Wellbeing is a word we see everywhere—from cereal boxes to insurance policies—but what does it really mean? And, how can early childhood workplaces contribute to educators’ wellbeing? Tamara Cumming and Sandie Wong investigate.

Researchers and service providers are increasingly considering ways to support educators’ wellbeing, but much of this research and discussion is focused on stress levels or how educators can manage these—through meditation and mindfulness, for instance. While these are useful strategies, wellbeing is a much broader concept. It includes physiological as well as psychological aspects—functions of the body and mind. Also, educators’ wellbeing is often affected by the work and policy contexts in which they operate, but this has not received much attention till now.

With these issues in mind, we recently investigated educators’ wellbeing using psychological and physiological measures, as well as measures of the quality of educators’ work environment (ECEWP, 2018). As part of our study, we asked 73 educators (from long day care centres in capital cities and regional towns) what work-related wellbeing meant to them, and what supported or challenged their wellbeing. To the participants, wellbeing meant maintaining a balance between their personal and professional responsibilities, and being aware of the ways in which their role, colleagues and work conditions affected their mental, physical and emotional health. They noted that the quality of their wellbeing affected their ability to carry out their duties as educators—that is, they needed to be well themselves in order to give their best to children and families.

All of these contributions matched parts of the existing literature on educators’ wellbeing. In particular, our participants’ responses confirmed the idea that wellbeing is dynamic; that it changes in relation to the conditions, resources and demands of individuals’ lives. The contributions also confirmed the idea that there is a connection between psychological and...
physiological wellbeing—that is, the experiences of the mind and body affect each other’s functioning.

According to some philosophies, attributing a sense of greater purpose to one’s work is also part of wellbeing. This is measured as part of job satisfaction. In our study, participants reported high levels of job satisfaction, but they also showed signs of stress and high levels of emotional exhaustion. This showed us that even though educators felt that their work was personally and socially important, the effects of the work could still be detrimental to their overall wellbeing. The results of other studies (Cumming, 2017; Hall-Kenyon, Bullough, MacKay & Marshall, 2014) suggest that ultimately these negative effects on mental, emotional and/or physiological wellbeing could prompt educators to leave a workplace or the sector altogether. And, as we all know, turnover is bad for the educator, their employers as well as the children and families.

**So what helps support educators’ wellbeing?**

Our participants shared the aspects of their workplace that helped improve their wellbeing. These included:

- being given enough time during work hours to complete tasks—especially programming, attending training, undertaking research and meeting with families
- working in a setting where all are treated fairly and equally
- having a workplace that offers support for parts of the work that are challenging, and also fosters innovation and creativity.

Participants also noted that they needed to feel supported both physically and emotionally by their own family as well as their managers, colleagues and children’s families.

Some of the factors that challenged our participants’ wellbeing included:

- the difficulty of managing work, study and family requirements
- long travel time to and from work
- having to manage ongoing physical pain resulting from workplace injuries.

A few participants considered the complexities of their role to be challenging as well. These included managing the number of tasks and amount of paperwork required; feeling that it was difficult to give quality care within the current child–educator ratios for infants; and managing relationships and multiple (sometimes contradictory) needs of colleagues, families and children. More broadly, some also mentioned the role of inadequate social respect and minimal pay as factors challenging their wellbeing. Our findings mirrored many of those identified by Jones, Hadley and Waniganayake (2019)—feeling that you belong in your workplace, that there is equity, and things run smoothly will help wellbeing.

Looking at findings from our study, it is clear that many factors that impact educators’ wellbeing are outside their immediate control—such as inadequate pay and social respect, ratios, and complex family and child needs. Similarly, some of the aspects that support educators’ wellbeing require the buy-in of others: service managers, owners and leaders, colleagues, families and children. Educators’ wellbeing is not, then, something that individuals can ‘solve’ or even sustain alone. It is something that requires recognition and action by all of those concerned with regulating, advocating for, managing, attending and working in early childhood education settings.

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**References**


