

# THE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO THE HIGH TURNOVER OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TEACHERS IN AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this investigation is to explore the contributing factors that cause the high turnover rate of Early Childhood Education (ECE) Teachers in Auckland, New Zealand. ECE teachers in this sector who have a history of leaving their childcare centres were interviewed in order to collect primary data. Thematic analysis was applied to the interview data to elicit the factors that cause ECE teachers to leave or stay in their current childcare centre, and practical strategies that childcare centre managers can adopt to increase the retention rate of their ECE teachers. Based on the findings, there are four predominant turnover factors: failure of the management to carry out their roles effectively, relational issues, heavy workload and low salary. Accordingly, four practical managerial strategies were recommended: increase management's support to their ECE teachers by maintaining a manageable teacher-to-child ratio, instil a healthy team culture, offer a commensurate salary and increase the level of appreciation for ECE teachers.

**Keywords:** Early Childhood Teachers, Turnover, Early Childhood Education, Retention, Factors

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Research shows that families who participate in quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) services get advantages because parents can work and contribute to the economy while their children are learning and being cared for by ECE teachers (Horwood & McLeod, 2017; Mitchell, 2011; Stuart, 2018). The support and education received by the children prepare them for success in their future life (Horwood & McLeod, 2017). However, these benefits require high-quality ECE services, as indicated by having an emotionally supportive atmosphere for the children, small group sizes, care continuity and low staff turnover (Recchia & Fincham, 2019). Unfortunately, the quality of childcare services is diminished when any of these indicators are poor such as when staff turnover is high. Research indicates that low teacher turnover is a significant indicator of a quality ECE (Holochwost et al., 2009; Huntsman, 2008).

Thus, it is important to investigate high staff turnover in ECE services because it is associated with many drawbacks to the stakeholders of the ECE community (Holochwost et al., 2009). Firstly, high staff turnover rates in childcare centres diminish the quality of work of the remaining teachers (Cumming 2015; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). The remaining teachers absorb the tasks, therefore, increasing their stress and workload (Grant et al., 2019). The expertise of the remaining teachers is compromised since management allocates resources to train new ECE teachers instead of building the professional skills of the remaining teachers (Jeon & Wells, 2018). Secondly, the constant change in the teachers destabilises the relationship between the child and the teacher (Holochwost et al., 2009). This interrupts the learning process of the child since they need to build their trust relationship again with their new teachers (Jeon & Wells, 2018; Mohr et al., 2011).

High teacher turnover is a significant challenge faced by the ECE sector in many countries like the United States of America (USA), Australia and New Zealand (Bretherton, 2010; Jones et al., 2017). Stuit and Smith (2009) explained turnover as the teacher's voluntary or involuntary leaving from the profession and the transfer from one childcare centre to another. This research will focus on the factors that cause teachers to voluntarily leave and transfer to another workplace.

The issue of turnover has also become prevalent in the New Zealand ECE sector. The turnover rate of ECE teachers in 2012 is 18% higher than primary teachers (Ministry of Education, 2020). ECE teachers educate and care for babies and children up to five years old, while primary teachers teach children between five and 13 years old in a formal classroom setting ("Careers.govt.nz", 2020). While the Government of New Zealand reported that the turnover rate of ECE teachers in 2014 improved by 4%, it was still greater than the turnover rate of the national workforce (Ministry of Education, 2014). Based on the Ministry of Education, the difference in the turnover rate between the two sectors is high. Although both teachers (ECE and primary) have similar qualifications, the difference in the turnover rate lies in the significant difference in their working conditions (Ministry of Education, 2014). According to Cumming (2015), primary teachers receive higher salaries, work shorter hours and have longer holidays. On the other hand, according to a recent study by Recchia and Fincham (2019), ECE teachers belong to the poorer paid workers and are supported less to develop their professional skills. For these reasons, this research will focus on the turnover rate of teachers in the ECE sector, specifically those employed in education and childcare centres.

This research has two aims; they are to identify the factors that motivate ECE teachers to leave their childcare centre and to investigate factors that motivate ECE teachers to stay in their current ECE centre. The research questions investigated in this research are

1. What factors motivate ECE teachers to leave or stay at their current childcare centres?
2. What practical strategies can ECE childcare centre managers apply to increase the retention rate of their ECE teachers?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section will present an overview of the existing literature on the turnover of ECE teachers in the ECE sector. Parameters were set in selecting which articles to review: (1) publish date is between 2010 to 2020, (2) focus on ECE teachers in the ECE field, (3) set in countries with a comparable model to New Zealand, such as Australia and England.

### **2.1 Factors that cause ECE teachers to leave**

Early Childhood teachers' motivation in leaving is categorised into three factors (Jeon & Wells, 2018): (a) personal background factors such as marital status and age; (b) external non-work-related factors such as illness in the family and relocation; and (c) internal work-related factors such as compensation and job-related stress.

This research focuses only on internal work-related factors because these factors: (a) have the most considerable influence on the quality of services delivered by the ECE teachers (Cumming et al., 2015); (b) significantly impact the well-being and job satisfaction of ECE teachers, which impact an ECE teacher's decision to stay or leave their current childcare centre (Jeon & Wells, 2018); and (c) management has direct control over the internal work-related factors such as salary, work environment, and professional growth, as opposed to the other external work-related factors (Sun & Wang, 2016).

The data extracted from articles discussing factors that motivate ECE teachers to leave are summarised in Table 1. Based on this review, low salary, work-related stress, lack of professional status, heavy workload and relational issues with co-workers are the key factors.

**Table 1 – Factors that motivate ECE teachers to leave their childcare centre according to literature**

FACTORS IDENTIFIED	TARGET COUNTRY	REFERENCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Incommensurate salary</li> <li>– Lack of professional status</li> <li>– Work-related stress</li> <li>– Limited career development</li> </ul>	Australia	Cumming et al. (2015)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Personal reasons such as salary</li> <li>– Workload</li> <li>– Relational issues</li> </ul>	USA	Wells (2015)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Salary level</li> <li>– Education level</li> <li>– Job satisfaction</li> <li>– Emotional competence</li> </ul>	USA	Hall-Kenyon et al. (2013)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Working conditions</li> <li>– Salary level</li> <li>– Low status</li> </ul>	Australia	Bretherton (2010)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Salary level</li> <li>– Work environment</li> <li>– Work-related stress</li> <li>– Lack of recognition</li> </ul>	Australia	Jones et al. (2017)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Stress</li> <li>– Burnout</li> </ul>	England	Pliogou et al. (2016)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– High workloads</li> <li>– Search for new challenges</li> <li>– Lack of support</li> <li>– High teacher-to-child ratio</li> </ul>	Australia	Jovanovic (2013)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Insufficient salary</li> <li>– Demanding work conditions</li> <li>– Inconsistent professional development programmes</li> </ul>	USA	Ullrich et al. (2017)

### 2.1.1 Low salary

The majority of participants in previous research studies identified low salary level as a factor why ECE teachers move from one childcare centre to another (Bretherton, 2010; Cumming et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2017; Wells, 2015). Similarly, the authors made a direct connection between the job satisfaction of ECE teachers and their level of salary. Bretherton (2010) revealed that there was a connection between the salary and the professional status of ECE teachers, and they lack professional status due to their salary rate. Meanwhile, Cumming et al. (2015), Jones et al. (2017) and Wells (2015) identified low salary as a common work challenge for ECE teachers. The incommensurate salary influences the ECE teacher's motivation to stay or leave their workplace (Cumming et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2017; Wells, 2015). On one hand, the research of Hall-Kenyon, et al. (2013) offers a contradicting finding to Bretherton's (2010) paper about the compensation level having an impact on the ECE teacher's decision to stay. According to Hall-Kenyon et al. (2013), the salary level of teachers is an essential component in the well-being of ECE teachers, but it does not directly influence the ECE teacher's decision to stay.

### **2.1.2 Work-related stress**

Pliogou et al. (2016) discussed that the most common occupational challenges of ECE teachers are stress and burnout. Hall-Kenyon et al. (2013) revealed that while some ECE teachers find toileting and feeding stressful, other ECE teachers consider interacting with parents and children as a less stressful task. Furthermore, Pliogou et al. (2016) explained that there is no definite interpretation of the impact of stress on ECE teachers because individuals cope with stress differently. These authors stated that ECE teachers are frequently subjected to stress and burnout due to the nature of their work. Jones et al. (2017) indicated that a high-stress level at work pushes ECE teachers to leave their workplace, thus increasing the turnover rate. The articles of the following authors validate the finding that the stress level of ECE teachers impacts their decision to stay or leave the childcare centre (Pliogou et al., 2016; Cumming et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2017; Wells, 2015).

### **2.1.3 Lack of professional status**

Cumming et al. (2015) showed that ECE teachers consider the lack of professional status as an occupational challenge, which drives their motivation to stay or leave their childcare centre. Previously, Bretherton (2010) related how the low salary of ECE teachers impacts how they perceive their job status. The apparent correlation between salary and status points to how their status as ECE teachers is defined by the amount of salary that they receive.

### **2.1.4 Heavy workload**

Jones et al. (2017), Wells (2015) and Hall-Kenyon et al. (2013) discussed another factor that influences an ECE teacher's decision to leave is the heavy workload and responsibilities. Wells (2015) discussed that the challenging behaviour of some children lead to ECE teachers' physical and emotional exhaustion. Similarly, Hall-Kenyon et al. (2013) stated that ECE teachers continuously struggle with maintaining their physical and emotional well-being due to the heavy workload expected from them. Aside from taking on the role of an educator and caregiver, ECE teachers are expected to take on non-teaching duties such as documentation and procurement of materials (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2013). Furthermore, Jovanovic (2013) elaborated that the vast job scope of ECE teachers contributes to their arduous and demanding work conditions.

### **2.1.5 Relational issues with co-workers**

Wells' (2015) reported that relational issues with co-workers were one of the factors that reduce the job satisfaction of ECE teachers. Conflicts among co-workers are commonly caused by the lack of communication and support for ECE teachers. Hall-Kenyon et al. (2013) added that ECE teachers who are not able to relate to co-workers positively are more likely to experience conflict with co-workers. Additionally, they have stated a healthy relationship among co-workers is essential in creating a good team dynamic within the workplace, this is particularly important since ECE teachers work in teams. ECE teachers rely on one another to create a healthy team culture (Ullrich et al., 2017). Jones et al. (2017) confirm the findings of Hall-Kenyon et al. (2013) regarding team support, stating that the fundamental psychological needs of relatedness are fulfilled when ECE teachers support one another.

## **2.2 Strategies to increase the retention rate of ECE teachers**

This section compiles scholarly articles with the overarching theme of increasing the retention rate of ECE teachers worldwide, particularly the strategies that may be applied at a managerial level. Such strategies are relevant to the second research question of this research, specifically practical strategies that childcare centre managers can apply to increase the retention rate of their ECE teachers.

The strategies identified in the literature are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2 – Strategy Analysis Framework**

STRATEGY AND (FOCUS)	VALUE CREATION	CULTURE	REFERENCE
Skill development (Professional development)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Create opportunities for professional advancement</li> <li>– Create a long-term and sustainable supply of ECE teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Skill acquisition</li> <li>– Support</li> </ul>	Bretherton (2010) and Cumming et al. (2015)
Pedagogical leadership (Quality improvement)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Foster a supportive learning atmosphere for ECE teachers to implement learned theories into action plans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Support</li> <li>– Collaboration with ECE teachers</li> <li>– Strategic alignment</li> </ul>	Pliogou et al. (2016) and Coughlin & Baird (2013)
Group-oriented culture (Belongingness and participation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Develops healthy working relationships among employees</li> <li>– Builds employee’s work morale</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Trust</li> <li>– Loyalty</li> <li>– Commitment</li> </ul>	Mohr et al. (2011)
Improved Salary (Salary and professional development)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Increase the professional status of ECE teachers</li> <li>– Create opportunities for professional growth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Employee morale</li> <li>– Competence</li> </ul>	Ullrich et al. (2017)
Satisfied employees (Job satisfaction)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Develop confident and competent ECE teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Competence</li> <li>– Self-confidence</li> <li>– Respect</li> <li>– Open communication</li> </ul>	Jones et al. (2017)

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The section is divided into three parts. First, the research design will be presented. Followed by the data collection and finally, ends with the data analysis and the detailed process of analysing the data.

#### 3.1 Research Design

The literature review in the previous section reveals a gap and how more extensive research in the New Zealand ECE sector is necessary. Although the research topic is widely studied in other countries primarily the USA (Jones et al., 2017) and Australia (Jovanovic et al., 2018), it has not yet been studied extensively in New Zealand despite its prevalence. Boxall et al. (2003) examined the turnover of employees in New Zealand in general by applying an exploratory research design. Also, Elmusharaf (2012) recommended exploratory research design for topics that are not yet widely explored in potential settings where such issues exist. As such, an exploratory research design was a suitable design for this research topic. According to the 2019 Census, the Auckland region has the highest density of operating and licensed childcare centres in New Zealand (Ministry of Education 2020). Thus, this research will be limited only to the Auckland region.

### 3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected by conducting semi-structured telephone interviews with ten ECE teachers who have a history of leaving their childcare centre. Since interviews are time-consuming (Kyngäs et al., 2020), the number of interviewees was limited to ten. Convenience sampling was used; which means sourcing a sample population from a pool of people who are easily accessible to the researcher (Elmusharaf, 2012). This process eased the procedure of inviting people to participate in the interview (Kyngäs et al., 2020). The researcher invited ECE teachers who have a history of leaving to voluntarily participate in the interviews. This research was approved by the Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus Research Ethics Committee.

The semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Using this technique made it easier to analyse the data, and the flexibility of the semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewer to ask further questions based on the participant's responses (Galletta, 2013). Additionally, this method generated rich narratives from the participants explaining the reasons why they left their previous childcare centres. This method also enabled the researcher to approach this research using a naturalistic inquiry philosophy (McInnes et al., 2017), gathering rich data that assisted the researcher in understanding the motivations of the participants for leaving or staying in their childcare centres.

The objective of naturalistic research is to see information as something descriptive and changing in order to study people's experiences and behaviour (Kyngäs et al., 2020). The same authors mentioned that recruiting participants who have the relevant background and experiences in the area of research is paramount because the interpretation of the participant's personal experiences plays a crucial role in unravelling their motivations for their decision. This research applied a naturalistic inquiry approach because it required analysing and understanding the factors that cause ECE teachers to leave their childcare centres. This is essential considering that the decisions of the ECE teachers dictate the turnover rate.

Initially, the data was supposed to be collected through face-to-face interviews. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews had to be undertaken through telephone calls. It was assumed that the change in the mode of the interview had no impact on the outcome of the research. Data saturation was reached upon interviewing ten participants, ECE teachers that had left their childcare centres. This proves that the interviews have generated sufficient, valid and reliable data for analysis.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using a thematic analysis method. Harding (2018) explained thematic analysis as applying an inductive approach combined with finding common themes that emerge from the data collected. Guest et al. (2011) recommended thematic analysis as an efficient tool to analyse and organise data collected through semi-structured interviews. The inductive approach in analysing the interview data is another significant component of a thematic analysis method (Harding, 2018). According to Guest et al. (2011), this inductive approach is descriptive and exploratory. This approach was applied in analysing collected qualitative data. This researcher read the data several times to find words, phrases and common themes. Prior to analysing the collected data, the factors identified by the participants were categorised in order to identify the common and related factors that increase their probability of leaving their childcare centres. The transcribed data was used to identify recurring words and phrases, this process was referred to as open coding, which means labelling and organising the data collected (Tracy, 2019). During the open coding process, the following 13 recurring words and phrases were identified: follow through with promises, goal setting, heavy workload, management, organising, planning, salary, stress, ECE teacher-only day, team building, teams, teamwork and transition. The next step, axial coding was applied and entailed grouping together various codes under a hierarchical umbrella category that makes conceptual sense ranking the codes into groups according to importance (Tracy, 2019). To achieve this, the number of recurrence or repetitions of the answers were recorded. Table 3 illustrates the words that appeared in the text and the frequency of occurrence.

**Table 3 – Axial Coding format in recording repetitions and categorising words**

WORD/PHRASES	FREQUENCY	CATEGORY
Poor management	6	Management
Growth	5	Career Advancement
Follow through promises	4	Management
Increase salary	5	Compensation Level

Finally, the codes, or the factors, were grouped into themes. The connections between the codes played a significant role because they generated the main findings of this research. Four predominant factors caused a participant; an ECE teacher, to leave their childcare centre: management-related challenges, relational issues, workload and salary.

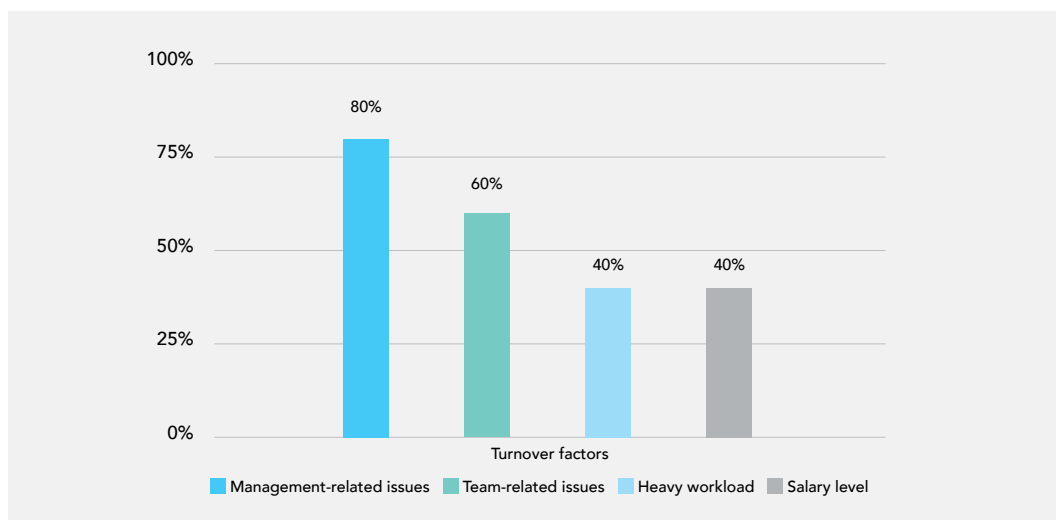
#### 4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This section will present the primary data collected from the semi-structured interviews with participants, ECE teachers who have a history of leaving their childcare centres. The findings of this research were categorised under two main areas: factors related to ECE teacher turnover and factors that increase the motivation of ECE teachers to stay in their childcare centres.

##### 4.1 Factors related to ECE teacher turnover

Each participant was assigned a number for the purpose of anonymity (e.g., P#1 means participant number 1). Each participant provided on average seven different turnover reasons, thereby generating a total of 39 turnover factors. Also, the factors were all work-related. Non-work-related reasons for turnover, such as pregnancy, were not included because this research as it was limited to work-related factors. Based on the responses of the participants, the four most significant turnover factors were management-related issues, team-related issues, heavy workload and salary levels (illustrated in Figure 1).

**Figure 1 – Significant turnover factors based on the frequency of responses from the participants**



#### 4.1.1 Management-related issues

Issues related to the management of childcare centres were the most frequently cited turnover factor; 80% of the participants cited management issues as one of the primary reasons for leaving their childcare centre. These factors are considered significant because they triggered the participants' decision to leave. The major theme of management-related challenges is divided into two subthemes: (a) management's failure to carry out their roles effectively and (b) unprofessional human resource management.

##### 4.1.1.1 Management's failure to carry out their roles effectively

Management's failure to carry out its leadership roles effectively contributed to the participant's decision to leave their childcare centre. Management carries out the role of allocating resources so that the ECE teachers can achieve the childcare centre's goal. Unfortunately, some childcare centres have failed to do this. P#10 shared:

*"And the general manager promised they would try to work the issues, trying to provide outside resources which were lacking as well. Trying to provide those things which should have been provided earlier other than when staff decided to leave."*

Management failed to provide enough resources to enable the participants to design a safe learning environment for the children. Participants perceived such failure as a lack of support from management. Eventually, this challenge spiralled another co-worker down to participants feeling ineffective as they could not offer a high standard of service that they felt the children deserved. Participants viewed management as the forerunner in implementing policies fairly among ECE teachers. Unfortunately, some participants experienced management being lenient and biased in imposing policies and procedures, which resulted in team conflict. P#1 narrated how their previous management's decision to hire family members and friends caused division among the ECE teachers. P#5 participant shared an instance when their childcare centre underwent a change in ownership. Management failed to enforce clear policies and procedures to guide the ECE teachers during the transition, which caused conflict and confusion among them. A pattern was observed when management was unable to fulfil their roles. It often produced conflict among the ECE teachers which affected their relationship with their managers and co-workers.

##### 4.1.1.2 Unprofessional human resource management

Another sub-theme discovered from the collected data was the inappropriate management of ECE teachers in the form of bullying from managers and co-workers. Two participants experienced being bullied by their childcare centre managers leading them to have low self-morale at work. P#8 shared the experience of being screamed at and scolded by the manager. Another participant approached the same manager to report another co-worker who was bullying the respondent. Unfortunately, the manager's response was unsupportive. P#6 said:

*"I ended up being bullied by the manager as well. Obviously, I went to my manager about it when I was being bullied by the team. I ended up also being bullied by my manager."*

Two other participants shared how their managers' treatment of ECE teachers was impartial. The manager treated their ECE teachers subjectively. P#4 shared the experience:

*"I already heard that they have a high turnover because management is crap. They are not happy with the management. I can say to you if the manager does not like the person, they will lay them off."*



The unprofessional management of ECE teachers led the childcare centre's turnover rate to skyrocket, according to P#4. The turnover was evident because they were always looking for new ECE teachers. The result of management's improper human resource management has diminished self-respect and self-confidence. This led to ECE teachers feeling unsatisfied with their childcare centre, causing them to look for another employer.

#### 4.1.2 Team relational issues

The second significant turnover factor was relational issues among co-workers leading to team-related issues. The factor was cited by 60% of the participants as a primary turnover factor. Relational issues apply to all levels of relationships, including co-workers and managers. ECE teachers work in teams most of the time and depend on each other to ensure that all the children are looked after. Conflict within the team creates a stressful environment for the ECE teachers. P#3 shared the reason why they felt overworked was the lack of cooperation and distribution of equal work among co-workers. Also, bullying by co-workers was also experienced by P#6:

*"I left there because of horrible workplace bullying. And I was not supported (by the management); that was very bad. I had to leave."*

P#8 shared a similar story and recounted how other ECE teachers bullied them by using derogatory words against them and shouting at them when she committed faults at work. Participants who were bullied experienced anxiety going to work. Eventually, a toxic work atmosphere developed, which caused the participant to leave their childcare centre. The quality of the professional relationships affects their disposition as an ECE teacher. Conversely, this research showed that ECE teachers who had good relationships and perceptions of their managers were less likely to leave from their childcare centre because they could easily communicate issues with their managers.

#### 4.1.3 Heavy workload

The third significant turnover factor was the heavy workload; 40% of the participants cited overwhelming work responsibilities combined with low salary as a major contributing factor in their decision to leave their childcare centres. The workload per se is not the turnover factor, but the workload was compounded by other factors such as low salary and lack of management support. Participants shared that one of the causes of the heavy workload was the high teacher-to-child ratio. The problem is aggravated when management does not provide support by hiring enough ECE teachers or relievers to maintain a healthy teacher-to-child ratio. When a participant was asked about the reason why they left their previous childcare centre, P#9 said:

*"The one that I've resigned from recently, highly stressful job, not much support. Overworked. I was always tired and grumpy. I would have preferred 1:8 (ratio of teacher-to-child), probably. If I think of it if the teacher goes off for a break. Cos there is only two teachers. It gets so stressful."*

The participants explained how their well-being as an ECE teacher was negatively affected by their workload. Although they raised the issue with management, they failed to resolve the issue, leaving the participant with no choice but to leave the childcare centre. Another similar story was shared by P#8, who is contemplating leaving the current childcare centre due to a heavy workload.

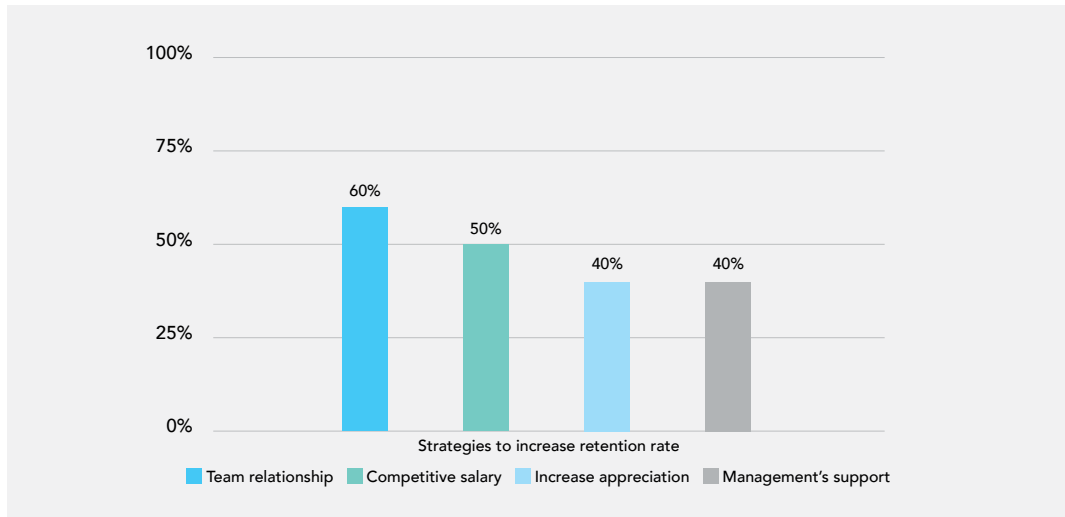
#### 4.1.4 Salary levels

The low salary of ECE teachers is a common issue that the participants raised in the interviews. However, it is not a turnover factor by itself. It only becomes a factor when it concurs with other issues such as heavy workload and stressful work environment. P#6, an experienced head-teacher, narrated how ECE teachers work very hard and that they are expected to fulfil many duties, and yet they are underpaid. The low salary was also raised by participants who perform roles of qualified ECE teachers even though they are unqualified. They perceived their salary to be incommensurate with the work that they contribute to the childcare centre. The incommensurate salary magnifies their feeling of being overworked. Hence, even though the low salary is not a major turnover factor for participants, it still contributes to their decision to leave the childcare centre.

#### 4.2. Factors that increase the motivation of ECE teachers to stay in their childcare centre

This section presents the factors that increase the retention rate of ECE teachers. Thirty different strategies emerged from the semi-structured interview data. The 30 codes were categorised into seven themes, and four themes were determined to be the most significant because they accounted for the highest frequency of citation by the participants (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Significant retention factors based on the frequency of participants' responses



##### 4.2.1 Effective relationship with co-workers

Sixty percent of participants view a healthy relationship with co-workers as a vital factor for them to remain in a childcare centre. Since ECE teachers in the ECE sector work in teams, the quality of their relationships with their co-workers play a crucial role in their motivation to work. Participants explained that they prefer working for a childcare centre where they can enjoy the quality of work because they have good relationships with their co-workers. P#9 shared during the interview:

*"I think I don't find it high-stress myself (the job of an ECE teacher). And I have a good relationship with teachers and students. I'm happy at the moment. I don't have any problems."*

In addition, when participants are asked if they are happy in their current childcare centres, one of the first reasons for their happiness was they have good relationships with their co-workers. P#7 said the reason for continuing with the current childcare centre is that they love the people whom they work with. Furthermore, participants perceived good communication and social interaction with co-workers as important elements in building good relationships. P#5 suggested that management must provide more avenues for ECE teachers to spend time getting to know each other outside the confines of work. Participants valued management's initiative to promote a positive working environment for them and their co-workers.

#### 4.2.2 Competitive salary

The second factor to increase the retention rate was the salary level of ECE teachers. Half of the participants perceived salary as a significant factor in making them stay in their childcare centre. Three participants shared that they experienced management offering them a higher salary to convince them to stay. A salary increment convinced P#3 to stay. However, using salary as financial leverage is not always effective according to two of the participants, who stated that their physical and emotional well-being was more important than a salary increase. Offering a higher salary as a strategy to make the participants stay was a topic divided into two schools of thought. While some participants may feel salary is enough to change their decision to leave, others felt that monetary reward was not sufficient in changing their decision to leave. These participants think their job satisfaction is based more on a healthy work environment and not on their salary level.

#### 4.2.3 Increase value for ECE teachers

The third strategy to increase the retention rate was increasing the appreciation and value for ECE teachers. Participants perceived value as something not only expressed in tangible means like salary. According to four participants, when they feel that their work is being appreciated, they feel more motivated to stay. A childcare centre with an open feedback loop and regular giving of compliments and recognition adds to the participants' feeling of worthiness, eventually increasing their professional status as ECE teachers. P#3 shared practical steps on how management could keep their ECE teachers longer:

*"Lots of compliments. When you do a good job or to recognise that you've done something giving you compliments or to create a record chart so and so have done a good job and parents have compliments and parents to recommend, they like or dislike or how to improve."*

P#7 shared another practical recommendation for increasing appreciation for ECE teachers. If management has given them autonomy in making decisions about how to communicate with parents. This made them feel that they were being valued and trusted. Overall, participants shared that the feeling of recognition and value should be addressed by the management of the childcare centre. Once these strategies are in place, management adds to their employee's motivation to stay with the childcare centre.

#### 4.2.4 Support from management

The fourth strategy to increase the retention rate was management's support to their ECE teachers. Participants shared two distinct ways in how management can improve their support to their ECE teachers.

##### 4.2.4.1 Follow through with policies and agreements

First, management can support their ECE teachers by implementing the policies of the childcare centre effectively and by fulfilling their promises. Promises are not limited to promises made with the ECE teachers like an annual salary increase, it also pertains to enforcing the policies, whether established by the childcare

centre or practising professional work ethics like dealing with bullying in the workplace. P#6 shared the experience of being bullied by other ECE teachers and how management acted indifferently.

*"I think that they could have really dealt with the bullying and supporting me and taking action against the bullying and that there were consequences for it"*

Management's withholding their support when a participant was being bullied resulted in their leaving the childcare centre. Interlinked with implementing policies is taking action, swiftly. P#3 shared that they felt supported at work whenever they see management resolving issues within the childcare centre with urgency. ECE teachers feel that management is supportive when they can trust that management will follow through with their words and effectively implement policies in the childcare centre.

#### 4.2.4.2 Assigning an in-house manager

Management can support their ECE teachers by appointing an in-house childcare centre manager whose role is to oversee the operations of the childcare centre daily. P#10, an experienced team leader, shared how the presence of a childcare centre manager made a big difference in the workload for the team leaders. According to this participant, a childcare centre manager makes the communication between team leaders and managers faster and more efficient, making seeking advice and decision-making more effective.

Therefore, the findings of this research show that the amount and scope of support that management in childcare centres provides to their ECE teachers have a significant impact on their motivation to stay longer in their childcare centre.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings of this research project. The factors that drive ECE teachers to leave their childcare centres are outlined and analysed with the support of relevant literature. The main factors that cause ECE teachers to leave, discussed in this section, are challenges related to management, relational issues, heavy workload and salary levels.

### 5.1 Management-related challenges

One of the key findings of this research is that management has control over the quality of the work environment of their ECE teachers. They can promote a positive work atmosphere by treating their ECE teachers with respect and equality, which can boost their self-morale. Also, evoking strong leadership roles through the implementation of policies within the childcare centre creates a unified direction for the ECE teachers. This research found that management-related challenges, which are characterised by the inefficient implementation of policies and human resource management, were a key turnover factor of ECE teachers.

The findings of this research are new in terms of identifying management specifically as a factor for staff turnover. However, when the effect of poor management is considered, findings are consistent with the existing research of Wells (2015), whose study indicated that organisations with poor management create a bad working environment. Previous studies have shown that one of the reasons why ECE teachers leave their childcare centre is because of the negative work environment (Wells, 2015; Jones et al., 2017). The prior research of Raziq and Maulabakhsh (2015) is consistent with the findings in this research, which links management with the self-morale of ECE teachers. Also, this research indicated management was a major contributor to producing a healthy work environment (Jones et al., 2017; Raziq & Maulabakhsh, 2015; Wells, 2015), indicating that ECE teachers will end up leaving one childcare centre and moving to another. Since management-related challenges were found to be the most significant factor of turnover in this research, further research to validate this finding is warranted.

## 5.2 Relational issues

Since the work of ECE teachers is team-oriented, their relationship with co-workers is a major factor in their decision to leave their childcare centre. Negative relationships become a turnover factor when they begin to affect the ECE teachers' well-being and work environment. ECE teachers who face irreparable issues with co-workers or their managers are faced with the decision to leave their childcare centre. It was apparent that the job satisfaction of ECE teachers significantly depends on the quality of relationships they share with co-workers and managers.

The findings in this research are consistent with the prior literature of Wells (2015) who determined that one of the factors that drive ECE teachers to leave their childcare centre is the quality of the ECE teacher's relationship with their manager. This research found that teachers' relationship with both their co-workers and managers plays a significant role in their motivation to stay at their childcare centre. When ECE teachers have a good relationship with their co-workers, they are more likely to stay longer with their childcare centre; ECE teachers who had a strong and positive relationship with their co-workers were more satisfied with their jobs (Jones et al., 2017). Research Publications suggest that employees who have positive job satisfaction are less likely to leave their childcare centre (Boxall et al., 2003; Jones et al., 2017). Therefore, the quality of relationships that ECE teachers have with their co-workers has a significant influence on their motivation to leave or stay longer at their childcare centre. Also, it was apparent in this research that ECE teachers look to their managers when relational issues arise. Management's support and effective decision-making skills in resolving conflicts among co-workers influence the ECE teacher's job satisfaction.

## 5.3 Heavy workload

This research found that ECE teachers considered workload as a significant factor in their decision to leave their childcare centre. The workload was a common factor among ECE teachers as the job is physically and emotionally demanding. The job becomes overwhelming when the teacher-to-child ratio is high. Although childcare centres are required to follow a prescribed teacher-to-child ratio, the issue exists when management fails to retain sufficient manpower. Extra ECE teachers were deemed by the participants of this research as a valuable source of help, especially in terms of covering lunch breaks and enabling non-contact times for full-time ECE teachers. Participants left their childcare centres because they had experienced a repeated pattern of heavy workloads, which eventually affected their well-being. The decision to leave a childcare centre becomes stronger when the ECE teachers feel that their salary is incommensurate with the load of their work.

These findings are consistent with the prior research conducted by Ullrich et al. (2017), Wells (2015) and Jovanovic (2013), whose studies show that ECE teachers have a higher probability of leaving their childcare centre because of the workload. This research found that management plays a significant contribution to the heavy workload of ECE teachers. Findings correlating heavy workload with management are consistent with Wells' (2015) research, which highlighted the lack of support from management has a negative effect on the workload of ECE teachers. Since the ECE teachers do not have any control over the number of the available ECE teachers nor the children who come in every day to the childcare centre, they are forced to cope with the amount of work assigned to them regardless of the sufficiency of the workforce. When this happens, the quality of care decreases and the stress on ECE teachers increases, which eventually causes the teachers to leave their childcare centre (Bretherton, 2010).

Bretherton (2010) supports the rationale of ECE teachers being unable to carry out their services to the children to a quality standard when the teacher-to-child ratio is too high. Although ratios have been strictly mandated by the government for all ECE services, the paramount principle behind every ratio must be the assurance that teachers can foster quality and personal connection with each child (Ministry of Education, 2020). In childcare centres with high teacher-to-child ratios, ECE teachers are forced to spread themselves

out too thinly, which causes them to burn out and become overtired at work, impacting their personal life. This is a common factor that has been evident in this research leading to ECE teachers leaving their childcare centre.

#### **5.4 Salary level**

The findings that low salary level is a contributing factor to turnover are aligned with the research of Jovanovic (2013), who argued that the salary of ECE teachers is significantly lower compared with the average salary of workers in Australia. Ullrich et al. (2017) argue that the salary of ECE teachers must be at par with teachers in the kindergarten sector. A proposal called "pay parity" has long been yearned for by ECE teachers in New Zealand (May 2017), which Mitchell et al. (2019) suggest, will resolve the present issues of low salary and work condition differences between ECE teachers and kindergarten teachers. The salary level and workload were two factors that were correlated in this research; showing that ECE teachers who leave their childcare centre because of workload were also dissatisfied with their salary.

An accumulation of the aforementioned turnover factors may result in a high probability of future ECE teachers' childcare centre turnover rate. The findings of this research show that the participants provided an average of seven reasons why they left their childcare centre. These findings match the study of Wells (2015), who stated that the ECE teachers who leave their childcare centres are the ones who have experienced an accumulation of factors why they want to leave. This means the decision to leave a childcare centre is not an event that happens over a short period, instead, it is a build-up of negative experiences, one after another. This was evident based on the data that emerged from the semi-structured interviews.

### **6. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The second research question discovered specific factors that motivate ECE teachers to stay with their childcare centres based on the strategies identified by the participants interviewed. The results of this research are the foundation of these recommendations.

This section presents specific and action-oriented recommendations which aim to improve the retention rate of ECE teachers in childcare centres. These recommendations all pertain to management since voluntary turnover has long been identified to be an issue for management (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). The order of these recommendations is hierarchical, and the objective of these recommendations is for ECE teachers to foster healthy relationships with management and co-workers in their childcare centre.

It is recommended that childcare centres be intentional in creating a positive working atmosphere so ECE teachers will be attracted to stay (Wells, 2015). One practical way of applying this is by providing opportunities for ECE teachers to develop healthy relationships with their co-workers. The location is ideally outside the workplace, a neutral and stress-free environment, to encourage a relaxed atmosphere of openness among ECE teachers and their co-workers (Peragine, 2017). This may be achieved by organising casual drinks or annual team-building activities. Team building is a powerful way to build teamwork and camaraderie with one another in a fun way. According to Lacerenza et al. (2018), team building provides avenues where interpersonal relationships of co-workers and role clarification can be improved. Two areas that ECE teachers need since their work involves highly team-oriented tasks. The avenues to foster teamwork must be initiated by management and they must encourage their ECE teachers to participate. A possible outcome of this practice is a robust team culture within the childcare centre and encouraging ECE teachers to stay at their childcare centre.

The following recommendations are targeted to increase the value of ECE teachers in childcare centres.

#### **6.1 Tangible Incentives: offer a competitive salary**

A significant recommendation for childcare centres to improve the retention rate is to increase the salaries that they allocate to their ECE teachers. According to Lai (2009), employees whose salary is contingent on

their work performance become more competitive in their jobs. It is recommended that childcare centres offer opportunities for incremental salary growth on an annual basis and based on performance evaluation. De Ree et al. (2017) discussed how salary increases lessened teachers' stress and increased their satisfaction. De Ree stated any salary increase must be accounted for in the budget allotment for the ECE teachers and not be dependent on the profit of the childcare centre. Upon hiring ECE teachers, management must offer a competitive salary as part of their recruitment, the years of experience and qualifications should be considered in the decision.

## 6.2 Intangible Incentives: verbal praise

An ECE teacher's work is demanding (Mitchell et al., 2019). Hence, verbal recognition is recommended. Increasing the frequency of giving personalised and sincere compliments to ECE teachers for their performance goes a long way in motivating them. According to Andersen et al. (2018), compliments are effective tools for motivating employees. Managers may put this into practise by giving positive feedback and compliments to ECE teachers or putting up an "Appreciation Board" in the staffroom where others can also write compliments or messages for other ECE teachers. Boosting the morale of ECE teachers by consistently acknowledging them may boost their motivation to stay in the childcare centre.

## 6.3 Increase the level of support of management

To increase the retention rate in childcare centres, it is recommended for management to be supportive of their ECE teachers, this can be achieved through three specific actions. First, the childcare centre must apply manageable teacher-to-child ratios, which are better than the minimum required. Examples of the recommended ratios are the 1:3 teacher-to-child ratio for under one-year-olds and the 1:4 teacher-to-child ratio for under two-year-olds. When ECE teachers call in sick, management must call relievers to step in for the day to ensure the teacher-to-child ratios are maintained. Second, management must allocate a budget to hire an in-house childcare centre manager who can oversee the overall operations of the childcare centre. Third, childcare centre managers must create an atmosphere where comments and suggestions from head teachers and ECE teachers are welcomed. The complaints which need swift resolution must be settled in no longer than a week. Applying these recommendations may produce a more valued ECE teacher, who in turn, will be loyal to their childcare centres and stay.

For future studies, it is recommended to conduct a focus group discussion with six to eight participants to validate the usefulness of the semi-structured interview questions (Gray, 2019). In order to get a holistic understanding of the ECE teacher's behaviour in leaving their childcare centres, a study on both non-work-related, and work-related turnover factors may be included in future research. This means future studies must consider the factors of turnover identified in this research and to a broader extent, including both personal and professional reasons for leaving ECE teachers leaving their childcare centres.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The subject of teacher turnover is a serious issue that the New Zealand educational sector is presently facing. In New Zealand, this issue is more related to ECE teachers. Thus, this research focused on the turnover factors of ECE teachers in Auckland, New Zealand. The aims of this research were: (1) to identify the common reasons why ECE teachers leave their childcare centres and (2) to determine what factors motivate ECE teachers to stay in their childcare centres.

Since the nature of the research aimed to understand the motivations of ECE teachers' decisions to leave or stay in their childcare centre, this research followed a naturalistic inquiry approach. This approach is rooted in gathering qualitative data and is why semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with ten ECE teacher participants who had a history of leaving their childcare centre and were invited through convenience sampling. To determine the common factors of turnover and retention, a thematic analysis was applied to the semi-structured interview data.

This research determined the four most predominant factors why ECE teachers in the childcare centres in Auckland leave their childcare centres (a) failure of management to carry out their roles effectively; (b) allocation of resources; (c) implementation of policies; and (d) effective human resource management. These factors led to ECE teachers' low motivation to work and diminished self-morale. Additionally, these issues increase turnover factors since ECE teachers relate the satisfaction of their work with their professional relationships. The heavy workload and low salaries were interlinked and directs the motivation of an ECE teacher to leave the childcare centre. This means if an ECE teacher is underpaid and overworked, the more likely the ECE teacher will leave the childcare centre.

To satisfy the second research question, four solution-based strategies were identified to increase the retention rate of ECE teachers. These strategies were also considered as recommendations. It is recommended that management (1) increase their support to their ECE teachers by maintaining a manageable teacher-to-child ratio; (2) instil a healthy team culture; (3) offer a commensurate salary level; and (4) increase the level of appreciation for ECE teachers. The recommendations being directed at childcare centre management illustrate how they play a crucial role in minimising the turnover rate of their ECE teachers.

Under these circumstances, management must take their leadership roles more seriously to minimise work-related factors that trigger the voluntary leaving of their ECE teachers from their childcare centre. Enacting their leadership roles efficiently plays a crucial role in maintaining a high quality of ECE services since the managers may instil one of the key indicators of quality in their respective childcare centres, which could lead to low staff turnover.

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