

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers are immensely valuable to the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children (Hatfield et al., 2016; Zaslow et al., 2016). However, the field faces persistently high teacher turnover (Totenhagen et al., 2016). One factor that may contribute to teacher turnover is occupational stress (Jeon et al., 2017). While burnout and emotional exhaustion has been studied within ECE teachers (Schaack et al., 2020), little qualitative work as been done to help describe what emotions teachers are experiencing and the factors that influence those emotions. This study examines the relationships among the work environment, colleague interaction, and their combined effects on ECE teachers’ physical and emotional exhaustion.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How do Early Childhood Education teachers describe the physical or emotional exhaustion they feel after particularly difficult days or weeks?

METHOD

Participants

- 1 Rural Private Childcare center
- 7 ECE teachers
- Age range: 18 – 56
- Years of experience: 1-10+ years

Measures

- 10 question demographic survey
- Structured interviews
- 40 question post-interview survey
 - Professional Quality of Life

Analysis

- Interview transcripts were reviewed to develop codes
- Interviews were coded based on themes
- Recurring patterns and themes were identified

Emotional Exhaustion

Theme	Frequency	Quote
Unconfident in Job	23	“...stressful sometimes, because you don't know what to do...”
Prolonged Stress	15	“But at the end of the week, and even sometimes at the end of the evenings, it's just like, your brain feels fried, because you have given so much of yourself.”
Emotional Spillover	14	“I feel like I would come home and be short with my family.”
Preoccupied Thoughts	12	“I would constantly be thinking about it and how I could help them.”
Role Strain	7	“I'd go home, and I didn't even want my kids touching me, like, I didn't want them sitting on me, I didn't want them...”
Perceived Inefficacy	5	“...feel like you can't do enough to do, you know, to do what you're supposed to do.”
Normalizing Emotional Strain	4	“It's a little frustrating sometimes whenever it's like that, but... It happens.”
Hopelessness	3	“...we're never gonna get through this.”
Guilt	1	“And I... I would cry at night because I was, like, I would... I'd feel bad because I felt that way.”

Note. This table demonstrates the frequency of codes for each theme as well as an example from the interview transcripts.

Professional Quality of Life Scale

Measure	Mean	Scale
Burnout	19	<22 = Low
Secondary Traumatic Stress	16	<22 = Low
Compassion Satisfaction	47	>42 = High

Note. This table demonstrates the mean score of each subscale for the Professional Quality of Life (Stamm, 2010) as well as the scale’s cut off scores.

CONCLUSIONS

Qualitative Findings

- Physical and emotional exhaustion is an ongoing, cumulative experience
- Influenced by emotional labor and workplace stressors
- Despite reporting physical and emotional exhaustion, teachers also reported high job satisfaction

Quantitative Findings

- No evidence of compassion fatigue or burnout
- Evidence of compassion satisfaction

Broader Implications

- The work of ECE educators is deeply nuanced
- Requires a breadth of measures (qualitative and quantitative) to be assessed and further research to gain greater perspective

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REFERENCES

