

Early Childhood Leadership Well-Being: A Phenomenological Examination of Workplace Stress and Supports

Jamlick Bosire¹, Kathleen Gallagher, PhD², Amanda Garrett, PhD³ & Wayne Babchuk, PhD¹

INTRODUCTION

- Early childhood center leadership plays a critical role in ensuring that programs are run efficiently and effectively.
- For instance, the center directors lead in building a stable and inspiring workplace culture (Waniganayake et al., 2017), and providing support to educators (Zinsser et al., 2016) through advocacy, administrative, pedagogical, conceptual and community leadership (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001).
- Additionally, the directors impact the quality of center work environments and the well-being of educators (Bloechliger & Bauer, 2016), in part through a decision-making hierarchy, delineation of roles, and supervisory methods (Jorde-Bloom, 1988).
- Yet, most studies of early childhood workplace well-being have investigated educator well-being using self-reports (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2017) and have overlooked leadership (Logan et al., 2020).
- The lived experiences of those serving in leadership in early childhood centers has not been explored.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by one central question, “*What are directors’ views and experiences regarding workplace stress, workplace support and well-being?*” and three secondary questions:

- 1) *What are directors’ knowledge and understanding regarding their work-related well-being?*
- 2) *How do directors experience work-related stress?* and,
- 3) *What systems are available to support directors in their work-related well-being?*

METHODS

Research Method

The current study employed a phenomenological approach to provide rich, descriptive data (Giorgi, & Giorgi, 2003; Smith, 2006) and to allow us to transcend any past knowledge or experience to understand the studied phenomenon more deeply (Merleau-Ponty, 1956). Specifically, we employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to understand and provide a detailed explanation of directors’ lived experiences with a sense of newness, so as to produce a richer descriptive data.

Data Collection

- Four directors, from three early childhood centers were individually interviewed as part of a larger study of compensation and workplace well-being.

Data Analysis

- Each transcript was entered into NVivo 12 and were read at least five times to allow us to become intimate with the participant’s account. Coding started on the 6th reading and functioned as a summary as the interpretation, association or connections that came to mind while reading the transcript were captured. Any theme titles that emerged were then documented.
- Using one transcript as the master-theme (Smith, & Shinebourne, 2012), we employed an iterative process for all the remaining three transcripts while looking for more instances of the themes already identified and exploring for new ones.
- New themes were tested against the earlier transcripts and used to modify or prioritize (e.g., subordinate or superordinate).
- The preliminary results were shared using a PowerPoint to all educators. Their suggestions were incorporated in the results and a final member check was done.

Bracketing

- To control for research bias, that is, bracketing was employed. We consciously and openly set aside our beliefs, perceptions, and feelings, and remained open to the phenomenon as it evolved through the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULTS

Five themes were identified regarding educator well-being (see Table 1)

What are the directors’ knowledge and understanding regarding work-related well-being?

Directors understood well-being to be comprised of physical and mental health, compensation, relationships, and self-care.

- **Physical and mental health:** The directors’ stated the need for paying attention to their body and mind to maintain both physical and mental health.

“...I think well-being is knowing when I need to check out for a minute or two or maybe I need a mental health day and letting people know that is okay...”

- **Salary:** Directors also understood well-being in terms of compensation received, noting that salaries reflect how they are valued in an organization

“I honestly believe that compensation is about how a person determines their worth and value...”

- **Relationship:** Supportive work relationships were dominant in the directors’ definitions of work-place well-being.

“I thrive in a team environment. I thrive in relationships. The people that I work with are wonderful.”

- **Self-Care practices:** The directors emphasized their own role in enhancing their own well-being. Through self-care practices

“Wellness to me means taking care of myself and being taken care of. I’ve learned in a big way some of those things is ... exercise is very, very important to me.”

How do directors experience work-related stress?

The directors identified compassion fatigue, their role as directors, and learning as sources of stress.

- **Compassion fatigue:** The concern about the well-being of educators, children, and parents as well as working to meet their needs, contributed directly and indirectly to the directors’ fatigue.

“Even if the parent isn’t majorly upset, but just wants to express a concern, I am thinking about ‘how did we get here? ... and if we’ve made a mistake, making sure they hear, ‘we made a mistake’ we’re sorry, and such concerns really weigh on me.”

- **Role:** The directors identified responsibilities of management as a source of stress.

“I take this position very seriously. I feel very honored to be in it, and the stressor for me is, I just don’t want to mess anything up that really impacts other people; having to make hard decisions, terminations, CPS calls... that’s just hard emotionally.”

- **Learning :** The directors reported that they did not know all the policies, procedures, and expectations of their role, and as a result spent a lot of time learning.

“I don’t know all of the policies, procedures and everything, so I’m just really learning a lot right now.”

How do the directors manage stress?

The directors pointed out three ways that they use in managing their work-related stress.

- **Self-Discipline:** The directors acknowledged the need to look inward and being proactive in managing stress.

“So, we have to look inward and heal ourselves and be aware so that we can be conscious when we’re working with children; so, if you are feeling isolated or alone or overwhelmed, get up, walk ...”

- **Mindfulness:** Trainings on mindfulness, wellness, and facilitated attunement were also identified as mechanisms that helped directors to effectively manage their stress.

“The trainings are helping me not to live so much in the past or future but in the present. I think has helped me a lot in practicing mindfulness.”

What systems are available to support directors in their work-related well-being?

Directors cited several types of support in their roles, including leadership, other staff, self-care, as well as friends and family.

- **Leadership:** The directors appreciated the support they received from the leadership organizations of their centers.

“To have that kind of support and to respect me as a professional to allow me to make that judgement feels really good, and that’s what I want to do for staff, for sure.”

- **Staff:** The directors identified the staff within the center as a source of support.

“So, people here check in, not only I’m checking with them, but they’ll come and check in with how things are going with me. They help carry the load. I mean, they’ll do anything and for one another, but it’s all reciprocal ...”

- **Self-support:** Directors also reported seeking support for themselves through personal connections.

“I feel like connections are important and connections that are outside of (center name)... I’m able to connect with the directors from (center names) and then I’m able to plug into them.”

- **Friends and Family:** Directors reported that their families and friends too supported them in their overall well-being.

“... all my brother wants to talk about is work. He wants to hear what’s going on at work and he wants to tell me what is going on in his work, and I recognize that, that is valuable for me, ... sharing about what is going on at work, so it’s an outlet for me.”

Table 1

Themes and categories related to educator well-being as established using interpretative phenomenological analysis

Theme	Categories
1. Understanding of well-being: How educators understand well-being and work-related well-being	Physical and mental Salary Relationships Self-care practice
2. Source of stress: Work-related issues identified by educators to be causing them stress in their roles as site directors	Compassion fatigue Role Learning
3. Managing stress: Manner in which educators navigate work-related stress	Self-discipline Mindfulness
4. Available support: The available and reachable support networks for the educators to help them manage their work-related stress and promote their well-being.	Leadership Staff Self-support Friends and family
5. Source of inspiration: Why the educators chose to work with the child care centers as directors	Opportunity Value

What inspires the directors to work in these centers?

The directors cited opportunities and recognizing the value of their work as sources of inspiration in working in the centers regardless the stress.

- **Opportunity:** Some joined early childhood centers from their former places of work to enhance their career growth.

“I love being in a leadership role, able to do these things and to be encouraged to do these things for teachers and the kids in this building.”

- **Value:** Directors acknowledged that their practices impacted the lives of young children, laying a firm foundation for education and development.

“... Once I learned about early childhood education, the power of birth to three and the impact educators can make, ... exciting to be a part of what was just amazing to me.”

DISCUSSION

- Contrary to other studies in which educators understood work-related well-being in terms of separate psychological and physiological states (Jeon et al., 2018; Kuykendall & Tay, 2015) directors in this study did not separate physical and mental well-being as separate, possibly due to several professional learning opportunities they received that focused on well-being.

- The directors sought for support through self-initiated connections because they lacked formal support systems.

- Not surprisingly, directors in this study identified compassion fatigue as a source of stress and resonated with another research documenting that, center leaders are sometimes overwhelmed by teachers, staff and parents who seek them out in highly stressed and anxious states (Logan et al., 2020).

- The directors also identified their close family and friends as source of their emotional support and well-being. Because this has not been found in other studies, more research is needed to examine the role of family and friend relationships for center directors’ well-being.

Implications for Practice

- This study affirms previous research that early childhood centers are stressful work environments (Cumming et al., 2020). programs can support directors and educators by providing interventions to enhance their well-being (Cumming & Wong, 2019).

- To ensure a thriving environment and provide quality early care and education, programs need to support educators’ physical and emotional states, maintain a culture of supportive relationships, pay educators favorably, and enhance their efficacy in managing stress.

- There is a need to prioritize resources for directors including formal networks and mental health supports. Cross-program peer mentoring could serve as another promising workplace support for directors.

- Because compassion fatigue was identified as a source of stress programs could strengthen distribution of leadership responsibilities in centers.

Implications for Research

- Further in-depth examination is needed to examine the association between the directors’ well-being and their roles in overall well-being in the workplace. This could help to understand how directors’ experiences of well-being shape the execution of their role.

- A comparison of how the directors and educators experience well-being within the same centers may also point to areas of convergence and divergence; future studies should examine how directors’ and educators’ experiences of well-being differ within the same contexts.

- Furthermore, quantitative and mixed methods may provide greater understanding of this relatively under-examined dimension of well-being – directors’ perspectives.

AFFILIATIONS

1. University of Nebraska Lincoln
2. Buffett Early Childhood Institute
3. Inspire