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## The Lived Experience of Psychological Occupational Stress in Early Childhood Education

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MPH Capstone Research Report

The Lived Experience of Psychological Occupational Stress in Early Childhood  
Education

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### **Abstract**

Early childhood education (ECE) programs have been recognized by the Institute of Medicine and the Administration for Children and Families as excellent interventions to alleviate the long-term negative effects of poverty in the United States, but the quality of intervention provided and outcomes for the target population are adversely hindered by high occupational stress burdens for ECE teachers. According to Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, and Knoche, the models used to address this concern are not empirically supported for specific applicability to ECE nonprofit settings. There is a need for deeper understanding of the lived experiences of ECE teachers, including the psychological aspect of their experience of occupational stress. This study aims to use the phenomenological methods described by Moustakas (1994) via Creswell (2013) to provide a description of the lived experiences of psychological-occupational stress for ECE teachers serving low-income families in a non-profit, quality-focused organizational setting. Semi-structured verbal interviews and written responses were collected from ECE professionals for a parent study on leadership and professional development in ECE. Data from participants in classroom teacher roles (n=4) were analyzed through steps of researcher bracketing, horizontalization of participant statements, and the development of clusters of meaning, and theme identification to provide an essential description of these ECE teachers' experience of the phenomenon of psychological-occupational stress.

## **Chapter 1—Introduction**

Occupational stress has been recognized by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) as a public health concern since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Occupational stress includes physical and psychological components, and preventing its negative health effects is supported by understanding the experience of stress in the setting in which it takes place. One setting known to have high levels of occupational stress is early childhood education, where teachers are both physically and psychologically stressed on a daily basis (Wells, 2015; Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2015; Jeon, Buettner, & Grant, 2018). Because the psychological component of occupational stress is inherently subjective, understanding it in an occupational context such as early childhood education can be enhanced through the use of phenomenological research methods. The lived experience of psychological-occupational stress for early childhood educators was observed to be a topic of interest through a larger study of early childhood education leaders in Nebraska.

### **Research Question**

What is the lived workplace experience of psychological-occupational stress for early childhood educators serving low-income families and children in a non-profit, accredited organizational setting?

### **Specific Aims**

This study aims to provide a phenomenological description of the psychological-occupational stress experienced by ECE professionals in centers serving families and children in poverty, for the purpose of better supporting these professionals in their occupational health.

## Significance

High-quality ECE has been widely recognized in the United States as a successful targeted intervention to provide families with the tools and knowledge to alleviate the negative effects of poverty (Office of Administration for Children & Families [ACF], 2018; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015; Magnuson & Duncan, 2016). Much of the success of ECE intervention programs depends on the social-emotional relationships between the children and the teachers (ACF, 2018; Brandt, Perry, Seligman, & Tronick, 2014; Whitebook, 2014; Miller & Bogatova, 2009; Jones, Bub, & Raver, 2013).

A significant barrier to positive teacher-child relationships is known to be the reduced social-emotional capacity of teachers that results from inadequately supported occupational stress, particularly the psychological components (Hamre & Pianta, 2004; Miller & Bogatova, 2009; Zhai, Raver, & Li-Grining, 2011; Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2015; Russell, Baumgartner, Ota, Kuhn, & Durr, 2017; Sottimano, Viotti, Guidetti, & Converso, 2017; Jeon, Buettner, & Grant, 2018). Since the late 1980s, quantitative occupational stress measurement tools with adequate internal validity and reliability have been used with this population (Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2014; Wagner, Forer, & Cepeda, 2013; Wells, 2015). Other researchers of the occupational stress of this population have chosen to measure biomedical stress indicators; there is blood marker evidence of extreme stress in ECE teachers, as well as a pattern of physical injury incurred through the variety of strenuous demands the job requires (Nislin, Sajaniemi, Sims, Suhonen, Maldonado, Hyttinen, & Hirvonen, 2016; Converso, Viotti, Sottimano, Cascio, & Guidetti, 2018).

Phenomenological descriptions have the capacity to provide policymakers, healthcare providers, supervisors, and educators with vital deep descriptions of a phenomenon as it is experienced by a small group of individuals, in a way that cannot be captured through large surveys (Creswell, 2013). While existing research (Wells, 2015; Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2015; Jeon, Buettner, & Grant, 2018) on early childhood education include the effects of teacher psychological-occupational stress on child outcomes, the majority of the descriptions of this phenomenon are brief and generalized, utilizing existing models to measure the intensity and outcomes of the experience of psychological occupational stress for these teachers. This study aims to provide a phenomenological description of the psychological-occupational stress experienced by ECE professionals in centers serving families and children in poverty, for the purpose of better supporting these professionals in their occupational health.

## Chapter 2—Background and Literature Review

### Description of Health Problem

*Relevance of ECE teachers' experience to public health.* Expert consensus on the social determinants of health emphasize that early childhood experiences are major predictors of lifetime health and quality of life (Institute of Medicine [IOM] & National Research Council [NRC], 2015). As knowledge about learning and development between the ages of 0 and 5 years grows rapidly, providing high-quality ECE is one of the primary intervention strategies recommended to address poverty and prepare children and their parents for engagement with the K-12 school system (IOM & NRC, 2015). It follows that publicly subsidized ECE programs are expected to implement up-to-date evidence-based practices to maintain funding and accreditation (IOM & NRC, 2015). The public health perspective endorses this expectation, but it is worth consideration that low-paid, racially diverse, primarily female teachers bear the majority of the stresses and responsibilities of meeting those requirements (National Survey of Early Care and Education [NSECE] Project Team, 2013). It is common for the children of the ECE teachers to attend the same programs where their parent teaches (Whitebrook, 2014).

The National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) published the first nationally representative portrait of the roughly one million ECE direct-service professionals in 2013 (NSECE Project Team, 2013). Center-based teachers are often lifetime professionals, with only 23% of the 2012 United States ECE teacher population having less than 5 years of experience, and 50% having more than 10 years of experience (NSECE Project Team, 2013). ECE direct service professionals in centers



work a median of 39.2 hours per week, and 74% are employed by their center full-time (NSECE Project Team, 2013). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' most updated report, the median salary in 2017 for a United States preschool teacher was \$28,990 per year, and those who worked in programs providing day care were paid a median salary of \$26,870 per year (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). The racial demographics of center-based ECE professionals in the United States in 2012 were 64% white, 17% African American, 14% Hispanic, and 5% comprised of individuals identifying with a race category other than white, African American, or Hispanic (Ullrich, Hamm, & Herzfeldt-Kamprath, 2016; NSECE Project Team, 2013). Regarding gender, the NSECE demographic data indicated an overwhelming majority of female ECE professionals and male professionals have been treated as outliers in the subsequent analyses (Whitebrook, 2014; NSECE Project Team, 2013). A 2014 report through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation compared the national ECE workforce with that of the K-12 workforce, and illustrated that in addition to being staffed by a more diverse and female-dominant population than K-12 schools, the unionization and employee advocacy for the improvement of working conditions are quite rare in the ECE field. The most common response by ECE professionals to poor compensation and working conditions is to leave the organization or transfer to another employer in the field, which has created a high organizational burnout and turnover rate (Whitebrook, 2014; Wells, 2015).

Public and legislator perceptions that competitive compensation and professional development are unnecessary for the care and education of very young children, combined with the fragmentation of the ECE field into home-based, private, and public

operations, have led to inconsistent and inadequate support of the professionals who circulate between ECE positions (Phillips, Austin, & Whitebook, 2016). Particularly in the non-profit sector of ECE, low compensation has ironically perpetuated poverty among the teachers who are working to alleviate poverty among children (Zhao & Lu, 2019). What little has been documented on the psychological experiences of early childhood professionals has focused on teachers who serve children ages 3 to 5, rather than ECE professionals working with those aged 0 to 3. One study used a grounded theory approach to describe the psychological experiences of ECE professionals working with ages 3 to 5 at Head Start, using a job demands-resources model for analysis (Wells, 2017). There is no such qualitative description published, however, describing the experiences of ECE direct-service professionals working with the ages of 0-3 years. Psychological-occupational stress left unsupported by the ECE organization is associated with lower retention, poorer teacher response and child interaction, and worse depressive symptoms within the ECE workforce (Wells, 2015; Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2015; Jeon, Buettner, & Grant, 2018).

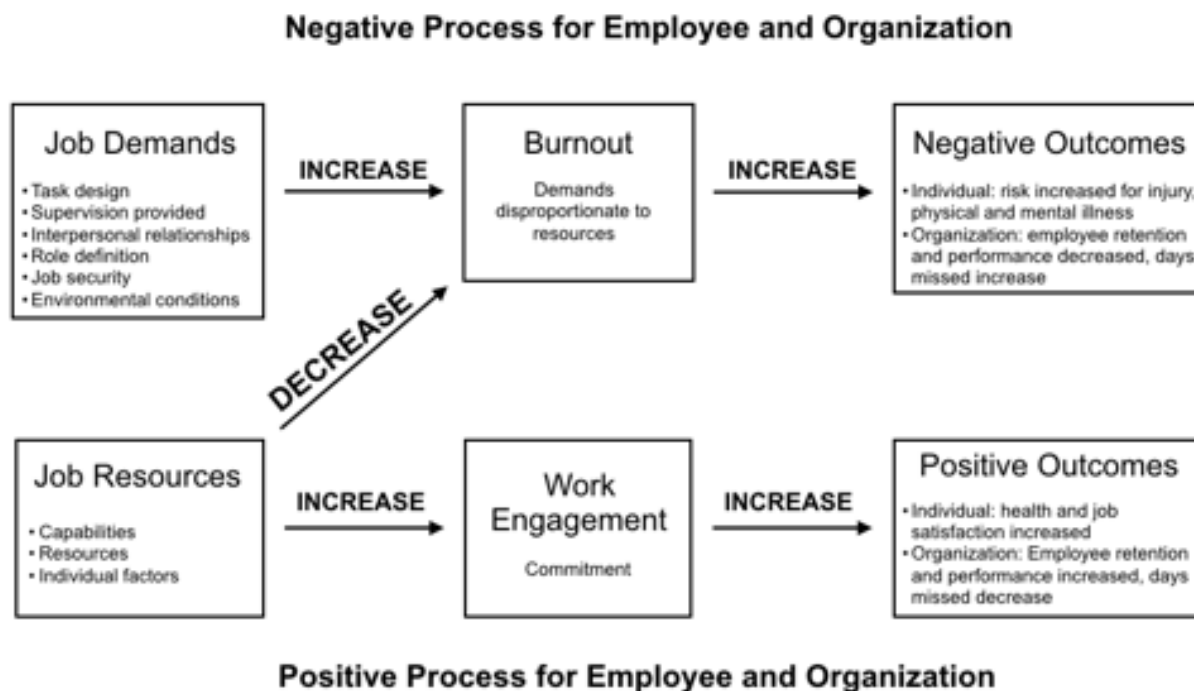
### **Scientific Background**

NIOSH defines occupational stress as the “harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker...leading to poor health and even injury”, taking care to differentiate between “challenges”, which are motivating components that can be met and do not produce long lasting stress responses (NIOSH, 1999, p 6). This phenomenology is focused on specifically the psychological (mental and emotional) element of overall occupational stress.

*Existing models of psychological-occupational stress.* The most widely used and validated model for understanding psychological-occupational stress is the Job Demands-Resources theory, which is also the basis of the Perceived Stress and Perceived Support model, the concept of burnout, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's (NIOSH) model, and the Job Demands-Resources-Supports model (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 1999; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Wagner, Forer, Cepeda, Goelman, Maggi, D'Angiulli, Wessel, Hertzman, & Grunau, 2013; Blochliger & Bauer, 2018; Lesener, Gusy, & Wolter, 2019). Figure 1 depicts the Job-Resources and Demands theory model with components from NIOSH included as descriptions. This model has been used widely with the ECE teacher population since the research surveys and measurement tools from NIOSH are based on this understanding of occupational stress.

Two other models that have been used to explore the phenomenon of psychological-occupational stress in comparable environments are the emotional exhaustion/compassion fatigue model for working with vulnerable populations (Chang, 2009; Bernstein-Chernoff, 2016; Brown, 2016; Jeon, Buettner, & Grant, 2018; Blochliger & Bauer, 2018), and the ecological systems theory for social work and development (Ullrich, Hamm, & Herzfeldt-Kamprath, 2016; Julien-Chinn, 2017; Russell, Baumgartner, Ota, Kuhn, & Durr, 2017; Zhao & Lu, 2019). Compassion fatigue and its related concepts rely on the understanding that there is a limited amount of empathy that individuals are able to use for motivation. The ecological model is a philosophical assessment framework that recognizes the impact of the environment on the individual.

Figure 1. Synthesis of JRDT and NIOSH models of psychological-occupational stress



*Role of ECE teachers.* Teachers in ECE have a primary goal of preparing the children in their classrooms for success in K-12 education. Their role is to plan developmentally appropriate lessons for very young children (ages 0 to 5), provide secure attachment relationships for the children, and to engage the children in social-emotional learning and development (Miller & Bogatova, 2009; Denham, Bassett, & Zinsler, 2012; Bullough, Hall-Keynon, MacKay, & Marshall, 2014; Whitebook, 2014; IOM & NRC, 2015; Phillips, Austin & Whitebook, 2016; Denham, Bassett, & Miller, 2017). The expectations for these teachers are increasing faster than the professionalization of the field is occurring (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin & Knoche, 2009; Bullough, Hall-Keynon, MacKay, & Marshall, 2014). The most commonly referenced source of psychological-occupational stress for ECE teachers is economic insecurity,

followed by the physical and emotional energy required to perform this job, and clinical levels of depression (IOM & NRC, 2015; Whitebook, McLean, Austin, & Edwards, 2018). Some investigations have found that ECE centers providing time and resources to develop healthy workplace relationships with other teachers and supervisors and personally reflect have shown improvements towards lowered overall occupational stress, indicating that the lack of personal resources typically provided to ECE teachers likely contribute to their extreme stress as well (IOM & NRC, 2015).

### **Gap in Literature and Rationale for Study**

A 2009 research needs assessment from the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools emphasized that while teacher accountability for ECE outcomes is high, our understanding of effective ECE teachers is limited (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009). The gap in knowledge on ECE teachers in 2009 was broad, but centered around characteristics, development, relationships, and sustainability for ECE teachers (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009). In the past decade, teacher characteristics have been documented quantitatively through the National Survey of Early Care and Education (2013) and suggestions for improved sustainability through wage increase and upward mobility have been made by the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2015). The emotional and relational everyday environment of ECE teachers remains an often-referenced but little-understood component of the profession's sustainability (IOM & NRC, 2015). Analyses of psychological-occupational stress in ECE teachers have thus far been based on models of stress developed in other occupational fields, while their workplace environment is unique. It is not yet known whether these existing models are able to

fully capture the experiences of ECE teachers. This study aims to capture a deep understanding of ECE teacher psychological-occupational stress through phenomenological exploration, without attempting to fit them into any existing occupational stress models.

### Chapter 3—Data and Methods

#### Study Design

The descriptive phenomenology research design model as recommended by Creswell (2013) endorses methodological congruence, which is that the question, purpose, and method are all interconnected parts of the whole, rather than a rigid stepwise design (Morse & Richards, 2002 as cited in Creswell, 2013). The general design used by descriptive phenomenological researchers as described by Moustakas (1994) via Creswell (2013) is to begin analysis by stating the philosophical assumptions of the researcher and those underpinning the phenomenological method, disclose prior knowledge or understanding of the construct in an effort to set it aside through awareness (referred to as bracketing), noting the specific components of the role of the researcher, recruiting a purposive sample who has a shared experience of the phenomenon of interest, collecting data on this experience using semi-structured interviews, analyzing data through several stages of reduction (horizontalization of data, clusters of meaning, and emerging themes) to produce an essential description of the phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994 as cited in Creswell, 2013).

This essential description, as well as the themes, were discussed and validated using data triangulation (multiple types or timing of data sources) and rich, thick descriptions including direct quotations from the participants speaking to the themes and essential description. Creswell (2013) has also noted that reciprocal, ethical relationships with the participants are an important part ensuring the credibility of the study (Creswell, 2013). To this end, the researcher provided a corrective emotional experience and referrals to resources as appropriate during the reflective interview

sessions for the participants to the best of my capability. Secondary analysis additionally provides validation through ethical, reciprocal relationships, by utilizing existing data from a larger study rather than requesting more of their time. These participants gave time and effort to this study, which is able to be honored by gleaning as much understanding as possible from their contribution.

### **Setting and Study Population**

*Data collection site.* The data for this study was collected as a part of a larger study, University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) IRB #583-17-EX: “Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care”. Participants were recruited voluntarily through the UNO Teacher Education course, Leadership in Early Childhood Education. The individuals enrolled in the course were all employees of ECE centers funded by the Buffett Early Childhood Fund (BECF), whose mission is to “invest in practice, policy and science to maximize the potential of the youngest and most vulnerable children and their families in NE and across America” (BECF, 2019, <http://buffettearly.org/missionvision>).

*Recruitment.* BECF center employees self-selected to enroll in the semester-long UNO course. Course components are summarized in Table 1 (Appendix A). Two cohorts enrolled in the course: one in August-December 2017 (n=11) and the other in August-December 2018 (n=15). These employees were voluntarily recruited to participate in the study “Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care.” (University of Nebraska IRB #583-17-EX). The IRB-approved research questions for the larger study are: “How do early childhood leaders conceptualize leadership and enact positive change in their current working context? What elements of a professional leadership development (journaling, coaching, and action research/collaborative inquiry) contribute



to positive and lasting change? What type of personal growth that ECE leaders experience throughout a professional leadership development course? What are the lived complexities in early childhood leaders' professional roles? Did this course meet their needs? What did they learn?" This project will address the question "What are the lived complexities in early childhood leaders' professional roles?" as it pertains to the role of direct service and classroom teaching.

As a component of the larger study and to provide support for the class, the participants were asked to complete three in-person reflective supervision sessions with the graduate assistant for the course, using an interview protocol adapted from the social work model of reflective supervision (Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health, 2009; University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2017). Informed written consent was obtained to use de-identified responses for research and analysis. The de-identified reflective supervision transcripts, along with the online journal entries from the selected participants, comprised the data for this study.

### **Data Sources and Collection**

*Inclusion Criteria.* As my research question is focused on classroom teacher psychological-occupational stress, this study explored only the responses of those participants who were in a direct teaching role during their study participation year of 2018.

*Sample size.* (n=4) These participants all identified as women; one as African American, and three as White American. All participants have a bachelors' degree level of education. According to Moustakas (1994) via Creswell (2013), a sample size as

small as  $n=3$  is considered appropriate for a phenomenological analysis given the depth of the construct being explored (Moustakas, 1994 as cited in Creswell, 2013).

*Table 1.* Study participants

|                        |                               |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Position (2018)        | Lead teachers (n=4, 100%)     |
| Education Level (2018) | Bachelor's degree (n=4, 100%) |
| Gender                 | Women (n=4, 100%)             |
| Race                   | African American (n=1, 25%)   |
|                        | White (n=3, 75%)              |

*Data collection protocol.* Semi-structured individual interviews using the reflective-supervision-based protocol were conducted in September and November 2018. The questions for which this study explores the responses were bounded prior to analysis are summarized in Chapter 4.

*Administrative resources.* Access to data collected by Dr. Debora Wisneski and Brooke Fletcher, for the study Leadership in Early Childhood Education (UNO IRB #583-17-EX). Interviews were conducted and transcribed by this researcher.

*Human subjects ethics.* This researcher obtained the approval of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Nebraska Medical Center for the purpose of the parent study. This study's question is within the boundaries of the research goals for the parent study. All participants voluntarily gave their informed consent.

### **Analysis Plan and Operational Definitions**

Moustakas's phenomenological procedure as described by Creswell (2013) employs several steps of examining and reducing the data to establish an essential description of the construct:

*Bracketing.* The researcher spent intentional time writing a description of my philosophical stance, prior academic understanding, and past personal experience of psychological-occupational stress for reference during the data reduction process. This allows me to check myself against my own stated possible biases and increases the credibility of the analysis.

*Horizontalization.* The researcher read and digested all participant statements as equally meaningful information, noting any patterns or repetition.

*Clusters of meaning.* The researcher organized data according to emerging patterns and summarize the patterns to name them.

*Themes.* Clusters of meaning were further reduced to themes, staying true to the original participant statements in the naming process. The researcher referenced direct quotations from participants to support the construction of themes.

*Essential description.* The response to the research question is an essential description of psychological-occupational stress for the participants, using the themes that emerge from the reduction process (Moustakas, 1994 as cited in Creswell, 2013). The essential description as described by Moustakas (1994) can include both a textural description and a structural description.

### **Validation Strategies**

Credibility of the analysis was established through the following strategies as summarized by Creswell (2013):

*Data triangulation.* The researcher analyzed interviews collected from participants over the span of August to December 2018, with a space of 30-45 days between interviews. Data collected over time provides stronger credibility to an essential description than data collected at a single time point.

*Rich, thick descriptions.* The themes that I describe were supported by direct quotations from the participants.

*Expert review.* Capstone committee members provided critical feedback for unsupported or imprecise themes.

*Ethical, reciprocal relationships with participants.* The researcher provided the emotional support and unconditional positive regard for the participants expected of a social worker during the reflective supervision sessions to the best of my professional ability. Participants who were in need of outside resources were provided with referrals (Creswell, 2013).

## Chapter 4—Results

### Bracketing

In phenomenological analysis, bracketing involves the researcher disclosing personal and subjective prior understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). For some researchers, bracketing is undertaken in order to reduce researcher bias and enhance reader interpretation, as the researcher is herself the tool for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013). However, not all phenomenological researchers agree that reducing bias is an appropriate goal for this research method, and instead treat bracketing as the disclosure of personal philosophical orientation and subjective understanding of the phenomenon as a part of the data analysis itself (Creswell, 2013). The epistemological stance of the researcher will determine the purpose of bracketing, and is therefore important to disclose.

This researcher's epistemological stance is heavily influenced by the committee members with qualitative expertise, and the phenomenological methodology. According to a summary of social constructionist epistemology by Andrews (2012), this researcher would disclose that her stance is aligned with social constructionism, and that this stance informed the following data analysis. Social constructionism can be described as the idea that knowledge is dynamic and constructed by its learners, particularly through social relationships and dialogue, rather than fixed and universal (Andrews, 2012). This researcher would additionally disclose that low-paid employment experience with direct service to vulnerable populations, as well as the prior knowledge of the theoretical models of psychological-occupational stress as described in the literature review, influence her analysis of the participants' statements. Lastly, the researcher has been

educated as a social worker, a profession for which there is special consideration for empowerment, especially in marginalized people whose identities have historically been stripped of self-determination. This professional training informs the researcher's attention to descriptions of powerlessness, and is both useful to the researcher as a compassionate presence during interviews, as well as a possible source of bias in the analysis.

### **Horizontalization**

Horizontalization, or the practice of treating all statements as equally meaningful, is a crucial part of phenomenological analysis (Creswell, 2013). Through the process of determining which interview questions from the larger project would correspond with the research question of "What is the lived workplace experience of psychological-occupational stress for early childhood educators serving low-income families and children in a non-profit, accredited organizational setting?" For horizontalization, the researcher determined which interview questions for which the responses should be analyzed.

#### *Interview questions chosen for analysis.*

1. What are your expectations/needs from a supervisor?
2. How do you take care of yourself?
3. How do you experience the work environment?
4. How do you handle stress/conflict/crisis?
5. What experiences have you had since our first meeting?
6. What strengths do you bring to the relationship?
7. What personal limitations do you bring to your work?

8. How does this impact your role in facilitating change?
9. If you could change something, what would it be?
10. What kind of feedback is most helpful to you?

### Phenomenological Reduction

Phenomenological reduction is the practice of determining which statements made by participants respond to the primary research question (Creswell, 2013). The researcher asked therapeutic clarification questions throughout the interview process, which she also transcribed prior to horizontalization.

*Initial codes.* Because this secondary analysis uses data directly collected by the researcher for a larger project, this researcher was able to utilize the documented dialogue between herself and the participants as a form of initial coding. The nature of the interviews allowed for member checking to occur during the conversations with the codes are listed in quotations if code names were taken directly from participants' own words, and listed without quotations if the researcher named the code.

*Clusters of meaning.* Several of the initial codes listed above arose multiple times throughout the reduction process, leading to the creation of clusters of meaning as described by Moustakas (1994) via Creswell (2013). The researcher spent time reading the raw data and codes and identifying repeating concepts to name as clusters of meaning. Table 2 below shows the clusters of meaning in the second column next to the initial codes they were derived from.

*Table 2.* Initial coding and clusters of meaning identified

| Initial Codes                        | Clusters of Meaning                                    |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| "draining"                           | exhaustion   |
| "freaking out"                       | personal life stressors                                |
| "harder on myself than I need to be" | culture of negativity/conflict avoidance/triangulation |
| "I have no idea what's going on"     | confusion  |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| "initial feeling that I did something bad"            | dread of criticism                                     |
| "it's busy and chaotic here"                          | chaotic environment                                    |
| "overthinking"  | uncertainty of performance                             |
| "We didn't know what was happening"                   | misinformed/not informed                               |
| "you lose taking care of yourself" in home role       | personal life stressors                                |
| ability to have boundaries depends on kids' behaviors | external locus of control                              |
| afraid of parent being mad                            | worry about impact                                     |
| being "beat up" on by kids                            | physical danger  |
| being encouraged to take work home                    | discouraged from appropriate work life balance         |
| boundaries are harder when kids have more going on    | external locus of control                              |
| can't change anything                                 | powerlessness  |
| catastrophizing about being in trouble                | dread of criticism                                     |
| conflict averse culture                               | culture of negativity/conflict avoidance/triangulation |
| difficulty asserting needs                            | discouraged from asserting needs                       |
| difficulty focusing                                   | exhaustion   |
| difficulty of saying no                               | discouraged from asserting needs                       |
| directly stressed by lack of communication            | misinformed/not informed                               |
| don't want to burden others                           | discouraged from asserting needs                       |
| dread of interacting with supervisor                  | not respected  |
| environment feels like negativity                     | exhaustion   |
| environment focus on what's wrong                     | culture of negativity/conflict avoidance/triangulation |
| exhausting  | exhaustion   |
| exhausting  | exhaustion   |
| fear of failure                                       | worry about impact                                     |
| feeling "nitpicked"                                   | expectations unrealistic                               |
| feeling behind expectations                           | expectations unrealistic                               |
| feeling forced to work on vacation                    | paradox of not having a say but being held responsible |
| feeling I'm in trouble                                | dread of criticism                                     |
| feeling incompetent without direction                 | uncertainty of performance                             |
| feeling judged for asking questions                   | discouraged from asserting needs                       |
| feeling judged for limitations                        | Expectations unrealistic                               |
| feeling like other teachers' advice is unhelpful      | worry about impact                                     |
| feeling trapped                                       | personal life stressors                                |
| feeling trapped                                       | powerlessness  |
| fighting an uphill battle                             | culture of negativity/conflict avoidance/triangulation |
| having to scramble                                    | "not my job"   |
| hectic  | chaotic environment                                    |
| hectic  | chaotic environment                                    |
| input not valued                                      | not respected  |
| input not valued, voice not heard                     | not respected  |
| isolated by negativity                                | culture of negativity/conflict avoidance/triangulation |
| just need "someone to listen to you"                  | External locus of control                              |
| lack of confidence                                    | uncertainty of performance                             |
| lack of parent trust in teacher                       | paradox of not having a say but being held responsible |
| loss/grief making self-care harder                    | personal life stressors                                |
| miserable   | chaotic environment                                    |
| needing to explain staff leaving to kids              | chaotic environment                                    |
| needing to meet unrealistic expectations              | unrealistic expectations                               |
| needing to sit and cry                                | personal life stressors                                |



|  |  |
|--|--|
| no direction on responsibilities outside job description | uncertainty of performance                             |
| no time to do job description responsibilities           | not my job   |
| not able to be proud of work                             | worry about impact                                     |
| not enough training                                      | misinformed/not informed                               |
| not feeling trust in leaders                             | discouraged from asserting needs                       |
| not knowing how to resolve conflict                      | culture of negativity conflict avoidance triangulation |
| not knowing if coworkers will show up                    | external locus of control                              |
| not knowing what's within your power                     | external locus of control                              |
| not provided with relevant information                   | paradox of not having a say but being held responsible |
| not respected  | Not respected  |
| overthink instead of relaxing                            | uncertainty of performance                             |
| overwhelmed  | external locus of control                              |
| overworked   | external locus of control                              |
| physically violent/destructive students                  | physical danger  |
| pushed from both sides                                   | paradox of not having a say but being held responsible |
| requests not taken seriously                             | not respected  |
| responsibilities far outside of job description          | not my job   |
| responsibility for others' decisions                     | paradox of not having a say but being held responsible |
| responsibility for others' reactions                     | responsible for other's decisions                      |
| responsible for decisions teacher didn't make            | responsible for other's decisions                      |
| self-harm  | personal life stressors                                |
| strengths feel like weaknesses                           | External locus of control                              |
| stress feels self-caused                                 | discouraged from asserting needs                       |
| structural lack of support                               | not my job, chaotic environment                        |
| support only provided if asked for                       | unrealistic expectations                               |
| support removed without replacement                      | personal life stressors                                |
| surprise structural changes                              | chaotic environment                                    |
| survival mode  | exhaustion   |
| taking on the stress of others                           | culture of negativity/conflict averse/triangulation    |
| tense  | culture of negativity/conflict averse/triangulation    |
| thinks grieving death will be perceived as an "excuse"   | discouraged from asserting needs                       |
| to be avoided at all costs                               | culture of negativity/conflict averse/triangulation    |
| triggered by interactions with supervisor                | dread of criticism                                     |
| uncertain of performance                                 | uncertain of performance                               |
| uncertain of performance                                 | uncertain of performance                               |
| uncertain of performance                                 | uncertain of performance                               |
| Uncertainty of role specifics                            | uncertain of performance                               |
| uncomfortable asking for help                            | discouraged from asserting needs                       |
| uneasy   | chaotic environment                                    |
| using unhealthy coping mechanisms                        | personal life stressors                                |
| working full time as a single parent                     | personal life stressors                                |
| worried about impact of performance                      | worry about impact                                     |
| worried supervisor is venting about them                 | dread of criticism                                     |
| Worry about actions impact                               | worry about impact                                     |

*Identification of themes.* The researcher identified themes by creating and reorganizing groups of clusters of meaning until arriving at categories that seemed to best fit the underlying themes described by participants. This was accomplished with coaching from committee member Liam Heerten-Rodriguez. As the researcher reorganized the data to determine the essential underlying themes, new clusters and names for clusters arose, leading to the addition or rewording of several clusters to the third set of groups.

*Grouped Clusters of Meaning (1)*

- A. Not my job; not enough time; unrealistic expectations
- B. Discouraged from appropriate work/life balance; personal life stressors
- C. Toxic work culture; powerlessness; paradox of not having a say but being held responsible; culture of negativity; dread of criticism
- D. Exhaustion; discouraged from asserting needs
- E. Worry about impact; uncertainty of performance
- F. Confusion; physical danger; chaotic environment; external locus of control; misinformed/not informed

*Grouped Clusters of Meaning (2)*

- A. Discouraged from appropriate work/life balance; physical danger; discouraged from asserting needs
- B. Unrealistic expectations; uncertainty of performance
- C. Personal life stressors; exhaustion; culture of negativity; not enough time
- D. Misinformed/not informed; confusion

E. Powerlessness; external locus of control; not my job; paradox of not having a say but being held responsible; chaotic environment

F. Dread of criticism; worry about impact

*Grouped Clusters of Meaning (3)*

A. External locus of control; uncertain of performance; unrealistic expectations; not my job; discouraged from asserting needs; discrepancy between official statement and reality

B. Not enough time; exhaustion; worry about impact; poor work-life balance; high investment in outcomes for kids

C. Powerlessness; confusion; paradox of not having a say but being held responsible; misinformed/not informed; culture of complaining; dreading criticism

D. Physical danger; surrounded by chaos; stress at home

*Creation of essential description.* The essential description of the phenomenon can be written as several themes in response to the research question (Moustakas, 1994 via Creswell, 2013). The textural description included a narrative about the sensory components of the interviews with participants, and the structural description was formatted through themes. Themes emerged from the organization of the clusters of meaning, in consultation with the participants' own statements, to ensure credibility (Moustakas, 1994 via Creswell, 2013). The primary theme of powerlessness, as described in Chapter 5, is comprised of the paradoxical themes of the inescapable responsibility the participants feel to create positive outcomes for their students and the devaluing the participants describe feeling about their own recommendations to the organization to create those outcomes.

**Key Results**

*Structural description.* The essential structural description created by this researcher is that the lived workplace experience of psychological-occupational stress for early childhood educators serving low-income families and children in a non-profit, accredited organizational setting is one of structurally inherent powerlessness. The lived experience of powerlessness underlies the themes that participants shared in their responses, one in which the participants felt an inescapable sense of responsibility and expectations to create positive outcomes for their students, which contrasts with the participants’ experience of being devalued. While there is evidence from the existing literature that this population has experienced devaluation in multiple forms, in the context of this project, the theme of devaluation for these participants primarily was that their recommendations to the organization for an environment in which those positive outcomes are possible felt unheard and unwanted. The essential description of powerlessness is depicted in Table 3.

*Table 3.* Essential structural description of psychological occupational stress with supporting participant quotes

| <b>Powerlessness: Primary theme</b>   |   |
|---|---|
| “Honestly I was gone, so I don’t even know who specifically made the decision. I found out because the other teachers in my classroom texted me. And so even though we’re not supposed to work outside of work, and it’s against the rules, I did my paperwork on vacation. Because what was I supposed to do?” |   |
| “I would change what I know I have control over.”   |   |
| “Sometimes I don’t really know what to change, because I don’t know what CAN be changed.”   |   |
| <b>Supporting theme: Inescapable responsibility</b>   | <b>Supporting theme: Being devalued</b>             |
| “It’s hard if they’re telling you all these things but not understandings of how you’re gonna have to get it done.”   | “Sometimes you just need someone to listen to you.” |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>“And then as teachers, we are rushed in getting it done, so it’s not quality work that we’re doing.”</p> | <p>“And then also, us teachers getting our view of things, or how we feel, across to leadership sometimes. You can express things to your master teacher but she’s not going to do anything about it, honestly.”</p> |
| <p>“I’m only one person.”</p>   | <p>“I mean, with being positive, sometimes it’s just really hard when you are trying to make it a more positive environment and you’re not getting much back. It’s really draining. It wears on you.”</p>            |

*Textural description.* During the interviews with these participants, the researcher’s experience of the interactions was a palpable sense of anxiety. When participants approached structural theme of powerlessness, the researcher felt an urgency to provide emotional validation and grounding. In contrast, participants expressed a sense of relief at being listened to without being evaluated, as also illustrated in initial codes, Table 2 (p 21).

## Chapter 5—Discussion

### Summary

The essential description of the lived experience of psychological-occupational stress as powerlessness aligns with the current knowledge about the occupational experience of early childhood professionals. The theme of devaluation through unheard, unwanted recommendations adds a new depth to the current understanding of the economic devaluation of this profession through low wages and controversiality of the professionalization of the field. The sense of responsibility that participants felt to create outcomes for their students seems to be informed by the current understanding of the importance of early intervention for children at risk for social problems due to poverty. Both as an at-risk population themselves, and a group that provides interventions for vulnerable populations, early childhood educators should be the focus of future efforts towards empowerment. Further research is needed regarding the best ways to address their psychological-occupational stress, particularly as it pertains to the organizational structures and environments in which they work.

### Strengths and Limitations

*Limitations.* A secondary analysis procedure does not provide as much depth and complexity to the description as a primary analysis would, in which the researcher directly asked participants for their responses to the research question (Creswell, 2013). This study's findings should be interpreted with an acknowledgement that the data were collected prior to the full development of the research question and methods, whereas the recommended chronological order of phenomenology is to develop the question and methods entirely before beginning data collection (Moustakas, 1994). It is possible that

findings would be different if the typical order of procedures would have been followed and the researcher would have been able to ask interview questions specifically designed for the purpose of this study. Because of the nature of the course through which participants were recruited for the parent study, inclusion criteria was limited to individuals employed in the position of “Lead Teacher” in 2018. The existing body of literature indicates that associate and aide teachers experience even higher levels of psychological-occupational stress than the population of this study (Whitaker & Dearth-Wesley, 2015; Wells, 2017; Ullrich, Hamm, & Herzfeldt-Kamprath, 2016). Further research is needed to gain a well-rounded understanding of the phenomenon of psychological-occupational stress in the full range of early childhood educator roles. Additionally, participants were all engaged in a self-selected leadership-focused course, and it is unknown whether leadership aspirations may effect the psychological-occupational stress that is experienced by teachers. The researcher recommends that future studies incorporate a phenomenological approach to understanding psychological-occupational stress using a primary analysis.

*Strengths.* Using phenomenological methods for this project means that the description created is not intended to be generalized to the entire population, rather to add to the depth and richness of understanding of the phenomenon as this particular group of participants experience it. Given what gaps are in the current literature about early childhood educators’ psychological-occupational stress, the primary strength of this study is that it addresses one of those gaps. Additionally, the relational components of the data collection allowed the participants to receive something in return for their contribution to the understanding of this construct.

Although secondary analysis is a source of limitation, it should be noted that from a research ethics perspective, secondary analysis is a strength. Research participants consented to conversations about vulnerable, personal topics, and gave of their time to take part in this study. As ethical, reciprocal relationships with participants provide validation to qualitative work, secondary analysis may be considered a part of the validity of this project. Inasmuch as the research question was able to be answered from data that had already been collected, secondary analysis honors the participants' time and efforts.

### **Interpretation**

Bracketing (as described in Chapter 4) provides a context in which phenomenological findings can be interpreted (Creswell, 2013). While the social work background of the researcher and attention to experiences of powerlessness have the capacity to bias the analysis process, it is a strength to have this training as a basis for the interviews with participants. Powerlessness as the essential lived experience of this population's psychological-occupational stress is consistent with clinical and subclinical depressive symptoms that have been found to be common among early childhood educators. The job of educating and caring for young children requires extensive management of emotional expression, which is known to be affected by depressive symptoms. The concept of powerlessness underscores the problems that have already been highlighted by the current literature (see Chapter 2). These findings align with the Job Resources-Demands Theory model of occupational stress in that there is a sense of powerlessness to follow through on what these professionals believe it is their duty



because of the lack of emotional support provided in the environment as it is currently structured.

### **Generalizability**

The nature of phenomenological research is such that the findings are specific to the study population (Creswell, 2013). The results from this study have the capacity to add a new dimension to what is already known about psychological-occupational stress in early childhood educators, and could provide a foundation for future qualitative research of this construct, as well as provide a starting point for the development of new models or tools that could be used to improve the occupational health of this population (Creswell, 2013).

### **Recommendations**

Future studies should be conducted using a primary phenomenological analysis of a variety of ECE professionals to provide a well-rounded sample to gain understanding of this construct. Additionally, it would be beneficial at a pragmatic level to consider emotional support a vital resource for ECE professionals to have good occupational health and provide quality services. This could be done through both continued explicit emotional support in reflective sessions with mental health professionals. Given the theme of feeling devalued as a component of powerlessness, need assessments including focus groups with teachers could occur regularly and heavily inform organizational change.

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