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Work demands and work resources in ECEC – turnover intentions explored

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ABSTRACT



Work climate affects the quality of early childhood education and care activities. The aim was to explore how the staff describe demands and resources in their jobs, and whether different profiles could be distinguished among those with turnover intentions and those without. The research was based on the Job Demands-Resources model [Bakker, A. B., and E. Demerouti. 2007. "The Job Demands-Resources model: State of the art." *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 22 (3): 309–328]. The study used a mixed-methods approach. The results showed that the profiles of those with turnover intentions and those without were similar in terms of perceived resources, but that they differed in terms of perceived demands. Those with turnover intentions reported more aspects related to work demands (e.g. workload, number of children, low pay). The findings also showed that work guidance and support from leaders and special education teachers were linked to turnover intentions. This research improves our knowledge of risk factors related to turnover intentions and can contribute to the development of high-quality working conditions.

KEYWORDS

Turnover intentions; emotional exhaustion; demands; resources; early childhood

Introduction

Work climate affects the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) activities. A positive classroom climate creates favourable conditions for children's development, learning, participation, security, well-being, and for a sustainable lifestyle (Finnish national agency for education 2018). A positive climate is related to job satisfaction, and motivates staff in their work (Judge et al. 2017; Xia, Wang, and Zhang 2023). However, staff who are unsatisfied with their working conditions are not able to care so attentively or sensitively for children (Buettner et al. 2016). In recent decades, ECEC staff have reported changes in job roles and increases in workload (e.g. Cumming 2017; Farewell et al. 2022; Hall-Kenyon et al. 2014). It seems that there is a misalignment between job demands and resources, and that this affects staff's intentions to stay at their workplaces. The policy and curriculum changes in Finland emphasise

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children's rights to learn in high-quality ECEC (e.g. Alila et al. 2014). Late changes in policy documents and the law (Finnish national agency for education 2018), have resulted in more need of planning time and reporting, which might lead to less time with the children and thus shortages of staff and further strain on ECEC staff. The paper-work includes, for example, planning activities, reporting, individual development plans for every child, and contact with parents. Changes such as these further add to the risks of emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions (e.g. Rajendran, Watt, and Richardson 2020).

International studies have reported turnover rates of 30–40% or even higher in ECEC (Grant, Jeon, and Buettner 2019; Thorpe, Jansen, and Sullivan 2020; Totenhagen et al. 2016). The same trend can be seen in the Finnish ECEC context, as 31–62% of staff consider quitting their jobs (Eskelinen and Hjelt 2017; Heilala et al. 2022). Turnover implies a loss of investment and interferes with the building and maintenance of a particular work culture, therefore also with values, norms, and goals (Kelchtermans 2017; Phillips, Austin, and Whitebook 2016). It also influences relationships among the educators, children, and families, and therefore disrupts continuity (McMullen et al. 2020). As the work is collaborative, turnover can increase the workload and stress of those who stay in ECEC, which in turn might lead to turnover among the remaining staff, creating a vicious turnover cycle (Whitebook, Phillips, and Howes 2014). Intentions to stay have been associated with supportive workplaces, well-functioning leadership, and management practices, collegial relations, vocational commitment, and a love of children (Heilala et al. 2022; McDonald, Thorpe, and Irvine 2018; McMullen et al. 2020; Thorpe, Jansen, and Sullivan 2020). The reported reasons for turnover in ECEC are low pay, poor working conditions, scarce resources, a demanding job description, and expectations to improve qualifications (Amin, Zaman, and Amin 2011; Eskelinen and Hjelt 2017; McDonald, Thorpe, and Irvine 2018; Phillips, Austin, and Whitebook 2016).

Despite all the research conducted, we agree with McMullen et al. (2020) that the full picture of why staff end up leaving the ECEC field altogether is still lacking. The results of our previous study (Heilala et al. 2022) showed that both general and emotional workload are related to intentions to leave and are mediated by participation. Somewhat surprisingly, employee satisfaction with leadership did not mediate the relationship between workload and turnover intentions. The results generated new questions about leadership, participation, received support, and other potential reasons for turnover.

Thus, the aim of this study was to investigate the reasons for turnover using two groups: one with turnover intentions and one without. The study was guided by the following research questions: How do the respondents in the two groups describe their demands and resources? Can we find distinct profiles among those with turnover intentions and those without? The intention was therefore, first to explore how the whole-sample of staff describe the demands and resources in their jobs, and second to examine whether different profiles can be distinguished among those with turnover intentions and those without.

Finnish ECEC

Finnish ECEC builds on the core values care, education, and teaching, with an emphasis on pedagogy. The context has been described in more detail elsewhere (e.g. Heilala et al.

2022). The main form is municipal day care centres, and all children are eligible to day care (ages 0-5). Pre-primary education (age 6) is mandatory. The Finnish system builds on inclusion, which emphasises that children with and without special needs benefit from learning together. There are three levels of support (general, intensified, and special support), and general support is offered to all children when needed. The group size and child-staff ratios are regulated according to the number of children and their age. The law also clearly stipulates eligibility conditions for staff working in ECEC, i.e. the degree of education (teachers, social workers, or practical nurse qualifications). In addition, there are special education teachers who visit the day care centres and consult the staff. According to the law, the municipality must provide access to the services of a special education teacher to the extent that corresponds to the need. In many cases, the consulting only takes place when needed, but it can also be regular, for example once a week.

Theoretical frame

The theoretical framework of the study is based on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker and Demerouti 2007) and the theory of Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) (Siegrist 1996). Both assume that employee well-being results from a balance between positive (resources) and negative (demands) job characteristics (Schaufeli and Taris 2014). However, the ERI model also incorporates the influence of personal characteristics on the perceptions of job stress (Siegrist et al. 2004).

According to the JD-R model, employee well-being is associated with job demands and job resources. Demands refer to costs or requirements, such as high work pressure or emotionally demanding interactions with clients (Demerouti et al. 2001). Resources, on the other hand, ensure the attainment of work goals, reduce job demands, or stimulate personal growth, learning, and development (Bakker 2011; Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Schaufeli and Taris 2014). They include factors that are related to (a) the organisation (e.g. job security, salary), (b) how the work is organised, (participation in decision-making, work role clarity), (c) the features of the work, (skill variety, autonomy at work, and feedback), or (d) interpersonal and social relationships (collegial and leader support, work climate) (Bakker and Demerouti 2007).

Demands and resources

Previous studies have shown that work climate in ECEC is an important resource (Hur, Jeon, and Buettner 2016; Jeon and Wells 2018; Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, and Gooze 2015). In Finland, support from centre directors and the work community, encouragement and respect from others, and the functioning of one's team have shown to be important factors contributing to success (FINEEC 2020). In the context of teacher attrition, Kelchtermans (2017) points out that teachers need recognition from co-workers and their leader in order to feel professionally valued and trusted. Recognition is an important source for both positive and negative job experiences, as positive experiences provide satisfaction and high self-esteem, whereas negative experiences result in disappointment, self-doubt, low self-esteem, increased stress and ultimately, burnout. Hur, Jeon, and Buettner (2016) have shown similar findings of staff well-being and job-

related satisfaction being related to a positive work climate and to receiving recognition as a professional. Leaders' support, guidance, and encouragement are behind a positive operating culture (FINEEC 2020). Studies show that when program leaders offer staff job autonomy, the staff experience higher job motivation and satisfaction, which in turn reduces the likelihood of turnover (Pearson and Moomaw 2005).

However, the reverse reaction is possible in restrictive environments in which participation is not encouraged, in the form of intentions to leave (Schaack, Le, and Stedron 2020). A poorly functioning psychosocial work climate can be seen as a demand, and a potential cause of greater levels of burnout, which in turn may lead to turnover (Hur, Jeon, and Buettner 2016). In Finland, unclear division of work between professional groups, resistance to change, differences of opinion, undervaluing the work of others, rudeness, and lack of motivation may attribute to a poor work climate (FINEEC 2020). Another concern in the Finnish context is that in some cases, centre directors are distanced from daily practice (Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganayake 2018), and thus, staff do not always receive sufficient support from their leader. The role of the leader may be experienced as a demand if the leadership does not run smoothly or if there is mistrust between the leader and their staff.

Other demand factors defined in previous studies are low pay, excessive workload, unsatisfactory staff resources, and a lack of leadership (e.g. Amin, Zaman, and Amin 2011; Eskelinen and Hjelt 2017; McDonald, Thorpe, and Irvine 2018; Phillips, Austin, and Whitebook 2016). ECEC staff work in child groups that are often understaffed, or staffed by underqualified new employees (Whitebook, Phillips, and Howes 2014). Temporary substitutes continuously change. In addition, little or no paid planning time has also been reported as a demand (e.g. Whitebook, Phillips, and Howes 2014). A Finnish study indicates that the curriculum gives nurses fewer opportunities to participate than other staff groups, and that nurses have an unclear role in the planning, implementation and recording of activities (FINEEC 2020).

Effort-reward imbalance (ERI)

According to the theory of effort-reward imbalance (ERI) (Siegrist 1996; Siegrist et al. 2004) work efforts and proper rewards need to be in balance to prevent emotional distress and promote feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy among staff. If this is not the case, an effort-reward imbalance (ERI) may lead to negative staff well-being because of continued strain reactions. The patterns of coping with job demands are based on individual characteristics. Overcommitted workers, or people with excessive work-related commitment and a great need for approval are at an increased risk of strain due to work imbalance. Highly committed workers make a great effort to meet work demands even when the rewards are low. They tend to perceive a greater imbalance at work due to unrealistic demands that they themselves have taken on. Research using the ERI model among ECEC staff is limited, but a misalignment between job demands and resources among ECEC staff has been found previously (e.g. Schaack et al. 2022). In addition, an imbalance between efforts and rewards among nurses has been associated with emotional exhaustion and burnout (Bakker et al. 2000; Shamian et al. 2002). In our study, we assume that a long-term unfavourable imbalance between demands and resources might lead to what is called moral stress.

Moral stress

It seems that ECEC staff and nurses describe similar ethical dilemmas related to their children and patients, respectively. They both engage in caregiving and deal with similar work demands, such as lack of time. Duties of the staff are related to caregiving of young children, sometimes less than 12 months of age, including feeding, changing diapers, comforting during distress, as well as supporting development and teaching new skills. Jameton (1984) defined moral stress as ‘when one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints makes it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action’ (p.6), while Silverberg (1996) found that moral stress manifests as: ‘feelings of inadequacy stemming from acting in conflict with one’s conscience and convictions’ (Silverberg 1996, 34).

In an attempt to synthesise the concept of moral stress (Lützné et al. 2003) the authors identify three preconditions to moral stress: First, nurses are morally sensitive to the patients’ vulnerability and lack of autonomy; second, nurses experience that external factors prevent them from doing what they think is best for the patients; and third, nurses believe that they have no control over the specific situation.

Stress related to ethical or moral dilemmas has mostly been reported in the nursing literature. Duties that involve dealing with human suffering or death are seen as moral, and the stress experienced is moral because the professional’s actions and behaviour affect the well-being of the patient (Lützné et al. 2003). In the ECEC setting, the duties of the staff are related to caregiving, supporting development, and teaching new skills, and thus organically interrelated. Using studies of the nursing profession as a basis for studies of the teaching profession is relevant according to a study by Shapira-Lishchinsky (2010), and we believe this is especially true concerning ECEC staff.

Moral stress has seldom been identified in teaching practice (Colnerud 2015), but it seems that ECEC staff and nurses describe similar ethical dilemmas concerning their pupils and patients, respectively. However, assessment scales designed to measure stress seldom mention factors that might assess value conflicts and moral responsibility (e.g. workplace stress scale, The Marlin Company 2001; work stress questionnaire, Frantz and Holmgren 2019). Therefore, it is interesting to study whether ethical dilemmas that may potentially lead to moral stress can be identified in the open answers of the ECEC centre staff.

Materials and methods

Sample and data-collecting procedure

Data were collected in May 2018 via an electronic survey, and the subject of the current study was the open-ended questions. The procedure for collecting the survey data has been described in a previous study (Heilala et al. 2022), which focused on the quantitative survey data. The sample was identified through the registers of trade unions. Altogether 3635 surveys were sent to all categories of ECEC staff, covering the whole country. Of these, 676 surveys (18.6%) were returned and $n = 33$ were excluded due to too much missing data. Leaders and deputy leaders ($n = 62$) were also excluded. In addition, $n = 43$ did not meet the qualification criteria for

their positions and were thus excluded. The sample consisted of $N = 538$ informants, and of these, $n = 384$ replied to at least one of the three open-ended questions. Therefore, our final sample consisted of $N = 384$ persons. The staff were between 21 and 62 years old, and 37.53 years on average ($sd = 9.41$). Of the staff, 104 (27.0%) were early childhood education teachers (university bachelor's degree), 200 (52.0%) were social workers in early childhood education (polytechnic), and 81 (21.1%) were licensed practical nurses.

Measures

Turnover intentions

Intentions to quit the ECEC profession and leave the sector altogether were measured by one item ('Do you plan to change profession?') which was coded 1 = yes/0 = no (Heilala et al. 2022). Turnover intentions were rather high, with more than half ($n = 209$) reporting intentions to quit their ECEC profession.

Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions were included in the survey, and in the present study we analysed the answers to three open-ended questions: 'Who guides you in your work?', 'What aspects of the job are you content with?', 'What aspects of the work are you dissatisfied with?'. A total of 385 respondents replied to at least one of the open-ended questions. Of these, 11 replies consisted of one word in total. The length of the statements varied between one and 73 words.

Qualitative data analysis

The open-ended questions underwent content analysis (Krippendorff 2013), using the two categories that were generated on the basis of the open-ended questions as well as the previous studies and the theories described above. The analysis used Atlas.ti version 8. As content analysis involves a certain amount of interpretation, in the first step, all the authors read the answers. We searched for themes and patterns within the data. The sets of codes were checked and further refined through re-readings. The intention was to first explore how the staff describe the demands and resources in their job on the whole-sample level, and second to examine whether different profiles can be distinguished among those with turnover intentions and those without. We established three main categories with subcategories to describe the profile characteristics of those with turnover intentions and those without.

Ethical considerations

The study was guided by the ethical principles issued by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) (2019). As the data collection was electronic, it was anonymous.

Results

The data yielded 12 subcategories, which were organised into the three main categories, namely *Resource factors*, *work guidance* and *demand factors* (Table 1). The same subcategories were valid for those with turnover intentions and those without. The respondents saw several aspects as resources, but they also reported demands. Fisher's exact test was applied to check for statistical significance between the two groups. SPSS version 24 was used.

Resource factors

Analysis of the resource factors in the whole-sample showed that the staff, both those with turnover intentions and those without, found work with children meaningful, and thus gratifying. The staff reported aspects or factors such as encounters, the importance and authenticity of work, warmth, joy, and work engagement. However, there was a statistical tendency for a larger number of those without turnover intentions to find the work more gratifying than those with turnover intentions.

Overall, the majority of the sample was content with their colleagues. The respondents considered their work community good, their teams were well-functioning, the atmosphere good, and they received support from colleagues. However, some respondents both with and without turnover intentions also reported that unfriendly, unsuited, or unprofessional colleagues were a reason for job dissatisfaction.

Both groups also enjoyed opportunities for competence development to a similar degree. They stressed things such as being able to implement your own vision, make use of your strengths, continuous development, being able to witness children's development, learning, and joy, as well as gaining strength to keep going when you saw that your aspirations were bearing fruit.

The work with children is versatile and challenging. [It g]ives a lot, rewards every day. When the work community is multi-professional, you can learn new things all the time. Person with turnover intentions

Table 1. Resources, work guidance, and demands related to turnover intentions.

	Turnover intentions <i>n</i> = 209 (%)	No turnover intentions <i>n</i> = 175 (%)	<i>p</i> *
Resource factors			
Positive aspects			
Gratifying work with children	52 (46.4)	60 (53.6)	<i>p</i> = .055
Supportive collegial atmosphere	64 (57.1)	48 (42.9)	<i>p</i> = .501
Feelings of competence	47 (50.5)	46 (49.5)	<i>p</i> = .404
Work guidance			
Collegial support	97 (58.8)	68 (41.2)	<i>p</i> = .148
Support from leader/deputy leader	101 (57.1)	76 (42.9)	<i>p</i> = .356
Support from special education teachers	40 (72.7)	15 (27.3)	<i>p</i> < .01
Demand factors			
Burdening aspects			
Staff resources	92 (60.5)	60 (39.5)	<i>p</i> = .059
Workload	72 (69.2)	32 (30.8)	<i>p</i> < .001
Number of children	60 (69.0)	27 (31.0)	<i>p</i> < .01
Salary too low	77 (65.8)	40 (34.2)	<i>p</i> < .01
Negative mentions of structural aspects and leadership	42 (63.6)	24 (36.4)	<i>p</i> = .105
Too much planning and paperwork	36 (56.3)	28 (43.8)	<i>p</i> = .785

*Fisher's exact test was applied.

Both groups of respondents saw the new curriculum as something positive, even though some stressed that they did not have enough time to fully implement it.

I enjoy challenges and the fact that even during early childhood years I have the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of both the child and the family by influencing and offering support. Pre-primary education is enjoyable and the new 'requirements' of the curriculum oblige the whole work community to consider their strengths. It's invaluable!. Person with turnover intentions

Work guidance

Regarding work guidance, the respondents mainly reported that they received guidance from colleagues and sometimes their leader, and these two aspects did not differ statistically significantly between the groups. A few people reported that they did not need support from others, whereas others wished they received more support. Some commented that the guidance they received was inadequate, whereas others described how they themselves actively asked for guidance from others.

I ask and demand guidance from an experienced older practical nurse, my working couple, a few nice ECEC teachers and a few other work friends. Person with no turnover intentions

Respondents from both groups felt that they received work guidance from the leader or deputy leader, but the amount or quality of this guidance was only mentioned briefly. However, some of those who had turnover intentions reported infrequent support and/or the leader being absent quite often, but the difference between them and those without turnover intentions did not reach statistical significance.

Interestingly, even though we did not have a specific question related to the support from special education teachers, those with turnover intentions more frequently reported receiving guidance from special education teachers (72.7%) than those without turnover intentions (27.3%), and this difference was statistically significant. This means that the groups really differed in the amount of guidance they receive from special education teachers, and that those with turnover intentions received support more frequently. Although those with turnover intentions did not elaborate on the reasons for their need for guidance, they mentioned not being able to meet the requirements of children with special needs in their responses more often than those who had no turnover intentions.

Demand factors

Both groups largely stated the same job disadvantages. Both regretted not being able to see each child in a stress-free environment or to plan the activities from the children's perspective. They felt that their pay was low and that they did not have enough time to plan and do paperwork. In addition, the number of children was high, and there was an ongoing lack of resources, mostly in the form of an insufficient number of staff. The difference between those with turnover intentions and those without was statistically significant in terms of workload, number of children, and low pay, and there was a tendency towards a statistically significant difference in terms of the lack of staff. In other words, those with turnover intentions perceived more demand factors in their work.

The difference in terms of workload was statistically significant, and for the group with turnover intentions, this dissatisfaction was more often expressed quantitatively and the quality was different. They used more negative expressions (e.g. *'I am very disappointed'*, *'we are living in the midst of chaos'*). Those with turnover intentions also expressed that the amount of stress was endless and that they could not relax or stop thinking about work when at home. A few also mentioned that exceptional circumstances had become the new norm, that they could barely survive some days, and were thankful when nothing bad happened. They expressed that they had to accept that working conditions were determined from the outside and from above, and that they were stuck in employment that they could not improve or change. In addition, those with turnover intentions commented that clients had become more challenging and that they could not meet children's needs for support more often than those with no turnover intentions.

Both groups also regretted that due to a lack of resources, they had no opportunities to incorporate pedagogical thinking into their daily work, or that due to stressful environments, they were unable to use their competence and skills. However, compared to those who planned to stay, those with turnover intentions also reported feelings that could be interpreted as moral stress due to not being able to perform their jobs in accordance with their own ethics, as many days were mostly pure survival.

[You] can't do your job the way you'd like to. It'd be wonderful if you could deal with each child in a truly individual way. In a stress-free environment. Now, unfortunately, I often have to work in a conveyor belt way, which is contrary to all my own values. [...] Sometimes it'd be nice to go home after a workday and feel like I've done a good job. Nowadays that's a rare feeling. Person with turnover intentions

Structural aspects and leadership

The respondents also found that the ECEC field was characterised by a general lack of respect and that the leadership was inadequate. There was no statistical significance in the frequency of the experienced leader support between those with turnover intentions and those without. Respondents in both groups mentioned aspects such as insufficient work guidance and support from their leader, lack of pedagogical leadership, insufficient time to discuss pedagogical issues, unqualified leaders, unfair management, and a lack of interest and respect.

[I am disappointed in] my bad and negligent leader. The organization and planning of the work is done too late or not done at all. Person with turnover intentions

Only those with turnover intentions stressed a lack of perseverance, constant checking of how planning time was used, and a lack of trust in staff. On the other hand, only those who intended to stay stressed a lack of/poor communication between leader and staff.

The leader abuses their power to belittle subordinates, doesn't seem to trust / appreciate the skills of the staff. The leader no longer knows the children / families, doesn't visit the groups, but still makes decisions that override the team's wishes on grassroot issues that affect the everyday running of the place. Person with turnover intentions

The flow of information does not always work between the leader and the staff. Person with no turnover intentions

In addition, one person, who had no turnover intentions, expressed concern that the leader's workload was too heavy and that their leader did not have the resources to resolve the issues at their workplace.

Discussion

The results show that the profiles of those with turnover intentions and those without were similar in terms of perceived resources, but that they differed in terms of perceived demands. A previous study (Schaack et al. 2022) showed that staff who had turnover intentions and staff who did not shared the same job frustrations. However, we anticipated that those who had turnover intentions would have concluded that the job was not for them, that they did not like working with children, and did not feel competent. In one study (McDonald, Thorpe, and Irvine 2018), one reason for staying was a passion for the job and a love of children. Our results showed a statistical tendency for those without turnover intentions to find work with children more gratifying. In our study, both those who had turnover intentions and those who did not were engaged and found work with children meaningful and thus, rewarding. Both groups reported similar aspects, such as the importance and authenticity of work, warmth, and joy. They found the job enriching and stimulating, but the resources, lack of time, and number of children had become too burdensome and they were left feeling that the imbalance between demands and resources undermined their capacity to do their work as well as they would like to (Siegrist 1996; Siegrist et al. 2004). This imbalance between demands and resources was reported in both groups, and the difference was statistically significant in terms of workload, high number of children, and low pay, with those with turnover intentions perceiving a stronger imbalance.

When analysing the results, we noticed that the role of the special education teachers emerged as a significant factor between those with turnover intentions and those without, even though we did not have a specific question related to the support from special education teachers. Those with turnover intentions reported having statistically significantly more work guidance from the special education teacher than those who had no such intentions. This is interesting, as it indicates that even though they received support, it was not necessarily enough. Of those who had turnover intentions, some mentioned that the guidance they received was inadequate, and that they felt they were not able to meet the special needs of certain children. This could indicate that support from special education teachers was not enough in itself. It is important to make sure that staff know how to implement advice from special education teachers in their daily life in the centre and that they have time to implement it. The knowledge of what they should be able to do for the children, and not being able to do it due to a lack of staff resources, may be overpowering and a source of moral stress (Jameton 1984; Silverberg 1996). This moral stress is caused by ethical dilemmas in everyday teaching practice (Colnerud 2015).

Recognition and support from co-workers and their leader is crucial in order for staff to feel that they are professionally valued and trusted (FINEEC 2020; Kelchtermans 2017; Pearson and Moomaw 2005). With regard to leadership practices, those with turnover intentions seemed to more often report a lack of perseverance, constant checking of how planning time was used, and a lack of trust in staff. This may reflect a lack of

recognition of ECEC staff by their leaders, which in turn could result in disappointment, self-doubt, low self-esteem, increased stress, and ultimately, burnout (Kelchtermans 2017). Those with no turnover intentions tended to stress a lack of/poor communication between the leader and the staff, which may indicate that they were given more autonomy. Studies show that when programme leaders offer staff job autonomy, staff experience higher job motivation and satisfaction, which decreases the likelihood of turnover (Pearson and Moomaw 2005).

Demands, resources and feelings of competence

The respondents reported similar demands to those identified in previous studies (Amin, Zaman, and Amin 2011; Eskelinen and Hjelt 2017; McDonald, Thorpe, and Irvine 2018; Phillips, Austin, and Whitebook 2016; Whitebook, Phillips, and Howes 2014). Factors such as low pay and a lack of appreciation, a lack of planning time, a high number of children in the group, understaffing, underqualified colleagues, and/or temporary substitutes have led to a situation in which staff experience a heavy workload. Those with turnover intentions even went as far as to describe how a state of emergency had become everyday life.

Those with turnover intentions more often reported that clients were challenging and that the support needs of children were not met, than those who had no turnover intentions. In addition, those with turnover intentions regretted that, due to a lack of resources, they had no opportunities to use their skills, as many days were mostly pure survival. According to the effort-reward imbalance theory (Siegrist 1996; Siegrist et al. 2004) this could indicate that the staff are committed and perceives a greater imbalance, which, however, might cause moral stress and turnover intentions. Those with turnover intentions in particular expressed that they could not do their jobs as well as they would like to or according to their own ethics. In other words, they knew the right things to do, but found them impossible to do in practice, which could result in feelings of moral stress (Jameton 1984; Silverberg 1996).

In conclusion, those who had turnover intentions felt that the positive aspects (rewards), such as a love for children and the importance and authenticity of work, did not outweigh the negative factors, such as workload, low pay, and lack of sufficient support. There was an imbalance between what they gave and what they received (ERI; Siegrist 1996; Siegrist et al. 2004). Those who had no turnover intentions experienced the same positive aspects of their work to a large extent, but with regard to the negative factors, their responses differed in both statistical significance and quality. This indicates that those with turnover intentions might experience more moral stress in their daily work with children. The phenomenon of moral stress in ECEC needs to be studied further, and how it relates to children with different kinds of special needs, such as children with disabilities, illnesses, or traumatic experiences.

Limitations

The data in this study were self-reported, and therefore we cannot rule out social desirability bias. The sample was small and the response rate for the survey was low (14.5%) and thus, attrition bias is a potential risk factor. The responses to the open-ended

questions were brief, which prevented us from interpreting any underlying meanings. Despite these limitations, we believe that this study has an interesting message to convey.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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