Nurturing the Nurturers: Understanding Support Systems for Early Childhood Educators in Alberta

by

Mary-Frances Smith

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Community Engagement

School of Public Health
University of Alberta

Abstract

The recent Government of Canada initiative to create a national early learning and child care (ELCC) system recognizes the importance of accessible and affordable early learning and child care. The Canada-Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Agreement aims to support the 46% of children aged birth to 5 years old in Alberta enrolled in regulated and licensed ELCC services (Government of Canada, 2022). The Agreement is a $3.8 billion investment in Alberta's ELCC sector. Its goal is to create 45,000 new childcare spaces and hire 7,000 to 20,000 new early childhood educators (ECEs) (Government of Canada, 2021a). However, concerns regarding workforce retention persist. This qualitative descriptive, community-engaged research aims to understand the factors contributing to the retention of ECEs in the sector. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to gain insights from eleven ECEs in Alberta about their experiences and perspectives on workforce stability. The interviews explored ECE's motivations for entering the sector, workplace experiences, self-advocacy strategies, and grassroots solutions. Thematic analysis identified five key themes of support: personal passion, pride, and professional identity; work-life balance; positive professional relationships; supportive organizational structures; and policy decisions. The participating ECEs had deep motivations to work with children and felt that their work with children and families was not adequately recognized or valued. However, they found the interview process empowering and stressed the importance of decision-makers understanding their skills and challenges. By providing ECEs with an opportunity to voice their concerns, this research helped them realize their agency and the importance of self-advocacy. The findings of this research have significant implications for policy decisions under the Canada-Alberta Agreement. They highlight the need to include the voices and perspectives of ECEs when decisions are made on their behalf.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Mary-Frances Smith at the University of Alberta under the supervision of Dr. Rebecca Gokiert. This research received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board under the title "Alberta Early Learning and Care Workforce Stability Project" (Pro00122267) on 18 May 2023.

Dedication

To J, my partner in all things, this thesis would not be possible without your unwavering support and cheerleading. Our daily walks and meetups at the Flamingo Lounge served as a sanctuary throughout this journey. "Thanks for doing everything around here."

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the role of my Supervisor, Dr. Rebecca Gokiert, and my committee, Dr. Rhonda Breitkreuz and Dr. Anna Kirova, in supporting this research and thesis completion.

Table of Contents

Tables

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
AECEA	Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta
CAYC	Child and Youth Care
CC	Child Care
CER	Community-engaged Research
CoP	Community of Practice
CUP	Community-University Partnership
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECE	Early Childhood Educator
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ELCC	Early Learning and Child Care
FDH	Family Dayhome
GBA+	Gender-Based Analysis Plus
IAP2	International Association for Public Participation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSC	Out-of-School Care
PS	Preschool
QD	Qualitative Descriptive

Glossary of Terms

The following terms are used within this thesis.

Canada-Alberta Agreement. Canada-Alberta Canada Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement. A bilateral agreement between the federal and provincial governments with intentions to create a national system of early learning and child care. These terms are used interchangeably.

Child care is written as two separate words to align with the style used by AECEA and the Government of Alberta.

Early Childhood Educator/Educator (ECE). A term used by AECEA and the Government of Alberta to describe the people who deliver licensed and regulated early learning and child care to children from birth to twelve in various settings. This term is applied holistically to describe an ECE's role as a teacher, leader, and carer.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The terminology used in other jurisdictions for ELCC. This paper will use ELCC terminology. Should ECEC appear, it will be due to the reference's regional terminology.

Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC). This term describes a sector, system, or program providing regulated, non-parental care and services to children from birth to 12 years of age. For this thesis, ELCC will be used to describe the sector.

Quality ELCC. Quality care has various interpretations and viewpoints. In this thesis, its definition is contingent on the context of the cited article. Analyzing elements of quality care is outside the scope of this research.

Terminology will default to the language used by the Government of Alberta and AECEA.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"Every child needs at least *one* adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her." Urie Bronfenbrenner.

The recently signed Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (Canada-Alberta Agreement/CWELCC) between the Governments of Canada and Alberta represents a significant investment in developing a national early learning and child care (ELCC) system. The agreement's goals include creating additional ELCC spaces and decreasing parent fees to an average of $10/ day (Government of Alberta, 2024b). However, the agreement lacks a comprehensive workforce strategy to attract and retain well-trained and qualified early childhood educators (ECEs) in these newly established spaces. To fill this gap, this qualitative, community-engaged research aims to understand the factors contributing to the retention of ECEs in the sector and those hindering their retention. This research gathered input from ECE's perspective to propose long-term workforce retention and stability solutions.

The initiative by the Government of Canada recognizes the significance of providing positive experiences and secure attachments to children from birth to eight years of age. Positive experiences and attachments profoundly impact children's health and well-being and support their long-term development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2008; Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011). The overall well-being of children, including their physical and mental health, relationships, and sense of security, heavily relies on the support and care provided by those around them (Gheaus, 2011). Therefore, it is of utmost importance to ensure

that children receive high-quality care[1] from supportive individuals to guarantee their safety,

security, and healthy development (Gheaus, 2011).

To support the 46% of Canadian families using ELCC, the Government of Canada

established the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework (Employment and Social

Development, 2022). This framework aims to create a unified national approach to ELCC,

wherein all children can benefit from enriched environments and reach their full potential

(Employment and Social Development, 2022). The federal government has allocated $30 billion

to develop a national ELCC system to achieve this vision. Bilateral agreements were negotiated

to support this vision and outline the Framework's principles and objectives within each

province and territory (Government of Canada, 2021). These bilateral agreements respected

provincial jurisdiction while aiming to create an affordable, accessible, inclusive, and high-

quality national system of ELCC (Government of Alberta, 2024b).

The bilateral agreements between federal and provincial governments share a standard set

of expectations tailored to the individual needs of each province. Alberta will receive 3.8 billion

dollars over five years to reduce parent fees to 'an average[2]' of $10 per day and create 65,000

inclusive and accessible spaces by 2026 (Government of Alberta, 2024b). To fulfill the vision

outlined in the Canada-Alberta Agreement, Alberta must hire 7,000-20,000[3] certified ECEs by

2026 for the projected new spaces (Government of Alberta, 2024b)[4]. The Canadian-based

Atkinson Institute (2022) raised concerns about workforce shortages in the *Canada's Children*

---

[1] The definition of quality in early learning and child care is broad and can vary depending on the perspective of the community member or interested party. Quality is not clearly defined within the agreement or by the Government of Canada and Alberta.
[2] The use of 'on average' is language taken from the bilateral agreement with Alberta.
[3] This number varies depending on the source.
[4] Number retrieved from the Government of Alberta website. Data may change depending on edits completed by Government of Alberta.

Need a Professional Early Childhood Education Workforce report. The report suggested that the ELCC sector is still catching up to pre-pandemic staffing capacity. The report further warns that ECE shortages may lead to provinces reducing qualification or licensing requirements to meet the Agreement's goals (McCuiag et al., 2022).

Recruitment and turnover continue to be primary concerns in the ELCC sector. Recent international studies suggest that turnover rates in ELCC may range from 30-40% (Heilala et al., 2022) and could be as high as 50% (Shaheen, 2016). According to Irvine et al. (2016), a group of Australian researchers, one in five ECEs surveyed intended to leave their job within a year due to low pay and feeling undervalued. Flanagan (2021) noted that the turnover of ECEs creates a cycle where new ECEs replace those who leave (Community-University Partnership, 2021), making it challenging to maintain stability or keep up with the pace of growth. In Canada, the lack of consistent or regularly collected data on the ELCC workforce makes it difficult to understand the extent or percentage of turnover of ECEs (Halfon, 2021) despite researchers such as Beach, Doherty, and Flanagan noting workforce retention concerns since 1998. Consequently, the sector faces challenges in meeting current needs and the expansion requirements outlined in the Agreement.

The significance of workforce stability in the ELCC sector cannot be overstated. Investment in the ELCC workforce is essential for establishing an effective national quality ELCC system; a dedicated and skilled ECE workforce committed to staying in the ELCC sector is essential for achieving the Canada-Alberta Agreement's goals of a national system. Moreover, the departure of ECEs from the sector can disrupt the bond with children and the consistent support provided to parents (Buettner et al., 2016; Jeon et al., 2018).

To build an effective ELCC system and retain ECES in the sector, we must consider their perspectives and experiences. Thus, this research aimed to understand workforce retention and stability from the viewpoint of ECEs. Three overarching questions guided this research: What factors contribute to ECEs feeling supported? How can the identified factors contribute to long-term workforce retention and stability of ECEs? What solutions to workforce retention can be identified from their perspective?

Specifically, this research sought to understand factors contributing to workforce retention and stability in the ELCC sector by investigating ECEs' motivations to enter the sector and the factors necessary for long-term retention. The intention of this research was to amplify the voices of ECEs and empower them as decisions are being made on their behalf. The findings of this research can shed light on the support ECEs need, guide policy recommendations, and assist the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (AECEA) in advocating on behalf of ECEs and amplifying their voices. Additionally, the findings can provide policymakers with solutions to retain ECEs in the sector, thereby addressing workforce stability and building a coherent and competent system under the Canada-Alberta Agreement. Ultimately, this research aims to create a supportive system around ECEs by providing timely insights into their needs.

This community-engaged, qualitative research was conducted within a long-standing partnership between AECEA and the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (CUP), which dates to 2017. AECEA is a member-based provincial organization that aims to enhance the professional standing of ECEs and the ELCC sector. AECEA advocates for increased educational standards, better wages, and improved working conditions and provides leadership, professional support, and information sharing across the ELCC sector (AECEA, n.d.). CUP, a research centre in the University of Alberta's School of

Public Health, conducts community-engaged research using a value-driven framework (About

Us, n.d.). This partnership is mutually beneficial, as both organizations share similar missions to

improve the well-being of children and families. The CUP and AECEA partnership guided the

research process through the complex landscape of ELCC, enhancing my understanding of

policy implications and government dynamics. CUP provided necessary research support

through its network of established researchers and partners, while AECEA ensured that the

research was grounded in its mission, vision and collaborative with community stakeholders.

AECEA's policy committee, comprised of the board chair, vice chair, and a special

advisor, represented the board and guided this community-engaged research as decision-makers

(Cargo & Mercer, 2008; D'Alonzo, 2010). Biweekly meetings were held, and email

communication ensured that the research incorporated input from the ELCC community and

aligned with AECEA's vision and mission (Attygalle, 2020). An agreement with AECEA was

established to provide guidance and direction for the research when decisions were necessary or

external factors influenced the research (Aslin & Brown, 2004). AECEA participated in all

research stages and provided valuable feedback and guidance as the research progressed.

Together, we focused on including the voices of ECEs as decisions are made on their behalf.

In the following chapter, I will outline the issues and concerns previously identified in the

literature and present the factors influencing workforce retention and stability found from other

jurisdictions. Chapter three will outline the methodology, data collection procedures, and

analysis approach. Chapter four will present the findings, incorporating representative quotes

from participants. In chapter five, I will discuss these findings in relation to the literature and

reflect on the policy consideration, limitations and future research directions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the literature and research conducted over the past 30 years on the retention and stability of early childhood educators (ECEs) in early learning and child care (ELCC). The literature review offers a brief summary of the critical early years of a child's development and the role that ECEs play in this period. Additionally, the review highlights various factors and aspects of working conditions experienced by ECEs that may influence their turnover and retention and emphasizes the significance of professional connections. The chapter concludes with a discussion of recent policy decisions, the consequences of the absence of data in Alberta, and an explanation of why this research is both relevant and timely.

Critical Period of Development and Early Childhood Educators (ECEs)

From birth to eight years, children undergo rapid brain development, with an estimated one million new neural connections forming every second (*Brain Architecture*, n.d.). Through a pruning process, a child's brain forms rapid connections between neurons and refines neural pathways based on their experiences, impacting language, cognition, health, behaviour, and emotional regulation (Robinson et al., 2017; Tierney, 2013). The quality of a child's early experiences with adults influences their brain building and pruning process, with adverse experiences such as neglect, trauma, or lack of supportive adults having long-lasting negative effects on their well-being, even into adulthood (Centre on the Developing Child, 2007). On the other hand, nurturing attachment and caring relationships with adults contribute to developing strong and healthy brain architecture (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2008). Positive early experiences have been shown to be foundational to brain development.

(Reschke, 2019). Providing children with a nurturing environment and enriching experiences during their early years can set a solid foundation for life (OECD, 2015).

Canadian co-authors of the Early Years Study (Mustard & McCain, 1999, 2007, 2011, 2020) Mustard and McCain support the claim that early childhood experiences are essential for the development of a child's core capacities. They describe how these experiences stimulate neural pathways and influence the development of coping mechanisms, movement, language, cognition, and biological systems, including the immune system. They stress the importance of positive social interactions, physical activity with others and adults, opportunities to problem solve, and responsive environments that provide learning opportunities to support children's cognitive, emotional, and social growth.

In the *Early Years Study 4: Thriving Kids, Thriving Society*, written after the passing of Mustard, McCain outlines how high quality ELCC environments are filled with engaging conversations between children and educators where ECEs pay attention to children's ideas and invite proximal growth through play experiences. This is done when well-qualified and well-trained ECEs pay attention and observe entry points to extend play of children and practice problem solving and critical thinking. "Effective educators intentionally guide and construct opportunities to extend and expand children's learning (McCain, 2020, p. 20)." McCain describes how ECEs with specialized training can use a suite of strategies to maximize learning potential. McCain (2020) further outlines the impact of turnover on ELCC, children, and families. McCain cites a 26% (pre-Covid) turnover rate resulting in a lack of consistency of care. Therefore, Mustard and McCain contend that well-trained and stable ECEs can significantly contribute to the quality of early childhood experiences, which can have long-term positive outcomes for children.

Qualifications are the recognized levels and types of knowledge, skills, and competencies that ECEs need to work in ELCC (Herzenberg et al., 2005; OECD, 2012; Vandenbroeck et al., 2016). In Alberta, a Child Care Staff Qualification Certificate is required to work in ELCC (Government of Alberta, 2022b). The Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Act (Government of Alberta, 2022c) and its Regulations (Government of Alberta, 2008) specify three levels of ECE certification, each with specific qualifications and educational credentials to be able to work in ELCC in Alberta. To obtain ECE Level 1, the minimum requirement to enter ELCC in Alberta, the *Certification Guide for Early Childhood Educators* (2022) outlines nine different pathways. For example, to achieve this ECE entry level, individuals can complete the 54-hour online Alberta Child Care Orientation course, a 45-hour post-secondary course in child development, relevant high school courses, or the Family Child Care Training Program courses. In 2022-2023, Alberta Children's Services expanded the capacity of the free Level 1 orientation course from 4,000 to 10,000 spaces, making it easier to enter the ELCC sector (Government of Alberta, 2022a). Although there is no publicly available data on the current number of ECEs in Alberta, there are indications that the number of ECE Level 1's has increased since the implementation of this initiative. The orientation course provides a brief introduction to early childhood development and the role of ECEs (Base Corp Learning Systems, 2021); however, it is not comprehensive and lacks a practical experience. Similarly, for ECE Levels 2 and 3, there are multiple recognized credentials for certification. According to the Certification Guide, ECE Level 2 requires a one-year post-secondary credential (30 credits), while ECE Level 3 requires a two-to-four-year post-secondary credential (60-120 credits) (Government of Alberta, 2022b). However, Level 2 ECEs have eight approved credentials, and Level 3 ECEs have seven, including both two-year diplomas and four-year degrees. Foreign credentials can be considered if

accompanied by English-translated transcripts and an English language proficiency assessment.

As a result, ECEs enter the sector with diverse credentials, knowledge, and understanding of

child development, licensing regulations, programming, interpersonal relationships, child

guidance, observation and recording, professionalism and ethics, and cultural diversity. While

the multitude of entry pathways into the sector facilitates accessibility, it also poses challenges in

terms of consistent competencies and workforce expectations.

The terminology used to describe professionals in ELCC can include terms such as child

care worker, child care provider, preschool teacher, and educational assistant. Each word implies

a variance in responsibility or educational level (Nicholson, 2008). This thesis intentionally uses

the word *educator*, primarily because AECEA and the Government of Alberta use it to describe

the individuals who directly care for children in licensed and regulated programs; secondly, the

term educator recognizes the dual role of *teaching* and *caring* that ECEs fulfill daily. For

example, the term "early childhood educator" conveys a sense of expertise in early child

development, which embraces the teacher-side of working with children while embracing the

importance of using care moments for learning and attachment (Murray, 2021). This terminology

moves the conversation beyond the realm of custodial care and recognizes the application of

ethical decision-making and professional judgment necessary to work with children (Langford,

2023).

The term early learning and child care invites incorporating care into an intentional

reflective practice that elevates the daily tasks found in ELCC into natural opportunities to

connect and relate to the child (Murray, 2021). AECEA's guiding principles underscore the

importance of well-qualified early childhood educators in ensuring high-quality ELCC.

Educators must possess foundational knowledge and understanding of child development,

understand the importance of responsive environments, and intentionally engage in meaningful interactions with children to foster strong attachments and connections (AECEA, n.d.). As such, the term "early childhood educator (ECE)" is used throughout this thesis to convey the combined role of educators and caregivers who carry expertise, ethics of care, professional judgment, and foundational knowledge of child development.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is an international organization that works to shape policy for the prosperity, equality, opportunity, and well-being of people (OECD, n.d.). The OECD publishes policy documents based on research to address ELCC workforce issues. Notably, the *Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey* (TALIS Starting Strong) is a critical survey conducted by the OECD, which queries teachers, early childhood education and care (ECEC) staff, and school leaders about working conditions and learning environments to help member countries develop workforce policies. The TALIS survey is distinguished by its substantial sample size, two decades of data, international research consortium, high response rates, and focus on quality that emphasizes the well-being of children in the analysis (OECD, 2019b).

The OECD report *Building a High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce* (OECD, 2020), provides an overview of support factors that contribute to stabilizing the ELCC workforce and creating a high-quality ELCC system. This OECD report provides overarching themes for this literature review, which include workforce support factors such as working conditions and well-being; education, training, and career progression opportunities; professional collaboration; and the impact of policy decisions. The following sections will examine these support factors and the impact on retention efforts. The chapter will conclude with

a review of policy decisions made in the past five years in Alberta regarding the ELCC

workforce.

Working Conditions and Well-being

   The following section outlines factors that impact retention, turnover, and stability. It is

important to note, while presented separately, the factors outlined below are interconnected and

necessary to work in harmony for workforce retention and stability in the ELCC sector. No

single factor can address the complexity of this sector on its own. However, for this thesis, the

factors are presented individually.

Compensation, Earnings, and Benefits

   Research on ECE compensation and its influence on turnover has been conducted in the

ELCC sector since 1991. American researchers Whitebook, Howes, and Phillips have

collaborated on ELCC and educator research since 1999 through the Center for the Study of

Child Care Employment and their work with the National Child Care Staffing Study (Center for

the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE), 2021). Their initial national study sampled 1307

staff members from 227 child care centers across five metropolitan areas. Its findings revealed

that ECEs were dissatisfied with their salaries, benefits, and the societal status associated with

their profession. A subsequent review by Whitebook et al. (2014) analyzed 25 years of data since

their original study, concluding that wages in ELCC remained inadequate without transparent

and fair salary structures.

   In Canada, the study *You Bet I Care!: A Canada-Wide Study on Wages, Working*

Conditions, and Practices in Child Care Centres (2000) by Doherty et al. utilized survey data

from 848 child care centers across the country to inquire about compensation and working

conditions. This seminal study found that many ECEs take on additional paid work to

supplement their income. A follow-up report: *You Bet We Still Care*! (2013) by Flanagan et al. revealed that ECEs still hold second jobs.

The average wage for an ECE in Alberta is $18.59 (Government of Alberta, 2021b). The Alberta Living Wage Network defines a living wage as a wage that enables individuals to cover their expenses, engage in their communities with dignity, exceeds the minimum wage, and is determined based on the region (Alberta Living Wage Network, 2022). The current average living wage in Alberta is $22.40 (Alberta Living Wage Network, 2022) with a current minimum wage of $15.00 (Government of Alberta, 2024e). Therefore, the average ECE, no matter their tenure or responsibilities are making less than a living wage.

Since 2014, the Government of Alberta has provided enhanced wages to ECEs through a wage-top-up system. The amount of top-up is determined by their level of certification (Government of Alberta, 2023). The wage top-up system in Alberta serves as a crucial mechanism for owners and operators to supplement the income of ECEs who may otherwise only be earning minimum wage (Government of Alberta, 2021b). The Government of Alberta has also established a wage table that outlines the average wages an ECE may receive based on their certification level (Government of Alberta, 2023). However, neither the wage-top-up system nor the wage table takes into account factors such as experience, responsibility, time worked outside operational hours, regional impact on the cost of living, or annual inflation adjustments (Government of Alberta, 2023). As a result, the current wage top-up system neither provides ECEs with adequate pay, nor does it incentivize owners and operators to pay more than minimum wage or provide wage increases based on years of experience or added responsibilities, leading to stagnant wages and limited wage growth for the majority of ECEs.

In their consensus report to understand financing of a highly qualified ELCC workforce, American researchers Allen and Backes (2018) outline that wage supplements are the most common strategy for increasing wages for ECEs. However, they point out, wage enhancements are not typically sufficient or adequate for supporting or retaining a qualified workforce. Additionally, Allen and Backes (2018) noted that "the temporary nature of the supplements does not create the predictable and steady salaries necessary for recruiting and retaining a highly qualified workforce" (p. 114). They suggest a financing framework that includes an adequately compensated workforce could establish a high-quality ELCC sector. Implementing a wage grid, such as the one proposed by Smith et al. (2023), that promises living wages based on tenure and education could stabilize Alberta's ELCC workforce.

An additional aspect of compensation relates to access to health benefits and pension plans. The advantages of health benefits and pensions may vary based on the age and career stage of the ECE (Employee Benefit Research Institute, 2023). For example, younger employees may prioritize higher wages over receiving benefits or pensions, while those with families may require access to a benefit plan. Employees nearing retirement may seek pension plans. The availability of benefits maybe an important factor in creating workforce stability (Holochwost et al., 2009; Whitebook & Sakai, 2003). However, in Alberta, ECEs can only access benefits, insurance, or pension plans if their employers offer them [5]. As Boyd (2015) suggests:

> To retain the most qualified and motivated early childhood educators, pay and working
> conditions must be improved. Obtaining professional status and credentials for early
> education and care workers is not enough. Substantial increases in wages and benefits

---

[5] Of note, the Government of Nova Scotia recently allocated funds through their bilateral agreement to create a provincial benefit and pension plan for employees in that province (Government of Nova Scotia, 2024).

must be central to this movement; anything less suggests exploitation not

professionalization.

In summary, ensuring adequate compensation for ECEs may be crucial for fostering a

stable workforce. However, compensation practices for ECES in Alberta vary across employers

despite government subsidies. A lack of consistency in compensation practices throughout the

province, results in inadequate living wages and limited access to benefits. Increasing

compensation packages via a wage grid and access to benefit and pension plans for ECEs may be

a key factor in reducing turnover rates and improving recruitment and retention.

Workplace Conditions and Environment

While wages are often considered predictors of turnover, the workplace environment and

working conditions in ELCC may have a greater impact on workforce retention strategies such as

fair compensation (Olaniyan et al., 2020; Totenhagen et al., 2016). A supportive work

environment creates a sense of value and respect for professionals (OECD, 2020). Research by

Zinsser et al. (2016) in their survey of 60 Headstart programs across the United States suggests

that efforts to improve teacher well-being, job satisfaction, and retention through positive

workplace emotional climates can benefit teachers and children alike in the long run. Canadian

researchers Doherty et al. (2000) also noted in their Canada-wide study *You Bet I Care!* that a

supportive working environment can protect the health, safety, and well-being of ECEs,

contributing to morale and job satisfaction.

Concerns about working conditions have been raised as early as 1988. In the United

States, a survey of 629 ECEs about organizational factors influencing the job satisfaction by

Jorde-Bloom (1988) highlighted the significance of working conditions, such as educator-child

ratios, adequate materials, and work schedules, in influencing personal and professional

satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment. According to Jorde-Bloom (1988b), who went on to found the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership and co-author valid and reliable tools for ELCC administration [6], early childhood work environments should prioritize humane practices and nurture both adults and children. A decade later, Manlove and Guzell (1997) surveyed 169 individuals employed in the field of child care in Pennsylvania. Through their research, they identified that satisfaction with the work environment stood out as the primary factor cited by ECEs for their desire to continue in their jobs. Likewise, Grant et al. (2019) examined data from the National Survey of Early Care and Education in the United States, uncovering a noteworthy association between workplace conditions, intrinsic motivation, and intentions to remain in the ELCC sector.

A systematic review conducted by Ng et al. (2023) on ECE burnout found that poor organizational structures and a lack of focus on ECE's well-being are two factors that contribute to burnout in ECEs. Their review of 26 studies revealed that the primary cause of burnout was high job demands, workloads, and insufficient resources, resulting in elevated stress levels and low job satisfaction. Specific aspects of working conditions that contributed to burnout included unrealistic expectations, time pressures, non-teaching tasks, and demanding parents. Notably, one study in their systematic review found that a lack of clarity regarding work expectations heightened the risk of burnout. These findings emphasize the importance of workplace support and environment in relation to burnout, stress, and ultimately, turnover. Ng et al. emphasized the necessity of providing professional training, fostering an environment conducive to working with children, and ensuring supportive work conditions, including sufficient opportunities for

---

[6] Program Administration Scale (PAS), (2011); Business Administration Scale (BAS), (2018)

recovery during non-work hours and maintaining healthy work-life boundaries, to mitigate

burnout among ECEs.

In summary, "Good working conditions can balance the most demanding aspects of the

job and help mitigate stress" (OECD, 2020, p. 39). This is particularly relevant for ECEs as their

work environment may impact their decision to stay in their profession or leave. Supportive

work environments, including appropriate educator-child ratios, adequate materials, defined

work schedules, nurturing and supportive workplaces, and reasonable workloads and time

demands, contribute to educators feeling valued and respected as professionals. However,

policies that address stress among ECEs are especially important, as those who work with large

groups of children may be undertrained, are not adequately financially rewarded, and may be

more likely to experience burnout. Additionally, according to Grant et al. (2019), ECEs who feel

undervalued, receive low pay, and face heavy workloads may struggle to effectively engage with

children. Therefore, policies that support access to better wages, and address working conditions

may contribute to retention efforts and improve the quality of practices involving children.

Education, Training, and Career Progression

A component of workforce sustainability includes education, training, and career

progression opportunities. The OECD recognizes that specialized training in child development

and learning dispositions can create enriching and stimulating environments that are adaptive and

supportive of children (OECD, 2020). This specialized, pre-service training should include the

ability to be responsive to children, problem-solve with them, and understand their perspectives

(OECD, 2012). The OECD (2006, 2012) acknowledges that not all ECE practitioners may

possess these skills, and the training quality may impact their ability to operate at this level.

Vandenbroeck et al. (2016) in their book *Pathways to Professionalism in Early Childhood*

Education and Care also highlights the importance of training content, stating that it plays a role in the professional competence of ECEs. They emphasize that the training should be of sufficient length and intensity and should be supported by continuous professional learning.

Pre-services Training, Practical Experiences, and Competencies

In addition to consistent and sufficient preservice education and training, practical work experience is essential to developing competencies and confidence. Vandenbroeck et al. (2016) note that practical experience allows practitioners to develop their skills and build professional competence. They stress the importance of a "recursive interplay of theory and practice" (p. 10) supported by workplace experiences. This is also supported by OECD's (2020) research brief, which highlights that practical placements serve as a bridge between theory and practice and expose future ECEC practitioners to a wide range of topics and experiences. Furthermore, Vandenbroeck et al. (2016) argues that high-quality ELCC necessitates a curriculum based on effective pedagogy that allows for collaboration, reflection, and practical training to facilitate practitioners in fulfilling their professional roles. They assert that professional ECEs are a vital component of a quality ELCC system and that such a system requires high expectations. Allen and Backes (2018) also highlight the need to strengthen competency-based qualification requirements for all ECE professionals working with children from birth through age eight. These requirements, they explain, should reflect foundational knowledge and competencies shared across professional roles, as well as specific and differentiated knowledge and competencies matched to the practice needs and expectations for specific roles (Allen & Backes, 2018). In contrast, the multiple pathways into the Alberta ELCC sector do not guarantee practical experience or consistent competencies. In 2023, AECEA was involved in an ECE Competency-

based Assessment Model project for the Government of Alberta. To date, this project has not been published.

Continuous Professional Learning

Access to coordinated and continuous learning opportunities is another important factor in workforce retention (Allen & Backes, 2018; OECD, 2006, 2012, 2020). Continuous professional learning opportunities provide supplementary training and encouragement. These opportunities should be comprehensive and well-designed, offering sequential programs that support lasting learning and meaningful impact on practice over time and across ECE roles (Allen & Backes, 2018). To make professional development meaningful, paid release time during non-child contact hours, as well as collegial sharing and reflection, should be available. The effectiveness of professional learning is influenced by its frequency, approach, and duration and should align with the knowledge and competencies of ECE professionals (Allen & Backes, 2018). However, it is worth noting that professional development is not always based on current research, standards of practice, or the needs of ECE professionals (Ullrich et al., 2017).

In Alberta, there are two funding streams available for professional development through the Canada-Alberta Agreement for ECEs (Government of Alberta, 2023). These funding streams support ECEs in pursuing further training and attaining higher certifications. The *Alberta Child Care Grant Funding Guide* (2023) outlines that ECEs can access a grant for workshops, conferences, and post-secondary coursework, with a maximum of $2,000 per year. In addition, there is a Release Time Grant available, which allows ECEs to be paid for time spent studying, attending, and completing professional development activities, up to a maximum of $800 per course or $17.5 per hour for a workshop. Employers have the option to hold back money for wage-related expenses, and the license holder must sign a Grant Funding Agreement for ECEs to

access these funding streams. The Government of Alberta also provides release time grant

funding to AECEA and Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement (ARCQE) to

administer professional development. AECEA oversees the Brain Story Certification and Theory

to Practice session, while ARCQE administers the Developmental Screening Training and

Leading Through a Pedagogical Lens program. These funding opportunities are available

because of the Canada-Alberta Agreement.

While funding is available for Alberta's ECEs seeking higher certification and

professional development, there are several uncertainties surrounding this funding. First, the

Funding Guide states that if the license holder (owner/operator) does not submit the Grant

Funding Agreement under the Canada-Alberta Agreement, the ECEs employed by them are not

eligible for any funding sources, including the wage enhancement program. Second, it is

important to note that these funding grants are considered taxable income for ECEs. Third, the

specific criteria for approving workshops and conferences that are eligible for funding are not

made publicly available. It is unclear whether the selection of approved workshops and

conferences considers current research. Finally, there is a lack of publicly available data of the

impact of this funding grant system, such as, how many ECEs are utilizing these grants, which

levels of ECEs are accessing the funding, if ECEs are increasing their credentials and

certification, and whether the funding system is effective in improving quality or retention. The

impact of the current funding grant system on workforce retention and stability is unknown.

Mentoring

A last component that can contribute to ELCC workforce stability is access to mentoring

programs. Engaging in mentoring opportunities allows ECEs to enhance their roles, improve

their effectiveness, and deepen their practices (Allen & Backes, 2018; OECD, 2020). According

to the TALIS Starting Strong Survey (2018), mentoring is a support structure where more

experienced staff assist less experienced colleagues, emphasizing its interactive nature as a

professional development strategy that builds and scaffolds on the capabilities of ECE

professionals (OECD, 2020). Mentoring programs provide valuable feedback, help refine

practices, keep educators informed about research and emerging trends, and promote meaningful

pedagogical discussions (Doherty, 2011). Additionally, mentoring initiatives contribute to

improving the quality of ELCC (OECD, 2019a). The frequency, approach, and duration of

mentoring practices play a crucial role in promoting professional growth and learning (RRC-

Evaluation and Training Institute, n.d.). Allen and Backes (2018) found that sustained mentoring

relationships lasting at least one year significantly increased the integration of professional

learning into daily practice. Furthermore, mentorship predicts the development of a professional

identity, which in turn fosters a commitment to the profession (Irvine et al., 2018; McDonald et

al., 2018) and provides system-wide support to ECEs (McKinlay et al., 2018; Miller &

Bogatova, 2009). Implementing mentoring programs for novice ECEs significantly contributes to

strategies aimed at improving retention rates (Gonçalves et al., 2017). In Alberta, there is

currently no established mentoring program beyond what is offered during post-secondary

training for ECEs. Considering the various pathways into the sector, mentorship available to

ECEs is inconsistent. Furthermore, there is concern that without a regulatory requirement for

owners/operators to obtain ECE certification, consistent mentorship in the workplace and sector

may be lacking. Despite the benefits of higher skills, knowledge, and competencies of ECEs

working with children, the demand for higher qualifications or certifications may lead to wage

demands, which can increase operating costs for owners/operators (OECD, 2006). Consequently,

there may be opposition from community stakeholders to support or accept higher qualifications,

even if they lead to improved quality of interactions and pedagogical practices (OECD, 2006).

Therefore, the qualifications, education, and training of ECEs are significant policy

considerations as decisions are being made regarding workforce stability in ELCC (OECD,

2006).

Professional Collaboration and Networking

A component of workforce stability is the concept of professional collaboration and

networking. A professional connection can lead to a shared vision and deepening of a

professional identity. Lillian Katz's pioneering work (1985) examined the professionalization of

ELCC and defined the characteristics of a profession using eight criteria: social necessity,

altruism, autonomy, code of ethics, distance from the client, standards of practice, prolonged

training, and specialized knowledge. The AECEA policy document *Qualified Educators, Quality*

Care (Lesoway, 2020) echoes Katz's work and emphasizes the importance of upholding

standards within the sector, consistency of competencies across ECEs, a code of conduct and

ethics, an expectation to maintain practice through professional development, creating

educational and career growth opportunities, and ensuring community confidence in the skills of

ECEs.

Professionalization

The *TALIS Starting Strong Survey Report 2018* (OECD, 2018) offers policy

recommendations to contribute to ELCC professionalization. These recommendations

encompass professional development opportunities that span the entire professional lifespan of

ECEs, from preservice training to informal learning throughout their career stages, which

develop specific skills for the setting and environment. Elevating the professional status and

rewards to attract and retain ECEs. The TALIS policy recommendations overlap with several

previously discussed ones, demonstrating that professionalization comprises many overlapping support factors contributing to workforce retention and stability. As Boyd (2015) offers, when a job demands higher educational qualifications and training, it can reinforce the belief that ECEs are professionals. However, the TALIS Report acknowledges that policies aimed at professionalization must be carefully designed and implemented to achieve desired outcomes and require collaboration from all community stakeholders, including owners/operators, ECEs, post-secondary institutions, and policymakers.

As Vandenbroeck et al. (2016) noted in their overview of *Pathways to Professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care*, the need to professionalize the ELCC workforce has generated debate, with varying concepts and understandings of what professionalism means in ELCC. In their book, the authors present case studies that highlight innovative pathways to professionalization. They suggest that professionalism is not only necessary for ECEs but also a means to promote social justice, diversity, and equity for children and adults. Moreover, they indicate that professionalism is not solely dependent on an individual ECE's competence but also requires a competent system around ECEs in a reciprocal relationship. The findings from this book highlight the importance of a systemic approach to professionalization, involving ECEs, institutions, and governments collaboratively across services.

Contributing to this discussion is the concept of professional identity as a component of workforce professionalization and stability. According to Katz (1972), Veenman et al. (1984), and Vander Ven (1998) (as cited in Rogers et al., 2020, p. 809-810) professional identity develops over time with encouragement, reassurance, comfort, and guidance. Veenman et al. (1988) (as cited in Rogers et al., 2020, p. 810) describe a transition period where new ECEs may experience 'reality shock' when their experiences in the workforce differ greatly from what they

were taught. Katz (1972) referred to a consolidation phase, during which ECEs, over time and

with support, become more confident and better able to focus on the needs of children, ultimately

renewing and maturing their professional identity. In a transnational comparison of educator

identity in Italy, Canada, and Australia, Rogers et al. (2020) found that support systems for ECEs

can be provided through peer mentoring, pre-service preparation, consistent professional

development, and collaborative conversations. In summary, these researchers highlight the

importance of providing educators with opportunities to reflect, dialogue, and question their

practices with consistent mentors.

Furthermore, Irvine et al. (2016) conducted a series of workshops in Australia on

workforce development and produced a report that focused on professional identity. Through a

national survey (n=1200) and semi-structured interviews with 97 ECEs from three areas of

Queensland, Irvine et al. (2016) indicated that a lack of professional recognition often led ECEs

to leave their workplace or even exit the sector altogether. These researchers concluded that

developing a strong professional identity entails adequate preparation through consistent

preservice education and training, joining a professional association, having opportunities for

critical reflection, and being paid a professional wage.

Halverson et al. (2022), in their Canadian concept analysis through case studies of

professional identity formation in nurses, describe professional identity as a sense-of-self derived

from and associated with the role one assumes in their work. Halverson et al. (2022) define

professional identity formation as the internalization of values and a sense-of-self as a

component of overall identity that is influenced by the community; however, there may be

tension as individuals construct and deconstruct their identities with trusted mentors. Based on

their analysis, Halverson et al. (2022) conclude that professional identity necessitates pre-service

education that adequately prepares future practitioners and allows graduates to understand and

practice these attributes in supportive settings. They suggest that clarifying the concept of

professional identity can aid in preparing, educating, and supporting graduates in their roles.

Professional Associations

As a component of professional collaboration and networking, a professional association

plays an important role in connecting ECEs professionally with a role to bring together

practitioners who share a common vision and aspire to advance their profession beyond self-

interest and toward the collective community impact (Pemberton, 1994). Pemberton (1994)

emphasizes that professional associations play a crucial role in maintaining the image of a

profession and providing necessary information and education to its members. To achieve this,

Pemberton point out the association must offer its members current, reliable, and relevant

information through supportive and applicable research. However, Pemberton cautions that it is

problematic when an association fails to recognize that its members are practitioners with

ongoing work issues that take priority over the association's needs. According to Pemberton

(1994, para. 16), if an association neglects its members' ongoing work concerns, it risks losing its

effectiveness and relevance.

According to Pemberton's definition, associations face a few obstacles before they can be

considered mature professional associations. These obstacles include the absence of professional

standards and a lack of a sense of belonging among early childhood educators (ECEs).

Pemberton (1994) highlights the extensive impact of professional associations in providing

social and moral support to members in their professional roles. These associations demonstrate

that members are not alone and help reinforce their strengths. In Alberta however, fostering a

sense of belonging to the ELCC profession is more challenging due to the various pathways

available for individuals to enter the ECE sector. Multiple qualifications and levels of

certifications make it difficult for AECEA to support ECEs in developing a strong connection to

their profession and a sense of professional identity.

Communities of Practice

Lastly, a community of practice (CoP) can support the concept of professionalization as a

component of workforce stability. Wenger (1998), in the article *Communities of Practice:*

Learning as a Social System, outlines that a community of practice has three dimensions. First, it

is important to define what the community of practices is about so that its joint enterprise is

understood and renegotiated by members. Second, it is defined by how it functions and how

mutual engagement binds members. Lastly, a community of practice is defined by the

capabilities it has produced as a shared repertoire of communal resources. Wenger (1998)

explains that this process takes time, and a CoP goes through stages of development, and it

should be centred around things that matter to participant. Therefore, a CoP should reflect the

members' understanding of what is important to their practice.

Roach O'Keefe et al. (2019) utilized Wenger's theoretical stance and examined ECEs

notions about professionalism via a CoP in Prince Edward Island through a qualitative inquiry,

using workshops, interviews, and field notes with a purposeful sample of 11 ECEs. According to

Roach O'Keefe et al. (2019), "[i]ndividuals learn through collaboration and that the co-

construction of knowledge and thinking transpires through a shared interest or mission" (p. 24).

The authors suggest that communities of practice can help ECEs develop a more profound

emotional awareness of their responses, reactions, experiences, and anxieties through the

collective support found in a community of practice. As well, Roach O'Keefe et al. (2019) also

suggested additional benefits of learning communities, such as a revived sense of positive

professional identity and decreased feelings of isolation.

In British Columbia, the professional association of Early Childhood Educators of BC

received a grant in 2018 to create a Peer Mentoring Program with communities of practice across

the province. The purpose of this project was to support the professional development needs of

both new and experienced ECEs (Early Childhood Educators of BC, n.d.). In the first year, there

were 15 communities of practice with 20 facilitators and almost 200 ECEs across British

Columbia. In the second year, the plan was to expand to 25 communities, including an

Indigenous community of practice. The project concluded in 2020, with participants gaining a

greater awareness of the value of peer mentoring, connection to community, increased

knowledge, and increased self-efficacy. However, despite its success, there is no indication that

the pilot project will be replicated, continued, or expanded.

In Alberta, there is currently no formal community of practice program. However, there

are some learning communities tied to specific organizations or topics, such as the Practice-

Based Learning Communities organized by the Alberta Resource Center for Quality

Enhancement for ECEs and administrators who have taken the Flight Framework curriculum

course (ARCQE, n.d.).

Recent Policy Decisions

This section provides an overview of significant policy decisions from the past five years

that have impacted the current state of ELCC in Alberta. These include amendments to the Child

Care Licensing Act, the rollout of the Canada-Alberta ELCC Agreement, and their effects on

ECEs. This section primarily focuses on regulations and decisions that directly affect ECEs,

excluding discussions about subsidies and profit/not-for-profit programs. For information about

Alberta's ELCC sector prior to 2019, Tom Langford's book "Alberta's Day Care Controversy:

From 1908 to 2009—and Beyond" (2011) provides an important historical context (Langford,

2011).

Early Learning and Child Care Act 2020

In 2019, the Alberta government campaigned on a platform of reducing unnecessary red

tape by one-third, aiming to eliminate duplicate processes and rules that burden Alberta

businesses (Government of Alberta, 2024c). Reducing red tape in ELCC was specifically

intended to alleviate regulatory burdens for operators (Government of Alberta, 2021a). The red

tape reduction initiative included an amendment of the Child Care Licensing Act and

Regulations, taking a risk-based approach. This risk-based approach sought to reduce inspections

for programs that consistently comply with licensing requirements while allowing licensing

teams to prioritize programs that require more support (Government of Alberta, 2021a)[7]. The

aim was to lessen regulatory burdens for both licensing and operators.

However, there is a cautionary note about the effectiveness of a risk-based approach to

ELCC regulations. Fenech et al. (2008) argue that risk-based regulations prioritize institutional

risks rather than risks to individuals, as they focus on managing environmental risks within the

child care facility, such as staff, facilities, and health and safety and may have unintended

consequences for the well-being of children. This risk-based approach assumes that children's

health and safety are compromised without continuous monitoring. Fenech & Sumsion (2007)

also argue that using regulations in this way limits ECEs' agency, restricting their ability to make

decisions that may be considered risky.

---

[7] The content on the government website may change depending on current policy decisions and initiatives.

Gunningham (2015) further points out that risk-based approaches do not offer clear guidance on whether a particular risk is acceptable. Gunningham's sectoral analysis of workplace health and safety regulations in Australia, found this perspective only considers the cost to companies and overlooks the voices of others. At first glance, red tape reduction may seem like a beneficial economic strategy, allowing for a free and competitive market to operate without intervention (Hathaway, 2020). Red tape reduction assumes that rules and regulations are burdensome and often unnecessary (Gunningham, 2015). However, Gunningham (2015) explains that regulations play a crucial role in preserving knowledge gained from past mistakes and providing guidance for workers in sectors with limited experience. Arguably, with the low entry requirement to for employment in Alberta, ELCC could be considered a sector with workers with limited experience. Regulations help protect citizens and workers by ensuring that markets are appropriately regulated (Hathaway, 2020). Furthermore, red tape reduction may not benefit businesses in the long run and can potentially lead to re-regulation, moving the burden of risk elsewhere, especially in sectors related to health and safety (Hathway, 2020). This body of literature creates questions about the appropriateness of taking this approach.

For example, a recent E. coli outbreak in Calgary's daycare programs has raised concerns about the consequences of red tape reduction. In September 2023, Alberta Health Services reported an outbreak of Shiga toxin-producing form of E. coli, in 18 daycares. Shiga toxins affect the intestines and may develop into hemolytic uremic syndrome that can cause kidney damage or failure in children under five years of age (Alberta Health Services, 2023). Over six weeks, there were 446 cases linked to the outbreak, which was believed to be connected to a central kitchen supplying food to the affected daycares (Alberta Health Services, n.d.). While there were no fatalities, 38 children were hospitalized, and eight required peritoneal dialysis. In total, the

outbreak affected 1,581 children under the age of five. In a National Observer report on the

outbreak, concerns were raised about the prioritization of reducing redundancy and regulatory

oversight over the health and safety of citizens (Fawcett, 2023). This example shows how a lack

of regulatory oversight in one sector (ELCC) leads to the burdening another (health).

As Gunningham (2015) notes, there is little evidence to support the claim that reducing

red tape increases business profitability or productivity. Instead, Gunningham points out,

regulations can support profit margins by fostering trust and respect among stakeholders,

encouraging employee participation in decision-making, ensuring a safe working environment,

and providing reasonable pay and working conditions, and promoting innovation. Therefore,

Gunningham does not suggest that businesses are constrained by prescriptive regulation but may

have long-term benefits for owners/operators, children, families, and ECEs.

Canada-Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, 2022

The second significant policy decision involved the implementation of the Canada-

Alberta Agreement in Alberta and meeting the objectives outlined in the Canada-Alberta

Agreement. One of these objectives was to ensure a reasonable profit for the mixed market (for-

profit, not-for-profit, and publicly operated) sector in Alberta's ELCC sector and public

accountability for funds (Government of Canada, 2022). As a result, the Affordability Grant was

established in Alberta (Government of Alberta, 2024d). This grant allows signatories (license

holders) to access operating funds aimed at reducing parent fees by an average of $10 per day.

Additionally, the affordability grant provides license holder to access funding for ECEs in their

employ for release time, professional development grants, and wage top-up funding

(Government of Alberta, 2024d).

Currently, the Government of Alberta is conducting a community-engagement process involving owners/operators and parents. The purpose of this process is to develop a cost control framework and a for-profit expansion plan that acknowledges and ensures accountability within Alberta's mixed market child care system (Government of Alberta, 2024a). The cost control framework will define what is considered a reasonable profit and outline the core costs and operator expenses of child care, all while aligning with the principles and objectives of the Canada-Alberta Agreement. The framework will establish a cost control funding formula that provides parameters for these components. The community engagement sessions gathered input from owners/operators and families regarding their perspectives on quality to define core child care costs. Despite decisions affecting them, ECEs have not been included in community-engagement sessions yet.

There are three significant factors regarding the rollout of the Agreement. First, ECEs have not been consulted on decisions directly affecting them under the Canada-Alberta Agreement. Second, a local group of child care entrepreneurs is lobbying government to ensure their operating interests are met, specifically by having a seat at the decision making table (Alberta Lobbyist Registry, 2023). Third, defining core operational expenses may have unintended consequences. The current legal Act and regulations may be used to define core expenses, which are minimum requirements to provide care to children and families and don't meet international benchmarks for quality (Beach, 2020). Programming outside the Act and Regulations would be considered outside of core expenses and therefore enhanced programming, possibly creating a two- or three-tiered system of programs that provide a fee-for-service list of options for families, such as field trips and meals, above the core costs that are not currently

stipulated within the act or regulations to provide to families. These policy decisions have not

included ECEs directly, despite the many decisions affecting them.

This section provides an overview of significant policy decisions from the past five years

that have impacted the current state of ELCC in Alberta. The section primarily focuses on

decisions that directly affect ECEs. The lack of inclusion of ECEs in all these decisions and

centering the interests of owner/operators and families, missing an important perspective.

Data Desert

In Alberta, there is a lack of publicly available information about ECEs. This absence of

data, which includes information about ECE demographics, characteristics, and experiences, is

particularly important because these factors shape the ELCC system. Whitebook et al. (2018)

referred to this lack or absence of consistent or frequent information collection as a deficit, gap,

or desert. Recognizing the limitations of relying on anecdotal or biased data for policy decisions,

the *Workforce Data Deficit Report* (2018) points out that misdirected resources and a one-size-

fits-all approach can result from decision-making based on anecdotes or biases.

Whitebook, a researcher and advocate for the ELCC workforce since the 1970s, founded

the Center for the Child Care Workforce and the Center for the Study of Child Care

Employment, a research center at the University of California, Berkeley. Being a national leader

in ELCC workforce research and policy (University of California, 2021), Whitebook et al.

(2018) suggest that understanding the demographics of ECEs helps align policy decisions with

their specific needs, enabling effective policymaking. They also argue that robust data can help

identify and disrupt biases. Ultimately, the lack of publicly accessible data on ECEs hinders

researchers, advocates, and other community stakeholders from evaluating the current

workforce, identifying their challenges, and making well-informed policy decisions to improve

workplace conditions (McLean et al., 2020).

While the lack of demographic data may lead to biased or misdirected policy decisions,

another concern is the lack of understanding of the intersection of issues faced by ECEs. The

ELCC sector is a vital part of the economy, which primarily consists of women, as well as

migrant and racialized individuals (Government of Canada, 2023). These individuals may

experience low wages, lack of benefits or pensions, and are at a higher risk of harm or

exploitation (International Labour Organization, 2012). Leah Vosko, a renowned Canadian

researcher in the labour market from York University (2018), explores the concepts of 'standard'

and 'precarious' employment. According to Vosko (2006), 'standard' employment refers to full-

time and permanent work with decent wages, benefits, and regulatory support. Conversely,

'precarious' employment includes part-time, seasonal, contract, or home-based work that lacks

stability and regulatory protections (Vosko, 2003, 2006). Vosko further highlights that precarious

employment is becoming increasingly prevalent among women, immigrants, Indigenous, and

racialized groups, who are already over-represented in non-standard work arrangements, leading

to economic insecurity (Vosko, 2003). The Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety

(CCOHS) provides valuable insights into the consequences of precarious employment for

vulnerable workers. According to CCOHS, workers in precarious employment often encounter

stressful psychosocial working conditions, increased workloads, unpaid overtime, ill health,

work-life conflict, inadequate training, and fewer regulatory protections. The ECE workforce in

Canada, including Alberta, is predominantly comprised of women, with many belonging to

visible minority groups (Government of Canada, 2021b, 2023). In addition, the ELCC sector

offers various non-standard schedules depending on the type of care provided, such as split

shifts, intermittent days, long hours, home-based child care, and summer closures. This further highlights the precarious nature of employment in this sector.

Given the scarcity of data in Alberta regarding the demographics of ECEs and the extent of precarious employment, it becomes evident that our understanding of the ELCC sector and ECEs in Alberta is incomplete. As decisions are being made on behalf of ECEs, it is crucial that this research contributes to the data landscape of Alberta's ELCC sector, identifies factors that support Alberta ECEs, and presents solutions from their perspectives. Although the scope of this research has limitations and its generalizability outside of this jurisdiction is limited, it is hoped that it can add to the existing literature and support the development of workforce solutions in Alberta.

Conclusion

This chapter presents a literature review on ELCC and the role of ECEs in providing stable and supportive environments for young children. It emphasizes the importance of ELCC in promoting healthy brain development and nurturing attachment, with evidence showing that positive experiences during the early years can have long-lasting effects on a child's well-being. It discussed the factors that contribute to or detract from the retention and stability of ECEs, including reasonable compensation, workplace conditions, and education and training and importance of professional connections. The Canada-Alberta Agreement presents an opportunity to establish a unified ELCC system in Alberta comprising fair wages, access to non-salaried compensation, positive workplace conditions, and the promotion of professional status (Boyd, 2015).

Chapter 3: Methodology

This research used a community-engaged approach (Cacari-Stone et al., 2014; Cargo &

Mercer, 2008; D'Alonzo, 2010) and qualitative descriptive methodology (Sandelowski, 2000,

2010) to gain insight into the experiences of early childhood educators (ECEs) in Alberta's early

learning and childcare (ELCC) sector. Using semi-structured interviews with eleven ECEs, this

research explored the following overarching research questions: What factors contribute to ECEs

feeling supported? How can the identified factors contribute to long-term workforce retention

and stability of ECEs? What solutions to workforce retention can be identified from their

perspective? This research is particularly relevant and timely because it seeks sustainable

solutions in line with the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement objectives. By

employing a collaborative approach and engaging ECEs, the research aimed to uncover the

factors affecting workforce stability and gather insights on potential barriers and solutions from

those directly involved in the sector. This chapter describes the community-engaged approach,

qualitative descriptive methodology, and positionality. Additionally, the data collection methods,

including the recruitment process, ethical considerations, and interview techniques, are detailed.

Finally, the analytical approach used in the study is discussed.

Community-Engaged Approach

Community-engaged research (CER) is an umbrella term that encompasses a range of

research approaches that actively involve communities in the research process (Cargo & Mercer,

2008). CER involves identifying the community, collaborating on issues identified by the

community, systematically collecting and analyzing data, and integrating community knowledge

to find solutions (Aslin & Brown, 2004; Centre for Community-Based Research Canada, 2023;

Ochocka & Janzen, 2014). Hallmarks of CER include community-driven research that is

relevant, involves the community in all stages through a democratic process, and produces results that benefit the community, fostering positive social change and equity (Ochocka & Janzen, 2014).

A collaborative CER approach ensured that Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (AECEA) participated in all decision-making processes for this research. Collaboration is a fundamental aspect of community-engaged research and distinguishes it from other research approaches (IAP2, 2018; Tamarack Institute, 2017). Collaboration involves creating a shared vision and goals, engaging in democratic decision-making through long-term interaction with the partner agency, and ensuring involvement in all research process steps (Tamarack Institute, 2017). CER focuses on understanding the community partner's capacity, working together to identify an issue, establishing equitable decision-making, and building trust among partners (Tamarack Institute, 2017). This approach recognizes that complex issues are best addressed within the community, highlighting their role in driving social impact (Cheuy, 2018).

For this research, I leveraged an established partnership between the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (CUP) and AECEA, which was further strengthened by my previous relationship with AECEA. A committee comprising the board chair, vice chair, and policy advisor supported this research and ensured community input and alignment with AECEA's mission and vision throughout the research process (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; D'Alonzo, 2010). We held biweekly meetings and maintained regular communication through email to ensure timely and collaborative decision-making. AECEA's engagement in all research stages provided feedback and guidance. AECEA was particularly interested in this research to develop policy recommendations in response to the

bilateral Canada-Alberta Agreement and promote community-based solutions that enhance the professional status of ECEs.

Qualitative Descriptive Methodology

Qualitative research enables a researcher to move beyond numbers and gain an understanding of the perspectives of individuals affected by a situation (Mayan, 2009). It can contribute to a better understanding of the context factors that influence people (Patton, 2015) and the processes that impact them (Maxwell, 2005). Qualitative research aligns well with a community-engaged approach, as it focuses on the community of interest and its members (Maxwell, 2005). Qualitative description (QD) is a flexible research methodology that allows a researcher to gain insight from the perspective of those experiencing a phenomenon (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This method uses naturalistic inquiry to capture participants' perspectives, describe their experiences in their own words, and provide a contextual understanding of their experience (Armstrong, 2010). QD was chosen over other approaches because it offers clear and concise descriptions that can inform policy recommendations that are both pragmatic and straightforward (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010). The design features of QD include purposeful sampling, semi-structured data collection via interviews or focus groups, data analysis methods that are tailored to the research, and a descriptive summary of the findings (Sandelowski, 2000). Another advantage of using QD is its flexible and adaptable nature (Kim et al., 2017), which makes the findings accessible to a broader audience and provides contextual insights from an ECE perspective. QD allowed me to explore the research questions and follow the curiosities that arose during the interviews, thus allowing for a comprehensive analysis of ECE's experiences.

Positionality

Positionality refers to the perspectives, biases, experiences, and assumptions a researcher brings to the research context (Bourke, 2014). Bourke (2014) emphasizes the significance of reflexivity by highlighting the necessity of self-scrutiny and awareness of positionality, which may influence the research design and interactions with participants. In qualitative research, a researcher serves as an additional data collection instrument within the research process (Wa-Mbaleka, 2020) as much as an interview or survey. Therefore, qualitative researchers must explicitly state their positionality as it shapes the research design and interpretation of data (Avci, 2016; Bourke, 2014; Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2023).

I am a white, middle-class, middle-aged woman with post-secondary education. I acknowledge that my unique situation brings a specific set of skills and knowledge that may influence the design approach and interpretation of data. This position carries implicit privilege and power (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). My past roles as an Alberta Child Care Accreditation Program Manager and pedagogical mentor with the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement have granted me knowledge and authority in the ELCC sector. However, my 15-year absence from direct care may pose challenges in understanding the current ECE experience. Additionally, my Level Two certification equivalency based on a Bachelor of Education, Elementary studies, may result in some community members dismissing my input due to the lack of foundational knowledge obtained from a Level 3 ECE Diploma. Finally, my previous ELCC roles with not-for-profits may raise concerns among for-profit owners who may perceive potential bias in my findings. This mixture of roles and experiences positions me as both an insider and an outsider (Bourke, 2014), presenting both advantages and challenges in this research.

In approaching the participants, I operated under the assumption that they shared a similar perspective to my own and were interested in engaging in a dialogue about the importance of valuing the practice of ECEs and their contribution to child development. I assumed that individuals would be willing to participate in the interview and provide truthful answers to the posed questions. Lastly, I assumed the interview information was sufficient to explore retention strategies.

I hold a constructivist epistemological point of view, which acknowledges that knowledge is subjective and shaped by factors in the context within which we live (Mayan, 2009; 2016). In a constructivist epistemology, knowledge is seen as actively constructed by people through their experiences and interactions with the world around them, where learning is an active and social process (Adom, 2016). A constructivist epistemology includes the researcher as a participant in the research process rather than an objective observer. In qualitative descriptive research, the researcher seeks to understand the experiences and perspectives of the people being studied rather than simply collecting data (Patton, 2015). The researcher may use semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and focus groups to gather rich, detailed descriptions of the phenomenon being studied (Bourke, 2014). The data collected through these methods is then analyzed to identify patterns and themes. This allows the researcher to understand the phenomenon being studied and construct a descriptive narrative of the experiences and perspectives of the people involved (Crotty, 1998).

Overall, a constructivist epistemology in qualitative descriptive research emphasizes the importance of the researcher's subjective experiences and perspectives and seeks to co-construct and understand the complex, dynamic nature of the social world through an empathetic engagement with the people being studied. For these reasons, I used a qualitative description

methodology because it acknowledges that the data gathered is from participants. A qualitative

descriptive approach summarizes, describes, and presents an account of the participant's

experiences and contexts (Sandelowski, 2000). Data is not abstracted but represents participant's

experiences using their voices (Sandelowski, 2000). Given that, qualitative description is suitable

for answering the research questions and recognizes participant's experiences and descriptions as

knowledge as we make decisions for long-term workforce retention and stability.

By acknowledging my position and embracing reflexivity, I committed to conducting

thorough research, giving voice to the participants' experiences, and ensuring rigour throughout

the research. These combined methods and approaches allowed the research to be grounded in

qualitative rigour and to emerge alongside community partners and participants.

This research was conducted with certified early childhood educators in Alberta.

Participants were recruited through AECEA's network and membership. All participants were

certified to work within Alberta and represented all regulated program types (daycare, family day

home, out-of-school care, and preschool). This research received research ethics approval from

the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board under the title "Alberta Early Learning and Care

Workforce Stability Project" (Pro00122267) on 18 May 2023.

Recruitment and Sampling

This research used a purposeful sampling of ECEs, consistent with qualitative research

(Mayan, 2016; Mertens, 2020; Patton, 2015; Sandelowski, 2010), to understand the factors

influencing workforce stability and to hear directly from those involved in the sector for potential

solutions. Participants were selected based on their ability to discuss their experiences, represent

the intended audience, understand the topic, and provide insight into the issue (Gill, 2020; Morse

et al., 2002). This sampling approach allowed for an understanding of workforce stability in

Alberta (Gill, 2020).

During an AECEA Connect webinar conducted with community stakeholders across

Alberta, information about the research was shared. ECEs who expressed interest in the research

provided their contact information. Interested participants received invitations to participate once

ethics approval was obtained. A second wave of recruitment occurred through the AECEA

newsletter and AECEA affiliates, including the Alberta Leaders Caucus and Edmonton Council

for Early Learning and Care.

Interested participants were given an information letter and consent form (See Appendix

A), a demographic questionnaire (See Appendix D), and a Calendly link to schedule an

interview. The information letter described the ethics, ongoing consent, confidentiality, topics,

and interview timelines. The consent form outlined similar information. Calendly allowed

participants to select a convenient date and time for the interview. The ELCC workforce is

predominantly female and may have caregiving responsibilities outside of work hours and other

employment obligations (Bretherton, 2010; Murray, 2000; Scott, 2021); the interview schedule

accommodated their availability by conducting interviews online and offering evening and

weekend options. The demographic questionnaire was optional for participants to complete. The

primary purpose of the questionnaire was to gain a sense of the background characteristics of the

participating ECEs. The questionnaire used language consistent with Statistics Canada and

GBA+ terminology (Government of Canada, 2021b), which considers the participants' diverse

identities, including gender, age, education, parental status and responsibility, immigration

status, visible minorities, disability, language, race, ethnicity, religion, and Indigenous status.

The interviews proceeded regardless of whether the participant completed the questionnaire.

Once the consent form was received, a Zoom link was sent for the scheduled online interview.

Recruitment occurred throughout June and July and overlapped with the scheduled interviews.

Eleven ECEs across Alberta were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews conducted

from July to August 2023. ECEs employed within an educational setting, such as a Headstart or

Kindergarten, were excluded from the research as they fall under the jurisdiction of the Alberta

Education Ministry.

Data Generation

To generate data, I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with ECEs to

explore their experiences in their own words (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Patton, 2015;

Sandelowski, 2000, 2010; Seidman, 2006). The semi-structured format allowed for follow-up

questions (Adams, 2015). An interview guide was developed to ensure adherence to ethical and

rigorous standards (Gerson, 2020). Although the interview guide provided a structure, it allowed

for flexibility during the interviews to follow keywords or topics from participants. The

interview guide can be found in Appendix B. It was designed using a strategic questioning

approach inspired by Fran Peavey (1990). Peavey, a social activist during the 1980s and 1990s,

believed that well-crafted questions can stimulate reflection, challenge assumptions, and

influence decision-making within community engagement processes, encouraging individuals to

discover their strategies for change (Hammond, 2019). These strategic questions aligned with the

core values of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), which maintain that

the community can bring change (*IAP2 Canada / Pillars of P2*, n.d.). Additionally, questions

from Scott (2021) and Woodman (2023) were integrated into the guide. During the interviews, I

shared the *Alberta Compensation Framework* report (Smith et al., 2022), a concurrent project

conducted alongside AECEA. Participants were directed to the wage grid recommendation and

the table for direct and indirect non-salaried compensation to gather their impressions. The interview questions were organized to explore the motivations of ECEs to enter and remain in the sector, the organizational environments they experienced, and the policy decisions that affected them.

Each interview began with rapport-building by inquiring about the ECE's well-being and their day. Only one interviewee chose to keep their camera off, which was an option available to all participants. After introducing myself and stating the research's purpose, I reviewed the Information Letter and Consent. Once permission was obtained, I recorded the Zoom session, capturing audio and video. It is important to note that Zoom has an additional layer of permission that the participants had agreed to. My first interview was conducted with an ECE, the owner/operator of a facility-based child care program. I reminded this participant to speak from the perspective of an ECE. This experience prompted me to verify the ownership status of participants to ensure that the data collected came directly from ECEs engaged in direct care. Owners/operators have distinctive concerns and existing avenues to address them. The duration of participant interviews ranged from 60 to 120 minutes. While the interview guide had initially been tested for approximately 60 minutes, the second interview exceeded 90 minutes. Consequently, for the remaining interviews, I informed the participants that the process should take 60-75 minutes, but it could extend depending on their responses if required. I offered breaks at the 60-, 75-, and 90-minute marks. The interviews taught me the significance of not rushing participants and allowing them adequate time to contemplate their answers.

Throughout the research process, informal procedural, situational, and relational ethics were observed (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). To ensure procedural ethics, informed consent was consistently maintained during the interview. Plain language, a clear and straightforward

language method (Government of Canada, n.d.), was implemented throughout the data collection

process to ensure participants fully understood their involvement. Situational ethics were

promptly addressed as necessary; for instance, an ECE became emotional during one interview

and started crying. She disclosed that a co-worker had passed away the night before. In such

instances, the interview took a backseat to the well-being of the ECE; therefore, I offered the

option to end the interview or take a break. Despite the news, the ECE wanted to continue the

interview as she had been looking forward to participating. Relational ethics were prioritized

throughout the research; I conducted all the interviews to build trust and establish rapport.

Throughout each interview, I checked on the participants' comfort and well-being. No significant

ethical concerns that required intervention or discussion with the AECEA or my supervisor

emerged.

Data Analysis

To prepare the data for analysis, all interviews were transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai

software. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 2006,

2019, 2021). Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest that thematic analysis is suitable when seeking

actionable outcomes and understanding personal experiences, which were essential to AECEA,

the community partner. Thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research due to its

flexibility and compatibility with a constructivist epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The

following process, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022), was followed to analyze the

interview transcripts: (1) familiarizing myself with the data by reading and rereading each

transcript and identifying shared content, which subsequently became codes; (2) coding the data

to generate preliminary themes; (3) reviewing the themes and refining them against the original

transcripts for accuracy and relevance, while highlighting representative quotes; (4) defining and

assigning names to the themes using an inductive approach, resulting in the identification of patterns and themes; (5) sharing preliminary codes, themes, descriptions, and illustrative quotes with the AECEA policy committee for review and refinement; and (6) compiling the findings using the themes, along with illustrative quotes from participants.

Prior to analysis, the transcriptions from Otter required cleaning for readability. The process of cleaning the data involved expanding acronyms and abbreviations, flagging potential codes and quotes, ensuring the anonymity of the transcripts, clarifying meaning by inserting words in brackets to enhance readability when appropriate, transforming sentence fragments into complete sentences, removing filler words such as 'um, like, kind of, so, anyways,' and eliminating sentence interruptions that are common in spoken language but do not contribute to the content (*Analyzing Qualitative Data*, n.d.).

Participants were sent their transcripts to member-check for accuracy. Member-checking is a method used to explore the credibility of the data by returning the transcripts to the participants for them to review and make any necessary corrections or additions (Birt et al., 2016). Eight out of the eleven participants agreed to participate in this process. The transcripts were sent to those who accepted. One participant returned the edits with some personal information removed. Another participant accepted because "I would love to have a copy of the transcripts from our conversation. I don't think I will have any feedback on them. I just would love to have them as a reminder why I am doing with completing my education and working towards obtaining my master's one day." The remaining participants either responded with, "This looks fine," or did not respond. Since the transcripts contained low-risk personal information and the questions and research topic did not pose any significant personal risk, I considered the lack of response as permission to proceed. Throughout transcribing, cleaning, and

member-checking, I read the transcripts at least three times, made notes and codes on the printed copies of the transcripts, and recorded reflections in my audit trail journal.

Once the interviews were transcribed, cleaned, and checked, I followed the coding process outlined by Ose (2016) and guided by the Center for Disease Control (2023) on using Excel for thematic analysis. Each interview had a designated worksheet where I recorded the codes and representative quotes. The first transcript had more than fifty unique codes. After reading the first three transcripts, I applied these codes to each transcript and eventually organized them into categories, themes, and subthemes, resulting in 145 preliminary codes. These codes were then applied to each transcript again, reduced to 25, and organized into themes and subthemes. This process allowed me to structure my thoughts, identify key themes, gather representative quotes, and ensure that the participants' perspectives were accurately represented and reported, with quotes from multiple participants included (Ose, 2016).

Rigour

Undertaking qualitative research requires a rigorous methodology. Researchers aim to establish credibility, dependability, and confirmability while engaging in reflexive practices to achieve rigour in qualitative research. Credibility refers to the extent to which the research approach supports the findings and conclusions of the research (Mayan, 2009, 2016). This community-engaged research ensured credibility by engaging in reflective discussions with peers and maintaining a personal reflective journal. Moreover, research credibility was reinforced by obtaining feedback on themes from academic peers and AECEA. The dependability of the research relies on the researcher's consistency (Lincoln & Guba, 1982) and data collection over time (Connelly, 2016). As the research progressed, an audit trail, peer reviewing, and member checking (Birt et al., 2016) were used to ensure consistency. An audit trail documented the

decision-making process, while peer reviews with a trusted colleague and checking themes with

participants confirmed that the data accurately represented the participants' experiences.

Confirmability was achieved through consultation with the AECEA to ensure that the research

approach and results met their needs. Regular biweekly meetings with the AECEA allowed for

the confirmation of results and conclusions(Connelly, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1982; Mertens,

2020). Deliberate strategies and verification methods were built into the research to correct errors

before they impacted rigour (Morse et al., 2002).

Chapter 4: Findings

This community-engaged, qualitative research aimed to understand factors affecting workforce retention in Alberta's early learning and child care (ELCC) sector by conducting eleven semi-structured interviews with early childhood educators (ECEs). The overarching research questions that guided this study included: What factors contribute to ECEs feeling supported? How can the identified factors contribute to long-term workforce retention and stability of ECEs? What solutions to workforce retention can be identified from their perspective? Five key themes evolved inductively from the data and included: (1) personal passion, pride, and professional identity; (2) work-life balance; (3) positive professional relationships; (4) supportive organizational structures; and (5) policy decisions.

This chapter is divided into two sections: the demographic information gathered from the questionnaire and the qualitative findings from the interviews with ECEs. The demographic information provides participant demographics, credential, qualifications, and years of experience in the sector. The qualitative findings examine the five key themes of workforce support within ELCC to identify factors that promote long-term stability. Furthermore, these sections delve into the experiences, motivations, and obstacles faced by ECEs to gain an understanding of the factors that contribute to workforce retention. It should be noted that the themes are not independent and do overlap; however, for this chapter, they will be presented separately. Each theme articulates the factors that facilitate and hinder ECEs from feeling supported in this work and how this influence long-term retention in the sector.

Demographic Information

Demographic information was collected to provide background on the participants in this research. All questionnaire data were analyzed using frequency and descriptive statistics and are

presented below. This includes information on ECE's ages, cultural identities, languages spoken, regional representation, program types, age ranges of the children they work with, and their certification levels and credentials. Ten participants completed the questionnaire; however, not all questions were answered. Nonetheless, additional information shared during the interviews was incorporated. The purpose of gathering demographic information was to understand the participants perspectives and to ensure a variety of perspectives were included.

Participants in this research were all female and ranged in age from 30 to 59 years (5 participants aged 30-39 years, 3 participants aged 40-49 years, and 3 participants aged 50-59 years). Four participants did not disclose their cultural identity. Three identified as having a Western European background (n=3), while other ECEs identified as South American (n=1), South Asian (n=1), South East Asian (n=1), and Indigenous (n=1). Three participants identified as new Canadians. All participants spoke English, with four of them speaking various other European or Asian languages, such as Portuguese (n=1), Gujarati and Hindi (n=1), Tagalog (n=1), and Filipino (n=1). During the interviews, nine participants disclosed that they had children and were in a relationship.

The participants in the study came from different geographical regions in Alberta as defined by the Child and Family Services regions. Three participants were from Edmonton, three from Calgary, two from Southern Alberta, one from Central Alberta, and two indicated they were from Northeast Alberta.

The participants worked in various program types defined by the Alberta Child Care Act and with children of different age groups (from infants at birth to 12-year-olds). Each participant was assigned a participant code (e.g., ECE 1 through 11) and the ELCC context in which they worked (child care = CC, family day home = FDH, out-of-school care = OSC, Preschool = PS).

Most participants worked in a child care program (CC) (n=7), two worked in preschools (PS),

two in a family day home agency (FDH), and four indicated that they worked in out-of-school

care (OSC). One participant was not working while attending post-secondary; however, they

were recognized for their previous experience with ELCC and were assigned an appropriate

code.

All 11 participants were certified to work in Alberta as early childhood educators, with

10 holding ECE Level 3 certification and one with ECE Level 1 certification. All participants

had current working knowledge of the context of Alberta, with an average of 14.7 years of

experience. Ten participants held an educational credential based on children or youth

development, either an Early Childhood Diploma (ECD) (n=4) or a Child and Youth Care

(CAYC) (n=6) credential, but not both. However, four participants held more than one

credential, typically a Bachelor of Science or Arts. One participant without credentials based on

children or youth was enrolled in online learning through Portage College to increase her

certification level from Level 1 to Level 3. The following table shows participant demographics.

Table 1, Participant Demographics (n=11)

Participant Demographics	N	Valid %
Gender		
Female	11	100
Program Types		
Child Care Program (CC)	7	64
Pre-school (PS)	2	18
Family Day Home Agency (FDH)	2	18
Out-of-School Care (OSC)	4	36
Not currently working	1	9
Credential (Educational attainment)		
Child and Youth Care (CAYC) Studies	4	36
Early Childhood Diploma (ECD)	6	55
Arts or Science Degree (additional credentials)	4	36
Certification Level (according to Alberta regulations)		
ECE1	1	9
ECE 3	6	55
ECE 3 Equivalency	4	36
Age of Participants (Years)		
Under 20 years	0	0
20-29 years	0	0
30-39 years	5	45
40-49 years	3	27
50-59 years	3	27
60+ years	0	0
Age Ranges of Children *(Participants may work with multiple age ranges)		
Infant (birth to 12 months)	3	27
Infant (12 to 19 months)	7	64
Toddler (19 months to 3 years)	8	73
Preschool (3 to 4 years)	8	73
Kindergarten (4 to 5 years)	9	82
Out-of-School Care (5 to 12 years)	6	55
Child and Family Services Regions in Alberta		
South	2	18
Edmonton	3	27
Calgary	3	27
Central	1	9
Northeast	2	18
Cultural Identity of Participants		
Did Not Disclose	4	36
Western European (British, Irish, French, Belgian, Dutch, German)	3	27
South American	1	9
South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan)	1	9
South East Asian (Filipino, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, Indonesia, Malaysia)	1	9
Indigenous or First Nations	1	9

Languages Spoken by Participants

English Only	7	64
English, Portuguese	1	9
English, Gujarati, Hindi	1	9
English, Tagalog	1	9
English, Filipino	1	9

Note. N = 11

Theme 1: Personal Passion, Pride, and Professional Identity

Understanding the motivation of ECEs entering the ELCC sector set the backdrop for the themes that evolved from the data. The first theme of personal passion, pride, and professional identity was shaped by the motivation of ECE to enter the sector. The first set of interview questions aimed to explore the personal reasons for entering the sector, participants' expectations of the work, and how their current situation compared. These questions intended to focus on individual experiences and provide context for internal factors that could support recruitment and retention efforts. The resulting data provided this theme of personal passion for children, pride in practice, and desire for a professional identity.

During the interviews, participants described their reasons for entering the sector and pursuing ELCC. Many participants (n=5) described a direct pathway to ELCC and were often inspired or guided by a significant adult in their lives. For instance, one participant explained,

My auntie was an early childhood educator-she still is, but she is retired now; she was my inspiration to join. She was a big influence on my life. I just followed in her footsteps and have been passionate about it ever since. (ECE 10__CC, PS)

Another participant mentioned how a high school guidance counsellor suggested, "If you're interested, why don't you do a work placement job experience at the local daycare in the town where I was going to high school?" (ECE 11__CC).

On the other hand, six participants revealed that they initially pursued different career paths and stumbled upon ELCC indirectly. Some participants (n=4) initially entered the child and youth care (CAYC) field to work with youth, only to find that their careers were not sustainable for personal reasons. One participant shared, "I used to work in a group home with individuals with disabilities that required me to work shifts and weekends. I decided not to return to that" (ECE 1__CC, OSC). Another participant entered the field of education and found the work dissatisfying. They explained, "I always wanted to be a preschool teacher. I took a Teacher Assistant because it was a one-year course. During my practicum, I got stuck doing photocopying, and I was like, no, I don't want to do this" (ECE 5__CC). One participant chose a career in ELCC after experiencing multiple life events that led them down a different path. They stated, "Staying at the computer for too long gives me a headache. So that's another reason for setting up a dayhome" (ECE 9__FDH). Once these individuals made the switch, they often discovered that they enjoyed working with younger children more than they had initially anticipated. One participant reflected, "Once I got into it, and doing it, after a while, I realized I really did enjoy doing it" (ECE 1__CC, OSC). They ultimately found fulfillment in their new careers, with one participant expressing, "I don't regret it. I love the younger children" (ECE 5__CC).

The theme of personal passion, pride, and professional identity emphasized the profound dedication of ECEs to their work with children. As one ECE noted, "I always gravitate to kids. Then somebody pointed out how good I am with them. I kept hearing how I have this ability to talk to kids. This is where I'm meant to be. I love being with children" (ECE 7__OSC). ECEs possess a deep personal connection to children, which may have motivated them to transition from another sector to the ELCC sector. Many ECEs felt a sense of making a difference in the

lives of children and families, and this sense of purpose supports their work in the face of challenges.

Pride and Making a Difference

Many participants were motivated to enter the ELCC sector to become positive role models or supportive figures in children's lives. One participant expresses this sentiment by saying. "I guess you just hope to make a difference with children as they grow and with families as they raise their children" (ECE 5__CC).

Six participants recognized that their roles extended beyond being caretakers and understood the importance of building positive attachments. The following statement from an ECE exemplifies this:

> Obviously, we have to keep them safe. We have to keep them fed, but just having that safe connection to them, where the children are comfortable talking to you and becoming confident in their skills. I want to know their dog's name and favourite colour. They just can't wait to tell you everything. Sitting down and getting on their level and looking them in the eye, and they're telling you about the butterfly they saw while playing at the park. That's big in their world. It's all about the connection to me. (ECE 11__CC)

Two participants described how they sought connections with children to feel grounded, often finding that avenue through interactions with toddlers. One participant shared:

> Sometimes, if I REALLY need a lot of hugs, I go to the toddler room and be prepared to be covered with sticky fingers and paint and everything else. Other times when I'm kind of curious and wondering, I'll go to the older children and put something on the table and be like, 'I wonder what we can do with this.' and just observe what it is that they're doing with those objects. (ECE 2__CC, OSC)

One participant described experiencing a pivotal moment that solidified their career choice and their leap into ELCC.

> We were going for a hike, but this child was not having it. I said, 'Look, I know you
> don't want to go on this walk. I know all your friends aren't going to be there. So, let's go
> on this walk, and every time you see something that sucks, you come and tell me how
> sucky it is.' He looked at me but joined. On the walk, he was talking to children who
> wouldn't normally talk with. At the end of the hike, he came back to report to me. 'You
> know what, this didn't suck at all.' That just cemented it for me. It was one of the most
> pivotal moments in child care, trying to help a child come to terms with their
> disappointment in something, knowing that nothing was gonna change for them, and
> helping them come to a point where they could accept it. (ECE 6__OSC)

ECEs acknowledged their as part of the caregiving team with families and recognized how their work benefited their families and communities. This awareness prompted them to form professional bonds with the families they worked with. One ECE stated, "I see myself as somebody who can support you in this journey of being a family" (ECE 6__OSC). Another emphasized the importance of teamwork, stating, "I want them to know that we're a team together. I'd like the parents to know that this is not a separate entity from your life. This is a part of a community together" (ECE 4__FDH).

Four participants emphasized the significance of their role. One participant notably articulated this significance well, saying,

> You (a parent) are giving me your most precious thing in the world. You're giving me
> that child to look after. Each parent has a lot of emotions invested in the children. We are
> the people that look after them. It's a precious thing to do. (ECE 8__OSC)

Another participant highlighted the impact of forming attachments with families over time, stating,

> Some of these kids have grown up with us. I've seen them take their first steps, hear their first sentences, and now go to kindergarten. Now, their siblings are there. I've seen the families grow. I know all their stuffed animal names. I know their animals at home. I know their grandparents, where they live, and when they're coming to visit, I feel a strong sense of community in my centre. (ECE 2__CC, OSC)

While participants expressed passion for making a difference and feeling connected, many cautioned about the obligations, routines, regulations, and commitment involved in working with children and families. They emphasized that ECEs entering this sector must fully understand their responsibilities and requirements. One participant noted, "I didn't believe it would be as challenging as it is in certain areas" (ECE 2__CC, OSC). Another explained how entering the sector with high hopes can sometimes be shattered by barriers.

> It's sad because you have so much hope and want to make a change, but it's hard because so many blockades prevent you from excelling to your full potential. You have your goals and what you set out to be as an educator, and your goals sort of shift. (ECE 10_CC, PS)

This research showed that to succeed, an ECE must be passionate about nurturing children and be committed to overcoming challenges. As the participants pointed out, entry into the ELCC sector requires a strong motivation to work with children and thick skin, as educators may face hostility or the possibility of physical harm.

> It's not for the weak; you have to be driven and have compassion and a thick skin because parents can be mean. Other educators can be mean. You can get hit by a child.

So many things come at you, and you have to be prepared for all of it. (ECE 10__CC,

PS).

Many ECEs entered the sector to become positive role models and supportive figures in

children's lives, aiming to make a difference and build connections. ECEs recognized the

importance of building positive attachments with children, which provided them with a sense of

purpose and grounding. They acknowledged their significance as part of the caregiving team

with families and formed professional bonds with the families they worked with. Participants

described pivotal moments that solidified their career choice and the impact of forming

attachments with families over time. ECEs emphasized the significance of their role in caring for

children and the trust parents invest in them. Overall, the ECEs interviewed were highly

dedicated and committed to supporting children's growth and development.

Professionalism and Professional Identity

Participants in this research also expressed a desire to be seen as professionals and valued

for their practice. Despite their passion and pride, many educators felt undervalued in their role

as early childhood educators. Nine educators wanted to be recognized as professionals and

'brain-builders' rather than being perceived as babysitters. ECEs in this research emphasized the

importance of altering societal perceptions and promoting recognition of their practice beyond

custodial caregiving. Furthermore, they highlighted that being valued and respected

professionally could lead to better compensation and working conditions. They wanted the

community to understand their crucial role in shaping the future generation. One ECE participant

expressed frustration, stating, "There is a stigma to some degree that you just sit and play with

kids. You're just a glorified babysitter. Anybody can do your job. I love that one" (ECE

11__CC).

Two participants specifically emphasized that gaining respect in the community made it harder to undervalue their work. One ECE stated,

> I think there are a lot of people out there who don't appreciate us as educators. They just see us as babysitters. I think that's a big struggle, too. It's why you should be getting paid only $18 and something cents because you're only watching the kids. (ECE 7__OSC)

Furthermore, the lack of respect can result in "not being taken seriously by parents and society in general. We didn't go to school and learn all of what we know to be some glorified babysitter" (ECE 10__CC, PS).

One participant reflected on the ELCC sector and how ECEs are perceived within society.

> It's not really a career because the career is a teacher. Daycares were just people who couldn't go to Teachers College or people who just wanted to work with kids but didn't want to do the education. There's a lot of stigma that it's not a very valued career. So, YOU have to make it your value. (ECE 11__CC)

One participant described their experience of being a new Canadian and their role as an ECE, particularly when viewed through the lens of their community.

> Some parents thought, especially that we are immigrants - that we don't know anything; they felt we were dumb, and they could do whatever they wanted," and that felt "[d]egrading, too. When I say, 'I'm a child care worker,' they pity me. People think, 'Oh, you're starving.' They tell me about the foodbank or say, 'I have some stuff from my grandchildren; do you want it?' That's not the image of a child care worker. (ECE 9__FDH)

Two participants wondered what it would be like for the ELCC sector to be regarded as a

profession and for themselves to be acknowledged as valued professionals. "I think we want

early childhood to be seen as a profession, right? What would it take? I don't know" (ECE

5__CC). One pondered further,

It was so sad to see that we are not considered a profession and don't meet that criterion

(of a profession). If we had those and set standards that would really uphold them, then. I

think there'd be a big improvement in the quality of child care that we're providing.

(ECE 10__CC, PS).

Participants acknowledged the importance of advocating for themselves and making their

work visible to the community. They felt empowered by being involved in the interview process.

I talk to everybody the way I'm talking to you. I share with friends, family, and people. I

describe what I love. For example, I have these conversations with you or write letters to

our council people or the government. I think every time there is a decision, they say you

know, if you have an opinion, share here if there's a survey, doing those surveys and

sharing your opinion or writing those letters. (ECE 4__FDH)

One participant recognized the significance of being the role model they wish to see

within the sector, "I'm doing it right now. I'm trying to learn. I'm doing what I can to uphold

professionalism from my role" (ECE 10__CC, PS). Simultaneously, another participant grasped

the bigger picture of not addressing existing issues and expressed concern, particularly regarding

wages and staff shortages. "There are problems out there. If we start addressing them now,

before they're bigger problems, especially with the wages or with the staff, because, like I said,

the older ones are going out, we've got to start replenishing" (ECE 11__CC).

Some participants discovered their professional identity via professional development and increased awareness of the impact of their work with children. Eight participants mentioned the Brain Story Certification/Theory to Practice sessions offered by AECEA. In partnership with the Palix Foundation, this session is a two-part series in which ECEs who complete the online Brain Story Certification through the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative are reimbursed for their time through AECEA. Participants could then participate in hands-on theory-to-practice sessions. These theory-to-practice sessions were explicitly designed for ECEs in Alberta. During the interviews, participants either specifically mentioned the learning sessions or used terminology from the learning, such as 'brain builder.' One participant highlighted, "We're building brains. [In] these early years, it matters where your kids are and what they do. All those little things that we do matter. We are building brains" (ECE 4__FDH). Two educators deepened their awareness of their practice.

> I just finished Brain Story. I never realized what we do as educators and how we could have done better after taking that. I wish we would have taken it before, so we understood our roles and provided experiences at all levels. I encourage all educators to take it. (ECE 8__OSC).

> [w]hen an educator *really* gets that they *serve* a child for what they need at that moment. It's not just a programmed response. I really can feel that they're creating a connection with the child. You know, we're brain builders. (ECE 4__FDH).

Two educators who had completed the Brain Story session suggested, "Every decision-maker and policymaker should take that course and understand what children do and what they have access to matters from the early years" (ECE 4__FDH). Lastly, one ECE acknowledged the impact of this course on their professional identity.

I just finished Brain Story. I never realized what we do as educators and how we could

have done better after taking that. I never took that before. I wish we would have taken it

before, so we understood our roles and provided experiences at all levels. I encourage all

educators to take it. They are not seeing this from this lens as educators. I wish they

would see this as educators and for operators. (ECE 8__OSC)

This research explored the motivations of ECEs to enter the sector and their desire to be

recognized as professionals and valued for their practice. The theme of personal passion, pride,

and professional identity emphasizes ECEs' dedication to their work with children. Despite their

passion and pride, many felt undervalued in their role. Participants emphasized the importance of

altering societal perceptions of their practice beyond custodial caregiving. They believed that

being valued and respected professionally could lead to better compensation and working

conditions. ECEs highlighted the importance of advocating for themselves and making their

work visible to the community. Participants expressed frustration at being seen as mere

babysitters and not taken seriously by parents and society. They discussed the impact of being an

immigrant on their role as an ECE and the need for the ELCC sector to be regarded as a

profession. Overall, this research highlighted the desire of ECEs to be recognized as

professionals and the importance of advocating for their practice.

Theme 2: Work-life Balance

Despite their personal passion and pride in their work, participants identified experiences

and factors affecting their family and personal time. These factors included high demands,

unrealistic expectations, and the need for self-care and stress management. The work-life balance

theme highlights ECEs' challenges in balancing their professional and personal lives. ECEs often

mentioned working long hours, which resulted in less time for personal and family activities.

This led to burnout and emotional exhaustion, affecting their overall well-being and their ability

to engage with the children they work with. Moreover, ECEs mentioned that donating their time

and resources further strained their work-life balance and finances. They mentioned situational

stress, which was exacerbated by parental complaints and challenging child behaviours. Many

ECEs emphasized the importance of stress management and self-care as they navigate the

pressures of their work and strive for balance. However, when work-life balance is poorly

supported, some ECEs may leave the sector, disrupting attachment to children and affecting

long-term workforce retention and stability strategies. The following section describes the

subthemes of protected professional and personal time, stress management, and self-care as

factors that support workforce stability. Without work-life balance, even the most passionate

ECEs struggle to maintain their commitment to working with children and families.

Protected Professional Time

Participants disclosed issues of unpaid work outside of operational hours. Many ECEs

reported working long hours without compensation to complete daily tasks, often at the expense

of family time. During an interview, one participant disclosed how frequently they worked on

weekends and how that impacted their family.

When I was doing evenings and weekends, my kid would come with me, and my

husband would come. My husband volunteered much time. When I went into work, my

child would just play. I knew it was getting really bad when they were asking if we were

going to work that weekend. And I was like, 'Oh, this is a problem.' At this stage, I

didn't have a choice. (ECE 1__CC, OSC)

One educator noticed, "It often felt like a full day's work on the weekend that you

weren't compensated for. The effort was never noticed or appreciated or, you know, commented

on. It just was expected" (ECE 2__CC, OSC). This expectation and lack of recognition and

appreciation for their efforts, with no compensation, led to burnout, exhaustion, and reduced

energy for their own children. One participant disclosed,

> If you don't have the planning time (during the day), you have to do it at home, which
>
> shouldn't be expected. You shouldn't be expected to do that. I mean, it's a tricky field
>
> because you're caring for children and families all day, and then you want to be energized
>
> and then have to come to your family, and you don't have anything left to give. (ECE
>
> 5__CC)

Working outside of operational hours, often unpaid, created internal conflict with

personal passion and pride in their work and an awareness of work-life balance. One participant

acknowledged that her partner drew attention to the need for work-life balance and the

subsequent internal struggle it prompted within her.

> I would come home and do newsletters and everything at home, and I had to take a step
>
> back because my significant other was like, 'Can you leave that at work because you're
>
> home now?' But I have to do it because it is my job, and you have to make money
>
> somehow, because I don't want to fail at my job. (ECE 10__CC, PS)

Financial Burden

ECEs highlighted the financial strain, as they often had to purchase materials and

supplies for their classrooms, which were not always reimbursed. Three educators described

spending time purchasing materials, searching for cheap materials on Facebook Marketplaces, or

requesting resources from families. The time spent sourcing materials for the organization was

sometimes not reimbursed and was often expected. One educator described how the

organizations they worked for did not provide materials for daily activities with children, which

placed a financial burden on their families.

> It was challenging financially because we didn't get all the equipment and supplies, we
>
> needed for our classrooms. I always bought paint for my kids because the owner would
>
> never buy paint. That's all the kids wanted to do. My husband would get very frustrated
>
> because paints and all the supplies are expensive. He couldn't believe that I needed to
>
> ever buy paint. He just couldn't wrap his head around it. He definitely loves the fact that
>
> I'm not buying anything for the centres. (ECE 2__CC, OSC)
>
> One educator felt compelled to supply materials because of her altruistic upbringing,
>
> This is a learning from my dad. He always said, whatever you do, wherever you work,
>
> you have to give a little bit back. So that's what I do. When I we want to do something
>
> really special (with the children), and we don't have it, I buy it. The bad thing is the
>
> dollar store is so close. (ECE 3__CC)
>
> The ECE later added,
>
> The day care has a budget and sometimes the children have an interest. I cannot wait for
>
> next month's budget. Sometimes they will pay me back, but sometimes the budget for
>
> next month is already for something else. I cannot wait because the interest is now. I'm
>
> gonna wait, and then it's not gonna work. (ECE 3__CC)

Two educators expressed the overlap of personal passion and pride with work-life

balance and as one reflected, "I know I could probably do a lot more. I just don't have the time to

do it" (ECE 11__CC).

Many educators spoke about the impact of long working hours on their families.

Balancing professional responsibilities with family responsibilities can present challenges for

ECEs. Participants expressed the importance of understanding and support from their own families and the families within the child care program or day home. While many recognized the need for boundaries to avoid missing important family events, achieving them was not always easy. Seven educators spoke about the impact of working in an ELCC setting on their families and the necessity of establishing boundaries regarding their work hours and commitments.

Two educators considered setting boundaries as parents of young children. One left the sector temporarily,

I was very mindful of that when my children were younger to not be directly working in that field because I didn't want to give all my best self to other kids all day and then have a not-so-great day for my kids at the same age. So, my children are older now. That's why I feel like I can be in the early childhood field. (ECE 5__CC)

Another educator set daily boundaries, "I wouldn't miss one of my children's sporting events to stay home because I needed to return emails. Emails can wait. My children and my husband were always the priority" (ECE 11__CC).

One educator described the balancing act of being present for both their own children and other children.

It's harder to be present. You know, sometimes my kids get sick. They have needs. There's lots when you're an early childhood educator. There's so much you need to keep up with that you can't do in your day-to-day. I want to be present with my kids after work. It's the same battle I think educators have as well, you know, busy family lives. I think that's the only downside to it. (ECE 4__FDH)

Stress Management and Self-care

Participants emphasized the importance of stress management and self-care strategies to offset the adverse effects of stress and burnout. They reported that spending time with friends and family was a valuable resource during stressful periods. Moreover, they employed various coping mechanisms such as deep breathing, meditation, yoga, physical exercise, time in nature, and self-talk to regulate stress levels. One participant provided a detailed account of the techniques she employs.

> I do a lot of basic breathing because I find stress comes from when you're tense. If I can be aware enough and notice, I'll do some deep breaths, and then I can actually think of a plan. I like to do yoga, but finding the time with my own kids and a busy job is tricky. But I do find that just the breathing part helps. (ECE 4__FDH)

One educator built a network of friends from a child care program where she had worked before COVID-19.

> I was lucky that I had built some really good relationships with some of the staff I worked with, and I still talk to them to this day. We're friends outside of work in everything. We spent a lot of time, kind of like outside of work with each other. You know, celebrating those sorts of things like that. We had a really good group of us, unfortunately, with COVID that just changed the whole dynamic. (ECE 1__CC, OSC)

Many educators found solace in the arts, whether doing arts and crafts or listening to music. "I like to crochet, and I want to do crafts and stuff like that. Listen to music" (ECE 5__CC).

Work-life balance difficulties were emphasized, including the need for personal space at the end of the day.

At the end of the day, I come home and don't talk to anybody. I need to have that time to

decompress and just analyze the day and figure out what I did right and when I did wrong

kind of thing so that I can do better the next day. (ECE 6__OSC)

The participants discussed burnout issues and a lack of balance in their lives. One ECE

described how COVID-19 became the breaking point for her, and she had to leave the sector

temporarily because of stress.

I worked anywhere from 40 to 60 hours. It just wasn't doable. And then COVID came in,

which was not a fun time in child care at all. COVID was a cherry on the cake for me. I

was so burned out at that point. At that point, I was done. I just couldn't do it anymore.

(ECE 1__CC, OSC)

Another educator discussed how the emotional aspect of working in ELCC care could

make it difficult to return to work after having children.

Coming back into the work field full-time can be difficult, being with children full-time,

and then having your own family. It takes away from your family because you might be

stressed, upset, or emotionally drained. Because you're like, emptying all day with other

kids, and then you come home, and you're feeling kind of your bucket is empty. (ECE

5__CC)

Educators mentioned the importance of self-regulation and taking breaks to prevent

burnout and stress. One ECE reflected,

I cannot come here and be poisoning my family with that. I was getting sick. I was

getting stomach problems. Meditation wasn't working. I had to make a decision not to

have everything. I needed to do what was best for me. I am in peace, so I can be there for

the children. That's important. If meditation couldn't touch the anxiety. (ECE 3__CC)

Overall, educators highlighted the need for better support and resources to prevent burnout and promote well-being. According to one participant,

It is too much sometimes. Sometimes, when you take a break, your body suddenly shuts down. That's what I felt like. I sometimes prefer being alone to get back to regulate back again, because the stress is that much. You're dealing with so much every single day. Unless you have good teams and people who understand you better or hear you out, then it's encouraging. But if you don't, and they are only about power struggle, you feel it's not worth the battle. (ECE 8__OSC)

The theme of work-life balance addresses the challenges that ECEs face when juggling their professional and personal lives. Participants identified factors such as high demands, unrealistic expectations, and the need for self-care and stress management that impact their family and personal time. ECEs often work long hours without compensation, resulting in less time for personal and family activities, burnout, and financial strain. Participants expressed how the job can be demanding and exhausting, affecting their overall well-being and ability to engage with their children. Many ECEs emphasized the importance of stress management and self-care as they navigate the pressures of their work and strive for balance, ensuring their well-being and continued dedication to the sector. Even the strongest motivations to work with children and families can be tested without a work-life balance. Participants expressed how work-life balance may improve overall well-being and may lead to improved job satisfaction leading to a higher quality of care provided to children and families.

Theme 3: Positive Professional Relationships

Alongside personal passion and pride and work-life balance, ECEs emphasized positive professional relationships as important factors of workforce retention and stability in ELCC.

They shared that collaboration and teamwork created a positive work environment, creating

opportunities for creativity, staff appreciation, and effective problem-solving. Positive

professional relationships with co-workers contribute to job satisfaction, reduced turnover rates,

and a supportive team environment. Respectful and collaborative co-worker relationships foster a

supportive team environment where ECEs can share ideas, experiences, and best practices.

Involving parents in ELCC also creates a nurturing atmosphere through effective communication

and collaboration with parents that fosters a sense of community, support, and a holistic

approach to child development. Collaborating with parents in decision-making, regular

communication, and developing a partnership based on mutual respect and support can yield

positive results but can be challenging. These relationships often last outside work, contributing

to work-life balance and stress management. Subthemes of sense of belonging, parental

involvement and support, professional associations and communities of practice, and curriculum

as connection are described in the following section.

Sense of Belonging and Professional Connections

All educators mentioned the impact of a supportive team environment where they could

share joy, challenges, stress, and ideas. One educator declared, "We have a very supportive team.

So, that's good for just like an outlet and for ideas., when it's not so great, just to have somebody

spell you off, fill in, or pick up where you need" (ECE 5__CC). One educator saw the value of

ECEs working together over time and the connection that could be developed.

> When you work with them (ECEs), there is that collaboration. There is give and take. She
>
> does better this way. So, they support. There is connection. And you have invested, too,
>
> right? They see *your* investment. They see the commitment. They see that value. If they

are not able to see that value, it's a waste of time. But if they are, then you put in the

effort there. You sew a seed where it goes. (ECE 8__OSC)

Two educators mentioned aspects of respect from and for their co-workers. One family

day home provider mentioned the impact of a supportive consultant.

There is one (consultant) who treated me well. She said, 'What did you do before?' I told

her what I did and about my work experience. Then she treated me well. But there's a

consultant who treats you like you don't know anything. (ECE 9__FDH)

Another educator devised a means of establishing supportive frameworks around an ECE

that accommodated their colleagues' cultural and religious practices.

We had an ECE who had to do prayers. We set it up. I had it on my phone. I knew when

to go into the classroom and cover her so she could go into her prayers. It was never

anything that impacted the day, the flow of the routine or anything. (ECE 2__CC, OSC)

Often, this relationship can last outside the operational hours. Two educators described

the deep connections with colleagues leading to lasting relationships outside work hours.

We workout together to do things like that. We do a staff retreat every year. I think that

helps build that camaraderie that helps others, not just educators, for people to live. I

don't really find a lot of stress in my position because I feel that I'm very supported

within my sector from the educators and the office. I know I'm very fortunate. (ECE

2__CC, OSC).

Another educator was surprised at the depth of the connection that was possible with her

educators.

It's definitely a relationship. I was so surprised coming in as a consultant. I didn't realize

how deep these relationships would run with the educators. I'm still getting to know them

on such a deep level. I was so surprised by that, and I love it. (ECE 4__FDH)

This collaborative atmosphere fostered a positive work environment, improves job

morale, and reduces turnover. "We do have quite a bit of staff that have been there a while, and a

group of ladies that do get along. That friendship and having a length of experience and working

together helps build that" (ECE 5__CC).

A supportive team provides an outlet for sharing experiences and ideas and offers support

during challenging times, such as filling in for colleagues or accommodating cultural and

religious practices. The depth of connection possible between ECEs and their colleagues,

including consultants, can be surprising and can lead to lasting relationships outside of work

hours, contributing to work-life balance and stress management. Alongside co-worker support is

an understanding from the ECE family and balancing their multiple responsibilities.

Parental Involvement and Support

Parents' involvement and support were also factors of creating a nurturing ELCC

environment. Effective communication and collaboration with parents contributed to a sense of

community and support and foster a holistic approach to child development. Educators described

how educators and parents working together can enhance the overall quality of care by involving

parents in decision-making processes and regularly communicating with them. A partnership

between educators and parents based on mutual respect and willingness to support each other

was in the child's best interest. However, while collaboration and partnership with families can

yield positive results, they can be challenging. One educator emphasized the importance of

collaborating with parents as a team rather than creating an adversarial relationship. "It is a very

demanding job, exhausting and isolating; parents complain so much. I wish I could read their

minds to do everything they want to" (ECE 9__FDH).

    Collaboration and partnerships with families had positive and negative elements

described by participants. One educator cautioned,

> Why are you complaining about the parents? You're setting yourself up for an adversarial
>
> relationship with the parents. We're only in these children's lives for a certain amount of
>
> time. Those parents are going to be with them for the rest of our lives. We can't be
>
> stepping on their toes like that. I see myself as a team member with the parents. Hey, I'm
>
> in your child's life for this amount of time. What can I do to support you? I really see us
>
> as child care workers, being partners with the parents. (ECE 6__OSC)

    Another educator recognized that the relationship between a child and their educator can

be a bond that the parent recognizes, "Hey, you're doing an amazing job. My child loves you"

(ECE 7__OSC).

    Other educators described the difficulties of collaborating with some parents, especially

those who did not understand the educator's role. "Everyone asks what the hardest part of the job

is. Realistically, I find it's the parents that are the hardest to deal with outside of the workforce

stability and administration" (ECE 2__CC, OSC). Another educator suggested educators need "a

thick skin because parents can be mean" (ECE 10__CC, PS).

    Overall, the participants agreed that positive professional relationships have a ripple

effect, extending to the families and creating a supportive community that benefits both children

and their families. This collaborative approach fostered a holistic and nurturing environment.

While families are undeniably significant, so are the professional connections with associations

and communities of practice.

Professional Associations and Communities of Practice

Participants recognized the need for professional connections and advocacy support as components of positive professional relationships. Being part of a professional association or having a professional community of practice means knowing who is in your community and who can support your practice. Two participants mentioned that their licensing officers were part of their professional communities. One ECE described,

I spent a lot of time working with licensing just because when I was first introduced to licensing when I first started, they were made out to be a very scary thing, which was sad. As I worked and progressed, I realized that they're a great resource. They've always told us that if we don't even know what we're doing, phone us first versus stuff coming out saying, you can't be doing that. I worked really hard. I had a really good relationship with our licensing officers to the point where I probably talked to them once a day. (ECE 1__CC, OSC)

The loss of professional connections was equally impactful, especially for educators and directors who rely on professional networks for support and advocacy. One participant acknowledged the impact and loss of their local professional association when funding was cut.

We had a local daycare association. They would bring in different speakers or workshops, and (we) met once a month. They were fantastic. The girls really advocated for a lot of things. As funding got cut, it disbanded. This is unfortunate because now there are many things, we could use them for. (ECE 11__CC)

Additionally, some participants shared that the profession can be siloed and isolating. As one ECE mentioned, connecting with others would open possibilities and reduce the sense of isolation.

Working together in child care is very difficult. You would think it wouldn't be because

of the type of person who goes into the field, but it becomes very isolating. Each centre is

an island unto itself. You get very myopic when you're like that. You become very like

this is my world. You don't realize all the possibilities out there. I really think there's a

serious lack of connection. But it won't change because child care centres are in

competition with each other. I really wish there was more connection. (ECE 6__OSC)

Ultimately, staying informed and 'giving voice' were components of a positive

relationship with their professional community. "I'm doing what I can to uphold professionalism

from my role. It's a cycle of just helping in any way that I can" (ECE 10__CC, PS).

Communities of Practices were a component as well. As one ECE noted, they feel

professionally connected when the community can come together and connect using a common

language and theories.

It's really nice to work with people that understand what you're saying, and you don't

have to explain it. It was really nice in that sense that we all shared the same background.

We all came from the same theories and practices. Thankfully, there was a group of us

that could work together to support each other's programs because we got it, and we

could bounce ideas off of each other. (ECE 1__CC, OSC)

Participants discussed the importance of professional associations and communities of

practice. They emphasized the need for professional connections, advocacy support, and the

benefits of being part of a professional community. They highlighted the loss of local

professional associations due to funding cuts and the isolating nature of the profession. Some

ECEs desired more connection and collaboration among child care centers and were aware of the

competition that may limit collaboration and connection. Staying informed and giving voice to

their professional identity were important components of positive relationships. Communities of

practice were noted as a way for ECEs to feel professionally connected through a common

language and shared theories. Overall, ECEs suggested that professional associations and

communities of practice play a crucial role in supporting ECEs and promoting positive

relationships within the profession. They mentioned how a curriculum can support a professional

connection to coworkers, families, and the community.

Curriculum as Connection

Alongside sense of belong, professional connections and parental support using

curriculum as a connection arose as a factor of positive professional relationship. The subtheme

of curriculum as connection is somewhat abstract as it pertains to the connection with oneself as

a professional. Participants expressed that using a curriculum fosters positive professional

relationships with colleagues and their families, as it encourages the exchange of knowledge and

understanding within an ELCC. When ECEs enter the sector with a solid foundation of

knowledge, they contribute to understanding child development, routines, and the structures of

ELCC, as well as the associated expectations. Without this foundational knowledge, colleagues

and supervisors may need to spend more time on supervision than mentoring. Professional

development opportunities, such as courses and shared networks, promote a well-rounded team

and support the continuous improvement of practices.

Of note, established curricula such as Flight or Montessori (the two curricula mentioned

by participants) connected ECEs through a guiding philosophy while allowing flexibility based

on children's interests and ensuring meaningful engagement. All participants described the Flight

curriculum, professional learning sessions, and the support they receive through pedagogical

partners as enhancing their practice. All of this contributed to the ECEs experiencing supportive

interactions and connections with other professionals in the sector. Engagement in the Flight

professional development sessions also allowed the ECEs to understand the diverse regional

concerns across Alberta, inadvertently connecting ECEs to understand the sector.

> I got to connect with other educators when I took my Flight course. It really opened my
>
> eyes to how different it is and how everybody's mindsets work in different areas. Every
>
> educator is different, just like in Flight. It's the image of the child. Each child has
>
> different beliefs and values, and it's the same way as an educator. (ECE 7__OSC)

Additionally, engaging in Flight principles helped connect educators with families by

making their practice visible. ECEs and families shared a language and practice.

> Our centre follows the Flight curriculum. So, if something was going on with that, and
>
> you knew that one of the rooms had something going on, you realize something that
>
> could connect to it. In our newsletter, we always include Flight stories. We include a little
>
> bit of learning about Flight for parents just so there's a connection. (ECE 5__CC)

It has been previously noted that the Brain Story Certification and Theory to Practice

Sessions fostered the development of a shared vocabulary and understanding among ECEs who

completed the professional learning sessions. As one ECE stated, "I've done Brain Story. And

most of the staff have done it as well" (ECE 11__CC). Additionally, ECEs recognized the

significance of the professional development provided by the series, as evidenced by the

comment, "The brain series really triggered me in so many ways because it's so important" (ECE

10_CC, PS). Participants in this study were experiencing a sense of connection through

curriculum, whether they were consciously aware of the potential impact of the professional

connection or not.

Participants in this research discussed using a curriculum to support positive professional relationships among educators and families. Curriculum has the potential to connect educators through a guiding philosophy while allowing flexibility based on children's interests. As well, engaging in curricular principles such as offered through Flight connected ECS with families by making their practice with children visible and sharing language and practice. Additionally, ECEs who completed professional learning sessions such as the Brain Story Certification and Theory to Practice Sessions developed a shared vocabulary and understanding.

Overall, the participants acknowledged the importance of positive professional relationships in ELCC. They recognized that these relationships extend beyond the community surrounding ECEs. The participants agreed that connecting, collaborating, and communicating with various community stakeholders is crucial for establishing and maintaining positive professional relationships. Ultimately, they recognized that these relationships are essential for maintaining a stable and thriving ELCC workforce.

Theme 4: Supportive Organizational Structures

The fourth theme was of supportive organizational structures encompassing various leadership support, operational practices, professional growth opportunities, and fair compensation. These factors collectively influenced ECEs to feel supported and valued, thus impacting workforce retention and stability.

Leadership Support

As a factor of supportive organizational structures, leadership support involved recognizing and valuing the contributions of educators, providing constructive feedback, and being responsive to their needs and concerns.

Participants described a spectrum of experiences, from being valued and cared for with voice and agency over daily decisions to having an absent owner who did not provide guidance or training. One educator mentioned how ownership is "[p]ushing me to find what I like to keep learning. They support me that way. They always check with 'How are you? Are you okay?' They're pretty nice with that stuff" (ECE 10__CC, PS). Another mentioned the importance of leadership in the ELCC sector. "I feel like my boss really does care for educators. She is somebody from the field and is very passionate about what we do. I think we're lucky in that sense" (ECE 5__CC). One educator noted that support is sometimes as simple as "Reassurance that I am doing okay. It'll be okay. We'll get through it. It's just a bump in the road. My boss has helped me solve and have solutions" (ECE 7__OSC). Sometimes, a leader's depth of experience can be a supporting factor. "I go to my general manager of child care, who has way more experience than I do" (ECE 1__CC, OSC). A knowledgeable, skilled, experienced leader can support ECEs. As one ECE noted, "My general manager has been in child care for many, many, many years. It helped to have somebody who, who was in child care for a really long time, who knew licensing just as well" (ECE 1__CC, OSC).

Conversely, poor leadership can be distressing. As one ECE reflected on the impact of poor leadership on her and how this created uncertainty about her chosen career,

> There was a really bad supervisor at the site I was working at. It was it was pretty bad. I didn't realize how traumatic the experience was. It affected me strongly because this person was very abusive towards the workers. It was one of my first real full-time jobs in child care, and it was making me doubt whether I should do this or not. (ECE 6__OSC)

The presence and involvement of owners/operators in the daily operations of ELCC centres significantly impacted the work environment. When owners are absent or disengaged,

this can lead to challenges in communication, decision-making, and overall staff morale. An involved owner/operator contributes to a positive work culture by providing support, resources, and guidance. Regular communication and collaboration between owners and educators may address challenges, ensuring the centre's success, and creating a supportive and effective work environment in ELCC settings. One ECE described the impact of the absence of leadership and foundational operational practices.

> I had an owner that spent a lot of time travelling and wasn't involved as much. I don't
> think I would say the support was there. It was, 'Okay, you have your level, here's your
> room. This is your room. These are your kids. Do your thing. Follow licensing. Don't do
> anything that will get you in trouble for licensing. We were just left on our own. (ECE
> 1__CC, OSC)

Conversely, one participant mentioned that good leadership could be an attraction factor for educators seeking good leadership. "The educators go where there are leaders. They want that environment. They want to be connected with the teams. They want to be happy when they come to work" (ECE 8__OSC).

Participants shared a range of experiences with leadership support, from feeling valued and cared for with voice and agency over decisions in their employment to having an absent owner who did not provide guidance or training. A knowledgeable, skilled, experienced leader can support educators in navigating challenges, while poor leadership can be traumatic and create uncertainty about their chosen careers. Participants highlighted the importance of supportive leadership as a pull factor for educators seeking a positive work environment. Supportive leadership can contribute to job satisfaction and retention in the sector. Overall,

supportive leadership may establish a stable and fulfilling work environment for ECEs,

impacting their job satisfaction and the decision to stay in the sector.

Operational Practices

Participants described the benefits of supportive operational practices, including clear

policies and communication channels, teamwork, protected professional time, reasonable

workloads, a safe environment, voice and agency over daily decisions, and adequate resources

that enable educators to effectively perform their roles. When educators feel supported by their

organization, this positively impacts their job satisfaction, well-being, and overall commitment to

the sector. Or the opposite.

> The first program I worked in was too big. It had high staff turnover constantly, for
>
> various reasons. The owner could never tell us when we could go home. I never
>
> understood why we didn't have shifts. There were just a lot of things that I just could not
>
> wrap my head around. I don't know why we can't have shifts. I didn't have benefits. I
>
> didn't have paid holidays. (ECE 1__CC, OSC)

Sometimes, a safe environment in which early childhood educators work significantly

influences job satisfaction and well-being. A safe and nurturing atmosphere supports children's

development and contributes to positive work experiences for educators. As one ECE noted,

> I wish I could find a better place. In this safer place, people would identify my skill set
>
> and would value it. Would respect it more. I am still hopeful that someday, I will be able
>
> to find that place. (Laughter) I think that might be a dream for everybody. They are
>
> looking for the right place to be. To be valued, the right leader. Not to be under-minded.
>
> (ECE 8__OSC)

Voice and Agency

Empowering educators with a sense of voice and agency over their daily decisions is instrumental to creating a positive work culture. Three educators mentioned that when they felt heard and valued by being include in decision making, they contributed to an inclusive environment that fostered collaboration and innovation. Encouraging open communication and decision-making processes in which educators' ideas and voice are considered and respected enhanced their sense of agency. In turn, positively affects job satisfaction and overall work experience.

I think I've always been invited into decision-making because it's a big thing where it's important for educators to be heard. Everybody's ideas are to be heard. Well, some people value them and some people because it's a belief thing too because every educator is different. (ECE 7__OSC)

She described how voice and agency allowed an educator to be open to children and set the stage for a learning culture in which both the child and educator can learn side by side. This openness allowed the educator to be receptive to the moments in which they could co-construct attachments.

The more open an educator, the more open a child can learn. I feel that because then they're learning together. If an educator gets to the point where they can learn **with** the child rather than being, 'This is what we do, this is how we do it.' When educators step back and really get into a child's head, I think it makes a big difference, especially for culture. They really need that understanding and that patience as an educator. I would say that some people are really closed to learning new things. They want to be more direct. Then there's other people who you know belong in child care. You notice, oh, my

goodness, you're in the play. You're experiencing it. You're observing it. You can tell

they love it. Then, others just come in for the pay. (ECE 7__OSC)

Lastly, where there is alignment between operational practices and values, there is an

increased likelihood of ECEs being more effective (Grawitch et al., 2006).

I think being able to have those creative ideas and run with them. The owner sometimes

doesn't always understand why we do certain things, but we know that the trust is there.

But just the collaboration and being around like-minded people that share the same

vision. They feel comfortable and confident. (ECE 2__CC, OSC)

This section highlighted the importance of supportive operational practices in ELCC

settings. Participants emphasized the benefits of clear policies, communication channels,

teamwork, protected professional time, reasonable workloads, a safe environment, voice and

agency over daily decisions, and adequate resources. When educators feel supported, their job

satisfaction, well-being, and commitment to the sector improve. Conversely, a lack of support

negatively impacts their experience. ECEs highlighted the value of protected professional time

for reflecting on practice, collaborating with colleagues, and addressing challenges. They noted

that a safe and nurturing environment was essential for children's development and educators'

well-being. Empowering educators with a sense of voice and agency in decision-making also

fosters collaboration, innovation, and job satisfaction.

Professional Growth Opportunities

Three participants mentioned the importance of seeing where their careers could go next.

As one participant reflected,

When I was a day care educator at a facility, there was nowhere to go other than to

become a director. There's nowhere to go beyond unless you want to move to head office

or become a child care director. It's not a big carrot because there isn't much to do. I see

a lack of advancement, sometimes in education or taking on those additional steps, the

pedagogical pieces and the communication, parents, and the documentation. There's no

motivation unless you're intrinsically motivated. If there's no external motivation to do

any of that. It's not compensated well. It's a lot of work. (ECE 4__FDH)

The concept of career progression touched on incentives to attain higher education. As

one ECE reflected, "Even with schooling, there should be more after your level three. You can

go for your master's, or there's that degree from MacEwan. There should be something else as

well, where you can continue" (ECE 10__CC, PS).

As an element of career progression, mentorship is dependent on the leadership and

opportunities available. This is inconsistent across the sector as one educator described teaching

herself: "The most mentoring I received would have been from my second daycare from my

manager. However, that was more of an HR position on how to deal with staff. But anything

child care related, I taught myself" (ECE 1__CC, OSC). However, another educator shared the

impact of a mentor,

> An educator who is one of the most influential educators I've ever come across. I find the
>
> way she deals with children and her perspective on things. She's definitely taught me to
>
> be a better educator and a better mom with how she engages with children. I feel
>
> everyone should learn from her. (ECE 2__CC, OSC)

ECEs in this research noted a need for professional growth opportunities and where their

career could progress. Investing in professional development benefits educators and enhances the

overall quality of care and education provided to children. Organizations that prioritized and

supported the professional growth of their staff were more likely to have a stable and effective

workforce.

Fair Compensation

The participants in this study shared that their co-workers have multiple jobs to make

ends meet. A wage grid was presented as a solution to provide ECEs with a way to be valued and

recognized as professionals. Overall, ECEs felt a wage grid would make them feel valued and

appreciated and could help retain staff. They noted, that increased wages would help retain staff

and prevent them from working multiple jobs to pay their bills. One ECE reflected, "I've been

fortunate enough not to have a second job, but a lot of the educators in our centre do have

second, third, or even fourth jobs" (ECE 5__CC).

Regarding the wage grid, ECEs felt it would provide them with a way to feel valued and

recognized as professionals.

> Personally, I would definitely feel more valued. I would feel more inclined to always
>
> stay, no matter what, wherever I go. Whatever I do, I feel really appreciated for what we
>
> do as educators and how long we've been doing this. To watch other jobs, get way more
>
> valued in the pay period. And knowing how much child care isn't hurt. It just makes you
>
> feel like I might as well just go work out at a job site. (ECE 7__OSC)
>
> Many educators reflected on the effect of wages on retention. One ECE commented,
>
> You would probably have more staff staying because they wouldn't have to be working
>
> multiple jobs to pay their bills. Because let's be honest, when you're barely making
>
> above $16, $17, or $18 an hour, that doesn't get you very far anymore. (ECE 1__CC,
>
> OSC)
>
> An ECE followed this with,

[i]t's easy to hire, but it's not easy to keep. Because people come, they don't believe the amount of work that you have to do for 18 bucks. Who wants to do it? We want to do it because we're passionate people. (ECE 3__CC)

Another ECE noted the impact of not earning a living wage. "I should be able to live on the wages I'm making because this is a job. I have bills to pay, too. I have to be paid a certain amount of money in order to survive" (ECE 6__OSC_24). Another participant commented, "If I had to move from the job that I currently have, I wouldn't be an educator. I couldn't afford it" (ECE 7__OSC).

Three educators commented on having a spouse's income and benefits to rely on "[h]is job is really important in our family. That is a large portion of our income. I'm not going to jeopardize it" (ECE 1__CC, OSC). Another ECE expressed the importance of spousal support "There's no pension, there's no RRSP. There are no retirement plans. No Basic extended health. No dental. I'm glad that my husband has it. No Extended vacation days. No. Flexible schedules. No health spending account. No personal leaves" (ECE 9__FDH). Lastly, one educator noticed, "If you were like a single-income family, then it would not be easy" (ECE 5__CC).

One educator reflected that when responsibilities are not fairly compensated, they can affect the intentions of career progression.

It hurts me to watch a supervisor have more responsibilities but get paid the exact same as a worker. I would love to see that change so that I don't have educators being like, why even bother taking a supervisory position if we don't get paid more? (ECE 7__OSC)

One educator suggested that being paid hourly affects how an ECE is valued and respected. "Every daycare should be on a salary because you are paid hourly, and you don't feel appreciated" (ECE 10__CC, PS).

Participants shared that wages may seem more attractive elsewhere, but the workplace culture is equally important.

We had a lady leave because of wages, and then I saw her a few months later. She's like, I would love to come back. We'll keep you in mind, and unfortunately, you're not being treated as you know you deserve. I can understand personal financial situations, and they're willing to give up workplace culture for the benefit of their family or whatever it is. They need the compensation. (ECE 2__CC, OSC).

Non-salaried Compensation. A subcomponent of fair compensation is access to non-salaried compensation. Non-salaried compensation is any monetary perk an ECE receives outside of a wage such as health benefits or a pension package. When presented with a table from the *Alberta Compensation Framework Report*, outlining non-salaried compensation, participants expressed a range of responses, from receiving extensive, non-salaried compensation to none. One suggested, "I think it does help. Even just knowing that you have the perks like a gym and swim passes for your whole family, not just for yourself" (ECE5_CC). One participant suggested that she and her co-workers stay because of the pension, "Personally, we stay here because we have a pension. We have a really good pension where our company actually could contribute to our pension, and we have health care and benefits" (ECE 7__OSC).

One educator offered that when vacation days are accumulated rather than paid out, they have a longer-term impact on well-being. "We have accumulated vacation days now. I notice that more of my educators are taking advantage of paid vacation time, and more are going away. They haven't ever gone on a vacation" (ECE 2__CC, OSC).

Two educators stated that when a program has few staff members, it makes it difficult to offer benefits. Specifically, one noted,

I want to get benefits. I've been trying to. ECEs want benefits, and we're working

towards that, including paid time off and paid sick days. If we had retirement plans,

pensions, health benefits, all of that. We don't have that like some daycares who are well

established. They will probably take a while to get there. (ECE 10__CC, PS)

Three participants described the impact of not having non-salaried compensation. "Last

April, my father-in-law passed away, so we had to go back to our home country, and that was not

paid. It took a month because of some paperwork. For a month, I lost my income. I don't have

the benefits" (ECE 9__FDH).

One educator reflected,

I would love to have my birthday. But then again, I'm not going to be picky because we

get a lot of benefits that other companies don't, and I know they don't, and I've worked

in those. You don't get time, and you don't get a health spending account. You don't

have a flexible schedule where our company does, and I think that's why we don't have

as much turnover and struggles as the other daycares and out-of-school care. (ECE

7__OSC).

Occasionally, a clearer description and understanding of the objectives of non-salaried

compensation is necessary, even for owners/operators. "The owner didn't want to do sick days

because she felt like people would take advantage of them" (ECE 2__CC, OSC). Some educators

could see the impact of fair wages and the non-salaried compensation on retention within their

programs. "There's retention in our program because we are paid a fair wage. We are offered

benefits, and we're given some perks in town. We get gym memberships and passes for our

families for the pool. So that really helps" (ECE 5__CC).

In summary, the fourth theme identified by ECEs was supportive organizational structures, which included various factors such as leadership support, operational practices, professional growth opportunities, and fair compensation. These factors collectively influence the sense of support among ECEs, which affects workforce retention and stability. Supportive organizational structures contribute to engaged and motivated ECEs. Leadership support involved recognizing and valuing the contributions of educators, providing constructive feedback, and being responsive to their needs and concerns. A positive leadership approach contributed to a workplace culture where educators felt heard and supported. However, poor leadership can be traumatic and create uncertainty among ECEs about their chosen career. The presence and involvement of owners/operators in the daily operations impacted the work environment. When owners were absent or disengaged, this led to challenges in communication, decision-making, and overall staff morale. An involved owner/operator contributed to a positive work culture by providing support, resources, and guidance. These themes extend beyond the ECEs well-being and organizational structures to policy decisions that directly or indirectly affected them. The policy decisions mentioned by participants are outlined in the next section.

Theme 5: Policy Decisions

Educators indicated that appropriate and enforceable regulations, consistent knowledge and competencies of co-workers, adequate funding for professional growth, recognition of their value to the community, and community engagement by policymakers that contribute to long-term workforce retention and stability. ECEs indicated that policy decision that supported them could lead to decisions to remain in the sector. Policy decisions contribute to building a skilled workforce in the ELCC sector and supporting sectoral expansion to meet the Canada-Alberta Agreement objectives. Subthemes of policy decisions of licensing regulations, certification and

competency, funding approaches, and opportunities for community-engagement are described below.

Licensing Regulations

Educators understood the intricacy of licensing and understood the complexity of operating with a ratio-driven sector, sometimes with competing organizational policies. As one ECE noted, "Licensing has a whole set of rules that we have to follow. On top of it, an organization has its own rules, policies, and theories that involve you doing what you need to do. (ECE 1__CC, OSC). Sometimes, educators mentioned how licensing minimum requirements around ratios, changed in the rewriting of the Child Care Act in 2020, can add stress.

> I do notice a difference for sure in ratio and sizing. The number of educators per kid went up, which I think is difficult to offer quality care. And that should be our goal: quality care. Having more kids in a room and having 20 kids in a room and two educators, it's just crap control. It's not quality care. No matter what you're doing. It's too hard (ECE 5__CC).

Another educator mentioned how licensing requirements were not always me, and the stress can be created for them. "I knew a program not in compliance with ratios. I knew it wasn't okay. We commit to the license; we commit to abide by the staffing plan. You're putting an educator under tremendous stress. But you can't say anything" (ECE 8__OSC). One ECE noted that some ECEs entering the sector do not fully grasp the importance of licensing and regulatory requirements and how that can create stress.

> Many staff don't understand the role or responsibility in child care. They have this image of what it is, and when they get in, they don't realize that we have to follow ratios, paperwork needs to be done, and critical incidents occur. Paperwork needs to be done.

Whatever programming is required at the centre on top of that. Staff look at me like I'm

nuts when I start listing all this stuff off. And they go, 'Well, why do I have to do this?'

And I was like, it's the requirements! It's not just watching kids. To an extent, yes. But

there's more to that. (ECE 1__CC, OSC)

One educator noted, how licensing ratios and mixing children without adequate staffing

made it challenging to meet the children's needs.

The shifting of the kids that's a big one. When I came back to that class, I had a mixed

group. We had children three and a half to six in there. It was a huge challenge. I kept

telling them that brain development of a six-year-old going to grade comparing to the

three-year-old is different. It became a challenge. They wanted to bring some younger

kids because of the waitlist, to have more kids for my room. I said I'm sorry. I'm already

have ten kids. (ECE 3__CC)

However, one educator mentioned using the Program Plan (a requirement of licensing) to

ensure that the ECES and parents understand the importance of closing the programs for

professional development and learning. "(ECEs) would have to show up for that (professional

development). Then, parents can't be upset if we close because it was in our program plan" (ECE

10__CC, PS).

ECEs understood the importance of keeping children safe and wanted new ECEs to know

licensing and have consistent enforcement of licensing. Some implied that more robust licensing

requirements are required. All understood its purpose in ensuring the safety and well-being of

children in their care. They emphasized the significance of consistently enforcing these

requirements to maintain high standards of care. Notably, none of the ECEs interviewed

expressed a desire to reduce licensing requirements, and all affirmed the purpose of licensing in
ELCC.

Certification and Competency

Concerns about licensing and certification led to conversations about foundational
knowledge and competencies. The certification process in Alberta assesses credentials and
assigns a certification level. As note din the literature review, entry into the ELCC sector
requires a 54-hour online course or three post-secondary credits in child development.
Participants mentioned that ECEs entering the sector with ECE Level 1 certification may require
more foundational knowledge, hands-on mentorship, and practicums. While passionate and
committed Level 1 educators can outperform Level 3 educators, participants observed that many
ECE Level 1s may need more foundational knowledge in child development, licensing
regulations, and day-to-day requirements. "I found the child care industry is fraught with a lack
of knowledge and a lack of training. It's tough. I've had a lot of really bad experiences in the
child care centres I've worked in" (ECE 6__OSC).

Ten educators mentioned the online course to attain ECE Level 1 certification and its
impact on the sector. The orientation certificate introduces individuals into the sector. However,
it may not guarantee a sustained commitment to long-term workforce retention and stability and
may require more training by leadership in the long run. One participant explained the concerns
about taking the online course to attain Level 1 certification.

> I have a love-hate relationship with the online course to get your level one. I love it
>
> because it was a really fast way for us to get staff to get their levels, but I hate it because
>
> the staff don't really understand what child care is. I've had some really amazing staff
>
> come out of there, but the majority of the time, it's not that great, and it shows.

> Somebody who does that online program is a lot of work to train. They're the hardest ones to get out of that mindset. You're not sitting on your phone. You have to interact with these kids. I love it because you can get a piece of paper, but I hate it because it doesn't give that practical experience. Those are the ones that they think they want to do child care, but they don't last. They don't realize the expectations and requirements that are set out. Those ones don't last very long. (ECE 1__CC, OSC)

This participant later mentioned that the certification process has created unintended consequences of making ECEs with higher certifications more expensive.

> Level threes are considered more expensive. Because we technically have what the government considers more education. Centres will only hire to licensing standards. I know of at least program that have exemptions because they don't have a level three. We fight over the level threes. They (owners/operators) don't even care at this point. They will see a level three, and they want to hire me because they need a level three. But we're dwindling because there's no incentives for us to stay. (ECE 1__CC, OSC)

One educator mentioned that program operators still ask for staff exemptions, despite the ease of entry into the sector. "I'm seeing that level ones come in more because of budgets. They (owners/operators) need people, so they bring in non-level people and then ask them to complete Level 1. The level ones are cheaper. It's putting a strain on the program" (ECE 8__OSC).

As one educator observed, "The government-funded orientation certificate for level one makes it easy to be in the field. So, people are coming into the field, and they're not passionate, they're not entering for the right reasons, and you can see it in their work ethic" (ECE 10__CC, PS) and that "it's just the band-aid to get them on the floor and to keep our ratios "(ECE 11__CC).

One educator noticed the possible conflict of raising the entry requirement into the sector. "That (ECE Level One online course) can draw people in and get their foot in the door, but then we don't want everyone to stay at level one. You don't want it to be so difficult that *nobody* wants to enter it" (ECE 5__CC).

One educator implied that assessing competencies may support building a proficient ECE workforce and suggested that the focus or certification should shift towards skills, passion, and pride rather than relying solely on formal education.

> I think more needs to be put into competencies. I've hired level threes that I would never hire again. Right now, I have a level one and a level two. The level one is amazing. She can run circles around the level threes. But she never finished her grade 12 diploma. She's almost 50 now and going back to school is just too daunting at this point in her career, but if you find a workshop, she's there. She is taking courses and workshops all the time to expand that knowledge. Whereas level three will barely take any professional development because they already came out of school knowing it all. (ECE 11__CC)

As a subtheme, ECEs mentioned concerns with certification in the ELCC and the need for foundational knowledge and competencies. One educator suggests assessing competencies to build a proficient ECE workforce and shifting the focus of certification towards skills, passion, and pride rather than relying solely on formal education or experience alone, as the online course to attain ECE Level 1 certification has been criticized for its lack of practical experience, leading to challenges in real-world child care scenarios. Furthermore, the certification process has created unintended consequences, such as making ECEs with higher certifications more expensive and program owners/operators asking for staff exemptions despite the ease of entry into the sector. In summary, ECEs highlighted the need for a more robust certification process

that provides practical experience and assesses competencies to build a proficient ECE workforce.

Funding Approaches

A factor of policy decisions included funding approaches taken by policy makers such as wage top-ups, cost control framework, access to professional development funding for ECEs in Alberta.

Wage-top ups. Funding for wages through the wage-top-up model is based on hours worked in direct care and ECE certification level. An ECE Level 3 earns a higher top-up ($8.62/hour) than an ECE Level 1 ($2.64/hour). The top-up model had previously been tied to accreditation status. If a program successfully attained accreditation, educators in facility-based child care were eligible for the top-up funding. Once accreditation ended, top-up funding became universal for all ECEs, regardless of the program's quality or status. The top-up funding model provides enhanced wages in addition to what the employer pays. Some ECEs found the top-up model adequate.

However, two educators pointed out that owners/operators relied on the wage-top-up system to pay their educators. "We were all being paid pretty much minimum wage plus top-up, that's it. Minimum wage was what they paid us, and then we got top-up on top of that" (ECE 1__CC, OSC). One educator observed that after 25+ years in the sector, "My base wage is $18. With top-up, I make $26.62" (ECE 11__CC). Another educator shared their experiences with the wage top-up.

> I really like the wage top-up system. I love how Alberta has done that. I love how they
> reward people who have gotten their education with a higher wage. I really, really like
> that system. Somebody with one year of education should not be making what somebody

with one year of education or no education is making; it just doesn't even make sense. I love that idea. And if they could increase it a little bit more, I think that would boost. I love the fact that it helps the centres. (ECE 6__OSC_37)

The wage top-up approach has been around since 2014; therefore, many community stakeholders in ELCC do not know a different approach. While most ECEs appreciated the system they also expressed concerns about still making minimum wage.

Cost Control Framework. The cost control framework was significant for the two educators. The cost-control framework is an element of the Canada-Alberta Agreement, which seeks to control the profits attained by owners under the federal bilateral funding agreement. One educator observed that marketing to reduced fees for families painted the wrong picture about the sector; "[i]n this cost framework, parents get spaces but forget about the people. We are so ratio-based. How are we going to get educators?" (ECE 8__OSC). Another educator commented that she had parents expecting 10/day fees immediately, not realizing that the sector did not have protocols or procedures yet.

> I had parents upset because they were waiting. It was hard because I don't think it should have been brought out the way it was. It should have been more planning and foreseeing how it's gonna play out. That was a challenge because I couldn't give parents answers." (ECE 10__CC, PS)

The cost-control framework was not a significant theme during this research, however, it is a significant component of the Canada-Alberta Agreement and needs to be discussed in more depth with ECEs so they understand its significance on the future of the workforce.

Professional Development Funding. In addition to wage enhancement, professional development funding from the government encouraged educators to advance professional

learning. Two educators offered, "I love how they're supporting centres in being able to support

(via tuition coverage) their educators in doing that" (ECE 6__OSC) with the observation that "it

is expensive to pay for additional learning and asking staff to pay for it" (ECE 1__CC, OSC).

One educator observed,

> Sometimes, they (ECEs) can't level up because they don't have funding. The funding is
>
> there, but that won't cover all of it (expenses to go back to school). That's a small portion
>
> of it. And it's only gonna get so far with that funding to the government. (ECE 10__CC,
>
> PS).

> Six participants mentioned that they were currently or intended to pursue further

education in ELCC. Two were enrolled the ECE Leadership Development Certificate from Red

Deer Polytechnic. "I just finished Brain Story. I'm doing the theory-to-practice soon. I am trying

to get into the leadership director at Red Deer College. I want to keep learning" (ECE 10__CC,

PS_62). Other ongoing professional development mentioned included enrolling in an undefined

master's program, the Flight curriculum course, and a Human Resources certificate to support

their current role.

> One educator urged that they wanted professional development to be helpful and

professional. "We want something that will give us skills, not just listening to someone who

created a fancy PowerPoint. Make it more educational. Make it something that will improve our

skills and knowledge. Like with Brain Story, that would be good" (ECE 9__FDH).

> One had recommendations for how policymakers could support networking and

professional growth.

> For me, I want to be able to go to a conference in a different province because I want to
>
> connect with people and see how they're running their programs and what they're doing.

But then, again, we don't get the funding to do that because the wages we're paying can't

necessarily afford to. (ECE 1__CC, OSC).

Participants of this research discussed various funding approaches for the ELCC

workforce in Alberta. This section covered three main funding approaches: wage top-ups, cost

control framework, and professional development funding. Wage top-ups are based on hours

worked and ECE certification level, with higher top-ups for higher certification levels. The cost

control framework is part of the Canada-Alberta Agreement and aims to control profits for

owners/operators. Professional development funding encourages educators to advance their

professional learning, with the government providing tuition coverage for ELCC educators.

Overall, the funding approaches in Alberta's ELCC sector are designed to support the workforce

by providing enhanced wages, controlling costs, and encouraging professional development. The

ECEs expressed gratitude for the wage top-up system and the government's support for

professional development. However, some educators expressed the need for more funding for

professional development. Participants emphasized the need for ongoing support and resources

to retain and attract qualified ELCC educators.

Collaborative Policy Development

It became apparent during the interviews that the ECEs appreciated the community-

engaged process. Community engagement can bridge the gap between policymakers and those

directly involved in ELCC through interactive knowledge exchange, providing a more accurate

understanding of the challenges faced on the ground. I asked the participants how they could

self-advocate and how they would get us all community stakeholders to work together. Some

educators noticed how important their voices and perspectives were. Most participants found

being included in the interview empowering. Just the act of asking for their perspective affirmed

their value and the importance of including their voices. Others realized they needed to complete

surveys, write letters, vote, and make their voices and practices visible. Overall, ECEs became

aware of the need for their involvement and the importance of collaborative policy development.

Four educators stated sentiments such as, "The interview made me want to change the

world now" (ECE 10__CC, PS) and

> This (interview) has shown where my passion now lies in early childhood. It started with
>
> the kids. There's a lot done for the families, and don't get me wrong, that's an amazing
>
> thing. But there's a flip side to it. Workers need a voice. (ECE 1__CC, OSC).

> "I just don't know where to start or help in this sector, but when this came along, I was

like, maybe this is a chance to talk about it" (ECE 7__OSC). Four educators suggested

policymakers walk in their shoes but for more than a sound bite or photo opportunity. As one

educator said,

> Walk a day in our shoes. Come spend a week and see what happens. People making these
>
> decisions they've never been in the trenches. What they think is a good idea, or usually
>
> isn't. It's not very feasible. It's not very practical. We're very practical people. Make
>
> things practical. Make it make sense. (ECE 11__CC)

> Recognition and appreciation for the value of ECEs that acknowledges educators' efforts

and contributions may impacts morale and job satisfaction. As one ECE declared,

> To be valued. People to understand, to see what we do. Come in and say, wow, you put a
>
> lot of work into this activity. To be recognized, I guess, to be recognized for all of our
>
> hard work. I think that's a big thing for educators because they sometimes feel like we're
>
> not important. (ECE 7__OSC)

The theme of policy decisions that emerged from the interviews showed the impact of policy decisions on the ELCC sector. Licensing, funding, and inclusion in decision making influence and shape the sector.

Participants indicated the importance of collaborative policy development in the ELCC. Educators appreciated being included in the interview process and became aware of their need for policy development involvement. They suggested that policymakers walk in their shoes to gain a practical understanding of the challenges ECEs face. Community engagement is crucial in bridging the gap between policymakers and those directly involved in ELCC, as it provides an opportunity for ECEs to contribute to their long-term workforce retention and stability. As decisions are being made on their behalf, including ECEs in community engagement initiatives is emphasized.

"You need to value the educators that are choosing to stay" (ECE 5__CC).

This chapter presented the findings of a community-engaged, qualitative study that aimed to understand the factors affecting workforce retention in the early learning and child care sector in Alberta, Canada. The study conducted semi-structured interviews with eleven early childhood educators (ECEs) and identified five key themes from the data. The first theme is personal passion, pride, and professional identity, highlighting the deep dedication and connection that ECEs have with children. This theme emphasized the importance of recognizing and valuing the professional identity of ECEs and providing opportunities for them to grow and develop in their careers. The second theme, work-life balance, highlighted the challenges that ECEs face in balancing their work and personal lives. The third theme was positive professional relationships, emphasizing the importance of positive and supportive relationships between ECEs and their colleagues, supervisors, and families. The fourth theme of supportive organizational structures

highlighted the need for supportive and flexible organizational structures that enable ECEs to

provide high-quality care. The fifth theme of policy decisions emphasized the need for policy

decisions that prioritize the well-being of children, families, and ECEs. This chapter concluded

by highlighting the importance of addressing these themes to improve workforce retention in the

ELCC sector.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Limitations, and Future Research Directions

This research aimed to understand the factors influencing workforce retention and stability in Alberta's early learning and child care (ELCC) sector by conducting semi-structured interviews with eleven early childhood educators (ECEs). Three overarching questions guided this research: What factors contribute to ECEs feeling supported? How can the identified factors contribute to long-term workforce retention and stability of ECEs? What solutions to workforce retention can be identified from their perspective? A thematic approach to analysis inductively showed five key themes: (1) personal passion, pride, and professional identity, (2) work-life balance, (3) positive professional relationships, (4) supportive organizational structures, and (5) policy decisions. Research directly involving ECEs working in Alberta is limited. Therefore, this research aimed to gain insight directly from ECEs as decisions are being made on their behalf as the Canada-Alberta ELCC Agreement is rolled out. This discussion will primarily focus on the findings from this research regarding the factors that contribute to ECEs feeling supported. Specific support factors will be highlighted within each theme, along with their potential contributions to workforce stability. Additionally, the discussion will contextualize the findings within the current policy window created by the Canada-Alberta agreement.

Personal Passion, Pride, and Professional Identity Factors

The commitment of the participant ECEs in this research to their work with children is strongly emphasized through the theme of personal passion, pride, and professional identity. Many participants had a deep personal connection with children and have chosen to enter the sector to impact children's lives positively. The findings of this study suggest that ECEs see themselves as essential members of the children's care team and understand the positive influence their work has on children. Specifically, participant ECEs wanted to be recognized and

valued as professionals, and as "brain builders," a term used by the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative in collaboration with the Harvard Center on the Developing Child and the Palix Foundation to describe caregivers responsible for nurturing children (Alberta Family Wellness Initiative, n.d.). ECEs in this research who completed the Brain Story Certification through the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative deeply understood the crucial link between brain development and early childhood experiences. In this research, ECEs viewed themselves as 'brain builders' who contributed to children's growth through intentional interactions and thoughtful curriculum decisions. This research supports the idea that ECEs entering the sector are passionate about working with children and young people (Cavazos, 2017; McDonald et al., 2018). However, participants acknowledged the significant challenges involved in their work. While personal passion and pride for working with children are important qualities, participants noted these may not be sufficient when facing multiple job responsibilities, unsupportive administrative policies, inadequate pay, or a perceived lack of recognition and value from society. Therefore, while pride and passion attract ECEs to the sector, creating support systems around ECEs is equally important as they engage in brain-building with children.

During interviews, ECEs emphasized the significance of their work and the emotional investment in the children they cared for. They spoke about developing strong bonds with children and their families. However, they faced challenges and did not always receive recognition for their skills. To succeed in this sector, ECEs in this research suggested an individual must have a genuine passion for nurturing children, a commitment to overcoming challenges, and resilience. Overall, participants mentioned it is important for new ECEs to carefully consider the motivations for entering the ELCC sector, ensuring a commitment to the well-being of children.

      To attract like-minded ECEs, it might be worthwhile to emphasize the opportunity to make a difference and seek opportunities for improving professional identity and value to community. The Brain Story Certification/Theory to Practice sessions provided by AECEA and access to Flight framework played a crucial role in deepening participant ECEs' understanding of their professional duties, cultivating a shared language, and fostering a sense of professional identity. It is possible that implementing the Flight curriculum (Makovichuk et al., 2014) and engaging in professional learning such as the Brain Story/Theory to Practice sessions can further enhance a sense of belonging and professional connection among ECEs (Halverson et al., 2022; Irvine & Price, 2014; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2022). This, in turn, may increase ECEs visibility and reinforce their contributions to families and the wider community. McKinlay et al.'s (2018) research highlights the vital role that a strong sense of professional identity plays in retention efforts, with professional identity encompassing attributes such as internalized values, a professional self-image, and a focus on social goals. Participants in this thesis research displayed a robust self-perception as professionals; however, they acknowledged that external perceptions influenced their professional identity. They wanted to feel valued for their professional practice but were aware this was not reciprocated by some community stakeholders. Irvine et al.'s (2016) study in Australia revealed that external perceptions shaped ECEs' internal perspectives and professional identity. Their findings align with this research, where participants recognized the significance of their work but felt a lack of full appreciation from the wider community. Therefore, professional identity should be considered when devising retention strategies, as collaborating with others who share pedagogical philosophies and value collaborative approaches with shared language and understanding can enhance motivation (Jones et al., 2019). Lastly, this research demonstrated the potential impact of recognizing ECEs as valuable

caregivers in the community. As one ECE in this research acknowledged, the recognition of

ECEs' contribution to society makes it more challenging to undervalue and underpay them.

Participants in this thesis research expressed feelings of diminished value, being

perceived as mere babysitters, not being taken seriously, or the belief that anyone could do their

job. As highlighted by Scott (2021) and Doherty-Derkowski (2000), emotional investment plays

a pivotal role in an ECE's decision to remain in or leave the ELCC sector. As discussed in the

literature, a reciprocal relationship exists between motivation to make a difference and receiving

acknowledgment for the skills ECEs possess. The factors influencing workforce retention are

multifaceted and overlapping factors that must work harmoniously to ensure that ECEs are

genuinely valued and respected for their professional practice. This approach reinforces the

importance of respecting ECEs and recognizing their contributions. As Irvine et al. (2016) assert,

a public image that fails to acknowledge the professional and educational nature of the work

devalues those who choose to work in this sector. Therefore, a campaign to elevate public

awareness about the roles and lives of ECEs could prove advantageous in enhancing their status

within the community and acknowledging their intrinsic value. As noted by Child Care Now, a

Canadian advocacy group created in 1982 to build support for a pan-Canadian ELCC system

suggests, public awareness requires collaboration (Child Care Now, 2024). Therefore, AECEA

and its partners and affiliates can create a public awareness campaign about ELCC and ECEs by

using the findings from this research.

In summary of this theme, each participant had varied reasons for entering the sector, yet

they all shared a personal passion and pride in their work. Policymakers and professional

associations can use these findings to develop strategies that align with the personal passion,

pride, and professional identity, creating an ELCC system that supports the professional identity

of ECEs. The findings suggest that the factors influencing workforce retention are complex and interconnected. Relying on a single factor alone is inadequate; stability requires a delicate balance of multiple factors working in harmony of which recognizing ECEs for their professional practice is a factor.

Work-Life Balance Factors

ECEs in this research reported working long hours or purchasing materials without compensation. ECEs may unintentionally subsidize the cost of providing high-quality child care by accepting low wages, limited benefits, and voluntary donations of time and resources (Child Care Human Resources Sector Council, n.d.). Participants highlighted the financial strain of purchasing classroom materials, with reimbursement not always guaranteed. This lack of compensation has tangible effects, as demonstrated by the research conducted by Whitebook and Sakai (2003) in their four-year study involving interviews with 220 ECEs. These researchers found insufficient paid and protected professional time can lead to burnout and stress for ECEs. The issue of low wages and donated resources raises questions about the true cost of providing quality child care in Alberta. Completing activities during unpaid hours may subsidize the cost of running a program and significantly impacts ECEs' personal lives. Expecting ECEs to donate their time and resources may be seen as exploitative. Additionally, as community-engagement occurs regarding the cost-control framework and core/enhanced services without the input of ECEs, policy makers may not be gaining adequate data about the true cost to operate an ELCC program. Addressing unpaid work and financial strain on ECEs may direct retention efforts.

Additionally, ECEs face challenges in achieving work-life balance due to personal responsibilities outside of operational hours. Hyde et al. (2020) and Walker (2013) in their articles about time poverty describe this phenomenon as not having enough time for rest or

leisure after accounting for all hours worked either domestically or after participating in the labour market. As they both note, time poverty has been shown to negatively affect physical and economic well-being and it often gendered. Neglecting nutrition, physical activity and self-care are consequences of time poverty, especially for ECEs with caregiving responsibilities or with multiple jobs. Long working hours impact their families, emphasizing the need for understanding and support. However, it is important to acknowledge the challenges of self-care due to limited resources and lack of free time, as Wiens and MacDonald (2021) highlighted in their intersectional review of self-care. They conducted a textual analysis of social media posts to compare postfeminist viewpoints on the privilege of self-care practices and how these practices may fail to address societal inequities, such as the lack of access to time and resources. Furthermore, they point out, current self-care discourse may be linked to dominant Western concepts of gender. Therefore, considering the intersectionality of ECEs, it is important to recognize that the responsibility for self-care and stress management should not be placed solely on ECEs. As noted, ECEs in Alberta are primarily female, many from visible minorities, and with added domestic responsibilities outside of work hours. Approaches to self-care should prioritize rest and rejuvenation without burdening ECEs with all the responsibility. Therefore, the supportive systems around ECEs have a responsibility to address stress management and self-care practices.

To summarize this theme, the research findings indicate that work-life balance is important for ECEs. This theme highlights participant ECEs' challenges in balancing their personal and professional lives, leading to burnout and stress leading to turnover. Achieving work-life balance through reasonable workloads and self-care practices may contribute to the long-term retention and stability of the ECE workforce. ECEs need support from their

workplaces, families, and policymakers. Providing necessary support and care for ECEs may allow them to be retained in the ELCC profession for an extended period.

The following section will explore how positive professional relationships may contribute to workforce retention and stability in ELCC settings in Alberta.

Positive Professional Relationship Factors

The participants in this research highlighted how a supportive team environment, characterized by mutual respect and understanding, reduces stress and cultivates a positive workplace culture. This theme aligns with McKinlay et al. (2018), in their qualitative case study of five teachers in Queensland who emphasized the importance of collaborative relationships in maintaining a stable workforce. ECEs in this thesis research stressed the need to develop a supportive team that allows them to share joys, challenges, stressors, and ideas. Further highlighting that connections between ECEs and their colleagues can lead to lasting relationships outside of work hours, contributing to work-life balance and stress management highlighting overlapping support factors. As Bridges et al. (2011) also noted, developing long-term relationships among collaborative team members can benefit ECEs, children, and families in the long run.

Positive professional relationships with families are also important. According to a literature review conducted by Cumming (2017), the quality of relationships with parents can have a significant impact on ECEs well-being. This includes several factors such as language barriers, differing expectations, adjusting emotional responses to families, feeling undervalued, and a lack of involvement in the program. Faulkner et al. (2014) also discovered that interactions with parents can be a source of workplace stress for ECEs. The literature shows, that while collaborating with parents can lead to positive outcomes, it can pose challenges that require

educators to navigate difficult situations. Participants in this research recognized the significance of the bond between a child and their ECEs in supporting parents with their child's development. The ECEs emphasized the value of collaborating with parents as a team rather than fostering an adversarial relationship. Britto et al. (2017) support this notion, noting that child care can provide nurturing care to children in a stable, responsive, and trusting environment, thereby supporting parents. The goal of ELCC should be to create a collaborative and supportive environment that benefits the child, parents, and educators. ECEs can be invaluable partners for parents and families.

In addition, ECEs can promote appreciation for their work, establish connections with families, and demonstrate their impact on children through open dialogue and showcasing their practice. Fenech (2012) outlined the potential for parents to provide valuable insights for policymaking through collaboration with early childhood educators, highlighting the importance of high-quality care. ECEs of this thesis research showed that collaboration and open communication may dispel the misconception that ECEs lack value or professional skills. It is possible that by making their practice visible, ECEs can demonstrate children's growth and showcase their ability to create diverse learning experiences thereby highlighting their value to the community. Furthermore, parents who advocate for ELCC and ECEs have a role in raising awareness and support for the sector.

Using a curriculum can foster professional relationships among co-workers and their families. In this research, ECE referred to themselves as "brain builders" and found connections through curricular languages in the Flight and Montessori approaches. Established curricula like Flight and Montessori can foster connections among ECE professionals, promote professional growth, and deepen their understanding of children's needs. Embracing Flight principles can

facilitate connections between families and educators by making their practices visible. This research highlights the potential role of the Flight approach in developing retention strategies and enabling ECEs to connect with their practice and colleagues. Flight may also nurture ECEs by providing them with a shared language and making their professional practice visible to families, communities, colleagues, and leaders.

Another factor contributing to workforce stability is the affiliation with a professional association. Irvine et al. (2016) state that professions typically have central professional associations that advocate for the sector and support early childhood educators (ECEs). One participant in this study emphasized the importance of a professional network, particularly after losing their local association. Professional associations or societies can facilitate connections among leaders, organize workshops, and interpret information from policymakers (Katz, 1985). Additionally, communities of practice or professional learning communities, such as those established by the Early Childhood Educators of BC (Early Childhood Educators of BC, n.d.), can foster connections among ECEs (Kirby et al., 2021). Cavazos (2022) observed that ECEs working together towards a common goal and sharing ideas tend to develop a sense of belonging and remain in the sector for extended periods. AECEA could consider similar options to provide professional connections, resources, and support for ECEs in Alberta. Staying informed through a professional association and participating in communities of practice can help ECEs advocate for change and amplify their voices.

In summary of this theme, positive professional relationships may contribute to workforce retention and stability in ELCC. A supportive team environment reduces stress and fosters a positive workplace culture, encouraging ECEs to stay in the sector. Building long-term relationships among team members benefits the children and families served. It is important to

remember that positive professional relationships extend beyond the team to include all community stakeholders, with children at the center. Effective communication and mutual respect are key to successful partnerships between educators and parents, improving the overall quality of care and creating a sense of community and support. Therefore, ensuring positive and supportive professional structures around ECEs may contribute to retaining and stabilizing the ECE workforce. Given the complexity of the sector, these foundational structures are of paramount importance.

Supportive Working Conditions and Organizational Structural Factors

Adding to the complexity of workforce retention and stability is the role supportive organizational structures play a role in determining the level of support experienced by ECEs. ECEs in this research noted they could voice their concerns, participate in decision-making, and establish a positive work environment. On the other hand, inadequate leadership was shown to be harmful, affecting job satisfaction and decisions to remain in the sector.

According to McDonald et al. (2018), supportive leadership strategies, such as promoting the voice and involvement of ECEs in decision-making and recognizing their professional expertise, enhanced ECE retention. Thorpe et al. (2020) also found that favourable workplace conditions were significant factors in almost half of the departures observed in early learning and child care organizations. Therefore, supportive leadership recognizes the contributions of educators, providing constructive feedback, being responsive to their needs and concerns and contributing to a workplace culture where educators feel valued and supported, ultimately influencing job satisfaction and retention.

In addition to supportive leadership and favourable workplace conditions, comprehensive retention strategies should include career guidance, professional activities, and post-secondary

coursework for staff. Bridges et al. (2011) highlighted that providing support in these areas increases the likelihood of ECEs completing more courses and enhances knowledge and stability in the ECE sector. When ECEs can share knowledge, engage in intellectual discussions, reflect on their practice, and apply their professional expertise, they experience a sense of pride that reinforces their passion for their work (McMullen et al., 2020). This underlines the importance of creating opportunities for ECEs to collaborate and grow professionally.

Alongside these supportive organization factors is a component of adequate compensation. During the interviews, participants were presented with wage grid recommendations and details about non-salaried compensation (Smith et al., 2021). While most ECEs supported the wage grid recommendations, some felt it needed to be more progressive and missed compensation for higher post-secondary credentials or responsibilities. One possible solution for fair compensation is to offer ECEs a living wage that considers the regional cost of living through a consistent wage grid that has stable funding and shows reward for continuous career progression (Ferrant et al., 2014). Acknowledging that a love of children should not overshadow the need for a living wage (Irvine et al., 2016, sec. Feeling undervalued). Additionally, it would ensure that ECEs can adequately cover their expenses and maintain a dignified standard of living in their communities (Alberta Living Wage Network, 2022). Implementing a wage grid system proposed by Smith et al. (2022) that ensures living wages and enables wage growth based on tenure may contribute to stability within the ECE workforce. Furthermore, consistent and adequate wages can result in ECEs no longer needing multiple jobs or relying on spousal or family support, contributing to work-life balance and well-being.

The issue of fair compensation for ECEs is influenced by gender-related concerns. According to Ackerman (2006), low salaries for ECEs can be attributed to gender-related factors,

leading to retention problems and diminished job status. As Vosko noted, ELCC could be considered non-standard or precarious employment, which is more often prevalent among women and visible minorities (Vosko, 2003, 2006). Additionally, precarious employment may lead to increased workloads and unpaid overtime leading to stress (Government of Canada, 2023). The issues of low wages for ECEs are complex but may be addressed by a consistent and coherent wage grid process for ECEs. However, fair compensation needs to work in harmony with supportive working conditions and work-life balance to retain ECEs (Furnham et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the fourth key theme is a supportive organizational structure encompassing operational practices, administrative support, professional growth opportunities, and equitable compensation. Supportive leadership fosters a positive workplace culture, job satisfaction, and employee retention. Clear policies and effective onboarding processes are crucial in addressing retention issues. Providing adequate vacation time and dedicated, protected time for tasks such as documentation and planning can promote overall well-being. However, more than fair compensation is needed to retain ECEs; addressing gender-related concerns and funding approaches is necessary. One potential solution is to provide a living wage considering the regional cost of living.

Policy Decision Factors

The final theme of policy decisions in ELCC in Alberta highlights the impact of policymakers on workforce retention and stability. In this research, ECEs emphasized the need for appropriate and effective licensing and regulations, consistent certification and competencies, funding models, and inclusion in decision-making.

The concept of licensing and regulations affecting the stability of the workforce emerged during the interviews. In collaboration with Public Interest Alberta, Child Care Now Alberta

released the report, *Where is the Child Care?: How the Shortage of Early Childhood Educators Undermines Access in Alberta* (2023). They point out that Alberta already had child-staff ratios below international standards for qualified ECEs; therefore, further reductions and streamlining of regulations would be reckless and endanger vulnerable children and may sacrifice children's well-being (Child Care Now Alberta, 2023). The risk-based approach to the Act in Alberta also appears to burden ECE disproportionately. Owners/operators, driven by a desire to minimize operating costs, may hire underqualified ECEs who lack the foundational knowledge required to meet regulatory and programming standards for children or engage in meaningful interactions with children with complex needs. Such practices create a concerning situation that inadvertently threatens the well-being of young children, which the Act is designed to protect.

Moreover, there is a potential conflict between a risk-based licensing approach and the Flight curriculum's social-constructionist perspective. The risk-based approach assumes that children are always at risk (Fenech, 2008; Gunningham, 2015). At the same time, the Flight curriculum views all children as "mighty learners and citizens" (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. iv) who have the ability and independence to make their own decisions with the support of ECEs. So far, these ideologies have coexisted. However, the ideological differences raise concerns of subtle underlying issues that could affect the workforce and implementation of the Flight curriculum.

Issues with certification and competencies of ECE also arose during the interviews. Participants suggested that while passion and commitment can lead to success in ELCC, ECEs with Level 1 certification may need more knowledge in child development, licensing regulations, and day-to-day requirements. Participants were quick to say, 'not all Level 1s', but when probed, ECEs in this research described concerns with the lack of practical experience and added that

extra mentoring and training was often required. While the Orientation course offers convenience to enter the sector, it lacks practical experiential learning, leading to difficulties for ECEs navigating real-world child care scenarios. Participants were concerned that the Level 1 orientation certificate may not guarantee long-term workforce retention despite the ease of entry. Additionally, ECEs in this research wondered about unintended consequences of the certification process, such as making ECEs with higher certifications more expensive and owners/operators hiring for minimum licensing standards. One educator mentioned that operators still ask for staff exemptions despite the ease of entry into the sector.

According to Fukkink and Lont's (2007) meta-analysis of caregiver training, specialized training enhances the pedagogical competencies of ECEs. As they pointed out, having childminding experience is essential; however, it is insufficient to prepare a person to work with groups of children. Their analysis emphasized the significance of training as a means of achieving quality ELCC. They conclude that the training must include information on child development and responsive interactions. Fukkink and Lont (2007) further noted that licensing standards are typically low and training expectations unclear. Therefore, the variety of pathways to certification in Alberta may have created inconsistent training that fails to provide foundational knowledge and may unintentionally lead to workforce retention issues and dissatisfaction among ECEs. The participants in this study emphasized that many ECEs with Level 1 certification were responsive to children and displayed a disposition to engage in meaningful interactions with them. At the same time, participants acknowledged that some ECEs with Level 1 certification were not fully prepared to engage in the daily work with children. ECEs in this research emphasized that certification should be accompanied by practical experience to establish a proficient and stable workforce in ELCC and ensure optimal outcomes

for young children. It was suggested that implementing a competency-based assessment can help clearly define the tasks and competencies associated with each certification level.

Allen and Backes (2018) conducted an extensive review of the financing of ELCC in the United States. They emphasized that a successful financing structure of ELCC must be consistent and cohesive. As solutions are created, Allen and Backes suggest that solutions should be considered part of an integrated ELCC system that encompasses service delivery, system support, and workforce support rather than independent components. Cleveland and Krashinsky in Canada (2012) outlined similar funding plans for an effective ELCC system to be implemented in Canada. Components included adequate and dependable funding equitably distributed with built-in accountability processes (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2012). Cleveland (2022) later wrote that funding ELCC requires significant public investment in operations and should be viewed as a public good. To be effective, financing should be coordinated and work towards a comprehensive ELCC system. Ullrich et al. (2017) further recommended that funding policies should include funding for professional development, wages, benefits, and rewards for degree completion. The literature suggests that these policies should include consistent standards for preparation and training, clearly defined career pathways, and support for ongoing professional learning. Funding for ELCC requires coordination and consistency, with a clear vision for an integrated ELCC system.

Finally, an unexpected outcome of this research was the significance of involving ECEs in decisions that impact them. Participants expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to share their perspectives through interviews. As this research has shown, incorporating participants' voices can yield numerous benefits. At the conclusion of each interview, participant ECEs expressed gratitude for being included, had heightened awareness of their capacity for self-

advocacy, and recognized their ability to propose solutions to challenges facing ELCC. By providing ECEs with a platform to articulate their thoughts, they gained insight into their voices and the potential impact they can have on policy decisions. As Wallerstein and Duran (2010) highlight, community-engaged approaches can cultivate space for grassroots knowledge, culturally supported solutions, and community advocacy. This research suggests that with appropriate community-engagement opportunities, ECEs can assert their needs and become self-advocates alongside professional associations. Nelson et al. (1998) emphasized that participatory action research, of which community-engaged research is a part, entails empowerment, fostering supportive relationships, promoting social change, and developing ongoing learning. All these elements were evident in the interviews, as ECEs discovered their voice and gained a clearer understanding of their role in effecting social change for their inclusion in policy decisions. Although this study only involved a small sample of eleven participants, all reported increased awareness of their significance within the larger ecosystem.

Community engagement can help bridge the gap between policymakers and those directly involved in ELCC, providing a more accurate understanding of the challenges faced on the ground (Attygalle, 2019; Cargo & Mercer, 2008). ECEs in this research expressed a desire for more self-advocacy and working together to make their voices and practices visible. They emphasized the need for policymakers to understand the daily challenges ECEs face and suggested spending a week in an ELCC program to gain practical insights. In summary, ECEs want to be seen, heard, understood, valued, and appreciated.

Nurturing

A central concept cutting across all themes was nurturing. To understand nurturing care, I referred to the World Health Organization's 2023 guideline, *Improving Early Childhood*

Development: WHO Guideline - Summary. According to this guideline, nurturing care involves "[a] stable, sensitive environment that is responsive to children's health and nutritional needs, emotionally supportive, developmentally stimulating and appropriate, with opportunities for play and exploration and protection from adversities" (World Health Organization, 2023, p. 3). When we view ECEs within the center of the ELCC ecosystem with children, and apply these guidelines, we see the importance of creating a nurturing environment that responds to and supports their needs. This includes providing ECEs training, mentoring, and professional learning opportunities to improve their practices. It means establishing supportive workplaces with colleagues who understand their roles, practices, routines, and child development, ensuring educators have the necessary knowledge. Educators should have the chance to explore their learning with supportive leadership that offers guidance and mentorship when needed. Effective leaders can also guide curriculum collaboration, establish consistency with organizational structures, practice active listening, demonstrate care, and pay attention to educators to ensure they can effectively support children (OECD, 2019a).

As part of community-engaged collaboration, I consulted AECEA's policy committee to understand their definition of "nurturing." They emphasized that nurturing involves connection, care, protection, encouragement, growth, and responsiveness. Being a responsive caregiver means providing guidance for safety, education, and development and establishing a caring and understanding relationship (World Health Organization, 2023). Relationships are recognized as the foundation of quality early education. We can observe caring actions by examining how we build relationships with young children. Through care, children develop trust and belief in their capacity to learn. Considering this concept, we can reflect on which nurturing concepts we can apply to the ELCC workforce where ECEs feel supported. Do we make time to care for ECEs

and acknowledge their motivation, intuition, education, and selflessness? Do we cultivate relationships with ECEs and value their dedication to children and families? A competent system requires coordinated approaches to governance, resources, professional preparation, and evaluation, recognizing its complexity (Urban, 2008, 2010; Urban et al., 2018). In general, ECEs in this research suggested that they are more likely to stay in the sector when they are involved in daily decisions, empowered to voice their opinions and make day-to-day choices, have input in curriculum decisions, are valued for their practice, and professionally engaged (Buettner et al., 2016; Jeon et al., 2018; McMullen et al., 2020). We have a roadmap for workforce retention and stability, ECEs know what they need, we just need to listen and nurture.

The findings of this research support the existing literature on ELCC from the past 30 years. However, what sets this research apart is that it represents the first qualitative community-engaged study in Alberta that engaged with ECEs and asked them about their needs. Including the voices of ECEs in decision-making is essential as we determine their future. The findings reveal that multiple factors can support or hinder ECEs' feelings of support. Moreover, this research suggests that community stakeholders should prioritize supporting ECE well-being and recognizing their value. Each of us has a role in ensuring the ELCC workforce stability in Alberta. A comprehensive approach is needed to address retention issues. This includes supportive leadership, favourable workplace conditions, adequate compensation, and comprehensive retention strategies prioritizing educators' well-being and professional growth. By implementing these measures, we can ensure workforce stability and enhance the quality of ELCC.

In summary, ensuring the success of ECEs is not solely their responsibility. The community provides fair compensation, consistent policies, professional growth opportunities,

administrative support, and collaboration with families and coworkers. All community stakeholders share responsibility. Many voices are expressing their perspectives on the Canada-Alberta Agreement, but ECEs who work directly with children often go unheard. By nurturing ECEs and children, we can achieve workforce stability. This research emphasizes the need for comprehensive support from all stakeholders in the ELCC community. To promote a supportive environment for ECES, stakeholders need to collaborate effectively.

Limitations

It is important to discuss the limitations of this research and consider the findings and discussion in light of these limitations. Limitations of this research include sample size, connectivity of ECEs, stakeholder perspectives, the current data desert, and the extent of the community-engaged process. The sample size of participants for this research was small (n=11), which is typical of qualitative research. The sample used in this research was somewhat varied with respect to age, length of time in the profession, ethnocultural background, training, qualifications, and certification. However, it would be beneficial to expand the size of the sample within each of these key demographics to help determine if there are any differences in retention among different demographic components. Additionally, adding a more comprehensive survey could be beneficial, as it can provide a broader perspective on the topic. While interviews are useful in providing depth, surveys can be effective in obtaining a larger sample size.

As well, ECEs in rural/remote areas may be disconnected from their professional community due to location or situation. ECEs in remote regions of Alberta may be disconnected due to a lack of internet connectivity or gatekeeping by the administration, which limits the reach of connection efforts. It is important to reach rural, remote, and isolated ECEs, every effort must be made to reach them.

Research interpretation may vary depending on the stakeholder perspective. Broadening the diversity of participants to include ECE Level 1, newly entered ECEs, and those with diverse cultural identities would provide unique perspectives. Additionally, alternative explanations for the findings may stem from different positionality and ideologies of community stakeholders. Community stakeholders with differing perspectives may argue that these findings don't align with their focus of ELCC.

The Government of Alberta tracks only the retention rates of ECEs. However, this data is not public. It would be additionally beneficial to know the context and conditions of where ECEs go and why when they exit or leave the sector. Understanding the nature of turnover and the demographics of ECEs would make it easier to deliver effective policy decisions. The sector cannot determine the factors that may influence turnover, such as poor working conditions, workplace harassment, or changes in family dynamics without adequate or consistent data. Understanding the nature of turnover would enable effective policy decisions (Bassok et al., 2021).

Lastly, community-engaged research can be time-consuming and resource-intensive. Every effort was made in this research to ensure the active engagement of participants. This research emphasizes the need to include ECE voices in decision-making regarding the future of ELCC.

Future Research Directions

This research provided valuable insight into the factors that influence workforce retention and stability in Alberta's ELCC sector from the perspective of ECEs. The findings emphasized the importance of supporting ECEs in their desire to work with children by understanding their motivations and creating support systems, such as work-life balance, positive professional

relationships, supportive organizational structures, and policy decisions. There are areas where further research could expand on these findings, such as exploring the questions that arose during this study and addressing unanswered questions.

The concept of educational equivalencies was mentioned multiple times during the interviews. Establishing a clear pathway into the sector may help professionalize it and create a unified image of educators. Four participants with a child and youth diploma or degree strongly believed that this qualification was sufficient for entering and sustaining their practice in ELCC. The debate surrounding equivalencies and their impact on the quality of care raises interesting questions about the effect of child and youth care credentials on ELCC. Additionally, the effectiveness of the ECE Level 1 certification is a matter of debate. Level 1 certification offers an accessible entry point into the sector and ensures that there are individuals on the floor who can meet licensing requirements. Community stakeholders argue that ECE Level 1s are more effective in their jobs than ECE Level 3s. However, when probed, participants in this research mentioned that ECE Level 1 often requires more training and mentoring due to a lack of foundational knowledge about child development and licensing requirements. Further research is needed to understand the impact of ECE Level 1 on the ELCC workforce.

Examining the Canadian experience of entering the ELCC sector is a potential avenue for future research. One participant raised the issue of the motivations of some new Canadians to enter the sector, suggesting that it may not always stem from a desire to work with children, but rather as a straightforward route into the labour market. Exploring this issue could provide valuable insights into the motivations of ECEs to enter the sector and the impact on the sector when the barrier to enter the sector is low. Additionally, ECEs who immigrate to Canada bring

diverse experiences and credentials. Understanding the experiences of new Canadian ECEs in Alberta would be a valuable area of inquiry.

Further research is warranted to explore the breadth of ECE experiences across Alberta, especially considering the "data desert" discussed in Chapter 2. This lack of data raises questions about ECEs' encounters with racism, ageism, classism, and exploitation. Given the scarcity of data, it is necessary to delve deeper into the diversity of ECEs to determine if exploitative labour practices are prevalent in Alberta's ELCC sector. Further investigation into the demographics of ECEs and their unique experiences would be invaluable in formulating targeted policies.

Conclusions

This research aimed to understand the factors that influence workforce retention and stability in Alberta's ELCC sector. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 ECEs, guided by three overarching questions: What factors contribute to ECEs feeling supported? How can the identified factors contribute to long-term workforce retention and stability of ECEs? What solutions to workforce retention can be identified from their perspective?

Using a thematic approach, the research identified five key themes: personal passion, pride, and professional identity; work-life balance; positive professional relationships; supportive organizational structures; and policy decisions. These themes demonstrate how various elements are interconnected and impact ECEs' feelings of support and stability, ultimately affecting workforce turnover and retention. ECEs desire to be valued, appreciated, and respected for their work with children and their contribution to families and the community.

The research adopted a community-engaged qualitative approach to identify the factors affecting workforce retention and stability in Alberta's ELCC sector. Through the thematic approach, the research emphasized the significance of personal passion and pride in working

with children, achieving work-life balance, fostering supportive professional relationships, establishing supportive organizational structures, and making favourable policy decisions to promote workforce retention and stability in the sector.

The findings of this research provide valuable insights into the factors contributing to workforce retention and stability in the ELCC sector and offer recommendations for enhancing the position of ECEs. It revealed that personal passion, pride, and motivation are crucial factors in ECEs' decision to enter the sector and underscored the importance of supportive work environments and policies that recognize the profession. Achieving and maintaining workforce stability and retention in ELCC requires a comprehensive approach. This approach should consider professional development, organizational support, compensation, work-life balance, and emotional well-being. It is crucial to establish a collaborative system involving all community stakeholders. The significance of leadership practices and organizational culture in creating a supportive environment should not be underestimated. Effective leadership is vital for fostering a positive workplace culture, which, in turn, leads to long-term employee satisfaction and commitment. Additionally, community stakeholders need to recognize the importance of policies that align with the needs and aspirations of ECEs. These policies should provide solutions to challenges and create opportunities within the sector. Fair compensation and comprehensive benefits could help retain and stabilize the ECE workforce. By acknowledging the value of educators through fair compensation, we can encourage long-term commitment. Workplaces should prioritize work-life balance and address the emotional well-being of ECEs. By offering resources and support, ECEs can effectively manage stress, improve their mental health, and enhance their overall well-being. Continuous professional development opportunities and

ongoing learning and skill enhancement are crucial for job satisfaction, professional growth, and workforce stability.

Throughout this research, one consistent aspect stood out: the deep commitment of each person to the children and families of Alberta. We should equally dedicate ourselves to supporting the ECEs who interact with children daily. We must commit to eliminating obstacles and providing resources that support their work. Our responsibility is to amplify their voices and enhance their ability to make a difference. ECEs take immense pride in their work, and this research sheds light on how they perceive themselves and the steps we can take to enhance their importance within the community. The research demonstrates the role of ECEs and the factors that contribute to their long-term retention. We must establish an environment that prioritizes care and responsiveness for both children and ECEs and prioritize their needs alongside families and owners/operators.

To achieve this, we must extend nurturing to those who nurture the children, ensuring a sense of being heard and valued. When ECEs feel valued, they are more likely to find contentment, experience joy in their work, and perform at their best when interacting with children. ECEs understand the significant impact they have on shaping young minds and developing brains. Therefore, they deserve equal support and recognition. By prioritizing the nurturing of the nurturers, we can cultivate a stable and reliable workforce that consistently provides excellent care for children and families.

References

About Us. (n.d.). https://www.ualberta.ca/community-university-partnership/about-us/index.html

Acker, S. (1995). Carry on Caring: The work of women teachers. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 16(1), 21–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569950160102

Ackerman, D. J. (2006). The Costs of Being a Child Care Teacher: Revisiting the Problem of Low Wages. Educational Policy, 20(1), 85–112. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904805285283

Adams, W. C. (2015). Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews. In K. E. Newcomer, H. P. Hatry, & J. S. Wholey (Eds.), Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation (pp. 492–505). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171386.ch19

Adom, D. (2016). Constructivism Philosophical Paradigm: Implication For Research, Teaching And Learning. European Centre for Research and Training and Development UK, 4(10), 1–9.

AECEA. (n.d.). Our Mission. https://aecea.ca/about/our-mission

Alberta Family Wellness Initiative. (n.d.). Brain Story Certification. Retrieved 4 February 2024, from https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/training/

Alberta Health Services. (n.d.). E. coli Outbreak—Latest Updates. Alberta Health Services. Retrieved 28 January 2024, from https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page18601.aspx#oct31

Alberta Health Services. (2023). E. coli Outbreak. Alberta Health Services. https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page13582.aspx

Alberta Living Wage Network. (2022). What is a Living Wage? https://livingwagealberta.ca/living-wage/

Alberta Lobbyist Registry. (2023). Consultant Lobbyist Registration—Notice of Change.

Allen, L. R., & Backes, E. P. (Eds.). (2018). Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education (p. 24984). National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/24984

Analyzing Qualitative Data. (n.d.). Learning for Action. Retrieved 13 October 2023, from http://learningforaction.com/analyzing-qualitative-data

ARCQE. (n.d.). Sponsored Support. ARCQE. Retrieved 15 November 2022, from https://arcqe.ca/programs/

Armstrong, J. (2010). Naturalistic Inquiry. In Naturalistic Observation (pp. 879–885). Research Gate.

Aslin, H. J., & Brown, V. A. (2004). Towards whole of community engagement: A practical toolkit. Murray-Darling Basin Commission.

Attygalle, L. (2020). Understanding Community-Led Approaches to Community Change. Tamarack Institute.

Avci, O. (2016). Positionalities, Personal Epistemologies, and Instruction: An Analysis. Journal of Education and Training Studies, 4(6), 145–154. https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v4i6.1462

Base Corp Learning Systems. (2021). Early Childhood Education Orientation Course. https://childcare.basecorp.com/home

Bassok, D., Markowitz, A. J., Bellows, L., & Sadowski, K. (2021). New Evidence on Teacher Turnover in Early Childhood. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 43(1), 172–180. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373720985340

Beach, J. (2020). An Examination of Regulatory and Other Measures to Support Quality Early Learning and Child Care in Alberta: A Discussion Paper. Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care and The Muttart Foundation.

Belsky, J. (1990). Parental and Nonparental Child Care and Children's Socioemotional Development: A Decade in Review. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 52(4), 885. https://doi.org/10.2307/353308

Bigras, N., Lemay, L., Lehrer, J., Charron, A., Duval, S., Robert-Mazaye, C., & Laurin, I. (2021). Early Childhood Educators' Perceptions of Their Emotional State, Relationships with Parents, Challenges, and Opportunities During the Early Stage of the Pandemic. Early Childhood Education Journal, 49(5), 775–787. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01224-y

Birt, L., Scott, S., Cavers, D., Campbell, C., & Walter, F. (2016). Member Checking: A Tool to Enhance Trustworthiness or Merely a Nod to Validation? Qualitative Health Research, 26(13), 1802–1811. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316654870

Bourke, B. (2014). Positionality: Reflecting on the Research Process. The Qualitative Report. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2014.1026

Boyd, M. (2015). "I love my work but..." The Professionalization of Early Childhood Education. The Qualitative Report. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2013.1470

Brain Architecture. (n.d.). Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. Retrieved 9
September 2023, from https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-
architecture/

Braun, & Clarke. (2022). Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide. SAGE.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in
Psychology, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. Qualitative Research
in Sport, Exercise and Health, 11(4), 589–597.
https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA?
Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic
approaches. Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 21(1), 37–47.
https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12360

Bretherton, T. (2010). Developing the Child Care Workforce: Understanding 'Fight' or 'Flight'
Amongst Workers. National Centre for Vocational Education Research, null.
https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/d6ef778548dc0aa8ee6877909dbf5ca676b2d43d

Bridges, M., Fuller, B., Huang, D. S., & Hamre, B. K. (2011). Strengthening the Early
Childhood Workforce: How Wage Incentives May Boost Training and Job Stability. Early
Education & Development, 22(6), 1009–1029.
https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2010.514537

Briggs, I. (1997). The Influence of Attachment Styles on Employee Engagement.

Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2018). Doing Interviews. SAGE Publications Ltd.
https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529716665

Britto, P. R., Lye, S. J., Proulx, K., Yousafzai, A. K., Matthews, S. G., Vaivada, T., Perez-
Escamilla, R., Rao, N., Ip, P., Fernald, L. C. H., MacMillan, H., Hanson, M., Wachs, T. D.,
Yao, H., Yoshikawa, H., Cerezo, A., Leckman, J. F., & Bhutta, Z. A. (2017). Nurturing
care: Promoting early childhood development. The Lancet, 389(10064), 91–102.
https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)31390-3

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

Cacari-Stone, L., Wallerstein, N., Garcia, A. P., & Minkler, M. (2014). The Promise of
Community-Based Participatory Research for Health Equity: A Conceptual Model for
Bridging Evidence with Policy. American Journal of Public Health, 104(9), 1615–1623.
https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2014.301961

Cargo, M., & Mercer, S. L. (2008). The Value and Challenges of Participatory Research:
Strengthening Its Practice. Annual Review of Public Health, 29(1), 325–350.
https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.publhealth.29.091307.083824

Cavazos, L. Y. (2017). A Basic Interpretative Study of Educators in the Childcare Profession:
Collegiality as a Base of Job Satisfaction. University of the Incarnate Word.

Caven, M., Khanani, N., Zhang, X., & Parker, C. E. (2021). Center- and Program-Level Factors
Associated with Turnover in the Early Childhood Education Workforce (REL 2021-069).
U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for
Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory
Northeast & Islands., 17.

Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE). (2021, November 9). Our History—
Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. https://cscce.berkeley.edu/about-us/our-
history/, https://cscce.berkeley.edu/about-us/our-history/

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Director). (2023). Excel Tool Tutorials: Thematic
Analysis. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49BEW9qdqWI

Centre for Community-Based Research Canada. (2023). Approach. Community-Based Research
Canada. https://www.communityresearchcanada.ca/approach

Centre on the Developing Child. (2007). The Science of Early Childhood Development (In
Brief). Harvard University. https://developingchild.harvard.edu

Cheuy, S. (2018). A Foundational Practice of Community Change. Tamarack Institute.

Child Care Human Resources Sector Council. (n.d.). What Factors Influence Wages and Benefits
in Early Learning and Child Care Settings?

Child Care Now. (2024). Early Learning and Child Care For All: A tool kit to bring about public
policy change. Child Care Now. https://childcarenow.ca/early-learning-and-child-care-for-
all-a-tool-kit-to-bring-about-public-policy-change/

Child Care Now Alberta. (2023). Where is the Child Care? How the Shortage of Early

Childhood Educators Undermines Access in Alberta.

https://assets.nationbuilder.com/publicinterestalberta/pages/2461/attachments/original/170

1365974/Where_is_the_Child_Care_Report_v1_%281%29.pdf?1701365974

Cleveland, G. (2022). Early Learning and Child Care in Canada: Where Have We Come From,

Where Are We Going? IRPP Insight, 44.

Cleveland, G., & Krashinsky, M. (2012). Financing Early Learning and Child Care in Canada.

Coghlan, D., & Brydon-Miller, M. (2023). The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research (By

pages 628-628; 1–2). SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446294406

Community University Partnership (Director). (2021, February). Early Learning and Child Care

– a National System for Canada [Video].

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Y4NIlKcYy0

Connelly, L. M. (2016). Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research. Medsurg Nursing, 25(6), 435–

436.

Crotty, M. (1998). The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the

Research Process. Sage Publications.

Cumming, T., Wong, S., & Logan, H. (2021). Early childhood educators' well-being, work

environments and 'quality': Possibilities for changing policy and practice. Australasian

Journal of Early Childhood, 46(1), 50–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/1836939120979064

D'Alonzo, K. T. (2010). Getting started in CBPR: Lessons in building community partnerships

for new researchers: Getting started in CBPR. Nursing Inquiry, 17(4), 282–288.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1800.2010.00510.x

de Bloom, J., Geurts, S. A. E., & Kompier, M. A. J. (2013). Vacation (after-) effects on

employee health and well-being, and the role of vacation activities, experiences and sleep.

Journal of Happiness Studies, 14(2), 613–633. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-012-9345-3

Doherty, G. (2011). Mentoring Pairs for Child Care Project: Final Outcome Report (p. 65). Early

Childhood Community Development Centre.

https://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/Mentoring%20Pairs%20for%20Child%20Car

e%20Project.pdf

Doherty, G., Friendly, M., & Beach, J. (2003). OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood

Education and Care Canadian Background Report (p. 137).

Doherty-Derkowski, G., Lero, D., Goelman, H., LaGrange, A., & Tougas. (2000). You bet I care!: A Canada-wide study on wages, working conditions, and practices in child care centres. Centre for Families, Work and Well-Being, University of Guelph.

Early Childhood Educators of BC. (n.d.). Peer Mentoring Program. Retrieved 31 January 2024, from https://www.ecebc.ca/professional-development/peer-mentoring-program

Employee Benefit Research Institute. (2023). Which Benefits are Valued Most Depends on Age of Workers. https://www.ebri.org/docs/default-source/fast-facts-(public)/ff-453-wwsage-26jan23.pdf?sfvrsn=5367392f_2

Employment and Social Development. (2022). Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework. Government of Canada. https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/canada/employment-social-development/programs/early-learning-child-care/reports/2017-multilateral-framework/MEL_and_CCF-EN.pdf

Faulkner, M., Gerstenblatt, P., Lee, A., Vallejo, V., & Travis, D. (2016). Childcare providers: Work stress and personal well-being. Journal of Early Childhood Research, 14(3), 280–293. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X14552871

Fawcett, M. (2023, September 18). Daycare poisonings show high cost of red tape reduction. Canada's National Observer. https://www.nationalobserver.com/2023/09/18/opinion/daycare-poisonings-show-high-cost-red-tape-reduction

Fenech, M. (2012). Discerning childcare quality: Parents as potential informants of policy beyond regulation. Critical Studies in Education, 53(3), 327–345. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2012.703136

Fenech, M., Sumsion, J., & Goodfellow, J. (2008). Regulation and risk: Early childhood education and care services as sites where the 'laugh of Foucault' resounds. Journal of Education Policy, 23(1), 35–48. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930701754039

Fenech, M., Wong, S., Boyd, W., Gibson, M., Watt, H., & Richardson, P. (2022). Attracting, retaining and sustaining early childhood teachers: An ecological conceptualisation of workforce issues and future research directions. The Australian Educational Researcher, 49(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00424-6

Ferrant, G., Pesando, L. M., & Nowacka, K. (2014). Unpaid Care Work: The missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes. OECD Development Centre.

Flanagan, K., Beach, J., & Varmuza, P. (2013). You Bet We Still Care! A Survey of Centre-Based Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada.

Fukkink, R. G., & Lont, A. (2007). Does training matter? A meta-analysis and review of caregiver training studies. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 22(3), 294–311. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2007.04.005

Furnham, A., MacRae, I., & Tetchner, J. (2021). Measuring work motivation: The facets of the work values questionnaire and work success. Scandinavian Journal of Psychology, 62(3), 401–408. https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12723

Gerson, K. (2020). Constructing an Interview Guide: Creating a Flexible Structure. In K. Gerson, The Science and Art of Interviewing (pp. 66–99). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199324286.003.0004

Gheaus, A. (2011). Arguments for Nonparental Care for Children. Social Theory and Practice, 37(3), 483–509.

Gill, S. L. (2020). Qualitative Sampling Methods. Journal of Human Lactation, 36(4), 579–581. https://doi.org/10.1177/0890334420949218

Gonçalves, M., Farcas, D., Leitão, T., Giorgakis, G., Valeriu, S. F., Traian, M. P., & Kovacs, K. (2017). Evidence Review on Labour Market and Job Place Retention: Mentoring Pathways Towards Employment. Journal of Organisational Transformation & Social Change, 14(3), 214–238. https://doi.org/10.1080/14779633.2017.1341760

Government of Alberta. (n.d.). Alberta Child Care Grant Funding Program. Retrieved 15 November 2022, from https://www.alberta.ca/alberta-child-care-grant-funding-program.aspx

Government of Alberta. (2008). Early Learning and Child Care Regulation. Alberta King's Printer.

Government of Alberta. (2021a). Changes in Child Care.

Government of Alberta. (2021b). Early Childhood Educator: Occupations in Alberta - alis. https://alis.alberta.ca/occinfo/occupations-in-alberta/occupation-profiles/early-childhood-educator/

Government of Alberta. (2022a). 2022-23 Children's Services Annual Report (p. 54). Children's
     Services.

Government of Alberta. (2022b). Certification Guide for Early Childhood Educators. Children's
     Services.

Government of Alberta. (2023). Alberta child care grant funding guide.
     https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/bd3052eb-659c-4779-adae-
     0c4e667bdcd0/resource/a19972c7-0eed-4119-9951-d721345d43a0/download/cs-alberta-
     child-care-grant-funding-guide-2023-01.pdf

Government of Alberta. (2024a). Cost Control Framework and For-Profit Expansion Plan.
     https://www.alberta.ca/cost-control-framework-and-for-profit-expansion-plan

Government of Alberta. (2024b). Federal-provincial child care agreement. Government of
     Alberta. https://www.alberta.ca/federal-provincial-child-care-agreement.aspx

Government of Alberta. (2024c, January 17). Cutting Red Tape | Alberta.ca.
     https://www.alberta.ca/cut-red-tape

Government of Alberta. (2024d, February 8). Affordability grant for child care programs.
     https://www.alberta.ca/affordability-grants-for-child-care-programs

Government of Alberta. (2024e, February 8). Employment standards rules – Minimum wage.
     https://www.alberta.ca/minimum-wage

Government of Alberta, P. (2022c). Early Learning and Child Care Act. Alberta King's Printer.

Government of Canada. (n.d.). Plain Language.

Government of Canada. (2021, November 15). $10-a-day child care for families in Alberta.
     Prime Minister of Canada. https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2021/11/15/10-day-
     child-care-families-alberta

Government of Canada. (2023, June 13). CCOHS: Precarious Employment and Vulnerable
     Workers. https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/legisl/vulnerable.html

Government of Canada, E. and S. D. (2022, May 27). Canada – Alberta Canada-Wide Early
     Learning and Child Care Agreement—2021 to 2026 [Navigation page - partnering and
     collaborative arrangement profile]. https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-
     agreement/agreements-provinces-territories/alberta-canada-wide-2021.html

Government of Canada, S. C. (2021, June 25). Child care workers in Canada.
     https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00005-eng.htm

Government of Canada, S. C. (2023, November 29). Canada's Care Economy: A Conceptual

    Framework. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-652-x/89-652-x2023002-eng.htm

Government of Nova Scotia. (2023, December). Wage Increases for Early Childhood Educators;

    New Pension, Benefits for Child-Care Sector.

    https://news.novascotia.ca/en/2023/12/20/wage-increases-early-childhood-educators-new-

    pension-benefits-child-care-sector

Grant, A. A., Jeon, L., & Buettner, C. K. (2019). Relating early childhood teachers' working

    conditions and well-being to their turnover intentions. EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY,

    39(3), 294–312.

Grawitch, M. J., Gottschalk, M., & Munz, D. C. (2006). The path to a healthy workplace: A

    critical review linking healthy workplace practices, employee well-being, and

    organizational improvements. Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research,

    58(3), 129–147. https://doi.org/10.1037/1065-9293.58.3.129

Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, Reflexivity, and "Ethically Important Moments" in

    Research. Qualitative Inquiry, 10(2), 261–280. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403262360

Halfon, S. (2021). Canada's child care workforce. 38.

Halverson, K., Tregunno, D., & Vidjen, I. (2022). Professional Identity Formation: A Concept

    Analysis. Quality Advancement in Nursing Education - Avancées En Formation

    Infirmière, 8(4). https://doi.org/10.17483/2368-6669.1328

Hammond, H. (2019, March 31). Strategic Questioning Manual: A Powerful Tool for Personal

    and Social Change. The Commons. https://commonslibrary.org/strategic-questioning/

Hathaway, T. (2020). Neoliberalism as Corporate Power. Competition & Change, 24(3–4), 315–

    337. https://doi.org/10.1177/1024529420910382

Heilala, C., Kalland, M., Lundkvist, M., Forsius, M., Vincze, L., & Santavirta, N. (2022). Work

    Demands and Work Resources: Testing a Model of Factors Predicting Turnover Intentions

    in Early Childhood Education. Early Childhood Education Journal, 50(3), 399–409.

    https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01166-5

Herzenberg, S., Price, M., & Bradley, D. (2005). Losing Ground In Early Childhood Education:

    Declining Workforce Qualifications in an Expanding Industry, 1979-2004. Economic

    Policy Institute, 40. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Stephen-

    Herzenberg/publication/237470430_Losing_Ground_in_Early_Childhood_Education_Losi

ng_Ground_in_Early_Childhood_Education_Losing_Ground_in_Early_Childhood/links/5
932ad3ea6fdcc89e7b9e6b3/Losing-Ground-in-Early-Childhood-Education-Losing-
Ground-in-Early-Childhood-Education-Losing-Ground-in-Early-Childhood.pdf

Holochwost, S. J., DeMott, K., Buell, M., Yannetta, K., & Amsden, D. (2009). Retention of Staff
in the Early Childhood Education Workforce. Child & Youth Care Forum, 38(5), 227–237.
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-009-9078-6

Hyde, E., Greene, M. E., & Darmstadt, G. L. (2020). Time poverty: Obstacle to women's human
rights, health and sustainable development. Journal of Global Health, 10(2), 020313.
https://doi.org/10.7189/jogh.10.020313

IAP2 Canada. (n.d.). IAP2 Canada / Pillars of P2. https://www.iap2canada.ca/Pillars

IAP2 International Federation. (2018). IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation.

International Labour Organization (Ed.). (2012). Global employment trends for women: 2012
(Vol. 1). ILO.

International Labour Organization. (n.d.). The care economy.
https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/care-economy/lang--en/index.htm

Irvine, S., & Price, J. (2014). Professional conversations: A collaborative approach to support
policy implementation, professional learning and practice change in ECEC. Australasian
Journal of Early Childhood (In Press), 39(3), 85–93.

Irvine, S., Sumsion, J., Lunn, J., & Thorpe, K. (2016). One in Five Early Childhood Educators
Plan to Leave the Profession. The Conversation.

Irvine, S., Thorpe, K., & McDonald, P. (2018, March 23). Low-paid 'Women's Work': Why
early childhood Educators are Walking Out. The Conversation.

Jennings, P., & Greenberg, M. (2009). The Prosocial Classroom: Teacher Social and Emotional
Competence in Relation to Student and Classroom Outcomes. Review of Educational
Research, 79(1), 491–525.

Jeon, L., Buettner, C. K., & Grant, A. A. (2018). Early Childhood Teachers' Psychological Well-
Being: Exploring Potential Predictors of Depression, Stress, and Emotional Exhaustion.
Early Education and Development, 29(1), 53–69.
https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2017.1341806

Jones, C., Hadley, F., Waniganayake, M., & Johnstone, M. (2019). Find your tribe! Early
childhood educators defining and identifying key factors that support their workplace

wellbeing. Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 44(4), 326–338. https://doi.org/10.1177/1836939119870906

Jorde-Bloom, P. (1988). Factors Influencing Overall Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment in Early Childhood Work Environments. Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 3(2), 107–122. https://doi.org/10.1080/02568548809594933

Katz, L. G. (1985). The Nature of Professions: Where is Early Childhood Education? ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.

Kim, H., Sefcik, J. S., & Bradway, C. (2017). Characteristics of Qualitative Descriptive Studies: A Systematic Review: QUALITATIVE DESCRIPTION: SYSTEMATIC REVIEW. Research in Nursing & Health, 40(1), 23–42. https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.21768

Kirby, G., Douglass, A., Lyskawa, J., Jones, C., & Malone, L. (2021). Understanding Leadership in Early Care and Education: A Literature Review (Literature Review OPRE Report 2021-02; p. 104).

Langford, R. (2023). Shattering Myths – Caring About Care. https://careinece.ca/shattering-myths/

Langford, T. (2011). Alberta's day care controversy: From 1908 to 2009--and beyond. AU Press.

Lesoway, M. (2020). Qualified Educators, Quality Care: The role of the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (p. 18). AECEA.

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1982). Establishing Dependability and Confirmability in Naturalistic Inquiry Through an Audit. 31.

Makovichuk, L., Hewes, J., Lirette, T., & Thomas, N. (2014). Flight: Alberta's early learning and care framework.

Manlove, E. E., & Guzell, R. (1997). Intention to Leave, Anticipated Reasons for Leaving, and I2-Month Turnover of Child Care Center Staff. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 12, 145–167.

Manzanillo, J. (2023). Black Health And Wellness. Equity Labs. https://www.equity-labs.org/blog/black-health-and-wellness

Maxwell, J. A. (2005). Designing a Qualitative Study. Sage.

Mayan, M. (2009). Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry. Routledge.

Mayan, M. J. (2016). Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry. Taylor & Francis Group. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ualberta/detail.action?docID=4692156

McCain. (2020). Early Years Study 4: Thriving Kids, Thriving Society. Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc. https://earlyyearsstudy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/EYS4-Report_01_15_2020.pdf

McCain, M. N., Mustard, F., & Shanker, S. (2007). Early Years Study 2: Putting Science into Action (p. 178). Council for Early Child Development. https://earlyyearsstudy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/EYS2.pdf

McCain, & Mustard, F. (1999). Early Years Study 1: Reversing the Real Brain Drain (p. 207). https://earlyyearsstudy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/EYS.pdf

McCain, Mustard, F., & McCuiag, K. (2011). Ear;y Years Study 3: Making decisions, Taking action. Margaret & Wallace McCain Family Foundation. https://earlyyearsstudy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/EYS3.pdf

McCuiag, K., Akbari, E., & Correia, A. (2022). Canada's children need a professional early childhood education workforce (p. 23). Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development. https://ecereport.ca/media/uploads/wr-downloads/canadas_children_need_a_professional_early_childhood_education_workforce.pdf

McDonald, P., Thorpe, K., & Irvine, S. (2018). Low pay but still we stay: Retention in early childhood education and care. Journal of Industrial Relations, 60, 002218561880035. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185618800351

McKinlay, S., Irvine, S., & Farrell, A. (2018). What keeps early childhood teachers working in long day care? Tackling the crisis for Australia's reform agenda in early childhood education and care. Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 43(2), 32–42.

McLean, C., Austin, L. J. E., Whitebook, M., & Olson, K. (2020). Early Childhood Workforce Index 2020 (p. 281). Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/02/Early-Childhood-Workforce-Index-2020.pdf

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

Mertens, D. M. (2020). Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. (University of Alberta Rutherford - Humanities, Social Sciences & Education LB 1028 M3964 2020; 5 edition.). SAGE; University of Alberta Library. https://login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx ?direct=true&db=cat03710a&AN=alb.8725778&site=eds-live&scope=site

Miller, J. A., & Bogatova, T. (2009). Quality improvements in the early care and education workforce: Outcomes and impact of the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Project. Evaluation and Program Planning, 32(3), 257–277. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2009.02.001

Morse, J. M., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification Strategies for Establishing Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 1(2), 13–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690200100202

Murray, C. G. (2021). Illuminating Care: The Pedagogy and Practice of Care in Early Childhood Communities. Exchange Press. https://www.exchangepress.com/catalog/product/illuminating-care-the-pedagogy-and-practice-of-care-in-early-childhood-communities/3600582/

Murray, S. B. (2000). Getting Paid in Smiles: The Gendering of Child Care Work. Symbolic Interaction, 23(2), 135–160. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2000.23.2.135

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2008). The Timing and Quality of Early Experiences Combine to Shape Brain Architecture (Working Paper 5; p. 12). Center on the Developing Child. https://harvardcenter.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/05/Timing_Quality_Early_Experiences-1.pdf

Nelson, G., Ochocka, J., Griffin, K., & Lord, J. (1998). "Nothing About Me, Without Me": Participatory Action Research with Self-Help/Mutual Aid Organizations for Psychiatric Consumer/Survivors. American Journal of Community Psychology, 26(6), 881–912. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022298129812

Ng, J., Rogers, M., & McNamara, C. (2023). Early childhood educator's burnout: A systematic review of the determinants and effectiveness of interventions. Issues in Educational Research, 33(1), 34.

Nicholson, S. (2008). "There Is So Much You Can Learn": Child Care Teachers' Perceptions of Their Professional Development Experiences [University of Texas, Austin].

https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/baa844a4-0ea3-4ce4-82f5-5698e5ec90b1/content

Ochocka, J., & Janzen, R. (2014). Breathing Life into Theory: Illustrations of community-based research: Hallmarks, functions and phases. Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement, 7, 18–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2014.893228

OECD. (n.d.). About the OECD - OECD. Retrieved 26 January 2024, from https://www.oecd.org/about/

OECD. (2006). Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). https://www.oecd.org/education/school/49322232.pdf

OECD. (2012). Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care | READ online. Oecd-Ilibrary.Org. https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/starting-strong-iii_9789264123564-en

OECD. (2015). Early Learning and Development: Common Understandings. Network on Early Childhood Education and Care. https://www.oecd.org/education/school/ECEC-Network-Common-Understandings-on-Early-Learning-and-Development.pdf

OECD. (2019a). Leadership for quality early childhood education and care (OECD Education Working Papers 211; OECD Education Working Papers, Vol. 211). https://doi.org/10.1787/6e563bae-en

OECD. (2019b). Providing Quality Early Childhood Education and Care: Results from the Starting Strong Survey 2018. OECD. https://doi.org/10.1787/301005d1-en

OECD. (2020). Building a High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce: Further Results from the Starting Strong Survey 2018. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/b90bba3d-en

Olaniyan, O. S., Hetland, H., Hystad, S. W., Iversen, A. C., & Ortiz-Barreda, G. (2020). Lean on Me: A Scoping Review of the Essence of Workplace Support Among Child Welfare Workers. Frontiers in Psychology, 11. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00287

Ose, S. O. (2016). Using Excel and Word to Structure Qualitative Data. Journal of Applied Social Science, 10(2), 147–162. https://doi.org/10.1177/1936724416664948

Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., Kummen, K., & Hodgins, B. D. (2022). A qualitative examination of early childhood educators' participation in professional learning: Investigating social

constructionist understandings of quality. Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2022.2099324

Patton, M. Q. (2015). Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice. (Lakeland College Lloydminster H 62 P3218 2015; Fourth edition.). SAGE Publications, Inc.; University of Alberta Library. https://login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat03710a&AN=alb.6755241&site=eds-live&scope=site

Peavey, F. (1990). Strategic Questioning Manual. https://commonslibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/strat_questioning_manual.pdf

Pemberton, M. (1994). The professional association: Some basics. Records Management Quarterly, 28(1). https://eds-p-ebscohost-com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/eds/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=d1a5b321-1fb7-435a-8b34-f02160c033eb%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=9502032038&db=ehh

Phillips, D., Howes, C., & Whitebook, M. (1991). Child Care as an Adult Work Environment. Journal of Social Issues, 47(2), 49–70. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1991.tb00287.x

Phillips, D., & Lowenstein, A., E. (2011). Early Care, Education, and Child Development (62; pp. 483–500). Annual Review of Psychology. https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/10.1146/annurev.psych.031809.130707

Reschke, K. (2019). Developing a Sense of Self and Belonging.

Roach O'Keefe, A., Hooper, S., & Jakubiec, B. A. E. (2019). Exploring early childhood educators' notions about professionalism in Prince Edward Island. Journal of Childhood Studies, 20–36. https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs.v44i1.18775

Robinson, L. R., Bitsko, R. H., Thompson, R. A., Dworkin, P. H., McCabe, M. A., Peacock, G., & Thorpe, P. G. (2017). CDC Grand Rounds: Addressing Health Disparities in Early Childhood. MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 66(29), 769–772. https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6629a1

Rogers, M., Dovigo, F., & Doan, L. (2020). Educator identity in a neoliberal context: Recognising and supporting early childhood education and care educators. European Early

Childhood Education Research Journal, 28(6), 806–822.

https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2020.1836583

RRC-Evaluation and Training Institute. (n.d.). Mentors and Mentoring. R2 Resilience Research.

Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? Research in Nursing & Health, 23(4), 334–340. https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X(200008)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G

Sandelowski, M. (2010). What's in a name? Qualitative description revisited. Research in Nursing & Health, 33(1), 77–84. https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.20362

Scott, A. M. M. (2021). Examining the Everyday Life of Child Care Workers: How Low Wages and the Lack of Benefits Affect Their Lives and Decisions About Employment. Clemson University.

Seidman, I. (2006). Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences (3rd ed). Teachers College Press.

Shaheen, A. (2016). Successful Employee Retention Strategies in Childcare Centers. Walden University, Dissertation, 155.

Sinha, M. (2014). Child Care in Canada. Government of Canada.

Smith, M.-F., Brown, M., & Saha, A. (2022). Alberta Compensation Framework Report: ECE Wage Grid Recommendations.

Tamarack Institute. (2017). Tamarack_Collaboration Spectrum Tool. Tamarack Institute.

Thorpe, K., Jansen, E., Sullivan, V., Irvine, S., McDonald, P., & The Early Years Workforce team. (2020). Identifying predictors of retention and professional wellbeing of the early childhood education workforce in a time of change. Journal of Educational Change, 21(4), 623–647. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-020-09382-3

Tierney, A. L. (2013). Brain Development and the Role of Experience in the Early Years.

Totenhagen, C. J., Hawkins, S. A., Casper, D. M., Bosch, L. A., Hawkey, K. R., & Borden, L. M. (2016). Retaining Early Childhood Education Workers: A Review of the Empirical Literature. Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 30(4), 585–599. https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2016.1214652

Ullrich, R., Hamm, K., & Schochet, L. (2017). 6 Policies to Support the Early Childhood Workforce. Center for American Progress, 35.

Ungar, M. (Ed.). (2012). The Social Ecology of Resilience. Springer New York. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-0586-3

Ungar, M. (Ed.). (2021). Multisystemic Resilience: Adaptation and Transformation in Contexts of Change (1st ed.). Oxford University PressNew York. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190095888.001.0001

University of California. (2021, December 1). Marcy Whitebook—Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. https://cscce.berkeley.edu/people/marcy-whitebook/, https://cscce.berkeley.edu/people/marcy-whitebook/

Urban, M. (2008). Dealing with uncertainty: Challenges and possibilities for the early childhood profession. European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 16(2), 135–152. https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930802141584

Urban, M. (2010). Rethinking Professionalism in Early Childhood: Untested Feasibilities and Critical Ecologies. Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 11(1), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2010.11.1.1

Urban, M., Cardini, A., & Romero, R. F. (2018). It takes more than a village. Effective Early Childhood Development, Education and Care services require competent systems. The Future of Work.

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

Vandenbroeck, M., Urban, M., & Peeters, J. (Eds.). (2016). Pathways to Professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care (0 ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315688190

Vosko, L. (2003). Precarious Employment in Canada: Taking Stock, Taking Action. Just Labour. https://doi.org/10.25071/1705-1436.163

Walker, J. (2013). Time poverty, gender and well-being: Lessons from the Kyrgyz Swiss Swedish Health Programme. Development in Practice, 23(1), 57–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2013.751357

Wallerstein, N., & Duran, B. (2008). The theoretical, historical, and practice roots of CBPR. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.34282.72648

Wallerstein, N., & Duran, B. (2010). Community-Based Participatory Research Contributions to Intervention Research: The Intersection of Science and Practice to Improve Health Equity.

American Journal of Public Health, 100(S1), S40–S46.
https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2009.184036

Wa-Mbaleka, S. (2020). The Researcher as an Instrument. In A. P. Costa, L. P. Reis, & A.
Moreira (Eds.), Computer Supported Qualitative Research (pp. 33–41). Springer
International Publishing.

Wenger, E. (n.d.). Communities of practice: Learning as a Social System.

Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: Learning as a social system. Systems Thinking,
June, 10.

Whitebook, M., McLean, C., & Austin, L. J. E. (2018). The Workforce Data Deficit: Who it
Harms and How it can be Overcome (p. 20). Institute for Research on Labor and
Employment, University of California.

Whitebook, M., Phillips, D., & Howes, C. (1993). The National Child Care Staffing Study
Revisited: Four Years in the Life of Center-Based Child Care (Child Care Employee
Project, p. 38). https://cscce.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/publications/National-Child-
Care-Staffing-Study-1993.pdf

Whitebook, M., Phillips, D., & Howes, C. (2014). Worthy Work, STILL Unlivable Wages: The
Early Childhood Workforce 25 Years after the National Child Care Staffing Study. 124.

Whitebook, M., & Sakai, L. (2003). Turnover begets turnover: An examination of job and
occupational instability among child care center staff. Early Childhood Research Quarterly,
18(3), 273–293. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006(03)00040-1

Whitebook, M., & Sakai, L. (2004). By a Thread: How Child Care Centers Hold On to Teachers,
How Teachers Build Lasting Careers. W.E. Upjohn Institute.
https://doi.org/10.17848/9781417524457

Wiens, B., & MacDonald, S. (2021). Living whose best life? An intersectional feminist
interrogation of postfeminist #solidarity in #selfcare.
https://doi.org/10.25969/MEDIAREP/16254

Woodman, L. A. (2022). Supporting Quality and Longevity in Alberta's Family Day Home
Educators: A Qualitative Study. University of Alberta.

World Health Organization. (2023). Improving Early Childhood Development: WHO
Guideline—Summary. Geneva: World Health Organization.
https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/374308/9789240004498-eng.pdf

Young, M. (2010). Gender Differences in Precarious Work Settings. Relations Industrielles,

65(1), 74–97. https://doi.org/10.7202/039528ar

Zinsser, K. M., Christensen, C. G., & Torres, L. (2016). She's supporting them; who's

supporting her? Preschool center-level social-emotional supports and teacher well-being.

Journal of School Psychology, 59, 55–66. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2016.09.001

Appendix A: Information Letter and Consent Form

Study Title: Alberta Early Learning and Care Workforce Stability Project

Research Investigator:	Supervisor:
Mary-Frances Smith, B.Ed.	Dr. Rebecca Gokiert, RPsych
School of Public Health	School of Public Health
11405-87 Ave. NW	11405-87 Ave. NW
Edmonton, Alberta T6G 1C9	Edmonton, Alberta T6G 1C9
maryfra1@ualberta.ca	rgokiert@ualberta.ca

What is the study about?
This research project is a partnership between the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (AECEA), Edmonton Council of Early Learning and Child Care, and the University of Alberta.

You are invited to take part in a conversation about your experiences as an early childhood educator (+18) in Alberta. You have been asked to participate in this research because we want to invite your thoughts about the wage grid recommendation that AECEA recently released. We want to understand what you need to feel supported in the workplace. The results of this study will be used to refine the wage grid recommendation and compensation framework and as part of my thesis.

Why are we doing this study?
The Canada-Alberta Agreement has opened the possibility of reducing early learning and child care (ELCC) fees for families and creating another 45,000 child care spaces. To meet the agreement's obligations, early learning and child care must attract and retain close to 10,000 early childhood educators. However, educators are not staying because of low pay and feeling undervalued. Little is known about the experiences of early childhood educators and what they need to remain in the sector. This research will explore the needs and experiences of early childhood educators and their expectations and recommendations as decisions are being made about how to stabilize the workforce. Your input will provide solutions and recommendations on compensation in efforts to stabilize the sector.

Who and what is involved?
You are invited to participate in a 60-minute individual interview on Zoom. The session will be audio and video recorded. You will be asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire. The questionnaire will ask about your background. The information will be used to find participants for this study and better understand those participating in the study in terms of years in the field, credentials, and background.

Your participation in the interview is completely voluntary. Even if you agree to be in the study, you can change your mind and withdraw at any time with no consequences to you. If you wish to have your individual interview removed from the data, you are welcome to do this at any time until two weeks after the interview. Once your data has been analyzed and combined with all the other interviews, we will not be able to remove it.

I will transcribe the interview and send it to you via email to check if it is correct. You will have two weeks to make changes or revisions. After you confirm that the transcript is accurate, your data will become part of our research. When the project is complete, we can send you a summary of the research findings to see the knowledge you participated in creating.

Confidentiality & Anonymity
The information that you provide will be kept private. No names or other identifying details will be attached to the information or in any reports from this study. During the interview, you are not obligated to answer any questions you do not want to. While we are on Zoom, you can keep your camera on or off. Additionally, you can change your name and use a pseudonym. Data will remain anonymized and confidential. Only anonymized transcripts will be saved and stored in a password-secured folder on my computer. The audio data will be held for 5 years, following the University of Alberta's data safety and storage protocol, and permanently erased after that period.

This study's results will be used to support my thesis research. It will be used by the partnering agencies to refine the wage grid and compensation framework. In addition, the results may inform future research, policy briefs, and advocacy efforts. We may publish the overall results from this study in scholarly journals and present results at conferences; however, individual participant comments will not be identifiable. Finally, the results from this study will be summarized and shared with partner agencies.

Risks and discomfort
There are minimal risks associated with this study. We have taken all reasonable safeguards to minimize known risks to a study participant. There may be no direct benefits to you as a participant; however, your participation will help us understand the wage grid recommendation and how to implement fair compensation for early childhood educators while suggesting funding models that will work. Results from this study may benefit early learning and child care in the future.

The study is being sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Government of Canada through a Canada Graduate Scholarship-Master's (CGS M) Scholarship and the Women and Children's Health Research Institute, University of Alberta, through a WCHRI-CUP PaCET Award. The Institution and Principal Investigator are getting money from the study sponsor to cover the costs of doing this study. You are entitled to request any details concerning this compensation from the Principal Investigator.

Contact Information
Thank you very much for considering this request. If you have any questions or would like more information about the study, please contact the principal researcher, Mary-Frances Smith, at maryfra1@ualberta.ca or my supervisor, Dr. Rebecca Gokiert, at rgokiert@ualberta.ca

The Research Ethics Board has reviewed the plan for this study at the University of Alberta, ID Pro00122267. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

Participant Consent Form
Study Title: Alberta Early Learning and Care Workforce Stability Project

Research Investigator: Supervisor:
Mary-Frances Smith, B.Ed.   Dr. Rebecca Gokiert, RPsych
School of Public Health   School of Public Health
11405-87 Ave. NW   11405-87 Ave. NW
Edmonton, Alberta T6G 1C9   Edmonton, Alberta T6G 1C9
maryfra1@ualberta.ca   rgokiert@ualberta.ca

Consent Statement:
I have read the information letter, and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

Are you willing to participate in an interview?

By choosing to continue with the interview, you are granting consent to participate in this study.

I_____ consent to join in the above
study.   (First, Last)

Date: _____

Please provide a phone number or email address where you may be reached.

Phone Number: _____

Email: _____

Best Time to Reach You: _____ Mornings _____ Afternoon _____ Evening

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for joining me today. My name is Mary-Frances. I will be facilitating our conversation today. I am a graduate student in the School of Public Health working on a master's degree in Community Engagement. Over the past year, I have been working with AECEA on a workforce stability project. We are interested in hearing from ECEs about your experience with workforce retention and stability. You were provided with an Information Letter for this study. Before I answer any questions, you may have about the study, I want to review the process, so you understand consent and confidentiality briefly. If you agree to participate, I will ask several questions about your experience as an ECE in Alberta. The results will be used in my thesis. The interview will take about 60-75 minutes.

Background

As you may know, the Canada-Alberta Agreement has opened the possibility of reducing early learning and child care fees for families and creating a possible 45,000 child care spaces. This would mean we need to attract almost 10,000 new early childhood educators. However, educators are not staying. This research will explore workforce stability and will help us understand the situation from your perspective.

I will take notes during the interview and record our discussion using Zoom. Participation is voluntary. You may withdraw or discontinue participation at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you will need to contact me and request that your responses not be included. Please note that after the transcription is complete and names are removed, we cannot identify and delete your responses as the transcription will be aggregated with the other data.

You can ask questions before, during, or after the interview. The questions are meant to spark conversation. If a question is unclear, I can rephrase it. If you wish to skip a question, just let me know. There are no right or wrong answers. There is no judgment on your answers. Since we are recording, please let me know if you feel more comfortable leaving your camera off. The audio and video recordings and transcripts will be saved in a password-protected drive. Identifying information will be kept confidential by me. I will de-identify your comments during the transcription process. If I use your quote in our final report or thesis, we will give you a nickname or pseudonym. There should be no way to identify you, as direct quotes will be anonymous.

We have taken all reasonable safeguards to minimize the risks of participating in this project. Your participation will not affect your ownership status or relationship with AECEA. There are no direct benefits from participating in this study. However, your contribution may benefit early learning and care in the future.

Recap and formal verbal Consent

You can ask any questions before we begin the interview. Participation in this project is voluntary. You may withdraw and stop participation at any time. The questions help the discussion. If you feel uncomfortable or uncertain, you can stop, ask for clarity, decline to answer, or end the interview. The interview is confidential; the final report and documents will not include your name, only a pseudonym. You can ask for your camera to be turned off during the interview recording. Do I have your permission to continue and to record? Yes No. If yes, proceed. If

Let us begin.

Please say your first name, how long you have worked in Early Learning and Care, which type of program you currently work in, your certification level, and your region.

Questions

<u>**Focus on Individual Experiences:**</u> Internal Motivations, context, and history.

1. Thinking back to when you first thought about working in ELCC, what inspired or motivated you to enter the sector?
2. What expectations or hopes did you have when you started working in ELCC?
3. How does your current situation compare with your hopes?

<u>**Focus on Interactions and Relationships:**</u> Interpersonal relationships in your workplace: team, co-workers, and administration.

4. Who do you turn to at work when you want to share a joyful or funny moment? What support do they provide you?
5. When you face a challenge, who do you turn to?
6. How is team collaboration encouraged?
7. How do you manage the stresses of your work?
8. How does your work in ELCC impact your family or personal life?

<u>**Focus on Organizational Factors:**</u> Supports or barriers are in place at the workplace.

9. What decisions were made at your workplace that supported you in your role?
10. What decisions were made that challenged you in your role?
11. How are you invited into decision-making at your program?
12. What opportunities have you had to develop professionally or improve your practice?
13. What would a wage grid mean to you? (Show wage grid recommendation from Smith et al., 2022 report)
14. What non-salaried compensation do you receive? (Show non-salaried compensation from Smith et al., 2022 report)
15. What would career progression look like for you? (May skip this question)

Focus on Societal Influences: How society supports, challenges, or approaches our sector.

16. What decisions have been made that make it challenging to remain in the sector?
17. Why would you most likely leave your current position or the sector?

Focus on Solutions and Recommendations: What do you want people to know about you and your practice?

18. What would you say to someone just entering the sector?
19. What do you want parents and families to know about your role and practice?
20. What would you say to the people making decisions about the sector?
21. How can you be an advocate for the work you do?
22. How would you get everyone to work together?
23. Is there anything else we should know about? Is there anything else you would like to add that we missed or that you want to emphasize?

Thank you so much for joining me today. May I contact you in the future if I have any more questions?

Appendix C: Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire of Early Childhood Educators

Study Title: Alberta Early Learning and Care Workforce Stability Project

Research Investigator: Supervisor:
Mary-Frances Smith, B.Ed.   Dr. Rebecca Gokiert, RPsych
School of Public Health   School of Public Health
11405-87 Ave. NW   11405-87 Ave. NW
Edmonton, Alberta T6G 1C9   Edmonton, Alberta T6G 1C9
maryfra1@ualberta.ca   rgokiert@ualberta.ca

Purpose of Questionnaire
The questionnaire will ask about your background. The information will be used to find participants for this study and to understand better those participating in the study in terms of years in the field, credentials, and background.

See Information letter for details.

Questionnaire
This questionnaire will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Read each question carefully and follow the directions provided throughout the questionnaire. If you are uncomfortable answering an item or do not know the answer, you may skip that item. We will need your personal information to contact you for an interview.

Demographics
Name
1. Surname
   Text box
2. First Name
   Text box
Contact information
3. Postal Code first three
   Text box with limitations
4. Telephone number
   Text box with limitations
5. Email
   Text box
6. Certification #
   Text box with limitations

<u>Age</u>

7. What is your current age range?
   o Under 20 years
   o 20-29 years
   o 30-39 years
   o 40-49 years
   o 50-59 years
   o 60+ years

<u>Gender</u>

8. What is your gender?
   Female
   Male
   Prefer not to say.

<u>Cultural</u> <u>identity</u>

9. What is your cultural background? (Select all that apply. Answering this question will not be used to exclude you from the research but to understand who ECEs are)
   ☐ Caribbean (Cuban, Puerto Rican, Barbadian, Bahamian, Jamaican,
   ☐ East African (Tanzanian, Kenyan, Ugandan)
   ☐ East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, Hong Kong, Macau)
   ☐ European
   ☐ Hispanic or Latino/a/x
   ☐ Indigenous or First Nations
   ☐ Inuit
   ☐ Metis
   ☐ West-Central Asia or Middle Eastern (Persian, Iranian, Iraqi, Jordanian, Syrian, Palestinian, Yemini, Turkish)
   ☐ North African (Moroccan, Egyptian, Libyan)
   ☐ Oceania (Australian, New Zealander, Pacific Islander, Samoan)
   ☐ South African
   ☐ South American
   ☐ South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan)
   ☐ South East Asian (Filipino, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, Indonesia, Malaysia)
   ☐ West African (Gambian, Nigerian, Senegalese)
   ☐ West Asian (Afghan, Egyptian, Iranian)
   ☐ I would like to specify an ethno-racial identity not listed above _____
   ☐ I do not identify with any of the options listed above
   ☐ Prefer not to answer

<u>Education</u>

10. What is your level of education (check all that apply and supply the type of certificate)
    o None
    o Certificate
    o Diploma
    o Bachelor's degree
    o Master's degree
    o PhD

11. What is the name of your educational credential?
    Text box

12. Do you plan on pursuing further education?
    Yes
    No
    If yes, then what kind and why?

Certification
    13. Which ECE credentials do you hold?
        ☐ None
        ☐ ECE 1
        ☐ ECE 2
        ☐ ECE 3
        ☐ Other (please specify).

    14. How long have you been at this certification level?
        o Less than 1
        o 1-3 years
        o 3-5 years
        o 5-10 years
        o Over ten years

    15. Do you intend in increase your certification level?
        Yes
        No

Years of Experience
    16. How many years have you worked in early learning and care?
        o Less than 1
        o 1-3 years
        o 3-5 years

- o 5-10 years
- o Over 10 years

17. How many years have you worked for your current employer?
- o Less than 1
- o 1-3 years
- o 3-5 years
- o 5-10 years
- o Over 10 years

Responsibilities

18. What responsibilities do you have at your current workplace? (Check all that apply).
- o Attend meetings.
- o Cleaning and maintaining the environment.
- o Communicate with families.
- o Creating Learning stories.
- o Direct caregiving.
- o Direct communication with families.
- o Event planning.
- o Implement programming.
- o Lead activities.
- o Observe children for assessment.
- o Observe children for planning.
- o Opening or closing duties.
- o Organize and maintain equipment.
- o Pedagogical documentation.
- o Planning or programming.
- o Planning with the team.
- o Record keeping.
- o Scheduling staff.
- o Subsidy documentation.
- o Supervise children.
- o Supervise other staff.
- o Other (please specify)

Job Title

19. What is your job title?
Open-ended text box

Program Type

20. What type of ELCC program are you employed at? (Check all that apply).
   o Child Care Program
   o Family Day Home Agency
   o Private Day Home
   o Out-of-School Care
   o Pre-school
   o Kindergarten or Educational setting
   o Head Start
   o Other: please describe

21. How old are the children you work with? Check all that apply.
   o Infant (birth to 12 months)
   o Infant (12 to 19 months)
   o Toddler (19 months to 3 years)
   o Preschool (3 to 4 years)
   o Kindergarten (4 to 5 years)
   o Out-of-school care (5 to 12 years)

Wages
22. What is your current hourly wage before top-up?
      Text box

23. Do you feel that you receive fair compensation for your work?
      Yes
      No
      Comments

24. Do you have enough income to save for retirement or other goals?
      Yes
      No
      Comments

25. Are you working at another job to supplement your income?
   o No
   o Yes, 1-10 hours per week.
   o Yes, 11-20 hours per week.
   o Yes, 21-30 hours per week.
   o Yes, 31 hours or more per week.
   o Other (please specify)

Hours of work

26. How many hours are you scheduled to work?
     Text box

27. How many hours do you work outside of scheduled hours?
     o   None
     o   1-5 hours
     o   6-10 hours
     o   11-15 hours
     o   16-20 hours

Benefits

28. Does your employer offer any of the employee benefits listed below? (Select all that apply.)
     ☐ Medical insurance
     ☐ Dental Insurance
     ☐ Disability insurance
     ☐ Life insurance
     ☐ Retirement plan.
     ☐ Pension or RRSP plan
     ☐ Paid Sick Time
     ☐ Paid Vacation Time
     ☐ Paid Holidays
     ☐ Paid Planning Time
     ☐ Paid Time for Early Childhood Conference attendance or training
     ☐ Paid Breaks
     ☐ Free or reduced-price child care
     ☐ None of these
     ☐ Other (please specify)

Non-salaried Compensation

29. Which of the following are offered by your employer? (Select all that apply.)
     ☐ Competitive salary
     ☐ Signing bonus
     ☐ Longevity pay or ongoing bonuses
     ☐ Regular cost-of-living increases
     ☐ Periodic increase in wages based on performance evaluations
     ☐ Regular opportunities for recognition and appreciation
     ☐ Emphasis on good working relationships/teamwork
     ☐ Opportunities for promotion
     ☐ Flexible work schedules.

☐ Paid and protected planning time
☐ Other (please specify)
☐ None

30. How likely are these to keep you in the sector (Likert scale)
      Fair compensation
         o   Not at all important ▢ extremely important
      Benefit plan
         o   Not at all important ▢ extremely important
      Retirement or pension plan
         o   Not at all important ▢ extremely important

Consent
I am interested in participating in an interview for the **Alberta Early Learning and Care Workforce Stability Project**. By clicking yes, I consent to being contacted to set up an interview.
      Yes
      No

https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/he/2021/03/aag-race-ethnicity-income-language-data-collection.pdf?la=en
https://ethics.research.ubc.ca/sites/ore.ubc.ca/files/documents/Participant%20inclusivity.Ethnicity%20and%20race.pdf

Appendix D: Themes & Codes

Themes and Codes

1. Personal Passion and Pride
- Motivation to Enter: 91
- Personal Life: 83
- Self-Advocacy: 46
- Hopes and Expectations: 39
- New ECE pep talk: 26
- Curriculum, Flight; Brain Builder: 17

2. Work-Life Balance
- Comparison to Current Situation: 54
- Share Joy: 45
- Manage Stress: 44
- Leave Sector: 23

3. Positive Professional Relationships
- Share Challenges: 38
- Everyone Work Together: 26
- Family Knowledge: 25

4. Supportive Organizational Structures
- Wage Grid: 170
- Workplace Support: 120
- Professional Development (PD): 116
- Workplace Challenges: 66
- NSC: 42
- Career Progression: 30

5. Policy Decisions
- Challenges, Sectoral Supports &: 95
- Policy Makers: 37
- Societal Value: 19