Impacts of managerial systems on early educators' job satisfaction in five countries

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The work of early childhood educators is conducted in highly regulated environments in many Western nations. This is due to managerialism, the right arm of neoliberal-inspired policies. To explore educators' work within these contexts, our international study highlights the impacts of these systems on educators and the children they teach. This paper presents findings from five countries, namely, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Georgia and Italy. The results reveal the experiences of educators in these countries, impacted by neoliberal-inspired policies that are manifested in two different ways. They are dealing with increased managerial regulation or with the neglect of the sector in the pursuit of higher profits. Educators' job satisfaction is impacted when they perceive they are not able to adequately educate and support children due to these constraints. Using a critical neoliberal framework, we employed a mixed-method approach. The participants were educators with various roles and qualifications in a variety of service types. To analyse the numerical/closed answer data we used cross tabulation. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. Despite their difficulties, educators provided many ideas on the ways their government can better support their work so that they can focus on supporting children's learning through play. This study will be of interest to researchers, educators, policymakers and teacher educators.

Introduction

The dominant paradigm in many high-income countries is neoliberalism (Apple, 2006). This has a profound impact on early childhood education and care (ECEC) due to the neoliberal policies that dominate the sector (Moloney et al. 2019). These policy settings manifest themselves in managerialism (Rogers, 2021; Sims, 2020), leading to highly regulated work environments for educators. Previously, research revealed that quality assurance is increasingly used, impacting procedures in ECEC services. In turn, this hinders the time educators spend on educational and support activities with both children and families (Moss, 2012; Osgood, 2006; Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016). Further, the balance between satisfying the demands of the system whilst promoting play-based learning, can influence educator wellbeing and burnout (Ng et al., 2023), and how educators perceive their roles (Rogers et al., 2020).

In this paper, we present results from an international study of educators' perception of their highly regulated work environment. The topic was explored using a mixed-methods approach. An online questionnaire was administered to ECEC educators working in Australia, Canada, Denmark, Georgia and Italy. The results underline the multiple challenges affecting educators' wellbeing and job satisfaction, due to the increasing administrative burden they face, and sector neglect.

We begin with a discussion of neoliberal policies and the impact these have on the ECEC sector. Then, the methods and quantitative and qualitative results are presented, compared, and discussed. Lastly, we provide a conclusion that summarises and points to the need for future research.

Critical neoliberal framework

Described as a 'conceptual sprawl' (Dunn, 2017), neoliberalism is an abstract concept that has been often adjusted over the last fifty years. These changes have been in response to changing political and economic circumstances, challenging non-contradiction principles. As an example, neoliberal policies have been responsible for the deregulation of the public service, and dramatically increased performance-based regulation procedures that are suffocating. Throughout the evolution, several essential elements of neoliberal doctrine have remained: free market consumerism, privatisation, capitalism, individual accountability and responsibility (Brown, 2019). Neoliberalism subsumes parts of society (e.g. education and health care) as the dominant paradigm in high-income countries. This paradigm is the opposite to the foundational philosophies of these fields (Apple, 2006), resulting in division, competition, and neglect, rather than promoting human altruism and community cooperation (Monbiot, 2017).

Neoliberal policies ensure management is replaced by managerialism (Rogers, 2021; Sims, 2020). In this system, workers are positioned as untrustworthy, and unskilled, placing extra demands on staff as in the form of compliance and subordination (Morrish, 2016). Such distrust results in high levels of managerialism, such as accountability and micromanagement (Giroux, 2015; Rogers et al., 2020). This can be seen in the framework's requirements for accreditation and registration of programs that are publicly funded, requiring large quantities of evidence, setting off a burdensome self-feeding cycle (Graeber, 2019; Morrish, 2016). Thus, a regime of tense inspections produces a hyper-accountability and hyper-vigilant culture in workplaces. Additionally, staff are intimidated through daily data collection and extreme requirements of paperwork that produce intense fear of performativity (Ball, 2003; Keddie, 2014). As a result, workplaces become places of increased stress, as time is diverted away from the work staff are skilled at and value. This results in workers feeling undervalued, becoming reluctant to innovate, and following regulations to the letter (Moore & Robinson, 2016). Bizarrely, these systems and regulations and systems are supposed to improve quality, whereas they lower work quality, productivity, and educational outcomes (Grant et al., 2016; Sims, 2020).

In education organisations and institutions that were created to emancipate, educate, and question, the use of this business model corrupts moral reasoning (Beattie, 2019). Furthermore, it can lead to neglect of education as a priority and channel resources into more immediate profitable areas (Allais, 2014).

Neoliberalism in ECEC

According to Moloney et al. (2019), the impact of neoliberal policies on the ECEC sector 'is profound and enacted differently across different nation states' (p. 2). The marketisation of ECEC has become normalised, and viewed as a way to improve quality, although this is not explicit in government documents (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016; Moss, 2012). Viewing ECEC as a marketable commodity undermines both equity and quality (Lloyd & Penn, 2012). Despite this, it complies to government's agendas (Sims et al., 2022). In this way, the caring becomes a performativity directive, enforcing separate steering mechanisms, according to Brown et al. (2015). The steering mechanisms include targets, rankings, and accountability as educational interventions (Ball, 2006) that need big data collected by educators (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016).

Grant et al. (2016) states that there is a large difference between policy intent and teachers' experiences. This disjuncture is formed by increasing control over educators' work tasks via management strategies. Therefore, educators spend inordinate amounts of time data collecting and record keeping. As Vandenbroeck et al. (2022) argued, the weight of control and performativity negatively impacts the professional identity of educators and harms the development of the holistic child.

In our study, the research examples highlight the way managerial policies reduce educators' job satisfaction. In the next section, we outline the methodology and present data that reveals the various aspects of job satisfaction that neoliberal policies impact.

Methods

Using a mixed method approach for the project (Bryman et al, 2021), the online questionnaire contained both closed and open-ended questions. The participants were educators working in the ECEC sector in Australia, Canada, Denmark, Georgia and Italy. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data, and inductive thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The University of New England's Human Research Ethics Committee approved the study, then each researcher applied for and was granted ethical approval in their respective universities.

Three of the authors had initially met through the European Early Childhood Education Association Special Interest Group. Those authors organised a symposium on the topic of the impact of neoliberal approaches on early learning and care programs within Canada, Italy and Australia. From this, we discussed the intersection of our research and co-authored a publication discussing the differences and similarities of educators' experiences

in different context (see Rogers et al., 2020). To expand this research, we co-designed this current international survey which assisted us to reach a wider number of participants. The survey was launched in 2021 in Canada, Italy and Australia, then extended for comparison to Denmark and Georgia in 2022, through other collegial connections.

Participants

Recruiting through various methods (social media, email, and online learning platforms), the educators were given access to the consent form and survey through *Qualtrics* or *SurveyXact*, depending on the context (Table 1). All participants were ECEC educators, however, they had different levels of qualifications, different positions in their services, and worked in various types of services (Table 2).

Table 1: Participants and recruitment by country

	Australia	Canada	Denmark	Georgia	Italy
Number	82	145	228	568	251
Recruitment	Email and student on-line learning platforms	Email and social media	Social media	Social media	Social media
Survey service	Qualtrics	Qualtrics	SurveyXact	SurveyXact	SurveyXact

Results

Quantitative data

In Table 2, the demographic data of the participants is presented, and discussed in the following paragraphs.

Most educators identified as female, with Denmark having the lowest figure at 89%. The majority of educators were 40-49 years of age. A younger workforce (18-39 years) was found in the Australian data, (over 62%), whereas Danish, Italian and Georgian educators were older, with over 30% aged 50-69 years. Most educators had been working 11 to 20 years in the sector. A significant number of Danish (36%) and Italian (34%) educators had been employed 21 to 40 or more years, in comparison to their Georgian, Canadian and Australian peers. Most educators in Georgia, Canada and Australia indicated they wanted to stay in the sector for the next five years (Figure 1). This might have changed, however, due to the increased incidence of burnout since the pandemic (Rogers et al., 2023a; Rogers et al., in press). Indeed, by 2022, ECEC educator vacancies in Australia had doubled since the pandemic, according to Lucas (2022). Importantly, many of the Danish educators skipped this question in the online survey as well as other questions, meaning some data is either not available, or, might seem quite different.

One third of the Australian participants are located in regional towns, while in Canada most of them worked in state, provincial, or regional cities. In contrast, 55% of Georgian educators are employed in rural towns, while in Italy educators are more homogenously distributed among different areas.

Table 2: Participant demographics (n.a. indicates not available)

|		Australia	Canada	Denmark	Georgia	Italy
	Number	82	145	228	568	251
Gender	Females	81 (98.8%)	140 (97.6%)	186 (81.6%)	562 (98.9%)	241 (96.0%)
	No response	-	-	19	-	-
Age range	18-29	26 (31.7%)	19 (13.1%)	20 (8.8%)	37 (6.5%)	17 (6.8%)
	30-39	25 (30.5%)	42 (29.0%)	33 (14.5%)	212 (37.3%)	69 (27.5%)
	40-49	22 (26.8%)	42 (29.0%)	79 (34.7%)	181 (31.9%)	89 (35.5%)
	50-59	7 (8.5%)	26 (17.9%)	55 (24.1%)	110 (19.4%)	61 (24.3%)
	60-69	2 (2.4%)	11 (7.6%)	23 (10.1%)	24 (4.2%)	15 (6.0%)
	70-79	-	2 (1.4%)	-	2 (0.4%)	-
	80+	-	-	-	2 (0.4%)	-
	No response	-	3 (2.1%)	18 (7.9%)	-	
Years work experience in ECEC	Not working	-	3 (2.1%)	1 (0.4%)	-	-
	< 3 years	3 (3.7%)	22 (15.2%)	18 (7.9%)	41 (7.2%)	31 (12.4%)
	4-5 years	3 (3.7%)	16 (11.0%)	23 (10.1%)	141 (24.8%)	31 (12.4%)
	6-10 years	35 (42.7%)	26 (17.9%)	22 (9.7%)	128 (22.5%)	39 (15.5%)
	11-20 years	29 (35.4%)	33 (22.8%)	58 (25.4%)	185 (32.6%)	64 (25.5%)
	21-30 years	12 (14.6%)	23 (15.9%)	58 (25.4%)	41 (7.2%)	50 (19.9%)
	31-40 years	-	15 (10.3%)	25 (11.0%)	18 (3.2%)	33 (13.2%)
	> 40 years	-	4 (2.8%)	5 (2.2%)	14 (2.5%)	3 (1.2%)
	No response	-	3 (2.1%)	18 (7.9%)	-	
Location	Nat capital city	22 (26.8%)	7 (4.8%)	n.a.	139 (24.5%)	30 (12.0%)
	Provincial city	16 (19.5%)	56 (38.6%)	n.a.	47 (8.3%)	41 (16.3%)
	Regional city	15 (18.3%)	37 (25.5%)	n.a.	36 (6.3%)	54 (21.5%)
	Regional town	25 (30.5%)	6 (4.1%)	v	35 (6.2%)	44 (17.5%)
	Rural town	3 (3.7%)	23 (15.9%)	n.a.	311 (54.8%)	46 (18.3%)
	Rural comm'ty	1 (1.2%)	9 (6.2%)	n.a.	-	36 (14.3%)
	Isolated com	-	4 (2.8%)	n.a.	-	-
	No response	-	3 (2.1%)	n.a.	-	-
Qualification	No tertiary qualification	-	3 (2.1%)	n.a.	18 (3.2%)	-
	Certificate	2 (2.4%)	50 (34.5%)	n.a.	81 (14.3%)	27 (10.8%)
	Diploma	65 (79.3%)	70 (48.3%)	n.a.	185 (32.6%)	122 (48.6%)
	Degree	14 (17.1%)	14 (9.7%)	n.a.	185 (32.6%)	36 (14.3%)
	Masters	1 (1.2%)	4 (2.8%)	n.a.	97 (17.1%)	66 (26.3%)
	PhD	-	1 (0.7%)	n.a.	2 (0.4%)	-
	No response	-	3 (2.1%)	n.a.	-	-
Studying to increase ECEC qual.	Yes	65 (79.3%)	57 (39.3%)	20 (8.8%)	262 (46.1%)	69 (27.5%)
	No	15 (18.3%)	57 (39.3%)	129 (56.6%)	161 (28.3%)	162 (64.5%)
	No, intend to	2 (2.4%)	28 (19.3%)	58 (25.4%)	145 (25.5%)	20 (8.0%)
	No response	-	3 (2.1%)	21 (9.2%)	-	-
Intention to still be in the ECEC sector in 5 years	Yes	55 (67.1%)	93 (64.1%)	25 (11.0%)	416 (73.2%)	179 (71.3%)
	No	12 (14.6%)	18 (12.4%)	21 (9.2%)	33 (5.8%)	32 (12.8%)
	Unsure	13 (15.9%)	27 (18.6%)	19 (8.3%)	119 (21.0%)	40 (15.9%)
	No response	2 (2.4%)	7 (4.8%)	163 (71.5%)	-	-
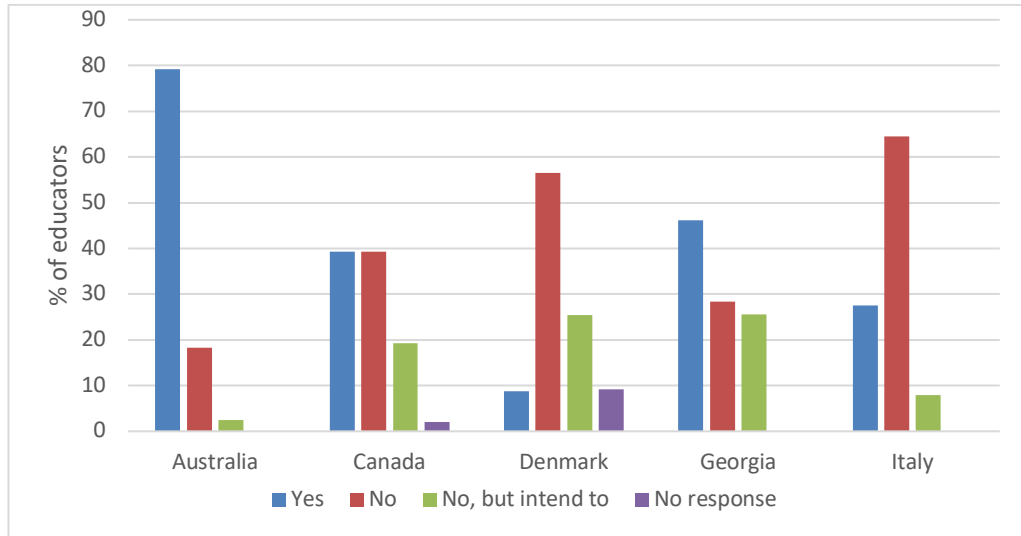
Figure 1: Intention to stay in the ECEC sector

Most participants have a diploma qualification (e.g. Australia 79%). Notably, 33% of Georgian educators are degree qualified, whereas masters qualified educators were 26% of the Italian educators. This would explain why about 80% of educators in Australia want to increase their qualifications, while a large percentage of Danish educators are not interested in further study in this field (Figure 2).
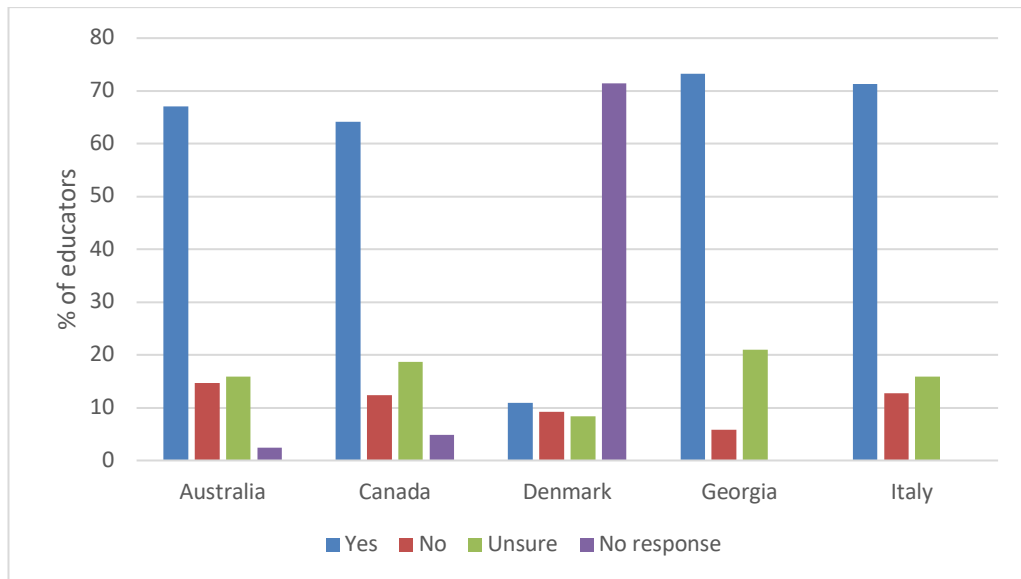

Figure 2: Studying to increase ECEC qualification

Qualitative data

Participants were asked to indicate the number of times they felt satisfied with their jobs in the last working week. Overall, the results show educators felt satisfied with their jobs most of the time (most Danish data are not included, because there were few responses). As Table 3 shows, the majority of educators from the four countries are satisfied most of the time. However, while a significant number of educators working in Canada, Georgia, and Italy are always satisfied with their work, *a lot*, *mostly* or *always*, an alarming 39% of Australian educators report that this is rarely the case.

Table 3: Number of times educators reported feeling satisfied in the last working week

Job satisfaction	Australia *n* = 82	Canada *n* = 145	Denmark *n* = 228	Georgia *n* = 568	Italy *n* = 251
Never	0	3 (2.1%)	2 (0.9%)	18 (3.2%)	4 (1.6%)
Once or twice	10 (12.2%)	5 (3.5%)	10 (4.4%)	17 (3.0%)	6 (2.4%)
A few times	22 (26.8%)	14 (9.7%)	22 (9.7%)	51 (9.0%)	8 (3.2%)
A lot	10 (12.2%)	29 (20.0%)	22 (9.7%)	148 (26.1%)	44 (17.5%)
Most of the time	28 (34.2%)	65 (44.8%)	23 (10.1%)	196 (34.5%)	132 (52.6%)
Always	11 (13.4%)	29 (20.0%)	6 (2.6%)	138 (24.3%)	57 (22.7%)
No response	1 (1.2%)	0	143 (62.7%)	0	0
Totals	82 (100%)	145 (100%)	228 (100%)	568 (100%)	251 (100%)

Passion and fulfilment
Many educators experience a deep passion for their profession. They speak of the unique purpose and challenge they find in their roles. One Australian educator stated, 'I feel a purpose and a challenge in this job that I have not felt in any others.' Similarly, a Canadian educator emphasised, 'This profession is everything to me. The *why* of what I do remains clear for me, and I will continue on.' This sense of purpose is also reflected in the words of an Italian educator who shared, 'I enjoy creating, proposing, and managing activities. The children have fun, participate enthusiastically, and give me satisfaction, even though some of them put me to the test.'

Challenges and stresses, regulatory pressures and burnout
The enthusiasm for the profession does not shield educators from the demanding challenges they face. High demands and pressures, often stemming from regulatory requirements emerge as significant stressors. Many educators expressed a preference for environments with comparable wages but reduced stress levels. The problem of burnout is significant because educators struggle to find a balance between their dedication to children's well-being and the impact it has on their own emotional health. An Australian educator explained, 'The demand on educators is too high and the pressure is intense.' Another Australian educator shared, 'I have been dealing with burnout from the job. I am losing enjoyment as we deal with so many regulations and behaviour issues.' A Danish educator added, 'So many regulations require enormous amounts of time, energy, and pointless running around, which takes crucial time away from working directly with the children, and significantly reduces job satisfaction.' Educators spend a lot of time

supporting children and families, but not getting enough recognition or pay can make them feel tired and frustrated. A very experienced Canadian educator says, 'I have been in this field with the same organisation for 16 years. I love what I do however I am reaching burnout as things continue'.

Moreover, a series of quotes from Danish educators illustrate the profound impact of regulations on their well-being. One educator voiced, 'They [the regulators] create stress and feelings of insufficiency among educators.' Another educator shared her experience, 'I was sick with stress and ended up resigning from my position.' These statements underscore the adverse effects of regulatory pressures on educators' mental and physical health, highlighting a critical challenge in the field. Additionally, an Australian educator revealed, 'Every day I look for jobs. I enjoy what I do but I get tired.' Similarly, an Italian educator provided insights into the emotional environment within their workplace, stating 'There is little positive in the place where I work. This negatively affects me; it dampens my enthusiasm for every aspect of my job.' Another Danish educator pointed out, 'We are running fast, and educators are fleeing the profession.' This shows the need to address these challenges to retain skilled educators.

Positive initiatives and leadership
Besides the challenges, there are instances where early childhood educators find satisfaction in the implementation of new official initiatives. Specifically, within the Danish context, many express contentment with the autonomy in curriculum development, that allows educators to align their teaching methods and content with the specific needs and goals of children. This sense of satisfaction is often connected with the presence of effective leadership. Educators appreciate leaders who actively involve them in the decision-making process. A Danish educator remarked, 'There is a good dialogue with our management team, as they ask us practitioners, how we see it done. This means we have a relatively great influence on the implementation of new initiatives.' Another Danish educator emphasised, 'The nursery curriculum (*den pædagogiske læreplan*) is our regulation – and it ensures that we constantly have our own objectives and qualities in mind'. This involvement empowers educators, granting them a sense of ownership over their work and enabling them to align with broader educational goals.

Balancing administrative demands and collaborative engagement
Early educators often find themselves in a challenging situation. They need to manage paperwork and other tasks while also spending quality time with the children they care for. Unfortunately, at times the administrative tasks can take their focus away from what truly matters – the well-being and education of the children. As a Danish educator highlighted, 'Children are generally neglected by other more important tasks [documentation], which also influence the so-called core tasks. The adults are often stressed and not mentally present.' Educators feel weighed down by paperwork and rules. Another Danish educator explained, 'I often go home frustrated because I have not been able to achieve my most noble task, which is spending time with the children, due to the documentation and requirements.' This shows how administrative tasks can take them away from their primary role of engaging with children.

Learning environments and impossible standards

Creating the right physical environment is vital for children's growth and learning. However, concerns are raised about the inadequacy of space and resources, with educators emphasising the importance of spacious and conducive surroundings. A Danish educator observed, 'The children need far more space than they have now (too many children in far too little space)'. Additionally, bureaucratic demands, particularly documentation and regulations, divert precious time away from direct interactions with children, thereby reducing job satisfaction. As expressed by a Danish educator, 'The [government and municipal] documents set a standard that is impossible to live up to within the given framework: ratio of child to staff, financial situation, and professional quality. Therefore, they create unnecessary pressure on day care institutions'. These challenges highlight the importance of striking a balance between regulatory compliance and creating an enriching environment for children.

Need for investment and recognition

A recurring theme centres on the need for investment and recognition within the ECE sector. Educators stressed that the quality of their services and programs is intrinsically tied to the quality of the people working within the field. A Canadian educator asserted, 'There needs to be an investment in people. We cannot improve the quality of our services and programs without good people working.' A Georgian educator echoed this sentiment, saying, 'I will stay in the profession if there are positive changes and the preschool teacher's work will be properly appreciated.' A Danish educator further emphasised, 'It is impossible to comply with the demands, as we are only 2-3 employees for 30 children in the afternoon. That is if there is no illness among the staff.'

Work-life balance

The challenge of achieving work-life balance becomes evident as educators speak of the impact of long hours and high demands on their personal lives. An Australian educator said, 'The pay and hours make life with a family difficult to juggle and the stress and requirements detract from the joy of working with children.' Similarly, an Italian educator expressed, 'Working long hours, as I do, puts a strain on the relationship with my partner and my family.' A Danish educator added, 'Workload is already high and I regularly have to work in a lunch break or just go home a little later, in order to write, document, interview, etc.' The sentiment of balancing work commitments with personal life was further echoed by a Danish educator who stressed, 'Often you prepare at home instead, in peace without 32 children around you.'

As educators reflected on their careers, some revealed the sacrifices they have made for their profession. A Georgian educator reflected, 'Our work and responsibility were not properly appreciated. We do a great job and I enjoy doing it, but we have families behind us and we can't sustain our enthusiasm for long'. The impact of these sacrifices on personal relationships and family time is acknowledged, posing a significant challenge to achieving a work-life balance. A Canadian educator shared her reflection,

> When I reflect on my career, I sacrificed my family for other families. My home time was interrupted - and still is daily. I haven't had one Christmas without being contacted by

parents needing something for the center or having a concern. I - as a professional - have always made time for the job. As a person, I have failed to make time for my family, I deeply regret this.

In subsequent sections, we discuss the results and their limitations, identifying areas for further research, and drawing conclusions.

Discussion

The outcomes emerging from our investigation conducted across the five examined nations underscore that educators continue to exhibit a high level of satisfaction in relation to their work. This satisfaction, primarily stemming from a profound vocation and personal involvement in activities with children and families, forms the foundation for the motivation and sense of purpose that many of the interviewees articulated in the questionnaire. However, this positive attitude towards their profession is jeopardised by the gradual deterioration of working conditions that characterises educators' activities across the five nations.

Data collected reveal a shared trend concerning the escalating work-life imbalance, levels of stress, and consequent professional burnout. This negative trend can be partly attributed to longstanding structural issues that traditionally afflict the sector, such as inadequate educational spaces and materials, an imbalanced educator-to-child ratio, low salaries, and a general lack of recognition for the importance and quality of work undertaken by educators. This is reflected in the literature about poor job satisfaction in other countries, including the US (Hur et al., 2022; McMullan et al., 2020; Wiltshire, 2023), Korea (Lee, 2020), Kosovo (Hyseni Duraku et al., 2022), Switzerland (Reyhing & Perren, 2021) and South Africa (Zulu et al., 2022). However, the neoliberal shift in service management has added new elements to these longstanding problems, significantly worsening the professional activities of educators. As attested by the interviewees, a substantial portion of educators' work is now directed towards managing increasingly pressing administrative and bureaucratic demands purportedly made in the name of transparency and accountability. However, these demands, far from enhancing service transparency and accountability, generate a 'nonsense documentation'. This documentation effectively diverts time and attention away from educating and caring for children and supporting families - the hallmark of quality.

Limitations

The study distinguishes itself by including five nations, whose results point in the same direction. Nevertheless, only a questionnaire was used to explore the issues, so a follow-up interview might have been carried out to deepen and strengthen the study. Moreover, in particular, in the Danish contexts, the response rate to some questions was relatively low, making comparisons difficult. This might have been due to the settings on the different software, allowing Danish educators to skip more questions. Additionally, the study was conducted in 2021-2022 during the Covid-19 pandemic that caused disruption and stress

across the sector (Sims et al., 2022). However, the timing and levels of disruption and stress varied between and within countries.

Need for further research

Previous research reveals that educators feel unsupported (Doan, 2014) and essential, yet somehow invisible (Ng, et al., 2023; Rogers et al., 2019). Although it was beyond the scope of this study, it would be interesting to deepen the relationship between ECEC educators' access to support and their job satisfaction.

Conclusion

Thus, despite the data highlighting the commitment and passion of early educators, motivated by their dedication to children's development and well-being, neoliberal policies have negatively impacted their job satisfaction (Sims et al., 2022). Demanding regulatory stresses and paperwork have increased burnout, detachment from working with children and has created a stress culture. This has worsened since the Covid-19 pandemic, according to Sims et al. (2022).

In conclusion, the data reveal a work-life imbalance, elevated stress levels, and the subsequent emergence of professional burnout. This can be attributed in part to long-standing structural challenges of the sector, including inadequate educational resources, an unbalanced educator-to-child ratio, low salaries, and a general lack of recognition. Nevertheless, the neoliberal shift in service management has introduced new complexities, exacerbating the professional challenges faced by educators. As reported by respondents, a substantial portion of their time is now dedicated to managing administrative and bureaucratic demands, imposed in the name of transparency and accountability.

The findings also shed light on educators' capacity for critical reflection in the face of these challenges. This ability empowers individuals to recognise different forms of their professional responsibilities, enabling them to perceive themselves as not just caregivers but as knowledge creators, change-makers, and advocates for better working conditions and recognition in the field. This underscores the importance of recognising the multifaceted roles of early educators and encourages reflection on how these insights might inspire improvements in the practices. This practice extends to supporting children and family welfare and mental health, especially in regional, rural and remote communities that may struggle to access much-needed services (Rogers et al., 2023).

Despite this, educators demonstrate strengths, coping strategies and a wish for sector improvements. The results point to the need for sector reform, including improved status and conditions (Robinson et al., 2021), professional development opportunities (Bicaj & Buzza, 2021), supportive and effective practicums for student teachers (Boyd et al., 2020; Kirk, 2022; Matengu et al., 2021), and a reduction in prescriptive curricula, administration and data collection duties (Aslanain, 2022). The findings also demonstrate a need to recognise, support and strengthen educators' wellbeing and professional growth, as

advocated by Ng et al. (2023). This will take time and investment in evidence-based supports such as counselling and peer to peer mentoring support (Doan, 2014; 2022).

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