

Hello from the Other Side:

Examining Experiences of Former Early Childhood Educators  
to Improve Recruitment and Retention

by

*Summer T.W. Lin*

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We accept the Thesis as conforming to the required standard.

Dr. Lynda Phillips, Faculty Supervisor  
Faculty of Health and Human Services  
Vancouver Island University

Dr. David Paterson, Dean  
Faculty of Education  
Vancouver Island University

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### **Abstract**

Since 2018, the government of British Columbia has funded more than 26,000 childcare spaces across the province. Due to the mandated caregiver to child ratio, at least 12,000 early childhood educators must be recruited and retained to deliver quality childcare. Recruitment and retention of early childhood educators has been an ongoing challenge even prior to the additional spaces being created. This research project aimed to identify the contributing factors that cause early childhood educators to leave their frontline positions. After three former early childhood educators with diverse career paths were interviewed, five major themes emerged from the interviews including wages and benefits; job satisfaction and autonomy; team support for early childhood educators; professionalism, and work-life balance. Based on these findings, it is recommended that early childhood educators ought to acquire livable wages and comprehensive benefits. The benefit package should include pensions, paid breaks, preparation time, as well as professional development. In addition, childcare administrators need to be equipped with leadership skills, preferably utilizing adaptive leadership framework techniques. Professionalism is a key factor to make early childhood education valued and recognized, and one of the strategies would be to raise the qualification standards. Finally, more research on former early childhood educators needs to be conducted to further inform recruitment and retention strategies going forward.

*Keywords:* early childhood educators, recruitment, retention, adaptive leadership, strategy, wages, benefits, job autonomy, team support, professionalism, work-life balance

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

*“We can barely operate at our current capacity  
with a shortage of staff.”*

-74% survey respondents from BC Childcare  
Sector Labour Market Partnership

### Introduction

Recruitment and retention of early childhood educators has been an ongoing challenge in the childcare sector across the province of British Columbia for a number of years (British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development [BCMCFD], 2018a, 2018b; Carlson, 2017; Doan, 2013; Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia [ECEBC], 2012). The high staff turnover rate of a childcare centre not only deteriorates the quality of care provided for children, but also increases the work-related stress for the remaining staff (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Holochwost et al., 2009; Hylton & Vu, 2019; Phillips et al., 2000; Russell et al., 2010; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Whitebook et al., 2014). As a result, this persistent workforce shortage urgently needs attention and investigation as it directly correlates with quality childcare. In particular, since the BC government has already funded more than 26,000 child care spaces over the past three years, an additional 12,000 early childhood educators must be recruited and retained in order to meet the mandated ratio (BCMCFD, 2018b).

### Researcher Context

My personal experience of high staff turnover rates within the BC childcare sector started in 2012. Upon graduating from the Early Childhood Education and Care program (ECEC) at Vancouver Island University (VIU), I managed to secure a full-time job at a childcare program as a frontline early childhood educator (ECE). I was quickly promoted to be a floor supervisor,



and I became a childcare facility manager two years later. In 2016, my husband and I started our own multiage childcare centre, providing care for eight children from our home. In 2019, I was privileged to obtain a part-time teaching position in the ECEC program at VIU. It was also at this time that I began to pursue a master's degree in the Educational Leadership program. Thus, over the past decade I have naturally taken on the role of being an early childhood educator, a manager, an entrepreneur, an instructor, a researcher, and last but not least, a leader. It is my belief that this unique set of experiences allows me to analyse the problem of recruitment and retention of early childhood educators from a diverse set of viewpoints.

All of my collective experiences lead me to one thought: Only when a stable workforce of early childhood educators is maintained will high-quality childcare be delivered. This research topic is not only personal, but also timely, as the BC government is currently implementing new strategies for recruiting and retaining early childhood educators in order to staff new childcare facilities (BCMCFD, 2018a, 2018b). In addition to sustaining the child/staff ratio mandated by the BC Ministry of Health (British Columbia Community Care and Assisted Living Act: Child Care Licensing Regulation, 2007), many research studies also established a close correlation between quality childcare and a stable early childhood educator workforce (Flanagan et al., 2013; Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Holochwost et al., 2009; Howes et al., 1992; Hylton & Vu, 2019; Phillips et al., 2000; Russell et al., 2010; Todd & Deery-Schmitt, 1996; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Whitebook et al., 2014). This direct relationship will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Bella and Bloom (2003) stated that early childhood educators may be promoted to positions of leadership when there is high staff turnover, even though they may not be properly prepared to take on a leadership role. Doan (2016) also pointed out that beginning early

childhood educators may find themselves the only staff member with recognized post-secondary credentials and “[a] constant rotation of new staff and/or very few qualified educators can lead to role ambiguity and workplace conflict, which in turn can result in burn out” (p. 44). I had this exact experience of being the only fully qualified early childhood educator one month after I had started working at a childcare centre, as my previous supervisor had walked off the floor during her shift and I was assigned to be her successor shortly thereafter. While I was deeply grateful for this opportunity, I was undeniably underprepared to manage two staff members, twenty-five preschool children, and thirty families. I felt very isolated and had no one to turn to for mentorship. The paperwork and requirement from childcare licensing all seemed overwhelming and intimidating. I had to spend evenings as well as weekends planning curriculum and catching up with paperwork due to inconsistent availability of prep time. It was definitely the most stressful time in my early childhood educator career and during that time, the thought of quitting hit me almost every day for about a year.

Emily Gawlick, Executive Director of Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia, once said, “In my 20-year career, I have seen too many quality licensed Early Childhood Educators leave the field due [to] the lack of respect for their work, low wages, and benefits” (ECEBC, 2012). Although I only have ten years of experience in childcare, I too have lived through said situation. During the four years I managed a group childcare centre, twelve staff members managed to leave their positions. The high turnover rate was not only hard for me to cope with as a manager and a childcare provider, but it also posed problems for the children and families that I worked with. Hylton and Vu (2019) confirmed my personal experience when they stated, “The consequences in the wake of high turnover rate are staggering, with the loss of staff

affecting children, families, and the general morale and stress levels of staff remaining in the program” (p. 35).

Now that I have become a small-scale entrepreneur as well as a post-secondary instructor, it is imperative that I understand the strategies of recruiting and retaining early childhood educators if I hope to expand my business and further my career in the field of early childhood education. As such, I have decided to look deeper into this particular phenomenon in an attempt to better understand what might be done to help address the issue at hand. It is also my hope that the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development will consider this research as constructive feedback from a relevant stakeholder *within* the profession.

### **Study Context**

Scholarly research has demonstrated that recruitment and retention of early childhood educators is a grave issue (BCMCFD, 2018a, 2018b; Carlson, 2017; Doan, 2013; ECEBC, 2012; Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Holochwost et al., 2009; Hylton & Vu, 2019; Malatest, 2017; Royer & Moreau, 2016; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2013; Whitebook et al., 2014). In addition, this issue has been overlooked by the government of BC, and the public in general, for many years (BCMCFD, 2018b; Carlson, 2017; ECEBC, 2012). In 2018, the BC government announced to invest \$1 billion over the next three years to increase availability and affordability of childcare (BCMCFD, 2018a, 2018b). However, without qualified early childhood educators, the goal of universal childcare is unlikely to be attained.

According to the Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia (ECEBC, 2012), 50% of all Early childhood educators leave the field within the first five years of work. Carlson (2017) suggested in his thesis that “Canada’s childcare centres consistently experience persistent workforce shortages and high turnover rates” (p. xi). In the report that R.A. Malatest &

Associates Ltd. (Malatest, 2017) prepared for Ontario Ministry of Education (OME), it was identified that “the recruitment and retention challenges facing the sector are not new; the same challenges have persisted for decades” (p. 51). Regrettably, British Columbia and Ontario are not alone. Flanagan et al., (2013) identified in the report entitled *You Bet I Still Care!* that 65.5% of employers reported at least one permanent staff leaving their centres across Canada in 2012. Furthermore, in the United States “retention among employees in the child care field is generally low; documented turnover rates range from 26% to 40% each year” (Totenhagen et al., 2016, p. 593). In Australia, the ECE turnover rate has been more than 30% for over a decade (McDonald et al., 2018). The timeline of these research projects also demonstrated that challenge of recruitment and retention is not only long-lasting but also persistent.

In 2018, the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development (BCMCFD) published the document *Investing in Our Early Childhood Educators: Early Care and Learning Recruitment and Retention Strategy* to address recruitment and retention of early childhood educators in BC. The strategy focuses on the aspects of compensation; education and training; and professional development. However, it lacks perspectives from early childhood educators who have left the sector. There will be a further discussion regarding this literature in the next chapter.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to improve the current recruitment and retention strategies by presenting the contributing factors that cause early childhood educators in British Columbia to leave their field. Through analysing the common themes that emerged from interviews with former early childhood educators, critical issues of recruitment and retention are revealed. The

goal of this study is to make recommendations to British Columbia's Ministry of Children and Family Development and close the literature gap for future research.

### **Research Question**

Based on the evidence from the above literature and my personal experiences, my research questions in regard to recruitment and retention of early childhood educators are as follows:

- What are some contributing factors that cause frontline early childhood educators to leave their positions?
- How are these factors affecting the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators?
- What strategies can be developed once we analyse these factors?
- How can we improve upon the current recruitment and retention strategies based on this research?

In order to investigate the matter of recruitment and retention of early childhood educators thoroughly, relevant literature will be reviewed in the following chapter.

## Chapter 2 – Background and Literature Review

*“For too long, the sector has gone unsupported,  
struggling with wages and recruitment and retention.”*

-BC Ministry of Children and Family Development

### Introduction

In the province of British Columbia, early childhood educators provide care for children between birth age and 12 years old (British Columbia Community Care and Assisted Living Act: Child Care Licensing Regulation, 2007). The workforce of early childhood educators has been struggling for years and an abundance of literature indicates that the early childhood educators' state of recruitment and retention is dire (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development [BCMCFD], 2018a, 2018b; Carlson, 2017; Doan, 2013; Early Childhood Educators of BC [ECEBC], 2012; Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Holochwost et al., 2009; Hylton & Vu, 2019; R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. [Malatest], 2017; Royer & Moreau, 2016; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2013; Whitebook et al., 2014). The *Childcare BC* Plan described this prevalent phenomenon with considerable accuracy:

The recruitment and retention of qualified Early Childhood Educators and other child care providers is one of the most pressing challenges to developing universal child care.

Low wages and lack of benefits is common across the sector. Early Childhood Educators have in-demand skills, and many experienced educators are moving to more lucrative careers in other sectors. (BCMCFD, 2018a, p. 18)

There is an ongoing struggle to address recruitment and retention in the early learning and childcare field which has become even more intractable and widespread over the past few decades. As mentioned in Chapter 1, research from all over the world maintains that there is

indeed a very high rate of turnover in the early childhood education sector including British Columbia (Carlson, 2017; ECEBC, 2012), Ontario (Malatest., 2017), Canada (Flanagan et al., 2013), the United States (Totenhagen et al., 2016), and Australia (McDonald et al., 2018). Moreover, a childcare employer from the 2012 Canada-wide survey report *You Bet We Still Care* concluded that “overall the ECEC sector always seems to be in a recruitment and retention crisis” (Flanagan et al., 2013). As such, the focus of this chapter will be to review the academic literature and current policies surrounding this issue in the province of British Columbia.

In order to understand the importance of recruitment and retention of early childhood educators, I will first present the research that established the relationship between quality childcare and a stable early childhood educator workforce (Flanagan et al., 2013; Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Holochwost et al., 2009; Howes et al., 1992; Hylton & Vu, 2019; Phillips et al., 2000; Russell et al., 2010; Todd & Deery-Schmitt, 1996; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Whitebook et al., 2014). Next, to understand the issues surrounding recruitment and retention, the profession of early childhood educators must be defined based on the childcare system in British Columbia, Canada (British Columbia Community Care and Assisted Living Act: Child Care Licensing Regulation, 2007). This will be followed with a discussion of the factors that impact recruitment and retention of early childhood educators and include such things as wages and benefits; job satisfaction and autonomy; and team support for early childhood educators (BCMCFD, 2018a, 2018b; Doan, 2013, 2016; Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Hylton & Vu, 2019; Katz, 1992; Malatest, 2017; McDonald et al., 2018; Royer & Moreau, 2016; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2013). Finally, I will close by exploring the current recruitment and retention strategies within the province of British Columbia (BCMCFD, 2018a, 2018b).

### **Quality Care in Relation to Stable ECE Workforce**

According to Russell et al., (2010), “teacher turnover has been identified as a major factor undermining the quality of early care and education programs” (p. 195). When the retention rate of early childhood educators was low and the quality of the program deteriorated, it was noted that the children became “less competent in language and social development” (Whitebook et al., 2014, p. 4). Early childhood educators who have spent a reasonable amount of time in the field often demonstrate the ability to build secure and meaningful relationships with the children in their care. Children who have strong relationships with their caregivers tend to develop the capability to interact with their peers positively as Howes et al. (1992) indicated:

Children who were more secure with caregivers were more competent with peers than children with insecure caregivers...Children who are less competent with peers are at risk for peer rejection. Peer rejection appears as a powerful predictor of later negative outcomes, including early withdrawal from school and delinquency. (p. 459)

Furthermore, low educator retention rates have been related to high levels of stress for the remaining childcare staff, as well as increased costs to the childcare centre (Russell et al., 2010, Totenhagen et al., 2016). Therefore, a high turnover rate is very likely to affect a centre’s quality at a variety of levels for the children, families, remaining staff and the centre overall (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Holochwost et al., 2009; Hylton & Vu, 2019; Phillips et al., 2000; Russell et al., 2010; Todd & Deery-Schmitt, 1996; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Whitebook et al., 2014). Consequently, it is critical to retain qualified early childhood educators in the workforce so that children will receive quality care and in turn, reach their optimal physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development.



### **Profession of Early Childhood Educators**

According to British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development (BCMCFD, 2020), there are four legally-defined types of child care in British Columbia including licensed child care, registered license-not-required child care, license-not required child care, and in-child's-own-home care. Under licensed child care, various types of care programs exist such as group child care – under 3 years old, group child care – 2.5 years old to school age, group child care – school age (before-and-after school care), multi-age child care, in-home multi-age child care, family child care, preschool – 2.5 years old to school age, and occasional child care (Table 1).

Depending on the type of the license and the group size, each licensed childcare facility is required to employ a prescribed number of qualified early childhood educators (ECEs), early childhood educator assistants (ECEAs), and responsible adults. Table 1 presents the ratio requirement of group child care according to Schedule E from *British Columbia Community Care and Assisted Living Act: Child Care Licensing Regulation* (CCLR, 2007). Child care licensees must comply with the following ratio in order to operate child care facilities in the province of British Columbia.

Table 1 Ratios in difference types of group child care program in British Columbia

Care Program	Maximum group size	Children per group	Ratio of employees to children in each group
Group Child Care (Under 36 Months)	12, with a separate area designated for each group	≤ 4	One infant and toddler educator
		5 - 8	One infant and toddler educator and one other educator
		9 - 12	One infant and toddler educator, one other educator and one assistant
Group Child Care (30 Months to School Age)	25, with not more than 2 children younger than 36 months old in a single group	≤ 8	One educator
		9 - 16	One educator and one assistant
		17 - 25	One educator and 2 assistants
Group Child Care (School Age), if any preschool child or child in grade 1 is present	24	≤ 12	One responsible adult
		13 - 24	2 responsible adults
Group Child Care (School Age), if no preschool child or child in grade 1 is present	30	≤ 15	One responsible adult
		16 - 30	2 responsible adults

Due to the ratio restrictions, the BCMCFD (2018b) stated that an additional 12,000 early childhood educators are needed in order to create 26,000 new child care spaces from 2018 to 2021. As shown in Table 1, each type of childcare license requires a specific level of training and number of educators. While it only takes a single academic course for someone to become an ECE assistant (CCLR, 2007, Sec. 27) and 20 hours of training to be considered as a responsible adult (CCLR, 2007, Sec. 29), it takes as long as two years to obtain an Early Childhood Educator Certificate with specialization in both Infant/Toddler and Special Needs (CCLR, 2007, Sec. 25-26). Table 2 lists the training requirements and corresponding hours required by the BCMCFD (2020) for the caregivers in a childcare centre.

Table 2 Child care certification requirements

<b>Certification Level</b>	<b>Requirements</b>	<b>Designated Training Institutions</b>
Responsible adult	20 hours of child care-related training	Local child care resource and referral centres
Early Childhood Educator Assistant	Completed one early childhood education course, approximately 45 hours of training	Educational institutions recognized in Schedule D from CCLR
Early Childhood Educator	Completed a basic early childhood education program, approximately 900 hours of training	Educational institutions recognized in Schedule D from CCLR
Infant and Toddler Educator	Completed an infant and toddler educator program, approximately 1300 hours of training	Educational institutions recognized in Schedule D from CCLR
Special Needs Educator	Completed a special needs early childhood educator program, approximately 1300 hours of training	Educational institutions recognized in Schedule D from CCLR

Obtaining these qualifications is not only time-consuming but also unlikely affordable to many already working in the field. For example, tuition costs of a two-year ECE diploma program range from \$9,168 (College of New Caledonia, 2020) to \$17,336 (Vancouver Island University, 2019). Moreover, the investment of time and funds does not seem to be worthwhile, because according to Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (2020), the self-reported wage of an early childhood educator assistant is \$17.70 whereas that of an early childhood educator is \$20.80. The wage differential between ECEs and ECEAs is so slight that it is challenging to motivate early childhood educator assistants to upgrade their credentials to early childhood educators.

### **Factors Impacting Recruitment and Retention**

Factors impacting recruitment and retention in early childhood educators can be attributed to three groups of factors: wage and benefits (British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development [BCMCFD], 2018a, 2018b; Carlson, 2017; Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia [ECEBC], 2012; Langford & Richardson, 2019; R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. [Malatest], 2017; Royer & Moreau, 2016; Social Research and Demonstration Corporation [SRDC], 2021; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Whitebook et al., 2014); job satisfaction and autonomy (Royer & Moreau, 2016; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2013); and team support for early childhood educators (Catapano, 2001; Doan, 2013, 2016, 2019; Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Hylton & Vu, 2019; Katz, 1972). These factors will be further discussed in the following sections.

#### ***Wages and Benefits***

Low wages have been cited as the main barrier to recruitment and retention of early childhood educators (BCMCFD, 2018a, 2018b; Carlson, 2017; ECEBC, 2012; Langford & Richardson, 2019; Malatest, 2017; Royer & Moreau, 2016; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Whitebook et al., 2014). Langford & Richardson (2019) painted a vivid picture:

Many enter the childcare sector temporarily, hoping to eventually become primary teachers or to move into other professions simply because there are very few opportunities to earn a decent living in this sector. Many others work part time, often in split shifts, as they pursue educational credentials or employment in other sectors. Others remain in the sector but have little professional commitment and/or opportunity to advance. (p. 26)

As the BCMCFD (2018a) suggested, “compensation has been identified as a critical issue and a significant barrier to recruitment and retention across the sector” (p. 5). In fact, continued low wages undeniably contributed to staff shortage and high turnover rate. The average ECE wage in BC is \$18 an hour, which is below the living wage in many areas of the province (BCMCFD, 2018a).

The *Workforce Study for Early Years and Child Care Employees* (Malatest, 2017), prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Education also found that low wages were a serious issue to retention. Though struggling with the low wages, 70% of the respondents in this report indicated that the Ontario Wage Enhancement initiative had a positive impact on both recruitment and retention while more than one in four respondents pointed out that wages were “perceived as having the most negative impact on their decision to remain with their current licensed childcare centre” (p. 59). The Ontario Wage Enhancement program was introduced by the Government of Ontario to subsidize early childhood educators’ wages province-wide. This program subsidized a \$1 per hour raise for all early childhood educators in 2015 which was then subsequently raised to \$2 per hour in 2017 (Malatest, 2017). British Columbia followed in Ontario’s footsteps and implemented the Wage Enhancement to increase ECEs’ wages by \$1-per-hour in 2019. Subsequently, a total \$2-per-hour enhancement came into effect in 2020 (BCMCFD, 2018b). Furthermore, the BC government has now announced a doubling of the Wage Enhancement to \$4-per-hour in 2021 (Little, 2021). Other research found that “child care workers rate low wages as one of the most important issues in the consideration of whether to leave their job, and one of the top ways to improve recruitment and retention” (Totenhagen et al., 2016, p. 587).

Besides low wages, early childhood educators also have a hard time accessing benefits (Carlson, 2017; ECEBC, 2012; Holochwost et al., 2009; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Whitebook et

al., 2014). Totenhagen et al. (2016) identified in their work that early childhood educators rarely had access to benefits such as health insurance, paid sick leave, and paid vacation. Holochwost et al. (2009), reinforced their findings by stressing that the three kinds of benefits which affected recruitment and retention of early childhood educators were the accessibility of health insurance, disability insurance, and a pension plan. In addition, Holochwost suggested that employers should offer financial aid on professional development opportunities, occasional paid leave, and free childcare as effective strategies to further support the recruitment and retention of educators. Overall, poor wages and lack of benefits are the primary factors that cause early childhood educators to leave their field. Consequently, it is critical to address these two issues in order to improve the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators.

### ***Job Satisfaction and Autonomy***

While issues of wages and benefits seem to top the list of the retention factors, job satisfaction and autonomy at work tend to alleviate perceived stress and burnout, and therefore also contribute to retention of early childhood educators (Royer & Moreau, 2016; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2013). High levels of burnout and low job satisfaction were significant predictors of retention for human service workers in the child care, social work, and child welfare fields. Wagner et al., (2013) investigated the effect of perceived stress on early childhood educators in the province of BC. The survey showed that self-reported perceived stress could be reduced when educators' exhaustion and frustration levels were low. By the same token, educators felt less burnout when there were "increases in job satisfaction, job control, and knowledge regarding use of problem focused coping" (p. 69).

Royer and Moreau (2016) argued that early childhood educators' autonomy in the workplace contributed substantially to their psychological wellbeing. This study showed that

“the autonomy granted to educators, particularly in the choice and preparation of teaching activities, the establishment of daily routines, and the development of group supervision strategies, is a determining facet of psychological wellbeing at work...” (p. 143). This illustrates that early childhood educators’ job satisfaction directly correlates with the level of autonomy they are given in the workplace. Royer and Moreau (2016) also indicated that “lack of satisfaction at work in combination with diverse sources of stress can lead to career reorientation and high rates of employee turnover” (p. 144). Now that the correlation between job satisfaction and retention of early childhood educators has been established, next I will discuss team support for early childhood educators.

### ***Team Support for Early Childhood Educators***

**Team Support for Novice Early Childhood Educators.** Katz (1972) described early childhood educators’ first year as the *survival year*, and during this time they need “support, understanding, encouragement, reassurance, comfort, and guidance” (p. 51). As suggested in the literature, effectively transitioning new graduates from their studies in Early Childhood Education program to working in the field was one of factors affecting staff retention (Malatest, 2017).

Doan (2013, 2016, 2019) emphasized that peer-mentoring was one of the crucial methods to retain both novice and experienced in the childcare sector. According to Doan (2016), “when beginning early childhood educators are not properly inducted into the profession, the quality of early childhood education programs suffers and the needs of children are not met” (p. 44). Every now and then novice early childhood educators “may find themselves working in a childcare program where they are the only staff member with recognized postsecondary credentials” (Doan, 2016, p. 44). Without proper mentorship, newly graduated early childhood educators

would experience stress as well as challenges and therefore tend to leave their positions due to overwhelming feelings of vulnerability.

**Team Support for Experienced Early Childhood Educators.** In addition to mentoring beginning educators, childcare administrators such as myself, should also provide continuous support for early childhood educators since it is “the single most critical influence in the success of staff retention” (Hylton & Vu, 2019, p. 35). Thus, by offering educators the administrative support they need, one would expect to see an increase in the retention of the workforce (Catapano, 2001; Doan, 2013, 2016; Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Hylton & Vu, 2019). One essential component of administrative support is “fostering a sense of belonging and shared ownership of the center community” (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006, p. 223).

Catapano (2001) interviewed 31 educators who had worked in the childcare field for ten or more years. She discovered that these educators “rely on the relationships with other staff members within the program...[and] a supportive organizational structure with a supportive administrator or director” (p. 68). Hale-Jinks et al. (2006) also indicated that effective administrative support could increase job satisfaction. Subsequently, administrators have the responsibility of facilitating professional and yet ‘comfortable’ relationships amongst the staff in order to retain qualified educators.

Thus far, factors impacting recruitment and retention of early childhood educators has been examined and discussed. In the following section, I will investigate the current BC recruitment and retention strategies.

### **Current BC Recruitment and Retention Strategies**

The early childhood educator workforce has been overlooked by the government, as well as the public in general, for many years (BCMCFD, 2018b; Carlson, 2017; ECEBC, 2012). In



2018, nonetheless, the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (BCMCFD) published the report *Investing in Our Early Childhood Educators: Early Care and Learning Recruitment and Retention Strategy* to address recruitment and retention in early childhood education. The BCMCFD (2018a) identified three key strategies including compensation, education and training, and professional development.

### ***Compensation***

Following Ontario's lead, the BCMCFD implemented their own provincial-wide wage enhancement program. Front-line fully-licensed early childhood educators have been subsidized \$1-per-hour through the wage enhancement program starting September, 2018 and subsequently granted an additional \$1-per-hour in April, 2020. In addition, the BC government announced to double the wage enhancement to \$4-per-hour in 2021 (Little, 2021). While the wage enhancement program addresses part of the wage issues, it completely overlooks the importance of benefits in terms of recruiting and retaining early childhood educators.

### ***Education and Training***

According to BCMCFD (2018b), the target set in the *Childcare BC* plan requires an additional 12,000 early childhood educators in order to create 22,000 childcare spaces. The BC Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training has invested \$7.4 million and expects to graduate 620 early childhood educators from 2018 to 2021 (BCMCFD, 2018b, p. 8).

The funding has two streams: one is the ECE Bursary Program, which funds up to \$500 per course for ECE students; the other is the ECE Workforce Development Fund, which funds up to \$5,000 per semester to help existing childcare staff to advance their education (BCMCFD, 2018b, p. 9). However, with only 5% of the caregivers able to access funding, one can't help but wonder how the government is going to meet the goal set out in *Childcare BC* of recruiting

12,000 new, fully-licensed early childhood educators (BCMCFD, 2018a). Moreover, Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia (ECEBC) indicated that they would not be accepting any additional bursary applications after October 11<sup>th</sup> 2019 due to unprecedented demand (personal communication, September 30, 2019). This fact alone implies that BC is in the midst of both a funding and childcare access crisis. The bursary was subsequently reinstated; however, the demand for quality childcare and the connection this has with the recruitment and retention of quality early childhood educators is very real for the province of BC.

### ***Professional Development***

The BCMCFD (2018b) is investing in a few programs to provide professional development opportunities for early childhood educators. The Community Early Childhood Facilitator Program “provides a platform for early childhood educators working in the field to collaborate with peers, reflect on best practices, and share innovative ways to enhance the early years learning environment” (BCMCFD, 2018b, p.10). In addition, the Early Childhood Pedagogy Network (ECPN) will be launched to expand the above pilot program “across the province over the next three years, including developing an online platform that will offer resources and learning modules for early childhood educators to continue their professional learning” (BCMCFD, 2018b, p. 10).

As noted by BCMCFD (2018b), the Changing Results for Young Children (CR4YC) program was initiated in 2017. This program brings early childhood educators, StrongStart BC facilitators, and kindergarten teachers together to share their practices and improve their skills in supporting children’s social and emotional wellbeing. The British Columbia Ministry of Education has announced that they will be “expanding CR4YC to 36 school districts in 2018/2019, and to all school districts that wish to participate in 2019/2020” (BCMCFD, 2018b,

p. 11). Finally, Doan (2019) conducted a small-scale project of peer mentoring and has since secured funding from the BCMCFD to have faculty from post-secondary institutions facilitate peer-mentoring in their local communities.

Although the BCMCFD has started to implement some strategies, the research literature still validates the declining circumstances of early childhood educators' recruitment and retention. In May 2021, Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) published an evaluation report in order to examine the effectiveness of the current recruitment and retention strategy. According to SRDC (2021), the current recruitment and retention strategy fails in the following areas:

- Staffing problems remain both acute and persistent.
- A net loss of staff was reported by 44% of employers in 2020 up from 34% in 2019.
- Recruitment strategies fail to achieve the outcome of an adequate supply of early childhood educators and other early care and learning workers.
- Retention strategies fail to support the long-term engagement of early childhood educators. The group of ECEs not working in childcare has by contrast less work experience in 2020 than 2019, suggesting more relatively newly-qualified early childhood educators have left childcare work. (pp. xviii-xx)

## **Conclusion**

So far it has been established in this chapter that besides the current recruitment and retention strategies being put forward in BC, more needs to be done to improve recruitment and retention of early childhood educators. As Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia (ECEBC, 2012) reminds us that 50% of all early childhood educators leave the field within the

first five years of work, these former frontline early childhood educators are the key stakeholders that the BCMFCD repeatedly fails to consult. It is for this reason that this research aimed to find out the main factors that cause frontline early childhood educators to switch their career paths.

An important goal of this thesis is to present factors overlooked by the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development and make recommendations to improve the current recruitment and retention strategy. Specifically, this research also provides unique perspectives from early childhood educators who have left the field. In the next chapter, I will introduce my research methods and design.

### Chapter 3 – Procedures and Methods

*“To find ideas, find problems.*

*To find problems, talk to people.”*

-Julie Zhou, author

#### Introduction

Interviewing is a time-tested and popular data collection method in the field of qualitative research. This chapter sets out my rationale of selecting interviews as my research method, the sample of the interviewees, the procedures I followed, the ethical areas I considered, as well as a discussion of reliability and validity.

According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), “[a] qualitative interview occurs when researchers ask one or more participants general, open-ended questions and record their answers” (p. 217). Cohen et al. (2018) indicate that the application of the interview in research “marks a move away from seeing human subjects as simply manipulable and data as somehow external to individuals, and towards regarding knowledge as generated between humans, often through conversations” (p. 506). Contrary to everyday conversations, interviews have specific purposes such as retrieving data or information (Cohen et al., 2018). Through interviews, researchers are able to locate emerging themes, analyze, and understand certain phenomena.

There are several different types of interviews. Based on the amount of structure, the types range from highly structured interviews to unstructured interviews. A good example of a highly structured interview is a marketing survey, which is an oral form of a written survey. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the major use of the highly structured interviews in qualitative research is to “gather common sociodemographic data from respondents” (p. 110). An unstructured interview, on the other hand, is more free-flowing and exploratory. It is usually

applied when the researcher does not know enough about a phenomenon to ask relevant questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, a semistructured interview finds the middle ground between structured interviews and unstructured interviews. When conducting a semistructured interview, the researcher follows a list of questions but has the freedom to change the order of the questions and probe deeper when necessary. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) maintain this format “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (p. 111). A semistructured interview, therefore, is effective and emergent for researchers who are knowledgeable about the topic as well as flexible with their participants’ responses.

### **Study Design**

Since the beginning of this research project, I have always intended to pursue meaningful and relational experiences. Therefore, I opted for semistructured interviews because it is “a social, interpersonal encounter, not merely a data-collection exercise” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 506). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that interviewing is necessary when “we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate” (p. 108). There are generally two different approaches a researcher would take when they are interested in an interviewee’s lived experiences. Cohen et al. (2018) identify Kvale’s idea regarding the two different attitudes to interviews:

[T]he ‘miner’ who thinks that the interviewee has the information and who is concerned to extract the nuggets of precious materials from the interviewee, and the ‘traveler’ who is concerned to travel with the interviewee as a partner into an unknown country. Whilst the former extracts information, the latter co-constructs knowledge. (p. 506)

Besides “roaming freely” with the interviewee, Kvale (1996) further explains how the ‘traveler’ explores the many domains of the territory:

The traveler may also deliberately seek specific sties or topics by following a *method*, with the original Greek meaning of “a route that leads to the goal.” The interviewer wanders along with the local inhabitants, asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world, and converses with them in the original Latin meaning of *conversation* as “wandering together with.” (p. 4)

Due to my experience as a veteran early childhood educator who is now on the verge of transitioning into a new career, I would rather be a ‘traveler’ than a ‘miner’ when interviewing the participants. It is critical that I “wander together with” the participants when they share their lived experiences. Having decided on my interview approach as a ‘traveler,’ I started to draft the interview questions and revised them carefully. After applying for ethical review and receiving approval from the Research Ethics Board at VIU, I approached three former early childhood educators for interviews. All three interviews were conducted online via Zoom in light of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. Prior to the interviews, the participants were emailed an explanation of the study, a consent form to sign, and a list of questions I planned to ask. Each interview was approximately one and half hours in length, and the overarching research question put forward was, “What are some contributing factors that cause the frontline early childhood educators to leave their positions?”

### **Study Sample Population**

Three former early childhood educators in British Columbia who left their positions and no longer work as frontline early childhood educators were interviewed. In order to collect a wide array of perspectives, three candidates with diverse career paths and experiences were

chosen: one participant is a childcare centre owner who employs more than twenty frontline early childhood educators, another participant was an early childhood educator whose work remains intertwined with the childcare sector, and the other interviewee was a frontline early childhood educator who left the field completely.

All of the participants had previously worked in the field for more than five years including obtaining their Early Childhood Educator certificates with infant/toddler and special needs specializations issued by the Early Childhood Educator Registry under the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development (BCMCFD). This indicates they have all earned their diplomas by attending recognized post-secondary institutions for two years according to *Schedule D in British Columbia Community Care and Assisted Living Act: Child Care Licensing Regulation (2007)*. Each participant had worked between 7 to 20 years in the childcare field before leaving their frontline positions.

My journey began with the three participants in 2010 when I enrolled in the Early Childhood Education and Care program at Vancouver Island University. Over the past ten years I have learned so much from them, so much so, that to this day I feel it is important to acknowledge the mentorship, support, guidance, and friendship they have given me as I traversed through my first few years in early childhood education. Consequently, I felt it was crucial to me to invite these individuals to participate in my research project. Due to my belief of wanting to be a 'traveler' with my respected colleagues on this investigative journey, I chose to conduct the interviews using a semi-structured format.

### **Data Collection Process**

Once the criteria of the sampling population were set, I began to identify appropriate participants. I approached the three prospective participants by text or by phone, and they all



responded that they would be interested in learning more about my project. Next, I sent emails to the interviewees explaining the purpose of this study. A deadline was also included stating that if I did not hear from them by certain date, I would move on to invite other former early childhood educators to participate in my research project.

Two out of three participants replied almost instantly and expressed their interests in partaking in my project. The other participant messaged me to explain that she needed more time because she had hoped to use her worktime to complete the interview. In order to achieve this goal, the request had to be approved by her supervisor. Ultimately, her workplace did not grant her wish, but she still graciously decided to participate in the study. Upon receiving the confirmation emails from each participant, I replied with the list of questions and consent form for them to read, sign, and return. The list of questions that was used in this project will be presented in the following section.

### ***Instrument Used***

As previously discussed, semistructured interviews were deemed to be the most suitable research method for this project. Thus, I created scripts to start the conversation and to lean on when I was having difficulty in extending the conversation. Alternatively, the semistructured interview format would give me the freedom to probe into the participants' values and beliefs when their emerging worldviews surfaced.

The list of questions was prepared as follows, along with probing questions when deemed appropriate:

- Please state your name, your qualification, your current job title
- How long did you work as a frontline early childhood educator?
- When did you leave the field and why?

- Do you consider the position of a frontline early childhood educator as a career?
- Do you consider your current job to be a career? What are the differences?
- What do you think would encourage more people to join this profession?
- Please compare the stress level between your current job and that of an ECE.
- Do you consider your current job rewarding? Please explain.
- Do you consider working as an ECE rewarding? Please explain.
- Do you think wages and benefits are the only reasons that cause an ECE to change their career? What do you think other factors may be?
- What influences your satisfaction with your work in early care and learning? What do you think about the compensation and benefits offered to early childhood educators?
- Do you think early childhood educators have work-life balance?
- In your opinion, are early childhood educators a stable workforce? What's your experience?
- What do you think is the general impression of early childhood educators and the people who work in this sector? Are early childhood educators considered professionals? How are they considered accountable in their work?
- How possible is it for people in the childcare sector to advance in their careers? What do you feel would support the career development of people who want to pursue early care and learning as a career?
- Did you feel that the work you were doing as an ECE aligned with your personal goals and interests?

- Would you recommend childcare as a profession to someone else? Why or why not?
- If you could improve one aspect of early childhood educators, what would it be?  
(Probe: perception of the role of early childhood educators, more support with the children, fewer hours)

Not all of the questions were asked, and the questions were not asked in any particular order. Depending on the individual interviewee's answers, I chose the next question and probed the participant with additional questions to those on the list. The purpose was to have the participants critically reflect on their own experiences and reveal the real reasons that caused them to leave their frontline positions as early childhood educators. The interviews all ended with my research questions:

- What are some contributing factors that cause frontline early childhood educators to leave their positions?
- How are these factors affecting the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators?
- What strategies can be developed once we analyse these factors?
- And how can we improve upon the current recruitment and retention strategies based on this research?

A copy of the questions listed above and the Zoom meeting link were sent to each participant at least two weeks before their interview, and appointments were made for the interviews. In addition, I offered to send each participant a transcript of their own interview for review, with the option of adding to or redacting from it. I also stated in the email that I would be available to answer their questions by email, by phone, or via Zoom. All three interviews were conducted online via Zoom in light of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. The interviews

were recorded and were subsequently transcribed using the NVivo Transcription. Moreover, I edited the transcripts manually to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were then emailed back to the participants for review. All of the participants approved their transcripts with little to no revision. At this time, I started the coding process using the software NVivo.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

The data were subsequently qualitatively coded using the software NVivo in order to search for common themes in individual interviews and across all interviews. Saldana (2021) explains that a code in qualitative research is “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 5). The coding process seemed intimidating to me at first, but I kept Saldana’s wise words in mind: “Bottom line: Code smart, not hard. Code only the data that relate to your research questions of interest” (p. 28). Focusing on my research question, “What are some contributing factors that cause the frontline early childhood educators to leave their positions?” I was able to detect some common themes emerging from the interview transcripts. These major themes include wages and benefits; job satisfaction and autonomy; support for early childhood educators; professionalism; and work-life balance. While the first three themes directly corresponded to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, the last two themes appeared predominantly and repeatedly in every participant’s response. The verbatim quotes from each participant will be presented under different themes in the next chapter. To end this chapter, I will introduce a discussion of ethical considerations as well as reliability and validity since these are the essential elements of every effective research project.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Prior to beginning research involving human participants, researchers affiliated with Vancouver Island University (VIU) are required to receive ethics approval from the Research Ethics Board (REB). According to Connelly (2014), the purpose of the review board is to protect human subjects by weighing any possible harm against and benefit...[and] to ensure study participation is voluntary and potential subjects have all the information they need to make an informed decision concerning study participation. (p. 54)

In preparation of applying for ethical review, I had successfully completed a course named *Research in Education*. In particular, as partial fulfillment of the requirement of this course, I was obliged to complete the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE). The whole application process took approximately three weeks, and the feedback from the board was relevant and straightforward. I received my initial feedback within a week of submission and was requested to address nine different issues including providing a mitigation strategy to protect the participants' privacy and revising different parts to improve the overall consistency of the application. Although it took me nearly ten days to revise the application thoroughly, upon a second attempt, my application was approved and I was authorized to commence my research. I received an email from the REB stating that the application was approved on November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, it would be valid for a year, and my file number was 101048. As a result, the following information is a summary that was communicated to the participants out of ethical considerations:

- The interviewees' participation was completely voluntary. They might withdraw from the study for any reason, without explanation, up to three weeks after they

- received the transcript and notes. If they chose to withdraw from the study before the deadline, all information provided during the interview would be withdrawn from the study and destroyed.
- Throughout the interview process, the participants were notified several times that the results of this study will be:
    - presented in a final thesis required for completion of my degree and potentially published on VIUSpace;
    - used to improve ECE recruitment and retention strategies;
    - used to make recommendations to British Columbia's Ministry of Children and Family Development (BCMCFD);
    - presented at various conferences and
    - published in peer-reviewed journals.
    - used as part of instructional components in my course delivery.
    - applied to assist in developing the ECEC degree program as well as future research.
  - In the consent form, I indicated that I would use a VIU email account to transmit the participants' personal information, which is subject to the protection of privacy requirement of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.
  - The interviews would be conducted online and recorded using Zoom, a VIU licensed account, which complies with the Canadian Data Protection regulations.
  - The software NVivo would be used to transcribe the video and analyse the transcripts. I made the participants aware that NVivo stores their data outside of Canada.

- All data derived from the interview would be stored on a password-protected computer. Once my thesis was published, the data would be deleted from the password-protected laptop and saved to an encrypted memory stick for possible future use. The memory stick would be placed in a locked drawer.
- I also reminded the participants that there was a possibility that the answers they provided might cause loss of privacy. In order to mitigate this risk, I removed all of their personal information and asked each of the participants for a pseudonym.
- There was also a risk that they may be indirectly identified based on a quotation and thus may become vulnerable to retribution, for example, if they were critical of their former employer. Therefore, before each interview started, I asked the participants to avoid directly identifying any third parties and giving specific descriptions of people or locations in their responses.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Cohen et al. (2018) identify that reliability and validity have different meanings in quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research. Ultimately, “[a]s researchers, we must be certain that our instruments for understanding phenomena are as sound as possible” (p. 245).

They further define the role of reliability and validity in qualitative research:

[G]iven that multiple views of ‘reality’ exist, whose is credible and ‘correct’, how do we know and how do we validate socially constructed knowledge? ...[V]alidity not only concerns the extent to which an instrument measures what it claims to measure, but that the meaning and interpretation of the results of the data collection and instrumentation are sound. (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 246)

Brinberg and McGrath (1985) indicate that in qualitative research, “[v]alidity is not a commodity that can be purchased with techniques...Rather, validity is like integrity, character, and quality, to be assessed relative to purposes and circumstances” (as cited in Maxwell, 1992, pp. 280-281). Maxwell (1992) argues that ‘understanding’ is a more suitable term than ‘validity’ in qualitative research. He further explains there are five kinds of validity as ‘understanding’ including descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalizability, and evaluative validity.

Descriptive validity was applied in this research since all of the interviews were videotaped. If a participant were to have any questions about certain statements they had made, the recordings could be checked for accuracy. Interpretive validity is associated with the “participants’ perspective”. In order to fulfill this criterium, I sent each interviewee their transcript so they can add or redact the content and tell their own ‘truth.’ As a researcher, I constructed theoretical validity and generalizability by collecting as well as analyzing the data, explaining the phenomenon based on the analysis, developing a theory, and hopefully this theory makes sense to those who want to better understand the issues surrounding the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators. Maxwell (1992) claims that “evaluative validity is not as central to qualitative research...Many researchers make no claim to evaluate the things they study” (p. 295). I am in full agreement with Maxwell, and for this reason, I will not discuss evaluative validity in this research.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined integral parts of effective research such as study design, study sample population, data collection process, ethical considerations, as well as reliability and validity. By following these procedures closely, I, as a researcher, believe the findings presented



in this study to be sound. This research aimed to identify the contributing factors that cause early childhood educators to leave their frontline positions. Three former early childhood educators were interviewed and five common themes emerged from their interviews. These major themes include wages and benefits; job satisfaction and autonomy; support for early childhood educators; professionalism; and work-life balance. While the first three themes directly corresponded to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, I found the last two themes kept reoccurring in every participant's response. These two themes have not been discussed in much of the literature and thus will require further research in the future. Finally, the fact that professionalism and work-life balance emerged organically from the interviews validated my choice of conducting semistructured interviews.

## Chapter 4 – Findings

*“True art selects and paraphrases,  
but seldom gives a verbatim translation.”*

-Thomas Bailey Aldrich

### Introduction

This research project aimed to pinpoint the contributing factors that cause frontline early childhood educators to leave their positions. The previous chapter discussed the methods and procedures used to analyze interviews of three former early childhood educators. This chapter will describe the findings extrapolated from the data collected from the participants in this study. In order to obtain different perspectives from the former frontline early childhood educators, I conducted interviews with one childcare center owner/director who employs more than twenty frontline early childhood educators; a participant who is still involved in childcare, and a third participant who has completely left the field. To protect their privacy, each participant was asked to select a pseudonym prior to their individual interview. Will, whose childcare facilities provide as many as a hundred and fifty childcare spaces, employs more than twenty frontline early childhood educators. Lauren doesn't provide direct care for the children, but she is still involved in the childcare sector. Joy has completely left the childcare field since the onset of the pandemic. Five themes emerged after analysing the data collected from the participants, and they are: wages and benefits; job satisfaction and autonomy; support for early childhood educators; professionalism; and work-life balance. The first three themes correspond neatly with the literature review conducted in this study while the last two themes would require further exploration in research.

### **Wages and Benefits**

Low wages have been cited as the main barrier to recruitment and retention of early childhood educators (BCMCFD, 2018a, 2018b; Carlson, 2017; ECEBC, 2012; Malatest, 2017; Royer & Moreau, 2016; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Whitebook et al., 2014). Will described his experience with some of his former employees and stated that, “as soon as a job that pays a little better would come along, they’re gone.” Lauren observed the same phenomenon, stating “most of the people that I had worked with that had left normally were leaving for something that paid better.” Nevertheless, Joy’s personal experience was completely the opposite:

The very last job I worked in childcare paid at least 15 percent more than what I get right now, but I still chose to quit for a couple of reasons including the static work environment, lack of appreciation, and absence of partnerships among the staff.

Besides low wages, early childhood educators also have a hard time accessing health benefits, pensions, and paid sick leave (Carlson, 2017; ECEBC, 2012; Holochwost et al., 2009; Whitebook et al., 2014). Will emphasized the importance of pensions for an aging workforce like early childhood educators, indicating that when “there’s no pension, there is no out. Like, there’s no way like you don’t see an ending for you.”

In 2018, the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development (BCMCFD) published a report entitled *Investing in Our Early Childhood Educators: Early Care and Learning Recruitment and Retention Strategy* to address recruitment and retention in early childhood education. One of the key strategies identified by the BCMCFD (2018a) is compensation. Regarding the \$2-per-hour subsidy for the frontline fully licensed early childhood educators, Lauren said, “the Wage Enhancement has definitely helped” and the ECE

workforce has “probably become more stable in the last couple of years than it was before the Wage Enhancement.”

### **Job Satisfaction and Autonomy**

Both Joy and Lauren found it rewarding to work in the early childhood education field. According to Joy, it is “so rewarding for me to see a little human growing to be independent.” Similarly, Lauren indicated that her strong relationships with children and their families was rewarding:

That was probably one of the highlights of the job for me, just being able to have that opportunity to be able to create these relationships with children. And in some circumstances, I was able to provide care for the same child in the same family or the first child and the second child for many years. So I was able to see those children and all the other children as well, grow and develop.

Royer and Moreau (2016) argued that early childhood educators’ autonomy in the workplace contributed substantially to their psychological wellbeing. This study showed that “the autonomy granted to educators, particularly in the choice and preparation of teaching activities, the establishment of daily routines, and the development of group supervision strategies, is a determining facet of psychological wellbeing at work...” (p. 143). Joy shared that it was hard for her to find a workplace “where it’s more open or flexible with new ideas and allows staff to exercise freedom of programming and managing the routine.” She also felt “the different ideas of doing things are not encouraged and I have been given comments on many little things and expected to follow the given instruction from the senior staff without validation in what I do” and the structure of childcare was “very much stable and also fixed. There is limited room for you to work with and suggest any changes.”

### **Team Support for ECES**

Before Joy decided to completely leave the childcare field, she worked with one other early childhood educator in a small childcare centre. Besides job autonomy, she also strived to call for support from her colleague. Unfortunately, the lack of team support caused Joy to promptly abandon her career as a frontline early childhood educator and this is her story:

I tried to have a discussion with this senior staff and to figure things out; however, she said to me that she expected the new hire just follow the instructions in the center as that's how she was trained in the center since she graduated from the ECE program. This senior staff mentioned that it's easier to follow the routine and the structure by simply sticking with it, which I can totally see why she was saying that but at same time but I would do things a bit differently if I am in her position. I believe there are things can be adjusted depending on who I work with. I value people's opinions with empathy, and I can also see the importance of validating people's hard work within the team just like any industries.

This is not my first time hearing a ECE staff talking like that. From that moment, I don't see myself thrive in working in this type of fixed routine anymore and no matter which center.

Lauren had more positive experience with regards to team support, and yet the support seemed limited and insufficient:

Whatever role I was in, even if it was just the directly providing care or being more on the management side, you definitely had the support from the people who were above me. They could only also do as much they could because they had to be meeting the

requirements by licensing... Sometimes even though they were supportive, it sometimes didn't translate.

Will has a relatively high retention rate of early childhood educators when compared to other centres in his community. When asked what he thinks a new hire would need to stay, Will described the significance of team support from the lens of an employer:

They have to have some good positive experiences with kids and staff and parents because all three of those things will drive somebody away... you're having troubles with one kid. You feel supported by the other staff, you feel supported by the parents and you feel supported by the ownership group... If that person doesn't get what they need from all those groups. They'll immediately put up a wall and they're just done, like you'll never get them back. Like they just realized that this isn't something for them and they'll move on quickly.

### **Professionalism**

The issue of professionalism in the work environment emerged when I asked Joy about working conditions and career advancement:

I still noticed that how families see ECES just as childcare workers which is different than seeing us as teachers. I think I have had that kind of feedback and impressions from different places over the years, especially when I was working with [infants and toddlers], and I felt I was treated like a caretaker instead of an educator.

When asked about some contributing factors that may cause early childhood educators to leave their positions, Joy listed some reasons including a lack of interaction with other professionals, the feeling of being isolated, the static work environment, and the lack of

professional growth. Then she continued to depict what the general public thought about her profession:

I do still see the stereotypical reaction coming from not just parents or not just like coworkers. It's in the society how other people see ECEs. I get that reaction, oh, you're an ECE even though you get higher pay than people doing other types of work, they still feel like the value of your job is not as high or as important as other position people are doing, even though the pay is not a key factor. That's how societies see ECEs.

Lauren thought the public perception of early childhood educators has improved over the past couple of years as the British Columbia government puts a focus and emphasis on childcare. However, the sector is far from being recognized and respected:

Some people do not consider [early childhood education] to be a profession and have the perception or assumption that all we do is, is watch kids play all day, where it's not that. Of course, being able to play and interact with the kids is a part of the job, but there's so much more.

As an owner and operator, Will believed the families he worked with had split opinions regarding professionalism:

I think 50 percent of our clients or our families really appreciate and respect the job that we do with their kids. I think the other 50 percent look at this as babysitters and that we should just be there because we they pay a lot of money to us to look after their kids.

You've heard it all.

Will also demanded a professional recognition of early childhood educators from the BC government:

We can address that with our families and demand to be treated as professionals from our families and our clients. But from the government perspective, they still don't look at early childhood educators as professionals. They can say they do, but they don't by the way they treat us. Hey, you're an essential worker, you need to stay open, but, hey, you're in the tier three of the vaccine.

### **Work-Life Balance**

The work-life balance theme didn't surface until I interviewed Lauren. I couldn't figure out what the contributing factor was that caused Lauren to leave her frontline position as she repeatedly stated she thoroughly enjoyed working with the children and families. When I asked her to compare the stress level between her current job and the frontline ECE position, to my surprise, she answered:

When I was working as a front line ECE was more often I'd be bringing the stress home, whereas with my current job, I'm not taking the stress home once I'm done. At the end of the day, the stress stays at work and it will be there the next day where that wasn't the same when I was working as an ECE.

I was curious as to what stress Lauren took home from work as a frontline early childhood educator, to this she explained:

I think probably life work balance definitely plays into that because I feel like my work life balance is definitely better now than it probably was before. Because I would either be taking home some additional stress later or if it wasn't stress, it was thinking about an activity. Because you have that moment with the children when you're providing care to them and they say something or they're doing something and they show an interest in something. And then you take that home and you're like, OK, how can I build on this?



How can I build on this interest that the children are showing and kind of expand that interest or experience into something else? So if I wasn't taking something stress related home, it would have been more spending the time to plan activity or looking through my resources at home or a lot of time maybe not physically going to the library, but going on the library website and then making the trip out to the library or just grabbing that resource I knew the kids would love. So I always found I was putting in extra time outside of my work hours to help meet the needs of the children. There was always something that I would be taking home, either stress influenced or just expanding experiences.

Later on, I asked Lauren what strategies should be implemented to retain talents in the childcare field and she replied:

I think being able to find that work-life balance will help keep ECEs in the field, because you can make whatever money you want to make, whatever you want to pay them. But if they're not able to find that work life balance, eventually the wage that they're making isn't going to matter because they still can't find that balance.

Joy, on the other hand, worried that she would not be able to provide the same level of care for her future family if she still worked as a frontline early childhood educator. She was concerned that:

From doing this line of work can really take my energy away from my future family. If I am still considering to have my own children, I don't feel confident that I can still provide enough energy to them if I am still an ECE. So that was one of the concerns I had.

Will spoke about the reality of frontline early childhood educators who owned and operated their childcare centres by themselves:

You can go spend eight hours or on the floor with the children and then have to do two more hours' worth of administrative work every day. It just turns you do that for so long and you're going to burn out and you're going to think that there's no compensation package that's going to keep you on this field.

A careful discussion of the five common themes will be presented in Chapter 5, followed by the recommendations made to the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development.

## **Chapter 5 – Discussion and Conclusions**

*“Train people well enough so they can leave.*

*Treat them well enough so they don't want to.”*

-Richard Branson

### **Study Summary**

This research project aimed to identify the contributing factors that cause early childhood educators to leave their frontline positions. An abundance of literature indicated the early childhood educators' state of recruitment and retention is dire (BCMCFD, 2018a, 2018b; Carlson, 2017; Doan, 2013; ECEBC, 2012; Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Holochwost et al., 2009; Hylton & Vu, 2019; Malatest, 2017; Royer & Moreau, 2016; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2013; Whitebook et al., 2014). It's also been established that a high turnover rate is very likely to affect the quality of a childcare program at a variety of levels for children, families, remaining staff and the centre overall (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Holochwost et al., 2009; Hylton & Vu, 2019; Phillips et al., 2000; Russell et al., 2010; Todd & Deery-Schmitt, 1996; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Whitebook et al., 2014). Given these findings, it is critical to maintain a stable workforce of early childhood educators in order to provide quality care for young children. Moreover, besides pinpointing the contributing factors that cause the frontline early childhood educators to leave their positions, I also hope to make recommendations to the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development (BCMCFD) pertaining to the findings which have emerged from this project.

In order to achieve the goals stated above, three former early childhood educators in British Columbia who left their frontline positions were interviewed in addition to a thorough review of the relevant literature. With the intention of collecting a wide array of perspectives,

three candidates with diverse career paths and experiences were selected: one participant is an owner of a childcare centre who employs more than frontline early childhood educators, another participant was a former early childhood educator whose work remains intertwined with the childcare sector, and the other interviewee is a former ECE who left the childcare field completely.

The three interviewees provided diverse perspectives based on their personal experiences. Will's childcare facilities provide as many as a hundred and fifty childcare spaces while he employs over twenty frontline early childhood educators. Lauren no longer provides direct care for children, but part of her job is to visit childcare programs regularly. Lastly, Joy has completely left the childcare field since the onset of the pandemic and now happily works as an immigration program officer for a large non-profit organization.

### **Study Significance**

Five common themes seemed to keep recurring after analyzing the data collected from the participants, and they were: wages and benefits; job satisfaction and autonomy; support for early childhood educators; professionalism; and work-life balance. While the first three themes correspond with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, the last two themes were new to me and as such required further exploration in research. The key findings of each theme are discussed below.

### ***Wages and Benefits***

Will and Lauren know many early childhood educators that have abandoned their careers to pursue better-paid positions. Their statements verified the literature presented in Chapter 2. All the researchers cited in this paper agreed that low wages have had a grave impact on the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators for decades. Will drew attention to the

issue that early childhood educators have little access to pensions let alone attractive benefit packages. As a matter of fact, most early childhood educators in BC pay half of the monthly premiums for their extended health plan benefits. Only those staff who are unionized have comprehensive employee benefit packages such as matching Registered Retired Savings Plan (RRSP) contributions from the employers as well as access to pensions. In Lauren's opinion, since the implementation of the Wage Enhancement, the turnover rate of ECEs has slowed down in her previous place of employment. However, low wages and a lack of benefits are still major factors that influence the recruitment and retention rate of early childhood educators.

Interestingly, Joy indicated that her current employment compensated her 15 percent less than her last position as an early childhood educator. However, she still chose to leave the ECE profession due to "static work environment, lack of appreciation, and absence of partnership among the staff." In my opinion, Joy's statement is of great relevance to the issue at hand. I think most people choose their professions not only based on the remuneration but also on the purpose that they can serve and serve well. For myself, the need to be inspired and to be able to contribute to our community sometimes offsets wages and benefits. This finding may be connected to professionalism which will be discussed in a later section.

### ***Job Satisfaction and Autonomy***

All three participants agreed that it was rewarding and fulfilling working with young children. Joy revealed that while it was satisfying to "grow with the little humans", her job autonomy was minimal. She felt that new ideas were not welcome by the senior staff and certain things were done certain ways with no possibility of negotiation. Joy's feelings corresponded to Royer and Moreau's (2016) research:

...the autonomy granted to educators, particularly in the choice and preparation of teaching activities, the establishment of daily routines, and the development of group supervision strategies, is a determining facet of psychological wellbeing at work, implying that it is essential to preserve that autonomy. (p. 143)

The degree of an early childhood educator's autonomy is often dependent on the values and beliefs of their colleagues, and more importantly, that of the administrators. Hence, team support and two-way communication between colleagues and administrators will improve educators' autonomy and well-being at work and support them to stay in the field.

### ***Team Support for ECEs through Adaptive Leadership***

As an administrator, Will pointed out that it is important to surround new early childhood educators with experienced educators as mentors. The pairing of novice and veteran educators improved the collaboration and naturally formed a community among the staff. Will's remarks proved peer-mentoring is a requirement of retaining beginning as well as expert educators (Doan, 2013, 2016, 2019).

Joy's experience regarding lack of team support from her colleagues and administrators was the pivotal factor in her deciding to leave her position as a frontline early childhood educator. From the way she described the senior staff, I suspected the staff was not equipped with the proper leadership skills. Looking back on my own experience, I did not seem to have the skills or experience to lead my team when I was first appointed as a floor supervisor. Presently, the term "management" instead of "leadership" still dominates in the field of early childhood education. Management is often linked to businesses and corporations, and besides, a manager is not always a leader. In the recent mandate letter to Minister Whiteside, Premier Horgan (2020) has asked the ministry to "move delivery of child care into the Ministry of

Education by 2023” (p. 3). If we are to integrate early childhood education into part of the K-12 education system, it is integral that administrators are equipped with the leadership skills in addition to their management skills. During the two years I have been enrolled in the Educational Leadership program, I have come to the conclusion that an adaptive leadership framework best suits the early childhood education sector.

Adaptive leadership presents a suitable framework for administrators to provide a supportive environment and “to assemble individuals to solve difficult problems and flourish” (Doyle, 2017, p. 19). According to Northouse (2019), the goal of adaptive leadership is “to encourage people to change and to learn new ways of living so that they may effectively meet their challenges and grow in the process” (p. 258).

Adaptive leadership is a follower-centred approach with a focus on the leader’s behaviour. The six leader behaviours are “(1) get on the balcony, (2) identify adaptive challenges, (3) regulate distress, (4) maintain disciplined attention, (5) give the work back to the people, and (6) protect leadership voices from below” (Northouse, 2019, p. 290). The literature presents the analogy of ‘getting on the balcony’ which means the leader is able to see the big picture and gain a clear view of reality. Then the leader must analyze the situation and identify the adaptive challenges. Adaptive challenges are the problems the leader cannot solve on their own and thus demands collaboration between the leader and followers. The adaptive leader will also help regulate the followers’ stress and encourage the follower to keep focusing on the challenges. Subsequently, the leader gives the work back to the people by “empowering people to decide what to do in circumstances where they feel uncertain, expressing belief in their ability to solve their own problems, and encouraging them to think for themselves rather than doing that thinking for them” (Northouse, 2019, pp. 269-270). Finally, the leader will listen to the low-

status individuals' concerns, give them voice, and consequently protect leadership voices from below. The framework of adaptive leadership suggests to empower people, make their voice heard, and encourage them to overcome the challenges. In my opinion, this framework is one of the most effective strategies to improve recruitment and retention of early childhood educators.

As Will put it prudently,

if people don't feel they're being heard or listened to or that their opinion matters, they'll quickly leave, like they'll say this isn't for them... You have to let them grow and learn what they are capable of. And you can't do that if you're always trying to shove them in one role. Yes, so you have to listen to what they are saying to you.

Up to now, little research has been done to connect adaptive leadership with administrative support as a staff retention strategy in the field of early childhood education. Based on the percipients responses, further research is indeed needed here as I see this theory of leadership as being highly applicable to the context of the early childhood education sector and my own experiences as an administrator in early learning settings.

### ***Professionalism***

The three participants experienced different degree of public perception in regard to early childhood educators as professionals. Will believed that about 50% of the families still think of early childhood educators as babysitters. Lauren voiced that the public perception of early childhood educators has improved since the BC government put a focus on childcare in 2018. Yet, she agreed that many people still refused to consider early childhood educators as a profession. Although her job title contained "educator", Joy did not think she was treated as a teacher. In fact, she felt she was treated more like a caretaker, especially when she worked with



children under three years old. She also stated that she was made to feel less important working as an early childhood educator regardless of her pay scale.

Similar to the participants' experience, I have also struggled to feel recognized by my community as well as the general public. As Hale-Jinks et al. (2006) stated precisely:

The child care workforce needs to look like a profession in order to be respected as a profession, and simultaneously needs to be respected as a profession in order to look like a profession. Higher standards of in training and field entry requirements need to be established in order to enhance the knowledge and competence that caregivers must possess in order to provide appropriate care and education for groups of young children. (p. 224)

Incidentally, the Coalition of Child Care Associates of BC and Early Childhood Educators of BC (2021) advised in the *Roadmap for \$10aDay Child Care in BC* to require “a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education as the new educational standard for the profession” (p. 16). To look forward, perhaps higher educational standards will contribute to increased perceptions of professionalism by the general public.

### ***Work-Life Balance***

One of the factors that caused Joy to leave the field is that she was concerned she might not have enough energy and patience for her own children when she chooses to have a family of her own. Lauren revealed that when she worked as a frontline early childhood educator, she often brought stress and extra work home. She would spend her own time planning activities and developing strategies as there was no paid prep time allocated at work. Opposite to her current workplace, where she just leaves her stress at work when her day is done. According to Lauren,

if you're able to have that time to finish those things within your work hours, then and it might not even be getting those resources or doing whatever, but it could be writing up a care plan for a child or maybe, being able to have a meeting with a parent about things you're seeing or meeting with child development. If it's happening within your scheduled hours of work, then it may be more likely that you're not thinking about those things in your personal time because you know that it's taken care of.

Due to the strict staff/child ratios, early childhood educators are required to be with the children throughout the day except for their lunch or bathroom breaks. Lauren suggested in the interview that an extra staff member is needed in order to provide educators preparation time. Early childhood educators should be provided at least 110 minutes of preparation time each week just like their teacher counterparts (British Columbia Public School Employer Association, 2019). There are many other ways to achieve work-life balance and solving this problem would definitely help to improve the recruitment and retention rate of early childhood educators.

### **Study Limitations**

There are undeniably limitations in this research study. First of all, the results are primarily based on the three individual interviews which means the sample size is particularly small. Thus, the findings presented here may not represent the full spectrum of viewpoints across the field. In short, a more detailed quantitative survey might help to fill in some of these gaps. Geographically, the three participants were all located on central Vancouver Island for most of their career and they all received their early childhood education training from Vancouver Island University. These similarities may affect their responses even though they had exceedingly diverse background and experiences.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was not able to conduct face-to-face interviews. This disadvantage restricted me from reading participants' social cues or building a deeper rapport with the individual interviewees. Besides, participants tend to be more reserved when talking on screen instead of when conversing in person. I have also known all three participants for more than ten years and therefore it is possible that the participants hold similar beliefs and values to my own.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

Five themes emerged from the interviews of three former frontline early childhood educators: wages and benefits; job satisfaction and autonomy; team support for ECEs; professionalism; and work-life balance. While the first three themes correspond with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, the last two themes require further exploration in the research.

Low wages have been cited as the main barrier to recruitment and retention of early childhood educators (BCMCFD, 2018a, 2018b; Carlson, 2017; ECEBC, 2012; Malatest, 2017; Royer & Moreau, 2016; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Whitebook et al., 2014). Besides low wages, Early childhood educators also have a hard time accessing health benefits, pensions, and paid sick leave (Carlson, 2017; ECEBC, 2012; Holochwost et al., 2009; Whitebook et al., 2014). While it is evident that wages and benefits are the major factor of recruitment and retention of early childhood educators, it is also noteworthy that Joy, one of the interview participants, left her frontline position to work for 15 percent less in remuneration. The positive impact of the Wage Enhancement was acknowledged by Lauren. Unfortunately, the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development fails to address benefits in their plan *Investing in Our Early Childhood Educators: Early Care and Learning Recruitment and Retention Strategy*.

Proper extended health benefits and the establishment of a pension program would surely help in the recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood educators.

The issue of job satisfaction and autonomy could be settled through proper team support for early childhood educators. As indicated earlier in this chapter, adaptive leadership provides a practical conceptual framework for childcare administrators who “play a role of assisting people who need to confront tough problems” (Northhouse, 2019, p. 266). Adaptive leadership is a follower-centred approach with a focus on the leader’s behaviour. Many early childhood educators are reluctant to take up a leadership role as the image of an educator is far from that of a leader. As Krieg et al. (2014) suggested,

[t]here is a distinct mismatch between theories of leadership that are directed at leaders of large, hierarchical, product-oriented corporations often with a sole figure and the share collaborative, and community-building approach taken in many early childhood settings. (p. 75)

Because adaptive leadership focuses the attention on the members of the community, early childhood educators who are equipped with these leadership skills will be able to coach and guide their community without coming across as controlling or authoritarian.

Early childhood education, as a profession, is in desperate need to be recognized and valued by the general public. To elevate the profession, I think it is critical to increase the educational standards from a diploma to a bachelor’s degree of early childhood education. I also recommend increasing professional development hours when early childhood educators renew their certificate every five years. Work-life balance would also be improved if early childhood educators could incorporate their preparation time within their paid work hours. The themes of professionalism and work-life balance will require further investigation in research.

In conclusion, my recommendations emerged from this research study are as follows. First and foremost, early childhood educators deserve livable wages and comprehensive benefits. The benefit package should include pensions, paid breaks, preparation time, as well as professional development. Next, childcare administrators need to be equipped with leadership skills, especially the adaptive leadership framework. Furthermore, professionalism is a key factor to make early childhood education valued and recognized, and one of the strategies would be to raise the qualification standards. Finally, more research on former early childhood educators needs to be conducted to further inform recruitment and retention strategies going forward.

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