

Keeping Australia's early childhood teachers in the profession

STRENGTHENING THE WORKFORCE THROUGH EVIDENCE-BASED MENTORING

Australia's early childhood education sector faces a critical workforce shortage. Recruiting qualified Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) is only part of the challenge – retaining them is essential to ensuring children receive the continuity, expertise and relationships that underpin high-quality early learning.

Research led by Associate Professor Rebecca Andrews and Professor Fay Hadley at Macquarie University has demonstrated that structured mentoring is one of the most effective ways to support early career teachers, strengthen professional identity and keep skilled educators in the profession.

TURNING RESEARCH INTO NATIONAL ACTION

Recognising mentoring as a priority identified in the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy 2022–2031 and the National Vision for Early Childhood Education and Care, Associate Professor Andrews and Professor Hadley spent almost a decade translating research into practical, scalable programs in partnership with government and soon will extend this to a partnership with Early Childhood Australia.

Across three major NSW initiatives, the team has developed, implemented and evaluated mentoring programs that support teachers from entry into the profession through to leadership: The Mentoring and Coaching for New NSW Early Childhood Teachers Project trained 60 experienced teachers to mentor 145 early career educators across metropolitan, regional and rural NSW.

This was followed by the Early Childhood Education Scholars Mentoring Program, which supported 59 NSW Department of Education scholarship recipients – including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants through culturally responsive mentoring. The SPiECE-Mentoring Project further expanded this work by combining mentoring with professional development to strengthen the early childhood workforce across NSW.

DELIVERING MEASURABLE IMPACT

The research has demonstrated that mentoring improves teacher confidence, leadership and professional identity while strengthening workforce retention. In the first mentoring program, 82 per cent of both mentors and mentees rated the program as 'excellent', reporting stronger leadership capabilities among mentors and increased confidence and professional identity among early career teachers.

The work has also influenced policy at the highest levels. Associate Professor Andrews and Professor Hadley's research is cited in the 2024 Productivity Commission report A Path to Universal Early Childhood Education and Care and informed advice to the NSW Department of Education's Workforce Strategy Directorate. This contributed to state government investment in an accelerated early childhood teaching degree supported by wrap-around mentoring.

BUILDING THE FUTURE WORKFORCE

By providing robust evidence that mentoring improves retention, leadership and professional capability, Associate Professor Andrews and Professor Hadley's research is helping to create a more sustainable early childhood workforce – ensuring more children benefit from experienced, confident and highly skilled teachers. The research is continuing to shape Australia's response to the early childhood workforce challenge through the Macquarie University StepAhead Early Childhood Degree and Mentoring Program (2025–2028), and a new ARC Linkage Project with Early Childhood Australia (2026-2029).

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