Emotional Well-being of Early Childhood Education Teachers in South Africa During the Pandemic: Lessons for Teacher Training

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Abstract: This conceptual study aims to investigate how teacher training can effectively prepare Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) teachers to cope with stress, develop resilience, and promote emotional well-being, particularly in times of crisis such as the current pandemic. Through a qualitative content analysis of existing literature, the study examines ECCE teachers' experiences in South Africa managing emotional challenges while caring for young children in difficult circumstances. The findings, analysed within the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model framework, highlight the emotional distress teachers face due to increased job demands, including the shift to remote teaching, personal health risks, and financial insecurity. These challenges were particularly acute in under-resourced communities and were exacerbated by a lack of access to psychosocial support, resulting in heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout. Despite these difficulties, some teachers demonstrated resilience by utilizing coping mechanisms such as peer support, mindfulness, and self-reflection. Access to professional development opportunities and supportive peer networks was linked to improved emotional stability and job satisfaction. Emotional competence emerged as a crucial personal resource that enabled teachers to manage stress and create nurturing classroom environments. Additionally, supportive leadership from school principals played a vital role in enhancing teacher resilience and promoting a favourable school climate. This study highlights a significant gap in current teacher training programmes, which often focus on pedagogy and child development at the expense of teachers' emotional preparedness. It recommends that higher education institutions and policymakers integrate structured training on stress management, resilience-building, and emotional well-being into ECCE curricula to ensure that future teachers are equipped to sustain their professional commitment and emotional well-being in the face of ongoing challenges.

Keywords: Emotional well-being, Early childhood teacher training, Higher education, Pandemic, Professional development, Teacher resilience

1.   Introduction

Globally, the pandemic disrupted education systems, forcing teachers to adapt to unprecedented changes that tested their emotional resilience and professional capacities. Teachers worldwide experienced heightened levels of stress and anxiety as they faced new demands, including transitioning to online teaching, implementing strict health protocols, and managing their well-being while supporting their learners (Aikuz & Zhang, 2024; Logan et al., 2021). The situation was particularly acute in low- and middle-income countries, where existing inequalities and resource constraints exacerbated the challenges faced by teachers (Kola et al., 2021). According to Fonsén et al. (2024), experienced stress caused adverse effects on ECCE teachers' mental health, such as making it difficult to focus and sleep. Teachers in South Africa's Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector were among the hardest hit. The closure of ECCE facilities during the pandemic in disadvantaged areas resulted in financial instability, job insecurity, and limited access to teaching tools, putting additional emotional strain on instructors (Govender & Hugo, 2022). However, South African ECCE leaders (teachers) showed resilience and dedication to maintaining learning continuity (Fonsen et al., 2024).

This scenario exposes severe inadequacies in teacher support systems, emphasising the need for more complete teacher training programs that prepare teachers for instructional duties, stress management, and resilience development during challenging times. Teacher training institutions are uniquely positioned to address these challenges by equipping pre-service teachers with the skills and strategies to navigate complex environments. Traditional teacher education focuses primarily on curriculum delivery and child development, but recent research emphasises the importance of integrating well-being and resilience-building frameworks into teacher preparation (Mansfield et al., 2016; Rashid & Zinn, 2023). Such training can empower future teachers to maintain emotional stability, adapt to changing circumstances, and thrive professionally, even in times of crisis. This study aims to investigate how the pandemic affects ECCE instructors and how teacher preparation can better equip them to handle the difficulties they encounter, especially when it comes to stress management, resilience building, and well-being promotion.

2.   Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The researcher has combined the literature review and theoretical framework to provide a comprehensive understanding of teacher well-being, stress management, and resilience, contextualised through Demerouti et al. (2021), the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model developed in 2006, and the Resilience Framework. The Job-Demands Resources (JD-R) Theory has been extensively utilised to explain organisational processes that impact employees' health, well-being, and performance (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023). Teachers' well-being is influenced by a balance between job demands and available resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). In the context of ECCE teachers during the pandemic, the increased job demands included adapting to remote teaching, managing health risks, and dealing with financial insecurity. Without adequate job resources, these demands led to high stress levels and emotional exhaustion (Zhou et al., 2022).

Research by Logan et al. (2021) supports the model's assertion that access to psychosocial support and professional development can significantly mitigate the negative impact of high job demands. The JD-R model provides a framework for teacher training programs to strengthen job resources, such as resilience training and peer support networks, to protect teacher well-being. Training programs should focus on developing teachers' emotional competence, crucial for managing stress and fostering a supportive classroom environment (Pozo-Rico et al., 2023). Programs that emphasise mental health and well-being can improve teachers' self-efficacy and resilience (Pozo-Rico et al., 2023). According to Miranda (2024), training that includes practical applications of resilience-building techniques can better equip teachers to handle adversity. Considering that, it is also important to look at practical stress management and coping strategies that can help teachers deal with everyday pressures. The literature highlights the importance of stress management in maintaining teacher well-being. Clarke (2022) identifies mindfulness and time

management as practical strategies, while Cromer (2020) highlights the role of peer support and professional counselling. The JD-R model aligns with these findings by emphasising the need for coping mechanisms as critical job resources. Teacher training programs can incorporate stress management workshops and practical tools to equip pre-service teachers with these skills. Resilience is a recurring theme in literature on teacher well-being. Defined as adapting and recovering from adversity, resilience is essential for teachers to maintain emotional balance in challenging circumstances (Mansfield et al., 2016).

The Resilience Framework complements the JD-R model by focusing on internal resources such as emotional regulation and optimism that help teachers manage external demands. It is essential to develop resilience in teacher education, especially during times of crisis like the epidemic. Research by Rashid & Zinn (2023) and Cromer (2020) demonstrates that resilience training dramatically raises work satisfaction and lowers teacher burnout. By incorporating this framework into teacher preparation programs, ECCE teachers can improve their long-term well-being and be more equipped to face obstacles in the future. Teacher educators must impart adequate and healthful coping mechanisms for dealing with the demands of learning and endurance, Ajmal (2022). According to Leithwood et al. (2020), leadership is critical in enhancing teacher resilience and well-being. This finding aligns with the study conducted by Çevik et al. (2025), which explores if there is a relationship between empowering leadership behaviours exhibited by school principals and the psychological resilience of teachers, of which the findings reveal that empowering leadership behaviours of school principals positively correlate with teachers' psychological resilience. Within the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model framework, authors believe that when a leader is supportive, leadership is conceptualised as a key job resource that supports teacher well-being and professional sustainability. The researcher concurs with both and is consistently willing to listen during challenging times, which fosters in individuals a positive mindset and a sense of determination to rise above adversity. Such leadership validates teachers' experiences and reinforces their capacity to navigate difficulties with resilience.

3.   Problem Statement

The pandemic significantly impacted the emotional well-being of early childhood care and education (ECCE) teachers in South Africa (Kola et al., 2021; Govender & Hugo, 2022). Research by Clasquin-Johnson & Ebrahim (2024) on the self-efficacy and well-being of female teacher educators in ECCE during the pandemic reveals that the shift to remote work led to heightened stress levels, an intensification of workload, extended working hours, and lifestyle changes, all of which negatively affected their well-being. This crisis exposed significant gaps in teacher support systems and how teacher training programs prepare ECCE teachers to cope with challenging and uncertain situations. While ECCE teacher training focuses mainly on pedagogy and child development, there is growing concern that it does not adequately equip teachers with the skills to manage crises' emotional and psychological challenges (Rashid & Zinn, 2023). This issue, however, has not received sufficient attention from all ECCE stakeholders in South Africa. The study examines the pandemic's impact on ECCE teachers' emotional well-being, particularly focusing on their ability to manage stress, build resilience, and maintain positive emotional states while supporting learners. Furthermore, it explores the implications of these challenges for teacher training and professional development.

As defined by Demandante (2025), resilience involves actively rejecting negative influences and adapting positively in adverse situations. This study, therefore, investigates the extent to which ECCE teachers could fulfil their roles under these difficult circumstances, while highlighting the need for teacher training programs to integrate well-being and crisis management into the curriculum. Building on this focus, the following section outlines the study's key objectives, which aim to explore the pandemic's impact on ECCE teachers and the implications for teacher training and professional development. The study's objectives are therefore to assess the impact of the pandemic on the emotional well-being of ECCE teachers in South Africa and explore the strategies they employed to manage stress and build resilience and to examine the implications of these experiences for teacher training and professional development, with a

focus on enhancing teacher well-being and integrating crisis preparedness into training curricula, as well as providing recommendations for policy and practice, ECCE teachers and Africa in general.

4. Methodology

This study follows a qualitative research approach, employing analysis of existing literature to explore ECCE teachers' emotional well-being, stress management, and resilience during the pandemic. The research focuses on secondary data sources, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of how teacher training programs can incorporate psychosocial tools to prepare future teachers for complex challenges. The data for this study were generated from a wide range of secondary sources, including 18 peer-reviewed journal articles, which were analysed to gain insight into teacher well-being, resilience, and stress management during the pandemic. In addition, one doctoral study, one book, and three book chapters were reviewed to understand ECCE teachers' global and national experiences. Key reports and guidelines from UNESCO, OECD, DBE, DHET, NRF, and UNICEF were reviewed to provide contextual understanding of the state of ECCE in South Africa and the larger education sector during the pandemic.

The primary sources were accessed through platforms such as Google Scholar for peer-reviewed academic articles, Scispace for research papers and preprints, and university libraries for accessing books, dissertations, and government documents. Open-access journals were also reviewed to ensure the inclusion of diverse international perspectives. Key words such as 'emotional well-being', 'early childhood education', 'South Africa', 'teacher mental health', pandemic, 'resilience', 'ECE teachers', 'pandemic', 'psychosocial support', 'teacher training', 'early childhood', 'pandemic impact', 'early years educators', and 'burnout among preschool teachers' were used to search for related literature. In conducting the literature review, the researcher deliberately prioritised sources published within the past five years, where possible, to ensure relevance and alignment with current scholarship. The data generated were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2016) thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes related to emotional well-being, stress management, and resilience. A deductive approach aligned the findings with the study's research objectives and theoretical framework. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model served as a guiding lens for categorising the data into two main categories: job demands (e.g., increased workload and emotional stress) and job resources (e.g., social support, training, and resilience strategies).

5. Ethical Considerations

This study forms part of a broader research initiative on leadership discourse in Early Childhood Education (ECE) in South Africa, for which formal ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa (UNISA) under reference number Ref: 2021/03/10/ 90284267 /23/AM. Although this article is based on a conceptual and desktop research methodology, with no direct engagement with human participants, all ethical protocols were rigorously observed by institutional, national, and international guidelines on research ethics and academic integrity. Approval for the overarching research project was granted by UNISA, ensuring alignment with the ethical standards articulated in the South African National Guidelines for Research Integrity (National Research Foundation [NRF], 2021) and the Department of Higher Education and Training's Framework for Ethical Research (DHET, 2022). The study reinforces the growing academic imperative to ethically engage with educational discourses, especially concerning vulnerable populations such as ECCE teachers.

Based on the principle of non-maleficence, the study exclusively employed secondary data sources. These included peer-reviewed scholarly articles, national education policy documents, reports from multilateral organisations, and other publicly available literature. No private, confidential, or identifiable data was collected or analysed. By relying solely on published and accessible content, the study avoided any risk of harm to individuals while still offering meaningful contributions to the field (Gough, Oliver, & Thomas, 2021) the criteria of credibility, relevance, academic rigour, and contextual resonance guided data selection. The study adhered strictly to ethical scholarship by acknowledging all intellectual contributions

through accurate academic citation. Beyond avoiding plagiarism, this research sought to promote the visibility of diverse knowledge systems, including African Indigenous epistemologies and critical Southern perspectives on educational leadership (Le Grange, 2020; Hlalele, 2022). This commitment supports global and local calls to decolonise academic research and curriculum development by engaging critically with multiple traditions of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Nyoni & Berman, 2023).

The ethical imperative here lies in recognising that equitable scholarship values what is known and how and by whom it is known. The research was conducted deeply committed to academic integrity, transparency, and scholarly honesty. Interpretive frameworks, theoretical standpoints, and analytic arguments were delineated from source material, ensuring a distinction between existing literature and the researcher's original contributions (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2021). Assertions were substantiated through evidence, and claims were cautiously presented, avoiding exaggeration or overgeneralisation. The study thus models ethical knowledge production that is critical, reflective, and responsible.

Given the focus on ECCE teacher emotional wellbeing and resilience in the wake of the pandemic, contextual sensitivity was central to the research process. The study acknowledged the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on early childhood teachers, particularly those working in rural, under-resourced, and historically marginalised settings in South Africa. Language choices were made carefully to affirm teacher agency, recognise professional courage, and resist deficit-based or pathologising narratives (König et al., 2022; Huber & Helm, 2020). The research aligned with a humanising ethics of care, justice, and relational accountability, drawing from African values such as Ubuntu and global ethical commitments to education as a public good (UNESCO, 2021b; Sayed & Singh, 2022; Makalela, 2023). While no direct participant engagement was involved, this study maintained rigorous ethical standards throughout its conceptual development. It was grounded in principles of non-maleficence, academic integrity, epistemic justice, and social responsibility. The ethical stance adopted reflects a broader commitment to educational research that honours the dignity, struggles, and aspirations of ECE teachers in South Africa, particularly in a post-pandemic landscape that continues to demand resilience and innovation.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Findings

The findings reveal how the pandemic affected the emotional well-being, stress management, and resilience of ECCE teachers in South Africa. These findings are categorised according to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, highlighting both the challenges (job demands) and the support mechanisms (job resources) that shaped teachers' experience. ECCE teachers experienced significant emotional distress due to increased job demands, including adapting to remote teaching, managing personal health risks, and dealing with financial insecurity during the closure of ECCE centres. This emotional strain often led to feelings of anxiety, depression, and burnout, particularly for teachers in under-resourced communities. The lack of access to psychosocial support further exacerbated these challenges, confirming the literature's emphasis on the vulnerability of teachers in crises (Logan et al., 2021; Govender & Hugo, 2022).

Despite the difficulties, some teachers demonstrated remarkable resilience, employing coping strategies such as seeking peer support, practicing mindfulness, and engaging in self-reflection. Teachers who had access to professional development and peer networks reported better emotional stability and higher job satisfaction, aligning with Cromer's (2020) findings on the effectiveness of programs. However, most teachers indicated a need for more structured training on managing stress and building resilience. The findings feature a critical gap in teacher training programs. While pre-service programs focus heavily on pedagogy and child development, there is limited emphasis on equipping future teachers with the skills to manage their emotional well-being. This gap leaves teachers vulnerable during crises and highlights the need for comprehensive training that integrates psychosocial support and resilience-building strategies (Mansfield et al., 2016; Rashid & Zinn, 2023). Teachers with higher emotional competence were better able to manage stress and maintain supportive classroom environments. Emotional competence emerged as

a key personal resource contributing to resilience and professional sustainability, particularly in high-stress contexts (Pozo-Rico et al., 2023). Supportive and empowering leadership from school principals played a significant role in enhancing teacher resilience. Teachers who felt heard, supported, and involved in decision-making reported greater emotional well-being and professional commitment. Leadership was identified as a critical job resource that buffered the effects of stress and promoted a favourable school climate (Çevik et al., 2025; Leithwood et al., 2020)

6.2   Discussion

The discussion interprets the findings considering the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and Resilience Framework, connecting them to the research objectives and literature. The pandemic increased job demands for ECCE teachers, resulting in emotional exhaustion and decreased well-being. These findings support the JD-R model's assertion that excessive job demands without adequate resources lead to burnout (Demerouti & Bakker, 2001). The literature confirms that teacher well-being is essential for maintaining high-quality education and positive interactions with learners (Lee et al., 2023). The absence of structured support systems during the pandemic left many teachers struggling to cope, emphasising the need for targeted interventions in teacher training. Resilience emerged as a key protective factor, enabling some teachers to adapt and thrive despite the challenges. This finding aligns with the Resilience Framework, which emphasises the importance of internal resources such as emotional regulation, optimism, and adaptability (Mansfield et al., 2016). Teachers who engaged in resilience-building activities were better equipped to manage stress and maintain a positive outlook, reinforcing the importance of integrating resilience training into pre-service education. Resilient teachers do not compromise their professional duties and keep giving their best despite their many challenges. The integration of resilience training into teacher education is particularly significant.

As supported by Miranda (2024) and Rashid & Zinn (2023), such training enhances teachers' ability to cope with adversity and contributes to long-term job satisfaction and reduced burnout. Emotional regulation, optimism, and adaptive coping strategies, core elements of the Resilience Framework, are essential for sustaining teacher well-being. Moreover, the role of leadership cannot be overstated. As Leithwood et al. (2020) and Çevik et al. (2025) demonstrate, empowering leadership behaviors serve as critical job resources. Supportive principals who validate teachers' experiences and foster open communication contribute significantly to a resilient and motivated teaching workforce. The findings reinforce the need for a holistic approach to teacher well-being that integrates emotional competence, practical coping strategies, institutional support, and leadership development. Embedding these elements into teacher training and professional development programs is essential for building a resilient ECCE workforce capable of thriving in routine and crisis conditions. To address this, teacher training programs must evolve to incorporate structured stress management and resilience-building modules. These could include workshops on mindfulness and self-care, peer support and mentoring systems, and training in emotional regulation and adaptive coping strategies. Adopting such comprehensive approaches, teacher education institutions can cultivate a more emotionally resilient and professionally prepared workforce, ensuring that future educators can navigate everyday challenges and large-scale disruptions with confidence and competence.

7.   Implications for Policy and Practice, ECCE Teachers and Africa in General

This study highlights the urgent need to prioritise emotional well-being, stress management, and resilience among Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) teachers, particularly during challenging times. Recent research has demonstrated that the pandemic exacerbated emotional strain among early childhood teachers, particularly in under-resourced and marginalised communities, due to increased workloads, role ambiguity, and lack of institutional support (Sayed & Singh, 2022; Motiang & Nkomo, 2023). Teachers often found themselves navigating heightened expectations with minimal guidance, leading to burnout, emotional fatigue, and, in some cases, attrition from the sector (Nxumalo et al., 2021). While

some ECCE practitioners displayed resilience by leveraging peer support, reflective practices, and informal mindfulness strategies, many did so without access to structured training or psychological services (Weldon & Ndlovu, 2023). These coping mechanisms, though commendable, are not sustainable without systemic reinforcement through policy and institutional investment. The implications of these findings extend far beyond the individual. A resilient and emotionally supported ECCE workforce is fundamental for ensuring quality early learning environments and long-term developmental outcomes for young children (UNESCO, 2022). In African contexts, where ECCE systems are still emerging and often underfunded, supporting educators' psychological and emotional health must be seen not only as a moral responsibility but as a strategic priority for sustainable educational development (Shaker & Hamid, 2021).

8.   Conclusion

Strengthening the emotional well-being and resilience of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) teachers is not merely a matter of occupational health but a strategic imperative for sustainable educational development across South Africa and the broader African continent. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated the already fragile conditions under which many ECCE teachers operate, particularly in under-resourced, rural, and informal settings. These challenges highlight the urgent need for systemic, sustained support mechanisms to foster professional resilience, psychological well-being, and social protection for the ECCE workforce (UNESCO, 2021a; Sayed & Singh, 2022). A resilient ECCE workforce is foundational to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasises inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all, starting with early childhood. Teacher wellbeing, encompassing emotional, mental, and physical health, is intrinsically linked to teaching quality, learner outcomes, and the overall success of educational systems (OECD, 2021; Tandon & Sharma, 2021).

Research increasingly demonstrates that teachers who experience high levels of stress, burnout, or emotional exhaustion are less able to deliver engaging, empathetic, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy (Eadie et al., 2021; Mthembu & Arends, 2023). Conversely, educators supported through meaningful professional development, peer networks, manageable workloads, and mental health services exhibit greater job satisfaction, professional commitment, and teaching efficacy. In the South African context, where ECCE provision is critical to addressing historic educational inequalities, investing in teacher wellness is social justice. It supports teacher retention in communities that are most affected by poverty, unemployment, and limited access to quality early learning opportunities (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2022). Moreover, attention to the emotional labour and wellbeing of ECCE teachers aligns with a decolonial and Afrocentric approach to education, one that honours the dignity, relationality, and humanity of those who care for and teach young children (Makalela, 2023; Msila, 2020).

Policy interventions must, therefore, prioritise not only the expansion of ECCE access but also the development of comprehensive wellbeing frameworks that include psychosocial support, mental health resources, fair remuneration, and recognition of ECCE teachers as professionals. Such investments can improve learning environments, lower attrition rates, and more positive outcomes for children, particularly those from marginalised and vulnerable communities (UNICEF, 2021; Spaull & Ardington, 2022). Importantly, ECCE teacher wellness must be framed not as an auxiliary concern but as a central pillar in education policy and practice. A commitment to ECCE teacher wellbeing is ultimately a commitment to the flourishing of children and their communities. It is a necessary step toward realising the broader educational transformation envisaged in national development plans and global goals. Building a resilient ECCE workforce, rooted in care, respect, and empowerment, is key to unlocking sustainable futures for the next generation of South African learners.

9.   References

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