

**Stressors in Early Learning Environments and Their Impact on the Mental
Health and Well-Being of Early Childhood Educators**

by

Melissa Probert-Gilhooly

A thesis submitted to the
School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Education

Faculty of Education

University of Ontario Institute of Technology (Ontario Tech University)

Oshawa, Ontario, Canada

August 4th, 2023

© Melissa Probert-Gilhooly, 2023

THESIS EXAMINATION INFORMATION

Submitted by: **Melissa Probert-Gilhooly**

Master of Arts in Education

Thesis title: Stressors in Early Learning Environments and Their Impact on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Early Childhood Educators.

An oral defense of this thesis took place on August 4, 2023 in front of the following examining committee:

Examining Committee:

Chair of Examining Committee	DR. ANN LESAGE
Research Supervisor	DR. BRENDA JACOBS
Research Co-supervisor	DR. DIANA PETRARCA
Examining Committee Member	DR. ROBIN KAY
Thesis Examiner	DR. AURELIA DI SANTO

The above committee determined that the thesis is acceptable in form and content and that a satisfactory knowledge of the field covered by the thesis was demonstrated by the candidate during an oral examination. A signed copy of the Certificate of Approval is available from the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.

Abstract

Early childhood educators (ECEs) are experts in early learning for young children. This study aimed to identify the stressors ECEs experience in the early learning sector and their impact on the mental health and well-being of ECEs. Using a mixed-methods approach, an online questionnaire was administered using Facebook to gather data on Google Forms. One hundred ECEs, ranging in age from 18 to over 60, responded to the survey. The findings revealed that many ECEs felt they did not have sufficient education or support to effectively cope with the stressors experienced. The results of this study indicate the need for enhanced education and support systems to promote the mental health and well-being of ECEs working in the early learning sector.

Keywords: Early Childhood Educators; Early Childhood Education; Stressors; Mental Health and Well-Being

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis consists of original work of which I have authored. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I authorize the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (Ontario Tech University) to lend this thesis to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research. I further authorize University of Ontario Institute of Technology (Ontario Tech University) to reproduce this thesis by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research. I understand that my thesis will be made electronically available to the public.

The research work in this thesis that was performed in compliance with the regulations of Research Ethics Board/Animal Care Committee under **#16967**.

Melissa Probert-Gilhooly

Melissa Probert-Gilhooly

Statement of Contributions

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication. I have used standard referencing practices to acknowledge ideas, research techniques, or other materials that belong to others. Furthermore, I hereby certify that I am the sole source of the creative works and/or inventive knowledge described in this thesis.

Acknowledgements

The process of writing my thesis has been an exciting but challenging time. I could not have done it without my supportive network.

Firstly, to my husband and biggest supporter, Hunter. Without your support and encouragement, I would not have had as much motivation to achieve my dream. His continuous encouragement, positivity, and belief that I could accomplish anything helped to secure my goal. From providing me with ample daylight hours to work while taking care of our two young children, to bringing me snacks when I wrote until the wee hours of the morning, I'm truly grateful for your support during this long journey. Thank you.

Secondly, to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Brenda Jacobs. Dr. Jacobs and I met during my first semester of my Master's degree and we connected almost instantly. We share a common background in early childhood education, and I was thrilled when she agreed to supervise my thesis. Dr. Jacobs has been and continues to be an inspiration to me. Her dedication to the art of teaching, significant knowledge base, continuous research and writing, and dedication to supporting her students has had an unwavering, positive effect on my entire journey at Ontario Tech. I am beyond grateful for everything she has done and will continue to do for not only me but every fortunate student who is taught by her.

Thirdly, to my parents and my in-laws. These four caring, loving individuals supported my dream from day one and have provided me with emotional support, uplifting positivity, and ensured that my children were cared for so I could focus on writing. Their continued dedication to supporting our family while I've been doing my thesis has been a testament to the love and strength of our family. I am beyond grateful.

Fourthly, to my co-supervisor, Dr. Diana Petrarca, and examining committee member, Dr. Robin Kay. Dr. Petrarca has been instrumental in developing the richness of my thesis by providing thorough and constructive feedback. She made me think outside of the box and I am grateful for all the work and guidance she put into my work. Dr. Kay provided some alternative perspectives when examining my thesis and I thank him for his contributions.

Fifthly, to my work family at Algonquin College. This group of individuals work in higher education and understand the pressures students face as well as the pressures the professors and administration face. From answering questions to providing me with reassurance to checking in to see if I was doing okay, each of these individuals provided me with a positive outlook on my progress.

And finally, to my closest friends who listened to me and encouraged me when I struggled with my writing. You all helped me see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel and reassured me that everything would be all right.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Author's Declaration	iv
Statement of Contributions	v
Acknowledgments	vi
Table of Contents	viii
List of Tables	xi
List of Abbreviations and Symbols	xii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Research Problem	4
1.2 Origins of the Research	6
1.3 Overview of the Chapters	6
Chapter 2: Literature Review	8
2.1 Stressors in the Early Childhood Environment	8
2.2 Professional Stressors	9
2.2.1 Behaviours in Children	9
2.2.2 Compensation and Professional Recognition	11
2.2.3 Parent-Provider Relationships and Relationships with Children	13
2.2.4 Relationships with Colleagues, Autonomy, and the Work Environment	14
2.3 Personalized Stressors	16
2.4 Depression, Emotional Exhaustion, and Burnout	16
2.5 Knowledge about Mental Health and Well-Being	18
2.5.1 Self-Care and Coping Skills	18
2.6 Wellness	20
Chapter 3: Research Methodology	22
3.1 Theoretical Framework	22
3.2 Mixed Methods Research	24
3.3 Overview of Methods	27
3.3.1 Context and Participants	28
3.3.2 Data Sources	28
3.3.3 Consent	29
3.3.4 Questionnaire	30
3.3.5 Ethics Approval and Data Storage	31
3.4 Data Analysis	31
3.4.1 Quantitative Data	32

3.4.2 Qualitative Data	33
Chapter 4: Findings.....	37
4.1 Reasons for Remaining in the Profession.....	37
Table 4.1	37
4.2 Stressors in Early Learning Sector.....	39
4.2.1 Personalized Stressors	39
Table 4.2	40
4.2.2 Professional Stressors.....	41
Table 4.3	41
4.3 How RECEs Cope with Stressors Experienced in the Early Learning Sector.....	43
Table 4.4	43
4.4 Mental Health and Well-Being: Learning Opportunities and Their Impact.....	46
Table 4.5	46
Table 4.6	50
4.4.1 Final Question.....	51
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	52
5.1 Professional Stressors Experienced by ECEs in the Early Learning Sector.....	52
5.1.1 Behaviours in Children and the Lack of Support from Agencies	52
5.1.2 Compensation and Professional Recognition	54
5.1.3 Relationships with Colleagues, Families, and the Work Environment	57
5.2 Knowledge of Mental Health and Well-Being	59
5.2.1 Coping with Stressors.....	61
5.2.2 Dysregulation.....	62
5.2.3 Professional Development.....	64
5.2.4 Burnout.....	65
5.3 Connection to the Research Question	66
Chapter 6: Recommendations and Conclusions.....	67
6.1 Addressing the Gaps in Knowledge.....	67
6.1.1 Identifying the Need for a Course on Mental Health and Well-Being.....	67
6.1.2 Supporting Practicing ECEs	70
6.2 Reviewing Policies	70
6.2.1 The College of Early Childhood Educators.....	71
6.2.2 The Ontario Ministry of Education	72
6.2.3 The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement	74
6.3 Limitations	75

6.4 Future Research	76
6.5 Conclusion.....	78
Appendixes	90
Appendix A: Consent Form	90
Appendix B: Advertisement.....	94
Appendix C: Questionnaire.....	95

List of Tables

Chapter 4

Table 4.1: Why ECEs Work in the Early Learning Sector	35
Table 4.2: Demographic Information of Participants to Establish Context for Personalized Stressors	37
Table 4.3: Professional Stressors Experienced by ECEs in the Early Learning Sector	40
Table 4.4: How ECEs Cope with Stressors Experienced in the Early Learning Sector	42
Table 4.5: Learning Opportunities for Mental Health and Well-Being and Their Impact on Mental Health and Well-Being of ECEs	44
Table 4.6: Course on Mental Health and Well-Being in the ECE Program	48

List of Abbreviations and Symbols

AECEO	Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario
CECE	College of Early Childhood Educators
CUPE	Canadian Union of Public Employees
CWELCC	Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement
ECE	Early Childhood Educator
RECE	Registered Early Childhood Educator
OCT	Ontario Certified Teacher

Chapter 1: Introduction

Early childhood educators (ECEs) are experts in the early learning sector (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014b). Their expertise is developed through formal post-secondary education programs, which use foundational government documents such as *How Does Learning Happen: Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014b) and *The Kindergarten Program* (2016). These documents outline the importance of the holistic development of the child, that is to say development in every area of their life including relationships. According to *How Does Learning Happen: Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014b), the development of children can be supported by the four foundations: belonging, well-being, engagement, and expression. ECEs are also guided by the *Early Childhood Educators Act* (2007), which identifies and provides information on the duties and requirements of the profession. ECE students apply the knowledge developed through their post-secondary education programs during placement which provides an opportunity for practical experiential learning. According to the *Early Childhood Educators Act* (2007), the duties of an ECE are planning and implementing inclusive play-based learning programs, promoting the holistic development and well-being of children twelve or younger, assessing programming and development, and various other activities or services required by regulations.

The early learning sector is an ever-growing professional field that has experienced many changes over the past ten years (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022c). From the initial development of the *Early Learning for Every Child Today* (2007) framework to the creation of the *Child Care and Early Years Act* (2014a) to the development of the *Kindergarten Program* (2016), the sector continues to develop and improve the early learning opportunities of young children. The College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) was established in 2009 to provide

ECEs with a regulatory body for their professional practice (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2022b). The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario (AECEO), a professional association separate from the CECE, works hard to advocate for the profession (Association of Early Childhood Educators, 2023c). They aim to promote the notion that individuals who work with young children are no longer simply babysitters or caretakers; they are experts in early childhood development (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014b). Additionally, the AECEO (2023b) is advocating for what they call “professional pay,” which reflects the level of professional knowledge that ECEs possess. Despite the creation of the CECE, ECEs are often still not acknowledged for their professional expertise, which has led to a feeling of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with the profession (Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, 2023.). This lack of professional recognition has also been identified with individuals who worked in the early learning sector in other countries, with studies out of Australia and the United States echoing this sentiment (Quinones et al., 2021; Schaack et al., 2020).

Many ECEs are permanently leaving the field which has caused a staffing crisis (McGinn, 2023). The Government of Ontario began providing incentives to attract new individuals to the early learning sector (Ontario ECE Qualifications Upgrade Program, 2022). These incentives include grant funding to pay for school and free tuition in select programs. The Ontario government is facing even more pressure now to fill positions with qualified ECEs after signing the Ontario Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (CWELCC) in 2022 (Government of Canada, 2022). The goals of the CWELCC are to create new childcare spaces and provide \$10 per day childcare to Canadian families (Government of Canada, 2022). These

incentives are meant to attract new individuals to the sector but are, unfortunately, masking the many stressors ECEs face regularly (Akbari & Mccuaig, 2022).

In November 2022, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) went on strike after failed negotiations with the Ontario Government about pay, preparatory time, and working hours for support staff who work in public school boards in Ontario (Canadian Union of Public Employees, 2022). These particular factors are some of the many stressors impacting the mental health and well-being of ECEs, leaving them unsatisfied with their career and even causing some to leave the early learning sector entirely (Corr et al., 2017).

Stressors are identified as real or perceived threats that may impact an individual, and their subsequent response is called the stress response (Schneiderman et al., 2005). Stressors experienced in the early learning sector can contribute to the stress level of an ECE which can affect their work performance when completing daily tasks. Repeated exposure to these stressors can impact mental health and well-being, potentially leading to psychological distress, which can compromise caregiving abilities (Berlin et al., 2020). Not only are these stressors affecting the mental health and well-being of the ECEs, but they are also directly impacting the children in their care (Berlin et al., 2020; Buettner et al., 2016; Corr et al., 2017).

Some stressors are individualized, such as those caused by demographics (marital status, having children in the home, education level). Some stressors are present in the early learning sector. These stressors include behavioural challenges exhibited by children, a lack of autonomy, long hours, and low pay (Berlin et al., 2020). ECEs are forced to experience these stressors daily, and many cannot cope with the challenges presented due to a lack of education surrounding mental health and well-being (Biglan et al., 2013).

Coping skills and self-care skills are critical when addressing stressful situations. One potential skill to combat stressors in the early learning environment is mindfulness, a “modifiable trait that involves non-judgemental attention to, awareness of, and acceptance of one’s own and others’ present-moment thoughts and emotions” (Berlin et al., 2020, p. 1071). At the time of this study, despite extensive searching through the course requirements of Early Childhood Education programs offered through public colleges in Ontario, there is no indication that ECEs are provided a formal learning opportunity for topics surrounding mental health and well-being, including self-care and coping skills, during their post-secondary education. This may contribute to their overall self-perception, enhance the stressors experienced when working, and contribute to feelings of burnout (Boyd & Schneider, 1997; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

1.1 Research Problem

Studies have been completed on stressors experienced across the world that ECEs may face when working in early learning environments. The examined studies contain similar themes: low pay, lack of professional recognition, long hours, lack of education on mental health and well-being, and a lack of support from management (Berlin et al., 2020; Boyd & Schneider, 1997; Boyd, 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; McMullen et al., 2020). These stressors have been significantly enhanced following the COVID-19 pandemic, an economic cost of living crisis, and the navigation for equity by unions with employees in public sectors (Eadie et al., 2021).

When examining the few studies completed in Ontario, Canada, I identified a gap in the research that does not highlight the individualized stressors that ECEs may face with demands specific to their region. The stressors faced by ECEs in Canada may differ from individualized stressors faced by ECEs working in other countries and will have different policies, education

requirements, costs of living, and generally a different way of life. These personalized, individual stressors are in addition to the professional stressors that impact the mental health and well-being of ECEs (Wagner et al., 2013). Educators identified a lack of mental health and well-being education as contributing to their inability to self-regulate and cope with the stressors encountered in the sector (Buettner et al., 2016; Corr et al., 2017). When writing this thesis, after examining course catalogues, it was determined that only one course in one program, only offered by Canadore College, focuses on an educator's mental health and well-being (Canadore College, 2023). The responsibility of learning about healthy coping strategies and developing positive well-being falls onto the individual ECE, and without the knowledge, many risk emotional burnout (Quinones et al., 2021).

In the early childhood education programs offered in Ontario colleges, there are courses focused on supporting children's mental health and well-being, such as *Supporting Self-Regulation and Well-Being in Early Childhood* offered at St. Lawrence College (St. Lawrence College, 2023). Different early childhood education programs in public and private colleges across Ontario offer similar courses. Part of the research in developing these courses identifies that children are impacted by how educators view themselves (Jacobs, 2022; Khattar & Callaghan, 2015). For example, ECEs with a positive psychological load and healthy coping strategies were likelier to express encouragement and positivity within their classroom (Buettner et al., 2016; Jennings, 2015). For children to have healthy emotional self-regulation skills, educators must have positive levels of social-emotional competence.

There is a lack of research on the stressors ECEs experience while working in the early learning sector in Ontario, Canada. The mental health and well-being of ECEs are crucial topics that need to be addressed and explored, especially with the introduction of the CWELCC and the

current turnover rate in the sector. This mixed-methods research study aims to identify the current knowledge ECEs possess concerning mental health and well-being and how this knowledge or lack of knowledge connects with the stressors ECEs may experience while working in the early learning sector.

The specific research question guiding this study is: How do stressors in the early learning environment impact the mental health and well-being of early childhood educators?

1.2 Origins of the Research

Early childhood education has been a focal point of my life. My first completed post-secondary education was in ECE, and I have over ten years of practical experience working with children of all ages. I have experienced many of the stressors plaguing ECEs firsthand. Now, as a Professor working in a College ECE program, I hear about them from colleagues and community partners. These comments raised the question of why. Why are so many stressors still experienced in the early learning sector? What can we do from an institutional standpoint to help mitigate or assist those working or soon to be working in the sector? All of these questions fueled my interest in uncovering the specific stressors that ECEs are experiencing in the field and understanding how they impact their professional practice. I believe that by uncovering this knowledge, it will enable me to better advocate for ECEs in the future.

1.3 Overview of the Chapters

This thesis will be divided into six chapters. The literature review in Chapter Two will provide an overview of the professional and personal stressors that ECEs have experienced and define burnout, emotional exhaustion, and depression. Topics surrounding knowledge about mental health and well-being will also be examined. Chapter Three will provide the methodology and structure of the study, which employed a mixed-methodology. Chapter Four will identify the

findings of the questionnaire completed by ECE participants. Chapter Five will discuss the findings from the questionnaire supported by existing literature. Finally, Chapter Six will provide recommendations for future research, limitations, and conclusions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this literature review, I will examine the personal and professional stressors ECEs may experience in the field, followed by how the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to existing stress levels. I will then explore current research about depression, emotional exhaustion, and burnout that ECEs may experience in the sector. I will then examine how positive mental health and well-being can contribute to job satisfaction, quality teaching, and educator retention. Finally, I will review how knowledge or a lack of knowledge surrounding mental health and well-being can contribute to an ECEs overall psychological state.

2.1 Stressors in the Early Childhood Environment

ECEs experience many stressors daily involving children and their families (Buettner et al., 2016). These stressors include professional stressors related to their vocation and individualized personal stressors that impact their lives away from their place of work (Corr et al., 2017; Quinones et al., 2021; Wagner et al., 2012). Some examples of professional stressors include compensation or wages, behaviours displayed by children, long hours, lack of autonomy, and maintaining parent-provider or colleague relationships (Berlin et al., 2020; Boyd & Schneider, 1997). Some examples of individualized personal stressors could include demographic information such as age, parental roles, education level, or marital status (Wagner et al., 2013). These stressors experienced by ECEs in their professional and personal lives can contribute to developing emotional intensity, anxiety, depression, or burnout (Quinones et al., 2021). The psychological burdens of the ECE also impacted the quality of teaching in early learning programs and their ability to form meaningful relationships with the children in their care (Buettner et al., 2016).

2.2 Professional Stressors

Professional stressors include items directly affecting or resulting from an individual's functional performance in the early learning sector. Professional stressors often affect an ECE outside the physical work environment, as many ECEs would bring their work home with them (Corr et al., 2017). ECEs generally continue to work outside of regular working hours. They will complete tasks such as finalizing newsletters, researching ideas for curriculum and programming, and conversing with their coworkers about professional matters (Corr et al., 2017).

2.2.1 Behaviours in Children

Behaviours exhibited by children can be a significant stressor, especially for educators who have not had formal training in managing children's behaviours (Berlin et al., 2020). Children can exhibit many behaviours when enrolled in an early learning program ranging from biting to bolting. ECEs need to work with families to establish a method of confronting and managing the behaviour in an age-appropriate manner. Jeon & Ardeleanu (2020) found that educators had a higher stress level when faced with student behavioural challenges, low or lack of family support, and a poor work environment.

Stress may be increased in early learning environments that have children with exceptionalities enrolled, especially if those behaviours are more challenging (Biglan et al., 2013). Children with exceptionalities tend to require more individualized support and care to help establish a foundation unique to their learning preferences and needs. This additional work requirement can tax an ECE who is already emotionally exhausted and feeling the effects of burnout or depression (Biglan et al., 2013). The stress levels of ECEs may also make them less tolerant of disruptive behaviours within the classroom and display less empathy when working

with these behaviours (Lang et al., 2020). There were also higher rates of reported child behaviours in classrooms where ECEs indicated more stressors (Johnson et al., 2020). A study by Buettner et al. (2016) found that early childhood educators experiencing emotional distress were less likely to have tolerance when dealing with challenging behaviours in the classroom.

Additionally, ECEs who responded negatively to behaviours exhibited by children in the classrooms adversely influenced the children's motivation, cognitive functioning, and self-efficacy (Jennings, 2015). This negativity could lead to children being unable to display their emotions healthily and could potentially lead to emotional incompetence (Buettner et al., 2016). Calming and nurturing environments for children could assist in reducing child-experienced stress, which can enhance children's development across various domains (Johnson et al., 2020). It could be difficult for an ECE who experiences an extended period of stress to find the motivation to learn how to create these calming and nurturing environments. It can be challenging for educators to teach children how to self-regulate when they themselves are dysregulated (Jacobs, 2022; Shanker, 2021).

Stuart Shanker (2021) developed the *Self-Reg Framework*, a tool families and professionals use to help understand stress and promote self-regulation. According to Shanker (2021), there are five domains of self-regulation: biological, emotional, cognitive, social, and pro-social. Different self-regulation stressors can be found across each of these domains. In the cognitive domain for example, an ECE may experience stressors including time pressure, organizing thoughts, remembering information, or multitasking (Shanker, 2023). Additionally, the five steps in the Shanker *Self-Reg Framework* assist in identifying, recognizing, and reducing stress, reflecting, and restoring energy. This tool is beneficial for children and adults to assist

with the recognition of stressors and promotion of self-regulation strategies to restore energy (Jacobs, 2022; Shanker, 2021).

2.2.2 Compensation and Professional Recognition

Compensation and professional recognition for early childhood educators are frequently discussed topics amongst those who work in the field of early childhood education. A study completed by Boyd and Schneider (1997) found that poor compensation in the early childhood education profession led to job dissatisfaction and burnout. More recent studies by Berlin et al. (2020) and Biglan et al. (2013) concur, adding that the pay rate for early childhood educators is low across North America, particularly in the United States, where the average childcare provider earned less than the federal poverty line for a family of four. In Canada, the pay rate for early childhood educators varies across the country but averages between \$16 per hour and \$25 per hour (Canadian Child Care Federation, 2022). Lower wage earners exhibit higher rates of depression and stress contributing to ECEs leaving the early learning field (Eadie et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the already high levels of economic stress ECEs were experiencing, as many places of work were closed and ECEs were not being paid (Swigonski et al., 2021). Many ECEs work a second or third job to pay the bills (Boyd, 2013; Hur et al., 2023).

Similarly, the lack of professional recognition is evident among early childhood educators who feel undervalued (Berlin et al., 2020). Despite efforts to promote ECEs as a professional group dedicated to the early education of young children, there are still families and individuals who believe ECEs are more of a babysitting service (Jeon & Ardeleanu, 2020, p.1033). According to a study by Royer & Moreau (2016), the social recognition of the early childhood education profession was the most unsatisfactory quality of the career. The

Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario is working hard to advocate for recognition of the profession to reduce or remove the stigma surrounding ECEs (AECEO, 2023b). A study by McMullen et al. (2020) found that ECEs who felt they belonged to an inclusive, adult-centered community within their profession had improved feelings of personal well-being. Within an early learning environment, the adult ECE community that completed team building tasks, had meetings where their values and opinions were heard, and felt acknowledged, were significantly happier (McMullen et al., 2020). Despite the efforts of ECEs and supportive networks like the AECEO, some ECEs reportedly felt more valued by the children they worked with than the general public (Eadie et al., 2021).

In Kindergarten programs across Ontario, an ECE is added to a classroom with more than 16 children (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). ECEs are expected to work as a team with an Ontario Certified Teacher (OCT), and share roles in planning, implementing, and assessing the development of the children in the classroom (Lynch, 2014). There are professional barriers for ECEs within Kindergarten classrooms. These include a lack of preparatory time with the OCT to discuss programming, a perceived lack of defined roles, lack of understanding about the skills and expertise of an ECE by a teaching partner, and tension due to differences in pay (Lynch, 2014). A study by Royer & Moreau (2016) found that ECEs earn half of what an elementary teacher earns during their first year of teaching. This significant pay difference is a stressor in some Kindergarten classrooms which can highlight the difference in education level and skills (Royer & Moreau, 2016). Some OCTs find working with ECEs challenging as their roles can be blurred (Lynch, 2014). One teacher from Lynch's study wrote that if "the Ministry defined the roles a bit better, there would be more collaboration and productivity (p.338)."

2.2.3 Parent-Provider Relationships and Relationships with Children

Communication is critical when working with colleagues and with families of young children. ECEs need to build quality, supportive relationships not only with the children but their families as well. A positive parent-provider relationship is built on a mutual understanding and respect for policies introduced by the centre and open communication between the parents and the ECEs (Corr et al., 2014; Jeon & Ardeleanu, 2020). Jeon and Ardeleanu's (2020) study found that a lack of support from parents of children in early childhood settings contributed to high stress levels and depressive symptoms in ECEs. Stressful encounters with parents negatively influence an ECE's well-being (Eadie et al., 2021). For example, parents who are frequently tardy to pick up their children, those who send their children to care when ill, and parents who do not respect the work educators are doing can increase the level of stress experienced by an ECE (Jeon & Ardeleanu, 2020).

Stress can impact an ECE's relationship with the children in their care. To protect themselves, an ECE may reduce their effort in building relationships with children to reduce their overall levels of distress (Biglan et al., 2013). A study by McMullen et al. (2020) discussed how social and emotional development could have harmful effects on children if the ECEs responsible for their care do not respond to them promptly. Additionally, dysregulated educators are less responsive to the children's emotions in their care, leading to dysregulation in emotion management, social, language, and cognitive processing skills (Lang et al., 2020). Building relationships with children is an essential component of the practice. These nurturing bonds help a child trust, learn self-regulation, and feel safe when learning (McMullen et al., 2020). Consequently, when an ECE leaves their position within a centre, the children are forced to

begin a relationship with a new person, which can have lasting effects on trust and attachment (McMullen et al., 2020).

Bowlby's (1969) Theory of Attachment explains the significance of the connections between an infant and their maternal caregiver during the first two years of life. Bowlby (1988) describes how a secure attachment to parental figures created in the early years can establish a foundation for physical and emotional readiness when engaging with the world. Certain attachment behaviours, like proximity seeking, are seen when children are insecure, fearful, or experiencing separation anxiety leading to the child exhibiting certain behaviours to regain proximity to their caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). These behaviours could range from smiling, crying for, or moving toward a caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). Addressing the behaviours and reinforcing the connections made between the caregiver and the child are important for developing trust and attachment.

2.2.4 Relationships with Colleagues, Autonomy, and the Work Environment

Early childhood educators who were more withdrawn and lacked professional engagement with their colleagues and the work environment were more likely to show depressive symptoms and have lower job satisfaction (Buettner et al., 2016). Insufficient support from colleagues or a lack of training contributes to stressful working environments, which can be enhanced by pressure to perform and meet goals (Boyd & Schneider, 1997; Jeon & Ardeleanu, 2020). Educators in centres with mutual support and respect among colleagues had higher levels of educator well-being (Biglan et al., 2013). The mutual respect and support between colleagues establishes a community of practice, which can improve the ECE's professional practice (McMullen et al., 2020).

Administrative policies, the physical work environment, emotional climate, and routines also impact the stress experienced by an ECE (McMullen et al., 2020). ECEs who felt valued in their position through being trusted with responsibilities, having a say when developing or reviewing policies, feeling challenged in the classroom, having autonomy, and being able to share their professional experiences showed an enhancement in personal well-being (McMullen et al., 2020). Early learning environments require those employed to make decisions quickly, which enforces the importance of being provided that level of trust and autonomy (Boyd & Schneider, 1997).

Educator well-being impacted the learning and developmental growth of children in the centre. Negative educator well-being showed a decline in the program quality (Eadie et al., 2021). A study by Roberts et al. (2019) indicated that ECEs who had more adult-centred instructional beliefs showed higher levels of depression compared to those who had more child-centred beliefs. ECE frustration can develop when the desired outcomes from the ECE with adult-centred beliefs do not match the natural autonomy displayed by children (Roberts et al., 2019). A study by Royer & Moreau (2016) found that ECEs who worked in home-based early learning settings had more positive well-being than those who worked in centre-based settings. Some educators feel like they are a sham of themselves when working in the early learning sector. The educators described it as a separation of their “public self” and their “home self” because they knew that the “public self” was being scrutinized and judged by the parents, children, and their colleagues (Rodriguez et al., 2020). ECEs must be appropriate role models for the children in their care and must be cautious of what qualities they display when working with them (Rodriguez et al., 2020).

2.3 Personalized Stressors

Personal stressors encompass individualized qualities outside the professional setting that may affect mental health and well-being. These stressors include demographic information (marital status, children in the home, socioeconomic status) and physical health (Wagner et al., 2013). According to a study by Johnson et al. (2020), many ECEs suffer from economic stressors, including food insecurity which can increase their reliance on government assistance. These financial or economic difficulties can force educators to forgo familial commitments, leading to tension among the family of the educator (Lang et al., 2020). The physical health of the ECE is also of concern, with ECEs suffering from poor physical health potentially having additional stressors (Johnson et al., 2020).

According to a study by Royer & Moreau (2016), ECEs who reach five years of experience exhibit a decrease in mental well-being after recognition of the magnitude of the responsibilities becomes evident. This decrease in well-being continues until the ECE reaches twenty years of experience. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is that ECEs are typically between the ages of 25 and 40 when they reach five years of experience and additional personalized stressors such as raising their own children, could contribute to the decrease in well-being (Royer & Moreau, 2016).

2.4 Depression, Emotional Exhaustion, and Burnout

According to a study completed by Johnson et al. (2020), almost a third of ECEs noted that they experienced depression due to the high stress level in their work environment. Moderate levels of depression can negatively affect the ECE's ability to deliver instructional and emotional support (Jennings, 2015; Roberts et al., 2019). A lack of professional recognition

contributed to reduced mental well-being as ECEs did not feel acknowledged or appreciated for their expertise or level of professionalism (Quinones et al., 2021).

Poor mental health and well-being have a negative impact on an ECE's ability to provide emotional and instructional support to the children in their care when managing classroom behaviours (Buettner et al., 2016; Jennings, 2015; Johnson et al., 2020). A study by Roberts et al. (2019) found that depressive symptoms in ECEs correlated with their ability to provide quality instruction within the classroom. Roberts et al. (2019) suggest that this makes depression amongst ECEs a "critical issue to address" (p.10). The Covid-19 pandemic enhanced the feelings of negativity surrounding the emotional well-being of educators with added stressors due to the nature of the pandemic (Eadie et al., 2021).

High stress, emotional exhaustion, and negative well-being have led to educator burnout (Jennings, 2015). Burnout was a term first coined by Herbert Freudenberger in 1974 and is frequently used to describe job stress, fatigue, boredom, and depression in positions that require a high amount of person-to-person contact (Boyd & Schneider, 1997). Higher turnover rates in early childhood settings directly result from ECE burnout, as many ECEs are pushed beyond their emotional and psychological capacities (Eadie et al., 2021).

Burnout is described by Boyd & Schneider (1997) as "a multidimensional construct made up of three component parts: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment" (p.172). Emotional exhaustion is the inability to give to others after being depleted of energy. Depersonalization consists of a negative outlook relating to an individual or their work. Personal accomplishment can refer to what has been accomplished by an individual or a lack of accomplishment or achievement in the workplace (Boyd & Schneider, 1997). ECEs are regularly depleted of their energy when ensuring the well-being and needs of the children in

their care. The number of daily stressors can contribute to a negative outlook on the work environment or themselves as a human being. Personal accomplishment can refer to how much value or worth an educator feels they may have when working in a stressful environment. They may question their choice to work in such an environment and begin looking for alternative career opportunities to raise their level of self-worth (Boyd & Schneider, 1997).

2.5 Knowledge about Mental Health and Well-Being

After an extensive search through all the post-secondary college course offerings listed on the College of Early Childhood Educators website, at the time of this study, I was only able to find one course focused on mental health and well-being for ECEs (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2023). This means ECEs may have no formal opportunities to learn about topics such as mental health and well-being, wellness, coping strategies, or self-care. Berlin et al. (2020) found that knowledge of coping and self-care techniques promotes positive well-being in educators who practice them regularly (see also Eadie et al., 2021). Some self-care practices have been proven to reduce the impact of stress on an ECE's well-being.

2.5.1 Self-Care and Coping Skills

Self-care practices and coping mechanisms are essential skills for an ECE to learn to combat some stressors they may experience while working in an early learning environment. These skills or traits have been proven to support educator well-being and lower stress (Eadie et al., 2021). Self-care practices can present in many fashions depending on the interests, time constraints, and capabilities of the individual practicing them. Self-care practices are not limited to bubble baths or relaxing quietly on a sofa. Carroll et al. (1999) recognize self-care as “intrapersonal work, interpersonal support, professional development and support, and physical/recreational activities” (p.135).

Physical or recreational activities could include yoga, running, playing team sports, or dancing. The interests of ECEs will impact the type of self-care they choose. Physical activity has also been proven to help an individual cope with stress, decrease feelings of anxiety or depression, and promotes positive well-being (Richards et al., 2010). Physical activities can be influenced by spiritual self-care. For example, a walk in the woods can be therapeutic as an individual is connecting with nature (Richards et al., 2010). Spirituality can help someone focus on their sense of purpose and help establish what they hope to achieve in this life (Richards et al., 2010).

Professional and personal support systems can also assist with mental health and well-being, as conversation can be a useful therapeutic tool. Communicating professionally with colleagues can reduce burnout and communicating with a mental health professional can also have a positive impact on mental health, well-being, and resiliency (Richards et al., 2010). Resilience is a coping skill that allows for an individual to recover from a potentially difficult situation or experience (Eadie et al., 2021).

Mindfulness, which couples a non-judgmental awareness with self-regulation, can improve teacher quality as it may enhance an ECE's response to stress (Jennings, 2015). Mindfulness is a coping skill that promotes engaging with the environment in the present, being aware of your own thoughts and emotions without any self-deprivation or judgement (Eadie et al., 2021). ECEs displaying mindfulness also display emotional support which can assist when working with children who engage in difficult behaviours (Lang et al., 2020). When ECEs are provided training on displaying mindfulness, it can increase their self-efficacy, well-being and relationships with children, as well as their ability to manage a classroom effectively (Lang et al., 2020).

2.6 Wellness

The Global Wellness Institute, a non-profit organization in the United States, defines wellness as “the active pursuit of activities, choices and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health” (Global Wellness Institute, 2020). A holistic approach focuses on the development of an individual through multiple avenues beyond just physical health. According to Watson et al. (2010), wellness is when the “mind, body, and spirit are integrated in a purposeful manner with a goal of living life more fully” (p.30). Wellness is the process of making healthy choices based on an ideal state of holistic health (Global Wellness Institute, 2020).

Wellness is a multidimensional entity which can comprise of up to 12 categories (Global Wellness Institute, n.d.; Watson et al., 2010). There are different models of wellness that exist depending on the author, but the majority identify six primary categories of wellness: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social, and environmental (Global Wellness Institute, 2020). An ECE can promote their wellness by ensuring that each component of their health is examined and supported. Educators who experienced higher levels of stress in their occupational role were more likely to exhibit lower levels of wellness (Watson et al., 2010). The lower levels of wellness involving the individual’s career choice can contribute to lower levels of wellness in other areas of the individual’s life (Watson et al., 2010). There are different approaches to improving an individual’s holistic health by increasing the wellness of each dimension. For example, an ECE could promote their physical wellness by ensuring they are sleeping enough at night, eating a balanced and nutritious diet, and exercising regularly (Global Wellness Institute, 2020).

This chapter addressed many factors influencing the mental health and well-being of ECEs. I discussed the difference between professional and personal stressors and their impacts

on professional practice and an ECE's mental health and well-being. The chapter then discussed the consequences of poor mental health and well-being, including depression, emotional exhaustion, and physical health, and potential strategies to help ECEs cope with their stressors, including self-care and coping skills. Finally, the chapter discussed wellness and its holistic approach. The next chapter will provide an overview of the research methodology.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Chapter three will be focused on the research methodology. I will review the theoretical framework, the research design, and supporting theories, examine the research question, and finally, review the structure and design of the study.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework helps provide guidance when reviewing research findings and ideas with an intended direction (Kivunja, 2018). It is described by Grant & Osanloo (2014) as “the foundation from which all knowledge is constructed (metaphorically and literally) for a research study” (p.12). A theoretical framework allows for the formation of the remainder of the study and paves the way for the description of the methodology, literature review, findings, recommendations, and conclusions (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). A theoretical framework can organize the findings within the study to provide a direction for the study and help the information make sense (Kivunja, 2018).

Bandura (1971) describes the *Social Learning Theory* as the acquisition of new behavioural patterns through direct experience or observation of others’ behaviours. Reinforcement, or strengthening, of specific behaviours, can be seen through informative and incentive functions (Bandura, 1971). The informative functions allow people to review the consequences of certain behaviours and develop hypotheses about which behaviours will provide them with the most significant positive outcome (Bandura, 1971). This conditions an individual to select behaviours or experiences that will benefit them and avoid those with potentially punishing outcomes. Incentive functions encapsulate an individual’s motivation and allow them to decide whether certain experiences will provide them with desired, unaffected, or undesired outcomes (Bandura, 1971). Within the context of this study, the stressors ECEs experience in the

field may eventually affect an educator's mental health and well-being. Consistent exposure to adverse or undesirable outcomes will provide a negative outlook on the experience, thus requiring the ECE to evaluate whether the incentive is worth the exposure (Bandura, 1971).

The *Prosocial Classroom Model*, penned by Jennings and Greenberg (2009), explains that the social and emotional competence of ECEs directly correlates with what occurs in the classroom environment. Educators with more social and emotional competence have more positive relationships with the children in their care and better classroom management (Lang et al., 2020; Sandilos et al., 2020). Additionally, when ECEs have higher social and emotional competence levels, they can encourage emotional regulation and social development in young children (Lang et al., 2020). Subsequently, ECEs who are emotionally exhausted fail to provide children with the emotional resources they require and thus have more behaviours in the classroom and lesser quality interactions (Sandilos et al., 2020). The *Prosocial Classroom Model* indicates that ECEs may benefit from professional development programs to help them improve their well-being and social-emotional competence (Sandilos et al., 2020).

The desirable and undesirable outcomes may vary based on the differing experiences that ECEs may have while working in the early learning sector. The environments differ greatly based on individualized factors or stressors that may impact ECEs on different levels of sophistication (Neuman, 1997). These findings could incur generalizations on different levels of sophistication identified by Neuman (1997) as the micro-level, meso-level, and macro-level. A micro-level theory offers generalizations about an individual's specific circumstances, for example, how personal qualities may influence their mental health and well-being. A meso-level theory could offer generalizations about a group of ECEs working in the same early learning

centre or city, whereas, a macro-level theory would offer information based on issues experienced by the entire profession (Neuman, 1997).

Repeated exposure to stressors can lead to poor mental health and well-being or burnout (Quinones et al., 2021). Burnout is “a state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress” (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, n.d., para. 3). It is a “process rather than a fixed condition that begins gradually and becomes progressively worse” (Figley, 1995, p.11). Kahill (1988) identified five categories of burnout symptoms: physical, emotional, behavioural, work-related, and interpersonal. Repeated exposure to stressors can lead to depressive symptoms or burnout, which affects the quality and performance of the ECE (Quinones et al., 2021). As discussed in the overview of *The Social Learning Theory*, Bandura (1971) argues that individuals will develop new behavioural patterns through experience or observation within their environment to determine if exposure to the stressor is worth remaining in the profession. This determination to remain in the profession can be influenced by a supportive and positive environment where professional connections can encourage emotional regulation and the improvement of well-being (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). A supportive environment can help an ECE self-regulate which can strengthen trusting relationships with children (Bowlby, 1969).

3.2 Mixed Methods Research

This study utilized mixed methods research to gather and interpret the data collected. Mixed methods research allows for two separate methodologies to be used simultaneously in conjunction with one another (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2013). Mixed methods were chosen as the methodology for this thesis due to the nature of the research problem and the questions in general. It allows for varying perspectives, or selection of the best qualities from both qualitative

and quantitative data (Teddie & Tashakkori, 2013). It was important to carefully word the questions in the questionnaire to ensure they allowed for the opinion of the participant to not be overshadowed by the inherent bias of the researcher (Greene, 2008). Additionally, this mixed-methods research design allows for the use of triangulation. In this idea, both qualitative and quantitative data have limitations, so by implementing both methods, the validity of the findings may be enhanced (Greene et al., 1989). Creating categories by grouping keywords and similar data during the qualitative data coding process can then be compared to the information gathered using quantitative data collection methods. The more correlations between the coded qualitative and quantitative data, the more valid the data may be (Greene et al., 1989). Several theories can be referenced when specifically addressing this mixed-methods study, including Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1971).

The research questions for this study were convergent, which led to the subsequent design being concurrent. This means that both the qualitative and quantitative data were collected around the same time (Chumney, 2015). For this study, the data were gathered simultaneously through an online questionnaire, which follows the convergent to concurrent design. This allows for triangulation or using both the quantitative and qualitative data to reach the same result (Fielding, 2012). The quantitative data that was gathered for this study was enhanced due to the supporting data from the accompanying qualitative questions. For example, a question may ask if a participant had received any training or education about mental health and well-being during their post-secondary program in the form of a scale. This question would be followed by a short answer question, asking about the specific opportunities the participant was granted to learn about mental health and well-being.

The introduction of mixed methods research began in the late 1970s, after a proposed quantitative study utilized qualitative concepts to further understand the numerical or quantitative data (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2013). According to Tashakkori & Teddlie (2003), mixed methods design needed to have what they named inferential quality. They described inferential quality as being the “consistency within the design of the study, consistency of multiple conclusions with each other, consistency of interpretations across people, and distinctiveness of the interpretations from other plausible ones” (p. 40). The synchronicity of these qualities allows for forming concluding statements with support from both the qualitative and quantitative data sets.

This was echoed by Greene (2008) who viewed mixed methodology as being a combination of four separate yet related domains. Domain one encompasses both the “philosophy of science and includes assumptions about the nature of the social world (ontology) and about the nature of warranted social knowledge (epistemology)” (Greene, 2008, p.8). Essentially, this means that viewpoints that the writer may have can be influenced by predisposed theoretical frameworks thus making the written material more subjective rather than objective. Domain two houses the traditional components of what is typically viewed as the methodology. It comprises the various design and analysis components, as well as the inquiry associated with survey research (Greene, 2008). This domain allows for the justification of the research design and influences how the research is collected and reported. Domain three focuses on the more practical components of the research, namely the inquiry design, data gathering, analysis, and interpretation (Greene, 2008). Survey construction, for example, would be a crucial component to this third domain, as this is the foundational design required to obtain the data essential to the research. The survey construction not only includes the question design, but also

focuses on the specific population targeted in the research and determining the authenticity of the results (Greene, 2008). The final domain discusses how the specific inquiry, or research, fits into the overall socio political environment. This could include questions like how will society be impacted by this research? What is the purpose of the research in the broader context? Who is going to benefit from this research? (Greene, 2008).

3.3 Overview of Methods

The main focal point of the study was to establish a connection between stressors that ECEs encounter while practicing in the early learning sector and their knowledge surrounding mental health and wellbeing. With this goal in mind, the specific research question for this study was: how do possible stressors in the early learning environment impact the mental health and well-being of early childhood educators?

A mixed-methods research design, using qualitative and quantitative questions, was used to gather information through an online questionnaire from practicing ECEs who are currently employed and practicing in the early learning sector. An online questionnaire was chosen due to its flexibility in terms of completion time, ease of use for participants, and allowed for greater representation of ECEs throughout the province of Ontario. Online questionnaires have a significant advantage for data collection. They allow for a greater geographic sample of participants, real time data collection over a secure network, and are cost efficient in terms of time required and not requiring a physical copy (Lefever et al., 2007). Prior to seeing the questions, participants were required to read the consent form (see Appendix A) and respond to a screening question before proceeding to the questions. The qualitative questions were often posed after a quantitative question to provide participants with an opportunity to reply with their own words (Creswell, 2014).

3.3.1 Context and Participants

The study was advertised in several Facebook groups (Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, ECE Teachers Ontario, and Ottawa ECE Connection) to attract potential participants (see Appendix B). Voluntary participants had access to a link which led them to the online questionnaire that they could complete when and where they chose.

The participants for this study are Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) who are registered with the College of Early Childhood Educators in the province of Ontario. The first question, as previously mentioned, was the consent form (see Appendix A). The second question was a screening question to determine whether or not the participant was a Registered Early Childhood Educator with the Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators. Those who responded “no” to this question were redirected to the completion page without an opportunity to complete the questionnaire.

In total, 102 individuals responded to this survey. One participant did not consent to the study and one other participant indicated they were not an ECE with the College of Early Childhood Educators and were both screened out. Therefore, there were 100 participants in this study. The participants ranged from 18 years to more than 60 years of age. The demographics of each participant varied widely with data being collected about their marital status, education level, and whether there were children who currently lived in their home. Most of the participants had more than ten years of experience working in the early learning sector, and the majority worked with preschool aged children.

3.3.2 Data Sources

The data for this survey was collected through an online questionnaire (see Appendix C). There were 20 questions in this questionnaire. Two questions posed at the beginning of the

questionnaire were screening questions, as previously discussed. Six questions collected demographic information like marital status, number of children in the household, and education level. The remaining 12 questions were to collect the primary data for the study. Four questions asked participants about their roles and experiences working in the early learning sector. Two questions specifically asked about the stressors the participant may have experienced, and six questions focused on the participant's knowledge of mental health and well-being topics. These questions ask the participant about what they may have learned about mental health and well-being during their post-secondary programs, including recognizing mental health disorders and their symptoms and exploring topics they may be interested in learning more about (see Appendix C).

There was a mix of 13 quantitative questions and five qualitative questions in the questionnaire. Eleven quantitative questions were in the form of statements with check box categories. This allowed for ease of comprehension for the participants and provided suitable data for statistical analysis (Boynton & Greenhalgh, 2004). One quantitative question was asked in the form of a 5-point Likert Scale to help an individual select their specific response to this question. There were five open-ended qualitative questions that requested individualized responses. These responses were analyzed using different qualitative methods including content analysis, and coding (Boynton & Greenhalgh, 2004; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017; Kleinheksel et al., 2020; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

3.3.3 Consent

When the participants clicked on the link to open the questionnaire, the first page contained the letter of consent (see Appendix A). This study required ECE participants to indicate that they provided consent by reading the consent letter and selecting a checkbox to

indicate that they agree to participate in the questionnaire. The participants could choose to continue with the questionnaire, or if they preferred, they could leave the questionnaire at any time without penalty. The consent letter provided assurance that the personal information for each participant was protected using an anonymous approach which did not require participants to leave any identifying information including emails. The responses were kept confidential through Google forms which were linked to the private institutional email of the researcher.

3.3.4 Questionnaire

As previously described, this questionnaire contained both quantitative and open-ended qualitative questions. The questionnaire was created using Google Forms which was linked to the Ontario Tech University Gmail account of the researcher. The data were gathered using multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions. The participants were provided access to the questionnaire through links posted in three Facebook groups. The questions were initially created based on my professional experiences working in the early learning sector. The questions were modified after reviewing relevant literature, collaborating with experts in their respective fields, and comparing my questions to those posed in similar questionnaires from previously conducted studies.

After gathering demographic data from the participants, one short-answer qualitative question requested a simple completion of the sentence “I chose to become an ECE because.” This question was posed to help establish context as to why the participant initially chose to work in the early learning sector. Two additional quantitative questions were asked following this question to gather information on the experience of the participant. The four long-answer qualitative questions that followed focused on coping skills, knowledge and opportunities to learn more about mental health and well-being, and how it impacted participants' mental health

and well-being when working in the early learning sector. These questions were asked to further the information gathered in the quantitative questions (Greene, 2008). For example, question 12 asked, “Do you feel as if you had opportunities to learn about mental health and well-being during your post-secondary education?” There were only two options provided as a response for this question: yes or no. The subsequent qualitative question asked, “How did this knowledge (or lack of) learned during your post-secondary education impact your mental health and well-being in the field?” The following qualitative question allowed the participant to share their personal experiences, which supported their response to the quantitative question (Fielding, 2012; Teddie & Tashakorri, 2013). Question 12 asked if participants felt they had received previous instruction on mental health and well-being and question 14 asked, “What opportunities were you given to learn about mental health and well-being since you completed your post-secondary education?” These questions were asked to understand participants' knowledge and how they compared with earlier responses discussing stressors experienced while working in the early learning sector.

3.3.5 Ethics Approval and Data Storage

The study was approved by the Ontario Tech University Research Ethics Board (REB) and there were no risks to participants. After approval was granted by the REB, the link to the questionnaire was distributed to potential participants on Facebook. The data were stored on the password-protected hard drive of the lead researcher.

3.4 Data Analysis

As the questionnaire for this study contained both qualitative and quantitative questions, the data were separated into their question type, either qualitative or quantitative, and analyzed accordingly. The qualitative data and quantitative data were examined simultaneously, and correlations were drawn based on the responses received. This method of analysis, known as

triangulation, allows for the validity of the responses to be enhanced (Greene et al., 1989). The connections noted between both sets of data contribute to the reliability and validity of the data, the more connections between the coded qualitative and gathered quantitative data, the more valid the data could be (Greene et al., 1989). The analysis underwent a mixed-methods approach where theory and frameworks were used in addition to professional practice and personal experiences to create categories to code the data.

3.4.1 Quantitative Data

Seven of the thirteen quantitative questions focused on gathering demographic information including marital status, children residing in the household, highest level of education, years of experience, age group of children primarily worked with, and current age range of the participants. These questions were posed to provide context about individualized stressors. For example, having children in the home may affect how an individual addresses their stressors or may add to existing stressors (Beatty, 1996). Marital status may also affect the personal stressors experienced by an individual as a supportive partner may ease the stress experienced but an unsupportive partner may contribute to the level of stress an individual could face (Berlin et al., 2020). Two of the multiple choice questions asked whether the participants were provided opportunities to learn about mental health and well-being during their post-secondary education and whether offering a potential course on mental health and well-being during post-secondary Early Childhood Education programs would assist with stress management while working in the early learning sector.

The two other multiple choice style questions allow for multiple answers to be selected. These questions were designed to gather information on the knowledge that participants possessed on certain mental health disorders and their symptoms as well as to understand the

stressors the participants experienced while working in the early learning sector. Finally, there is one Likert scale style quantitative question which asked if provided the opportunity to recommence their post-secondary education if early childhood education would be the primary choice of program. Likert scale questions collect ordinal data, allowing participants to share their thoughts through numerical representation. The data were primarily summarized into charts using the Google Form software for easy viewing. The raw data were then inputted into an Excel spreadsheet and tabulated. The distribution of responses was reported using percentages.

The quantitative data were analyzed using frequency counts. The information was manually tabulated in an Excel spreadsheet on a question-by-question basis. I examined each submission for the questionnaire, recorded the response in a tally chart on a piece of paper, double-checked the information to ensure its accuracy, and added it to the Excel spreadsheet. I completed a comparative analysis by manually reviewing each individual submission to tally information relating to the question and how this specific information compared to other information in the responses to the questionnaire (Pickvance, 2001). For example, a participant could have marked that they were in the 40-49 age range and their highest level of education completed was a two-year college diploma. By doing a comparative analysis, I was able to see how potentially stressors may be influenced, heightened, or reduced based on the demographic information provided (Pickvance, 2001).

3.4.2 Qualitative Data

The qualitative data underwent content and categorical analysis. Content analysis is a process which involves reviewing the qualitative information, condensing the information into categories or themes, and producing a thorough summary of the data (Kleinheksel et al., 2020; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The data were organized by identifying frequently used words for

each question which resulted in developing patterns and establishing connections between the different categories (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). From there, codes were established by reducing the information into categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First-level coding involves the creation of the categories to organize the information that was gathered during the data collection. Second-level coding identified patterns throughout the data that assisted in making meaningful connections (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The second-level coding created categories to establish connections between the stressors experienced by ECEs in the field and their perception and understanding of topics related to mental health and well-being. The organization of the data into categories involved analyzing the information and establishing groups of data with common properties (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). To ensure credibility, a supervisor reviewed the established categories to discern their authenticity and reliability. Finally, the information gathered through the initial analysis was then quantified using frequency counts (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

The data were stored in a password protected Ontario Tech Google Drive account belonging to the researcher. First, the information was reviewed and initially sorted. This involved reviewing the information on a question by question basis. A new Excel spreadsheet was created for each qualitative question and I inputted the participant responses. I then began to complete the process of first-level coding through identifying commonalities in the language for the qualitative questions by highlighting repeated words by hand (Teddlie & Tashakorrie, 2009).

The data then underwent second-level coding and the words and commonalities were sorted into categories based on the repeated words in the qualitative data for each question. For example, question 11 asks, “How do you cope with the stressors?” Each participant’s response was evaluated, words were highlighted, and a frequency count was performed on the highlighted

words. Thirdly, using the top frequent words and the literature as a guide, detailed categories were established for each question, and the information was sorted under each category based on their responses in an Excel document. Using question 11 as an example again, based on the submitted responses, “Mindfulness/Self-Care/Exercise,” “Research/Seek Sources,” “Conversations with Others,” “Hobbies,” “Relaxing/Taking a Break,” “Being in Nature,” “Leaving Work at Work,” “Manage/Struggle,” and “Reminders of the Job” were created as categories. A comparison of the frequently counted words to the literature provided some clarity when establishing the categories. Some responses submitted by participants could be placed under multiple categories, thus a response indicating that the participant participated in mindful breathing and talking with coworkers would be recorded under both “Mindfulness/Self-Care/Exercise” and “Conversations with Others.” The frequency of the words and patterns helped establish the different categories which were continuously reviewed as further investigation into the data ensued. For example, exercise was initially its own category but because exercise can be viewed as a form of self-care and was often mentioned as being a form of self-care by the participants, exercise was eventually coupled with mindfulness and self-care to establish one overall category due to the ambiguity surrounding what self-care looks like to each individual (Carroll et al., 1999).

Finally, the data were quantified in each column and tabulated at the bottom of the Excel document under each category to establish the frequency. This qualitative data were then triangulated with the quantitative data collected in an accompanying question that either preceded or followed the qualitative question to determine the authenticity of the results (Greene, 2008; Fielding, 2012).

The mixed-methods research design allowed for a detailed examination of the data gathered for both the qualitative and quantitative questions. Specific qualitative questions complimented several quantitative questions, allowing for varying perspectives, assessing the validity, and using triangulation on the data (Green et al., 1989; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). A convergent to concurrent design was employed as the qualitative and quantitative information was gathered simultaneously (Chumney, 2015; Fielding, 2012). The study's design was established using information from scholarly literature, discussions with experts in the field of ECE and mental health, and using my professional experiences as a guide to gathering data to potentially support the research question. A detailed narrative of the research methodology was discussed, and individual components of the study's design were reviewed. In the next chapter, I will review the results of the questionnaire.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter will report on the results of the quantitative and qualitative data collected during the study. The results from the questionnaire will be shown using percentages and organized in table format. I organized the information in Chapter 4, beginning with why the participants chose to become an ECE to provide an overview of the positive aspects of the work. From there, the findings are reviewed for the personal and professional stressors, how ECEs cope with the stressors, and what opportunities ECEs had to learn about mental health and well-being. The findings are organized based on the number of respondents per response, and participant quotes are included to show specific examples to support the data.

4.1 Reasons for Remaining in the Profession

The first short-answer question I posed was, “I chose to become an ECE because.” This question was asked to establish context about why ECEs chose the profession. Out of 100 responses, five individuals chose not to answer the question. Out of the 95 remaining responses, seven categories were identified. Table 4.1 summarizes the different categories that emerged from this question.

Table 4.1

Why ECEs Chose to Become an ECE

“I Chose to Become an ECE Because” – Emerging Categories n = 95 total number of participants; 5 left the question blank	
Category	Number of Participants
Category 1: Love for Children	64
Category 2: Personal Fulfillment	47
Category 3: Work is Meaningful or Important	39
Category 4: Learning with Children and Child Development	23
Category 5: Teaching and Curriculum	22

Category 6: Creativity	6
Category 7: Pathway to Dream Career	5

Category 1. Out of the total participants, 64 indicated that their love of working with children is the main motivation for continuing to work in the early learning sector. Participant 19 wrote, *“I love children and want to make a difference in their lives.”* This sentiment is echoed throughout more than 60% of responses to this question. Several participants indicated that their love for children is why they remain in the field. Participant 24 mentioned, *“remind myself that I love what I do and despite the low wages, I’d rather be here than working retail or anything like that.”*

Category 2. Personal fulfillment was part of the reason 47% of participants became an ECE. Participant 33 explained, *“I wanted to make a positive difference in the lives of young children. We help to shape the minds of our future children. It’s nice to see the difference we are making in children’s lives.”* Participant 40 adds, *“I want to make an impact in children’s lives.”*

Category 3. Meaningful work or purposeful work was indicated by 39% of respondents as the reason they became ECEs. Participant 47 says, *“It felt like something that I could do that mattered.”* Similar statements are found throughout the different submissions to the questionnaire such as the one written by Participant 57, *“It is valuable, important work supporting our future leaders of society.”*

Category 4. Understanding children, their development, and learning with them was mentioned by 23% of respondents. Participant 62 wrote, *“Child development and children are my passion.”* Participant 71, who works with Kindergarten children, adds, *“I enjoy spending time with this age group – fascinating. I love the way they think and figure things out. They explore so many new things in their day to day activities.”*

Category 5. Creating curriculum and teaching was mentioned by 22% of respondents. Participant 94 said, *“I always wanted to be a teacher, but disagree with the standard practice in most school systems. Early learning is more in line with my philosophies.”* Participant 53 adds, *“I felt like it would be an opportunity to be an educator and help others.”*

Category 6. Creativity was mentioned through 6% of the responses. Participant 18 wrote, *“I love the creativity of teaching and observing children reaching milestones.”* Participant 9 indicated, *“I love kids, am creative, enjoy multitasking, and love to have fun.”*

Category 7. ECE is a stepping stone to the dream career for 5% of respondents. Participant 73 mentioned, *“I couldn’t validate my teaching degree from my home country.”* Participant 73 later mentions that they are in the process of completing a Bachelor degree. Participant 74 wrote, *“I always wanna work with exceptional abilities children. ECE will be a pathway to getting my goal.”*

4.2 Stressors in Early Learning Sector

The questionnaire asked many questions to provide an indication of what professional stressors and personal stressors the participants have experienced. Understanding the personal stressors experienced by ECEs may influence how they are able to deal or cope when faced with professional stressors in the early learning sector. Professional stressors would vary depending on the nature of the work in the early learning sector as there are differences among the age groups and types of early learning environments.

4.2.1 Personalized Stressors

The individualized stressors experienced by ECEs working in the early learning sector may contribute to their ability to deal with the professional stressors encountered in the early

learning sector. Table 4.2 summarizes the demographic information provided anonymously by participants.

Table 4.2

Demographic Information of Participants to Establish Context for Personalized Stressors

Personalized Stressors – Demographics	
Age Group	Number of Responses
18-29 years old	22
30-39 years old	35
40-49 years old	23
50-59 years old	15
60 years or older	5
Marital Status	Number of Responses
Married	64
Single, never married	27
Divorced	8
Widowed	1
Children Living in the Household	Number of Responses
None	46
One	23
Two	21
Three	5
Four or more	4
Level of Education	Number of Responses
Certificate of Apprenticeship	7
2 Year Diploma	54
3 Year Diploma	4
Bachelor Degree	23
Graduate Diploma	2
Master Degree	10
Years of Experience	Number of Responses
10 years or more	60
7-9 years	13
4-6 years	13
1-3 years	10
Less than 1 year	4

The majority of the participants (64%) are married or in a common-law partnership. The 18-29 and 30-39 age groups made up the majority of the single population with 12 participants

being single in the 18-29 group and 13 participants being single in the 30-39 age group. There were some varied responses to the number of children who currently reside in the home with 46% percent indicating that there were no children currently living in the home and one individual claimed to be pregnant. More than half of all participants (54%) had one child or more living in the home, including foster children and nieces.

As seen in Table 4.2, the level of education question also drew varied responses, including indication of a Certificate of Apprenticeship to become a Child Development Practitioner. This is a program offered in Ontario to earn the credentials to become a Child Development Practitioner through remote coursework and placements completed in the individual's place of work (Skilled Trades Ontario, 2021). The highest education level for the majority of participants was the Two Year Diploma (54%), followed by a Bachelor's degree (23%), Master's Degree (10%), Certificate of Apprenticeship (7%), Three Year Diploma (4%), and a Graduate Diploma (2%). Thirty nine percent of participants have more formal education than is required for enrollment in the CECE. Sixty percent of participants have worked in the early learning sector for more than ten years, followed by 13% for 7-9 and 4-6 years, 10% have 1-3 years of experience, and 4% have less than one year of experience.

4.2.2 Professional Stressors

The professional stressors identified the primary age group the participants worked with, and the stressors experienced in the early learning sector. Table 4.3 summarizes the professional stressors experienced by ECEs.

Table 4.3

Professional Stressors Experienced by ECEs in the Early Learning Sector.

Professional Stressors Experienced by ECEs
n = 100 (total number of respondents)

Age Group Primarily Worked With	Number of Responses
Infant (<18 months)	9
Toddler (18-30 months)	14
Preschool (30 months to 6 years)	39
Kindergarten (44 months to 7 years)	23
School-Age (68 months to 13 years)	15
Stressors Experienced While Working	Number of Responses
Low Wages	88
Lack of Recognition	82
Children with Exceptionalities	61
Continuing to Work After Workday is Complete	60
Children with Self-Regulation Difficulties	54
Long Hours	51
COVID-19 Restrictions	48
Communication with Colleagues	
In-person	52
Online	14
Communication with Families	
In-person	35
Online	20
Communication with Director	
In-person	36
Online	20
Organizational Changes	34
Curriculum Planning	32
Lack of Autonomy	30
Incorporating Technology into Program	24
Using Unfamiliar Technology	16
Other	22
Lack of Government Support for Educators	2
Lack of Job Description	1
Lack of Professional Development Opportunities	1
No Opportunities For Advancement	1
Lack of Support for Children with Exceptionalities	4
Staff Turnover – Training Staff	3
Short Staffed	2
Other Educators	2
Physically Assaulted by Children	1
Lack of Respect from Colleagues and Administration	1
Inappropriate Expectations of Children	1
Favouritism	1
Parent Judging	1
Seeing Children/Families Waiting for	

Note: The stressors listed in Table 4.3 are from a pre-written multiple-select question from the questionnaire based on personal experiences, review of literature, sample questionnaires, and collaboration with the co-supervisors of this thesis (see Chapter 3). The questions were changed based on a detailed review of the literature. The “Other” section of Table 4.3 is from individual submitted participant responses.

Some of the “Other” responses from participants revealed additional stressors not included in the original list in the questionnaire. Participant 5 wrote, “*Vaccine mandates – not being allowed body autonomy.*” Participant 6 included an extensive list, “*Lack of government support for educators, educators’ personal rights violated by parents, children, and employers.*” Participant 8 adds, “*Lack of job description, lack of professional development opportunities, no opportunities for advancement in my career in the board.*” Participant 16 describes staff turnover as a significant stressor: “*Staff turnover – training and retraining staff.*” Participant 9, Participant 25, and Participant 58 wrote identical statements which mention, “*Lack of support for children with exceptionalities.*” The statement is echoed by several other participants, including Participant 56, who wrote, “*I was going to select children with exceptionalities, however they are not actually the stressor. What is stressful is the lack of support for these kids and for us as educators. That’s not the fault of the children, that’s down to the government and region.*”

4.3 How RECEs Cope with Stressors Experienced in the Early Learning Sector

This section addresses how ECEs cope with the stressors experienced in the early learning sector. Table 4.4 summarizes the overall findings.

Table 4.4

How ECEs Cope with Stressors Experienced in the Early Learning Sector.

How ECEs Cope with Stressors
n = 100 (total number of respondents)

Coping Mechanism	Number of Responses
Mindfulness/Self-Care/Exercise	48
Conversations with Others	37
Manage/Struggle/Internalize	26
Hobbies	19
Relaxing or Taking a Break	18
Leaving Work at Work	13
Reminders of the “Joy of the Job”	8
Research/Seek Sources	7
Nature	5

The responses written by the respondents indicated that there were many healthy and unhealthy mechanisms they used to cope with the stressors experienced in the early learning sector.

Mindfulness/Self-Care/Exercise. The participants (48%) indicated many different ways they practice mindfulness and self-care to help them cope with the pressures and stressors of being an ECE. Mindfulness describes the process of observing a changing environment, processing what is taking place, and reflecting on how to adapt or change their perspective based on their surroundings (Capel, 2012). Self-care refers to the care an individual provides to themselves to reflect on healthy practices and illness management (The International Center for Self-Care Research, 2019). Self-care can look different for each person as seen from the results. Participant 4 mentioned, *“I love to read, it’s my escape from reality. I take walks on my lunch break, and pay attention to the state of my physical and mental health.”* Participant 33 said, *“Self-care, such as exercise and alone time.”* Sometimes, self-care and mindfulness assists but is not enough, according to Participant 32, who wrote, *“Take one hour at a time sometimes. I’ve also made self care a priority but I am also looking at leaving the field.”*

Conversations with Others. Almost half of the participants (37%) indicate that conversations with colleagues, family, and friends help them cope. Some participants talk with

family, such as Participant 53, who said, *“Talk it out with my spouse.”* Others prefer to debrief with colleagues, like Participant 44, who said, *“Venting to colleagues.”* Sometimes, as in the case of Participant 40, discussions and conversations are not enough. They wrote, *“I talk to my friends or family about it or to be honest I will just cry when it gets too much.”*

Manage/Struggle/Internalize. More than a quarter of participants (26%) internalize or struggle with the stressors they experience. Some participants are upset with the circumstances beyond their control, like Participant 68, who wrote, *“All the stressors I went through just happened; I had no frame of reference to try and make it better. Some days I felt hopefulness cause I didn’t know what to do. But just try to move forward as much as I could with what I was given. You just keep swimming.”* Other participants indicated unhealthy coping habits, like Participant 83, who said, *“Work loads and responsibilities became overwhelming and I began eating and drinking to cope with stress. I have since taken a break from working and I am considering a new career choice.”* Participant 75 indicated that the stressors experienced at work affected their personal life and wrote, *“I find it difficult to cope. It stresses me at home with my child and husband. I am often enough finding myself short tempered when I get home after a long day.”* Some participants have internalized their stressors to the point of physical and emotional pain, as indicated by Participant 19, who said, *“I struggle through. I get headaches, stomach aches, neck pain, and an overall feeling of unhappiness, depression, and questioning whether I should be in the field at all and the feeling of being useless.”* Finally, some participants responded bluntly, like Participant 20, who said, *“Just manage,”* and Participant 50, who wrote, *“I just deal with it.”*

The other methods of coping vary based on the participant’s lifestyle. Around 19% of respondents indicated they pursue a hobby to help them cope with their stressors. Participant 43

wrote, “*I do something I love, like tap dancing.*” Participant 12 adds, “*Crafts and sitting outside.*” Nearly 20 participants (18%) mention they need to take breaks varying in length. Participant 28 said they cope by “*Stepping away and disconnecting,*” Participant 57 wrote, “*It is hard to recognize the buildup of stressors – it is too much. It is such a giving profession. I am in the process of recovery from burnout after hitting a wall and having to take time off.*” Other responses mention leaving work at work, seeking outside sources, and reminding themselves about the joy of the job. There are individuals who indicate that despite the positive components of working with children, the incentive to stay does not outweigh the exposure to stressors (Bandura, 1971).

4.4 Mental Health and Well-Being: Learning Opportunities and Their Impact

This section describes the learning opportunities provided to ECE participants through post-secondary ECE programs, opportunities they had after working in the early learning sector, and how this impacted their mental health and well-being.

Participants were asked if they had an opportunity to learn about mental health and well-being during their post-secondary programs. Out of the 100 responses to this question, 28 participants said yes they had opportunities to learn about mental health and well-being and 72 said no.

Table 4.5

Learning Opportunities for Mental Health and Well-Being

Learning Opportunities after Post-Secondary Program Completion n=100 (total number of respondents)	
Opportunity Provided	Number of Responses
Other	33
Own Research	20
Workshops	16
Classes	15

None	13
Professional Assistance	11
Webinars	5

Note: The “other” section will be elaborated on below.

Post-Secondary Learning Opportunities. Out of the 100 respondents, only 28% felt they had any opportunities during their post-secondary programs to learn about mental health and well-being. To accompany this quantitative question, the subsequent short answer style question provided an opportunity to expand on their response by asking if this acquired or lack of knowledge impacted their well-being when working in early learning environments (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Many responses were vague or did not quite answer the question as it was intended. Several notable responses from participants elaborated on what they had learned about mental health and well-being during their post-secondary education. Some respondents focused on the knowledge of mental health and well-being of children. For example, Participant 3 said, “*I am aware of the effects of stress on the children, co-educators, and myself. I try to reduce stress in my classroom.*” Participant 8 mentioned, “*Understanding how every child is different and therefore they learn, respond, and develop at their pace.*” Participant 45 mentioned how their post-secondary education focused more on childhood mental health than the educators. They said, “*It was primarily directed at children’s mental health and well-being. My own knowledge of personal mental health and well-being did not truly come to a place that I could manage on my own until after having my second child during the height of Covid and attending professional one on one therapy.*”

Most participants took the opportunity to describe how their post-secondary education affected their mental health and well-being. Some participants reflected on how their post-secondary experiences helped provide them insight into recognizing poor mental health.

Participant 15 wrote, “*The knowledge I gained helped me be reflective during times of poor*

mental health, acknowledge symptoms, and address the issues on my own or with the support of loved ones and/or professionals.” Participant 30 said, “*It made me notice the stressors earlier and get on top of it faster.*” Most respondents, however, highlighted how their lack of knowledge acquired during their post-secondary education affected their mental health and well-being. There was no difference noted in the data between recent graduates and those who took the program many years ago.

Over a quarter of respondents (26%) submitted a statement about how the post-secondary programs did not prepare them for the reality of the early learning sector. Participant 25 said bluntly, “*I was not prepared for the stress of being an ECE.*” Participant 38 elaborated more and said, “*I felt unprepared for the real work of an RECE, in terms of my own mental health and well-being and how it impacts the children and families in my care.*” Participant 40 wrote, “*I wasn’t prepared for the mental demands when working with children and how taxing it is on you.*” Over ten respondents (12%) reported learning nothing about mental health and well-being during their post-secondary education. Participant 89 wrote, “*I lack the tools to support my mental health.*” Participant 24 said, “*I don’t think I learned anything during post-secondary that helped.*”

For 11% of respondents, it took a breakdown or burnout to recognize how poor their mental health was without formal training. Participant 7 said, “*It took a breakdown for me to recognize it.*” Participant 10 echoed this and said, “*I didn’t know what burnout was until I struggled with it.*” Participant 33 wrote, “*The lack of knowledge can cause burnout fairly quickly in the field. Without knowing how to properly take care of ourselves, we are going to burnout from constantly putting others’ needs above ours.*”

Learning Opportunities after Graduation from Post-Secondary. There were some opportunities for learning about mental health and well-being after graduation from a post-secondary program. The majority were a combination of workshops (16%), webinars (5%), or classes (15%), but some were from learning on their own through their research (20%). Some opportunities are provided to the participants by their employer, as stated by Participant 18, *“My centre has us take a mental health first aid course.”* Some opportunities provided by the employer do little to help the respondent, as mentioned by Participant 19, *“My board does provide mental health learning opportunities but the environment is the same so the triggers will always be there.”*

Most respondents took the initiative and found information about mental health and well-being themselves (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Participant 25 said, *“My workplace does offer some courses on mental health, however, I take it upon myself to gain more knowledge.”* Some turn to professionals to help them process their experiences as noted by Participant 42, *“None on a professional level. But on a personal level, I had to learn a lot after being diagnosed with severe depression, anxiety, and panic disorder. With the help of my doctor, psychiatrist, social workers, counseling, etc., I learned a lot about self-care and coping skills.”*

To finish this section, I have included a quote from Participant 26: *“I have had the opportunity to take workshops since I graduated as an ECE, but the lack of post-secondary education while I was in the program was heartbreaking. I was able to throw myself into those rooms and those children captured my heart, but there has certainly been moments where I leave at the end of the day in tears. I am now in the middle of switching careers because of the negative impacts from previous jobs.”*

Table 4.6*Course on Mental Health and Well-Being in the ECE Program*

Would a Course on Mental Health and Well-Being Offered during the ECE Program Help ECEs Cope with Stressors? What Topics Do ECEs Want to Learn About? n=100 respondents	
Answer	Number of Responses
Yes	94
No	6
Topics	Number of Responses
General Topics on Mental Health	12
Self-Care/Mindfulness	12
Stress	10
Burnout	5
Advocacy	5
Supports/Resources	5
Work-Life Balance	5
Case Studies/Real Experiences	3

Note: 27% of participants indicated they did not know what additional topics they would like to know more about.

After reviewing the responses, 94 participants indicated that a mental health and well-being course offered during the ECE program would help ECEs cope with stressors experienced in the early learning environment. When asked about what specifically they would like to learn more about, participants had detailed responses and ideas for topics. Participant 67 wrote, “*Some ECE specific course on managing stress in our classrooms would be very interesting for future ECEs.*” Participant 15 said, “*More knowledge of community resources and support that can be used in times of poor mental health but not at imminent risk (eg. Dealing with anxiety but not having thoughts of suicide).*” Participant 26 had many ideas and wrote, “*With the respect of confidentiality and privacy, I wish the topic of self-reflection was taught more in the ECE program. Not just self-reflection of how your program is, but self-reflection upon yourself. Having the opportunity to learn strategies about active communication. How to talk to others about concerns, like families, supervisors, and coworkers. How to professionally send emails*

even. Knowing more about the rights as an Early Childhood Educator. Learning more about the systems and supports in place for ECE's."

4.4.1 Final Question

The final question on the questionnaire asked, "If I had the opportunity to begin my post-secondary education again, early childhood education would be my first choice." The results were split on a Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (17%), disagree (19%), neutral (29%), agree (19%), and strongly agree (16%). Participants between the ages of 18-29 were split between disagree (7%), neutral (5%), and agree (5%). Most participants between the ages of 30-39 indicated that they strongly agreed (9%) or agreed (9%). Interestingly, participants between the ages of 40-49 were most likely to choose another profession, with 8% strongly disagreeing, 4% disagreeing, and 8% remaining neutral.

The data gathered in this study emphasizes the importance of listening to those working in the early learning sector. The level of detail and honesty in the responses to the questions shows the impact of the stressors experienced while working with young children. This chapter identified the specific stressors experienced by ECEs, how they cope with them, what information they learned during their post-secondary education about mental health and well-being, and finally, what initially drew them to work in the early learning sector. The next chapter will be a discussion of the results.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Chapter Five will include a discussion and interpretation of the findings and the potential significance of the results. The information gathered from the questionnaire will be compared to the literature discussed in Chapter Two, and similarities and differences will be reviewed. The limitations of the study will also be addressed.

5.1 Professional Stressors Experienced by ECEs in the Early Learning Sector

Professional stressors included those primarily experienced while working in the early learning sector. The professional stressors were grouped into categories based on first-level and second-level coding (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). These stressors were identified as behaviours in children and the lack of support from agencies, wages, and professional recognition, relationships with colleagues, families, and the work life. These stressors affected the mental health and well-being of ECEs, and many identified that they lacked the support or knowledge to address or cope with the stressors faced in the early learning sector (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

5.1.1 Behaviours in Children and the Lack of Support from Agencies

As noted in Chapter Two, children's behaviours can impact the mental health and well-being of ECEs working with them. Previous literature indicated that these behavioural challenges could cause a higher stress level for ECEs and that a lack of support or knowledge of how to support children with behavioural challenges increased the level of stress (Biglan et al., 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jeon & Ardeleanu, 2020). Over 60% of participants echoed these studies by indicating that the lack of support or lack of education on working with challenging behaviours contributed to their stress levels. According to Ontario's Access and Inclusion Framework (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022a), the Ontario Government's Special Needs

Resourcing supports children with special needs at no additional cost to parents. Still, no indication in this framework identifies how agencies will be supported to accommodate the needs of these children. Independent agencies are available across Ontario to assist childcare providers with inclusion support in licensed childcare programs, such as Children’s Inclusion Support Services (CISS) in Ottawa, Ontario (Andrew Fleck, 2023).

There are independent training opportunities provided to childcare educator teams through varying agencies and organizations both online and in-person (AECEO, 2023a). Still, it can be challenging to access these training opportunities with the limited time for professional development provided during paid working hours (Biglan et al., 2013). Participant 70 wrote, *“There have been a few courses made available but sometimes getting the time off for them is hard or you sacrifice home time to go to them.”* Participant 84 echoed this statement and said, *“Only after work professional development workshops for mental health or well-being were offered at additional cost to the educator if you chose an outside training opportunity. At times, some opportunities were given during mandatory after work staff meetings. These only added to the daily stress I was feeling.”*

The stress level is higher in a classroom with children who have exceptionalities, leading to potential dysregulation among ECEs and the inability to provide self-regulation tools or support to the children in their care (Buettner et al., 2016; Jacobs, 2022; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Participant 56 indicated that the lack of support from the government and individual regions was the cause of the stress, not the children themselves. Participant 84 identified that sometimes the place of work needs to be held accountable by the ECEs who work there. Participant 84 said, *“ECEs should have training to be able to identify and speak out about unfair*

work practices that affect mental health and well-being instead of just accepting the explanation of the company and having no resources for support.”

5.1.2 Compensation and Professional Recognition

A common theme throughout the study was the lack of recognition provided to ECEs by their fellow professionals, families, the public, and government agencies. This lack of recognition was the second most identified stressor by ECEs, with 82% of participants sharing that the misconception that ECEs are glorified babysitters and the consistent undervaluing of the work ECEs perform leads to poor mental health and job dissatisfaction (Boyd & Schneider, 1997; Eadie et al., 2021). Participant 57 wrote, *“There is definitely a lack of recognition/attention given on the mental health toll of working in the early years sector.”*

Teaching partnerships between Ontario Certified Teachers (OCTs) and ECEs are common in Ontario Kindergarten classrooms, with responsibilities shared between professionals (Lynch, 2014; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). Participants identified communication with colleagues (52%) as one of the main stressors affecting them during the workday, with many participants elaborating on the partnership between themselves and their OCT counterparts. Participant 19 wrote, *“There is a hierarchy in my workplace and although I feel that ECEs are ultimately more qualified to be teaching that age group. The government feels that teachers know best.”* Participant 49 elaborated on the relationship between ECEs and OCTs by saying, *“Working as an ECE with the school board means you are paired with a teaching partner (OCT). I consider this a ‘working marriage.’ Your teaching styles and personalities may not mesh well and this can easily become challenging. I have had a few negative interactions with OCTs and my fellow ECEs have many stories.”*

Undervaluing of ECEs is one of the core reasons they are leaving the early learning sector (Eadie et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2019). Private for-profit and nonprofit centers do not have a unionized environment with a group of individuals to advocate for the profession (Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, 2023). The childcare industry thus relies on other unionized organizations such as CUPE (which advocates for the support staff in specific Ontario public school boards) and professional organizations like the AECEO to advocate for the profession on their behalf. The AECEO regularly holds campaigns to raise awareness of the struggles ECEs face in their profession and asks ECEs to join petitions and open letters to address these issues with the provincial government (Parker, 2022). These petitions and open letters did lead to the creation of the wage enhancement grant, but it is not sufficient, according to the participants in the questionnaire. The current campaign from the AECEO, *A Workforce at Breaking Point – Rising Up*, hopes to establish a wage grid and decent work standards (Parker, 2022). Low wages were identified by 88% of participants in my study as one of their main stressors. Participant 56 reflected on how the low pay affected other areas of their career and wrote, *“I have had to try and not care as much, there is no one fighting for us, the CECE [College of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario] does nothing for us except cost us money when we are already in a very low-paid career. If my planning/docs is not completed during my paid time, it doesn’t get done. I’ve lowered my standards in the sense that if I don’t get recognized/paid for the work I do, then I will just give what I can achieve in the time that they provide me.”*

Bandura (1971) suggests that through conditions of reinforcement or as a result of prior experiences or observations, an individual will have certain expectations of outcomes that may affect their actions. Simply put, an ECE may expect a specific outcome based on their previous

experiences. For example, in the quote provided by Participant 56 in the paragraph above, their negative prior experiences have given them a pessimistic outlook on the support provided and the amount of work issued by the CECE in addition to their responsibilities in their place of work. Bandura (1971) notes the following:

A person can acquire, retain, and possess the capabilities for skillful execution of modeled behavior, but the learning may rarely be activated into overt performance if it is negatively sanctioned or otherwise unfavorably received. When positive incentives are provided, observational learning, which previously remained unexpressed, is promptly translated into action. (p. 8).

In the case of Participant 56, an examination of the current expectations by the CECE for Registered ECEs could provide insight into potential changes that need to occur to make the experience something they would enjoy doing rather than an unpaid expectation. In addition to the expectations for ECEs required of the CECE, Participant 56 raises a concern about how their low wages also impact the amount of work they are willing to do.

Developing a wage grid similar to the one provided to Ontario Certified Teachers could enhance the educator's performance. This could incentivize ECEs to move up through the grid through years of service, higher education, and professional development. The cost of living crisis and inflation are also significant factors in the personal stressors affecting ECEs, according to participants in the study. The COVID-19 pandemic was a significant stressor in the early learning sector, and 48% of participants indicated the restrictions imposed during the pandemic affected their mental health and well-being (Eadie et al., 2021; Swigonski et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic forced the development of new protocols, policies, and organizational

changes to ensure the safety of those working with young children, but 34% of respondents said they caused more stress than benefits (Eadie et al., 2021). Participant 20 wrote, “*I think I was most not prepared for COVID and the ridiculousness of it all.*”

5.1.3 Relationships with Colleagues, Families, and the Work Environment

Communication is integral to relationship building, and effective communication can make a professional environment more inviting (Buettner et al., 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Study participants identified communication with colleagues (52%), communication with the director or supervisor (36%), and communication with families (35%) as some of the stressors impacting their work performance. Work environments can become more stressful without effective or supportive communication with colleagues (Jeon & Ardeleanu, 2020). Building professional relationships while working can enhance an ECE’s professional practice and mental health (McMullen et al., 2020). Several participants identified relying on discussions with their colleagues to help them cope with mutual stressors experienced while working. Participant 16 mentioned “*Debriefing with like-minded colleagues*” as one of the methods they deal with stress. Participant 38 stated, “*I try to connect with optimistic colleagues who have a growth mindset.*” Having a positive work environment and strong relationships with colleagues enhanced an ECE’s personal well-being (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; McMullen et al., 2020).

Approximately 30% of respondents identified a lack of autonomy as a stressor experienced in the early learning sector. Feeling undervalued and being provided a lack of responsibility contributed to the adverse mental health and well-being of an ECE (McMullen et al., 2020). Having more responsibility and more say in the program's structure provided ECEs with opportunities to expand their professional growth, thus resulting in higher levels of personal well-being (Bandura, 1971; Boyd & Schneider, 1997). An additional factor that caused stress for

an ECE was a reminder to leave work at work. An overwhelming 60% of respondents admitted to continuing to work after working hours or while at home, completing tasks such as research, program planning, or responding to emails. Creating a work-life balance is crucial to well-being as one can easily cause domination of their paid employment during unpaid personal time (Gregory & Milner, 2009). Participant 18 supported this statement by adding, *“I’ve learned not to bring work home – I don’t get paid enough for that.”*

Working with families can be equally challenging, as each family has unique characteristics to consider, such as socioeconomic status or cultural background. A professional and respectful relationship between a family and the ECE is critical in ensuring the proper care for children in the early learning centers (Corr et al., 2014; Jeon & Ardeleanu, 2020). Families who do not value the ECE profession or who neglect a relationship with the ECE can negatively affect an ECE’s well-being (Eadie et al., 2021). Participant 6 wrote, *“An educator’s personal rights violated by parents”* as part of their stressors on the questionnaire. The mental health and well-being of an ECE can also impact a family and their children (Corr et al., 2014). This was echoed by Participant 38, who said, *“I felt unprepared for the real work of an RECE, in terms of my own mental health and well-being and how it impacts the children and families in my care.”*

The work environment is constantly changing, especially with new policies and organizational changes. Part of this problem is the increasingly significant difficulties of staff turnover and staffing changes. This is partly due to the high burnout rate of ECE staff in the field (Berlin et al., 2020). Several participants identified this as a prominent issue in their place of work, including Participant 16, who wrote, *“Staff turnover – training and retraining of staff.”* This can harm children who create bonds with their educators to help them feel safe and develop trust and attachment (McMullen et al., 2020). Staff retention seems to be one of the biggest

challenges in the early learning sector, especially after the new policies introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 90 highlighted an even more significant problem: "*A massive staff shortage is currently happening.*" The shortage of qualified ECEs to work in early learning centers is beyond just Ontario, it is Canada-wide (Crawley, 2023).

Introducing technology into programming is a stressor experienced by some respondents. Using unfamiliar technology was identified by 16% of respondents as a stressor focused on learning new technological tools like childcare apps. Childcare apps, like HiMama (2023) or Brightwheel (2023) provide a simple method for families to communicate with childcare providers, and allow childcare providers to record daily information about the children in their care, maintain attendance, and take care of bookkeeping tasks such as billing and payments (Brightwheel, 2023; HiMama, 2023). Incorporating technology into programming for children (tablets, apps) was identified by 24% of respondents as a stressor. Incorporating technology could include sourcing videos or music for the children to explore, supporting children as they navigate technological devices like tablets, and identifying educational apps that will benefit child development. It can be more difficult for older adults to learn new technology (Chiu et al., 2019), and most respondents over 60 identified technology as one of their professional stressors.

5.2 Knowledge of Mental Health and Well-Being

As identified at the beginning of this thesis in Chapter One, upon thoroughly investigating all the course offerings for ECE programs in Ontario at the time of this study, only Canadore College offers a course to ECE students on mental health and well-being (Canadore College, 2023). Knowledge of mental health and well-being appears to be lacking in the early learning sector according to the participants in the study. Many individuals are left seeking their education from sources after working hours or simply ignoring their mental health and coping

with the lack of knowledge. A few workplaces offer professional development opportunities to educate their ECEs to enhance their mental health and well-being knowledge (Andrew Fleck, 2023). These workplaces are few and far between. In total, 23% of participants were grateful for the opportunities provided by their workplace, while 49% of participants were frustrated with the lack of options for their education. Participant 50 elaborated on their experience with their place of work and said, *“The school board provides links on the employee website for mental health and well-being topics. We have been given opportunities for professional development/activity days to learn more about self-care topics.”* Participant 95 wrote, *“Was not given any opportunities, I have had to go looking for resources myself.”* Acquired knowledge of self-care and coping strategies have been proven to reduce stressors' impact on an ECE's well-being (Eadie et al., 2021).

Only 28% of participants said they had an opportunity to learn about mental health and well-being during their post-secondary education. Eight of the responses indicated that participants learned more about the mental health and well-being of the children in their care but not their mental health and well-being. Participant 94 said, *“We learned about well-being and mental health for the children but never for ourselves. I think they assume as adults we didn't need that knowledge and could figure it out for ourselves.”* Only 8% of participants indicated that they were provided the skills to recognize symptoms of poor mental health and gave them the ability to recognize potential stressors. Almost half (46%) of participants sought outside sources to provide them with the skills required to recognize signs and symptoms of poor mental health or to provide them with the skills necessary to cope with the stressors experienced in the workplace. These outside sources included workshops, webinars, classes, or personal research. Participant 70 wrote, *“All opportunities were facilitated by myself and not my place of work.”*

Participant 96 echoed this statement and added, “*I have done a few webinars and workshops, but more training on this is necessary.*”

5.2.1 Coping with Stressors

Practicing self-care and having adequate coping skills can lead to a more regulated and adjusted ECE (Eadie et al., 2021). There are many different methods of coping with the stressors presented in the early learning sector. Self-care practices have been identified as one of the best methods to cope with the stressors experienced daily. Self-care is not limited to sleeping in and jogging but is more of a holistic practice of taking care of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and professional development and enjoying life (Carroll et al., 1999). Self-care practices differ per individual, but some of the most identified ones in the questionnaire were exercise (48%), conversations with others (37%), hobbies (19%), and relaxing (18%). An overwhelming 26% of individuals had no coping strategies and chose to internalize or struggle with the stressors.

The holistic approach to self-care is one of the main topics discussed by the Global Wellness Institute (Global Wellness Institute, 2020). Out of the 100 participants in this study, 50 listed multiple self-care methods occupying two or more of the primary six wellness categories, as described in Chapter 2.6. This may indicate that a participant may use multiple avenues of self-care to address their stress to promote wellness, creating an ideal state of holistic health. By addressing some of the needs of each of the six primary categories, an ECE may begin their journey towards wellness (Global Wellness Institute, 2020).

Acknowledging physical health was mentioned by nearly half of the participants. One of the most popular responses from respondents was exercise, indicating that walking, spending time in nature, or working out was their preferred coping method. Several participants mentioned basic physical needs, such as Participant 51, who said, “*Sleeping whenever I can.*” Participant 68

indicated that taking care of their mental and physical needs is their preferred coping method and wrote, *“I try to reflect, always make room for me time. I break up my week. I eat better, drink water, and get the rest my body needs.”*

Maintaining mental needs is vital to retaining an ECE in the early learning sector (Berlin et al., 2020). Mental and emotional are two additional primary wellness categories that can be addressed by ECEs (Global Wellness Institute, 2020). Mindfulness is a skill that an individual could practice to take the proper steps to understand how they feel when encountering a particular situation, environment, or stressor (Eadie et al., 2021). Understanding the value of mindfulness can assist an ECE with reflecting on their thoughts and emotions and enhance their self-regulation abilities (Jennings, 2015). From there, a plan can be created to assist an ECE with coping strategies, self-care options, or seeking additional help or resources. Participant 84 said, *“I drink lots of coffee to keep the energy up, go for walks, practice gratitude and pray. I think any job can be stressful.”* Spirituality was also identified as one of the primary categories and can help re-establish a sense of purpose and provide hope (Global Wellness Institute, 2020; Richards et al., 2010). Spirituality can provide an ECE with comfort through religion, practicing gratitude, and acknowledging that there may be something more significant for humanity (Global Wellness Institute, 2020). Sadly, 11% of participants have neglected to engage in self-care or coping skills and instead choose not to acknowledge their feelings or stressors. Participant 37 said, *“I try to pretend it’s not happening.”* Participant 47 simply wrote, *“I do not [practice self-care].”*

5.2.2 Dysregulation

Dysregulation is more apparent in ECEs, who are unaware of how to process their emotions and focus on improving their mental health and well-being (Roberts et al., 2019). ECEs

cannot teach children to self-regulate when they are dysregulated (Jacobs, 2022; Shanker, 2021). Educators who have more social regulation skills often have more positive interactions within the classroom, therefore creating stronger relationships with the children (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). About a quarter (26%) of the respondents indicated that they did not understand how to self-regulate and were not provided the education to do so.

Some individuals sought outside sources on their own time and self-educated, while others continued to work through the stress and ignore their symptoms. Participant 17 was optimistic about their journey to learning about self-regulation and said, *“I’m still trying to figure it out. I try to ensure I’m doing things I enjoy in my free time, but sometimes lack the energy. This job requires a lot of rest in my off hours.”* Another ECE, Participant 63, wrote, *“I need a quiet place upon getting home. I rarely talk to people after work. I refuse to do any job related things after work. I avoid places with people with children.”*

Jennings and Greenberg (2009) identified the *Prosocial Classroom Model* which explains that there are correlations between the social and emotional competence of an ECE and what is experienced within their environment. By building self-regulation skills within the classroom, and ECE will have better opportunities to create a more positive learning environment thus positively enhancing the learning experiences of the children as well as the mental and emotional health of the educator (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Regulated educators will be able to promote social and emotional development within their classrooms which can reduce the behaviours exhibited in the classroom which could alleviate some of the environmental stress (Lang et al., 2020).

5.2.3 Professional Development

Nearly half of the participants (46%) indicated that they sought professional development opportunities outside of their place of work because the opportunities provided by their workplace were either insufficient or non-existent. Only 28% of participants mentioned that they were provided opportunities to learn about mental health and well-being during their post-secondary programs. The College of Early Childhood Educators (2022a) adjusted the expectations for the Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) program which is a requirement for registration with the college. The CPL was designed to encourage professional development among the ECE registrants to ensure they are engaging in self-reflection and self-directed learning to enhance their knowledge and skills, professional judgment, and improve their practice (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2022a). Participants neglected to mention the CPL in their responses, thus questioning its effectiveness.

Instead, participants seek external sources of information to assist them in learning about topics surrounding mental health and well-being including workshops (16%), webinars (5%), classes (15%), or their own research (20%). These external opportunities for professional development can be found through internet searches, recommendations by others working in the early learning sector either in-person or over social media, self-discovered articles and books, and through paid and unpaid classes external to the original post-secondary education. Many of the learning opportunities can be completed online to allow for ease of accessibility and flexibility for completion (Roy & Al-Absy, 2022). Participant 14 said, *“I made an effort during COVID to learn what I could about my mental health and now I am happy to say that I am enrolled in the infant and child mental health certificate program.”* Participant 95 wrote, *“I was not given any opportunities. I have had to go looking for resources myself.”*

5.2.4 Burnout

Burnout was one of the most addressed terms by participants throughout the various questions in the questionnaire. Burnout in ECEs is primarily caused by high stress, emotional exhaustion, and negative well-being from the various professional stressors in the early learning sector (Jennings, 2015). The roles and responsibilities of an ECE can be taxing on an individual, and without proper knowledge of coping skills or self-care, the emotional toll can be detrimental (Eadie et al., 2021). Participant 10 wrote, *“I didn’t know what burnout was until I struggled with it.”* This leads to the question of the education that ECEs receive during their post-secondary training. A lack of knowledge negatively affected Participant 28, who wrote, *“ [A lack of knowledge] lead me to burnout quickly within two years of graduating.”* Participant 35 echoed this statement and added, *“I don’t know how to deal with my mental health and well-being in the field due to a lack of education.”* Participant 53 wrote, *“Some centers would have you working 9-10 hours. When are you supposed to have you time? On top of that, a lot of centers I’ve worked at make you feel guilty for taking a sick day (you call it that because a mental health day doesn’t sound like an actual excuse to them).”* The term burnout was mentioned by seven individual respondents who admitted to not seeing it happen until it was too late. Participant 100 wrote, *“I have had to learn on the job. The requirements of the job are tough, and it’s easy to fall into the overwork trap because ‘it’s for the kids.’ I failed to see my burnout happening.”*

The dysregulation, lack of education, and eventual burnout have led to five respondents admitting they have taken a leave from their place of work due to the poor quality of their mental health and well-being. Additionally, five other respondents admitted thinking about or actively leaving their career in the early learning sector. Participant 23 said, *“Quick [quite] severely. Currently leaving my role on a leave of absence for mental health reasons.”*

5.3 Connection to the Research Question

At the beginning of this study, I had a clear idea of what I was looking for and developed a research question focused on how stressors in the early learning environment impact the mental health and wellbeing of ECEs. I designed a questionnaire to seek experiences from ECEs to support my theory. When I began looking through the data to find evidence to support my research question, I was astonished at the richness and depth of the responses that I received. The testimonials provided by the participants appeared to be honest, direct, and eye-opening. The stressors that were identified in the questionnaire exceeded the initial list I had created, and reviewing those new stressors enhanced my understanding of what ECEs were currently dealing with in the early learning sector. The connections the ECEs made between their professional stressors, their knowledge on mental health and well-being, and how it affected their mental health were, in some cases, empowering and in others devastating. The working environment, including relationships with colleagues, had a major impact on the mental health and well-being of ECEs as noted in section 5.1.3.

More must be done to improve the working conditions, mental health and well-being, and overall environment for ECEs. This chapter highlighted the many stressors experienced by ECEs in the early learning sector, including compensation, professional recognition, and autonomy. The chapter also reviewed participants' overall knowledge of topics surrounding mental health and well-being and their coping mechanisms. Finally, the chapter reviewed dysregulation, frustration, and eventual burnout. The severity surrounding the lack of knowledge on mental health and well-being indicates that ECEs require more education to assist them in coping with their stressors before they lead to mental distress or burnout.

Chapter 6: Recommendations and Conclusions

This thesis explored the stressors experienced by ECEs while working in the early learning sector. It examined the knowledge ECEs possess on topics related to mental health and well-being. There was a strong response from the ECE professionals currently working in the early learning sector, and their need to address the current state of early childhood education was overpowering. Additionally, there are more concerns in the early learning sector than addressing the mental health and well-being of those working in the field, including the need to re-examine government and governing body policies, the extent of the work required by ECEs, the lack of professional recognition, and the low wages with minimal benefits. These systemic issues have multiple moving parts that need to be addressed in the coming years, as it is evident that the current method of doing things is insufficient. I hope to address these concerns throughout my academic career as an advocate for ECE professionals.

6.1 Addressing the Gaps in Knowledge

Many issues were identified throughout the thesis that showed the significant gaps in understanding how to cope with stressors experienced in the early learning sector, recognizing the signs and symptoms of poor mental health, and the reality of working in the early learning sector. Participants discussed these issues through the responses submitted to the questionnaire and identified a more extensive, systematic problem that is more complicated than initially thought.

6.1.1 Identifying the Need for a Course on Mental Health and Well-Being

As I write this thesis, there is only one course focused on the mental health and well-being of ECEs offered by one Ontario college during the Early Childhood Education diploma program. This lack of knowledge about mental health and well-being is frequently discussed in

the responses to the questionnaire submitted by the participants. One of the final questions posed on the questionnaire was: “Would a course on mental health and well-being offered during the ECE program help ECEs cope with stressors?” A staggering 94% of respondents replied, “Yes.”

Based on this study’s findings, the need for a mental health and well-being course during the post-secondary ECE program is overwhelming. A course offered in this program could provide ECEs with the information required to identify when facing issues relating to mental health and well-being. Topics could include possible triggers, the importance of self-care, coping strategies, professional communication, and resources to help them obtain further information.

About 12% of respondents were interested in general mental health and wellness information. Participant 40 said, “*How to care better for my mental health, strategies, and time to get through when mental health issues arise.*” Others were interested in learning more about the different mental health conditions seen in their professional practice. Furthermore, self-care, coping strategies, and mindfulness were identified by 12% of respondents. Participant 53 wrote, “*How to care for yourself after taking care of everyone else. I think that making mental health more legit in the eyes of adults is very important. As for my own, I feel I could learn more coping mechanisms.*” Ten respondents wanted to learn more about stress and how to manage it. Five respondents wanted to learn more about burnout, advocacy, support and resources, and work-life balance. Three respondents were interested in learning about the experiences of others through case studies to see how they addressed similar issues. Participant 67 said, “*Case studies, examples of other school board ECEs issues and how they dealt with them.*”

Critical analysis of the existing stressors in the early learning sector and the concerns of the ECE professionals should provide a foundation for creating a course on mental health and

well-being. Performing more in-depth and personalized qualitative research, potentially through focus groups or interviews, would provide more detailed insight into the topics that require the most attention and inclusion in the course. Participant 64 included this statement after the question of whether they had an opportunity to learn about mental health and well-being during their ECE program. They said, *“It did not prepare students for the rigor of complex ideas in the Early Years, challenging behaviours, uneducated partners or administrators in best practice for our youngest learners, nor did it offer mental health understanding or guidance.”*

I also believe an examination of the impact of the course offered by Canadore College for their ECEs should be explored. The course offered by Canadore College is nine hours long. It covers specific topics discussed throughout this thesis, including recognition of poor mental health, understanding the difference between professional and personal stress, the definition of well-being, and providing self-care and coping strategies. This course, which is compulsory for this ECE program, could provide resources and skills that an ECE may otherwise not have when facing stressors in the early learning sector.

Creating a course could impact how ECEs view stressors experienced in the field. This course could be offered through Early Childhood Education post-secondary programs, as modules through the College of Early Childhood Educators, or as workshops or webinars. It should address the main concerns listed by participants throughout this thesis and provide ECEs with the tools required to address their concerns and resources where they can seek additional support. It should also contain information that does not glorify or shield ECEs from the reality of working in the early learning sector. It should prepare them for what they may see or experience, such as testimonials or case studies from practicing ECEs. I believe that by providing pre-ECEs with these skills before they enter the profession, the retention level may be higher. I

also believe that providing practicing ECEs with this information may help validate and provide recognition for their experiences.

6.1.2 Supporting Practicing ECEs

The participants in this study are practicing ECEs. Examining their personal and professional experiences is critical in understanding the significant gaps in their mental health and well-being knowledge. A formal course may not be the best method of addressing the gaps in knowledge with those practicing in the sector. Alternative methods, like personal learning networks, support groups, and online groups or forums, may be more helpful than formal learning opportunities. Conversing with others is one of the primary methods that ECEs use to cope with their stressors. This can help an individual validate their experiences and relate to others who may be experiencing something similar.

Providing more opportunities for professional development, such as training for working with children with exceptionalities, may enhance the early learning environment and promote the retention of ECEs. The AECEO is advocating for better working conditions for ECEs and an increase in pay to reflect their professional knowledge. Addressing the gaps in professional development could provide ECEs with more confidence in how to work within specific circumstances, thus increasing their level of satisfaction with the profession.

6.2 Reviewing Policies

The most significant concerns from ECEs focused on things they could not control, including governing policies from the CECE and the Ontario Ministry of Education. The most recent addition, the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreement (CWELECC), may also contribute to the existing stressors ECEs face because of all the unknowns associated with its implementation.

6.2.1 The College of Early Childhood Educators

The CECE was designed to provide a regulatory body for Registered ECEs in Ontario. Its purpose is to uphold registration requirements, enforce ethical and professional standards, promote continuous professional learning, and observe disciplinary processes and complaints resulting from professional misconduct (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2022b).

Although the CECE upholds the professionalism standards and regulatory practices of ECEs, the college itself does little to support the ECEs. There is no attempt at advocacy from the college, and this is typically left to organizations outside of the CECE, including the AECEO and unions (Association of Early Childhood Educators, 2023b). The AECEO (2023c) has the distinct roles of the AECEO and the CECE written on their website, with the common goal of raising the standards of the early years sector. The AECEO (2023c) explains the differences by stating:

The primary role of the college, as defined in the Act, is to protect the public and hold the profession and those using the professional title of ‘Early Childhood Educator’ accountable. As outlined on the college website, “the College is not an educational institution or a professional association that advocates for early childhood educators. It is an organization that helps to serve and protect children and families by setting registration requirements and ethical and professional standards for registered early childhood educators (RECEs), and governing member conduct through a complaints and discipline process.”

This raises questions from the participants in this study about the efficacy of the CECE and whether or not it is there to support or suppress its members. This confusion about the roles of the AECEO and the CECE is a common sentiment expressed by ECEs, who refer to the CECE as unsupportive or doing nothing to help them. This is noted by Participant 56, who wrote, “It’s

hard to cope with the frustration you feel at being undervalued by the general public, the CECE, and government.”

The CECE also ensures ECEs complete the Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) portfolio, which, in theory, is designed to support the professional development of ECEs to improve their practice, knowledge, and skills (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2022a). Although the CPL seems adequate in its design, the practicality of the CPL can be called into question. The CPL relies on the ECE to formulate their plans by creating personalized goals, identifying a plan to complete them, and finally reflecting on their progress (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2022a). The CPL portfolio could be supported by an incentive for ECEs to complete it, such as ensuring that ECEs have access to professional development opportunities through the CECE website in modules, webinars, or other virtual options (Bandura, 1971). The CECE could also provide links for professional development opportunities through external sources, such as the Early Childhood Community Development Centre (ECCDC) (Early Childhood Community Development Centre, 2023). This will alleviate the stress of an ECE sourcing professional development opportunities outside of working hours if their employer does not provide any. The ECCDC was mentioned by Participant 56, who wrote, “*ECCDC provide CPL in these topics which you can sign up for.*”

6.2.2 The Ontario Ministry of Education

The Ontario Ministry of Education provides guidance, policies, and regulations for delivering education for children in early years, childcare centres, and publicly funded education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a). The existing policies from the Ontario Ministry of Education provide guidelines to private agencies, publicly funded schools, and other early learning options through documents like the *Child Care and Early Years Act* (2014a), the *How*

Does Learning Happen? (2014b) and *The Kindergarten Program* (2016). Within the guidelines, a childcare centre must maintain specific requirements and regulations to secure licensing (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a). This can include the determination of ratios, the number of unlicensed and licensed staff per space, environmental guidelines, and more.

The number of qualified ECE staff available is dwindling due to the mass exodus of ECEs from the early learning profession (McGinn, 2023). This can pressure agencies when attempting to find qualified staff to fill their open positions. Due to budget restrictions, some of these positions may be “split-shifts” where an ECE is required to complete three to four hours of work in the morning, take a long break, and then cover 3 to 4 hours in the afternoon or evening. For example, an ECE may be working in a before and after school program which operates from 6:30-9 when the children go to school and then from 3-6:30 in the evening. This can result in an ECE being paid for only 8 hours but required to work from 6:30 in the morning until 6:30 in the evening despite having a break in between.

Reviewing government funding allocated to agencies to hire staff for those undesirable shifts may incentivize an ECE to stay (Bandura, 1971). This could include higher wages for working a split shift or having funding for additional staff to create an overlap shift to cover the in-between hours. This approach was used to create the Extended Day Program (EDP), which the Ontario Ministry of Education operates in some school boards to provide before and after-school care to families (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022b). Typically, three ECEs work within a Kindergarten classroom in overlapping shifts. For example, a sample shift for an AM ECE working for an EDP program could be 6:45-2:45, a core ECE would be 8:30-4:30 and a PM ECE would be 10:45-6:45. Adapting this practice could be difficult for private agencies, which would

require a review of the CCEYA and allocated funding to provide split shift ECEs with opportunities to work one shift without the split.

ECEs, depending on the agency, may be required to find a replacement or supply on their own if they are absent. Some agencies will not let an ECE take a day if the ECE cannot find a supply teacher to fill their absence to maintain ratios set by the CCEYA. This can be a challenging topic regarding the mental health and well-being of ECEs, as many often feel that their reasons for taking a day are invalid. This is mentioned by Participant 53, who wrote, “*Some centers have you working 9-10 hours. When are you supposed to have you time? On top of that a lot of centers I’ve worked at make you feel guilty for taking a sick day (if you call it that because a mental health day doesn’t sound like an actual excuse to them).*”

These particular stressors fall more on the individual agencies themselves. Some agencies are supportive and will assist the ECE with finding a replacement so they can take the day off. Still, other supervisory staff within agencies make staff intentionally or unintentionally feel guilty for needing to take time. I recommend more funding for private agencies to utilize private staffing agencies if they cannot find an adequate supply on their own. A centralized supply staff list for multiple agencies, like one provided by school boards to service multiple schools, may also assist with finding qualified supply staff.

6.2.3 The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement

Ontario early learning centres and school boards were already facing a staffing shortage before implementing the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreement (CWELCC) (Crawley, 2023; McGinn, 2023). This new program introduced by the Government of Canada is meant to create thousands of new childcare spaces in licensed agencies with a low daily fee of \$10 per day for families by 2026 (McGinn, 2023). This program is so new that many agencies

are unaware of the specifications of the program. The shortage of qualified ECEs has left agencies scrambling to find staff to maintain their ratios, and they are facing a lack of funding to pay the remaining ECEs (McGinn, 2023) adequately.

According to an article written by McGinn (2023) for the Globe and Mail, the current workforce crisis must be addressed. Without adequate staff to work in the childcare centres, there will be no expansion of available spaces offered by agencies. The current needs of the ECEs must be addressed, including working conditions, low wages, and an examination of existing policies before implementing the CWELCC (Crawley, 2023). Without qualified ECEs to work in the agencies, the CWELCC will not work.

6.3 Limitations

This study provided insight into the many stressors ECEs experience daily and yielded plenty of responses; however, the study had several limitations. The data collection method was through an anonymous questionnaire with quantitative and qualitative questions. The responses to these questions provided a surface-level look into the stressors experienced by ECEs in the sector, their knowledge of topics surrounding mental health and well-being, and how their knowledge or lack of knowledge contributed to their mental health and well-being. Some of the responses provided were specific, and I wanted to learn more about their unique circumstances. Providing an opportunity for a more in-depth data collection through focus groups or in-person interviews would provide more thorough responses.

The online questionnaire delivery allowed easy responses and reached a large participant pool in Ontario, Canada. The study was limited to ECEs registered to practice in Ontario to generate responses specific to the policies and practices unique to Ontario. The study was advertised through Facebook, so unless the link was shared to an ECE by an individual who uses

the Facebook platform, the accessibility was limited. Therefore, this study may not represent all ECEs working in other provinces and territories across Canada where the policies and practices may differ. It would be intriguing to repeat the study Canada-wide to see the difference in response generated by those practicing in different provinces.

There is also the possibility of a researcher misinterpreting the results or inserting their personal bias. The deductive approach uses a pre-established framework that benefits a researcher with an idea of the potential participant's responses (Burnard et al., 2008). When a researcher is familiar with the anticipated responses from data collection, it is possible that they would potentially insert their bias which can skew the interpretation of results (Burnard et al., 2008; Greene, 2008). To avoid this, I recorded the responses provided by the participant verbatim and included only words obtained during the coding process to establish categories and provide quotes. Additional information provided in Chapter 5 - Discussions, was supported by existing peer-reviewed literature or information from professional organizations such as the College of Early Childhood Educators and the AECEO.

6.4 Future Research

The data collection process was swift; nearly half of the respondents replied to the questionnaire within 24 hours of it being available. The participation level emphasizes the study's significance and may illustrate that ECEs want to be heard. Many areas of struggle were identified by ECEs. Further research is needed to learn more about these struggles and to research potential solutions for those working in the early learning sector. Advocacy groups for the early childhood education profession, like the AECEO, are working hard to advocate for fair wages and professional recognition. The CECE has created a registry for ECE professionals and has them comply with professional development to uphold their registration in good standing.

Advocacy groups, unions, and the CECE need to work together to identify the stressors in the early learning sector and brainstorm solutions to improve mental health and well-being before poor mental health leads to burnout and more ECEs leaving the sector.

Based on this study, a lack of knowledge is one of the primary reasons ECEs cannot process the stressors encountered in the early learning sector. There are many areas where ECEs identified they lacked the required information, as mentioned in previous paragraphs, including self-care and coping strategies, general information about mental health and well-being, dysregulation, and working with colleagues, families, and children. Providing ECEs with this information during their post-secondary programs may provide them with the tools required to identify, problem-solve, and advocate in their future places of work. These tools may offer the retention that the early learning sector desperately needs.

Providing ECEs with the tools to improve their mental health and well-being, ability to cope with stressors and guidance on working collaboratively with others will incentivize the ECE to remain in the field of early learning (Bandura, 1971). However, this information will not sufficiently impact larger portions of the early learning sector governed by individuals no longer working directly with children (Newman, 1997). The need for advocacy of the ECE profession is required now more than ever, and the need for professional recognition is dire. ECEs are leaving the field rapidly due to the stressors discussed in Chapters 2 through 5. Acknowledging the legitimacy of these stressors will be the beginning of reconciling with those working in the profession. With the introduction of the CWELCC, the need for ECE professionals is more significant than ever, and the profession is currently in a staffing crisis (Crawley, 2023).

6.5 Conclusion

The introduction of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement will impact all Canadian childcare providers and those working in the early learning sector. Despite repeated requests from ECE professionals working in the early learning sector to address some of their most significant stressors from a systematic perspective (low wages, lack of recognition, lack of professional development), the policies were pushed through, and the early learning sector is now under more pressure than ever. Quality ECE professionals are in high demand, yet the challenge of retaining ECE professionals remains (Association of Early Childhood Educators, 2023). Criticism from advocacy groups, like the AECEO, and unions like CUPE, have acknowledged some of these systematic stressors, like the unfair working conditions and low wages, to little effect. The staffing crisis remains significant and will now be even worse with the introduction of the CWELCC (Crawley, 2023; Parker, 2022).

The key to addressing the concerns of ECE professionals working in the early learning sector is to listen to and validate them. Addressing burnout and turnover in the sector will require a detailed review of the pressures and stressors ECEs face. From there, a plan to remedy them can be created. Without a formalized acknowledgment that the system requires a review, the stressors affecting ECEs will continue to impact the work of these professionals, and the staffing crisis will worsen.

References

- Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario. (2023a). *Professional learning opportunities*. AECEO. https://www.aeceo.ca/sector_learning_opportunities
- Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario. (2023b). *Professional pay and decent work*. AECEO. https://www.aeceo.ca/professional_pay_decent_work
- Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario. (2023c). *The College of ECE & the AECEO*. https://www.aeceo.ca/college_of_ece
- Akbari, E., & Mccuaig, K. (2022). *Prioritizing the wages and working conditions of early childhood education workers*. ETFO Voice. <https://etfovoice.ca/feature/prioritizing-wages-and-working-conditions-early-childhood-educators>
- Andrew Fleck. (2023). *Children's inclusion support services*. <https://www.afchildrensservices.ca/childrens-inclusion-support-services/>
- Bandura, A. (1971). *Social learning theory*. General Learning Press.
- Beatty, C. A. (1996). The stress of managerial and professional women: Is the price too high? *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 17(3), 233-251. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2488571>
- Berlin, L. J., Shdaimah, C. S., Goodman, A., & Slopen, N. (2020). "I'm literally drowning": A mixed-methods exploration of infant-toddler child care providers' well-being. *Early Education and Development*, 31(7), 1071-1088. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2020.1766915>

Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning. (2007). *Early learning for every child today*. Ontario Ministry of Education.

Biglan, A., Layton, G. L., Jones, L. B., Hankins, M., & Rusby, J. C. (2013). The value of workshops on psychological flexibility for early childhood special education staff. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 32*(4), 196-210.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0271121411425191>

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment. Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Loss*. New York: Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. Great Britain: Routledge

Boyd, B. J., & Schneider, N. I. (1997). Perceptions of the work environment and burnout in Canadian child care providers. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 11*(2), 171-180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568549709594704>

Boyd, M. (2013). "I love my work but..." The professionalization of early childhood education. *The Qualitative Report, 18*(71), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2013.1470>

Boynton, P. M., & Greenhalgh, T. (2004). Selecting, designing, and developing your questionnaire. *British Medical Journal, 328*(7451), 1312-1315. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.328.7451.1312>

Buettner, C. K., Jeon, L., Hur, E., & Garcia, R. E. (2016). Teachers' social-emotional capacity: Factors associated with teachers' responsiveness and professional commitment. *Early*

Education and Development, 27(7), 1018-1039.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2016.1168227>

Burnard, P., Gill, P., Stewart, K., Treasure, E., & Chadwick, B. (2008). Analysing and presenting qualitative data. *British Dental Journal*, 204(8)m 429-432.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.bdj.2008.292>

Canadian Union of Public Employees. (2022, November 16). *Ontario education workers serve five days' strike notice*. <https://cupe.ca/ontario-education-workers-serve-five-days-strike-notice>

Canadore College. (2023). *Early childhood education*.

<https://www.canadorecollege.ca/programs/early-childhood-education>

Capel, C. M. (2012). Mindlessness/mindfulness, classroom practices and quality of early childhood education. *International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management*, 29(6), 666-680. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02656711211245656>

Carroll, L., Gilroy, P. J., & Murra, J. (1999). The moral imperative: Self-care for women psychotherapists. *Women & Therapy*, 22, 133-143.

https://doi.org/10.1300/J015v22n02_10

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. (n.d.). *Career burnout*. <https://www.camh.ca/en/camh-news-and-stories/career-burnout>

Chiu, C., Tasi, W., Yang, W., & Guo, J. (2019). How to help older adults learn new technology? Results from a multiple case research interviewing the internet technology instructors at

the senior learning center. *Computers & Education*, 129, 61-70.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2018.10.020>

Chumney, F. L. [Franceschumney81]. (2015, June 7). *Mixed methods research: The basics* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XynPxWSLjZY>

Crawley, M. (2023, March 13). *Why a shortage of workers threatens \$10/day child care*. CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/child-care-worker-shortage-early-childhood-educators-1.6774940>

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

College of Early Childhood Educators. (2022a, July 21). *CPL program*. <https://www.college-ece.ca/members/cpl/>

College of Early Childhood Educators. (2023). *ECE diploma programs from OCAATS*. <https://www.college-ece.ca/applicants/ece-diploma-programs-from-ocaats/>

College of Early Childhood Educators. (2022b). *Purpose and mandate*. <https://www.college-ece.ca/about-us/purpose-and-mandate/>

Eadie, P., Levickis, P., Murray, L., Page, J., Elek, C., & Church, A. (2021). Early childhood educators' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 49, 903-913. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01203-3>

- Early Childhood Community Development Centre. (2023). *Helping early learning and child care professionals and programs be successful innovative and professional*.
<https://eccdc.org/>
- Early Childhood Educators Act of 2007, Chapter 7, Schedule 8. (2007).
<https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/07e07>
- Erlingsson, C., & Brysiewicz, P. (2017). A hands-on guide to doing content analysis. *African Journal of Emergency Medicine*, 7(3), 93-99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.afjem.2017.08.001>
- Fielding, N. G. (2012). Triangulation and mixed methods designs: Data integration with new research technologies. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 6(2),
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689812437101>
- Figley, C. R. (1995). *Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized*. New York: Routledge
- Gillis, C. (2013, May 16). *Why full-day kindergarten doesn't work*. MacLean's.
<https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/the-munchkin-invasion/>
- Global Wellness Institute. (2020). *What is wellness?* <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/what-is-wellness/>
- Government of Canada. (2022, May 9). *Canada - Ontario Canada-wide early learning and child care agreement - 2021-2026*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories/ontario-canada-wide-2021.html>

Grant, C., & Osanloo, A. (2014). Understanding, selecting, and integrating a theoretical framework in dissertation research: Creating the blueprint from your “house.” *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research*, 4(2), 12-26. <https://doi.org/10.5929/2014.4.2.9>

Greene, J. C., Caracelli, V. J., & Graham, W. F. (1989). Towards a conceptual framework for mixed-method evaluation designs. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 11(3), 255-274. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737011003255>

Greene, J. C. (2008). Is mixed methods social inquiry a distinctive methodology? *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 2(1), 7-22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689807309969>

Gregory, A., & Milner, S. (2009). Editorial: Work-life balance: A matter of choice? *Gender, Work, and Organization*, 16(1), pp.1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2008.00429.x>

Hur, E. H., Ardeleanu, K., Satchell, T. W., & Jeon, L. (2023). Why are they leaving? Understanding associations between early childhood program policies and teacher turnover rates. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 52, 479-440. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-022-09693-x>

Jacobs, B. (2022). *Self-regulation and inquiry-based learning in the primary classroom*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars Press.

Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 491-525. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693>

- Kahill, S. (1988). Interventions for burnout in the helping professions: A review of the empirical evidence. *Canadian Journal of Counselling Review*, 22(3), 310-342.
- Khattar, R., & Callaghan, K. (2015). Beyond professionalism: Interrogating the idea and the ideals. *Canadian Children*, 40(1), 5-19. <https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs.v40i1.15208>
- Kirby, S., & McKenna, K. (1989). *Experience, research, social change: Methods from the margins*. Toronto, CA: Garamond Press.
- Kivunja, C. (2018). Distinguishing between theory, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework: A systematic review of lessons from the field. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 7(6), 44-53. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v7n6p44>
- Kleinheksel, A. J., Rockich-Winston, N., Tawfik, H., & Wyatt, T. R. (2020). Demystifying content analysis. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 84(1), 127-137. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe7113>
- Lefever, S., Dal, M., & Matthiasdottir, A. (2007). Online data collection in academic research: Advantages and limitations. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 38(4). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2006.00638.x>
- Lynch, M. (2014). Ontario kindergarten teachers' social media discussions about full day kindergarten. *McGill Journal of Education*, 49(2), 329-347. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1029423ar>

- McGinn, D. (2023, March 12). *Child-care centres in Ontario, and across Canada, face staffing crisis*. The Globe and Mail. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-child-care-centres-in-ontario-and-across-canada-face-staffing-crisis/>
- McMullen, M. B., Lee, M. S. C., McCormick, K. I., & Choi, J. (2020). Early childhood professional well-being as a predictor of the risk of turnover in child care: A matter of quality. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 34(3), 331-345.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2019.1705446>
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Neuman, W. L. (1997). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. London: Allyn & Bacon.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2014a). *Child care and early years act*. Toronto, ON: Ministry of Education. <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/14c11>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2014b). *How does learning happen? Ontario's pedagogy for the early years: A resource about learning through relationships for those who work with young children and their families*. Toronto, ON: Ministry of Education.
<https://www.ontario.ca/page/how-does-learning-happen-ontarios-pedagogy-early-years>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2022a). *Ontario's access and inclusion framework 2022: Canada-wide early learning and child care system*.
<https://msdsb.net/images/ADMIN/correspondence/2022/annex-1--access-and-inclusion-framework.pdf>

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2022b). *School board-operated (extended day) program*.

<https://www.ontario.ca/document/before-and-after-school-programs-kindergarten-grade-6-policies-and-guidelines-school-boards/school-board-operated-extended-day-program>

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2022c, June 16). *Strengthening early years and child care in*

Ontario, 2020 report. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/strengthening-early-years-and-child-care-ontario-2020-report>

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2016). *The kindergarten program*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario.

Ontario ECE Qualifications Upgrade Program. (2022). *Qualifications upgrade program*.

<https://ecegrants.on.ca/qualifications-upgrade/>

Parker, S. (2022, February 23). *A workforce at breaking point – Rising up*. Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario.

https://www.aeceo.ca/_a_workforce_at_breaking_point_rising_up

Pickvance, C. G. (2001). Four varieties of comparative analysis. *Journal of Housing and the*

Built Environment, 16, 7-21. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1011533211521>

Richards, K. C., Campenni, C. E., & Muse-Burke, J. L. (2010). Self-care and well-being in mental health professionals: The mediating effects of self-awareness and mindfulness.

Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 32(3), 247-264.

<https://doi.org/10.17744/mehc.32.3.0n31v88304423806>

- Roy, R., & Al-Absy, M. S. M. (2022). Impact of critical factors on the effectiveness of online learning. *Sustainability*, 14(21). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su142114073>
- Schneiderman, N., Ironson, G., & Siegel, S. D. (2005). Stress and health: Psychological, behavioral, and biological determinants. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 1, 607-628. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.1.102803.144141>
- Shanker, S. (2021). *Self-regulation: 5 domains of self-reg.* The MEHRIT Centre. https://self-reg.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/infosheet_5-Domains-of-Self-Reg.pdf
- Shanker, S. (2023, January 12). *The Self-Reg framework: The cognitive domain.* The MEHRIT Centre. <https://self-reg.ca/self-reg-framework-cognitive-domain/>
- Skilled Trades Ontario. (2021). *Child development practitioner.* <https://www.skilledtradesontario.ca/trade-information/child-development-practitioner/>
- St. Lawrence College. (2023). *Early childhood education.* <https://www.stlawrencecollege.ca/programs/early-childhood-education/full-time/kingston>
- Stauffer, S. D., & Mason, E. C. M. (2019). Addressing elementary school teachers' professional stressors: Practical suggestions for schools and administrators. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X13482578>
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (Eds.). (2003). *The Sage handbook of mixed methods in the behavioral and social sciences.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Teddlie, C., & Tashakkori, A. (2013). Mixed methods research: Contemporary issues in an emerging field. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative issues*. SAGE Publications.

The International Center for Self-Care Research. (2019). *Background: Philosophical underpinnings*. <http://www.selfcareresearch.org/background/>

Vaismoradi, M., Turunen, H., & Bondas, T. (2013). Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study. *Nursing & Health Sciences*, 15(3), 398-405. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nhs.12048>

Watson, J. C., Harper, S., Ratliff, L., & Singleton, S. (2010). Holistic wellness and perceived stress: Predicting job satisfaction among beginning teachers. *Research in the Schools*, 17(1), 29-37.

Appendixes

Appendix A: Consent Form

Consent Form to Participate in a Research Study

Title of Research Study: Stressors in Early Learning Environments and Their Impact on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Early Childhood Educators

Name of Principal Investigator (PI): Dr. Brenda Jacobs

PI's contact number(s)/email(s): Brenda.jacobs@ontariotechu.ca

Names(s) of Co-Investigator(s), Faculty Supervisor, Student Lead(s), etc., and contact number(s)/email(s): Student Lead – Melissa Probert-Gilhooly (melissa.probertgilhooly@ontariotechu.net), Supervisor - Dr. Jennifer Laffier (Jennifer.laffier@ontariotechu.ca).

Departmental and institutional affiliation(s): Faculty of Education, University of Ontario Institute of Technology.

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled *Stressors in Early Learning Environments and Their Impact on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Early Childhood Educators*. Please read the information about the study presented in this form. The form includes details on the study's procedures, risks, and benefits that you should know before you decide if you would like to take part. You should take as much time as you need to make your decision. You should ask the Student Lead (SL), Melissa Probert-Gilhooly (melissa.probertgilhooly@ontariotechu.net), or study team, Principal Investigator Dr. Brenda Jacobs (Brenda.jacobs@ontariotechu.ca) and Dr. Jennifer Laffier (Jennifer.laffier@ontariotechu.ca) to explain anything that you do not understand and make sure that all your questions have been answered before signing this consent form. Before you make your decision, feel free to talk about this study with anyone you wish including your friends and family. **Participation in this study is voluntary.**

This study has been reviewed by the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (Ontario Tech University) Research Ethics Board [16140] on [insert date].

Purpose and Procedure:

Purpose:

Early childhood educators (ECEs) serve the community by providing quality, inclusive care to young children, creating and delivering age-appropriate programming, continuing professional development, and working with a diverse group of families. ECEs may experience stress while

working in the early learning field and this can lead to occupational stress, trauma, anxiety, and depression which can affect work performance and the psychological wellbeing of the ECE.

This study will also examine the current mental health knowledge possessed by practicing ECEs. The ECEs experience a high-stress rate in the early learning environment, and many are permanently leaving the ECE field. This research could illustrate a solution for retaining the ECEs in the field by potentially providing them with the knowledge and tools required to handle the stress required of the profession.

You have been invited to participate in this study because of your role as a **practicing Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE) in Ontario**. There are no risks to participating in this study.

Procedures:

The data will be collected from a sample group of approximately 50 practicing RECEs within the province of Ontario who work in various early learning settings. The RECEs will fill out an anonymous, online survey comprised of multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions. This survey will provide information about the struggles ECEs face in the field, mental health knowledge, and supports they already have in the field.

The survey would allow for the raw data to be examined and processed to establish the need for a mental health course, and the components needed to be addressed in the course. The survey data will be analyzed using NVivo to examine similarities in survey responses, and the interview responses are reviewed for common themes, specific words, and other patterns.

The length of time required to complete the survey would be approximately 10-15 minutes.

Potential Benefits:

The results from this study may indicate a need for further research about the importance of mental health for early childhood educators and may establish a foundation for the possible creation of a course focused on mental health for early childhood educators.

Potential Risk or Discomforts:

There are no risks to participants when participating in this study.

Use and Storage of Data:

All data submitted will be submitted anonymously. There will be no demographic questions or indicators that could lead to the potential identification of a participant. The survey will request the participants to indicate their approximate age range, level of education, marital status, and if there are children living within the home of the participant for comparative information about outside stressors of the RECE. The data collected will be stored within Google Forms linked to the Ontario Tech University Gmail account of the Student Lead. The analyzed data will be stored on the password-protected personal computer of the Student Lead and will not be shared with anyone other than the supervisors of the project, Dr. Brenda Jacobs and Dr. Jennifer Laffier, and the thesis committee.

The data will be stored until the completion of the project. The Student Lead will submit a proposal to the Research Ethics Board prior to establishing any potential future secondary study. After the project is complete, the data will be destroyed by digital removal from the personal computer of the Student Lead and from the Google Form. All information collected during this study, including demographic information, will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone outside the study unless required by law. You will not be named in any reports, publications, or presentations that may come from this study.

Confidentiality:

Your privacy shall be respected. No information about your identity will be shared or published without your permission, unless required by law. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law, professional practice, and ethical codes of conduct. Please note that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed while data is in transit over the Internet.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may partake in only those aspects of the study in which you feel comfortable. You may also decide not to be in this study, or to be in the study now, and then change your mind later. You may leave the study at any time. You will be given information that is relevant to your decision to continue or withdraw from participation. Such information will need to be subsequently provided.

Right to Withdraw:

It is possible to withdraw from the survey by closing your browser window. If you withdraw from the research project before submitting the survey, the incomplete survey will not be stored. Data from completed surveys cannot be withdrawn due to the anonymity of the survey.

Conflict of Interest:

Researchers have an interest in completing this study. Their interests should not influence your decision to participate in this study.

Debriefing and Dissemination of Results:

The results of the study will be available upon completion of the survey, and a link to the completed study will be provided in the same locations where the original survey was published. If you are interested in learning the results of the study prior to publication, please contact the Student Lead Melissa Probert-Gilhooly at melissa.probertgilhooly@ontariotechu.net.

Participant Rights and Concerns:

Please read this consent form carefully and feel free to ask the researcher any questions that you might have about the study. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, complaints, or adverse events, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 721-8668 ext. 3693 or at researchethics@ontariotechu.ca.

If you have any questions concerning the research study or experience any discomfort related to the study, please contact the Student Lead at melissa.probertgilhooly@ontariotechu.net.

By signing this form you do not give up any of your legal rights against the investigators, sponsor or involved institutions for compensation, nor does this form relieve the investigators, sponsor or involved institutions of their legal and professional responsibilities.

Consent to Participate:

a. Online Consent

Include the following statements:

1. I have read the consent form and understand the study being described.
2. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I am free to ask questions about the study in the future.
3. I freely consent to participate in the research study, understanding that I may discontinue participation at any time without penalty. A copy of this Consent Form has been made available to me.

Having read and understood this letter of information and consent form, I consent to participate in this study by completing and submitting the online survey entitled *Stressors in Early Learning Environments and Their Impact on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Early Childhood Educators*.

Appendix B: Advertisement





VOLUNTEER
PARTICIPANTS
NEEDED FOR A

Research Study

Examining mental health knowledge
and stressors experienced by
Registered Early Childhood
Educators (RECEs) in the early
learning field.

Melissa Probert-Gilhooly, Faculty of Education
Melissa.probertgilhooly@ontariotechu.net

Appendix C: Questionnaire

1. I agree to participate in the research study under the conditions detailed above. *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes, I agree to participate. *Skip to question 2.*
- No, I do not wish to participate.

2. I am a Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE) with the College of Early Childhood Educators in Ontario, Canada. *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

3. Which category best describes your current age group? *

Mark only one oval.

- 18-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- Above 60

4. What is your current marital status? *

Mark only one oval.

- Single (never married)
- Married or Common-law
- Separated or Divorced
- Widowed
- Other: _____

5. How many children are currently in your household? *

Mark only one oval.

- 1

- 2
- 3
- 4 or more
- None
- Other: _____

6. What is the highest level of education you have successfully completed? *

Mark only one oval.

- High school diploma or equivalent
- Certificate of Apprenticeship or Certificate of Qualification
- College, CEGEP, or other non-university certificate
- College, CEGEP, or other non-university 2 year Diploma
- College, CEGEP, or other non-university 3 year Advanced Diploma
- Bachelor's Degree
- Graduate Diploma
- Master's Degree
- Doctoral Degree

7. I chose to become an ECE because:

8. How many years of experience do you have as an Early Childhood Educator (ECE)? *

Mark only one oval.

- Less than 1 year
- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 7-9 years
- 10 or more years

9. Which age group do you CURRENTLY and/or PRIMARILY work with? *

Mark only one oval.

- Infants (under 18 months)
- Toddler (18 months to 2.5 years)
- Preschool (2.5 years to 4 years)
- Kindergarten (3.5 years to 6 years)
- School Age (6 years and older)

10. How stressful overall was your ECE role prior to the COVID-19 pandemic? *

Mark only one oval.

- 1: Not stressful
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5: Extremely stressful

11. How stressful overall is your ECE role since the COVID-19 pandemic began? *

Mark only one oval.

- 1: Not stressful
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5: Extremely stressful

12. What stressors have you experienced while working as an ECE from the list below?
Select all that apply.

Check all that apply.

- Low wages
- Lack of recognition
- Behavioural challenges
- Communication with superiors
- Communication with colleagues
- Communication with peers
- Long hours
- Lack of autonomy
- Organizational changes (new polies, new guidelines)
- COVID-19 restrictions
- Curriculum planning
- Continuing to work from home after the workday is complete (researching, answering emails, etc.)
- Other: _____

13. How do you cope with the stressors? *

14. Do you feel as if you had opportunities to learn about mental health and stress during your post-secondary education?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

15. How did this knowledge (or lack of) learned during your post-secondary education impact your mental well-being in the field?

16. What opportunities were you given to learn about mental well-being or coping skills since you completed your post-secondary education?

17. Which mental health disorders are you familiar with and are able to recognize the signs and symptoms of? Please select all that apply.

Check all that apply.

- Acute Stress Disorder
- Anorexia Nervosa
- Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
- Bipolar and Related Disorders (Bipolar I, Bipolar II)
- Bulimia Nervosa
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Insomnia Disorder
- Major Depressive Disorder
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
- Panic Attack (Specifier)
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

- Social Anxiety Disorder
- Somatic Symptom Disorder
- Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders

18. What additional topics would prepare you to learn about your own mental well-being?

19. Would offering a course on mental health and well-being during the early childhood education program help ECEs cope with stressors experienced in the early learning field?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

20. If I had the opportunity to begin my post-secondary journey again, early childhood education would be my primary program choice.

Mark only one oval.

- 1: Strongly disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5: Strongly agree