



## Heading for Burnout: The Early Years Workforce in England post COVID-19

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# Heading for Burnout: The Early Years workforce in England post COVID-19

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## Abstract:

Over recent years there has been a raft of literature drawing attention to the inequity of working conditions for those in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector in England; however, it remains rare that we have the opportunity to hear the voices of the practitioners telling their own story. Through an online anonymous survey, we gained rich qualitative data from 59 ECEC practitioners in England who discussed feeling disillusionment, injustice and exhaustion; experiences and emotions that were magnified through their experiences during and after the pandemic. In this article we argue that the ECEC sector has reached breaking point, and that immediate action is needed if we are to avoid the loss of a passionate, skilled and dedicated workforce, and if we are to avoid the risk of our most vulnerable children suffering the consequences.

Keywords: Early childhood, salary, conditions, COVID-19, recruitment, commitment

## Introduction

The Four Nations of the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) each have their own, very distinct, approaches to the education and care of young children. The discussion that follows is situated within, and considers approaches taken to, early childhood education and care (ECEC) in England. Whilst a cultural comparison of professional contexts would add a further dimension to this exploration, unfortunately there is not capacity to explore that with the rigour necessary here. The ECEC sector in England is made up of a patchwork of provision consisting of: state maintained nursery schools (MNS); private, voluntary and independent providers (PVI); and childminders and nannies (Lewis and West, 2016). Archer (2024, no page) explains that, "As a result of this plurality of provision, the ECEC workforce is diverse in its qualifications and responsibilities", it is, however, fairly consistent in being one of England's most poorly paid professions.

Since the Conservative government introduced nursery vouchers in 1997, which entitled three and four year olds to subsidised early years education, providers have contended with increased workload, regulation and expectations; whilst their pay, and their status, remain meagre (Social Mobility Commission, 2020). Despite this clear imbalance, the rewarding aspects of influencing a

child's early development have generally attracted skilled practitioners to ECEC, and united a disparate range of individual roles in the early years workforce within a shared moral purpose. However, the tide, and the goodwill, appear to be turning.

Our research, adding to the wider body of literature, suggests that in the aftermath of COVID-19, many early years practitioners are no longer prepared to accept such unreasonable working conditions. The intrinsic rewards of working with young children are becoming increasingly overshadowed by the collective workforce experience of exhaustion and stress; resulting in many ECEC professionals leaving the workforce in order to preserve their mental health and well-being (La Valle et al, 2022, Early Years Alliance, 2021). This comes at a time when the Chancellor of the Exchequer has recognised early childcare provision as essential infrastructure in his Spring Budget 2023, announcing an unprecedented expansion of early years funding as a driver to boost economic growth (Cosslett, 2023). Without the capacity to meet this expansion of provision, it is unlikely that the prospect will become a reality. Drawing from rich empirical data, this report explores a range of reasons why ECEC practitioners are becoming disillusioned with the sector, and recommends actions that should be taken, with some urgency, to prevent the continued exodus of our most experienced practitioners.

## **The Current Early Years Context**

### *Pay and conditions, retention and recruitment*

In 2018 Penn (p.8) discussed how at least twenty-percent of the ECEC workforce were earning much lower than minimal wage, in private companies that were not subject to regulation. More recent research suggests that the situation is not improving.

The stark picture of underfunding across the early years sector means low incomes for the workforce, who are faced with the harsh reality of trying to make ends meet day to day. In England, the average wage across the early years workforce is just £7.42 an hour, this compares to £12.57 for the total population (Social Mobility Commission, 2020) ... 13% of the workforce earn less than £5.00 an hour and many childcare workers take on second jobs to make ends meet (Education Policy Institute, 2019).

(Early Years Workforce Commission, 2021, p.6)

If we started and finished this section with the statement above, this would provide sufficient explanation for the ECEC workforce crisis, yet there is much more to explore. Prior to the above research, Solvason, Webb and Sutton-Tsang's (2020) exploration of maintained nurseries, found that many practitioners needed to find additional paid employment to enable them to continue in a job that they were passionate about; and in a role that many researchers have proven to have a positive impact upon children's future education and life chances (Bakken, Brown, and Downing, 2017; Barnett, and Ackerman, 2006; McCoy et al., 2017). That this should be the case in our 'developed' society is unfathomable. However, what *is* perfectly understandable, is that "The sector is facing unprecedented staff recruitment and retention challenges" (La Valle et al, 2022, p.5) with 20% of ECEC practitioners seriously considering leaving the sector (Early Years Alliance, 2021). Mounting challenges, and a general feeling of underappreciation, have resulted in stress, exhaustion and poor mental health for many practitioners, and more and more choosing to opt out of the profession (Early Years Alliance 2018; Social mobility Commission, 2020).

There are enormous disparities in pay and conditions across the ECEC sector (Early Years Workforce Commission, 2021); the only consistency being that wages are far lower than in most other sectors. Farewell et al.'s (2021, p.197) research reported that generally practitioners experienced "poor

working conditions, including long hours, high job demands and low job control” when working in settings, as well as the daily occupational health hazards related to working in close contact with babies and young children. This is accompanied by a lack of organised representation, which, as Penn (2018) mentions in her report funded by the European Union, is actively discouraged within ECEC. She explains: “Outside of local authority employment, childcare workers do not usually have union representation or any kind of voice, and their conditions of work may not cover the usual benefits such as pension, sick pay and holidays” (Penn, 2018, p.8). Haux et al.’s (2022, p.55) reasons for the ECEC workforce depletion echoed these aspects of disparity and insecurity and particularly focused upon the immense pressure and workload faced by practitioners in the early years. The Social Mobility Commission (2020) contend that it is these steep workloads that have contributed to increased turnover in the ECEC workforce; all of these factors inevitably impact on the quality and availability of early years services (La Valle et al, 2022, p.5).

Hardy et al (2022, p.5) highlight the role that COVID-19 played in further intensifying the challenges that already existed, *prior* to the pandemic. For example, in 2018, the Early Years Alliance (EYA) conducted research which highlighted that the administration and paperwork, financial pressures, pay and workload were the top factors contributing to stress in the ECEC sector. In 2021 “Feeling undervalued by the government” was the chief reason for those wanting to leave the profession (EYA, 2021, p.9). These factors are similar to those identified by the Social Mobility Commission’s (2020) review of literature, which, in addition to those already listed, identified demanding child-to-staff ratios, high levels of responsibility and unfavourable tasks as contributing to practitioner dissatisfaction.

ECEC professionals are a workforce simultaneously overworked and overlooked by policy; Archer (2024) explains that government policy “frame[s] the early childhood educator as both ‘in need of improvement’ and the Early Years Professional as a driver of quality improvement but with limited government support to do so”. Similarly, Solvason and Webb (2023: p. 137) describe them as professionals that have “persistently fought to shape more appropriate agendas for ECEC rather than just conforming to prescribed (and often inappropriate) policy and metrics”. Finally, Haux et al (2022) explain how ECEC practitioners struggle to keep up with the continuously changing demands of evolving policy and statutory guidance, yet do so, relentlessly striving to provide the children in their care with a high-quality experience. All of these factors call into question how such a challenging profession has endured, and the answer appears to be found in the intrinsic motivation that practitioners derive from the joyful moments of working with the very young. These, The Social mobility Commission (2020) suggest, outweigh concerns over inadequate pay and recognition. However, more recent research suggests that intrinsic reward, post-pandemic, is failing to suffice.

### *The Impact of COVID-19*

An ECEC practitioner speaking to the Early Years Alliance in 2021, stated:

*I feel that the early years sector has been treated disgracefully during the pandemic and I feel that workers have been put at increased risk during the pandemic with little support and acknowledgment of [our] feelings and welfare. (No page, italics in original)*

ECEC practitioners faced unprecedented health risks during the pandemic, whilst supporting vulnerable children and the children of key workers in close contact. They struggled through staff shortages caused by several factors: “staff illness or need for some staff to shield; positive COVID-19 cases and self-isolation; and staff having health concerns about working”, in addition to coping with the absence of those staff who were at home caring for their own children (La Valle et al, 2022, p.

57). After this demanding and stressful time 87% of ECEC practitioners were left feeling that the role that they had played during the pandemic was not adequately valued by the government, with one practitioner commenting: “*I feel the sector has been treated appallingly. Staff have been expected to carry on regardless and the risk we are putting ourselves at is not really acknowledged*” (Early Years Alliance, 2021, no page). Once again, those in the sector felt overlooked and treated as “less than” educators in other age phases of education, an issue repeatedly highlighted by Nutbrown (2013) in her defence of the sector.

During the pandemic, the early years sector adeptly proved their capability, quickly adapting operations in response to COVID-19 guidelines and restrictions, including the management of ‘bubbles’ and the increase of cleaning operations (Hardy et al, 2022, p. 15). They were faced with the heightened responsibility of ensuring the safety and welfare of vulnerable children, including children with additional needs, in a context of drastically reduced support from external agencies. And they did all of this whilst also acquiring the extensive range of new skills required for delivering activities through online learning (La Valle et al, 2022, p.4). ECEC practitioners rose to the many challenges presented, but for many this was at the cost of their own health and mental wellbeing (Douglas-Osborn et al, 2021, p. 21).

In addition, of course, there was the financial aspect. During the pandemic, this already financially impoverished sector was hit harshly by lower ECEC use, and the costs associated with COVID-19 restrictions (La Valle et al, 2022, p.4). This contributed to the permanent closure of many ECEC settings (Hobbs and Bernard 2021; NDNA 2021). At their time of writing in 2022, Hardy et al. highlighted that morale was “extremely low” and that the ECEC sector was facing a “recruitment and retention crisis” (p.5). The challenges of staff shortages and recruiting qualified and skilled practitioners has persisted beyond the lifting of the pandemic’s restrictions (Early Years Alliance, 2021; Kulakiewicz et al, 2022: p.5).

#### *The Mental health of ECEC practitioners*

The foreword of Mainstone-Cotton’s text, cited in Moxley (2022: Xiv) states that practitioners “can only look after and enhance the wellbeing of children if [they] are paying attention to and looking after [their] own wellbeing”. Likewise, research conducted by the Anna Freud Centre (Douglas-Osborn et al, 2021) highlights that practitioners’ capacity to support children’s mental health and wellbeing is dependent on staff’s own state of wellbeing. It is extremely concerning, therefore, that all current research into the sector points toward the mental health and wellbeing of early years staff being at an all-time low. This is exemplified by the following comment from a ECEC practitioner in the Early Years Alliance’s (2021) research:

[I’m] Not sure how long I can do this for. In a charity pre-school, I already work many hours for free and on a low hourly rate but since Covid, this has tripled, I’m heading for a burn-out and I’m a person that has never had any mental health issues in the past.

We know that there are clear links between physical and mental health and wellbeing (Mental Health Foundation, 2022) and working within the ECEC sector can place demands on both of these areas. Hardy et al (2022: p. 16) reported that 82% of managers were concerned about the mental health and wellbeing of their employees, concluding that they “felt not only devalued, but invisibilised and ignored”. A study conducted by the Anna Freud Centre (Douglas-Osborn et al, 2021) identified 4 areas needed to support mental health and wellbeing in practice, these were: *Support for each other, Supportive management, a Supportive physical environment* and *External support*. They describe the external support as access to wellbeing services, peer networks and CPD, but our

data, as does much of the research discussed above, suggests that so much more is needed in this area.

## **Methodology**

For this research we used an anonymous electronic survey which was distributed via our existing institute contacts with a wide range of ECEC settings, via email, and through existing social media channels. Those who received the survey were encouraged to share it with any colleagues working in ECEC settings in England to maximise opportunity for responses. As such we have no way of knowing whom the survey ultimately reached or the identity of our respondents.

An anonymous, online, survey was selected in order to maximise accessibility and reach, but also to allow the respondent full autonomy to decide upon their participation. We did not want to exert any pressure on already overburdened staff. Full ethical approval was obtained through our institute prior to the research commencing. In the Participant Information Sheet that preceded the survey we made clear to respondents that they should be careful not to share any information that might lead to them (either directly or indirectly) revealing their own identity or that of their colleagues or setting. If a participant did include such information, this was anonymised within the processed data. The electronic survey itself protected anonymity, with respondents identified only by a unique code, but in addition we gave respondents the choice to miss out identifiers such as role, or age group, if this made them more comfortable. All questions were optional.

The survey took a mixed methods approach including both quantitative and qualitative questions. The quantifiable questions, used to provide an overview, were based upon a range validated measures. These were:

- Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales (Tennant et al, 2007)
- Wellbeing Measurement for Schools Staff Survey (Anna Freud National centre for Children and Families & CORC, undated)
- CIPD Good Work index (CIPD, 2022).

Predominantly designed as scales, these closed questions were helpful for providing a general picture of the Health and Wellbeing (HWB) of early years practitioners, but we were also keen to “understand...the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt 1998, p.221). Because of this, open-ended questions were extremely important. These questions predominantly asked ‘why?’ So, for example, if a participant was asked to indicate the positive or negative impact that their employment had upon their wellbeing using a scale, they were then asked if they could explain their choice. The survey was piloted prior to distribution.

## *Data Analysis*

We received 59 responses, these included: 30 practitioners/ teachers (P); 9 owner/ managers (M), 5 teaching assistants (TA), 3 special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCo), 3 specialist support teachers (SST), 2 childminders (CM) and 7 ‘other’ roles. The quantitative data were processed into percentages for us through the JISC platform. The qualitative responses were examined individually by the researchers, who then came together to discuss and agree upon the key themes emerging. The data were then coded within these themes, dissected and reassembled, using data reduction grids. Finally, they were re-organized into a logical argument (Wellington, 2015), including strong examples to evidence the key points under investigation.

The acronyms shown after each role in the list of participants above are the identifiers used within the data analysis below, and the words of respondents are made clear through the use of italics. The

staff worked across a range of nurseries, schools, children's centres and even from their own home; for this reason, the term 'settings' is used with reference to the work context throughout.

## Results

It is useful to contextualise the discussion to follow by starting with a snapshot of the quantitative data related to our respondents' mental health:

- 48% never or rarely feel relaxed
- 88% are regularly upset by unexpected events
- 75% regularly feel that important decisions are out of their control
- 67% regularly feel angered by events outside of their control
- 91% regularly feel stressed (61% often or always)
- 76% regularly feel unable to cope
- 66% are regularly overwhelmed by difficulties.

The statistics outlined above add to previous research which suggests that the mental health of the EY workforce in England is extremely poor. The practitioners who responded to our survey indicated that they are stressed, overwhelmed and exhausted. In the data analysis that follows we explore in further depth some of the reasons why.

### *Feeling taken for granted*

Several of our owner/ manager respondents referred to the difficulty they were experiencing, post-COVID-19, in recruiting suitable staff. The following statements indicate why this might be the case, as practitioners reflect upon their experiences during the pandemic.

*I still worked daily at my setting with a group of key worker children - I feel that support to early years provisions majorly lacked from the general government and my local authority - I feel that there was always information for schools, colleges and universities - but early years was never /hardly mentioned. This left myself and my setting feeling alone, uncertain and vulnerable during the pandemic (P 55)*

*...we were unsupported by the country and yet expected to be there to support keyworkers. I felt used by the government and especially our local authority who asked us to go into schools and support teaching staff who didn't have first aid. We were told that we were all in it together??? Stress overload. Our setting couldn't pay us extra due to lack of financial support off the government and early years staff didn't get even a thank you (M 40)*

Respondents shared feeling taken for granted during the lockdowns, as this senior leader explained, keeping their setting open through the pandemic was "extremely stressful", adding "we worked throughout and didn't close and therefore are a little resentful that this isn't recognise" (M 57).

Comments exemplify how the existing feelings of inequity were exacerbated by the pandemic, not only in terms of the EY sector generally, feeling overlooked in comparison to schools and other education institutions, but also within settings, where some staff were forced to continue working whilst others spent time at home with their families. This senior manager recalls feeling "resentful having to work while the rest of my team were furloughed" (M 34). Likewise, this practitioner shares how:

*Those of us who remained were desperate to be stood down just for a couple of weeks, not necessarily for full furlough but for some time to regroup and be with our families. We battled through the chaos while on the usual poor wages (P 33).*

With such comments we begin to see a picture of why morale in the workforce is at an all-time low.

#### *Increased anxiety*

Most respondents referred to the anxiety caused by the pandemic either implicitly, for example, this practitioner referred to the fact that *"Gyms were closed, that's my mental release"* (P 9), and this manager mentioned that they are *"not good coping with change"* (M 29); or more explicitly, with expressions such as *"made my anxiety and depression significantly worse"* (P 21) or *"Made me feel anxious and depression high"* (P 54). Some responses indicate that practitioners struggled with feelings of isolation during the pandemic (P 31, TA 46, P 55, SENCo 4). Others became fearful of social situations, sharing that they *"became withdrawn and antisocial"* (P 35) or *"just don't like being around lots of people"* (P 38). And whilst these emotions are no different to anyone else during lockdown, unlike the majority of the population, many EY practitioners did not have the option to stay in the safety of their home and shield. This workforce had to work during, or immediately after the lockdowns; putting themselves at extreme risk whilst carrying the burden of responsibility for the safety of the children that they worked with.

Some respondents found working through lockdown *"overwhelming"* (P 36, CM 32). Respondents used *"Exhausting"* and *"relentless"* (M 53) with a *"Massively increased workload"* (M 1) to describe the experience. This practitioner explained that *"the never-ending changes were brutal. It was absolutely stressful trying to adapt to radically new practices and routines so frequently"* (P 33). One specialist teacher explained that in returning to work she not only had fears about her own health, but also those of her family, sharing: *"I was very anxious to return to work after being furloughed, I was anxious to be out in the general public and was worried about mine and my families health"* (SST 22), others found the return to work *"really stressful"* (P 8) or just *"hard"* (ST 16).

Another source of anxiety for several respondents was finances. This specialist teacher (25) had to go without pay. They described their experience:

*I did not work enough hours to be furloughed. I had to be at home as I had three school age children. I therefore had no pay for the time I was at home. I was not willing to go in to setting with the risk of bringing home serious illness to my family. Settings were flexible to keep my position open (SST 25).*

A manager explained that despite carrying on working through the lockdowns they didn't receive any extra pay, as the government did not finance this, and that *"early years staff didn't get even a thank you"* (M 40). Some owners had the stress of worrying whether COVID-19 would impact upon the *"viability and sustainability"* (M 51) of their business, whilst others had to face the *"devastation"* of closure when they could no longer afford to stay open (P 45). Those that did survive then experienced the *"Added pressure to build [their] business back up" following the lockdowns"* (M 2). All whilst nurturing the wellbeing and continued development of the most vulnerable in our communities.

For others, it was physical health that suffered. Whether through the exhaustion caused by *"More workload and more hours during the day"* (SENCo 23) or through difficulties relaxing and sleeping (P 33, TA 14, P 45, P21). Some found that their diet became poor, and they gained weight (P 33, P 21, P 35). One manager (19) recalled how they experienced physical symptoms from stress for the first



time, through “*lack of sleep, stomach aches, being sick and frequent headaches*”. This manager explained how they experienced:

*...high levels of anxiety trying to keep things running at the nursery while also dealing with staff/parents’ anxiety and questions. In the first lockdown I was so anxious about the virus and my loved ones whilst trying to support everyone else... felt more pressure working from home as everything was changing all the time. So increased workload and always felt like I was on call (M 34).*

And, of course, many others became unwell through the virus itself; a senior manager shared that they’d been “*very poorly and off work for 6 weeks*” (M 38). And another that they’d had COVID-19 before the vaccines and that they “*still struggle with fatigue, breathing and chest issues*” (P 50).

Our results indicate that early years practitioners became disenchanted in the wake of COVID-19, during which, despite working for a minimum wage, they redoubled their efforts to support the children and families in their care. Many were physically and mentally exhausted following lockdown, yet returned to work immediately, and with no recognition of the selfless work they had carried out whilst others were able stay at home and care for their families. Inevitably, as our statistical results indicate, this put significant strain on practitioners’ mental health, with 61% often or always feeling stressed. This leads us on to the support that is currently in place for practitioners’ wellbeing.

#### *Support for Mental Health in Settings*

*There has been an increased workload in my role as the SENCo within the setting, but this is supported via the management team and the wider team. This then enables me to achieve to the best of my ability, although this process is not without stress it has a long term positive impact on my mental health as I feel I am making a difference in a critical environment (P 58)*

Education is relational, therefore, key to a positive mental health environment in settings is that practitioners know that they are listened to and cared for, just as they do for those families with whom they work. Our data suggest that practitioners want to feel that their colleagues are interested in their wellbeing. As this manager described: “*My team support me, and I can talk to them, and we share worries and concerns...My management team listen and support. Listening to me, making me feel appreciated*” (M 40). Small acts of acknowledgement and kindness made a significant difference, with this practitioner explaining: “*At my work setting the people around me always ask if I’m alright in the morning. They are always there for me when I need to talk to them*” (P 12). Those who believed they worked in a supportive environment, talked about having colleagues there for them “*if and when needed*” (P 20) to “*support you and [give] advice, too*” (P 31). The data suggest that consistency is important through the use of ‘always’; that there is “*Always someone to listen*” (P 6), that “*Management are always so supportive and caring! She’s [manager] always there for me!*” (P 9). It should not be assumed that ‘caring’ is a characteristic found in all ECEC managers and practitioners, however. For example, this specialist teacher shared how, in her experience, the wellbeing of staff “*wasn’t always forefront of priorities*” (SST 22) with managers, and a manager (M 53) noted that the care of staff was often dismissed as all energies were expended on the children. The data suggest considerable variances across settings in terms of the support individual practitioners received.

That practitioners wanted to feel valued also emerged as key, through comments which mentioned having a manager who: shows consideration towards personal events (P 17) and that is “*open for*

*chats*” about any issues (P 54). The confidence boost of being complimented on good practice (P 21) or appreciation being shown through open communication and token gifts was, likewise, appreciated (M 53). Small gestures were clearly valued. Unfortunately, our data suggests that teaching assistants, in particular, felt that their efforts often went unregarded. This TA shared how they felt that *“teaching assistants are put a lot of pressure on and given lots to do in a short amount of time but paid the most minimal which gets me down as you feel underappreciated”* (TA 30).

### *Unsupportive cultures*

Although 89% of early years practitioners intimated that their job did have a positive impact on their wellbeing, for the majority this was *despite* the stresses and strains that their job brought. As this practitioner summarised: *“working with the children is rewarding but the job is so hard and tiring”* (P 24). A manager, who indicated that the job *never* impacted positively on their wellbeing, said *“We are expected to do more and more, yet the pay doesn't rise in line with this... I didn't sign up for this”* (M 1). One practitioner who felt that staff wellbeing was made a priority in their setting, still described themselves and their colleagues as being *“stretched and stressed”* and *“pushed to our limits”* (P 42).

More than a quarter of our respondents referred to the stressful nature of their work, using terms such as: *“Very stressful little support or positive feedback, constant worry”* (SENCo 4). This practitioner explained how they were not able to leave that worry at work, that it *“just dampens the whole day and you end up taking it home with you”* (P 36). Staff shared feeling *“exhausted”* and *“underappreciated”* (P 8) and that, despite being just about within ratio (a sufficient number of staff to children), they were still struggling to get things done (P 43).

Some staff were a little more cynical about the support that they received, suggesting that although mental health appeared to be supported *“the ultimate goal would be to make sure staff turn up for their shifts rather than call in sick”* (P 39). Others felt that mental health was something that might come up in an appraisal or supervision, but wasn't talked about generally (P 55). Unfortunately, in more toxic environments driven by *“gossip and unkindness”*, some staff were too worried to mention mental health issues, for fear of it being viewed *“as a weakness [that] will affect their role”* (TA 46).

### *Why do practitioners stay in the profession?*

Our data present the views of staff that put their own health, and the health of their families at risk during the pandemic, for the wellbeing of the children in their care. These practitioners helped keep hospitals and schools open; and many did this for minimum wage, and minimum thanks. Our previous research revealed that many early years staff need take on a second job in order to earn a wage that is sufficient to meet their bills (Solvason, Webb and Sutton-Tsang, 2020), and these results suggest there has been no improvement, with ‘minimum wage’ frequently mentioned. Many staff in this sample shared that pressure and expectations have mounted exponentially over recent years, causing an increase in anxiety and exhaustion. Considering these factors, it is difficult to comprehend why so many staff remain in the profession, but the many comments underpinned by altruism provide some clue. This specialist teacher said: *“working with young children can take you away from your problems. When with them you need to focus on their needs not yours”* (SST 25).

Several staff explained how through focusing upon the needs of the children they could escape their own anxieties. This manager explained: *“It keeps me going. The children and staff come first so I look after them and my needs can get put to the side”* (M 53). Likewise, this practitioner explained that spending time with the children *“makes me feel happy and relaxed - resulting in positive impacts on*

*my mental health and wellbeing*" (P 55). One childminder shared that she *"loved"* her work (CM 3). Practitioners also identified *"making a difference"* to the lives of children and their communities as a key motivator for them (P 45, P 55). One practitioner described the satisfaction that they gained through *"Seeing a positive difference because of my provision. Guiding the children through new experiences"* (P 33); and one specialist teacher explained how *"helping others to develop"* impacted positively upon her low self-esteem (ST 16). One manager recognised the stressful nature of work in the EY, but did their best to ensure that their own setting was *"a positive place to be"* (M 38). And clearly other managers were doing the same, as this teaching assistant shared: *"I work with good people and I enjoy spending time with the children"* (TA 49).

## **Discussion**

These findings suggest that the pandemic has exacerbated the sustainability issues of the ECEC sector through lack of financial support and inadequate recognition of the critical role that the sector plays, contributing to increases in stress at all levels. Our results also suggest that this is not dependent upon position or qualification, feeling unrecognised and underappreciated was universal across our respondents. Over the last two years setting leaders have had to: bolster staff morale; adapt to ever-changing guidelines from central government; cope with the economic consequences of reduced numbers of children; be supportive of the anxieties of staff, as well as coping with the strain upon individual mental health. ECEC staff in all roles reported physical symptoms such as weight gain, headaches, nausea, difficulties sleeping and fatigue, all consistent with an overdose of the stress hormone cortisol. This increases the risk of long-term health conditions such as depression, heart and lung disease, anxiety and obesity (Cahn et al., 2022), placing increased pressure on an already struggling National Health Service.

ECEC is nothing without its staff (O'Sullivan and Sakr, 2022) and our research demonstrates the remarkable dedication that many practitioners show toward the children in their care, as well as their colleagues. Words of thanks, small gifts and checking in on one another do appear to contribute to high job satisfaction, however, the positive effects of these gestures appear to be waning in the shadow of persistently poor working conditions. Low wages have always been an issue for professionals working in ECEC and those who stay in the sector clearly do not do it for financial recompense. It is morally wrong, however, that the passion and compassion of ECEC practitioners continues to be taken advantage of by a government that consistently raises demands without providing the resources to enable this.

It is notable that our findings indicate that what has caused the current tipping point in ECEC is not so much the historical low rate of pay, but the lack of government recognition and thanks for the additional burdens and associated stresses carried by ECEC practitioners during the pandemic. The frequency of reports of feeling unappreciated and unrecognised throughout our data, suggest deep emotions of injustice. This is consistent with research finding that when there is a significant gap between what an individual anticipates as a just reward and what they actually receive, they feel demotivated and take up a position of self-preservation (Stets, 2003). The sector can no longer be sustained by charitable acts of selflessness.

This general sense of disappointment and injustice expressed throughout our data provides further explanation for why so many practitioners are quietly leaving the sector. The sight of striking public-sector workers across the media, including teachers, health service staff, railway and postal workers, all outlining their grievances regarding pay and conditions, has become common place, however, it is important to recognise that because early childhood professionals are not unionised there is nowhere for them to lobby. This, no doubt, further contributes to their feelings of invisibility. The

reality for those in the ECEC sector is that even the lowest paying jobs, such as retail or cleaning, are likely to provide them with a similar, if not increased wage- but with far less responsibility and stress. It is only their dedication to the children that they work with that keeps them in the profession.

The current exodus of experienced staff that we are seeing is particularly troubling considering the evidence that suggests that well-trained staff not only make a significant difference to the quality of early years provision, but that they also engender positive outcomes for children that last until the end of their compulsory schooling (DfE, 2015). This role, so often viewed as inferior, provides the building blocks for the child's future success or failure, yet remains the most under respected and underpaid job in the education sector (EYA, 2021, p.9; Nutbrown, 2013, Social Mobility Commission, 2020). Eventual burnout is inevitable.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

This research adds further weight to the ever growing body of literature indicating that early years practitioners feel unrecognised and unappreciated, despite their skill, expertise and dedication. The outcome of this is the erosion of practitioners' physical and mental health, and their departure from the sector in order to sustain their own wellbeing. Our data also add to the wider body of existing research suggesting that the sector is at breaking point, and that changes need to be made with some urgency. Below we outline some of our recommendations that have emerged from careful consideration of the data collected, both at government and local level.

We call for further changes to national policy, or statutory guidance for ECEC, be suspended for the time being, providing early years practitioners the autonomy to implement and embed practices according to local need during this prolonged period of recovery. Of course we implore the government to ensure that all early years staff should be paid a minimum wage, if not the living wage, and that settings are funded appropriately in order to enable this. All practitioners completing the newly proposed 'Early Years Teacher' qualification should be paid at the same rate as teachers in other phases of education, and the value of early years, and the early years pedagogue, be recognised and reinforced consistently.

Wider consultation with the sector *must* be a key aspect of the government's longer-term planning, as this report adds to a growing library of research outlining the unhappiness experienced by early years practitioners at remaining unrecognised for the vital work that they do. This is reflected in both the lack of financial remuneration, and the general misunderstanding and underestimation of ECEC practitioners' unique and complex skill set (Solvason and Webb, 2023). Simply increasing the training and the expectations of practitioners in ECEC, which appears to be the crux of the government's current plan (DfE, 2023), *without* addressing the appalling pay and conditions that ECEC professionals work within, will do no more than exacerbate, rather than relieve current dissatisfaction in the sector.

In the interim more localised systems of support should be considered. In lieu of adequate pay and conditions, more effective channels of support for those who expend so much energy nurturing others must be developed. ECEC settings must put the mental and physical health of their staff first, even if this does sometimes result in reducing the services that are offered. Whilst practitioners continue to cope, our government will continue to take advantage. In the meantime, it will be helpful for local authorities, or local groups of providers, to foster collaborative schemes across ECEC settings, for managers and staff teams to share best practice and build supportive networks. Immediate action must be taken to prevent the loss of the wealth of expertise found within the ECEC

workforce. If not, the implications for our youngest children, children who have already struggled through a pandemic, are devastating.

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