Exploring Early Years Educators’ Psychological and Financial Well-being in Non-Profit and For-Profit ECE Settings in Ireland

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Elaine graduated with a Master of Education Studies in Early Childhood Education (ECE) from MIE in 2020. Prior to this she obtained a Master of Children and Youth Studies from UCD in 2013. As well as having accumulated many years of experience in early years settings in Ireland, Elaine has also spent numerous years working in early years settings abroad, including both Australia and New Zealand. This experience motivated her to explore certain aspects that play a vital role in maintaining high-quality care and education. In particular, her focus is placed on the significance of educator well-being.

KEYWORDS: Early years educators well-being, Self-determination theory, psychological well-being, financial well-being

INTRODUCTION
The First 5 strategy describes 0-5 as the most critical years for children’s learning and development (DES, 2018). Most important to these years, are the relationships that are formed within them, as these relationships have shown to have a significant impact on both the child’s development and their well-being (Hamre & Pianta, 2004). High staff turnover rates in early years settings have shown to negatively impact these relationships and reduce the quality of care and education (Cassidy et al., 2011; Grant, Jeon & Buettner, 2019). The national average rate for staff-turnover in early years settings in Ireland is more than double the national average and even higher in full time early years settings (Pobal, 2019). Even more concerning than this is the recent finding from the Early Years Professional survey, revealing that the majority of educators intend on leaving the sector entirely if working conditions do not improve (Greer-Murphy, 2019).
Moloney (2019) describes the reality of working life for educators as juggling multiple competing expectations, engaging in complex thinking and decision-making processes, and working with various partners to do what's best for young children. The demands and responsibilities of an educator’s daily working life far outweigh the professional recognition that is awarded to them by both the Government and society. Hence, the high staff-turnover rates in the early years sector cannot be questioned when the reality of the job requirements and lack of benefits come into perspective.

Research on educator well-being found the term “well-being” to be frequently used without any definition or conceptualisation (Cumming, 2017). Cumming and Wong (2019) therefore, took a multidisciplinary perspective approach, when defining educator well-being, taking Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory into consideration:

A dynamic state, involving the interaction of individual, relational, work-environmental, and socio-cultural political aspects and contexts. Educator’s well-being is the responsibility of the individual and the agents of these contexts, requiring ongoing direct and indirect supports, across psychological, physiological and ethical dimensions (p. 276).

Research is increasingly recognising the links between early years educators’ well-being and high-quality education and care (Jennings, 2015; Jeon, Buettner & Grant, 2018; King et al., 2016). Research has also suggested that quality is generally higher in non-profit settings (Sosinsky et al., 2007). However, it has also been found that there are significant differences in quality among private early years settings, such as independent private and corporate chain settings (Rush & Downie, 2006). In Ireland, it has been reported that on average, educators working in community services remain in their settings longer than educators working in private settings (Pobal, 2019). This research study aims to investigate the reasons for this and examine how the experiences of educators differ among non-profit and for-profit early years settings. Drawing particularly on Ryan and Deci’s (2017) work on self-determination theory (SDT), this study aims to investigate aspects of early years educators’ well-being within community, private independent and private chain early years settings and to explore factors that contribute to and benefit early years educator workplace wellbeing.

**CONTEXT**

Research has shown that early years educators have on average poorer levels of psychological health in comparison to women with similar demographics working in other professions (Whitaker et al., 2012). Research has also highlighted the potential consequences on quality of care and education when educator well-being is not experienced (Hall-Kenyon, 2014; Hamre &
The concept of psychological well-being is understood through various perspectives across literature. For instance, Ryff and Singer (2008) found it to include aspects of personal development, forming secure relationships, autonomy, competence and self-acceptance. Whereas, Cumming and Wong (2019) found educator well-being to be discussed in terms of psychological distress, such as depression, stress or burnout. Despite concerns over the sectors high staff turnover rate, there is a noticeable lack of research carried out on early years educators’ psychological well-being in Ireland. For the purpose of this research study, educators’ psychological and financial well-being is explored through Ryan and Deci’s self-determination theory. According to self-determination theory, wellbeing is described in terms of thriving rather than simply having a positive outlook (Ryan & Deci, 2017). For an individuals’ psychological well-being to thrive, their needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness must be satisfied.

COMPETENCE

Ryan & Deci (2017) define competence in SDT as a basic need to feel effectance and mastery. According to SDT, educators who feel more competent should show a higher level of job performance and register a higher degree of psychological well-being. Research has also found higher levels of competence to correlate with greater well-being (Collie et al., 2016). Jeon and colleagues (2018) found that teachers who had higher levels of job competence were less likely to be depressed and stressed. However, competence tends to diminish in environments that are deemed too challenging, such as environments where “negative feedback is pervasive, or feelings of mastery and effectiveness are diminished or undermined by interpersonal factors (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 11). This can be seen in individual settings, within the relationships between management and co-workers, but also seen through the dominant discourses that pervade the sector that situate educators in feeling a lack of recognition by both society and the Government (Greer-Murphy, 2019).

AUTONOMY

Autonomy described by Ryan and Deci (2017) is the need to self-regulate one’s experiences and actions. When “acting with autonomy, behaviours are engaged whole-heartedly, whereas one experiences incongruence and conflict when doing what is contrary to one’s volition” (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 10). Autonomy is therefore aligned with an individual’s authentic interests and values. Research has found educators’ autonomy in the workplace to contribute significantly to educators’ psychological well-being (Royer & Moreau, 2016). Cassidy and colleagues (2017)
found educator’ autonomy in the work environment was directly linked to the emotional support provided for the children in their care.

RELATEDNESS
Ryan and Deci (2017) describe the need for relatedness to concern feelings of being socially connected. Corr and colleagues (2015) found that having good working relationships with co-workers, management, children and their families was associated with better mental health. Thus, workplace relationships show us that well-being is not only an individual response but is interconnected to everyone within the setting (Cumming, 2017). Research also found that the relationships educators have with both their supervisor and management is a strong indicator of their workplace satisfaction (Jeon & Wells, 2018).

Ryan and Deci (2017) state that all three basic needs of SDT are interrelated and equally contribute to high quality relationships and well-being. Ryan & Deci (2017) claim that pay also relates to competence, autonomy and relatedness, in that pay needs to be perceived as equitable. Research has found that educators’ financial well-being to be equally as important as their psychological well-being (Grant et al., 2019; Jorde-Bloom, 1988; King et al., 2016). Grant and colleagues (2019) found that educators who perceived better working conditions such as pay, and promotion opportunities showed a decreased likelihood of intending to leave the sector and maintained a greater sense of professional commitment to the field. Hall-Kenyon et al., (2014) on a review of literature, found nearly all studies to conclude that low pay had a negative impact on not only educators’ well-being but the entire sector. King et al., (2016) found strong links between educators that had greater financial well-being and their ability to demonstrate greater emotional availability in interactions with children. The early years sector in Ireland is one of the lowest paid professions in Ireland, with an average rate of pay of €11.93 per hour (ECI, 2018). Research carried out by SIPTU found the majority of educators working in Ireland had poor financial health (Greer-Murphy, 2019). Educators reported issues such as, difficulty managing their salaries and being unable to cope with unexpected expenses and almost all educators surveyed believed the sector to be unfairly paid (Greer-Murphy, 2019). Educator financial wellbeing however, is more than just feeling financially secure. Self-determination theory demonstrates the importance of being paid a salary that reflects a feeling of recognition and value, not only from the early years setting itself, but the Government and society too.

METHODOLOGY

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This research is based on a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design. Guetterman and colleagues (2015) state that an explanatory design begins with a quantitative data collection and analysis phase, which informs the follow-up qualitative phase. Similarly, Onwuegbuzie and colleagues (2007) claim that when quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques are utilized through a sequential mixed analysis, the results from the quantitative phase should then inform the qualitative research or vice versa. The information that the researcher obtained from the survey conducted was then used to inform the semi-structured interviews in the qualitative phase.

The research sample targeted early years educators currently working in early years settings in Ireland. The survey questionnaire was a non-probability sample as it involved opportunity sampling, snowball sampling and purposive sampling. The total number of responses for the questionnaire amounted to 277 responses. When filters were applied to only include early years educators, the survey responses resulted in a total of 115 respondents. The focus of the questionnaire was to gain as many perspectives from early years educators on their experiences and opinions in relation to their workplace well-being. In drafting the questions for the survey the researcher took into consideration the five facets identified by Jorde-Bloom (1998) as being most important to job satisfaction in the early childhood setting and the three basic needs of self-determination theory, being autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2017). The questionnaire also drew insight from recent research carried out by Jeon and Wells (2018), who devised the Early Childhood Job Attitude Survey (ECJAS).

The interview sample was based on representing the three main early years setting types in Ireland. These include community, private independent and private chain settings. The researcher targeted educators working in all three sub-groups who had varied backgrounds, in both their qualifications and experience. The researcher recruited the participants of the semi-structure interviews through colleagues in the profession and contacting individual services directly. It must be acknowledged that this study is limited from the responses of the participants of the semi-structured interviews. The immediate closure of early childhood settings due to the spread of COVID-19 impacted the data collection process. The researcher felt that proceeding with the remaining two interviews would impact heavily on the data already collected and in turn would affect the validity and reliability of the overall results, given the profound effect of a pandemic on educators’ psychological and financial well-being. The researcher, therefore, focused on the four interviews that had been conducted prior to the announcement of the closures of early years services. These four interviews consisted of two educators working in
private independent settings, one educator in a private chain and one in a state funded community setting.

The typology of the semi-structured interviews used in this research was based on a descriptive/corrective approach. This approach particularly focuses on participants whose opinions and experiences are typically absent from research (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The questions for the semi-structured interviews were informed by the findings of the survey. The themes and topics that emerged the strongest were given priority, however the participants were free to discuss other issues they felt strongly about. Interviews lasted between twenty-five minutes to forty-five minutes and were recorded on an audio recording device.

The quantitative analysis was carried out using online survey development software Survey Monkey™. The qualitative data from the open-ended questions was coded by applying tags using SurveyMonkey™ software. It was then transferred to MAXQDA™ for further analysing. For the qualitative analysis of this study, the researcher followed Braun and Clark’s (2006) model for thematic analysis of the data. The themes that were prioritised as most relevant to the study were chosen as they related to theory and were found consistently throughout both data sources. The researcher then re-named the core themes accordingly and found contrasting themes among all three groups. One significant limitation to the research was observed in the lack of survey responses from educators working in private chain settings. Another limitation to this research was the impact of Covid-19 through impacting the quantity of interviews carried out.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

One key finding from this research came from exploring the types of relationships within early years settings. As previously discussed, relatedness is a psychological need that emphasises the importance of being socially connected to others (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Workplace relationships show us that well-being is not only an individual response but is interconnected to everyone within the setting (Cumming, 2017). Thus, relatedness is the foundation for creating a sense of belonging in early years settings, not only for staff but for children and families too.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

One interesting finding came from analysis of the quantitative data when comparing the type of relationship educators had with management. This relationship differed among the sub-groups. Most educators (68%) working in community settings described their relationship with management as informal/relaxed compared to 59% in independent private and 26% in chain settings (Figure 1). Although a small percentage (8%) of respondents from the survey stated
having a formal relationship with management, this type of relationship was directly linked to higher levels of dissatisfaction in the workplace and feeling less valued by management and directly linked to intentions to leave (Figure 2). Further analysis found that informal/relaxed relationships with management directly related to better job satisfaction.

This research study also found the type of relationship educators have with management directly relates to the quality of care and education being provided. The majority of educators (88%) that have a formal relationship with management felt there were too many children in their classrooms and only 37% of those educators claimed that ratios were being maintained throughout the day (Figure 3). This variance between the type of relationship educators have with management was evident again when educators were asked on whether ratios were maintained throughout the day (Figure 4). Thus, this research argues that early years settings that are driven by business (extrinsic) motives through increasing profit might maintain a strictly professional (formal) relationship with their staff.
QUALITATIVE DATA

Both the priorities and values of management was an important theme that emerged from the qualitative data. The variances in these became apparent between the types of early years settings. P04 (private chain) felt management placed financial priorities first: “I was talking to the manager and she said to me ‘it’s not your problem because this is a business’ and I feel it’s more a business than a creche and I don’t like that”. P04 discussed this business ethos employed by management further by referring to how this resulted in a lack of recognition and value:

I mean because it is a big company and I feel we are numbers for them. Because they know that when someone leaves the company, they know they are going to have five or six more people waiting to start. I feel that they don’t care if we are happy there or not (P04 – Chain).

Some educators spoke positively about certain priorities and values that their settings had. For example, P01 (Community), P03 (Independent) and P01 (Independent) all discussed the benefits of having the owners and/or managers in their settings who are trained in early years education and that work directly with the children. P03 found this created a relaxed environment where the manager values the educators’ opinions and expertise, allowing educators to feel
competent in their practice. P01 (Independent) reflected on the fact that the owners in her setting are trained and qualified as being important to why it is one of the best places she has worked:

I think there’s a huge difference where there’s a place that run as a business and the owners are only financially invested and not necessarily like educationally invested. I think that’s a big difference. Because they care more (P01 – Independent).

The concept of owners who are only financially invested is an interesting theme to explore in relation to extrinsic motivation. If owners are only extrinsically motivated by profit, this could entail repercussions for the quality of care and education. As this research has found, educators in community settings have on average better relationships with management than educators in private settings. One possible reason for this could be that management priorities and values are aligned with educators. Recognition and pay were discussed by educators in terms of their connection. Low pay was viewed by educators as a lack of recognition not only from management but from the government too. The quantitative data found that educators working in chain settings received the lowest pay, however the majority of educators across all three sub-groups expressed dissatisfaction with their salary. When discussing reasons for the pay in the sector being low, P01 (Independent) believed the reason for this relates to the caring aspect of the profession: “It’s like this idea that they know that this is the kind of profession where you care and as a result, they don’t feel like they have to pay us as much because we care so much”. It is evident that the need for competence is closely interlinked with recognition and that this diminishes when educators are not given recognition for the emotional labour that is involved in the profession.

It is apparent on analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data that that there are noticeable differences among the three sub-groups, particularly among the experiences of educators working in private chain settings. It is evident that educators working in community settings have on average, higher job-satisfaction and provide higher quality of care and education than educators working in independent private and private chain settings. Most significant to the findings is the importance of the relationship educators have with management as this has shown to directly relate to job satisfaction and the quality of care and education.

CONCLUSION

This research study explored aspects relating to educators’ psychological and financial well-being in community, independent private and private chain early years settings in Ireland. It also examined factors that contribute and benefit educators’ psychological and financial well-being
in the workplace. This research argues that an urgent change is needed, to address the significant high-turnover rates in the sector, which have shown to have negative implications on the quality of care and education (Cassidy et al., 2011; Jeon, Buettner & Grant, 2018).

This research study found educators’ psychological well-being differed within community, independent private and private chain early years settings. Educators working in community settings described better working conditions, higher job satisfaction and stronger relationships with management than educators in private settings. Educators in private chain settings showed the most dissatisfaction with working conditions and felt the least valued by management. Findings from this study also suggest an important variable in educator well-being is the type of relationship educators have with management, with informal relationships directly corresponding to higher job-satisfaction and quality of care and education. This study further suggests that educators who have informal or relaxed relationships with management may correspond to shared priorities and values.

Findings from this study suggests that management priorities and values in early year settings is a pertinent factor that may influence the working conditions for educators and the quality of care and education it provides for the children. For managements’ priorities and values to be in line with educators then they also need to be intrinsically motivated and educationally invested. Therefore, it is recommended that a mandatory higher-level qualification in early years education is obtained by owners and managers. This may improve the relationship management have with their staff as findings from this research study suggest that stronger relationships with management occur when both the educator and management share the same priorities and values. It has been argued that early childhood work environments need to nurture adults as well as children (Cumming & Wong, 2019; Jorde-Bloom, 1988). It is further recommended that policy considers the benefits of a holistic working environment for educators, through prioritising time for relationships, encouraging autonomy and promoting competence.

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