For the sake of our children
Research led by KATE GOLEBIOWSKA may have uncovered a solution to some of the stresses in the Top End’s early childhood education and care sector.

Overseas-born early childhood workers living in the Top End may hold the key to easing the workforce stresses in the Northern Territory’s early childhood sector. With rapid population growth in the capital city Darwin and satellite city of Palmerston, and new national service standards in early childhood education and care, questions have been raised about the sector’s capacity to continue delivering quality services to children in their vital early years.

But research headed by Dr Kate Golebiowska, of the Northern Institute at Charles Darwin University, into the characteristics of workers already in the sector suggests a solution may be close at hand. In the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011 Census, overseas-born people comprised nearly one-third of the Territory’s 1515 early childhood workforce. Dr Golebiowska’s research documents the demographic, economic and educational characteristics of 27 individuals working in the industry in Darwin and Palmerston, and suggests that most of these people intend to stay in the NT and most intend to remain in the sector.

“Our interviews suggest that they are likely to be stable rather than transitory, which contradicts the widely held view that immigrant workers in peripheral areas are highly mobile,” Dr Golebiowska said.

“Some 85 per cent of those interviewed said they intend to remain in the NT for the long term and 81 per cent intend to stay in the early childhood sector. This may help address the retention problems in a small workforce where a high turnover would have a negative effect on the quality of service and potentially on child development.”

Dr Golebiowska said the research was believed to be the first of its kind in Australia. “The findings inform two of the primary challenges confronting the sector noted in the Northern Territory Early Childhood Workforce Plan 2011–2021: workforce stability and the need for a qualified workforce.

“It provides data where virtually none existed previously about the characteristics of the NT’s overseas-born early childhood workforce.”

Dr Golebiowska said a series of ongoing national reforms was designed to enhance the level of professionalism within the early childhood workforce. “The most recent reform, which came into effect on 1 January [2014], raises the minimum qualification to a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care.

“In our study 67 per cent of the overseas-born staff interviewed met or exceeded this standard and an even higher percentage (70 per cent) aspired to achieve higher levels of education. The overseas-born cohort offered a high degree of stability to services in the face of changes that might have had a dramatic impact on the workforce.

“Overseas-born workers are passionate about working with babies and children, which points to the retention potential of these staff,” Dr Golebiowska said. “It is helpful to understand their professional motivations, particularly in light of the infamously low salaries that the sector pays.”

Dr Golebiowska said a range of measures could be implemented to improve the appeal of a career in the industry to both Australian-born and overseas workers. “Promoting permanent contracts, which were held by almost all of our participants, and offering scholarships tailored toward an early childhood qualification, are two examples. Another would be to promote the greater likelihood of reaching management level in the NT rather than elsewhere in Australia.

“Overseas-born workers already play a large and important role in the sector and the prospect of creating opportunities for more would mitigate some of the difficulties in a sector under considerable duress.”

The research team comprises Dr Golebiowska, Ms Alicia Boyle, also of the Northern Institute, and Ms Denise Horvath of VET Health, Community and Children’s Services.