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# Well-being of Early Childhood Educators in Singapore

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# **Well-being of Early Childhood Educators in Singapore**

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## **Introduction**

Early childhood education (ECE) is important because it lays the foundation for learning. High quality ECE experiences positively impact children's learning and development, both in the short- and long-term. In the short-term, high-quality ECE contributes to improved school readiness skills, including early language, literacy, mathematics, executive functioning, and socio-emotional skills (Hamre et al., 2014; Leyva et al., 2015; Mashburn et al., 2008; Weiland et al., 2013). Longer-term impacts include subsequent academic achievements, high school graduation rates, socio-economic status, health, and life satisfaction in adulthood (Campbell et al., 2012; Campbell et al., 2014; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Yoshikawa et al., 2016).

In line with these findings, there has been increasing interest in improving the quality of ECE across many nations. Likewise, in Singapore, there have been ongoing efforts to raise the quality of ECE over the past 20 years (Sum, 2022). The first wave of changes occurred from 2000 to 2007 with the introduction of the first kindergarten curriculum framework for 4- to 6-year-olds, financial subsidies for kindergartens, common entry requirements for kindergarten and childcare teachers, and accreditation of teacher training courses. During the second wave (2008 to 2012), key developments included raising the entry requirements for teachers, setting up a preschool quality assurance system (SPARK), and launching of the Early Years Development Framework (EYDF) for 0- to 3-year-olds. Following the Singapore Government's announcement of a strategic focus on ECE in 2012, the third wave (2013 to 2019) brought more significant changes to the whole ECE system. This included the enactment of a new Act to regulate both kindergartens and childcare centres, updates to the kindergarten curriculum framework, and the setting up of a national training institute—the National Institute of Early Childhood Development (NIEC)—that aims to uplift the quality of ECE teacher training and professional development. Building on the work of earlier waves, key improvements in the fourth wave (2020s) include revising the SPARK quality assurance framework to include younger age groups, increasing the income ceiling for eligibility for government subsidies, and expanding the Partner Operator (POP) Scheme to more childcare centers.

Despite increased government investment in the ECE sector, common early childhood workforce challenges remain, such as issues regarding recruitment, turnover between workplaces, and attrition from the field altogether. A recent report cited an annual attrition rate of 10% in the ECE sector “over the past five years” in Singapore (Lipponen et al., 2019, p. 29). During the same time frame (i.e., 2014 to 2018), the average monthly resignation rate of Singapore's overall labour force was 1.8% to 2.0% (annualised rate: 22% to 24%; Manpower Research and Statistics Department [MRSRD], 2022). Although the attrition rate in the ECE sector is lower compared to the overall labour

force, attrition rates in the ECE sector may have increased in the past year as educators have reported experiencing increased stress from COVID-19 (Qing, 2021). High turnover and attrition rates are causes for concern as they affect the quality of education and care by interfering with efforts to create consistency in relational-care systems (Bull & Bautista, 2018; McCormick et al., 2021). Thus, there is a clear need for local research studies focused on generating solutions to address these workforce challenges. While many international studies have identified educators' well-being as a focal point of this research agenda, few such studies have been conducted in Singapore.

In this working paper, we argue that early childhood educators' well-being is a crucial component of high quality ECE. We then provide a review of international as well as local research on early childhood educators' well-being and identify key gaps in our knowledge. The paper will conclude with a discussion of implications for research and policy in Singapore.

## **Increasing Need for Formal Childcare Services and Quality ECE in Singapore**

Over the past decades, Singapore has seen an increase in women's workforce participation. To illustrate, data from the past 10 years revealed that women's participation in the workforce increased from 56.5% in 2010 to 61.2% in 2020 (MRSD, 2020). This is one of the factors that has contributed to an increased demand for formal childcare services (Goy, 2016). To meet this growing demand, the government recently projected an increase in preschool places from 180,000 in 2020 to 200,000 by 2023 (Elangovan, 2020). Against this backdrop and recognising the importance of providing high quality education and care to young children, the Singapore Government has mounted various initiatives to increase the quality of ECE in local preschools. Some of the key initiatives are described in the next section.

## **Current Efforts to Improve ECE Quality**

### ***Uplift the quality standards of preschools through regulatory and accreditation frameworks***

Prior to 2019, childcare centres and kindergartens were regulated by different governance mechanisms and licensing regulations under the Child Care Centres Act and Education Act, respectively (Bull & Bautista, 2018). For example, kindergartens had to be registered once only, whereas childcare centres were licensed for a period of six months to 2 years and needed to have their licenses renewed. When the Early Childhood Development Centres Act took effect in January 2019, childcare centres and kindergartens were licensed under a common regulatory framework, which allows centres with good regulatory track records to be licensed for up to three years. In essence, this Act stipulates that childcare centres and kindergartens have to meet similar standards and frequency of license renewal, thus ensuring more consistent and higher quality standards across the preschool sector (Bull & Bautista, 2018).

In 2011, a voluntary quality assurance framework, known as the Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework (SPARK) was launched to assist preschools in raising the quality of their programs. Over the years, SPARK has been continuously updated to better assist preschools to improve program quality. The latest eight domains of SPARK are leadership, planning and administration, staff management, resources, early years learning environment, early learning and development, curriculum and pedagogy (Early Childhood Development Agency [ECDA], 2022b). According to figures released by the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), approximately 50% of preschools are SPARK-certified (ECDA, 2022a).

### ***Enhance early childhood curriculum resources***

The Ministry of Education (MOE) first launched a preschool curriculum framework (i.e., the Nurturing Early Learners [NEL] framework) in 2003, which specified the country's desired best practices for kindergarten teaching and learning (Tan, 2017). Subsequently in 2011, ECDA introduced the Early Years Development Framework (EYDF) for children from birth to 3 years old. The NEL and EYDF curriculum

frameworks and accompanying resources help educators support child development and create quality learning experiences for children (ECDA, 2022a). Following the launch of the NEL and EYDF, training programmes and other complementary resources were introduced to support educators in unpacking the principles to achieve the desired outcomes in the frameworks. For example, MOE developed NEL curriculum resources to help early childhood educators create quality learning experiences for children. These include teaching guidelines for the three official Mother Tongue languages (Chinese, Malay, and Tamil), a curriculum guide with practical teaching strategies, and a resource package to support the nurturing of learning dispositions (Tan, 2017). Similarly, ECDA developed the EYDF Educators' Guide in 2017 to translate the principles and considerations in the framework to practice. ECDA and MOE are currently refreshing both curriculum frameworks. The revised NEL was launched in November 2022 and the refreshed EYDF will be ready by end-2023.

### ***Set up government kindergartens to catalyse quality improvements***

In 2012, the government announced plans to set up MOE kindergartens. The objective of setting up MOE kindergartens was to incorporate relevant research findings on effective teaching and learning in preschools, develop appropriate teaching resources and best practices to be shared with preschool operators to serve as catalysts for enhancing the quality of preschool education (ECDA, 2012; Ministry of Education [MOE], 2017). The first batch of MOE kindergartens were set up in 2014 and there are currently 43 MOE kindergartens across Singapore, with a total of 57 kindergartens to be opened by 2025 (MOE, 2022).

### ***Strengthen early childhood educators' training/professional development and improve their work experience and productivity***

ECDA initiated the Early Childhood Manpower Plan (ECMP) in 2016 to address manpower issues in the preschool sector (Bull & Bautista, 2018). A key strategy focused on expanding current professional development (PD) initiatives to provide early childhood professionals (including mid-career entrants) with more opportunities to develop their career and upgrade their skills through the Skills Framework (SFw) for

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). This was complemented by the creation of the ONE@ECDA online platform, which offers early childhood educators a convenient online account to chart and track their PD and sign up for continuing PD courses. In conjunction with the 2021 launch of the refreshed SFw for Early Childhood (EC), ECDA has also launched a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Roadmap listing the competencies that educators may wish to prioritise at different stages of their career and the PD opportunities to develop those skillsets (Ministry of Social and Family Development [MSFD], 2021). In addition to these recent initiatives, preschools under the existing Anchor Operator and POP Schemes receive funding from ECDA to send early childhood professionals for continuing PD.

Another key strategy was the setting up of the NIEC in 2019 to uplift the quality of training and professional development for the sector. The NIEC works closely with key partners, ECDA and MOE, to offer a range of early childhood courses that are aligned to the NEL framework and the SFw for ECCE (National Institute of Early Childhood Development [NIEC], 2021). These courses cater to the learning needs of students at different stages, including pre-service educators (post-secondary students, mid-careerists) and existing early childhood educators. NIEC also offers PD courses tailored to help in-service educators gain knowledge in niche early childhood areas, such as outdoor learning and Mother Tongue language teaching.

The third strategy focused on enhancing the work experience of early childhood educators in practical ways, such as leveraging technology to streamline preschools' day-to-day administrative and management tasks so that educators can spend more quality time with children (ECDA, 2018a). In 2021, ECDA launched the Early Childhood Digitalisation Grant to defray the cost of adopting pre-approved digital solutions under the Early Childhood Industry Digital Plan (MSFD, 2021). ECDA also released recommendations and initiatives arising from the Occupational Health and Safety Assessment (OHSA) to enhance the well-being, job satisfaction, and productivity of educators (ECDA, 2021). These included encouraging preschools to build more staff-friendly workplace environments (e.g., provide ergonomic/adult-



friendly furniture and dedicated work/rest areas for staff), facilitating the use of technology to improve work processes (e.g., adopt centre management solutions to ease their administrative workload), and promoting physical and mental well-being of staff (e.g., provide health and wellness programmes and annual flu vaccination) (ECDA, 2021; Goh, 2021).

### ***Raise public awareness and understanding of the role of ECE professionals in early childhood development***

In 2018, ECDA launched a National Campaign for the Early Childhood Sector to raise the profile of early childhood educators (ECDA, 2018b). This campaign, with the tagline “Shape Our Tomorrow”, leveraged both social media and traditional media platforms to highlight the important work of ECE professionals in building strong foundations for life. This is part of ECDA’s sustained efforts to foster greater respect for and recognition of early childhood educators. Other related initiatives include ECDA’s provision of additional closure periods for childcare centres to support Teacher’s Day and the ECDA Awards for Excellence in Early Childhood Development for educators, teachers, and leaders.

### ***Summary***

It is encouraging to note that a wide range of initiatives have been rolled out to improve ECE quality in Singapore. Although the impact of these initiatives has not been examined through systematic research, it is worth considering recent trends in terms of ECE course enrolment and salaries of ECE diploma fresh graduates. According to NIEC’s Annual Report FY2020/21, student intake in NIEC’s full-qualification courses, comprising the Pre-employment Education and Training (PET) and Continuing Education and Training (CET) courses, increased from 2,511 in Academic Year (AY) 2019 to 2,709 in AY 2020 (NIEC, 2020). The starting gross monthly salaries for full-time ECE diploma fresh graduates increased from SGD 1,900 in 2012 (ECDA, 2017) to SGD 2,550 in 2021 (Ministry of Manpower [MOM], 2022). Nonetheless, the ECE sector continues to face challenges in attracting and retaining qualified and experienced early childhood educators (Abu Baker, 2022; Lipponen et al., 2019). In terms of the broader goal of improving the quality of ECE, recent findings suggest that educators’ well-being is an important factor to consider.

## **What is Educators' Well-being?**

Well-being is a ubiquitous construct, but its definition differs across disciplines, societies, and cultures (Cumming & Wong, 2019). Thus, it is important and necessary to contextually define well-being. Within the domain of ECE, there is at the moment no widely accepted definition of educators' well-being (Cumming & Wong, 2019; Hascher & Waber, 2021). Previous empirical reviews of early childhood educators' well-being have focused on different elements of well-being. In a review of 30 research articles published between 1988 and 2012, Hall-Kenyon et al. (2014) considered both personal and professional elements such as quality of family life, emotional and physical health, financial stability, sense of self-efficacy and empowerment, autonomy, and the nature and quality of work relationships. In another review of research published between 2011 and 2016, Cumming (2017) focused on individual psychological and emotional aspects of educators' well-being.

In recent years, researchers have called for the adoption of a holistic, multi-dimensional, and dynamic conceptualisation of educators' well-being. Congruent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory of human development, a holistic and dynamic conceptualisation takes account of the complexity of early childhood educators' work by acknowledging the multiple influences on well-being, and the connections and interactions between aspects of the complexity. For example, Cumming and Wong (2019) proposed the following theoretical definition of early childhood educators' work-related well-being:

A dynamic state, involving the interaction of individual, relational, work-environmental, and sociocultural-political aspects and contexts. Educators' 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. 12)

According to Cumming and Wong (2019), the ethical dimension of well-being reflects the moral stance that educators have a right to psychologically and physically safe work environments in which they can thrive. While educators have the capacity to make choices that support their well-being, existing social and political contexts also

influence the extent to which educators' well-being is enabled. In other words, the responsibility for supporting educators' well-being rests on the individual educator as well as the systems and structures that shape the contexts and discourses of the broader society.

Various scholars now consider a holistic view of educators' well-being as comprising physiological/physical, psychological, and workplace dimensions (Chari et al., 2018; Cumming et al., 2021; Kwon et al., 2022). **Physiological/physical well-being** refers to the quality of functioning of cardiovascular, immune, and endocrine systems, prevalence of chronic diseases (e.g., high blood pressure, asthma) and other health-related issues (e.g., work-related injuries, headache, infectious diseases, obesity), as well as the subjective perception about one's own physical health (e.g., ergonomic pain, general health condition, general physical functioning). **Psychological well-being** refers to one's perception about one's own emotional and/or psychological health (e.g., happiness, depression, perceived stress). **Workplace well-being** refers to one's feelings about one's work and job (e.g., job satisfaction, self-efficacy, job commitment, work engagement, burnout). It is important to recognise that educators may experience a positive sense of well-being in one dimension but not in others. For example, recent studies have found that early childhood educators reported high levels of work engagement, satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment while experiencing work-related stress and burnout at the same time (e.g., Cumming et al., 2021; Nislin et al., 2016).

## **Why is Early Childhood Educators' Well-being Important?**

Early childhood educators play an essential role in providing stimulating and high-quality learning environments that support optimal child development (Hu et al., 2021; Jennings, 2015). One of the key features of a high-quality learning environment is high-quality teacher-child interactions (Hamre et al., 2014), which include creating a sensitive and warm learning environment that supports and maximises children's learning and classroom engagement, as well as demonstrating supportive instructional behaviours that facilitate

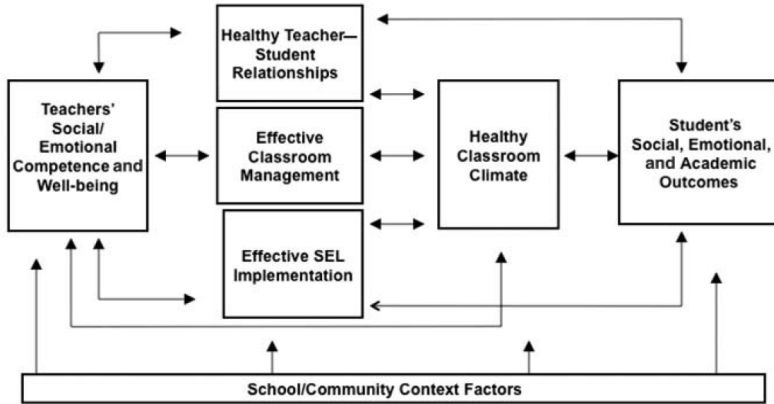
higher-order thinking and language skills (Hamre et al., 2014; Hu et al., 2021). Research has shown that the provision of effective instructional support (e.g., supporting the development of critical thinking skills and providing contingent feedback) contributes to larger improvements in preschoolers' language and math skills (Mashburn et al., 2008). Through the provision of high-quality interactions in the classroom, teachers also foster the development of effective self-regulation and socio-emotional skills (Blair & Raver, 2015; Brophy-Herb et al., 2007; Mashburn et al., 2008). Some studies also suggest that positive teacher-child relationships and interactions may be especially protective for children exposed to adversity and familial risk factors (Cadima et al., 2016; Lipscomb et al., 2014).

The Prosocial Classroom theoretical model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, Figure 1) establishes the importance of early childhood educators' social-emotional competence and well-being for providing high quality education and care. Specifically, socially and emotionally competent teachers are better equipped to cultivate supportive relationships with their students, manage their classrooms in authoritative and proactive ways, and serve as positive role models of prosocial behaviour (Jennings, 2015). These create a healthy classroom climate that directly supports children's social, emotional, and academic outcomes. Moreover, improvements in classroom climate may strengthen "a teacher's enjoyment of teaching, efficacy, and commitment to the profession" (Jennings, 2015, p. 733), creating a positive feedback loop that may contribute to the prevention of teacher burnout.

In line with the predictions of the Prosocial Classroom model, empirical findings have shown that poor physical, psychological, and workplace well-being hampers early childhood educators' ability to create and sustain high-quality learning environments. Several studies have reported negative relationships between educator stress/emotional exhaustion and the quality of emotional and instructional support provided to students in the classroom (Ansari et al., 2022; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014; Jennings, 2015; Zinsser et al., 2013). Highly stressed teachers are susceptible to having conflictual interactions with their students, are less likely to establish supportive relationships

**Figure 1**

<sup>1</sup>Prosocial classroom theoretical model



with them, and more likely to use more reactive and punitive classroom management strategies (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Emotionally exhausted teachers may also lack the motivation or energy to engage in preparation for daily instructional activities, which compromises the quality and rigor of the learning experiences they provide in the classroom (Ansari et al., 2022). As a consequence, the classroom climate is not conducive for meeting students' learning and emotional needs. Consistent with this line of reasoning, several studies have reported strong connections between early childhood educator stress and child outcomes, including poorer social skills (Siekkinen et al., 2013), poorer socio-emotional functioning (Zinsser et al., 2013), lower child engagement with adults, peers, and materials (Ota et al., 2013), as well as higher instances of internalising, interpersonal, and externalising problems (Milkie & Warner, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup>The prosocial classroom: A model of teacher social and emotional competence and classroom and student outcomes. From "The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes," by Jennings, P.A., & Greenberg, M. T., 2019, *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 491–525. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693>. Copyright 2009 by the American Educational Research Association.

We chose to highlight the Prosocial Classroom model as it provides a useful framework to derive working hypotheses about the effects of poor educators' well-being on classroom practices, management, and relationships, as well as student outcomes. Moreover, the model recognises the influence of contextual variables in the school and community (e.g., support from colleagues and school leaders, community culture, education policies) on well-being and other elements. This consideration of contextual variables fits in well with a holistic, multi-dimensional and dynamic conceptualisation of education well-being, which was discussed in the previous section.

### **Predictors of Early Childhood Educators' Well-being**

Within the domain of occupational health psychology, many studies have documented the impact of job demands and job resources on employee well-being. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) offers a theoretical framework to understand how protective (i.e., job resources) and risk (i.e., job demands) factors contribute to employees' well-being. According to this model, job demands are elements of the job that require prolonged psychological and/or physical effort, which drain employees' psychological/mental and physical resources, and could lead to exhaustion and health problems. Job resources refer to job characteristics that either facilitate the attaining of work goals, minimise job demands and its related psychological and physiological costs, or encourage personal learning and growth. Thus, the presence of job resources leads to increased motivation, work engagement and interest, whereas a lack of job resources could lead to increased psychological strain or burnout. In this section, we provide a brief review of findings from international studies to demonstrate how various job demands and resources are linked to physiological/physical, psychological, and workplace dimensions of educators' well-being. Although our literature review focuses on job demands and resources as predictors of well-being, we recognise that there may be broader systemic factors at play within each country, which presents unique challenges and opportunities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022).

### ***Job demands***

One of the major job demands in ECE settings is the challenging work conditions that educators face on a daily basis. Early childhood educators juggle multiple work demands, including managing heavy workloads under time pressure, dealing with challenging behaviours in the classroom, multi-tasking, and completing administrative tasks (Cumming et al., 2021; Cumming et al., 2022; Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014; Heilala et al., 2022; Kwon et al., 2021; Løvgren, 2016). Early childhood educators also handle multiple emotional demands on a regular basis, such as managing children's emotional outbursts and conflicts while regulating their own emotional reactivity in response to these challenges (Jennings, 2019). At the same time, early childhood educators are burdened by the need to express certain emotions and avoid expressing others in their interactions with children, families, and colleagues (Cumming et al., 2021; Heilala et al., 2022; Zinsser et al., 2016). Moreover, early childhood educators working with very young children face physical work demands, such as lifting and carrying a child and having to stoop, push, and sit in awkward positions to adjust to child-sized furniture in the classroom (McGrath & Huntington, 2007; Kwon et al., 2022).

Although these job demands are not necessarily negative, they may turn into work-related stressors if educators do not have sufficient resources to meet those demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Work overload, which refers to having a large number of tasks to accomplish within a limited time (Spector & Jex, 1998), is one of the most cited stressors for early childhood educators (Gu et al., 2020). An early childhood educator may experience work overload when s/he is assigned an increased workload after a colleague leaves their job (Cumming, 2017), when tasked with completing teaching and non-teaching tasks under time pressure (Løvgren, 2016), or having to multi-task (e.g., being with children and writing observations) and rotate from one task to another multiple times daily (Cumming et al., 2022). Prolonged exposure to work-related stressors has been linked to a variety of adverse outcomes on early childhood educators' well-being, including risk of physical injuries, emotional exhaustion, lower job satisfaction, as well as an increased motivation to leave the profession (Cumming et al., 2022; McGrath & Huntington, 2007; Kwon et al., 2020; Løvgren, 2016; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Zhai et al., 2011).

### **Job resources**

The quality of the work environment, or the organisational climate, is a key job resource for early childhood educators. Organisational climate is generally understood to include job tasks and their scheduling and management, the physical and social climate of the work setting, and opportunities for employee satisfaction and advancement (OECD, 2017). A positive work climate comprises a variety of aspects, such as supportive relationships with supervisors and colleagues, having a sense of autonomy, opportunities for professional growth, and perceived professional support (Cumming et al., 2021; Jeon & Ardeleanu, 2020; Lipscomb et al., 2021). These elements create a healthy and collaborative working environment in which early childhood educators can thrive and experience work fulfilment (Cumming et al., 2021; Zinsser et al., 2016), which contributes to improving their professional commitment (Grant et al., 2019; Totenhagen et al., 2016). Moreover, given that teaching is a people-oriented job and involves a significant amount of interaction with others (Ng & Meow, 2022), a positive social climate (e.g., feeling socially connected and supported at work) is key to facilitating teachers' work.

Previous studies involving early childhood educators have shown that positive features of organisational climate, such as a perceived sense of community, high quality leadership, and social support from co-workers and supervisors predicted higher job satisfaction, increased work engagement, lower levels of emotional exhaustion, and higher levels of classroom quality (Kusma et al., 2012; Henry et al., 2021; Lipscomb et al., 2021; Løvgren, 2016). In studies focusing on sense of autonomy, early childhood educators who perceived themselves as having control and influence over work-related decisions (e.g., choosing and preparing teaching activities) reported lower levels of stress, higher work engagement, and job satisfaction (Hur et al., 2016; Royer & Moreau, 2016), as well as lower levels of burnout (Blöchliger & Bauer, 2018). In comparison, negative features of organisational climate, such as stressful and conflictual parent-teacher relationships contributed to poorer physical well-being in childcare teachers (Faulkner et al., 2016).

Research has also identified financial compensation and work time supports (e.g., paid planning time for classroom activities, vacation days, sick days) as a crucial job resource for early childhood educators



(King et al., 2016). In a study involving preschool teachers, King et al. (2016) found that teachers' wages and their perceptions of their ability to pay for basic expenses positively relates to children's positive emotional expressions and behaviours in the classroom. Another study found that preschool teachers who reported lower satisfaction with their pay experienced burnout symptoms more often (Blöchliger & Bauer, 2018). In a state-wide survey of early childhood educators in the United States, teachers who reported lower hourly wages and did not have health insurance had more depressive symptoms (Roberts et al., 2019). These findings suggest that these financial resources and benefits provide educators with a sense of financial security and stability, which contributes to lower stress levels, increased perceived respect, self-efficacy, or self-worth (King et al., 2016).

Many studies reviewed above have focused on the influence of either job demands or job resources on well-being in their investigations. However, more recent studies have investigated the relative associative power of job demands and resources with educators' well-being. For example, in a study examining the associations among various job demands, resources, and early childhood educators' professional well-being (self-efficacy and work commitment), Kwon et al. (2021) found that among four different elements of work resources, only positive work climate and quality of the physical environment were correlated with higher self-efficacy and work commitment; teachers' wages and employer-provided health insurance did not. In terms of job demands, only physical demands, not work-related stressors (e.g., working long hours, having no control over taking time off), were correlated with professional well-being. Taken together, these findings highlight the value of simultaneously examining multiple facets of job resources and demands to elucidate the elements that are most important to educators' well-being. This may include exploring interaction effects or comparing the relative associative/predictive strength of job demands and resources on well-being.

### **Summary**

A variety of job demands and resources have been identified as possible predictors of early childhood educators' well-being. It is worth noting that some of the job demands discussed here, such as heavy workloads, lack of support from colleagues and supervisors,

and management of difficult student behaviours (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016), have also been reported by primary and secondary school teachers. However, the physical and emotional demands of working with young children are more salient for early childhood educators. This may be the case because the preschool environment differs significantly from primary and secondary school settings (Gu et al., 2020). As preschoolers are still developing their cognitive and socio-emotional skills, preschool teachers may find it more challenging to manage and resolve peer-to-peer conflicts and other behavioural management issues in the classroom (Hindman & Bustamante, 2019). Moreover, compared to their colleagues working with 4- to 6-year-olds, preschool teachers working with children aged three and below are also expected to shoulder common childcare responsibilities (e.g., managing mealtime, toileting, and diapering routines) in addition to administrative and teaching duties.

## **Research on Singapore Early Childhood Educators' Well-being**

To the best of our knowledge, only three studies have investigated issues related to early childhood educators' well-being in Singapore. Findings from these studies (Ng & Meow, 2022; Pek-Greer & Wallace, 2017; Singapore Counseling Centre, 2021) provide some initial insights about the job demands and resources for early childhood educators and the factors that influence educators' intention to continue working in the early childhood profession.

Based on interview data from 102 childcare teachers, Pek-Greer and Wallace (2017) identified four factors that contributed to teachers' job motivation and satisfaction: *employee remuneration*, *employee benefits*, *work environment*, and *professional development opportunities*. In addition to financial rewards, teachers also valued non-financial rewards (e.g., receiving compliments from supervisors and parents, and seeing children's developmental progress over time) and "fair employee benefits and human resource practices" (p. 10), such as healthcare insurance, annual and sick leave, as well as staff retreats or field trips. Although participants voiced concerns about their heavy workload that involved teaching, administrative, and routine care tasks, they also appreciated the positive aspects of their work environment, including

flexible work arrangements and work shifts which allowed them to attend professional development courses.

Consistent with Pek-Greer and Wallace's (2017) findings, the preschool teachers interviewed in Ng and Meow's (2022) study shared about the challenges of handling an excessive workload, managing children with different needs, struggling with a lack of autonomy in decision-making and lesson-planning, and managing parents' demands and expectations. At the same time, they also spoke about different resources that aided in their work, such as having supportive supervisors, colleagues, family, and friends, as well as opportunities for personal development and growth. A key takeaway of Ng and Meow's findings is that despite reporting similar sources of job demands, each participant's lived experiences differed depending on the amount of job resources, their working environment, and their personal circumstances.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Singapore Counseling Centre (2021) launched a survey to explore the mental well-being of teachers in Singapore and the unseen pressures they face at work. Online responses were gathered from 1,325 teachers (29% preschool, 29% primary school, 31% secondary school, 6% junior college, 3% special education, 2% others). In line with the qualitative findings above, respondents listed lack of work-life balance, excessive workload, and managing students' behaviours as the main workplace issues faced. A substantial majority of teachers also reported that their mental health (80% of respondents) and physical health (63% of respondents) were negatively affected.

## **Implications for Singapore**

In our review of the empirical literature, it is clear that poor educators' well-being has an adverse impact on children under the educators' care, the educators themselves, as well as the ECE sector. What do these findings mean in the context of Singapore, which is striving to raise the quality of ECE while managing the issue of turnover and attrition in the ECE workforce? In this section, we discuss the implications in terms of policy and research.

***Need for focused research on early childhood educators' well-being***

The scant local literature on early childhood educators' well-being underscores the urgent need for a focused research agenda to clarify the state of early childhood educators' well-being in Singapore, the factors that contribute to their well-being, and the relationship between educators' well-being and child outcomes. Key research questions include:

- What are the job demands and resources of early childhood educators in Singapore? Do these differ according to teacher demographics (e.g., age, years of experience), preschool, or classroom characteristics (e.g., type of preschool—childcare centres versus kindergartens, same age versus mixed age groups, developmental profiles of children in the classroom, pre-nursery versus kindergarten-age children)? To what extent has COVID-19 changed educators' perceptions of their job demands and/or resources?
- Which aspects of educators' job demands and resources are predictive of psychological, physiological, and workplace well-being?
- To what extent do job resources buffer the adverse effects of job demands on well-being outcomes?
- How do educators' well-being impact on children's cognitive, socio-emotional, and language development?

More generally, there is a lack of consensus about how educators' well-being should be defined (Hascher & Waber, 2021). A shared conceptual understanding about the construct of early childhood educators' well-being and its dimensions is necessary to guide our research agenda and empirical research towards developing a concise theory and identifying good practices using evidence-based knowledge (Cumming & Wong, 2019; Hascher & Waber, 2021). In addition to developing clearly articulated definitions and conceptualisations, there are benefits to adopting a uniform approach to investigate research questions of interest. For example, using a common set of measures

to assess different dimensions of well-being and related constructs across different research projects would contribute to building a comprehensive understanding of educators' well-being.

To this end, we are working with researchers from Australia, Hong Kong, The Netherlands, and Finland on the Early Childhood Educators' Well-being Project (ECEWP; Saha, 2022; Wong et al., in press), an international project that aims to obtain a more complete understanding of early childhood educators' well-being across different socio-cultural contexts. The objective of ECEWP is to investigate how different factors from individual, organisational, and socio-cultural-political levels have an impact on early childhood educators' well-being, and further, on their pedagogical work with children. This work is guided by a holistic conceptualisation of well-being, which "combines broader perspectives on well-being with the specificities of educators' work environments" (Cumming & Wong, 2019). Specifically, well-being comprises psychological and physiological well-being, as well as the organisational context that educators work in (Cumming & Wong, 2019). ECEWP members are collecting data in their countries for comparative analyses, which could then be used to inform interventions to better support and sustain the workforce. Plans to collect data in Singapore are currently underway.

### ***Implications for policy***

The Singapore Government has taken a "measured and pragmatic approach" to improve the quality of ECE (Lim, 2017, p. 19) by introducing policy initiatives in selected high leverage areas (see examples in *Current efforts to improve ECE quality* section). This approach allowed for varying levels of government control while maintaining a commercial, private, and marketised ECE system (Lim, 2017). The government's rationale was to provide parents with a diverse range of programmes to choose from based on their preferences and the different needs of their children (MOE, 2017). However, it has been argued that "a privatised [ECE] sector cannot always provide optimal conditions for the care and education of young citizens" (Lim, 2017, p. 21) because children's needs can be overshadowed by ECE providers' need to focus on being competitive in

a free market and becoming financially profitable (Lim, 2017). To ensure that the ECE workforce is able to sustainably provide high-quality education and care, we argue that more can be done at the policy level to support and safeguard early childhood educators' well-being.

In our view, an important priority is to develop policies or regulations to stipulate the elements of a quality work environment for ECE educators, which would contribute to nurturing a "quality [ECE] workforce that is motivated, engaged, equipped, and rewarded" (Rao et al., 2022, p. 125). This move, which goes beyond providing a set of recommended practices to the sector, would help to establish the minimum quality operational standards for the whole ECE sector, facilitate the creation of equitable working environments across different ECE providers, and provide assurance to the ECE workforce that their well-being is a priority. Moreover, establishing and maintaining attractive working conditions that promote job satisfaction and educators' well-being conveys the message that early childhood educators are valued by the society, which contributes to better ECE workforce retention and reduce turnover (Rao et al., 2022).

This policymaking effort may be guided by policy documents developed by international organisations. The International Labour Office (ILO) Policy Guidelines on the Promotion of Decent Work for Early Childhood Education Personnel (International Labour Office, 2014) outline a comprehensive set of decent work conditions which can be used as a reference tool to develop country-specific ECE policies, strategies, legislation, and administrative measures. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Policy Brief on Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Development: A Foundation for Process Quality (OECD, 2022) outlines the policy considerations to develop a strong early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce, which is essential to providing good process quality in ECEC. In addition, the OECD's Starting Strong IV report describes policy levers (including workforce development) that are instrumental to the quality of children's everyday interactions (OECD, 2021). Drawing on these documents as well as relevant literature (e.g., Rao et al., 2022; Smith & Lawrence, 2019), the following elements of a quality work environment can be considered in the Singapore context.

## **Compensation and Benefits**

1. Establish minimum standards for financial compensation and benefits (e.g., health insurance, sick leave, vacation time) to reflect the importance attached to ECE so that educators feel valued, committed, and have a sense of financial security.
2. Review salaries of ECEC staff regularly to ensure that they are differentiated by the skills, competencies, and requirements for different roles and reasonable even at entry-level positions, given cost of living.

## **Working Conditions**

1. Establish a fixed percentage of overall working time obligations as non-contact time to favour planning and preparation of learning activities, reflections on practice, professional development, communicating with other staff members and parents, as well as assessing and documenting children's development.
2. Establish support structures to promote ECE personnel's participation in continuing PD. For example, provide funding support and a guaranteed number of PD days per year to increase access and staff engagement in PD and to remove barriers to participation.
3. To ensure a safe and healthy ECE environment, establish a mechanism to ensure that relevant government authorities and ECE employers put in place safe and healthy conditions, such as an occupational safety and health framework for each ECE centre, suitably adapted to the specific needs of educating and caring for young children. According to ILO (2014) guidelines, the framework should address:

preventative measures to avoid exposure to communicable diseases, biohazards linked to ECE, and hazards related to ergonomic injury and use of chemicals such as cleaning agents; should provide for occupational safety and health monitoring procedures and reporting mechanisms for problems; and should be subject to regular review and evaluation. (p. 28)

## Conclusions

In this paper, we presented an overview of research conducted locally and internationally on early childhood educators' well-being. Given current developments in the field, we strongly advocate for incorporating early childhood educators' well-being as a crucial and essential element in creating and maintaining a high quality ECE system in Singapore. Continued efforts in the areas of research and policymaking would be important to elevate the professional standing of educators who work with young children, improve professional practice and the quality of the practice environment, and give priority to the well-being of the ECE workforce (Jennings, 2019).

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