When well-being, workload and work-life balance is the focus

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Close to 80 early childhood educators (ECE) attended this year's SSTUWA ECE Conference, aptly titled Well-being, Workload and Work-Life Balance.

With the current teacher shortage crisis on the forefront of people's minds, an increase in burnout and the ongoing impact of funding constraints being felt for many years, this theme couldn't have come at a more relevant time.

In a recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report on early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce development: A foundation for process quality, a number of the key points made for working conditions for early childhood educators included:

- To "consider both extremes in terms of work hours: excessive hours that can compromise attention to process quality and limited and inconsistent hours that can compromise ECEC staff members' sense of job security or ability to attend to all relevant activities".
- To have set time for "professional development; time to plan for activities with children; time for communication with other staff members and parents; and time for cleaning and preparation of the physical environment (the importance of which is highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic)".

So, for our early childhood educators in particular, the conference meant spending

a day with experts on how to find some sort of work-life balance, managing their workloads, while taking care of their own personal needs.

The keynote address was delivered by Peta Slocombe, a practicing psychologist with over 25 years of experience across clinical, organisational and consulting settings.

Peta's passion lies in changing the way we think about and manage wellness at work. She was creator of Australia's Biggest Mental Health Check-in and co-founder of the One Million Lives initiative.

In her address, Peta talked about how our biology, the personality variables most common to the profession and the complexities of the last few years, have significantly impacted on teachers' mental health and well-being.

She highlighted how we all think we should live to our fullest potential at all times, but that we are not designed for that. Her key tip for high performance was about being present when necessary, thus our deliberate attention would be given to the task.

Peta stressed how multi-tasking is not something which we should do or strive to do. Also, downtime was not to be seen as being lazy, but rather a way to be refreshed and ready for the tasks ahead.

Her top practical tips to support each other, return balance to life and to stay well were informative and well received.

Kylie Bice (pictured above) was the featured speaker for the conference. Her topic: Their chaos my calm, focused on how to stay well and professional when the behaviour around us was challenging.

She gave relevant ECE examples and ways to look at individual triggers, symptoms or changes experienced when stressed, as well as the factors in managing behaviour at different levels within a school.

Kylie provided all early childhood educators with a handy booklet, which included methods for restoring balance and how to manage stress and prevent burnout.

The afternoon workshops were delivered by Vanessa Herbert and Ian Crosby (pictured bottom right). They focused on getting the balance right with assertiveness, mindfulness and resilience. Both workshops provided useful strategies for our early childhood educators to use. We also delivered
a workshop on member rights and entitlements and understanding the new agreement.

The day ended with a lot of energy and excitement as David Koutsoukis was back by popular demand.

His topic: Why you click with some people and others drive you crazy engaged the members with music, movement and information around how individual personality traits can influence behaviour and outcome.

In true David style, the session ended with a song.

I would like to thank the SSTUWA Education and Training Centre Team for the conference's success.

At the day's conclusion the early childhood educators who I spoke to all enjoyed their day and got a lot out of it.

However, I couldn't help but reflect on the conversations I had heard earlier about how overworked and tired they were.

It is a reminder that we need to keep fighting on workload reduction though our bargaining processes.

We need to end the equity issues around funding to allow our public schools to function in spaces that are well considered, thus reducing the burden placed on our educators.

Finally, we need to regain the value of the profession by raising its status.

Without passionate educators from ECE to TAFE, we know our future generations will be severely impacted.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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