Early Childhood Education and Care
Quality in Practice

Snapshot #2

What we heard from Educators

the FrontProject



Early childhood educators make hundreds of small decisions every day about where their time goes. The moments they spend engaging in play with a child. The time spent supporting a new family to transition into a centre. The documentation that accompanies children's learning and development and working out how to extend that learning.

How educators spend their time, and whether they have the conditions to spend it well, makes a real difference to the quality children experience.

In our first Quality Snapshot, we heard from leaders across 20 providers about what makes good practice possible. This time we wanted to hear from the people doing the work on the floor.
We wanted to understand how educators see quality in their everyday work. We wanted to understand what gets in the way of it, what would help them deliver it, and what makes the work meaningful enough to stay.

During July and August 2026, we surveyed frontline educators collecting 118 responses. The survey covered educator demographics and tenure, what drew people to the work and keeps them in it, the current areas of greatest challenge and need, and what supports would make the biggest difference to their day-to-day work.

This is what we found.

Executive summary

1

Relationships keep educators in the work.

Educators told us relationships are what keep them. That reason grows stronger the longer they stay, so retaining educators in services is not only good for children, it's good for staff and their job satisfaction.

2

Time with children is under pressure.

Inadequate support for children with additional needs and increasing compliance requirements were the two challenges that stood out. Both stretch educators' capacity to be responsive.

3

Support needs differ by role and career stage.

There's no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting the workforce. Supportive ratios matter to everyone, but other priorities shift with role and experience. Support needs to be tailored to where people are in their careers.

4

Inclusion is the most pressing training gap.

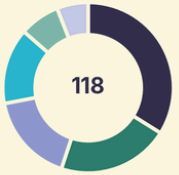
Educators at almost every qualification level said they need more support to include children with additional needs, including neurodivergent children. They value opportunities for furthering their knowledge and skills, including professional deleopment, and coaching and mentoring.

Demographic data



- Educator 36 (31%)
- Teacher/ECT 25 (21%)
- Director/nominated supervisor 22 (19%)
- Room/team leader 18 (15%)
- Coordinator/manager 9 (8%)
- Other 8 (7%)

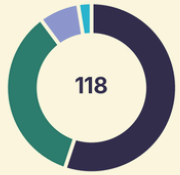
Respondents span the full breadth of the workforce, from educators and teachers through to centre directors and managers, with no single role dominating.



- Bachelor 40 (34%)
- Certificate III 25 (21%)
- Diploma 20 (17%)
- Masters 17 (14%)
- No ECEC qualification 9 (8%)
- Graduate Diploma 7 (6%)

Just over half of respondents hold a Bachelor's degree or higher, alongside a substantial Certificate III and Diploma-qualified group.

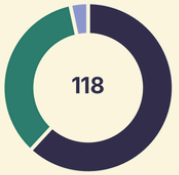
Service type



- Long day care 65 (55%)
- Kindergarten/preschool 41 (35%)
- Other/mixed 9 (8%)
- OSHC 3 (3%)

The majority of respondents work in long day care, with kindergarten/preschool educators making up just over a third of the sample.

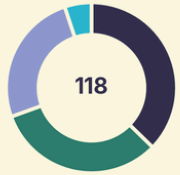
Ownership



- Not-for-profit 73 (62%)
- For-profit 41 (35%)
- Not sure 4 (3%)

Almost two-thirds of respondents work in a not-for-profit service, and around one-third in a for-profit service.

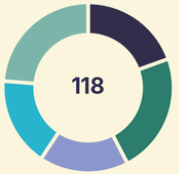
Organisation size



- Large provider/chain 44 (37%)
- Standalone 38 (32%)
- Small group 30 (25%)
- Not sure 6 (5%)

Respondents are fairly evenly split across large providers and chains, standalone services and small groups.

Time at current workplace



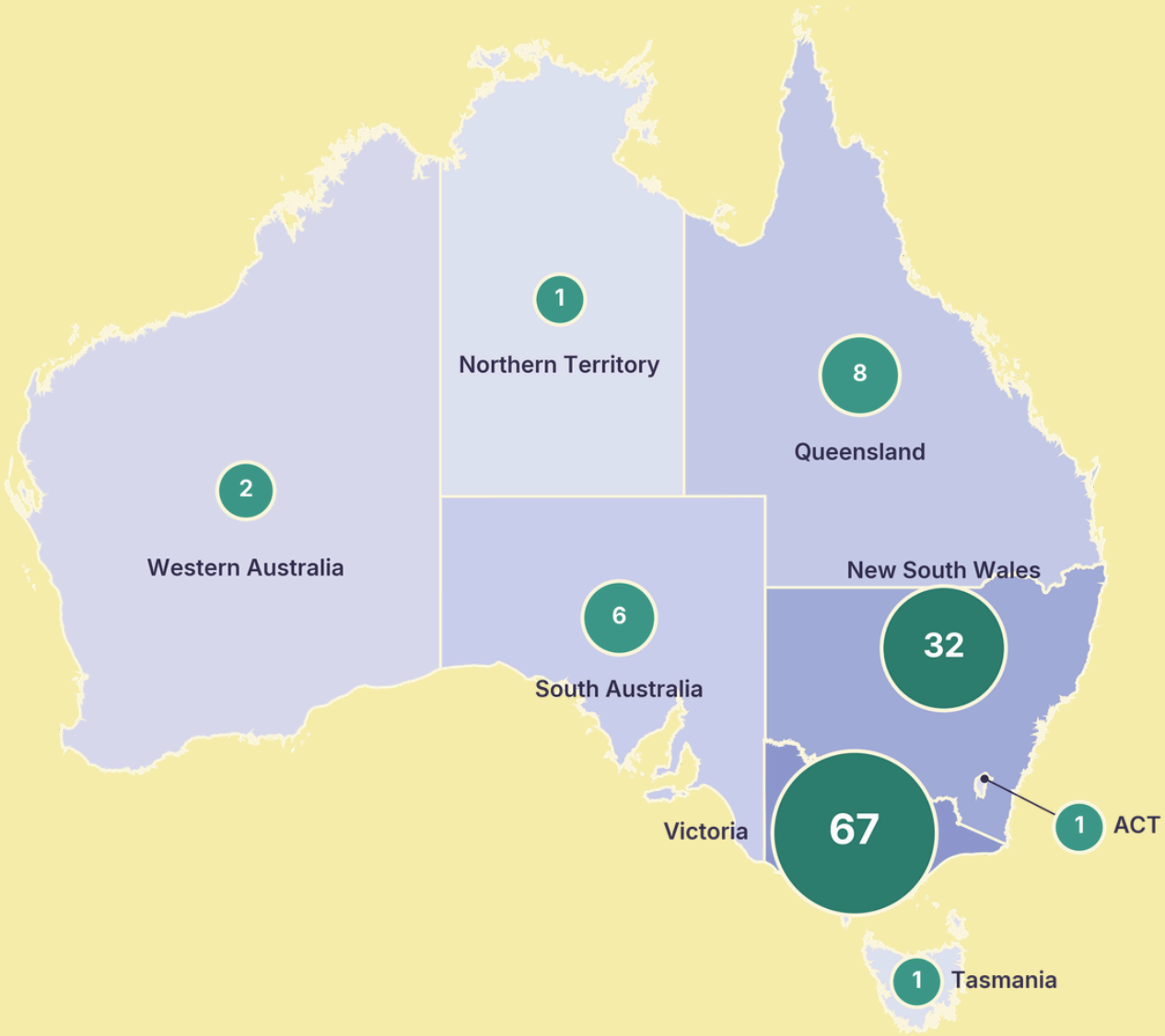
- Under 12 months 23 (19%)
- 12 months–3 years 27 (23%)
- 3–5 years 20 (17%)
- 5–10 years 20 (17%)
- 10+ years 28 (24%)

A quarter of respondents have been at their current service for ten years or more, and almost a quarter for 12 months to 3 years.

Location

Respondents were based across every state and territory, but the sample skews heavily toward Victoria and New South Wales, which together account for nearly **85%** of all responses.

By location type, **64%** work in a major metro area, **31%** in regional centres, and **5%** in rural or remote communities.



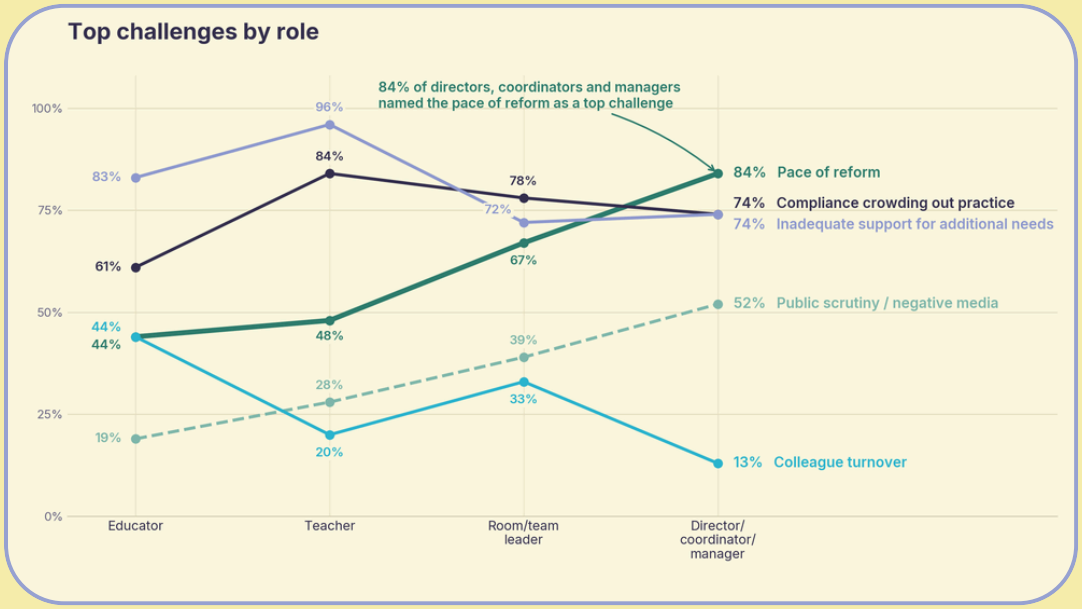
What gets in the way of delivering quality

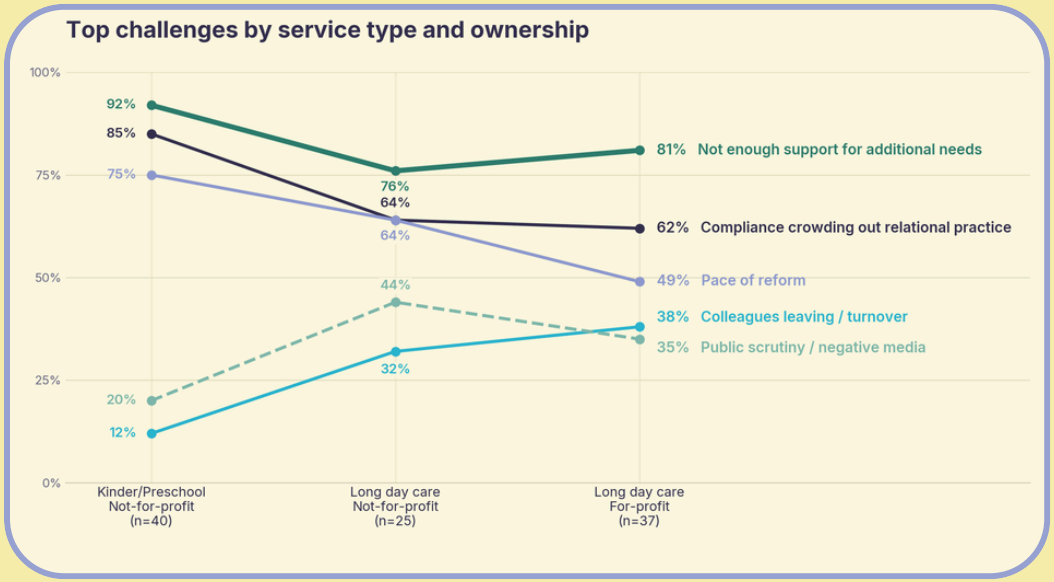
Educators were clear about what makes quality harder to deliver. Two challenges stood out across every service type and role: inadequate support for children with additional needs, and compliance requirements that take time away from children.

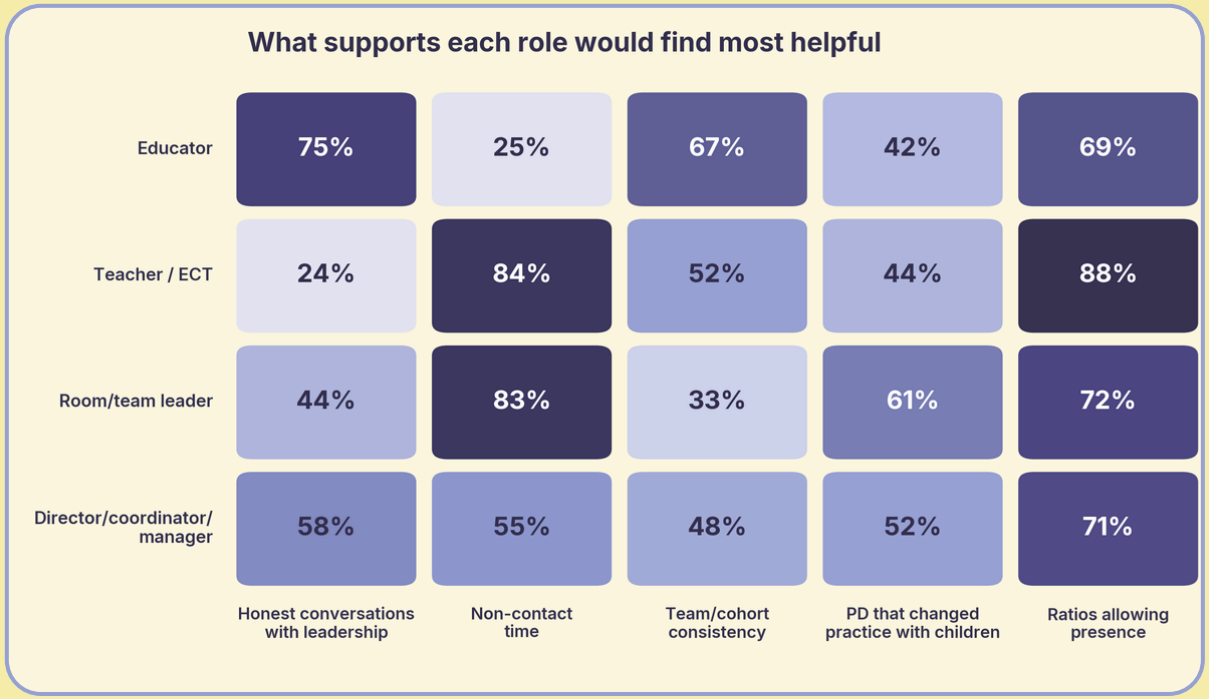
For leaders, the pace of reform adds a third. It was named by **44%** of educators but **84%** of directors, coordinators and managers, the people responsible for putting each new requirement into practice.

Both of the main challenges were felt more strongly in kindergartens and preschools than in long day care. This points to the type of service, rather than who owns it, as the bigger factor. One likely reason is that kindergarten teachers often carry administrative and compliance responsibilities on top of their teaching.

Within long day care, the differences by ownership type run in both directions. Educators in for-profit services were more likely to report colleague turnover as a challenge (**38%** compared with **32%**), while those in not-for-profit services were more concerned about the pace of reform (**64%** compared with **49%**) and public scrutiny of the sector (**44%** compared with **35%**).







What staff find most helpful varies by role. Non-contact time is the clearest example: only **25%** of Educators name it as helpful, compared with **84%** of Teachers and **83%** of Room/Team Leaders, the two role types carrying the most planning and documentation responsibility.

Honest conversations with leadership shows the opposite pattern, mattering most to Educators (**75%**) and less so to Teachers (**24%**). This may indicate varying degrees to which people in different roles have access to leadership and management.

Ratios allowing presence is the one form of support every role values highly and consistently, making it the closest thing to a universal need across the workforce. But beyond ratios, no single form of support is identified as helping equally well across every role. What helps a Teacher plan and reflect isn't necessarily what helps an Educator feel supported day to day.

The help educators want

The support educators ask for maps directly onto these challenges. Above all, they want practical support: ratios that allow them to be present with children, protected time away from the floor to plan and reflect, relief from administrative load, and coaching and mentoring in the room rather than one-off training. Where educators identified training needs, the biggest gap was inclusion and understanding neurodiversity, the same area they named as their most acute challenge.

"

"The ratios in this sector are totally flawed. The needs for these children cannot be met with the current ratios we have now."

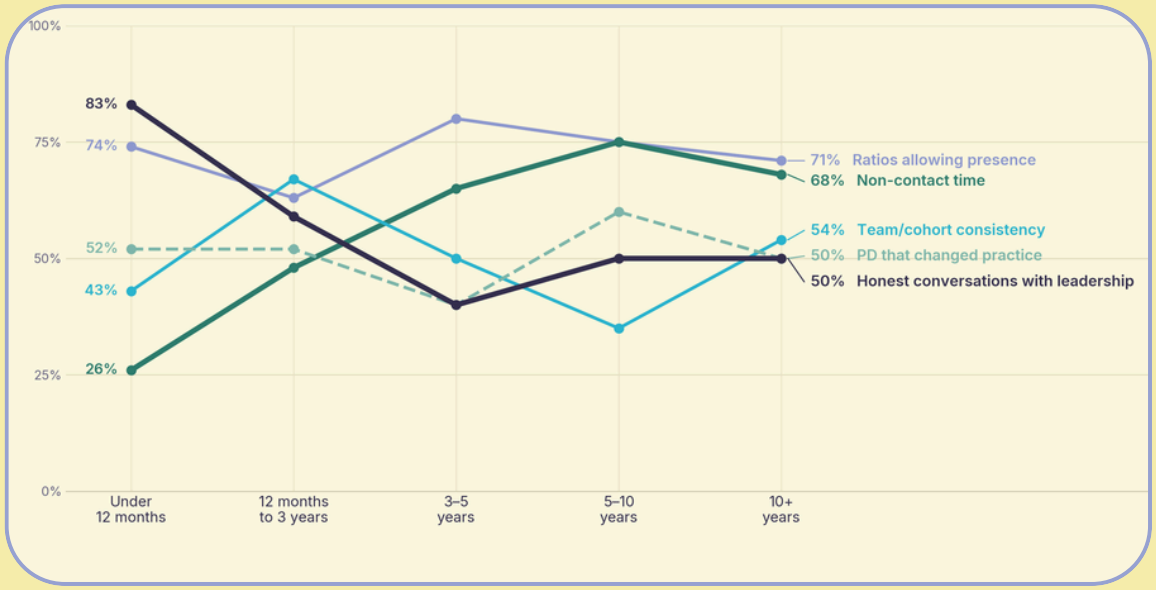
Kindergarten Teacher

"

"The sector needs improved educator-to-child ratios and a significant investment in professional development for both experienced educators and those entering the profession. If we want high-quality outcomes for children and families, we must also invest in the professionals who make those outcomes possible."

Centre Director

Different support helps at different career stages



The kind of support that helps most changes as staff move through their careers. The valuing of non-contact time climbs steadily the longer someone stays, from just **26%** in the first year to **68%** by ten-plus years. This may reflect that planning and reflection needs grow with experience and seniority.

Honest conversations with leadership tells the opposite story: it matters most to brand-new staff (**83%**), drops through the early and mid-career years, then plateaus around **50%**. This likely reflects the needs of newer versus more experienced staff.

Supportive staff / child ratios stays consistently high throughout time spent in the sector, the closest thing to a universal need across every career stage.

"

"Planning time is nowhere near adequate to do a good job as an ECT and meet DET and employer expectations. You either work the hours provided and do a sub-standard job or you work many unpaid hours to do a good one, causing burnout and resentment."

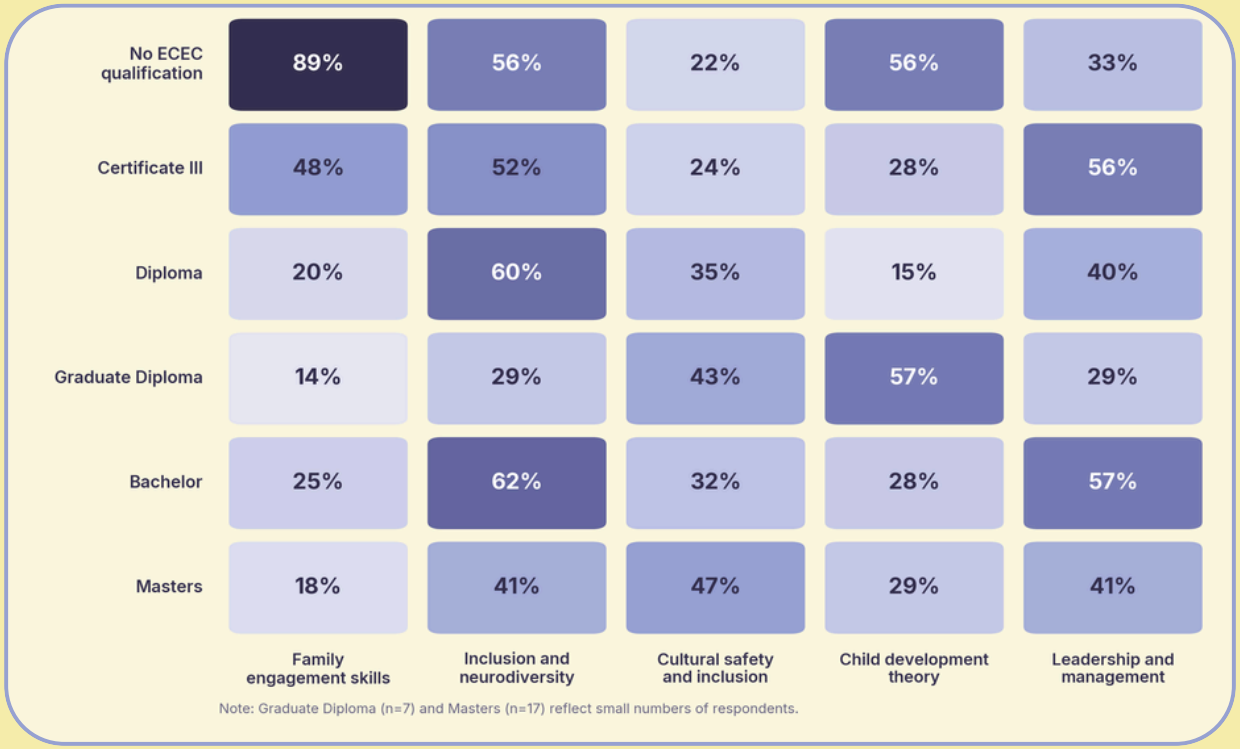
Early Childhood Teacher

"

"While I am highly motivated to lead my team, the sheer volume of administrative and compliance-related tasks- often managing everything from payroll to complex staff transitions- significantly limits the time I can dedicate to genuine pedagogical leadership. Any policy shift that reduces this administrative burden or provides funding for dedicated administrative support for smaller centres would be transformative."

Centre Director

Some training gaps depend on qualifications. Others don't



Respondents were asked to identify their top three training needs. Some training gaps follow a clear pattern linked to qualification level. Family engagement skills are one example: educators with no formal ECEC qualification report this gap at nearly four times the rate of Bachelor-qualified staff (**89%** vs **25%**), suggesting formal training genuinely builds this capability over time.

Inclusion and understanding neurodiversity tell a different story entirely: the gap stays consistently high across almost every qualification level, including among Bachelor-qualified educators (62%).

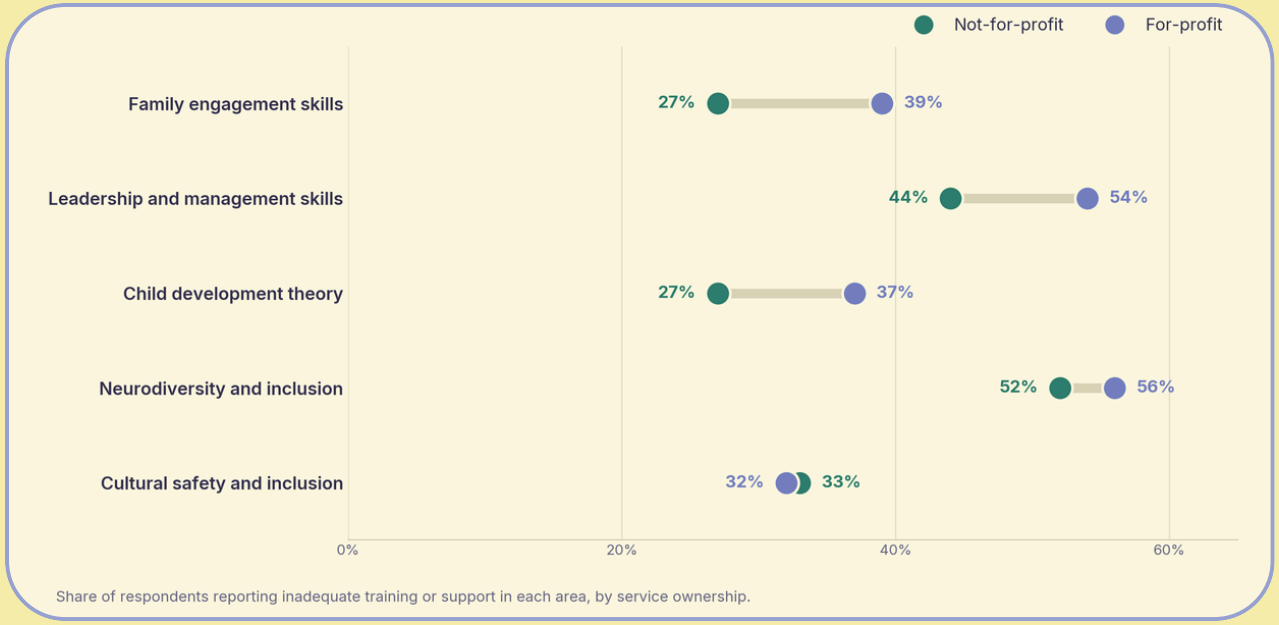
"Support for meeting the needs of children with neurodiversity and developmental delays. A regular dilemma is how we can best support children who need close educator guidance throughout all of the day but do not have any form of diagnosis."

Team Leader

"Inclusion support programs need to change - less paperwork, less onerous eligibility requirements, not having to reapply for the same child. We need more time to do referrals, reports, developmental assessments, discussions with families/allied health. I can't plan for my group because I spend most of my planning time doing these tasks."

Early Childhood Teacher

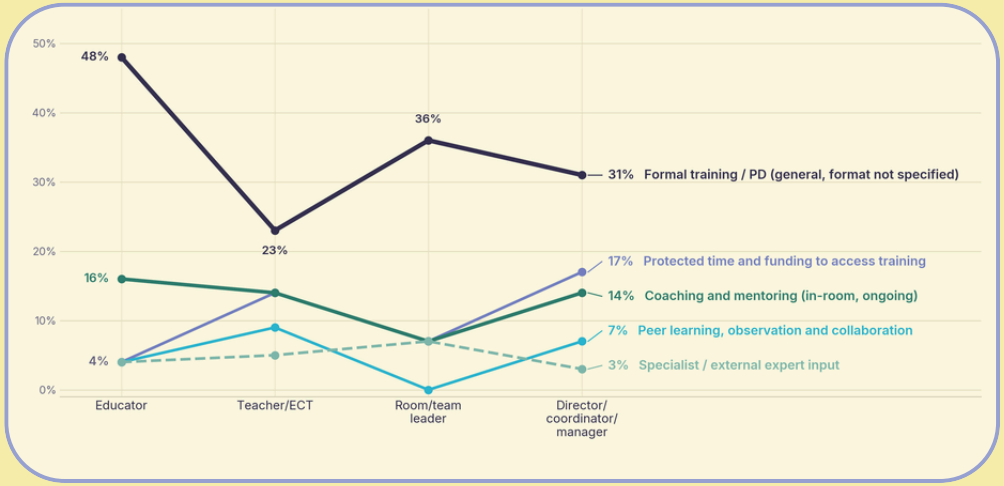
Training gaps can look different across different provider types



Share of respondents reporting inadequate training or support in each area, by service ownership.

Ownership model shows a consistent pattern across training gaps. For-profit respondents report higher gaps than not-for-profit respondents in four of five areas, most notably in family engagement skills (**39%** vs **27%**) and child development theory (**37%** vs **27%**). Cultural safety and inclusion is the exception, where the two ownership types report almost identical gaps (**32%** vs **33%**).

The type of support educators want, by role



> **"I would benefit most from mentoring, leadership and management training, and opportunities to learn from experienced leaders. Regular feedback and professional development would also help me build my confidence and skills."**
>
> **Early Childhood Educator**

This chart draws on responses to an open-text question asking what type of support respondents would most benefit from. Around half of respondents (45 of 96) named only a topic area, such as neurodiversity, family engagement or cultural safety, without specifying how they wanted that support delivered.

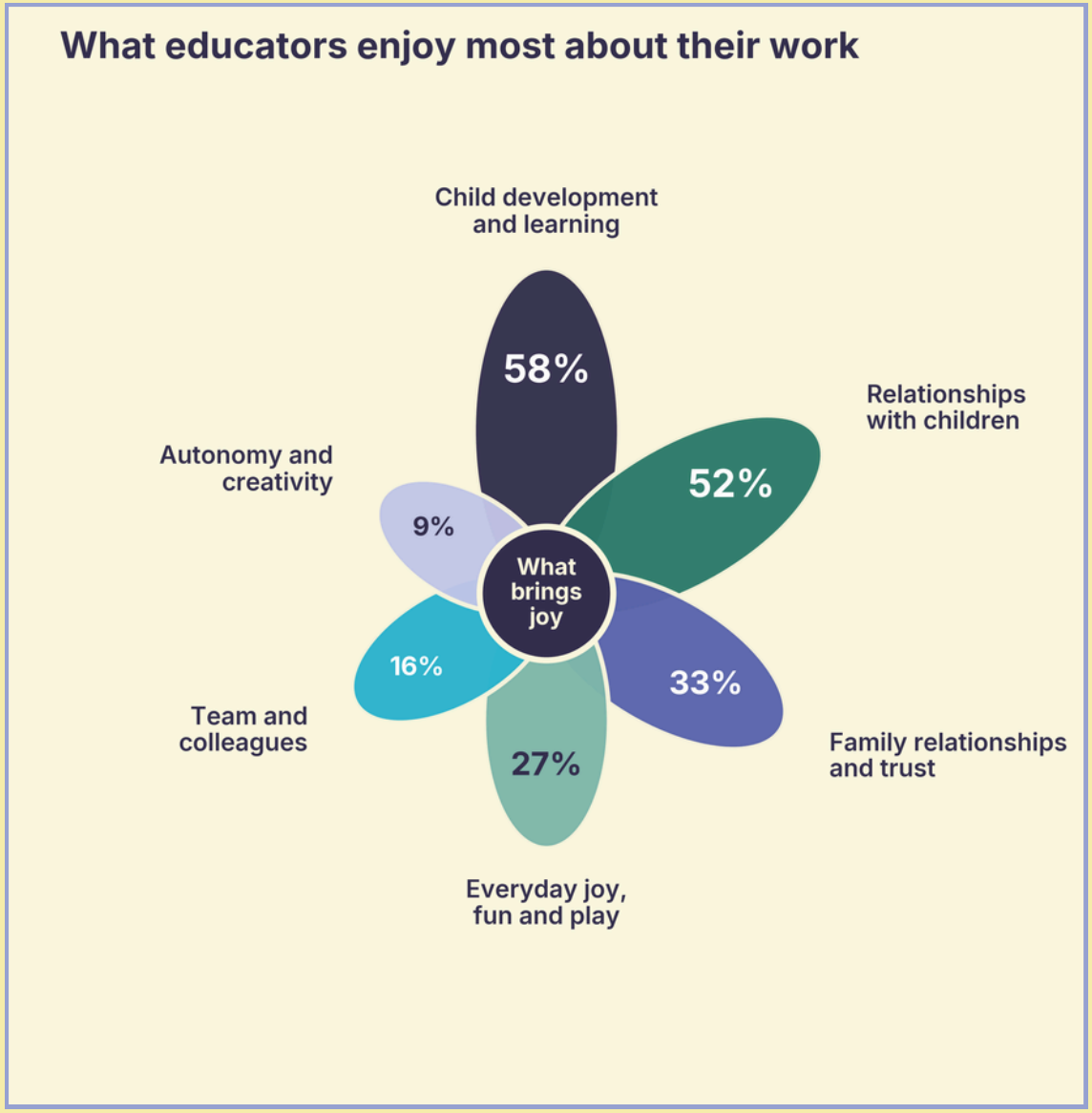
The percentages shown here reflect the remaining responses that did name a delivery method, so the chart should be read as describing preferences among those who expressed one, not the full sample.

Two patterns are worth noting. First, generic requests for "more training" dominate for Educators (**48%**) and Room/Team Leaders (**36%**), while coaching and mentoring is the only preference that holds steady across every role, suggesting in-room, ongoing support has broader appeal than one-off training regardless of seniority. Second, Directors, Coordinators and Managers are the main group to substantially name protected time and funding as a distinct need (**17%**).

What matters most: relationships and joy

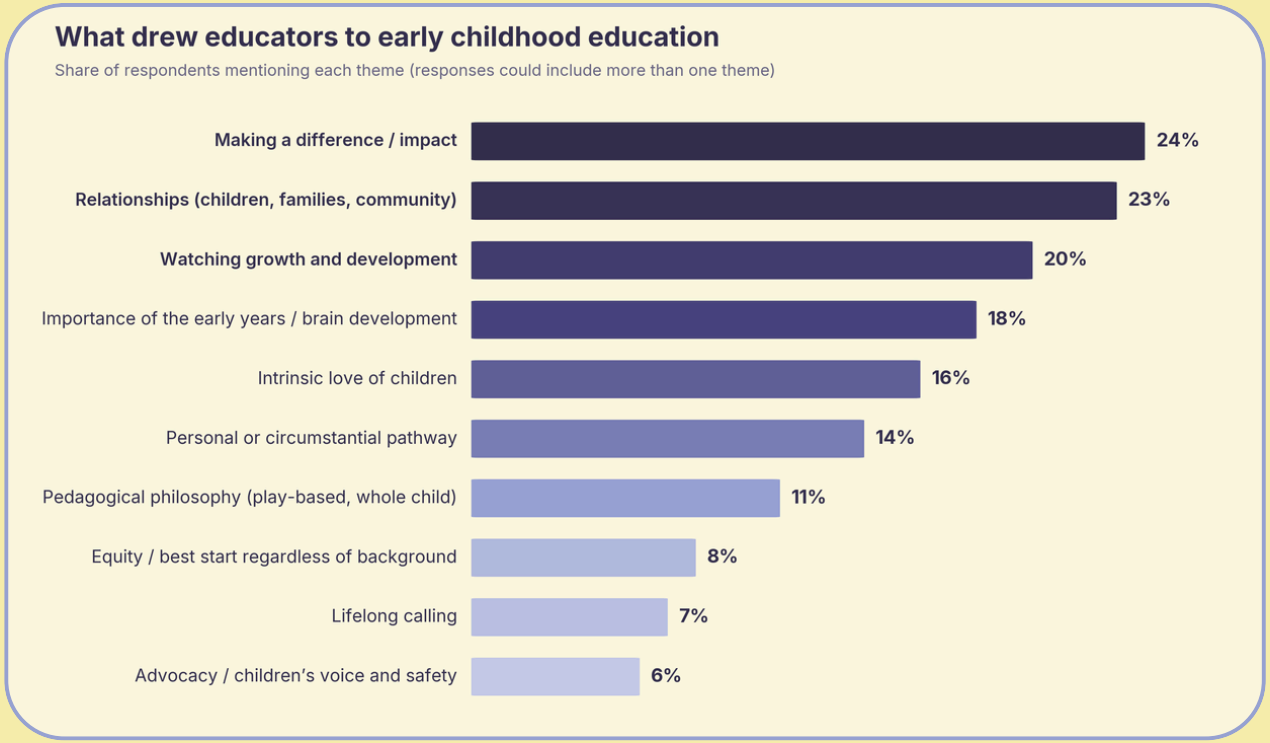
The clearest finding from the survey is what educators value. However they came into the sector, what keeps them is relationships - with children, families and colleagues. It is the joy of being present as children learn and grow.

These are exactly the things that the challenges named above put at risk. Compliance load, the pace of reform and the lack of supportive conditions take time away from children and teams, and when educators burn out and leave early, they leave before relationships have had the chance to become the reason they stay.

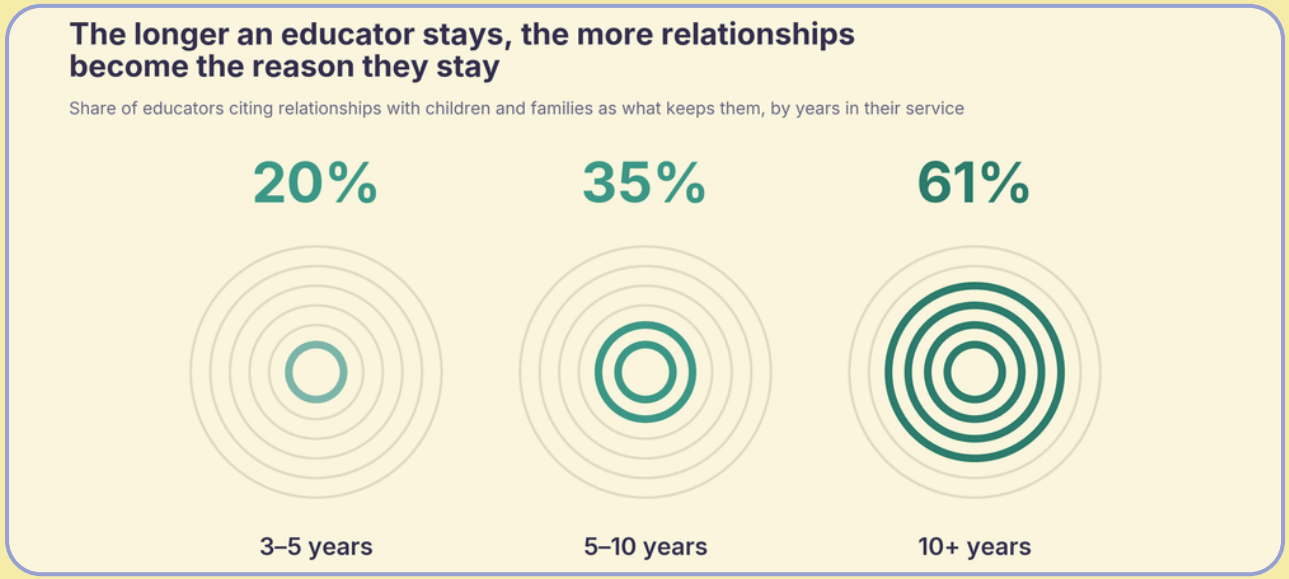


What attracts people into ECEC

Educators come into the sector for a mix of reasons. Some were drawn by a sense of purpose and the chance to make a difference in the lives of children and families, often because they understood how much the early years matter for children's development. Many came for the relationships. And some arrived more by circumstance. They had their own children and needed a level of flexibility, or they started in another education or care sector and moved across to early childhood.



Why people stay



The longer an educator stays, the more relationships become the reason they stay. It builds over time, which creates a real paradox: when turnover is high, people leave before they've stuck around long enough to experience the very thing that would have kept them.

The educators most at risk of leaving early are also the ones who haven't yet experienced the reward most likely to make them stay.

Why people leave

When educators talked about why people leave, the reasons were rarely about the work itself.

One nominated supervisor remembered the profession as one that offered real freedom to follow children's learning and work closely with families, but said few educators can now sustain the workload, and that early-career educators at network meetings are already planning to leave within their first few years.

A room leader described caring, patient staff being pushed out by stress and burnout, and called for more support for rooms where other pressures make it hard to build relationships with children and families.

Some pointed to the quality of practice around them and feeling disillusioned.

Others named the regulatory and compliance burden that can overshadow everyday quality practice.

Conclusion



We started this survey wanting to understand how educators see quality in their everyday work. What they told us comes back, again and again, to time and whether they have enough of it with children, with families and with each other.

Most importantly, educators told us what keeps them in the work and it is relationships. Relationships with children, families and colleagues, and the joy of being part of children's learning and development. Those relationships take time to build, and the educators most likely to leave early are the ones who haven't yet had the chance to experience them.

Every time an educator burns out and leaves, children lose a relationship, and the sector loses someone who might have stayed for years.

If we want a high-quality early learning and care system with strong outcomes for children, we need to invest in the leaders, teachers and educators who make it happen, and give them the time, support and conditions to bring their best to the work every day.