STRENGTHENING WORKFORCE CAPABILITY AND CAPACITY

A REPORT ON FAMILIES AUSTRALIA'S

'WORKFORCE CAPABILITY' POLICY FORUM

(DELIVERED VIA MS TEAMS)

12 MAY 2022

Building Stronger Australian Families

What do they need to thrive?

AN INITIATIVE OF

Families Australia

About Families Australia

Families Australia is a national, not-for-profit, peak organisation that strives to improve the wellbeing of Australian families, especially those experiencing vulnerability and marginalisation. We do this by providing policy advice to the Australian Government and Parliament on behalf of more than 800 member organisations around Australia.

Families Australia's member organisations provide services in urban, rural and remote locations across Australia. These organisations operate in a diverse range of fields such as family support, child protection, domestic violence, disability, education, grandparent/kinship care, foster care, mental health, and youth work.

Our work is organised around three important ideas, namely, that Australia will be a fairer and more equitable and compassionate nation if we better protect and value children, if all families irrespective of their form are strengthened, and if there are genuine and lasting improvements in the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Acknowledgements

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Contents

Background

Families Australia's policy forums were initiated in 2015 and bring together key people from government, the community sector and the research community to consider how best to advance the wellbeing of Australian families now and into the future.

Editorial note:
Text below represents a summary, rather than a direct translation of policy forum content. While every effort has been made to correctly capture the intent of speakers, please consult the original presenters prior to quoting any material from this report.

Introduction

This report sets out the main themes from an online policy forum held on 12 May 2022 as part of the Building Stronger Australian Families policy forum series established as part of its mission to represent the interests of families and children, especially those experiencing the greatest vulnerability and marginalisation. The forums aim to assist the Department of Social Services (DSS) and Families Australia to explore contemporary challenges facing families in Australia and to help chart new ways of responding to them.

All policy forums are chaired by Families Australia. Most forums are posted on the Families Australia website. Families Australia works closely with DSS to ensure invitations to attend the forums are extended to representatives of other Commonwealth agencies, the ACT Government, non-government organisations and the research sector.

In this policy forum, a panel of four speakers addressed a range of issues relevant to the strengthening workforce capability and capacity.

Keynote speakers:
- Dr Erica Russ, Senior Lecturer, Director of Field Education, Social Work and Community Welfare, Southern Cross University.
- Mr Steve Kinmond OAM, CEO of Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA).

Case study presenters:
- Ms Dianne Potter, Manager, Learning and Development Centre, AbSec.
- Ms Annette Michaux, Director Policy and Practice, Parenting Research Centre.

Approximately 80 people registered for the forum representing a range of Australian Government agencies, research and academic institutions and non-government organisations.

Following is a summary of the three-hour forum which provides detailed summaries of the keynote presentations and case studies. It then provides some key points for consideration by those working on policy related to workforce capability and capacity.

Copies of available presentation slides have been provided separately.

Summary of presentations

Keynote 1: Dr Erica Russ, Senior Lecturer, Director of Field Education, Social Work and Community Welfare, Southern Cross University

Dr Russ shared the findings of the recent report <u>Trends and Needs in the Australian Welfare Workforce</u>, which she co-authored, and also discussed worker resilience. She outlined current knowledge of child protection systems from previous research, which includes:
- Challenging contexts: it is difficult and complex work;
- High public expectations - with a poor public profile;
- Risk-averse cultures;
- A growing demand on staff, noting there are lots of ways child and family-focused workers can contribute & work towards more prevention areas;
- A forensic, narrow intervention focus on high-risk creates additional pressures on the systems in place. This means a high proportion of children and families cycle through the system;
- High proportions of marginalised groups in the system, for example, people with disabilities & the over-representation of indigenous communities in statutory child protection systems;
- Contexts of trauma for children, families and workers in the system; and
- Workload pressures: workers deal with complex and sensitive matters, therefore it's important to ensure highly skilled workers are appropriately supported to perform their work.

For at least the past two decades, international research has demonstrated recruitment and retention of staff as a chronic issue. While this research has primarily focused on the statutory arena, similar issues exist in the secondary service sector, such as targeted family support. At present, inexperienced staff are doing complex work, which has resulted in high stress levels, burnout and direct and vicarious trauma. These factors impact on service delivery effectiveness, with implications for the decisions people make, service delivery effectiveness, consistency and quality services, and client outcomes.

The presentation then considered other ways to do child welfare when working with vulnerable children and families. Dr Russ referenced the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (the National Framework), which takes a public health approach, and noted the tertiary statutory system was usually at the top of the pyramid, and typically receives the greatest focus and money. Dr Russ proposed that the public health approach should help flip the pyramid and change the focus, so that primary prevention initiatives that support all families and children receive the focus and financial support. The focus should then be on secondary initiatives, early intervention services targeted to vulnerable families and children, and lastly the tertiary system. Dr Russ said that, by flipping this pyramid, the demand on the tertiary statutory system would likely be reduced.

Dr Russ considered how a public health approach could impact child and family services and the child welfare system. She displayed a graph illustrating the changes in the Australian workforce over the past twenty years, noting the rapid growth over the past two decades in the Health Care and Social Assistance sector, which has rapidly grown to represent the largest component of the workforce. When the child welfare workforce is drawn from this workforce, it means the subcategories of the child welfare workforce have also grown rapidly and have outstripped growth in hospitals and some other health care areas. Rapid growth increases competition for workers in the child welfare sector. Unless the sector can attract and retain workers, we will struggle to shift this approach and achieve the workforce required, (i.e., highly skilled workers committed to working with children and families, in a way that will increase prevention and support services and move from a high-end tertiary focus).

Recent research reveals the following trends:
- Workforce growth in the health and social care and child welfare sectors;
- Worker shortages;
- An ageing workforce, which poses challenges in generating the workforce needed;
- The workforce is primarily female (70-80%). This may be linked to the casualisation of workers;
- Wages are an issue across primary, secondary and tertiary sectors, though tertiary sector employees on average are better paid;
- Most people hold qualifications in recent years;
- The rate and availability of training is not keeping pace with the demands of this growth; and
- Statutory services: Recruitment and retention and vacancy issues persist.

Looking at the three tiers as different elements of the child welfare system:
- Tertiary: Faces recruitment issues with higher rates of turnover (every 18 months) and casualisation. Staff tend to be degree qualified, younger, less experienced, female and limited in terms of diversity;
- Secondary: Recruitment is still an issue with a lot of vacancies, tend to have vocational qualifications, casualisation in this sector is also a significant issue, tending to be a female workforce with higher levels of diversity; and
- Primary: There is limited information for this sector, no systematic data. When looking at the broader range of services and workers, there was no sense of clear targeting services towards the safety and wellbeing of children. This sector is comprised of an ageing, predominantly female workforce with varied qualifications.

Data on diverse groups within the Australian population suggests First Nations peoples are 3%, culturally and linguistically diverse people 33% (20% for people who speak a language other than English in their homes), and people with a disability 18%. For data of those in the workforce, there was only data specific to tertiary and secondary level services, but the numbers don't fit our population. For example, the rate of First Nations workers in tertiary services, which is 3%, is not comparable to the number of people in the system who are being serviced, posing challenges for service delivery. The graduate data was more difficult to determine, but the data of First Nations graduates coming into the system was about 2%. There is not yet a pipeline to bring skilled, qualified workers into the system.

If the tertiary tier has the focus, then how are secondary and primary tiers supported to have skilled and effective workers who can provide complex services in relation to the safety and wellbeing of children and the vulnerabilities and stresses that families face that create risk and maltreatment?

Marginalised people and families and those from lower socioeconomic groups are disproportionately represented in the system. A challenge for services is to create appropriate and responsive services with a workforce that often lacks diversity. The impact of retention, turnover, casualisation also directly impacts on how children and families receive services, the type of services they receive and the outcomes they achieve.

How do we manage an ageing workforce in a system of growth that is likely to further limit the workforce?

This needs consideration as we manage this system of growing demand, also competing with these other health and social care providers, who are also seeking these qualified workers from very similar qualification backgrounds. We need planning and strategies for the workforce, not just in the tertiary arena, but across the three tiers of the child welfare system to turn around those demand issues. To retain workers, we need cooperation between educators and industry and better engagement and support of workers. We also need to enhance the skill base of our workforce.

Worker resilience

Resilience is often talked about as an individual quality. Instead, resilience should be understood as an interaction with the context, with the organisation, with the supports available and the people the workers are working with. It is in this context that resilience occurs, it is not just up to the individual. Research demonstrates the following creates an environment that contributes to resilience:

- If workers are committed to and satisfied with their work, they less likely to leave;
- Developing self-awareness, a reflective process of being aware of the self in relation to others will help;
- Self-efficacy and agency in work;
- A valuing and respectful approach to working with clients. Workers who demonstrate resilience build relationships with their clients;
- A commitment to positive client outcomes;
- Use of reflective practice to achieve personal and professional learning and practice improvement; and
- Applying relationship-based approaches to work.

To achieve the above, Dr Russ advocated for both an organisational and industry approach. Over and above personal qualities and supportive relationships, the culture of a workplace must support learning, rather than have a blaming culture.

Significant influences over and above individual factors, such as personal qualities and supportive relationships include:

- Reflective practice which contributes to self-awareness and enables learning and practice improvement;
- Relational elements of the work involved supervisory, peer, managerial and client relationships; and
- Workplace culture.

Understanding this culture of support, learning and engagement is a reflective process, not just at the individual level but the team level, at agency level, at organisational level. Hopefully, that flows through to the systems level.

Keynote 2: Mr Steve Kinmond OAM, CEO, Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA)

Mr Kinmond drew upon the definition of micro-credentialling from a recent PWC report commissioned by the NSW Department of Education Skills and Employment, National Microcredentials Framework. The report defines a micro credential as:

> *A certification of assessed learning or competency, with a minimum volume of learning of one hour and less than an AQF [Australian Qualifications Framework] award qualification, that is additional, alternate, complementary to or a component part of an AQF award qualification (p.9).*

Mr Kinmond argued that a micro-credential must be outcome based and responsive to industry need. He stressed that the most critical workforce development and training need for us to deliver is the three tiers of public health. Micro-credentialing and a framework are not a bad thing. But it does pose the question: is there a risk with significant activity in the microcredential and broader space, that we might miss the big picture?

Micro-credentialling has had broad uptake from schools, non-profits and businesses. Microcredentials can address a whole range of issues, including personalisation for employees and for employers. Microcredentialing can provide a structured approach to learning on the job, recognise soft and hard skills and meet the demand for flexible, lifelong learning. In multidisciplinary roles, micro-credentialing can play an important role. It can cover specialised skill sets, and it can be part of addressing wider skills gap. And it can enable us to track and deliver training more effectively.

But, on the flip side, micro-credentialling may not necessarily be effective if we do not have an overarching plan, or we lack rigour in relation to the design of micro-credentialing. While Mr Kinmond supported the growth of micro-credentials, he pointed out that the report on Trends, Needs and Resilience in the Australian Community Welfare Workforce highlights critical challenges that must be addressed, not only in terms of micro-credentialing, but training and workforce development in our sector more broadly. Including:

- More roles requiring specialist skills: It is hard to meet the demand with the insufficient number of graduates coming out of courses offering qualifications preferred in the sector;
- To creatively address the numbers of First Nations workers and people with lived experience in the sector workforce (and examining and dealing with issues of, of trauma);
- There is an inextricable link between our workforce and workforce development and training strategies, which includes micro-credentialing, but also includes strategies more broadly, and our workforce, recruitment plans, and strategies;
- To do the design work and develop the pathways to allowing more accessible entry into our sector;
- Keeping front of mind that the reason for building a better equipped workforce to provide family support and early intervention services in a way that entails an integration of programs across the three tiers, primary, secondary, and tertiary services is ultimately to support our clients;
- As noted in Trends, Needs and Resilience in the Australian Community Welfare Workforce delivering the right workforce development and training response must also sit alongside and support the necessary broader system transformation work (e.g., national frameworks, goals and related activity);

- A requirement for various State and Federal programs with a responsive, evolving workforce that have the capacity to align and deliver on the objectives of the other key programs at the major reform programs; and
- The workforce requires the right operating environment to be able to apply their skills in a way that will make a difference.

Overall, an overarching plan is required. There is an inextricable link to the provision of training, but also then the creation of environments that allow staff who are well trained to be able to, to work in a very wonderful, creative way, with our clients. There is an enormous amount of outstanding workforce development and training activities that we need to identify, we need to seek to address and we need to track the results.

What success could look like:
- Identifying the knowledge and skills that are needed in different key roles, including key management and frontline worker roles, identifying strategies for the delivery of these skills in a way that aligns with the evidence relating to the best way of providing the required training skills; and
- The finalisation of a workforce skills blueprint: Embedding a future governance and business operating model that ensures that there is an ongoing and evidence-based review of workforce development and training needs, together with related ongoing adjustments to the blueprint, as the evidence evolves regarding what constitutes best practice for meeting each identified knowledge and skill requirements and enhancement in pre- and post-employment training provided by universities and the tertiary education sector, more broadly, including RTOs.

Mr Kinmond advocated that all of the above needed to be carried out under robust and effective co-design principles and practices.

Case study 1

Ms Annette Michaux, Director Policy and Practice, Parenting Research Centre

Ms Michaux presented a Parenting Research Center (PRC) case study on building workforce capacity to the forum. The presentation looked at:
- What child children and families need from our workforce;
- A broad theory of change on prevention practice, what is getting in the way of the workforce meeting this need; and
- Practice solutions (focusing on a coaching approach).

Children thrive when we effectively support their families. PRC believes that through their organisation, staff, and practices they can make a significant contribution to child and family outcomes. When this is done well, children's wellbeing, mental health and health will improve both today and in the long term. Partnering with parents, is the best way to support children's development. Skilled and resilient practitioners are required to provide the kind of support that works for parents and benefits children.

Research shows that it is the quality and frequency of warm and responsive, serve and return relationships and interactions that promote and stimulates children's learning, development, health and wellbeing. It literally shapes the way bodies and brains develop as well as a whole range of bodily development issues that are stimulated through serve and return interactions. Parenting is absolutely modifiable: parenting is not naturally acquired - it is something that we can learn.

Skilled, resilient, capable workers can support parents to learn new ways of interacting with their children. This is the theory of change. Work from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child on how best to achieve children's health and wellbeing indicates the need to:
- Support responsive relationships;
- Strengthen core skills; and
- Reduce sources of stress.

These three principles are grounded in science and can guide our policies, our programs, and how we design and adapt to improve child and family outcomes. The principles are also interconnected: you progress one principle and the others are likely to improve. This is central to this kind of capacity building approach, supporting responsive relationships, the interactions that build skills and resilience are really important, strengthening core skills and capabilities.

Families need to be supported in their executive functioning and self-regulation in order to build their resilience and ability to cope through sometimes enormous stress and trauma. If you are experiencing institutionalised racism, homelessness, poverty, all these kinds of things, they are going to cause enormous stress and get in the way of your parenting. Parents may be exposed to a high level of scrutiny and blame and judgment which can make it difficult to ask for help. The challenge right now is that some children and families are not receiving the level of support that they need to thrive.

Without early and effective parenting support, at the primary and secondary stage, development will continue to suffer both in the immediate and long term.

> *Our whole system is geared for response for reporting, for surveillance, rather than for early or even later help (see for example Gary Melton 2020). This must be changed this around. Our workforces, primary, secondary, and tertiary can all play a significant role in better outcomes through practice improvement, but they need to be well supported in that process.*

PRC have been working on a capacity-building approach to supporting our workforce and families. A set of generic Practice Certificate skills that can be acquired at a basic or advanced level. These are:
- Collaborative relationships to build trust;
- Focus on the desired outcomes of the family;
- Formulate concerns and goals into problem-solving; and
- Use 'active skill building' together with families.

This is linked to relational work which Dr Russ has spoken to, but relational work in and of itself is not enough: it has to be highly purposeful. Hence the coaching approach to ensure active skill building so that families can walk away with the skills they need to get on with their lives. Practice coaching allows scope to provide on the job feedback and support which is essential to changing practice and mastering new skills.

Families should receive the help they need when they need it rather than having to wait until things go wrong. When they do reach out, they should get referral/assessment; there is not enough response and help.

Solutions:
- Workforce gains basic coaching skills to help parents with the issues they face;
- Taking a capacity-building approach with the generalist workforce, so families receive the help they need when they need it, rather than waiting till things go wrong; and
- When families do reach out, they often get a referral or an assessment, but not enough immediate response and help, so a solution is a workforce which is being coached and gains basic coaching skills to help parents on the issues they face.

Parenting as Partners in early childhood education and care centers in Victoria provides an example of places that parents go to where they can trust the workforce. They are not dealing with a welfare workforce, but educators. The way practitioners interact with each other, the way they interact with families, is very strengths based and an environment that's welcoming and responsive.

When there is a particular issue you need to address with a family, it might be a concern that you need to approach, for example, behavioral issues, there is a kind of basic reflective coaching model that can be used. It is called "just in time" coaching to support problem solving on that issue before it escalates.

With more complex issues, where families might need a more kind of systematic approach that can be used, we draw on Centre staff who become practice coaches. It is a "train the trainer" model, in situ.

Key considerations:

- A capacity building approach, goal setting, strength building, helping parents in their active skill building;
- Workplace coaching to deal with high complexity of work: Make sure the workplace is structured, to support practitioners to be coached by coaches, so that they are practicing the skills before they go out and work with families, they are also getting that feedback loop to improve and master the skills that they need;

- Implement generalist activities with care, considering the evidence for effectiveness around training and development, the context and needs of the staff, and the families and communities they serve;
- First Nations families should be given scope to develop mechanisms which work for them;
- Ensure that practice improvement activities effectively build knowledge, motivate staff to develop those practice techniques and embed the practices in the work with families; and
- Consider a coaching approach applied across the workforce and workforces to implement effective skills and strategies which benefit families and children.

Case Study 2:

Ms Dianne Potter, Manager, Learning and Development Centre, AbSec

Ms Potter noted a significant gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous education, training and employment outcomes. Indigenous students are more at risk of disengaging, particularly those in remote areas. Education experiences directly impact further training outcomes. Issues include:

- poor teacher or trainer skills;
- cultural and language barriers;
- preconceived ideas about career opportunities;
- lower expectations by trainee and others;
- trainees not being able see what the potential is, and what the goals might be; and
- lower language literacy and numeracy skills, which have long term impacts, lack of long-term meaningful support.

Ms Potter offered elements of what culturally appropriate education and training could be like for First Nations people:

- Start early and ensure good experiences happen at school, build teacher/trainer skills to suit the cohort. Expose Indigenous students to real career opportunities from an early age, provide long term support networks that work together and have one objective;
- Design training models that build digital literacy early and provide opportunities for ongoing exposure;
- Engage First Nations teachers and trainers or who have a genuine connection to, or understanding of, culture. Build programs in consultation with the community. Training must have a purpose, be relevant and achievable;
- Recognise and reward each step as an outcome or an achievement and showcase these achievements to the community: Make a fuss of it, show the community that people are achieving. That makes the person who is achieving feel important and satisfied, and it also gives the community an example and motivation as to what actually can be achieved.
- Mentoring in the workplace is very important to success. Work with cultural expectations.
- Work with the families and the community to make sure the program design, timetable, length and commitments required, all fit within the cultural confines.
- Engage with the trainer or the organisation and consider modifying assessments to suit the cohort's ability. (Rather than just having an assessment at the end of every unit or coming in and just ticking boxes as a workplace assessment). This style is still formal and compliant but has been tailored to the needs of the cohort.

Ms Potter drew upon a case study of a successful model of vocational training in aged care or Home and Community Care conducted with a group of First Nations people in a remote area of South Australia to discuss best practice for providing vocational training to First Nations communities. She felt the learnings had applicability in our sector. Key observations by employers:

- The flexibility of the program enabled employees to continue with their study, even if they have had to leave the workplace for periods of time or were unable to attend a training lecture;
- Appropriate trainers were essential. The continuity of the trainer was valued: The trainer continued with the program for 10 years and became quite well known and accepted in the community. Trainers need to understand how to work with the community and use relevant examples;
- The training program should be tailored to suit people with different abilities, including varying literacy and numeracy levels. For example, they often employed older people who did not

have computer skills and study skills. So online learning would have been very difficult. Instead, hands-on workplace learning was needed;

- A trainer who worked closely with industry to make training relevant reported that they saw changes to workplace practice when students could actually see why they are undertaking it.
- Measures of success other than completion rates included increased self-confidence, improved communication and foundation skills, maintaining connection to country culture and language, local ownership, secure funding, employment outcomes and trajectory transition to further study opportunities: and
- Lower course completion remains a problem in need of resolution.

Policy Implications

The forum presentations and the subsequent discussion, raised the following key considerations to take into account when designing policy related to workforce capacity and capability:

- Ensure that reporting requirements are not a barrier to early intervention: Many presenters pointed out that we've built a system based on reporting requirements, rather than responding with broader supports.
- Improved workforce data is required: Dr Russ suggested that we need a better understanding of who the workforce is, particularly at the secondary and primary levels. *The Trends and Needs in the Australian Welfare Workforce* report highlighted a gap in knowledge about who's out there and how people are focused on child safety and wellbeing.
- An absolute commitment to workforce planning is required: Dr Russ suggested that there are national workforce plans being developed and have recently been developed broadly in other industries, and yet, within social service systems these seem to be lacking. While there is some planning state by state, in the tertiary tier level, there seems to be a significant gap when we think about workforce nationally.
- Definitions of worker resilience must be broadened out: Dr Russ expanded our thinking on resilience from the narrow sense of it being an individual issue, posing the question: How do we think about not just individual resilience, but think about resilience in the context of our responsibilities, as organisations, as managers, as leaders? We need to better equip the workforce, not just in training, but managing the complexities and the emotional content of the work that people at all levels face.
- Additional vocational training outcome measures need to be developed: Outcomes should not solely be measured by academic course completion; assessment should also incorporate building the capability of individuals, their teams, workforce, and ultimately, the capability of parents and, and families and increasing child wellbeing. As Dianne Potter noted, it is important that fund for training is not solely tied to students completing a course.
- Valuing the expertise of First Nations Peoples and Families: Mr Crosby pointed out that some of the skills, practices and attitudes of First Nations people, particularly around kinship structures, community responsibility, collective support of children, young people and families are things that mainstream providers may have missed developing knowledge about.
- Micro-credentialling has value, particularly for difficult to engage students, however, it must fit into a broader, overall workforce development strategy.
- Address digital literacy through training: Professor Higgins pointed out that digital literacy also needs to be tailored as appropriate to different contexts including First Nations community settings, from remote through to urban, etc. Digital literacy in child sexual abuse prevention and education is an obstacle because many parents and workers do not understand the digital lives of children.
- Create opportunities for community-based responses to be part of the paid - not just volunteer - workforce: Dr Russ raised the question of how we engage, encourage and support that process? Micro-credentialing is one option but more broadly we need to think about what, who's out there, and who does this work? How do we value and recognise wins?