An Ecological Exploration into the Agency of Four Former Early Childhood Teachers

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Abstract

Issues of Early Childhood Teacher (ECT) shortages, recruitment, and retention are of concern in many nations, with ECT attrition being a contributing factor. Simultaneously, scholars argue that neoliberal influences are restricting the agency of ECTs. This article explores the relationship between ECT attrition and agency by re-examining narratives shared by four individuals who chose to leave early childhood teaching in Victoria, Australia. Through an analytical framework grounded in ecological systems, I delve into how agency was experienced in relation to the incidents that led participants to leave the profession at the individual, micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chrono-systems. The findings suggest that upon entering the profession, participants had anticipated and found the need to advocate for their professional aspirations. Notably, their relationships with colleagues, particularly management and leadership, either afforded or constrained their agency. Other system factors influencing their agency, and reasons for leaving the profession, include the everyday busyness of teaching, educator-child ratios, and working conditions as defined by their employment entitlements. I argue that early childhood managers and leaders act as agency gatekeepers and concur with scholars who suggest a need to reimagine early childhood education and care as a public good, and to reconsider current hierarchical structures. This article aims to initiate further research concerned with the agency of ECTs and how they are or can be supported to not only remain but thrive within in the profession.

Keywords Early childhood education and care · Kindergarten · Preschool · Teacher attrition · Teacher agency · Ecological approach

Introduction

The recruitment and retention of teachers working in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is of pressing international concern (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019). For some nations, Early Childhood Teacher (ECT) shortages are a compounding factor. For instance, New Zealand currently falls short 300 ECTs each year due to teacher attrition alone (Wolfe, 2019). Simultaneously, enrolments in tertiary education for ECEC have been declining rapidly (Hipkins, 2018). ECT shortages are also prevalent throughout Europe. Data collated from 27 countries across Europe between 2015 and 2017 revealed that 15 participating countries experienced ECEC workforce shortages (Oberhuemer & Schreyer, 2017). The reports disclosed that countries such as Finland, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Sweden experience ongoing difficulties recruiting individuals qualified to teach in ECEC. For Czech Republic, Estonia, and Italy, these difficulties are experienced in some parts of the country. Furthermore, difficulties are anticipated in other European countries including Austria, Belgium, Ireland, Lithuania, Russia, Scotland, and Wales due to rising demand for ECTs, which is exacerbated by the increasing qualification requirements needed to become an ECT. In the case of England, a report based upon data from England's Department for Education revealed a shortage of nearly 11,000 ECTs (Save The Children, 2018). Reports of ECT shortages also emerge from countries such as the United States (Kwon et al., 2020), China (Zhang et al., 2019), and Singapore (Pek-Greer & Wallace, 2017).

In Australia, the context of the current paper, a recent inquiry reported a conservative estimate of requiring an additional 9,000 ECTs nationally by 2023 (Australian

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Children's Education & Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2019). Moreover, the state of Victoria requires a further 9,000 ECTs over the next decade to meet increasing demand alongside existing supply issues (The Department of Education and Training, 2022; Kolovos & Rose, 2022).

As argued by Ingersoll (2003), addressing teacher shortages requires attention to problems beyond the recruitment of new teachers. Importantly, the issue of teacher attrition must be considered. By understanding the reasons why an ECT may leave the profession, strategies to retain those already teaching and potentially attract capable teachers back into the profession can be understood (Lindqvist et al., 2014).

Neoliberalism and Agency

Simultaneous to issues of ECT retention and attrition, there is growing concern that the agency of ECTs is being restricted due to neoliberal influences. Neoliberalism is evident in the increasing movement towards ECEC services being provided by private, often for-profit, corporations (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Urban & Rubiano, 2014). This is particularly noticeable in the United Kingdom, the Americas, Asia, and Pacific nations, including Australia (Arndt et al., 2021; Chon, 2019; Lloyd & Penn, 2012; Penn, 2014; Sims, 2017). Reducing ECEC into a market-based logic reflects neoliberal concerns with economic wealth, whereby ECEC is regarded as an investment that can bring about high returns to the economy and society (Adriany, 2018; Lin & Jones, 2020). To secure such returns, scholars have noted increasing prescribed standards for teaching in ECEC and the reduction of teaching as a technical exercise (Moloney et al., 2019; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Consequently, teachers' professional decision making is undermined (Osgood, 2006) and their agency is in tension with compliance (Rogers et al., 2020).

Agency is important for ECTs' job satisfaction, wellbeing, and retention (McMullen et al., 2020). Accordingly, teacher agency is beginning to be recognised as important to the discourse on teacher retention and attrition (Kayi-Aydar & Steadman, 2019). Irvine et al. (2016) suggests that further research into the agency of ECTs is important for informing strategies that aim to promote the sustainability of the workforce. The present article contributes to this need by offering insights into both ECT agency and attrition.

The Australian Context

Research concerned with ECEC workforce issues such as retention and attrition has paid little attention to ECTs working in kindergarten contexts (Fenech et al., 2021). To clarify,

ECTs in Australia are individuals who hold an approved teaching qualification, commonly a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood (EC) education. An ECT is responsible for developing, implementing, and overseeing educational programs within ECEC settings. Individuals who work with children in ECEC but are not employed as a qualified ECT are referred to as educators (ACECQA, n.d.).

Kindergarten in Victoria, Australia is a non-compulsory educational program offered to three- and four-year old children and is delivered by an ECT in the year before formal schooling. Kindergarten is provided through two means. One, through a standalone service offering sessional hours. Kindergartens offering sessional hours provide educational programs to children for up to 15 h per week on days and during hours specified by the service, across approximately 40 weeks per year. Current reforms will see the 15 h increase to 30 h by 2030. Alternatively, kindergartens are integrated into a long day care service where children can continue to access education and care outside of kindergarten hours. Typically, long day care services operate for eight hours a day, five days a week, for a minimum of 48 weeks per year.

Literature Review

Teacher Attrition

Internationally, literature identifies ECTs that intend to leave the profession due to dissatisfaction with their working conditions (Kwon et al., 2020; McKinlay et al., 2018; Rentzou, 2012). For example, in the United States, 1129 ECTs were surveyed on their employment intentions to move within, remain in, or leave the profession (Grant et al., 2019). Of those surveyed, 41% intended to remain in their current employment, 31% intended to move to another employer, and 27% intended to leave the profession. Individuals who reported higher levels of stress and emotional exhaustion, perceived negative working conditions, and as lacking intrinsic motivation, expressed higher intention to leave the profession. Additionally, the low pay of American ECTs has been identified as a significant contributing factor (Bullough et al., 2012). Comparatively, 538 individuals working in ECEC across Finland were surveyed on aspects of their workload demands and their employment intentions (Heilala et al., 2021). Of those surveyed, 138 individuals were ECTs with 61% of this subgroup reporting intentions to leave the profession. ECT participants reported experiencing a demanding workload and were dissatisfied with their leadership support.

Research conducted in Australia revealed that one-in-five of the 1,200 surveyed individuals working in ECEC intended to leave their workplaces within 12-months (Irvine

et al., 2016). A complementary study sustained contact with 916 of the surveyed individuals and their employers across 18-months (Thorpe et al., 2020). Of those participants, the expected turnover rate was 22% however, the actual rate was 37%. Through ongoing contact with the participants, the researchers were able to analyse movement within and out of the profession. A revealing 73% of movement was attributed to individuals leaving the profession altogether. As such, the ability to meet the demand for ECTs is faced with considerable challenges.

Teacher Agency

Agency refers to an individual's choice to pursue and achieve outcomes that they regard as important, and which reflect their values (Sen, 1999). The current study adopted an ecological view of teacher agency. As explained by Priestley and colleagues (2015), the ecological approach conceptualises agency beyond merely being a capacity of individuals. Rather, agency is achieved through the interplay between individual effort, available resources, and the context the individual finds themselves in (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestley et al., 2015). Therefore, an individual's capability to exert agency can be supported or restricted by social and institutional arrangements (Sen, 1999). For ECTs, these may include workplace goals, policy directives, and social practices (Billett, 2006); collegial relationships (Wells, 2015); accountability pressures (Irvine et al., 2016; Moloney et al., 2019); and the professional status and pay of teachers (Ingersoll & Collins, 2018). Due to the individual acting "by *means* of their environment," the same individual may achieve agency in one context and not another (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137; Priestley et al., 2012).

Scholarly understanding of how teacher agency is constrained and resourced in the interplay between individuals and structure is developing. Constraints include a lack of time and opportunity to collaborate with colleagues (Eteläpelto et al., 2015), a lack of voice and option to contribute to work-place decision-making (Hökkä et al., 2012; Pantić, 2017), and the broader policy context (Buchanan, 2015). Interestingly, accountabilities passed down to teachers from policy-directives are reported to both constrain (Buchanan, 2015; Hökkä & Vähäsantanen, 2014) and afford (Pantić, 2017) agency, depending on whether the teacher agrees with those directives. Likewise, collegial relationships and collaboration have the ability to enable or constrain agency depending on the culture of the context (Lockton & Fargason, 2019; Melasalmi & Husu, 2019). Resources that afford agency include supportive leadership who encourage teachers to choose and develop their pedagogical practices (Eteläpelto et al., 2015). In this way, teachers are able to engage in practices that are meaningful to them and align with their professional identity (Ursin et al.,

2020). Nevertheless, teacher agency has been less explored in ECEC settings compared to school and higher education contexts. As such, the current study contributes to this gap in knowledge.

Recently, Molla & Nolan (2020) explored agency and professional practice in the Australian ECEC context. The researchers interviewed ten educators and reviewed pertinent policy documents. An inductive analysis of the data revealed five facets of agency as practiced by these educators, including: inquisitive agency, deliberative agency, recognitive agency, responsive agency, and moral agency. Inquisitive agency refers to the specialist knowledge and skills of educators which may manifest through professional learning. Deliberative agency involves intentional, effortful, and critical reflections on one's practices (Molla & Nolan, 2020). As found by van der Heijden et al. (2015), teachers who utilise their agency for change often continue to inquire into, reflect, and adapt their practices. Furthermore, they also hold teaching knowledge and skills that allow them to influence, collaborate, and make changes in their educational context. Necessary to these facets of agency is confidence, which is closely related to self-efficacy, as it depends on the teacher's "conviction that they can successfully accomplish a task" (Nolan & Molla, 2017, p. 12). This has implications for agency as self-efficacy is central to the mechanisms of agency. As discussed by Bandura (1989), when individuals feel inefficacious, they are more inclined to assume failure and become demotivated, subsequently, their agency becomes constrained. Alternatively, successful experiences support teachers to develop self-efficacy (Nolan & Molla, 2017) and thus, can foster agency. Accordingly, in order for teachers to express professional agency, they may first need to develop confidence in their abilities and teaching skills (van der Heijden et al., 2015).

Recognitive agency refers to teachers' relationships with colleagues, managers, and families; feeling valued and respected; opportunities for self-expression; and to engage in participatory decision-making. Teachers who feel recognised and respected in their role are more inclined to create and pursue goals that they value (Molla & Nolan, 2020). Feeling a lack of recognition and support from managers, colleagues, and the community, contributes to challenges in retaining ECTs within the profession (Kwon et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2018). Furthermore, recognitive agency emphasises its relational nature. Relational agency acknowledges that professionals, such as ECTs, work in collaboration with others to purposefully pursue goals (Edwards, 2010). Even for experienced teachers with strong aspirations, difficulties in working collaboratively can impede agency (Priestley et al., 2015). Therefore, the capability to engage with colleagues is imperative for agency.

Responsive agency concerns the extent that ECTs are able to appropriately respond to children's diverse needs in

Table 1 Participants' previous employment as an early childhood teacher

Participant	Service type	Tenure
Laura	One metropolitan long day care kindergarten; CRT	One year; several years
Barbara	Three metropolitan long day care kindergartens	Three years; two years; two years
Irene	One rural standalone kindergarten	Seven years
Robin	Two metropolitan long day care kindergartens; CRT	Total of two and a half years

a socially just way (Molla & Nolan, 2020). The construct of *responsive accountability* is applicable here, whereby the decision-making of ECTs may be more concerned with children's diverse needs, rather than fulfilling contractual expectations (Sachs, 2016). Finally, moral agency refers to ECTs capacity to make ethical decisions when confronted with instances of disjunction (Molla & Nolan, 2020). In such moments, individuals or collectives are required to utilise their agency to respond to a conflict or challenge. The moral facet of agency recognises the ethical and emotional investment many ECTs embody (Osgood, 2010). This embodiment is evident in the emotionally engaged relationships ECTs have with the children and others they work with (Warren, 2014). Santoro (2018) argues that when teachers are unable to access moral rewards or find themselves subverting the values that inspire, guide, and sustain their work, they may become dissatisfied with their work. In this way, leaving the profession can be seen as a form of agency through resistance and as a commitment to children by upholding the integrity of the teaching profession (Glazer, 2018; Smith & Ulvik, 2017).

Viewing agency as an ecological achievement would see that embodying any facet of agency may be achieved at various degrees as supported or hindered by individual efforts, and the social, cultural, material, and structural resources available to them (Priestley et al., 2015).

The Current Study

The original study discussed in this paper explored the narratives of four individuals who left the EC teaching profession in Victoria, Australia (Ciuciu & Robertson, 2019). Ethics approval for the study was gained through the Deakin University Human Ethics Advisory Group. Participants were questioned on their reasons for becoming an ECT, experiences of teaching, and the factors that led them to leave the profession. In sum, findings revealed that the decision to leave the profession was due to compounding factors that compromised participants' health and wellbeing. This included a lack of support from their managers and to a lesser degree, their colleagues; administrative burdens; feeling undervalued; and a sense of professional isolation.

Despite not being directly asked about their agency, data analysis also revealed that the participants experienced debilitated professional agency. With the aforementioned findings explored previously (Ciuciu & Robertson, 2019), this paper re-examines and expands on this significant finding which was less explored. That is, the participants' experiences of debilitated agency as an ECT which contributed to their decision to leave the profession.

Agency has been less discussed in current empirical literature concerned with ECT retention and attrition. Therefore, the current article contributes to the small but emerging body of knowledge concerned with the relationship between ECT agency and attrition. Furthermore, holistic consideration is given to the issue of ECT attrition by accounting for "individual, workplace, relational, socio-political and discursive influences" (Fenech et al., 2021, p. 4). To achieve this, an ecological conceptualisation of the findings is presented.

Methodology

This qualitative study was grounded in an interpretive methodology. Qualitative research aims to explore and understand the meaning that individuals ascribe to social issues (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interpretivism compliments a qualitative approach as it intends to understand, interpret, and describe the meaning that individuals attach to their subjective reality (Holloway & Galvin, 2017). Specifically, a narrative inquiry approach was adopted. Through a narrative inquiry, I gathered stories shared by individuals with lived experiences (Clandinin, 2013) of choosing to leave the ECEC profession.

Participants

Participants were recruited through criterion sampling to ensure each individual had lived experiences of leaving the profession. A research flyer was posted on Australian ECEC social media groups after obtaining permission of the administrator. Internet recruitment vastly expands the pool of potential participants and has been found to receive high response rates (Whitaker et al., 2017).

Four individuals voluntarily participated in the study. All participants identified as female, had changed careers to become an ECT, taught within Victorian kindergartens, and had left the profession within five-years of being interviewed. Pseudonyms have been given to protect participants'

confidentiality. As shown in Table 1, their tenure as an ECT and the service type they worked within varied. Within this table, Casual Relief Teaching (CRT) refers to teachers who work on a casual basis to substitute an absent teacher across various ECEC workplaces.

Data Collection

Individual semi-structured interviews were utilised for data collection. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Nolan et al., 2013). As such, they capture unique insights with depth and complexity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A repertoire of pre-determined questions was used to ensure the collection of purposeful data, with participant responses further explored through conversation, follow-up questions, and probes.

Each interview was audio recorded and conducted for approximately 90 min. Three interviews occurred in-person at a university site and one via phone. The recordings were transcribed and provided to respective participants for review. Although no participants requested changes, the opportunity to validate the transcript ensured transcript trustworthiness.

Analytical Framework

The findings were organised using an ecological framework proffered by Fenech et al. (2021). The framework is based upon the theoretical work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) who argued that human development and behaviour emerges though interactions between oneself and their environments. The organisation of the research findings vis-à-vis an ecological framework compliments the conceptualisation of agency as an ecological achievement. Therefore, allowing for the holistic consideration of participants' reasons for leaving the profession as well as their achievement of agency, or lack thereof, as an ECT. The findings are categorised across six interconnected and bidirectional ecological levels: the individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

As identified by Fenech et al. (2021), the individual level considers an ECTs' motivations for becoming an ECT, their values, beliefs, and aspirations, their perspective of the profession, and their sense of wellbeing. The microsystem comprises of the higher education institutions where ECTs completed their teaching qualification, and the ECEC services in which they are employed. The mesosystem refers to their relationships with colleagues, families, and service providers, and the degree of harmony or dissonance that characterises those relationships. The exosystem considers broader sector policies, regulations, wages, and initial teacher education programs and their requirements for enrolment. The final structure is the macrosystem, which accounts

for societal culture, values, and the dominant discourses relevant to the profession. The ecological view also acknowledges the chronosystem whereby the five interrelated systems are all bound and influenced by history and place. The systems evolve over time in response to historical events, generational influences, and social and cultural trends.

Data Analysis

In line with a narrative inquiry, the interview transcripts were inductively analysed in two stages. The first involved restorying the raw transcripts whereby the narratives were arranged in chronological order with a beginning, middle, and end (Clandinin, 2013). In this instance, participants' experiences of entering, being within, and leaving the ECEC profession were identified. Each participant reviewed and approved the constructed narratives.

The second stage involved thematic narrative analysis through which each narrative was coded to identify comparative themes across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Themes from the data related to participants' agency as an ECT and their reasons for leaving the profession were identified. Given that the dataset was analysed by a sole researcher, trustworthiness of data interpretation was of concern. To affirm that the codes assigned to the data were consistent, I took a break of more than 14 days (Schreier, 2012) before returning to recode the data without referring back to the initially identified themes. This process allowed for alternative themes to be considered (Roller, 2019) while supporting trustworthy conclusions (Elo et al., 2014).

Findings

Individual

The participants entered the profession as ECTs with a sense of purpose driven by intrinsic and altruistic desires. They also entered with a perception of the profession that shaped their beliefs on what could be achieved as an ECT. Laura described wanting to be an advocate for children and to uphold practices that were responsive to children's needs. Barbara held a strong sense of social justice as she sought employment within ECEC services with high enrolments of children from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds. Irene left primary school teaching with the belief that she could better influence children's development and learning through EC teaching. For Robin, becoming an ECT related to a goal of establishing a three-year-old kindergarten at her workplace. However, Robin's plans foiled due to organisational changes. In response to this conflict, Robin renewed her goal: "I wanted to move into the long day care sector to

make those differences and bring up the quality within long day care."

Between the four participants, there was a similar perception that practicing as an ECT would allow them to foster children's learning and development in a responsive way, while positively influencing the quality of the profession. Laura, Barbara, and Robin felt that they would need to personally advocate for these beliefs and goals. Therefore, the profession was regarded as a space where their intrinsic and altruistic goals could be pursued, but that it would require individual effort and may be challenging.

Microsystem

Laura and Robin each undertook a pathway of vocational training before completing an undergraduate degree in EC education to become an ECT. Compared to Barbara and Irene, these two individuals expressed greater confidence in their higher education experiences. As described by Laura, obtaining the degree gave her confidence and knowledge, and granted her the authority to "advocate more for children." Barbara and Irene undertook post-graduate degrees in EC teaching and felt that their courses did not fully prepare them in areas of planning and programming, and as being limited in practical experience opportunities.

Participant discussions pertaining to the microsystem largely revolved around work arrangements that constrained their agency. The nature of the work was remarked on by all participants. Specifically, the busyness of the day due to high numbers of children. Although Irene taught the lowest number of children across the participant group, with 22 children between herself and one educator, her expectation of having opportunities to be creative as an ECT went unmet. As Irene described, "what I've found was a lot of time just dealing with behaviour." Likewise, Laura remarked that "having 30 children in the room was not something I'd really supported." Laura described feeling unable to fulfil her ambition of supporting children's learning and development through authentic engagement:

> there was probably a lot being missed, there was probably children that would require intervention, but we couldn't quite capture them because in the busy program of the day, it was almost like putting out spot fires everywhere …I felt that I was doing the children a disservice, you were just working with so many children that you couldn't really plan for them authentically. (Laura)

Robin and Barbara additionally noted a lack of material resources as contributing to difficulties teaching as they intended. Robin commented that the resources available to her were "horrendous" and that "I'd bring things from home or pay for things, just so I have a resource or something that

I knew the children might or that they could engage with." A lack of resources to aid her teaching restricted Robin from her plan to provide a kindergarten program that prepared children for school. In reflection of this, Robin stated "we're doing the four-year-old's such a disserve and that's so much time lost, you can't get it back." Likewise, Barbara commented on her third place of employment, stating that "they never bought anything." Instead, Barbara personally purchased resources such as books, music equipment, and pencils due to her desire to ensure "children have things to make, and they [service provider] never had any money so I had to give all my time for nothing, then all my money on buying supplies, it was bad."

Mesosystem

The relationships participants had with colleagues, and in particular, management and leadership, were identified as sources of support and constraint for their practice. Barbara reminisced on her first place of employment as an ECT. Within this context, Barbara found herself within a team that valued mentorship and collaboration involving shared reflective thinking, planning, and ongoing learning. The collegial relationships Barbara experienced enabled her to co-create and implement a program that she valued. In her second place of employment as an ECT, Barbara drew upon her teaching and previous nursing experience to implement a program focused on nature play and art. However, in her third and final employment as an ECT, Barbara found her capability to teach in ways that she valued was constrained despite previously being able to do so:

> The manager there didn't like that program I had … she was interfering all the time… criticising me …I couldn't be the teacher I was, I couldn't be the teacher that she wanted, because I was me and I lost me in there. (Barbara)

Similarly, Laura initially felt supported and encouraged by her workplace director. She also valued the strong connections she felt with her colleagues and families throughout her career. However, as Laura exerted agency by making changes to her program in response to the children's needs, the support she had once received from her director diminished. Laura explained that her director was longstanding, and that changes Laura wanted to implement such as flexible eating times contrasted ingrained practices. Laura found that she "had to fight for it" as the director did not want these changes implemented. Over time, Laura was impacted by her director's disapproval:

> Slowly, slowly, slowly, it ate away at my self-esteem because things that I had given thought to and that had some evidence behind it …or even if it didn't, it's

worth trailing, eventually eroded my confidence, or my happiness to be in that environment because in the end I felt that everything I did was being watched or judged. (Laura)

The participants' standing as ECTs did not necessarily come with the authority to teach with agency. Although participants thought that they would be valued and respected as qualified teachers, they felt that they were not. As expressed by Robin, "I thought we'd be given a little bit more respect as kindergarten teachers but in long day care, minimal respect, you weren't, in fact it was often the opposite."

All four participants reported a sense of professional isolation that impinged on their ability to feel connected and supported in their roles. In particular, the participants referred to feeling as an outsider to their team. For Laura, this referred to feeling unwanted and being excluded by her workplace managers and leaders. Barbara, Irene, and Robin remarked on being the only ECT on-site and unable to collaborate with other colleagues. For Barbara, this inability was due to separate planning times to her colleagues. Whereas Irene noted a disinterest from her colleagues to engage in reflective discussions. For Robin, the inability to engage with colleagues was due to an apparent perception that she was separate to the team: "rather than seeing it as a team, they saw you standing outside that team." Reflecting on what could have supported Irene to stay in the profession, she noted:

if I had been in a different kindergarten …a bigger kinder where maybe there was another teacher that I could have bounced ideas off instead of being the only teacher …having someone who is willing to share an idea or push back a little bit or take it a little bit further. (Robin)

Exosystem

The four participants remarked on employment conditions that influenced their ability to create, implement, monitor, and evaluate the programs they provided to children. For one, all participants expressed inadequate time to complete administrative tasks or to plan in reflective ways that would address children's needs. Robin explained, "we didn't have any admin hours to speak of, I think [at] one centre I had about two hours a week." Robin additionally noted that "there was not really a lot of time to actually teach." Laura, Irene, and Robin reflected on children they had hoped to better support but were unable to due to a lack of time to reflect on children's needs, plan accordingly, and monitor those plans. Barbara described that she was "taking all this work home with me and still wasn't getting enough done and then I was falling in a big heap," ultimately compromising her

own wellbeing. For Irene, working as the only ECT within a standalone kindergarten left her with a multitude of responsibilities that detracted from teaching. With a primary school teaching career behind her, Irene made a comparison:

I felt like a principal because I'm the front person, I'm the teacher, I go to the committee meetings, I do like cleaning the toilets sometimes, you're doing everything from the top to the bottom …when you're kind of the only person, you get everything, you've got to process everything. (Irene)

Allocated time for collaboration, planning, and reflection was sensitive to participants' employment entitlements and conditions. Both Robin and Laura attributed issues related to the demands of ECTs and a lack of time and support to meet those demands as issues related to, as described by Robin, "the structure of the companies." Laura additionally emphasised a lack of structure in place that protects "talented people [ECTs]" from being treated poorly by their managers and leaders.

In Australia, the Fair Work Commission sets minimum employment entitlements including wages, working hours, and time allocated for teaching duties. However, ECTs in Australia can be offered variations above these minimum entitlements and conditions. For example, Laura and Irene were employed with entitlements which exceeded the minimum standards, while Barbara and Robin were employed under the minimum employment entitlements. Barbara and Robin in particular expressed the most dissatisfaction with their administrative allotments which restricted their ability to teach as they valued. In previous employment as an ECT, Barbara had also been employed with above-minimum entitlements. In her comparison, Barbara described that the above-minimum entitlements afforded her the time to collaborate with her team which supported her to reflect on children's learning, to problem-solve, and collectively design the service's curriculum. In her employment under the minimum entitlements, Barbara was confronted by an inability to address her administrative duties, collaborate with colleagues, and undertake her leadership responsibilities as an ECT. The lack of time to undertake her responsibilities due to her employment entitlements translated into what Barbara described as a lack of respect for her teaching role.

Microsystem findings highlighted that the participants perceived the numbers of children per educator impacted on their capability to teach with agency. This is relevant for the exosystem as educator-child ratios are set and regulated by ACECQA (2021), an independent authority. Barbara felt that the educator-child ratios were inadequate, remarking: "it was just two of us, it wasn't enough people even to be with them [the children], we needed more staff." Irene explained that her employer capped child enrolments right before an additional educator would be legally required, leaving her with

the highest possible number of children between herself and one educator. For Laura, having high numbers of children and inadequate time to meet work demands constrained her ability to support children's needs. Laura shared an example of a child whose social skills she wanted to foster. Providing the child with the support they needed required Laura to remain physically close to them. Despite setting goals and identifying ways in which she could assist this child, Laura found that the high numbers of children and what she perceived as an insufficient ratio of educators inhibited her ability "to get to the bottom of it."

Macrosystem

Three participants explained that they had intended to become employed within a standalone kindergarten with sessional hours. Irene was successful in doing so, whereas Barbara and Laura found employment within long day care services. Laura clarified that working in a long day care setting "wouldn't be my first choice" due to the perceived long and exhausting work hours. Robin was the only participant who expressed interest in working within a long day care service. Her reason to do so, however, held a deficit view of those environments whereby she hoped "to bring up the quality within long day care."

All participants discussed sustained stress and disappointment in being unable to meet the demands of their work. For example, Laura expressed: "I felt the pressure of always having to demonstrate somehow, whether it be documentation, within an interaction, that I was doing what the right thing was and what policy says." Irene shared that the experience of having her kindergarten formally assessed with a disappointing result "really hit me hard," feeling as though she had no opportunity to contest the results. Working towards demands prescribed by their managers and policy-directives impeded on the agency of these participants. As expressed by Robin: "I didn't really have much say in things, I was under the rules and regulations of the company I was working for, do this, don't do that …I didn't feel I had any authority."

Chronosystem

Barbara's career progression saw her agency supported and active in her first two places of employment as an ECT. However, her final employment negatively impacted her agency, teacher identity, and mental health. Despite a seven-year commitment in her career, Barbara commented: "I was a really good teacher, and they [director] destroyed me, absolutely destroyed me." As for Irene, after five-years within one rural standalone kindergarten, she found that the ongoing stress from the incessant nature of her work and the lack of support from her management compromised her wellbeing. Feeling "burned" by her experience, Irene was not willing to try teaching in ECEC again and sought to return to primary school teaching.

Prior to leaving the profession, Laura and Robin continued their career by undertaking CRT. Robin felt it might allow her to find an ECEC service that aligned with her own teaching philosophy and goals. However, "after working at a good 15 centres, I couldn't find it." Contrastingly, Laura found CRT to be a validating experience where she felt valued and was able to hold onto her teaching philosophy without others "trying to manage you." In undertaking CRT, Laura felt "relief for not having the constriction, the tightness, of someone monitoring your every move, I felt valued, I felt like a teacher." To summarise the experience of agency for the four former ECTs, I quote Robin:

> I [thought I] would be able to make some alterations, changes or upgrades and not being able to do that, not having any facility to enable me to increase the ability to benefit the children, I found really frustrating, yeah, I felt like my hands were tied all of the time. (Robin)

Discussion

Upon entering the profession, the participants grounded their agency goals within their perception that they could have a positive impact on children's lives and the profession. However, these individuals were confronted by an inability to pursue and achieve their altruistic goals. This inability could be attributed to a mismatch between their expectations and the realities of teaching. As Sumsion (2003) noted, a teacher's vision may be underpinned by a romanticised view of engaging in caring and responsive relationships with others. This identity informs their agency, which may contrast the dominate culture of their workplace (Sumsion, 2003). However, upon entering the profession, participants of the current study expressed that they felt that their goals would need to be personally advocated for, suggesting that they anticipated conflicts to arise. Research indicates that many individuals enter the teaching profession motivated by intrinsic and altruistic goals, such as wanting to contribute positively to children's lives and society (Ciuciu & Robertson, 2019; Watt & Richardson, 2007). Indeed, there is an apparent interest in engaging with teaching as relational work. However, Noddings (2013) argues that this is not a romantic but rather a practical approach to education. Instead, a relational approach is necessary for a holistic view of children who are nurtured, both intellectually and ethically, through caring relationships. Therefore, it may be important to educate pre-service and early career ECTs on the potentially

competing ideologies or cultures that may restrict their ethic of care. The facets of agency identified by Molla & Nolan (2020) appear to be imbued with altruistic and relational intentions for the participants of the current study.

Notably, two participants entered the profession feeling underprepared by their post-graduate degree. Confidence has been highlighted as being important for teachers' self-efficacy and agency (Bandura, 1989; Nolan & Molla, 2017; van der Heijden et al., 2015). Therefore, beginning teaching with a lack of confidence may be problematic for agency. However, the current findings reveal promising insight. Mentorship and a highly collaborative team during the first years of teaching mediated confidence and fostered agency, even when entering the profession feeling underprepared. Research has demonstrated that mentorship and collegial collaboration that teachers find helpful correlates with teachers being less likely to consider leaving the profession (DeAngelis et al., 2013; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Therefore, supportive mentorship and collaboration with colleagues is an important factor that fosters both agency and retention, even for individuals who enter the profession with a lack of confidence in their knowledge, as highlighted within the current study. However, participants who initially felt confident in their teaching knowledge and purpose, or had received support early in their careers, still experienced debilitated agency when collegial collaboration and support was difficult or absent. This finding is comparative to Priestley et al. (2015) who found that even for teachers who are "experienced and have strong aspirations for their work," (p. 103) agency can be impeded when collaborative work is restricted or not reciprocated.

The findings reported in this article affirm the relational nature of agency (Edwards, 2010; Evans, 2017). Managers (e.g., service directors) and leadership support, or lack thereof, either afforded or constrained participants' agency. In particular, participants' ability to achieve agency was stifled when they felt their teaching practices were criticised or rejected by their managers. For some participants, their agentic pursuits were impeded by colleagues' ingrained ways of teaching. Melasalmi and Husu (2019) found that ECEC teams with low agency display high amounts of compliance. That is, team members adapt their views to match the views of others rather than challenge ingrained cultural norms of teaching. However, participants of the present study contested the ingrained culture of their services. Instead, they advocated for and pursued alternative practices but found that they ultimately lacked authority and felt disempowered due to consistent managerial disapproval. Rather than become compliant themselves, participants exerted agency by choosing to leave the profession. The (dis)approval of managers and leaders that influenced the participants' agency positioned them as what I argue to be as agency gatekeepers. The achievement of agency was contingent on collegial relationships which saw the agency of an individual being achieved in some

contexts, and not others. Therefore, I concur with scholars who recognise agency as an ecological achievement that may be achieved in one context and not another and at varied degrees (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestley et al., 2012). In fact, for Laura, agency was achieved and later disempowered within the same place of employment.

There is a need for reimagining ECEC (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Recent decades have observed the neoliberal movement of ECEC being displaced as a public good in exchange for a mostly privatised market (Brennan et al., 2012; Press et al., 2018). Consequently, consistent and fair working conditions and remuneration for the ECEC workforce are not standardised within Australia. Addressing the disjointed employment entitlements of ECTs requires the Australian Government to take responsibility for the sector, akin to public schools. ECEC as a public space opens opportunities for democracy, collaboration, and relationships built on trust (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Within this space, ECTs may be able to recognise their agency and sustain their commitment to the profession.

Although participants of this study who were employed under the minimum employment standards were most dissatisfied with their employment conditions, all participants noted a number of working conditions that restricted their agency. These Included the demands of their work; inadequate educator-child ratios; a lack of support, time, and material resources; and a pressing need to uphold policy directives. Across the globe, there is concern that the professionalisation of the ECEC sector has led to systems of accountability, performance management, and the intensification of ECTs' work (Aabro, 2020; Kilderry, 2015; Simmie & Murphy, 2021). Scholars have noted that increasing prescribed standards and accountabilities are a result of neoliberal agendas (Apple, 2013), which mistrusts the professional judgement of ECTs and restricts their work as a technical exercise (Moloney et al., 2019; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Increasing accountabilities and regulation both delimits agency (Moloney et al., 2019; Molla & Nolan, 2020), and contributes to reasons why ECTs consider leaving the profession (McKinlay et al., 2018).

Finally, I contend that a movement away from current hierarchical management structures and towards shared and reciprocal responsibilities could foster both ECT agency and retention. This would require a move towards decision-making that is shared and discretionary, as opposed to standardised and imposed, and which trusts the professional judgement of ECTs (Sims, 2017, p. 6).

In the current study, agency was largely disrupted by those in management and leadership positions, with the ECTs feeling a lack of authority. However, in the narratives of Barbara, early experiences within a collaborative team, and ample time provided by her employment entitlements to do so, supported her agency and wellbeing. Professional

relationships that are supportive and encouraging, as well as workloads and conditions that allow ECTs to undertake work that they value, are essential for ensuring ECTs can access the moral rewards of teaching which can support them to feel satisfied and committed to their work (Santoro, 2018).

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Considerations

The discussed findings contribute new insights into ECT agency in addition to contemporary understandings concerning ECT attrition. Review of current literature reveals that both issues are largely explored respectively and with teachers working in school contexts. Furthermore, research conducted in Australian ECEC contexts often explore issues of attrition without particular attention paid to ECTs (Fenech et al., 2021). This article offers insights into the attrition of ECTs who worked in metropolitan and regional kindergarten services. Furthermore, explicit consideration was given to ECT agency and its relationship with attrition. This relationship highlights a promising line of inquiry for future research. Additionally, the findings provide a holistic consideration on how interconnected systems impact on ECTs' agency and their career progression, including entry into, experiences within, and exiting the profession.

Despite the strengths and contributions of the study, there are limitations to be acknowledged. Although I aimed to collect rich data, the qualitative approach and small participant group restricts findings from being generalised. Furthermore, the participants were a homogenous group given that they were all Caucasian women, career changers, and worked in Victoria, Australia. Future research could engage a more representative sample by engaging individuals of diverse personal and demographic features. A further limitation was the exclusive method of interviews conducted and analysed by a sole researcher. Future research could integrate mixed methods approaches across more large-scale research with multiple researchers to offset these methodological weaknesses and reduce bias. Finally, although this article contributes to the emerging knowledge base concerning teacher agency, the findings reported are not derived from a study initially designed to account for this facet. Thus, future studies designed to carefully account for various forms of agency and how these are achieved within and across each ecological system may provide further insights.

Conclusions

The findings discussed in this article emerged from a study designed to explore the narratives of four individuals who chose to leave the ECEC teaching profession (Ciuciu &

Robertson, 2019). Although many findings were comparative to current literature on teacher attrition, it was also found that the agency of the participants had been debilitated. Therefore, this article re-examined the data to explicitly explore agency as a way to begin examining the relationship between ECT agency and attrition.

Significantly, it was found that the relationships between ECTs and their colleagues, including educators, management, and leadership influenced their achievement of agency. Professional relationships characterised by mentorship and collaboration supported participants to grow in their confidence, and develop and pursue goals that they valued, thus supporting their agency. However, when such relationships were absent or characterised by a lack of support and engagement, their agency was debilitated. Subsequently, participants felt they had no authority to influence the direction of their work or to work in ways they valued. These findings highlight particular issues at the mesosystem, whereby the participants' managers and workplace leaders were identified as being agency gatekeepers.

Exosystem factors also appeared as a significant constraint in the achievement of agency. The participants identified that the busy nature of EC teaching, inadequate educator-child ratios, and employment entitlements that are inconsistent and lacking further impeded their ability to pursue and achieve goals that they valued. Although these findings are also relevant to the microsystem, they pertain to the exosystem as the working conditions and entitlements are ultimately set by tribunals and independent authorities external to the workplace. The equitable regulation of these issues is complicated by ECEC being provided within an increasingly privatised market, where profit may be prioritised.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author certifies that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Consent to Participate and Publish Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study and for their data to be published using pseudonyms.

Ethical Approval Low risk ethics approval was obtained from the Deakin University Human Ethics Advisory Group.

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