



Buffett
Early Childhood
Institute

at the University of Nebraska

Early Childhood Professionals' Well-being and Experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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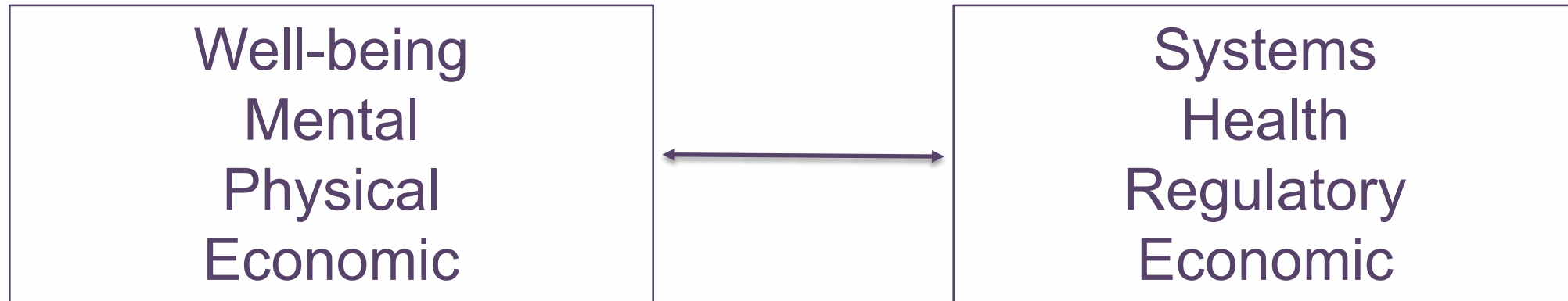
Start early. Start well.

The well-being of early childhood professionals influences the quality of care and education they provide.



Purpose of this study

Lived Experiences of Early Childhood Professionals



Project Goal: Understand the experiences and well- being of ECE professionals in the context of the COVID- 19 pandemic and beyond



Funded by PDG-5

Objectives – to understand providers’ perspectives on:

- Their economic, physical, and mental well-being
 - How these have been impacted by the pandemic
- Systems and resources designed to support their work
 - How these have been impacted by the pandemic
- How they have adapted to changes in systems and circumstances
- What resources they have used to support their work and well-being
- What resources they think would be most helpful to support their work and well-being

Focus Group Methodology

- Authentic voices of practitioners
- Representing diverse program contexts (family, center-based, Head Start)
- Members of diverse cultural communities
- Geographic representation
- Conducted by trusted community members

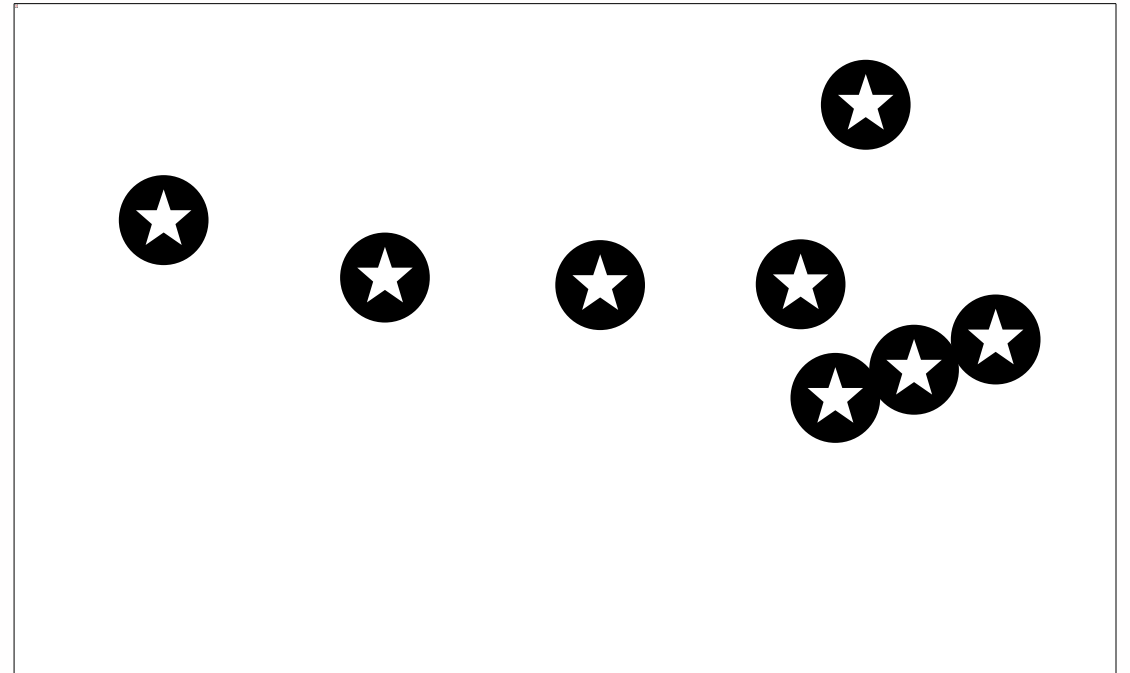
Caption



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Trusted community members as researchers

- 12 Interviewers
- 13 Interviews
- 4 Spanish
- Rural and urban
- Community researchers recruited participants



Participants

- 98 English-speaking (M=14.6 years in ECE field)
 - 87 female, 3 male, 8 missing sex identity
- 23 Spanish-speaking (M=7.14 years in ECE field)
 - 22 female, 1 missing sex identity

	English		Spanish	
	n	%	n	%
Professional role				
Teacher	26	28.9	5	21.7
Assistant teacher	10	11.1	3	13
Director	16	17.8	2	8.7
Owner	8	8.9	3	13
Family child care provider	19	21.1	10	43.5
Other	11	12.2	2	8.7
Missing	8		—	

	English		Spanish	
	n	%	n	%
Racial identity				
American Indian/Alaska Native	7	7.1	—	—
White	58	59.2	—	—
African American/Black	21	21.4	—	—
Asian/Pacific Islander	—	—	—	—
Ethnicity				
Latinx/Hispanic	9	9.2	22	100

Methods

- Focus group interviews (13)
- 75 minutes
- 4 in person, 9 via Zoom
- Interviews transcribed for coding
 - Spanish interviews transcribed in English and Spanish

Interview Protocol

1. Motivations for EC work; perceptions of families & public
2. Physical, economic, mental well-being & impacts of COVID on well-being
3. How they connect families to services
4. How they support children's social-emotional well-being
5. Supports for their practice

Data coding and analysis

- Protocol coding (Saldana, 2021)
 - **descriptive phenomenology** to cluster similar experiences/perceptions reported by participants
 - identified preliminary codes within each question
- MaxQDA platform
 - 2 researchers read all transcripts & assigned codes
 - 3 rounds of coding to determine final codes & themes

Key Themes

- Professional Pathways
- Family & Community Perceptions of ECE
- Dimensions of Well-being & Impacts of COVID-19

Professional Pathways



Intentional Pathways to ECE

I had a daycare job in high school and I fell in love with it.

I've always worked with kids from when I was old enough to be by myself.

I guess I just knew my passion. I've worked with kids through church and it's just what I want to do.

I've always been in education. Before I came here, I was an elementary school teacher, but then also as a member of the Jewish community, it's important to me to continue to work in that world.

The gradual on-ramp to ECE

- Substituting or helping out a friend or family member who was a family child care provider, then encouraged them to open their own child care
- Neighbors would ask her to care for their children, and she continued receiving requests for child care because she became known as a person who “takes good care of them.”

Serendipitous Pathways to ECE

[Social Worker]: You're very good at taking care of kids. We have many women [who] need childcare for their kids. And out of nowhere one day she arrived with a bunch of paperwork and she said I had my license.

I was looking for a job and one of [my daughter's preschool teachers] said, 'let's take you to the principal.' And I asked for what? And she told the principal, look I have brought you a [teacher]. And I said what, no I can't work here. And they said 'yeah go take your exam.' And now I have two years.

[Prenatal Clinic]: Why don't you take care of kids in your home? And I said 'no, I still don't know how to take care of my own.' They would say, 'you can start like that.' I said 'ok, well, yes.' So the ladies from the clinic started taking me their kids. An up to this day I am still taking care of children in my house.

Caring for one's own children

We really struggled to find daycare, and I'm like, I love to be with kids, I decided to do this, and I get to be home with my kids which was a huge motivator.

I just got into this because we had a bad experience with our oldest son, and so I decided right then and there that I wanted to make the kind of a difference where I wouldn't do anything that I wouldn't do for my own children.

What motivated me was when my son was a little boy at a different daycare he got burnt. How did you allow your staff to even have stuff to burn my child?

4 years ago, I had grandchildren and visited some daycares and decided that I should just do that.



Family & Community Perceptions of ECE

Saints and Superheroes

I feel like the parents in our program, especially those that have been around for a while, view us like a second family to their children. We have a lot of parents that call us saints and superheroes. So I think it's a really positive outlook.



I got a lot of feedback from the parents, that they appreciated the effort and that they could see difference in their child, that they could see them growing through the years. And so, at that time, I felt like they were, they didn't look at it as just daycare or watching children, just to have something to do. They saw it as an educational experience.

For me it has been a bit difficult at times. Because ...there are parents that don't give it the value...that a job has. That don't understand that this is our job.



I think that... [the] general public... view early childhood education largely as like... babysitting... and I feel that there's a lot of people that don't really respect the profession if they don't understand it



There is a little bit more knowledge on what we do at preschool, but I do feel like there is a lot of people still that just think it's just like daycare all day. What – you know, “How hard are you gonna work? You're just gonna play with kids all day.”

ECE Professionals' Well-being



“I would say well-being to me it’s kind of talking about your whole self. I mean like body, mind, spirit, everything.”



“Well, economically also because not that money also matters, but it takes away the stress.”

*We're so focused through the day making sure the daily needs are met, and that they're meeting milestones and goals, and that, you know, their well-being is always at the forefront that I think teachers and educators our well-being is so – becomes so adaptable. **You know, we're able to put ours on the backburner.** And well-being for a teacher can look like taking, you know, two minutes in the bathroom to breathe and splash some water on your face.*

*I feel like we're trying to make everyone happy, that **sometimes we don't think about ourselves.***

*I look at well-being as a form of self-care, as well. I think that as they always say, when you're on a plane you always have to put on your mask first before you help any others, and I think it's **very important to make sure that our cups are as full as possible, because we always have to give so much to our team.***

*Something that I think of when I think of well-being is just being supported, so whether it's with a **parent showing gratitude and appreciation** for everything that they're doing for their children, or the **company providing good benefits**- financial, physical, mental, whatever it is, and then executive directors, making sure they have all the materials they need.*

Pandemic Effects on Well-being



I am exhausted every, single day. Every, single day. Every, every day. Even on a Saturday, and I don't even work on Saturdays, but I want to say the demand of the job, it seems like it's a little bit overwhelming because we take on everybody's responsibility. Especially when say for instance, you're short staffed. Say that there are behaviors in the classroom and you're handling different behaviors. Say you have reports that we all have to do and turn in and all of those paper work things, so I think it just becomes a little bit overwhelming, especially when you think about that and then of course, sometimes we are the last people to take care of ourselves, is ourselves, because we put everything on the forefront.

I'd say my physical [well-being] has changed since the pandemic. I don't know if I can just blame it on the pandemic, but before I didn't have any issues and now I do.

*[I] put on some extra pounds and now it's really hard to get off because now you've got to find time – you know to get it off, and **your job sometimes is so, you know, draining, and you're exhausted, and you just want to get home and relax, and then you get home late and it's dark outside – so that's less motivating.***

I used to be more active before the pandemic. I would always go to Zumba, I practiced soccer, I would go to my practices... I was active and as a part of it I would watch what I eat. Now I don't take care of myself like that, I don't do Zumba nor football and now I barely even eat right.

Economic Well-being

Financially, my center was impacted. You know, we had whether staff was out sick more and we had to tell families we can't take your kids today. And the way my rate structure is, I didn't charge for days that families weren't in attendance. Especially if it was due to my staff not being able to be there, we weren't able to provide care. And during COVID, I didn't charge for sick days at all. But that had a negative impact on me that was pretty significant.

Pandemic Relief Funds – helps, and...

A lot of my grant money went to keep my employee.

I had so many people tell me no [they did not want to receive the pandemic relief funds]. They were, like, if you raise that, then I'll lose my benefits. And I'm like, okay. So, so what do we do? I literally had a person, I gave her a bonus and then she got her raise, and she was, like, now since you gave me that raise my rent went up 300 dollars. I, I, I felt so bad, but I was, like, you know, this is what this money was for.

Pandemic Relief Funds – We are essential!

I think it was something that, you know, it almost felt like [we] exist. Like, they do know that we're struggling, too. I mean, there was a lot of talk about the nurses and the doctors and the people who had to go out [inaudible] into the work field to do all this stuff, but then, I mean, - these kids, in the beginning it was these kids are these super spreaders and all that. But then the parents are dropping their kids off into our homes and affecting all of our families, and it was, like, this is stressful. So to get that, almost, like, a bonus, it was kinda nice to be appreciated and to know that we weren't forgotten.

Pandemic Effects on Psychological Well-being

COVID gave childcare not a break. It just added extra frustration. And I think for the mental well-being of that, I think a lot of us still struggle with that because we're exhausted.

For me, the most difficult thing was the fear. I still fear COVID because many, many people around me died. People very close to me in Mexico more than anything. I had a [inaudible] about COVID. It was very intense. Intense still working at the daycare, think it affected me a lot because I – I couldn't have that same connection with the kids. Because, well, I used to let them kiss me, grab me with their hands. I didn't care if they had boogers, honestly.

Staffing and well-being

So being someone that was on the job all the time, you just learn to stop and pause and like, wait a minute, it's okay to take care of yourself. So, it's a struggle, though. I can see on here, like, flexible work schedule, paid work, sick leave, breaks-away- that part is really a struggle. I try to do that to the best of our ability, but just like everybody else probably, that recruitment and hiring of staff has really been hard, also coming back from Covid, that sometimes that I would love to give everyone the time off they want, but it's hard to do that because if we did that, then I wouldn't have enough staff.

Stress of Preventing COVID

Dear Lord, there wasn't enough lotion in the whole [name] community to take care of our hands at that time. Because we were sanitizing everything.

I think it was very stressful trying to keep it out of my house. I met parents at the door, um, and we probably did that for 6 months. And every parent was okay with it.

I had a parent who was upset with me about that [mask requirement], and so that put a strain on our relationship, whereas I was just trying to look out for myself and other families, but they didn't believe in masks. So, that obviously brought a lot of stress and strain on the relationship because they threatened me, like, we're gonna leave if you're gonna make us wear a mask and things like that. And then families hiding that they had COVID or somebody in their family had it.

Lack of official guidance for family child care

The State of Nebraska, - here I am licensed. I would have loved just to have a little feedback, you know? Nothing [COVID-related information] was pertained to in-home. Everything was about daycare centers. And it, that was stressful...



Program Supports for Well-being



I'm very intentional with how I approach a team. And so if it means that you're getting snacks... or if I am just helping giving them an extra 15 minute on their breaks because they need to time to decompress. We had yoga on the yard, and mindfulness breaks, and so it was just a couple of things that we had to do as an organization to kind of help support staff during COVID.

What I make sure that I do is, if the kids are, you know, crying too much, I'm quick to say, baby, go on outdoors, have you a little break, you know, 'cause that's important for them as well as it is for me.


We do have a gym and a workout room, and staff get paid an hour to go up and work out. You know, get paid for that hour to work out because you're so exhausted with the kids. Usually everybody just kind of goes home, you know, like I'm tired.

Always take our break. And if you're like having a tough time like call somebody who can switch it around and get you a second out to breathe. Our boss is very into like your kids come first, just like our kids here.

*It's been really important to encourage our staff to really **build their team and build their relationships with one another** because then when someone's going through something rough, it's a lot easier for your team to- that ebb and flow- so-and-so's having a bad day, so I'm going to step in and help out, because I know tomorrow is going to be a better day, and I've seen a lot of that happen naturally with our staff and I'm really impressed with the way they come together for each other.*

Key Points to Consider

- Early childhood professionals defined well-being as holistic, including physical, mental, social, and financial dimensions.
- Early childhood professionals recognize that their well-being impacts the quality of the care and education they provide for young children and their families.
- Early childhood professionals reported challenges meeting their own needs, for example, not having time to eat lunch or take bathroom breaks and feeling exhausted every day.



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