childcare was nothing more than childminding (A. Elliott, 2006; Russell, 2009a; Shpancer et al., 2008). Thereby perpetuating inequities in the system and encouraged employers to maintain a situation where ECEC workers receive low pay and inferior working conditions (Boyd, 2012; Irvine et al., 2016; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013).

Identified as a way to elevate the problem of retaining experienced older workers, supported training in the form of in-servicing training and assessment for eligible unaccredited ECEC workers already employed in the sector. Providing additional educational support for early childhood workers still to complete an accredited early childhood-related credential, will encourage participation and assist in retaining these valuable mentors who are currently leaving in the sector as a result of external pressure exerted upon them by employers.

Research has confirmed that highly qualified educators have a greater understanding of child development and are better equipped to lead activities that support early childhood learning and development (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). Improving educator qualifications is imperative for children's emotional and academic growth (O'Connell et al., 2016; Lally and Mangione, 2017; Sroufe et al., 2010). Highlighted in research identified in the literature review improving educator qualifications is imperative for children's emotional and academic growth (Lally and Mangione, 2017; O'Connell et al., 2016; Sroufe et al., 2010). Cheeseman and Torr (2009) argue:

> while attention is given to recruiting students into training places, there has been little reference to the development of strategies to address the long-term difficulties of retaining staff in the prior to school sector (p. 71)

The attrition of valuable unqualified early childhood workers, as a consequence of the introduction of mandatory accreditation, has raised concerns in the ECEC sector and the community in general (Brennan & Adamson, 2014). In recent years, Commonwealth Government attention has shifted to the role of childcare in providing opportunities for children's development, learning and socialisation. An issue still prevalent throughout

the ECEC sector today, retaining suitably qualified and experienced staff remains a priority (Jordan et al., 2018; Lewis & West, 2016; Osgood et al., 2017; Whitebook et al., 2016).

5.11 Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care Provision

Research documents identified in the literature review support the opinion that quality in ECEC can be defined by the human and structural resources available, suggesting that an indicator of quality is the level of integration between care and education activity and the quality of interactions between children and staff (Manning et al., 2017). According to Curby, Downer, and Booren (2014), 'the more effective interactions become between the child and staff, the greater likelihood of positive and constructive engagement on the part of the child' (pp. 103–194)—especially when providing high-quality education and care services (Melhuish et al., 2015).

Established by extensive research identified in the literature review, quality in ECEC comprises 'a variety of elements including, group size, staff to child ratio, supervision level, teacher sensitivity, the quality of staff interactions, learning and emotional climate, curriculum content and caregiver qualifications' (Brennan, 2016, p. 16). The quality of children's early environment and attachments—particularly the quality of relationships with primary caregivers—has a significant effect on a child's development and wellbeing (Lally & Mangione, 2017). Although there is little reliable evidence on the contribution of each of these elements to the child's overall developmental outcomes (Brennan, 2016; PC, 2014, 2015), there is evidence that a child's early years significantly shape brain development, which in turn influences lifelong learning, behaviour and health (Lally, 2013; Lally & Mangione, 2017).

According to a recent report titled 'Quality Education for All' (O'Connell et al., 2016), almost 5 years after the NQS was introduced, one-quarter of early childhood services in Australia were yet to be assessed against the QAS and, of those assessed, almost one-third were failing to meet the required standard. Consequently, over 60,000 children are starting school with poor social skills and emotional wellbeing, resulting in them experiencing behavioural problems throughout their school life (O'Connell et al., 2016). Placing onus on the importance of the EYLF, NQS and current reform agenda

succeeding, early childhood educators are focusing all their attention on developing high-quality ECEC practice. According to Sims and Waniganayake (2015a):

> There is even a sense that criticism of the quality agenda in early childhood is traitorous: that early childhood has fought so long to be valued that criticising the mechanisms through which professionalism is painfully being born is analogous to performing an abortion without anaesthetic. (p. 342)

It is important to remember that the NQS reforms simply brought Australia up to international norms regarding ECEC provision (Brannan, 2016 Brennan & Adamson, 2014; OECD, 2015). However, a significant gap still exists between international best practice and Australia's current policy provision, with Australia still considerably below average for public investment in the ECEC sector compared with other OECD countries (Brennan & Adamson, 2014; OECD, 2015). Only through a shared approach to ECEC provision can Australia hope to achieve its goal of high-quality service provision, irrespective of social or economic considerations (ACECQA, 2014a; Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

Investing in disadvantaged children within our society must be a priority for government and the community (Cloney et al., 2016; Speight & Smith, 2010). Failure to do so is likely to cost more over time (Heckman, 2011; Ishimine et al., 2010). Early intervention in support programmes for the disadvantage will promote fairness and equal access for all (Cloney et al., 2017; Heckman, 2011; Silburn et al., 2011; Speight & Smith, 2010). According to Brennan and Adamson (2014), 'although universal access to ECEC has been expressed as an official aspiration by the Commonwealth Government, it does not establish an entitlement for children' (p. 17).

5.12 Factors Constituting High-quality Early Childhood Education and Care Provision

The effect of mandatory accreditation on the practice and provision of care within the individual ECEC service is yet to be thoroughly investigated, however, the opinion expressed by the participants together with research identified in the literature review has emphasised the financial and emotional price paid by the early childhood worker in having to undertake industry-specific training in ECEC to retain employment. Highlighting the untold loss of valuable, experienced, unqualified workers, who, having

worked in the sector for many years, receiving low pay and poor working conditions, were obliged to undertake mandatory accreditation or leave the sector.

Quality of service delivery is a contextually determined concept with common structural, organisational and process elements (Lally & Mangione, 2017; Sroufe et al., 2010). The quality of service delivery and process elements within an early childhood service predicts early childhood development outcomes, including a child's cognitive, linguistic, socioemotional and physical development (Cantor et al. 2018; Lally & Mangione, 2017; Rose et al., 2013; Sroufe et al., 2010). No longer simply child minding, early childhood services are now accountable professional organisations with high-quality educational facilities, offering a comprehensive educational curriculum in a warm and nurturing environment (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

Quality ECEC programme development and delivery include various programme and classroom features of multilevel and multidimensional constructs, integrating playing and learning (Irvine et al., 2016; Sammons et al., 2015). Traditional Western standards and definitions of quality do not necessarily represent the optimal solution—one size does not fit all (Woodhead, 2006). Mathers et al. (2012) claimed that Western and internationally developed frameworks are not implicitly transportable to regions in the developing world or necessarily culturally appropriate for the Indigenous population (Woodhead, 2006).

Farquhar and Fleer (2007) contended that centre-based programmes, which positively affect young children's development, consist of a combination of the following features: highly skilled staff; small class sizes and high adult-to-child ratios; an age-appropriate curriculum; and warm, responsive interactions between staff and children (Brennan, 2016; Farquhar & Fleer, 2007). As argued by Early et al. (2016), despite the potential importance of early childhood education for children's development, the quality of children's experiences varies across programmes and classrooms in centre-based programmes (Early et al., 2016; Whitebook & Austin, 2015).

While the available evidence suggests that the most important aspect of quality is the nature of the interaction between the early childhood educator and child, this is difficult to define and regulate (Howes et al., 2008; Ishimine et al., 2009; Lally & Mangione,

2017). Negative experiences such as 'a lack of stimulation or conflict can negatively impact on a child's development' (Naudeau et al., 2011, p. 37). According to researchers and educators, if we hope to improve the availability of high-quality early childhood services, we must ensure that children are respected, nurtured and challenged (Donoghue, 2017; McCoy et al., 2017).

Lally and Mangione (2017) believe that providing children with the opportunity to participate in individual, small-group and large-group activities will enhance their learning and is important in the development of social and self-regulation skills (Ishimine et al., 2009). Through adult guidance, children are able to develop at their own rate, using a variety of learning activities. Exposing children to ongoing opportunities to learn important skills and dispositions through participation in projects, experiments, reading and play will assist children to make meaningful decisions, exercise their curiosity and engage in important conversations with friends and family (Donoghue, 2017; Lally & Mangione, 2017).

5.12.1 Personal Qualities of the Early Childhood Worker

Assessing the quality of childcare provision should not be limited to the views of partisan politics or bureaucratic structures, but encompass the views of staff and parents who have direct experience of the service and are in a better position to judge quality (Moss, 2016). Da Silva and Wise (2006) stated that:

> one of the most important aspects of childcare for parents are the personal characteristics of the staff; parent-carer communication; the health and safety of their children; and flexibility of service provision.

This opinion was shared by the current study participants, who identified worker qualities as an important factor in determining childcare quality for families and children. An opinion shared by Waniganayake and Semann (2011) and others who believed early childhood worker personal qualities for outweigh the education standard achieved by that worker (Pakarinen et al., 2010; Sezgin & Erdogan, 2015). A consensus amongst participants, a passion for the job rated highest on the list of qualities that early childhood workers need. A 'love of the job' was a dominant factor identified throughout participant interviews, with participants describing how they felt in respect to their interactions with children, parents and staff. According to C. Jones (2016), early

childhood workers have a strong belief in themselves and what they know, stand for and are passionate about. This opinion was shared by Lee:

> the early childhood worker has to be kind, caring, able to nurture the children, keep them happy and safe. As long as the child's nappy is changed using OH&S [occupational health and safety] standards and the child is happy, that is what we have to worry about in the long run.

Other key qualities identified by participants included empathy, understanding, flexibility, adaptability and the ability to relate to children at their level and interact with participants on a one-on-one basis.

5.12.2 Professional Qualities of the Early Childhood Worker

According to participants in this study, the professional qualities of the early childhood worker, although important, are much less significant when considering the personal qualities of the early childhood worker and their interactions with the child and family (Pakarinen et al., 2010; Sezgin & Erdogan, 2015; Waniganayake & Semann, 2011). According to Ty:

> 95 per cent of parents do not even worry about things like that [accreditation]. They just worry about whether their child has been fed, is happy, been changed and safe. It's learnt a little bit, especially pre-schoolers.

This opinion was reinforced by Lauren:

> parents just want to know their child has learnt how to communicate, had a bit of help with reading and things like that. But other than that, I don't believe parents worry too much about whether staff are accredited.

5.13 Early Childhood Service Accessibility and Affordability

It is important to consider a multi-agency approach when dealing with disadvantage in our community, particularly because children from disadvantaged groups historically receive poorer-quality ECEC provision (Moloney, 2019; Slot, Lerkkanen, & Leseman, 2015; Urbis Social Policy, 2011). The lack of access to childcare in areas of need within different geographic locations, has raised concern, particularly regarding nursery places

for children from birth to two years and children with additional needs (PWC, 2011). Many parents view quality childcare as crucial in assisting them to balance work and family and safeguarding their child's health and safety (Logan et al., 2015; Moore & McDonald, 2013; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018). High-quality care offers the added advantages of incorporating early reading and mathematics skills, while highlighting social skill development in a quality environment that respects each family's cultural heritage and individual beliefs (AIHW, 2015; PC, 2014).

Continuing price increases for ECEC services has created an affordability issue for families, particularly those on limited incomes (AIHW, 2015; Slot et al., 2015; PC, 2014), resulting in a flow-on effect to government and an increasing cost for subsidised childcare (Slot et al., 2015; PWC, 2011, 2014). Exacerbating this problem is the selection tendencies of parents and clustering of ECEC services, which has compounded existing social and economic disadvantages (Slot et al., 2015; Urbis Social Policy, 2011).

The proportion of children enrolled in preschool in the year before full-time school is lower for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than for children from the mainstream community (Baxter & Hand, 2013; McKenzie & Da Costa, 2015). High-quality ECEC programmes lead to better learning and development outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage (Chen & de Groot Kim, 2014; Moloney, 2019), yet simply providing high-quality ECEC programmes may be insufficient to deal with structural disadvantage in the sector (Cloney et al., 2016; Cloney et al., 2017; Hatfield et al., 2015). As argued by Cloney et al. (2017), an alternative ECEC system may need to be developed, with services offering more flexible hours of operation and care to shift workers and casual or weekend workers, as non-standard working hours (Cloney et al., 2016; Cloney et al., 2017; Hatfield et al., 2015). Unless combined with wider social and health support schemes for families and disadvantaged communities, the desired benefits of the Commonwealth Government's reform agenda may not be realised (Hunkin, 2016).

5.14 Need for Further Reform of Early Childhood Education and Care Sector

The ECEC sector in Australia is experiencing an ongoing process of transformation. A change process that relies on political change through negotiation and an understanding of societies changing needs. Children with a low socioeconomic status or living in

remote areas throughout Australia receive a lower quality of care in early childhood than the average child (ACECQA, 2013; Baxter & Hand, 2013; McKenzie & Da Costa, 2015). As a result, a smaller proportion of children from low socioeconomic backgrounds enrol in preschool in the year before full-time school begins (McKenzie & Da Costa, 2015). According to study participant, Kris:

> the high cost and lack of affordable services in low socioeconomic communities has created a division, with children from disadvantaged communities being denied access to ECEC services, simply because of the high cost of care.

Additionally, we need to consider why research has historically failed to acknowledge the contribution of the unqualified early childhood worker and how changes in policy in respect of early childhood worker accreditation and training may assist in validating the experience and skills of the unqualified worker. Rather than being valued for their dedication and years of services within the ECEC sector and that experience leading to recognition and equivalency in respect of a recognized credential in the form of Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care, in many cases it has resulted in a loss of valuable expertise and experience. According to Pat:

> Some [unqualified] people already working in the industry were competent and respected and already guiding and mentoring others. Sharing their valuable life skills with young people coming through but instead, have been lost to the industry as a result of the introduced of mandatory accreditation and being required to undertake a course in early childhood education.

Furthermore, comments made by participants in respect of the training and accreditation of early childhood workers has brought into question the role of registered training organizations. Demonstrated shortfalls in the technical and further education training system and the recognition of prior learning process, have called into question the contribution and value of compelling ECEC workers to undertake such courses. An opinion shared by participants including Lauren who stated:

> I can see the need for it [mandatory accreditation for staff], but I still have issues with it. They really should have done it as a gradual sort of thing. People were

> really worried about it and because they were worried about it [accreditation] they just left.

5.15 Conclusion

Although Australia has begun to build the necessary infrastructure to achieve genuine ‘universal access’ to early childhood education programmes, a proactive approach is still needed to ensure that the landmark reforms currently implemented achieve their intended outcomes. Higher quality ECEC programmes produce positive cognitive and social development outcomes for the child. Research identified in the literature review shows that workers undertaking some ECEC-related in-service training is an important predictor of classroom quality. Creating a bridge between education, industry and business, the neoliberal focus on the primacy of the market by the government has resulted in an increased presence of for-profit entities in education.

Previous researchers have failed to address the valuable contribution of unqualified early childhood workers to the developmental and emotional needs of the children in their care and have concentrated on qualified ECTs’ education and training. Through addressing the gaps in existing literature on early childhood workers’ education and training, my research highlights the need for the Commonwealth Government to undertake a further review of their policy regarding ECEC provision and early childhood workers’ training and accreditation.

CHAPTER 6: Where to From Here?

Introduction

An area of research still to be thoroughly investigated, ECEC mandatory accreditation has invoked criticism and become an area of contention among early childhood workers, politicians, researchers and parents. This thesis has reported qualitative research findings exploring the experiences and opinions of a group of Australian early childhood workers located in NSW, who experienced first-hand the effect of the introduction of mandatory accreditation on them and their co-workers.

Using in-depth interviews, I asked open-ended, semi-structured questions to elicit detailed information from 22 men and women, ranging in age from 18 to 76 years, regarding their experience of mandatory accreditation. I engaged in thematic analysis to draw from the participants' narratives to explore their opinions on the subject under discussion.

6.1 Topic Overview

As an introduction to this chapter, I present an overview of the initiatives implemented by the Commonwealth Government to overhaul the ECEC sector in Australia. Incorporated in these initiatives, the EYWS was designed by industry experts to develop a workforce capable of meeting community demands, and came into effect from 1 January 2014 (ACECQA, 2014a). The EYWS aimed to assist early childhood workers to attain the skills and qualifications necessary to provide high-quality childcare experiences across all early childhood service types, and incorporated mandatory accreditation for early childhood workers employed to care for children ranging in age from birth to 5 years (ACECQA, 2012a, 2014; DEEWR, 2014).

Situated within the current childcare policy context, my research has identified early childhood worker qualifications and accreditation as key factors in the provision of high-quality ECEC service delivery. Aimed specifically at systems and structures within the ECEC sector, the Commonwealth Government introduced a reform agenda focusing on 'quality' as a centrepiece for change (Logan et al., 2020; Moloney & Pope, 2013). Quality in early childhood education is often defined within 'a specific policymaking context' (Krejsler, 2012, p. 100), which according to Bowen and Sumsion (2016) and

others is closely connected to specific legislation and policies existing at the time (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Bown & Sumsion, 2016; Krejsler, 2012).

Over the last decade, a strengthened focus on early childhood educators holding industry-specific qualifications has emerged, with a particular focus on the need for ECTs to work with preschool-aged children. By making national qualifications, skills and competencies easily translatable and readable from state to state, mandatory accreditation was designed to promote mobility and accountability within the ECEC workforce (Moloney & Pope, 2013; O'Connell et al., 2016).

6.2 Using an Interpretivist Phenomenological Paradigm

Applying an interpretivist phenomenological paradigm to all stages of my research, provided me with the opportunity to examine the subjective experience of external influence exerted by government, ECEC service operators and managers on early childhood workers to undertake mandatory accreditation (Gray, 2014; Neuman, 2012; Ryan, 2018). An interpretivist phenomenological paradigm encouraged me to explore the 'lived experience' of early childhood workers in respect of the introduction of mandatary accreditation and examine the effect that had on the professional and personal lives of the early childhood workers who participated in this study (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano-Clarke, 2017). Through exploring early childhood workers' lived experiences of mandatory accreditation, I sought to problematize those experiences, relating them to the broader societal ideology and prevailing policy and political landscape, thereby highlighting the issues affecting the early childhood worker, including pay inequity, accreditation, coercion and exploitation (Brennan, 2016; White & Wastell, 2017).

It is important to consider that the views presented here are representative of a small number of participants and chronicle stories from different perspectives. This topic requires further study, and the participants' stories represent a partial telling of a complex issue. While my research contributes to broader academic discussion regarding the introduction of mandatory accreditation, the study has implications for early childhood workers, the government, parents and the children attending ECEC services throughout Australia. The knowledge presented here contributes to broader academic discussion, addressing early childhood worker professionalism and the personal and

professional qualities that constitute a high-quality early childhood worker and service (Logan et al., 2020; Sezgin & Erdogan, 2015; Waniganayake & Semann, 2011). Further, this study examined issues surrounding the inequities experienced by qualified and unqualified early childhood workers in respect of pay, professional development opportunities and advancement (Brennan & Adamson, 2015; Irvine et al., 2016). By valuing the contribution of the participants in this study and listening to their voices, I challenged preconceived notions regarding the nature of ECEC work and the contributions of early childhood workers to the growth and development of Australia's youth.

6.3 Reflections on Findings

The current system of ECEC service delivery in Australia is complex and fragmented, with unequal access to high-quality ECEC services further entrenching health, social and economic inequalities (Niklas et al., 2017; O'Connell et al., 2016). Having been influenced by employing organisations, professional associations and educational institutions the Commonwealth Government adopted policies that changed the nature of ECEC provision in Australia (O'Connell et al., 2026).

Although a number of the policy changes implemented by the Commonwealth Government appear effective, a number of policies still require attention—specifically those addressing issues relating to jurisdictions between the states and Commonwealth regarding licensing, staffing ratios (ACECQA, 2013) and equity of access to high-quality ECEC services for Indigenous and disadvantaged children (O'Connell et al., 2016). Highlighting several pressing concerns, research articles, studies and government policy documents identified in my literature review were supported by stories collected from the early childhood workers who participated in this study,

6.4 Participant Feedback

My research findings suggest that, for the workers who participated in this study, mandatory accreditation alone does not guarantee high-quality childcare or equate to improved benefits for the individual child, worker or sector. Overall, the participants' experience of the accreditation process was of a 'one size fits all' approach that failed to value the contributions of experienced unqualified workers and their ability to connect to families at the desired personal level. When considering early childhood worker

qualifications as defining a persons' ability and skills to work in the ECEC sector, we must also look at experience and the personal qualities of the worker to clearly understand their contribution. Although qualifications give a worker formal knowledge and skills to become qualified as a Certificate III, Diploma of Bachelor level early childhood worker, we must also consider the contribution of the unqualified early childhood worker who, through years of experience, has provided invaluable support and assistance to the ECEC sector in Australia. According to O'Connell et al., 2016):

> when childminders engage in performative professionalism, they gain recognition as bona fide members of the children's workforce, but their work is changed in demonstrable ways, which make it less meaningful for them. (p. 782).

Considering those unqualified ECEC workers who have been forced to leave the early childhood sector or undertaken formal studies in early childhood education, we need to look at ways we can assess each worker's abilities and skills and how these can be translated into a formal qualification in the field. Obtaining the 'experiences, perspectives and viewpoints' (Neegaard & Ulhoi, 2007, p. 4) of unqualified early childhood workers and newly accredited early childhood workers provided a clearer understanding of the overall effect of mandatory accreditation.

6.5 The Early Childhood Education and Care Worker's Role

The ECEC workforce in Australia was historically diverse, with qualifications ranging from unqualified carers to university graduates (Logan et al., 2020; Russell, 2009a). The term 'childcare worker' historically applied to anyone working in the ECEC sector, whether trained ECTs or unqualified staff members (Elliott, 2004, 2006). The term 'teacher' in the ECEC context historically applied to almost anyone working directly with children in an ECEC service, irrespective of credentials (Elliott, 2004, 2006; Russell, 2009a). A consequence of the rapid changes taking place in the ECEC sector in Australia which include the introduction of the NQF, NQS, EYLF and the EYWS, the attraction and retention of ECEC workers has become of vital concern nationally (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; PC, 2011). An increased emphasis on early childhood educators' professionalism and role in a child's early development has become a central

theme in discussions on the content and direction of early childhood educators' training and professional development (Brennan, 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016).

Resulting from changes in legislation regarding ECEC provision, early childhood workers are required to gain increasing credentials and expertise to be able to work in the current complex legislative and regulatory framework (Brennan, 2014; O'Connell et al., 2016). Ensuring that early childhood workers have graduated from properly accredited professional courses and are registered with a relevant professional organisation is a means of assuring that children in the years prior to entering formal school receive high-quality learning experiences (ACECQA, 2017; Adamson & Brennan, 2016; CA, 2009a; COAG, 2009a; Elliott, 2006). According to Fenech et al. (2007), regulations such as mandatory accreditation for ECEC workers support the early childhood worker, establishing links between professional practice and the regulatory environment, and giving clear guidelines for reporting, curriculum development and staff accreditation. With the potential to afford early childhood workers enhanced social status, economic rewards and professional recognition, mandatory accreditation has increasing relevance in our ever-changing world (Adamson & Brennan, 2016; Brennan, 2014).

6.5.1 Teachers' Work

Early Childhood education is an essential part of our children's path to knowledge and lays the foundation for lifelong learning and success. By learning about the capacities of infants through meaningful interactive experiences in high-quality early childhood educational settings (Recchia & Shin, 2010), the ECT can develop high-quality education and care programmes, which encourage better learning outcomes for the children in their care. When considering the ECTs' role in ECEC, we must consider where we can best utilize their skills, particularly when considering the age of the children. Traditionally, ECTs primarily work with children ranging in age from 3 – 5 years, with little information available regarding pre-service ECTs' experiences when working with young children under 3 years of age (Recchia & Shin, 2010). This represents a gap in knowledge especially when examining the Australian context—particularly when considering pre-service ECTs must successfully complete an infant/toddler or birth to 2 years professional experience placement to achieve registration as an ECT (Rouse et al., 2012).

A continuing point of contention among scholars, academics and participants in this study, is whether ECTs working with preschool-aged children ranging in age from 3 – 5 years leads to improved children's learning outcomes in an ECEC setting (Early et al., 2016; IofM & NRC, 2015; Mashburn et al., 2008; Whitebook & Austin, 2015). According to Harrison et al. (2012) and Kennedy, (2018), 'ECT teacher–child interactions have achieved higher levels of quality, resulting in higher levels of social competence and lower behavioural problems in pre-kindergarten classrooms. A point contested by participants in this study who believe, emotionally supportive early childhood workers, irrespective of credential, providing quality interactions between themselves and child, provide equal benefits to the child as interactions between the qualified ECT and child. Irrespective of the opinion of the researchers and participants cited above, an incontestable point remains—there is a need for credibility within the ECEC sector through all ECEC workers participating in early childhood education and care training.

6.6 Improving Early Childhood Worker Training and Accreditation

According to participants in this study including Pat, 'early childhood worker training can provide a pathway to the early childhood worker which can lead to them undertaking further study.' A path to empowerment, worker training is central to the professionalisation process (Sarra, 2011). Through early childhood workers developing their own professional learning, those qualities considered necessary to be a high-quality educator can be examined through reflective practice and will assist early childhood educators in developing and sustaining high-quality ECEC programmes (ACECQA, 2013; Brennan, 2016; COAG, 2009a; Russell, 2009a). The EYWS emphasises the need for participation in 'professional development and job-based training opportunities to assist the early childhood worker to acquire specialist skills and knowledge in the field of ECEC education' (COAG, 2012, p. 8). Ongoing professional development programmes enable ECTs and early childhood workers to translate their knowledge and skills into practice (Hall-Kenyon, Bullough, MacKay, & Marshall, 2014; Sheridan, Giota, Han, & Kwon, 2009).

6.6.1 Improving Early Childhood Worker Pay and Working Conditions

Regrettably, the EYWS and mandatory accreditation have failed to address a core issue that dissuades early childhood workers and qualified ECTs from choosing to work in the LDC sector—the absence of any discussion concerning professional wages, working conditions and pay parity across ECEC settings (Early Childhood Australia, 2014; Hermant, 2013; Irvine et al., 2016). Despite best attempts on behalf of the ECEC sector, a critical shortage of qualified staff has threatened the attainment of broader child and family policy objectives (Press, Wong, & Gibson, 2015). Attempts to meet the lack of suitably qualified ECEC workers and the additional workloads placed of workers, has require many ECEC workers to commit additional time to meeting mandatory reporting requirements and in some cases formal study, which has necessitated balancing study, family and work obligations (Miller et al., 2012)—a situation with the potential to place enormous strain on the physical and mental health of the early childhood worker (Miller et al., 2012).

The loss of early childhood workers and a shortage of suitably qualified ECTs continues to impede the development of the ECEC sector (DEEWR, 2013b; Early Childhood Australia, 2014, 2016). Early childhood workers, both with and without formal qualifications, are among the lowest paid workers in Australia. Further, poor remuneration and mandatory accreditation is driving people out of the sector (Russell, 2009b, 2009c; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018). This view was supported by participants in this study. According to Nickie, 'if we hope to continue to develop the ECEC sector, we have to address the poor pay and working conditions common throughout the industry'. Similarly, Erin stated:

> As far as I can see, there has been little change in status of anyone. Our pay and working conditions have not really changed. I am now on a contract, so maybe I am being paid a little more, but I don't think so.

According to Irvine et al. (2016), little additional financial benefit has been forthcoming for early childhood workers who have upgraded their qualifications or participated in professional development courses (Boyd, 2012). The supply of educators holding a diploma- or university-level qualification; high staff turnover; and staff shortages in the metropolitan, regional and remote areas of Australia have negatively affected the ECEC sector (Hermant, 2013; Irvine et al., 2016), thereby inhibiting the Commonwealth

Government's ability to implement and accelerate the reform agenda currently in place (PC, 2011, 2014, 2015).

Sumsion (2012) argued, low pay and poor working conditions continue to negatively affect the ECEC sector, resulting primarily from the 'gender pay gap and the fact that 94 per cent of this workforce is female' (p. 1). Consequently, the problem of attracting and retaining early childhood workers, particularly for Indigenous-focused services, continues to impede the ECEC sector's ability to develop consistency in service delivery (Irvine et al., 2016; PC, 2014). According to a study participant Erica:

> in order to retain existing and new unqualified staff and encourage them to undertake formal training, steps need to be taken to address the issue of parity within the ECEC sector.

Reflecting on participants' stories, I have argued that a range of approaches will need to be adopted if the EYWS is to address the problem of attracting and retaining early childhood workers—specifically ECTs—to the LDC sector (Boyd, 2012; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Sumsion & Barnes, 2013; Tayler et al., 2013; Thorpe et al., 2011). These approaches include the development of an effective, well-trained ECEC workforce, with improved qualifications and levels of professionalism (Early Childhood Australia, 2014; COAG, 2012; Logan et al., 2020). Early childhood education needs to focus on the empowerment the early childhood worker, particularly those workers of Indigenous culture and values—the 'need for children to grow up strong in their culture and the expectation that early childhood educators will operate in ways that support these aims has become a priority' (Sims, 2017, p. 224).

The disparities in the salaries and working conditions between primary and secondary school teachers and early years educators are ongoing (Lewis & West, 2016; Ohi, 2016), with a lack of recognition for early childhood qualified ECTs, compared with other university degree teachers, resulting in continued calls for parity (Osgood et al., 2017). These are endemic workforce challenges influencing the ECEC sector's ability to attract and retain highly qualified staff (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018).

6.6.2 Need for Ongoing Monitoring of Vocational Education Training Services

Critical to Australia's economic and social productivity is a professional skilled and engaged ECEC workforce (COAG, 2009a; Logan et al., 2020). International research has reinforced that belief, acknowledging that skilled ECTs are invaluable and enhance successful ECEC practice (Carrington & MacArthur, 2013; Gruenberg & Miller, 2011). Cross-country studies with non-experimental data found a strong correlation between staff qualifications and early childhood outcomes in terms of language scores among children (Montie, Xiang, & Schweinhart, 2006). These studies examined elements of ECEC staff quality, including caregivers' education attainment, specialised training in ECEC and commitment to childcare work (Doherty, Tu, Schilmoeller, & Schilmoeller, 2006; Montie et al., 2006).

Tayler's (2012) Australian study into professional practice and pre-service preparation of early childhood educators identified gaps in higher education and VET courses. Specifically, it identified gaps in ECEC bridging programs for primary teachers, which failed to consider the unique culture of the LDC context (Tayler, 2012). Additionally, concerns regarding the effectiveness of RTO's training organizations in providing adequate training programmes for ECEC workers were raised in the Senate and became a focus of attention for participants in this study. According to Connie:

> Embodied in these reforms should be clearly defined assessment requirements, specifying practical skills to be demonstrated in a workplace environment, with closer monitoring of the implementation of RTO training practices as a priority

Having qualified ECEC educators working within the early childhood sector can accelerate how children learn, build social skills and develop emotionally and intellectually (Cantor et al., 2018; Lally, 2013; Lally & Mangione, 2017).

The introduction of a range of recognised qualification pathways is viewed by researchers, politicians and the ECEC sector as important to the development of the ECEC workforce (Logan et al., 2020). Study participant Connie similarly recommended:

> ECEC courses in the form of Certificate II and III should be included as part of Year 11 and 12 curriculums, particularly for those students contemplating a career in the ECEC sector'.

Connie elaborated by stating that '[p]roviding an opportunity for secondary students to experience work in the ECEC sector first-hand will assist them to make a more informed choice in respect of their future careers'. Offering a career pathway for educators, nationally recognised qualifications have the potential to improve worker retention and enhance the future supply of qualified ECTs (Choy & Haukka, 2010; COAG, 2009a).

6.6.3 Recognition of Early Childhood Worker Credentials

Governments generally accept the responsibility of ensuring the welfare and safety of vulnerable members of our society (AIHW, 2018; Niklas et al., 2017), which includes ensuring all ECEC services provided to children meet minimum community standards, regardless of the family's economic circumstances or social status (Choy & Haukka, 2010; Niklas et al., 2017; Tayler et al., 2013; Thorpe et al., 2011). Adopting a regulatory approach allows governments to intervene rapidly and decisively in cases of non-compliance, where regulatory requirements have been laid down (ACECQA, 2019). This is an important consideration, given the strong community expectation that governments should be willing and able to act immediately when significant childcare concerns arise (Brennan, 2016).

Ingvarson et al. (2006) discussed the purpose of accreditation, professional registration and the setting of registration standards to raise the status of the ECEC profession. Ingvarson et al. (2006) stressed the need for all staff to be appropriately qualified, and emphasised the importance of adequate support, resources and ongoing consultation with stakeholders. As with any professional body, accreditation is fundamental to the credibility of a 'discipline', and the ECEC sector has for too long avoided the inevitability of requiring early childhood workers to be accredited. According to participants in this study if we hope to generate lasting change in professional practice and sustain changes already underway, early childhood workers attitudes, knowledge and beliefs must be considered (Edwards & Nuttall, 2009; Fisher & Wood, 2012).

Professionalising the ECEC workforce is seen to be a solution for an ongoing problem, with many factions, including government and industry experts, promoting the link between professional status and the need for professional wages and improved working conditions for the ECEC workforce (Boyd, 2012; Logan et al., 2020; Sumsion, 2012).

Participation in some form of formal tertiary or university studies will equip early childhood workers for the role they play in the care and nurturing of the children in their care. The need to focus on early childhood worker preparation, competence and credentials is fundamental to underpin and complement ongoing debate about status and professionalism in respect of ECEC workers qualifications and training (Irvine et al., 2016; Logan et al., 2020). According to Elly, 'it is an advantage for early childhood workers to have a credential in early childhood education'. This belief was also supported by Mick: 'having a credential in ECEC helps; the need to understand childcare is important'.

A consensus among participants was the belief that a further review of current ECEC sector reforms should be undertaken. Highlighted in the findings, participants such as Ty thought that 'attaining a credential in ECEC provision in the form of Certificate III or Diploma of Children's Services had no value'. According to Kristy:

> it doesn't matter what our accreditation, everyone is still just doing the same job. It is only the ECT who are recognised, it's not the diploma. So, again, the credential is not worth anything—the same with the Cert. III.

Ty reiterated this view: 'it is simply a name change, with no change to the early childhood worker's status, salary or working conditions.' This belief was echoed by participants, including Erica, who stated:

> we are still performing our duties in the same way. Still paid the same wage and our status has not changed. Parents still treat us the same and we interact with the children in the same way.

Andrew Piccoli, the former NSW Minister for Education, recommended the inclusion of early childhood trained teachers in the NSW Institute of Teachers, as supported by the NSW Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) report, 'Early Childhood Teachers and Qualified Staff' (SPRC Report 4/04) (Adamson, & Brennan, 2014). This recommendation resulted in the recognition of early childhood teaching credentials and was a first step towards professional recognition for the ECEC workforce (Irvine et al., 2016; Logan et al., 2020). This initiative enabled early childhood workers with a minimum Bachelor of Early Childhood Education or equivalent degree to be included in the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) and other equivalent state

and territory licensing and regulatory bodies, including the Victoria Registration and Qualification Authority and the Queensland College of Teachers. Sadly, this initiative has fallen short of the Commonwealth Government's aim of establishing administration and monitoring standards for the ECEC sector. According to the participants in this study, including, Kristy:

> only extending admittance to state and territory licensing bodies to university-trained and qualified ECTs has resulted in the majority of early childhood workers being automatically excluded from recognition as 'professionals' within the sector.

In considering my own learning journey through this research study, I initially believed that experience was the most important factor in producing high-quality early childhood workers. I now believe the educational process to be a collaborative one—drawing upon practice wisdom, with educators developing authentic connections with the childcare workforce, so that the education is meaningful, respectful and of real value to parents, children and workers. According to the participants in this study, if the Commonwealth Government hopes to develop a management system capable of monitoring the ECEC sector, it will need to rethink its policy on recognising those lower-level qualifications mandatorily required for people wishing to work in the ECEC sector in Australia.

If high-quality in-service professional development is to be effective in improving classroom practices, the quality of the ECEC workforce needs to be addressed (Early et al., 2016; Hamre et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2017; Piasta et al., 2012). A professional learning culture must be cultivated in initial early childhood education and training courses, and then continued through the professional life of the educator.

6.6.4 Recognition of Prior Learning for Unqualified Early Childhood Workers Who Have Worked Long Term in the Sector

A consequence of the introduction of mandatory accreditation, older unqualified ECEC workers have chosen to leave or been forced from the sector. This point was echoed by participants in this study, such as Asha, who stated that '[t]he loss of experienced older workers has created confusion and resentment throughout the ECEC sector'. Highlighting the need for ongoing mentoring and skills development, the need to train older workers has gained increased attention in recent years (Beier, Teachout, & Cox,

2012; Zacher, Kooij, & Beier, 2018). Despite ageing and the decline of physical abilities, older workers offer increased benefits in terms of knowledge and experience. If we hope to avoid the further loss of valuable, experienced ECEC workers from the sector (United Voice, 2011), we must consider a holistic approach to in-service training and development. This situation provides further evidence that the world's ageing working population is considered disposable (Hedge, Borman, & Lammlein, 2006), with mandatory accreditation and the method by which it was implemented highlighting the need for a review of the RPL process to avoid the further loss of experienced older workers from the sector. According to Lauren:

> It's very time consuming and repetitious [recognition of prior learning], it is absolutely ridiculous! They ask the same question about thirty times phrased differently and you are still answering the same question. So even that little gift they gave to the untrained worker was still of no benefit, because it was mind boggling to try and accomplish attaining your Cert III using that process.

It is important to consider the relationship between age and training, particularly when establishing training programmes for older workers. ECEC service operators and managers must be made aware of the strengths of older workers (e.g., work experience, loyalty and strong work ethic). According to Zacher, Kooij, and Beier (2018), two tactical approaches to training older workers can be used: (i) treating age as an 'aptitude' or (ii) accommodating older workers by providing more training time and allowing 'self-pacing'. Both tactics can lead to higher job satisfaction and performance and increased benefits to the industry through mentoring and leadership (Zacher et al., 2018).

Motivation to learn is also significant, as it influences whether workers learn during training or acquire knowledge and skills through experience. Motivation is the direction, effort, interest and persistence that a person invests in learning before, during and after training (Tannenbaum, & Yukl, 1992). Motivation to learn is a function of individual characteristics and the work environment and is enhanced by organisational and supervisory support before and during training (Sezgin and Erdogan, 2015). A person's motivation to learn is influenced by personality traits, age; cognitive ability; and anxiety levels (Pakarinen et al., 2010; Waniganayake & Semann, 2011), a factor which became

evident when considering comments by participants in this study including Shaz, who stated:

> I only completed high school and have undertaken no further studies in early childhood education. Personally, I did not believe I would be able to cope [undertaking mandatory accreditation], particularly as I did not finish high school. I didn't have the money or time to worry about those kind of courses.
> Shaz continued saying:
> Why bother wasting my time doing courses when I would receive no extra benefits. I've worked too long in the industry, for over twenty-years, I don't believe I could get any more benefits than I already do.

While participants were frustrated with the RPL processes, revisiting such systems seems worthwhile. According to Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005), adults have higher motivation to learn when they view the training content as related to their job demands. According to study participants, if we hope to motivate older workers to undertake industry-specific training, we must tailor training programmes to accommodate their needs, expectations and experience. According to Connie:

> unless initiatives are put in place to encourage experienced older unqualified workers to participate in the RPL process and thereby maintain employment in the ECEC sector, a valuable resource for training and mentoring future workers will be irretrievably lost.

6.6.5 Ongoing Professional Development of the Early Childhood Workforce

Professionalism within the ECEC sector has long been of concern to state, territory and Commonwealth governments. Issues such as initial training, supply and demand, salaries and working conditions have been fundamental concerns for government and services operators and at the heart of quality ECEC provision throughout Australia (Slot et al., 2015; Urbis Social Policy, 2011). Taking a broader view of ECEC professionals working in the LDC sector, Tayler (2012) suggested that an integrated model of training should be introduced to university coursework, designed around community work and early childhood and family work (Sims, 2010; Tayler, 2012). This opinion was shared by participants in this study including Pat, who believed that, 'improving ECEC pre-

service education and training is necessary in ensuring educators provide high-quality ECEC service provision'. According to Tayler (2012), we must:

> generate ECEC professionals who are child learning focused and interventionist practitioners who can work within play-based environments and who are capable of using evidence to identify and meet the learning interests and capacities of individual young learners. (p. 10)

Leadership and a supportive organisational infrastructure are key to implementing professional learning and pedagogical improvement strategies in ECEC settings (Gomez et al., 2015; Walter & Briggs, 2012). It is important for 'employers and centre management to encourage and support staff to undertake formal study to attain a Certificate III, Diploma or Bachelor qualification' (COAG, 2009, p. 120).

6.6.6 Develop Outcome-focused Data-collection System

To ensure the ECEC sector is prepared to deal with the complex issues of certification, registration, staff training, accreditation and professional development, industry-specific training programmes need to be established (Elliott, 2006). This belief was echoed by participants in this study, including Kristy, Pat and Connie. According to Connie, 'Establishing and monitoring of ECEC training programmes, which are industry specific, offering adequate in-service training opportunities, is essential'. The PC (2014) stated that:

> the recognition of professional standards within the ECEC sector is achievable with the development of clear and precise guidelines for staff accreditation, ultimately culminating in the acceptance of early childhood workers within the academic community as professional educators.

Encouraging early childhood workers to view their roles as competent, caring professionals, while endeavouring to foster a culture of extended professionalism, rather than of professional compliance, will equip early childhood workers for the challenges ahead (Whitington et al., 2014). Establishing preschool education as a legislated entitlement, equivalent in status and importance to primary and secondary schooling, will bring Australia into line with OECD peer nations and assist to bolster the

creditability and professional recognition of the university-trained ECT (Brennan & Adamson, 2014).

6.7 Recommendations

Based on input from the study participants, the following suggestions are presented for initiatives to improve the ECEC sector.

Recommendation 1: Improve Early Childhood Worker Accreditation System

Given the mooted expansion of the current mandatory accreditation rule to include early childhood workers employed to care for children ranging in age from 6 to 12 years, it is important to consider the ramifications for older untrained early childhood workers still employed in the OSHC sector. According to the participants in this study, encouragement seems needed for experienced workers to stay in the industry. By retaining older experienced workers as mentors for future educators and encouraging them to undertaken RPL, we will ensure their valuable contribution to the care and education of our youth is not loss.

It is important to consider the extent to which the EYWS and mandatory accreditation is meeting its objectives. According to study participants, including Pat, 'the loss of experienced early childhood workers due to the introduction of mandatory accreditation has negatively impacted the sector'. Encouraging lifelong learning by promoting the validation of non-formal and informal learning (ACECQA, 2019; Austin et al., 2012) Australia has implemented the RPL scheme for the ECEC workforce (ACECQA, 2019; Austin et al., 2012). RPL enables unqualified early childhood workers, who have worked in the sector for 5 years or more, to have their skills and competency tested, so they can attain a credential without undertaking more formalised studies in the field (ACECQA, 2019; Austin et al., 2012).

By shifting the emphasis from 'learning inputs'—such as the length and type of formal learning undertaken or type of institution involved—to skill-based inputs (Austin et al., 2012), RPL is an important element of VET (ACECQA, 2014b; CA, 2015; DEEWR, 2014). RPL is commonly used by workers seeking to obtain a qualification in their current area of work, yet there is an inherent trade-off when implementing RPL. It is important to consider the benefits of retaining experienced early childhood workers by

removing unnecessary training costs, against the loss of valuable experience ECEC workers. According to Pat, 'the RPL process is hampered by a lack of skilled trainers and assessors and the inconsistent implementation of the assessment framework by the VET sector'. According to study participants, including Connie:

> the development of a national RPL assessment tool, implemented by trained assessors, will promote a nationally consistent RPL process, although further monitoring and revision will need to be undertaken to ensure a consistent application by RTOs throughout the ECEC sector.

Recommendation 2: Improve Early Childhood Worker Pay and Working Conditions

Serious staff shortages and high staff turnover have affected staff recruitment and retention throughout the ECEC sector in Australia (Cumming, 2017; Irvine et al., 2016; Osgood et al., 2017; Whitebook et al., 2016). According to the participants in this study, including Pat, 'if we hope to retain early childhood workers, we need to provide incentives, including better remuneration packages, improved working conditions, and funded in-service and professional development opportunities'

The difficulty lies with attracting and retaining qualified staff in a sector that historically had no clear career pathways (Baxter & Hand, 2013; Brennan, 2016; McKenzie & Da Costa, 2015; PC, 2011, 2015). The lack of opportunity for career advancement has characterised the ECEC sector and is seen as a deterrent for workers from seeking employment in this sector (Brennan, 2016; Torquati et al., 2007). According to Pat:

> unless ECEC service operators, together with the Commonwealth and state governments, work to provide incentives to the early childhood worker, such as better remuneration packages, improved working conditions and funded in-service and professional development opportunities, the ECEC sector will continue to suffer.

Recommendation 3: Ensure Ongoing Professional Development of Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce

Professional development ensures that early childhood workers remain up to date with the latest information and research regarding children's learning and development (Dyment et al., 2013; Elliott & McCrea, 2015; Hill et al., 2014; PC, 2014). ECEC

studies have emphasised the need for in-service training; targeted ongoing professional development; collaboration between ECEC services; and regular reading of professional books, journals and articles on ECEC education and development as a means by which the ECEC workforce can maintain currency of knowledge in the field (Algozzine, Chuang, & Violette, 2011). By creating a community of learners through ongoing professional development and in-service programmes, we can assist early childhood educators to apply their skills and put into practice their knowledge specific to early child development and learning (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014; Sheridan et al., 2009). An opinion shared by the participants in this study including Lee who believed that:

> if we hope to retain existing experienced ECEC workers, we must provide clear accreditation guidelines, specific to the RPL process, to ensure we retain those early childhood workers who may otherwise be lost to the sector.

Recommendation 4: Ensuring Ongoing Monitoring of Vocational Education Training Services

Available through the higher education (i.e., university) and VET sector, formal education and training in ECEC service provision is provided by a range of government and private organisations. Higher education and VET early childhood education courses must be approved by the ACECQA (2014; CA, 2015; DEEWR, 2014). ACECQA-approved courses offer qualifications for ECTs and diploma- and Certificate III-level educators, as set down in the NQF (ACECQA, 2014b). Specialist ECEC teaching degrees must demonstrate compliance with the ECEC curriculum and pedagogy (ACECQA, 2014b; CA, 2015; DEEWR, 2014). As the demand for higher levels of knowledge and skills increases, education and training organisations are endeavouring to meet the changing needs of the workforce (Choy & Haukka, 2010; Logan et al., 2020).

A comprehensive system for monitoring VET service delivery, curriculum content and ethical standards must be implemented to ensure that VET services and RTOs are effective in lifting standards and supporting the provision of quality teaching and learning environments**.** Choy and Haukka (2010) stated that a priority must be to develop effective employment-based training models to meet the current and future demand for professionally trained ECEC staff. Ongoing learning is essential for

educators to maintain and improve their skills, confidence and professional growth (Elliott & McCrea, 2015; Hill et al., 2014). According to Pat:

> VET practices in respect of the accreditation of ECEC should be reviewed as a priority to ensure training packages reflect the changes to the regulatory environment for [the] ECEC sector and are consistent with those changes.

Recommendation 5: Develop Outcome-focused Data-collection System

To ensure early childhood worker credibility Kristy, believed that:

> Early childhood worker credentials, including the Diploma in Children's Services, Diploma in Out-of-school Hours Care and Advanced Diploma in Children's Services, should be recognised as valid teaching credentials.

Consequently, early childhood workers holding a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Certificate IV in Out-of-school Hours Care or diploma-level credential would be recognised as early childhood educators and professionals.

According to the participants in this study, to ensure the professionalisation of the ECEC sector, the Commonwealth Government, in conjunction with the respective state and territory governments, needs to consider establishing a national register of ECEC workers. With the capacity to drive a national data linkage agenda to monitor ECEC staff credentials, professional learning and employment history, a national register should be a priority for the government and ECEC sector. This register could be established as a new responsibility for existing state and territory teacher registration and accreditation agencies, such as the NESA in NSW and Victoria Institute of Teaching in Victoria, or as an independent national agency established to provide an outcome-focused data-collection system. The collection, linkage, analysis and dissemination of data relevant to early childhood worker credentials and employment history would provide valuable information to inform the government and ECEC sector now and into the future. Developing a national early childhood databank is fundamental to the professionalisation of the early childhood worker and continued growth of the ECEC sector and would enable monitoring of the ECEC sector through linked datasets. Together with the WWCC card, the registration of early childhood workers, irrespective of credentials, would assist with the monitoring of staff movement, availability and

accreditation status. The register should contain a record of each early childhood worker's credentials, courses undertaken, in-service training, professional development courses and employment history.

Through the systematic collection of data on early childhood workers' credentials and in-service training, the government and ECEC sector would have access to relevant, up-to-date data, providing a comprehensive overview and evaluation of the effect of the EYWS and mandatory accreditation. Linking early childhood workforce data to the ACECQA, the DEEWR and other government administrative agencies' data systems—including data held by the Australian Government Department of Human Services, Tax Office and WWCC—would assist in the accurate registration and monitoring of ECEC staff nationally. Such a database would provide accurate and up-to-date data to assess the effects of current and future reforms, and allow researchers, the government and the ECEC sector to be better informed about early childhood worker practice and industry trends to assist them with future policy decisions (Logan et al., 2017).

6.8 Research Significance

ECEC has long been undervalued as a profession and a marginalised area of focus within the field of education in comparison with the primary, secondary and higher education sectors (Bown et al., 2009; Brennan, 2016; Fenech, Waniganayake, & Fleet, 2009). ECEC is an under-researched area in need of further contributions, with the nature of the work of the unqualified early childhood worker and educator requiring further investigation (Dalli & Urban, 2013).

The aim of this study was to explore the effect of mandatory accreditation on the early childhood worker, focusing on the experiences and accounts of qualified and unqualified workers and contributing to policy conversation about the Commonwealth Government's aim to professionalise the ECEC sector. Currently, there are no national qualification requirements for educators working at centre-based childcare services and OSHC services educating and caring for school-age children between the ages of six to 12 years, with the OSHC sector one of the only areas of the ECEC sector still permitted to employee unqualified workers (DEEWR, 2013a). The research findings are relevant to the current policy context in view of possible future legislative changes, which may

include the expansion of mandatory accreditation to include early childhood workers employed to care for children ranging in age from six to 12 years (ACECQA, 2014b).

6.9 Conclusion

Education and learning in the early years play a vital role in children's lifelong learning. A journey encompassing all facets of our lives, early learning opportunities provide children with the foundation for future learning, growth and development. Irrespective of the quantity of information we absorb during our lifetime, the way in which we apply that information or knowledge to our everyday lives determines the value gained. Education and learning relate to the interaction of the individual and society and can lead to social transformation through building the individual's critical consciousness. As identified in the literature review, when organisations invest sufficiently and wisely in well-designed training, it succeeds. The goal of training is to create sustainable changes in behaviour and cognition so that individuals possess the competencies needed to perform their job. Although learning and training are related, they are not the same. Some training fails to produce any learning, with a great deal of learning occurring outside of training.

As evident in the findings, unqualified ECEC workers employed long term in the sector have acquired the skills necessary to work effectively from experience and in-service training. Unqualified ECEC workers perform their job with equal efficiency and expertise as accredited ECEC workers, having acquired their knowledge and expertise through practice and experience and are therefore capable of supporting the accredited early childhood worker in a positive way.

A fear expressed by participants in this study was that having only qualified ECTs working the in ECEC sector could depersonalise the sector' According to Mick:

> without those personal interaction between staff, children and their families, high-quality interactions cannot be attained. The personal quality of early childhood educators far outweighs credentials attained and are fundamental to good quality teaching and learning.

A consensus among participants in this study was the belief that the demands of working in the ECEC sector have contributed to qualified and unqualified early childhood workers leaving the sector. According to Kristy:

> feeling undervalued, longer working hours and increasing professional expectations have all contributed to increasing numbers of early childhood workers leaving the sector in search of better-paid work elsewhere.

A number of participants expressed the belief that the EYWS fails to address some core issues discouraging early childhood workers and ECTs from working in the ECEC sector—particularly services offering LDC—and this view is supported by peak industry bodies, including Early Childhood Australia (2014). Certain factors leave both early childhood workers and early childhood trained ECTs well below the national standard for qualified four-year-trained teacher graduates, including in terms of professional wages, poor working conditions and pay parity within the ECEC sector.

Recognition of all levels of early childhood worker credentials—including workers holding Certificate III, Certificate IV and diploma-level accreditation—as accredited professionals with NESA or other equivalent state and territory authorities is essential in establishing a professional and accountable ECEC service sector. The majority of participants in this study expressed the belief that, if we hope to establish a greater sense of professional identity for the early childhood worker, it will be necessary to establish a mechanism by which the various levels of worker accreditation can be acknowledged. According to Asha:

> It is disheartening that so many industries need qualifications to be able to provide services, particularly when there are lot of unqualified workers who are able people and may not get an opportunity for work because they do not have training relevant to that industry. I understand the need for qualifications, and I understand the need for training, especially in children's services, but I think we also need to recognise people's skills and experience.

The frequency and quality of interactions between adults and children in ECEC settings affects children's cognitive and social skills over time. As evident in the findings in this study the system by which government, the ECEC sector, community and RTOs work to develop a professional, highly trained and skilled ECEC workforce requires urgent

review. To ensure the development of an industry-trained, age-specific ECEC workforce, capable of meeting the changing needs of the ECEC sector in Australia, clear pathways for progression and recognition of professional training and accreditation need to be established. This approach will eventually reduce the disparity in pay and working conditions between early childhood workers, early childhood university-trained ECTs, and primary teachers working in the school sector. Recruitment and retention of high-quality early childhood workers will only improve when early childhood worker credentials are widely recognised.

Central to the development of integrated early childhood educational programmes, are the early childhood workers abilities to engage with children and collaborate with co-workers and families. A consequence of the increasingly complex social environments current within Australian society and the diverse family make-up, experiences and backgrounds within our communities, it's imperative that new training practices are developed to accommodate this diversity and complexity. Developing a cross-cultural workforce by training and retraining displaced personnel and encouraging a new generation to enter the sector will accelerate the development of an adaptive, flexible workforce, capable of adjusting to our changing world. According to researchers and industry experts, developing industry-specific training programmes for the early childhood workforce and encouraging the participation of a new generation of ECEC workers, with different motivations, expectations and approaches to learning, will foster continuity within the ECEC sector. The development of well-designed training programmes will provide benefits to the individual and sector by ensuring a properly prepared labour workforce. Staff qualifications, including initial education and professional development, contribute to enhanced pedagogical quality. Early childhood educational programmes, delivered by qualified early childhood educators, ensure that quality care and education is provided to young children—particularly the vulnerable or underprivileged child.

Through informing organisational practices for early childhood services, service owners and operators, I believe the research findings outlined in this study will contribute to current research in the field of ECEC and assist the early childhood worker by offering them a better understanding of the reasons for and benefits of undertaking further training and studies in their chosen field. The future of ECEC service delivery depends

on an environment where high-quality early childhood workers, with industry-specific vocational qualifications, work in collaboration to develop an age-specific ECEC curriculum that can be implemented across all ECEC service types throughout Australia.

A consequence of current economic and social pressures, companies and the government are facing pressing challenges, many of which have important implications for ongoing staff employment, training and development. The problem of unemployment and stagnant economic growth have serious repercussions for the economy and have created challenges in aligning public and private interests in respect of workforce training and skills development. Addressing gaps in existing literature on early childhood workers' education and training, which previously concentrated only on the qualified early childhood teacher the key findings highlighted this study will assist policy makers and researchers, in understanding the influence and ramifications of the introduction of a mandatory accreditation for diploma level, Certificate III and unqualified ECEC workers throughout Australia.

The findings from this study offer policy makers the unique perspective of workers in the field, who have lived the introduction of mandatory accreditation. Giving voice to those ECEC workers directly affected by the Commonwealth Government's decision to introduce mandatory accreditation, these findings encourage the early childhood sector to look beyond mandatory accreditation as the sole indicator of childcare quality. To look more closely at those areas already targeted by the Commonwealth Government as in need of reform including, curriculum development; rating and assessment; quality control; classroom management strategies and programme supports. I envisage my research will assist policy makers and researchers to understand the effect that introducing mandatory accreditation has had on the ECEC sector and consider the opinions expressed by the participants in this study. If high-quality ECEC provision is to be achieved, a more efficient and equitable means of ensuring the professionalism of the ECEC workforce will need to be implemented.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Invitation Poster

Exploring Mandatory Accreditation of Early Childhood Workers in Australia:

Implications for Practice, Provision of Care and the Early Childhood workforce.

RESEARCH PROJECT

Researcher: MERRYL MAY RUTH SYKES
Department of Society, Culture and Education
James Cook University,
Townsville, Qld. Australia.

YOU ARE INVITED to participate in a research project currently underway to investigate the effects of the introduction of Mandatory Accreditation of all early childhood workers in Australia which came into effect on 1st January, 2014.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

The purpose of this research is to;

- investigate the impact on and implications for the early childhood worker of the introduction of mandatory accreditation
- investigate the benefits the early childhood worker and sector has gained, or hopes to gain as a result of the introduction of mandatory accreditation;
- investigate whether the Commonwealth Government has achieved its stated aim of providing 'universal access' to 'high' quality childcare for all Australian children in the year prior to their starting school (DEEWR, 2016).

RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

To address gaps in existing literature on early childhood workers' education and training, which have previously concentrated on the qualified early childhood teacher, their education and training and contribution to the developmental and emotional needs of the child.

DATA COLLECTION

You will be asked to undertake an interview which will focus on your views on the introduction of Mandatory Accreditation for all early childhood workers in Australia.

The nature of the work undertaken by the early childhood workers in your Centre and whether as a result the early childhood worker having undertaken a course in early childhood education the way in which they perform their duties, interact with the children in their care has changed.

APPENDIX B: Qualitative Interview Schedule

Exploring Mandatory Accreditation of Early Childhood Workers in Australia

Participant Interview Questions

1. What do you think about the introduction of mandatory accreditation for unaccredited early childhood workers?

2. What changes have you observed?

3. What benefits have there been for those staff members who have participated in the accreditation process?

4. What benefits have there been of having only accredited staff employed at your service?

5. What are some of the disadvantages you have observed of staff having to undertake mandatory accreditation?

6. What challenges did you or your colleagues face in undertaking mandatory accreditation?

7. What are your feelings regarding the way in which mandatory accreditation was introduced and its impact on unaccredited staff who had worked long term in the sector?

8. Based on your experience in the ECEC sector, what suggestions would you make to improve the accreditation system?

9. What advice would you give to someone entering the sector or considering undertaking mandatory accreditation?

10. Is there anything else you would like to comment on regarding mandatory accreditation?

APPENDIX C: Information Letter—Participants

PROJECT TITLE:
Exploring Mandatory Accreditation of Early Childhood Workers in Australia

Dear Colleague,

My name is Merryl Sykes and I am currently undertaking doctoral research at James Cook University, Townsville. The purpose of my research is to learn more about the perceived benefits of the implementation of legislation for the mandatory accreditation of all early childhood workers in Australia.

As you are no doubt aware, the Australian Commonwealth Government introduced the National Quality Standards in 2009, which came into effect from 1 January 2012 (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 1), providing details on a range of operational requirements for education and care services (ACECQA, 2012a) that apply to long day care (child care), family day care, outside school hours care and preschools throughout Australia.

In line with these initiatives, the Commonwealth Government introduced compulsory accreditation for all childcare workers in Australia, effective from 1 January 2014. This means that all unaccredited childcare workers employed in the ECEC sector must either have completed a minimum Certificate III in Early Childhood Education or must be enrolled in a suitably accredited course offered through TAFE or an accredited provider, prior to 1 January 2014, to be eligible to work in any early childhood service in Australia.

These initiatives aim to 'improve recruitment and retention of the early childhood education and childcare workforce; develop pathways that reward and support the best workers; and raise the level of qualifications of all childcare workers in Australia' (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 1).

You are invited to participate in this research project, and will be asked to answer questions regarding your work experience, types of duties carried out by you, and whether you have attained a formal early childhood credential or commenced studying for a formal early childhood credential since the implementation of this legislation. You will also be asked about your views on the legislation and what impact it has had on you with regard to your current position, the type of work undertaken by you, and what benefit may be derived from the implementation of this legislation.

I believe the results of this research will not only be of value to individual early childhood services, their owners and operators, but will also help the untrained early childhood worker, giving them a better understanding of the reasons for and benefits of undertaking further training and studies in their chosen field.

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be invited to be interviewed. The interviews, with your consent, will be audio-taped. The interview will be conducted at your early childhood service and should take no more than 45 to 60 minutes.

Participation is voluntary and all data will be anonymous. Participants may withdraw from the study at any time without explanation or prejudice.

Your attitudes and opinions are critical to the success of this study and I recognise the value of your time, and sincerely appreciate your efforts on my behalf.

Attached is an informed consent form for you to return if you wish to be involved in this study. If you have any concerns or question in relation to the study, please contact either the principal investigator or supervisor listed below.

Principal Investigator:
Merryl Sykes
School: Social Work College of Arts, Society and Education
James Cook University
Tel:
Fax:
Email: merryl.sykes@my.jcu.edu.au

Supervisor:
Associate Professor Nonie Harris
Honours Coordinator Social Work and Human Services
College of Arts, Society and Education (CASE) in the Division of Tropical Environments and Societies (DTES)
James Cook University
Douglas, Townsville QLD 4811, AUSTRALIA
Phone:
Fax:
Email: nonie.harris@jcu.edu.au

If you have any concerns regarding the ethical conduct of the study, please contact:
Human Ethics
Research Office
James Cook University
Townsville, QLD, 4811
Phone: (07) 4781 5011
Email: ethics@jcu.edu.au

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Merryl Sykes
MsocSc, BSocSc, DipCS, DipOSHC–MACA

APPENDIX D: Information Letter—Authorised Supervisors/Managers

PROJECT TITLE:
Exploring Mandatory Accreditation of Early Childhood Workers in Australia

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Merryl Sykes and I am currently undertaking doctoral research through James Cook University, Townsville. The purpose of my research is to learn more about the perceived benefits of the implementation of legislation for the mandatory accreditation of all early childhood workers in Australia.

As you are no doubt aware, the Australian Commonwealth Government introduced the National Quality Standards in 2009, which came into effect from 1 January 2012 (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 1), providing details on a range of operational requirements for education and care services (ACECQA, 2012a) that apply to long day care (child care), family day care, outside school hours care and preschools throughout Australia.

In line with these initiatives, the Commonwealth Government introduced compulsory accreditation for all childcare workers in Australia, effective from 1 January 2014. This means that all unaccredited childcare workers employed in the ECEC sector must either have completed a minimum Certificate III in Early Childhood Education or must be enrolled in a suitably accredited course offered through TAFE or an accredited provider, prior to 1 January 2014, to be eligible to work in any early childhood service in Australia.

These initiatives aim to 'improve recruitment and retention of the early childhood education and childcare workforce; develop pathways that reward and support the best workers; and raise the level of qualifications of all childcare workers in Australia' (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 1).

I would appreciate your assistance with the distribution of the information letters and letters of invitation to those staff members who indicate interest in participating in this study, together with an informed consent form to be filled out by each participant, confirming a convenient date and time at which to conduct a formal interview with them.

With your permission, the interviews would be conducted at your early childhood service at a mutually convenient time, or at a mutually convenient location and time to be agreed upon by the participants. The interview should take no more than 45 to 60 minutes per participant. Participation is voluntary and all data will be anonymous. Participants may withdraw from the study at any time without explanation or prejudice.

The purpose of my research is to learn more about the perceived benefits this legislation has for practice and provisions of care within specific early childhood services and the effect it has on the untrained early childhood worker.

I believe the results of this research will not only be of value to individual early childhood services, their owners and operators, but will also help the untrained early childhood worker, giving them a better understanding of the reasons for and benefits of undertaking further training and studies in their chosen field.

Attached is an informed consent form for you to return if you wish to be involved in this study. If you have any concerns or questions in relation to study, please contact either the principal investigator or supervisor listed below.

Principal Investigator:
Merryl Sykes
School: Social Work College of Arts, Society and Education
James Cook University
Douglas, Townsville, QLD 4811, AUSTRALIA
Tel:
Fax:
Email: merryl.sykes@my.jcu.edu.au

Supervisor:
Associate Professor Nonie Harris
Honours Coordinator Social Work and Human Services
College of Arts, Society and Education (CASE) in the Division of Tropical Environments and Societies (DTES)
James Cook University
Douglas, Townsville, QLD 4811, AUSTRALIA
Phone:
Fax:
Email: nonie.harris@jcu.edu.au

If you have any concerns regarding the ethical conduct of the study, please contact:

Human Ethics
Research Office
James Cook University
Townsville, QLD, 4811
Phone: (07) 4781 5011
Email: ethics@jcu.edu.au

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Merryl Sykes
MSocSc, BSocSc, DipCS, DipOSHC–MACA

APPENDIX E: Letter of Invitation—Participants

PROJECT TITLE:
Exploring Mandatory Accreditation of Early Childhood Workers in Australia

Dear Colleague,

My name is Merryl Sykes and I am currently undertaking doctoral research at James Cook University, Townsville. The purpose of my research is to learn more about the perceived benefits of the implementation of legislation for the mandatory accreditation of all early childhood workers in Australia.

As you are no doubt aware, the Australian Commonwealth Government introduced the National Quality Standards in 2009, which came into effect from 1 January 2012 (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 1), providing details on a range of operational requirements for education and care services (ACECQA, 2012a) that apply to long day care (child care), family day care, outside school hours care and preschools throughout Australia.

In line with these initiatives, the Commonwealth Government introduced compulsory accreditation for all childcare workers in Australian, effective from 1 January 2014. This means that all unaccredited childcare workers employed in the ECEC sector must either have completed a minimum Certificate III in Early Childhood Education or must be enrolled in a suitably accredited course offered through TAFE or an accredited provider, prior to 1 January 2014, to be eligible to work in any early childhood service in Australia.

These initiatives aim to 'improve recruitment and retention of the early childhood education and childcare workforce; develop pathways that reward and support the best workers; and raise the level of qualifications of all childcare workers in Australia' (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 1).

I believe the results of this research will not only be of value to individual early childhood services, their owners and operators, but will also help the untrained early childhood worker, giving them a better understanding of the reasons for and benefits of undertaking further training and studies in their chosen field.

Your attitudes and opinions are critical to the success of this study and I recognise the value of your time, and would sincerely appreciate your participation in this study. Attached is an information letter and informed consent form for you to return by mail, if you wish to be involved in this study.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Merryl Sykes
MSocSc, BSocSc, DipCS, DipOSHC–MACA

School: Social Work College of Arts, Society and Education
James Cook University
Mobile:
Phone:
Fax:
Email: merryl.sykes@my.jcu.edu.au

APPENDIX F: Informed Consent Form—Participants

This administrative form has been removed

APPENDIX G: Informed Consent Form—Authorised Supervisor/Centre Manager

This administrative form has been removed

APPENDIX H: Consent for Ethical Research Study—James Cook University, 25 October 2016 to 31 October 2017

This administrative form has been removed

APPENDIX I: Consent for Ethical Research Extension—James Cook University, 25 October 2016 to 31 October 2018

This administrative form has been removed

APPENDIX J: Consent for Ethical Research Extension—James Cook University, 25 October 2016 to 31 January 2019

This administrative form has been removed