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## Early Childhood Teachers' Perspectives of Job-Related Stressors and Decisions to Remain in or Leave the Profession

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Michelle Margaret Mertic

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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

Early Childhood Teachers' Perspectives of Job-Related Stressors and Decisions to  
Remain in or Leave the Profession

by

Michelle Margaret Mertic

EdS, Wayne State University, 2018

MSW, Wayne State University, 2012

BS, Bowling Green State University, 1990

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2022

## Abstract

Early childhood teachers are leaving the profession at high rates, citing job-related stress as the reason for their departure. These vacancies have a detrimental effect on the children enrolled in these programs and their future school readiness. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of job-related stressors and how those stressors impact their decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession. The conceptual framework used in the study was the coping-competence-context theory of teacher stress. The research questions addressed early childhood teachers' perspectives of job-related stressors and how those stressors impacted teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession. Data were collected through interviews with 12 early childhood teachers, six who were currently working in the field and six who had left a teaching position within the past 5 years. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-step guide for thematic analysis. Four themes emerged as findings from the analysis: (a) early childhood teachers are overwhelmed by multiple job-related stressors, (b) the work is physically and emotionally demanding, (c) coping skills help early childhood teachers remain in the profession, and (d) a lack of benefits, support, and resources affect early childhood teachers' decision to leave the profession. The findings may be used to develop strategies and implement supports for early childhood teachers to counteract job-related stressors and reduce the number of teachers leaving the profession.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband Tony and to my boys John, Joseph, and Jacob. I love you and am grateful for you being my biggest cheerleaders during this process. I also dedicate this dissertation to my parents, John and Ruth Ann Dobbs, who raised me with the strength and resilience to believe that with hard work, anything is possible. I love you both and am incredibly grateful that you instilled in me the courage to pursue my dreams.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to all the women and men who have dedicated their lives to the field of early childhood education. May you always know how much your work matters to this world.

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“It is God who arms me with strength and keeps my way secure” (2 Samuel 22:33). Thank you, Lord, for guiding me on this journey and placing this desire in my heart to make a difference for teachers. I would not have been able to complete this dissertation without you.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Approximately 13 million children under the age of 6 years spend a significant amount of time each week being cared for by teachers in early childhood education programs (Garner et al., 2019). These teachers play an essential part in the development of their students, and their work impacts the children's future success in school (Eddy et al., 2019; Jeon et al., 2019). Despite this understanding of the critical role of early childhood teachers, they often have low salaries, stressful work environments, and receive minimal societal recognition for the importance of their work (Kim et al., 2020). Work-related stressors for early childhood education teachers may include low wages, poor benefits, difficult working conditions, and lack of perceived administrative support (Roberts et al., 2019). Teaching young children is stressful and demanding, as these teachers are responsible for children's learning, behavior management, and social and emotional well-being (Eddy et al., 2019). Ninety-three percent of early childhood teachers identified as highly stressed (Herman et al., 2020). Further, the job turnover rate for early childhood teachers is more than four times the turnover rate of elementary teachers (Gagnon et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020).

In this study, I addressed the impact of job-related stressors on early childhood education teachers and their commitment to remain in or leave the teaching profession. I explored perspectives from early childhood teachers who are currently employed, as well as teachers who have left the profession within the past 5 years, through the lens of the coping-competence-context theory. Young children need caring, stable relationships with

teachers who are invested in their development. Ensuring continuity of care with those teachers is essential for children's long-term academic and social success (McNally & Slutsky, 2017). The results of this study provide insight to the early childhood community on teachers' job-related stress and how this affects their decision to remain in or leave the profession.

Chapter 1 includes background information from the research literature related to the problem of early childhood teacher job-related stress. The purpose statement focuses on the perspectives of early childhood teachers' job-related stress and how that stress impacts decisions to remain in or leave the profession. The problem statement presents the circumstances in which to frame the purpose of my study on the experiences of early childhood teachers' job-related stress and how that stress impacts decisions to remain in or leave the profession. The conceptual framework, made of the coping-competence-context theory of teacher stress, was used to develop the research questions and the data collection and analysis processes. This chapter also contains information on the nature of this study, definitions of key terms, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of this study.

### **Background**

Every job can create stressful experiences for individuals engaged in the daily tasks of their position. Early childhood teachers' job-related stress is defined as negative or uncomfortable emotions resulting from some aspect of their work (Herman et al., 2017). Two broad categories for such stress are teaching stress and teacher stress (Gagnon et al., 2019). Teaching stress can result from interactions with students,

especially if they exhibit challenging behaviors in the classroom (Eadie et al., 2021; Gupta, 2019; Jeon et al., 2018; Peele & Wolf, 2021; Pogere et al., 2019). Teacher stress encompasses the other aspects of this profession, including workload, insufficient resources, lack of control, inadequate support, and low pay (Eddy et al., 2019; Gagnon et al., 2019; Jennings, 2019; Jeon et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2020). The workload is the most often investigated aspect of teacher stress and can encompass paperwork completion, attending meetings, report writing, and completing professional development (Gagnon et al., 2019). The job-related stress experienced by these teachers is unique compared to the stress experienced by teachers in primary or secondary schools (Jones et al., 2020). In addition to understanding the causes of early childhood teachers' job-related stress, it is essential to know how teachers cope with this stress.

There is a gap in practice about how early childhood teachers experience and cope with job-related stressors and how it affects their decisions to remain in the profession. This qualitative study is needed to contribute to an understanding of the role that coping, competence, and context play in a teacher experiencing stress and their decision to remain in or leave the profession (Herman et al., 2020). Policymakers in the field of early childhood education, as well as early childhood center directors, need to understand teachers' job-related stress so that a supportive environment can be created to support teachers and encourage them to remain in the profession (Gagnon et al., 2019; Jeon et al., 2019; Kwon et al., 2020).

## **Problem Statement**

The problem addressed through this study is early childhood teachers are leaving the profession at high rates, citing job-related stress as one of the reasons for their departure (Jeon & Ardeleanu, 2020). Ninety-eight percent of teachers reported that they experienced stress on the job, felt overwhelmed, and were unsure that they would have the stamina to continue teaching or provide the patience their students need (Clement, 2017). Across the United States, there is a shortage of early childhood teachers, and as many as 30% of preschool teachers leave the profession each year due to stress and workload (Federis, 2019; Gagnon et al., 2019). Internationally, the rate of early childhood teachers leaving the field each year is close to 40%, and this turnover rate is double that of elementary education teachers (Thorpe et al., 2020). Teacher departures are a significant issue in early childhood education, with an annual turnover of 26–40% of teachers in licensed childcare programs (Tate, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these departures. In the National Survey of Early Care and Education, early childhood teacher participants were asked if they had looked for a new job within the past 3 months. Twenty-five percent of Head Start teachers, 38% of public prekindergarten teachers, and 22% of center-based teachers responded that they had looked for a new job within the past 3 months (Phillips et al., 2019). Approximately one-quarter of early childhood education teachers leave their jobs each year, and this rate is four times higher than elementary education teachers (Phillips et al., 2019).

The gap in practice addressed in this study was how early childhood teachers experience and cope with job-related stressors and their decisions to remain in or leave



the profession. Because early childhood teachers are critical to children's development and school readiness (Jeon et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Kwon et al., 2020), it is vital to identify teachers' perspectives on job-related stressors and the impact of that stress on decisions to remain in or leave the profession. To retain teachers, there is a need for an increased understanding of why they may experience feelings of job-related stress and how those feelings impact their desire to remain in or leave the profession. If early childhood directors and policymakers understand what is causing stress and turnover in teachers, they may be able to institute changes to improve early childhood teachers' working environments.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of job-related stressors and how those stressors impact their decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession. The coping-competence-context theory of teacher stress was used to help understand the impact that early childhood teachers' stress had on positive or negative teacher outcomes and teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the profession. I explored the perspectives of 12 early childhood teachers who possessed a minimum of an associate degree in an education-related field and had been employed for a minimum of 1 year. Six of these teachers were currently working in the field, and six were former teachers who decided to leave the profession. Former early childhood teachers were eligible to participate if they had left the profession within the past 5 years. Information provided by this research could help improve job-related

stressors for early childhood teachers to reduce the number of teachers leaving the profession.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions addressed the purpose of this research:

RQ 1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of job-related stressors?

RQ 2: What strategies are early childhood teachers using to cope with job-related stressors?

RQ 3: How do job-related stressors impact teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that grounded this study was the coping-competence-context theory of teacher stress developed by Herman et al. (2020). This theory was developed using knowledge from the transactional theory of stress, the prosocial classroom model, and the stress mindset theory. Herman et al. designed this new framework after identifying the need for further research in conceptualizing an understanding of teacher stress and understanding the roles that coping, competence, and context play in the mitigation of that stress. Stress for teachers occurs when the demands of the profession exceed their ability to cope with those demands. The consequences of teacher stress affect the teacher and their decision to remain in or leave the profession and the children in the classroom, their families, and the educational system at large (Herman et al., 2017). The coping-competence-context theory was designed to guide further

research by highlighting the importance of understanding teacher stress and subsequent means of intervention.

Herman et al. (2020) described coping as a teacher's characteristic that determines how they respond to stress as well as the teacher's self-identified coping skills and strategies. Perception of stress levels cannot be studied without also studying coping (Herman et al., 2020; Puertas Molero et al., 2019). Competence is the connection between teacher stress and classroom practices, specifically how the teacher manages their classroom and the relationship between stress, teaching practice, and children's behaviors. Finally, context is identified as the school, system, or professional practices contributing to a teacher's job-related stress. The coping-competence-context theory was also designed to identify points of intervention for teachers experiencing job-related stress. Although my study did not provide intervention for the study participants, this theory highlights the importance of understanding how the participants were able to cope with the stress of their roles.

The interview questions were designed using the basic constructs of the theory to assist me in gathering an understanding of the experiences of early childhood teachers' job-related stress. The conceptual framework was used during data analysis as I used the a priori codes of coping, competence, and context when examining the interview transcripts. A thematic analysis of the data identified patterns in early childhood teachers' experiences with job-related stress. The themes in the data might provide information for early childhood administrators on how to mitigate the effects of job-related stressors

experienced by teachers. A more detailed explanation of the conceptual framework will be shared in the literature review in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

Qualitative research is used to explore and understand an individual's experiences within a particular setting or period (Aspers & Corte, 2019). This methodology was appropriate for this study as I sought to understand the specific experiences of early childhood teachers' job-related stress and the impact on decisions to remain in or leave the profession. No two teachers are alike in their experiences, as there are different classrooms, settings, and groups of children. Using a basic qualitative approach provided the opportunity to listen to individual teachers' experiences in their jobs and the meaning they created from those experiences (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

Participants were recruited through maximum variation sampling, using the Walden University participant pool and the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) *Hello* message board to find early childhood teachers that met the criteria for participation. Maximum variation sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to find participants that can bring diverse experience to a study's research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I also used the snowball method of sampling to recruit additional participants.

I collected data using semi-structured interviews with 12 current or former early childhood teachers who possessed a minimum of an associate degree in an education-related field and had been employed for at least 1 year. Six of these teachers were currently working in the field, and six were former teachers who decided to leave the

profession. Former early childhood teachers were eligible to participate if they had left the profession within the past 5 years. The interviews were open-ended, providing the participants an opportunity to share information that I may not have considered (see Aspers & Corte, 2019). Semi-structured interviews are often used in basic qualitative research to gather information from participants (Burkholder et al., 2020). I used an interview protocol with specific questions and prompts to provide structure and consistency with each interview.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data collected in this study. I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis to examine the data. Once each interview had been transcribed, I actively engaged in the repeated reading of the transcripts, taking notes, and identifying potential codes. I used open coding to analyze the data within each interview and across all interviews. Once open coding was complete, I used the a priori codes of coping, competence, and context to review the data. I created a codebook to keep track of all codes, subcodes, categories, and definitions during this process. Next, I used axial coding, creating categories of a priori and open codes.

In Phase 3, I looked for the emergence of themes by examining the categories identified in Phase 2. At the end of Phase 3, I had broad themes that related to my research questions, using an excel spreadsheet to track this process. During Phase 4, I reviewed and refined the themes identified in phase three, reviewing at both the level of coded data points and the level of themes in relation to the entire data set. In Phase 5, I defined and named the final themes. I utilized member checking by sending a two-page

summary of the analysis to participants and invited them to share feedback within 3 days of receipt of the summary. During Phase 6, I created the final report from the data obtained from my research, creating a credible argument for the merit and validity of my findings, and answering my research questions.

### **Definitions**

The following definitions for this study were grounded in the current body of research.

*Early childhood education programs:* Early childhood education programs focus on providing care to children from birth to prekindergarten age while supporting the children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2021).

*Early childhood teacher:* Individuals who work with young children from birth through prekindergarten (NAEYC, 2018). They are also referred to as caregivers or childcare workers.

*Occupational burnout:* A psychological response to chronic work-related stress of an interpersonal and emotional nature (Viotti et al., 2019).

*Relationship-building:* The method in which early childhood teachers engage with young children in order to provide high-quality learning experiences (Garner et al., 2019).

*Responsiveness:* The way an early childhood teacher positively acknowledges children's actions and emotions (Garner et al., 2019).

*Self-efficacy*: An individual's belief in the ability to be effective in a role and can also be aligned to that individual's coping capacity (Eddy et al., 2019; Kırkıcı & Çetinkaya, 2020).

*Stress*: An individual's experience when the demands of an environment or experience exceed their ability to adapt to those demands. Experiences can be felt emotionally, cognitively, and physiologically (Herman et al., 2017).

*Turnover*: The number of individuals who leave a place of employment within a time frame, or the number of individuals who left employment compared to the number of individuals still employed (Kim et al., 2020).

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are aspects of the study that are believed but cannot be demonstrated to be true (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The first assumption was that participants were willing to participate in this study. The second assumption for this study was that the teachers would be truthful in answering the research questions. Participant interest in the study and willingness to be open and honest was vital to the validity of the data collected.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Research studies have been conducted on early childhood teacher job stress, but most of those studies had been quantitative (Cumming et al., 2020). I explored the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of early childhood teachers' experiences of job-related stress, as well as the effect of that stress on their decision to remain in or leave the profession. To fully understand teachers' perspectives, this study included former early childhood teachers who decided to leave the profession. Teachers must have been

employed for at least 1 year to participate in this study and possess a minimum of an associate degree in an education-related field. Former early childhood teachers were eligible to participate if they had left the profession within the past 5 years. I found participants by utilizing the Walden University participant pool and the NAEYC *Hello* message board, as well as through snowball sampling.

The scope of this research was an increased understanding of the subject of early childhood teacher job-related stress, in addition to the effect that situational context, coping skills, and teacher competence played in the experience of that stress (see Herman et al., 2020). During semi-structured telephone or Zoom interviews, I asked participants questions regarding their experiences with job-related stress to understand their perspectives. I also asked questions about whether they had considered leaving the profession, and for those who had already left, questions about what led them to make that decision.

I considered using affective events theory to guide this study. According to affective events theory, attitudes related to work develop because of daily affective experiences as well as an accumulation of those experiences (Carson et al., 2017; Cropanzano et al., 2017). I decided not to use this theory because I wanted my study to contribute to qualitative research on the intersectionality of coping, competence, and context with teachers' job-related stress and the subsequent impact on the decision to remain in or leave the profession.



### **Limitations**

Limitations in a study are potential weaknesses out of the researcher's control due to the research design choice, limited funding, or the number and location of participants (Price & Murnan, 2004). The following were limitations to this study. Qualitative studies have a small sample size which limits the transferability of the findings to a larger group. With a sample size of 12 participants, it was not possible to capture the perspectives of all early childhood teachers. I addressed this limitation by utilizing maximum variation sampling, purposely recruiting a diverse group of early childhood teachers regarding age, geographical location, and length of time in the field. A qualitative study also has the potential for bias in the participants' answers, who may share answers that they think I would like to hear instead of sharing their genuine responses. I addressed this limitation by encouraging honest responses, and participants were also reminded that their identities would be kept confidential as well as the name of their school or center (if they were currently teaching).

Although I designed the research questions for this study to be open-ended and capture the individual experience of each participant, there was a possibility that I might have missed something. I addressed this limitation by preparing an interview guide with supplemental prompts to guide the conversation and ensure I received the participants' most accurate information.

Researcher bias could have also influenced the outcome of this study. I recognized that I am biased toward early childhood teachers with associate degrees, believing that they are not as skilled as teachers who have achieved a bachelor's degree. I

addressed this by being transparent about the research process and reflecting on the process by using a research journal. I was also clear about the process through which data were analyzed and processed.

### **Significance**

A substantial number of early childhood teachers are leaving the field each year, at a rate of four times their elementary counterparts (Phillips et al., 2019). It was essential to examine how early childhood teachers experienced and processed job-related stress, because understanding their experiences could assist early childhood administrators with creating strategies to help lessen the effects of that stress. Addressing the causes of early childhood teacher job-related stress and how it impacts a decision to remain in or leave the profession might lead to programs making improvements to best support their teachers. Common themes emerged from the shared experiences of the individuals who left teaching. In that case, this may provide an opportunity for shared dialog between early childhood policy makers who are also committed to making a difference for teachers, especially because billions of dollars are spent each year recruiting and training new teachers (Kim et al., 2020).

Positive social change may come from this study with an understanding of why early childhood teachers decide to leave the profession. With an increased awareness of why teachers leave the profession and what factors influence why they stay, positive changes may occur within early childhood education programs to reduce causes of job-related stress for teachers. Early childhood teachers are essential to children's future

school success, so it is necessary to understand how to support them so that they can support their students (Jeon et al., 2019).

### **Summary**

Early childhood teacher job-related stress negatively affects all stakeholders: children, their families, the childcare program, community of residence, and society. Although studies have been conducted on teacher stress, limited research has been conducted with early childhood teachers on their experience with job-related stressors and the impact that those stressors have on the decision to remain in or leave the teaching profession. In Chapter 1, I identified the problem of early childhood teachers leaving the profession at high rates. I also identified the purpose of this qualitative study to contribute to the research of early childhood teacher stress by interviewing teachers who had left the profession and those who were still teaching. With 40% of new teachers leaving the field within their first 5 years, understanding their stress is essential to preventing this attrition (Herman et al., 2020). In Chapter 2, I describe the factors that contribute to early childhood teacher job-related stress by providing a review of the literature. I explain the research strategies used to become familiar with this topic, and I describe the coping-competence-context theory of teacher stress, which was used to guide this study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The best way to support positive outcomes for young children and their families is to invest in high-quality early childhood programs, and teachers are the key to high quality (NAEYC, 2018). Early childhood teachers' relationships with the children in their classroom directly impact children's social and emotional development, which later affects their success in school (Jeon et al., 2019). A teacher who is sensitive and responsive to the needs of their students, has positive interactions, provides emotional and instructional support, and encourages development is providing the ideal learning environment (Jeon et al., 2019).

Despite the understanding of the critical role of early childhood teachers, the job turnover rate for early childhood teachers is more than four times the turnover rate of elementary teachers, and the costliest consequence of this turnover is the effect on the children (Coor et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2020). Through turnover, children who lose their teacher must focus their time and attention on building a relationship with a new teacher instead of focusing that time and attention on growing and learning (Kim et al., 2020; McMullen et al., 2020; Schaack et al., 2021). Young children have a challenging time with turnover because it disrupts their daily routine, and these disruptions can lead to detrimental cognitive, social, and emotional impacts (Gagnon et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Kwon et al., 2020; McMullen et al., 2020; Schaack et al., 2021). The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers who work in settings serving children from birth to prekindergarten and former early childhood teachers who decided to leave the profession. My focus was to understand the

experiences of these individuals through the context of their settings, their feelings of competence as a teacher, and the skills they used to cope with any adverse experiences.

In this chapter, I identify the search strategies used to obtain primary and secondary research sources from the past 5 years focused on early childhood teacher stress and the impact of that stress on decisions to remain in or leave the profession. I present information on my conceptual framework, the coping-competence-context theory of teacher stress. The rest of the literature review contains information on defining stress and understanding the impact of organizational and personal characteristics on a teachers' stress levels. I conclude the chapter with a summary based on the information contained in this literature review.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature search strategy was a thorough review of current information on early childhood teacher job-related stress and the impact on teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the profession. During my time at Walden University, I focused many papers and assignments in my courses on the topic of early childhood teacher job-related stress and was able to read and collect articles about teacher well-being and turnover. I used the Walden Library to conduct in-depth searches in the following databases: Education Source, APA PsychInfo, and ERIC. I used Walden University's ProQuest Dissertations resource to access other dissertations relevant to my topic and used their reference list as a guide to find other articles. I also used Google Scholar to identify resources.

The search process was conducted using the primary concepts of *early childhood teachers* and *preschool teachers* and the secondary concepts of *burnout*, *job satisfaction*,

*job stress, occupational stress, and turnover*. As I read articles, I looked for common themes and sorted information into three categories: setting context, early childhood teachers' competence, and coping skills. I only included relevant, peer-reviewed articles published in the last 5 years unless the article was a seminal work related to one of the secondary concepts. I began the literature review for this study by researching the conceptual framework, the coping-competence-context theory of teacher stress.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The theory supporting this study is the coping-competence-context theory of teacher stress by Herman et al. (2020). This theory acknowledges that there are multiple causes of stress for teachers and various means of coping. This theory also identifies the importance of further research around teacher stress, creating a connection between job-related stress and adverse outcomes for students and teachers.

The coping-competence-context theory of teacher stress was created by combining aspects of three different theories into one: the transactional theory of stress, the stress mindset theory, and the prosocial classroom model. The transactional theory of stress conceptualizes stress and coping mechanisms across various professions, including education. Within this model, stress is experienced when there is an imbalance between the demands of the work and the resources available to meet those demands (Eddy et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2017). There are three steps within this model. The first step in this model is the primary appraisal of stress. A primary appraisal refers to how the individual views the stress as either a threat, a challenge, or something to ignore (Eddy et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2020). Suppose an individual sees stress as a challenge. In that case, they

perceive benefits to come as the result of the stressor, and the stress can be seen as pleasurable as the individual focuses on resolving the issues related to the stressor (Li et al., 2017). If an individual perceives the stress as a threat, they view the stressor with its potential to create feelings of loss; in addition, feelings of fear and anxiety are felt by the individual, and dysfunctional responses may be triggered (Li et al., 2017). The second step in this model is the secondary appraisal of stress. In this step, an individual looks at their capacity to cope with the stressor (Eddy et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2020). The third step in this model is the individual's response to the stressor, whether behavioral or cognitive (Eddy et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2020).

The stress mindset theory refers to the way individuals view stress-related consequences. A stress mindset is a metacognitive attitude about stress, which occurs in the presence or absence of stressors (Herman et al., 2020). Individuals who believe that stress is enhancing may see stress as a facilitator for growth and learning and thus experience less distress, depression, and anxiety (Kim et al., 2020). These individuals also experience increased energy, exhibit a positive work performance, and cope using effective planning and scheduling when faced with a heavy workload (Kim et al., 2020). Individuals who view stress as debilitating see it as decreasing performance and productivity and harmful to their overall health (Kim et al., 2020).

Emotional competence affects all aspects of teaching and is vital to creating positive relationships with the children in their classroom and children's cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development (Garner et al., 2019; Jennings, 2019). The prosocial classroom model highlights the importance of teacher social-emotional

competence in mitigating the harmful effects of job-related stress on teachers and their students (Herman et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2019). Emotional competence is multifaceted and essential in creating a positive classroom environment (Garner et al., 2019). Coping is a necessary skill to counteract the experience of stress. According to Eddy et al. (2019), there are two types of coping strategies: problem-focused and emotion-focused. Problem-focused strategies are used to change, reduce, or adapt to the demands of the environment, and emotion-focused strategies are used to lessen or cope with the emotional consequences of stress.

Herman et al. (2020) combined the transactional theory of stress, the stress mindset theory, and the prosocial classroom model to create a new framework for guiding further research on the topic of teacher stress called the coping-competence-context theory of teacher stress. The coping pathway includes individual characteristics contributing to stress responses and teachers' self-perceived coping skills and strategies. The competence pathway describes the connection between stress and teaching practices in the classroom. The context pathway identifies school, system, and professional policies and procedures that contribute to teacher stress (Herman et al., 2020). Early childhood teachers are simultaneously exposed to multiple stressors during their workday, creating a challenging working environment for them (Sjödin & Neely, 2017).

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**

While conducting the literature review on job-related stress for teachers, there were four patterns that emerged that are highlighted in this section. Other than the concept of stress in general, the research focused on the competency skills of teachers,



the contextual factors that create job-related stress or that can act as a buffer, and the coping skills used to counteract the effects of job-related stress.

## **Stress**

The concept of stress refers to emotional or mental strain that develops because of adverse circumstances (Roberts et al., 2019). Stress response in an individual causes the activation of the hypothalamus, resulting in cortisol release throughout the body (Sjödín & Neely, 2017). Stress is not harmful to an individual if it is countered by time for rest and recovery, but long-term stress can lead to symptoms of fatigue, depression, sleep issues, high blood pressure, and heart disease (Sjödín & Neely, 2017). An inability to cope with stress can also lead to burnout, a psychological condition that encompasses emotional exhaustion, fatigue, and a lack of confidence in one's skills and abilities (Roberts et al., 2019).

Several studies found the stressful nature of the work of early childhood teachers as a common factor for those teachers who have an intention to leave or have already left the profession (Kim et al., 2020; Kwon et al., 2020). Jeon et al. (2019), researched teachers in the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic regions found that job-related stress can be caused by children's behavior and guidance issues, conflict or limited communication with families, fellow teachers and program administrators, low status and compensation, limited resources, and time constraints. This job stress can become overwhelming, as teachers are simultaneously exposed to multiple stressors throughout the workday (Sjödín & Neely, 2017). Early childhood teachers' feelings of stress and burnout have been linked to high turnover rates and poor-quality classrooms (Carson et al., 2017; Coor et al.,

2017; Roberts et al., 2019). Turnover rates are often highest in programs with the most elevated stress; often, these programs are in disadvantaged communities and are receiving a significant amount of subsidized childcare dollars (Eadie et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2020). These early childhood teachers were less likely to receive support and job coaching and were more likely to view their work as a job instead of a career or profession (Johnson et al., 2020).

One of the side effects of persistent stress experienced by early childhood educators is occupational burnout, which may contribute to a teacher's decision to leave the profession and is characterized by three symptoms: emotional exhaustion, diminished enthusiasm for the work or depersonalization, and cynicism (Viotti et al., 2019). Eddy et al. (2019), in a study of Midwestern urban teachers, described these three symptoms in further detail. Emotional exhaustion is the fatigue that comes from experiencing high levels of stress within the job and causes a reduction in the energy needed to perform the daily responsibilities of an early childhood education teacher. Enthusiasm is the motivation and passion that a teacher has for the work they are doing with children. Depersonalization occurs as stress increases and enthusiasm decreases, and this causes feelings of disconnection from the profession and the students (Eddy et al., 2019). Diminished enthusiasm can bring forth cynicism toward the job location, the work the teachers are doing with children, or the profession in general. Burnout is positively correlated with teachers' decisions to leave the field of early childhood (Eddy et al., 2019).

The experience of job-related stress is unique to each teacher (Gagnon et al., 2019). Kim et al. (2020), in a study of early childhood teachers, found that a stress mindset predicted job stress and turnover within the course of a school year. Teachers who could identify the positive aspects of stress felt less stress and were less likely to leave their jobs than those teachers who only saw the harmful effects of stress (Kim et al., 2020). There are individual components of teaching stress, which include feeling a lack of competence as a teacher, needing support to cope with job-related stressors, experiencing a loss of satisfaction with teaching, and dealing with the disruption of the teaching process due to constant changes within the program (Gagnon et al., 2019). There are also several everyday job-related stressors of early childhood teachers. Viotti et al. (2019), in a large quantitative study of teachers, found there are specific aspects of teachers' roles that are challenging, including navigating the complex nature of children's developmental stages of growth, having a high workload, and teaching large numbers of students in small spaces or without adequate resources. Responding to children's challenging behavior while managing the rest of the class is stressful for early childhood teachers, as is meeting children's needs and parents' expectations for their children's learning. However, Thorpe et al. (2020) found work conditions were the most common source of job-related stress for early childhood education teachers, as well as a common reason shared by those teachers who decided to leave the field.

### ***Coping with Stress***

According to Herman et al. (2020), *coping* is the process by which an individual meets their daily needs when faced with unusual or unexpected circumstances. When

examining early childhood job-related stress, it is essential to look at the literature regarding the ways teachers cope with the demands of their profession. The transactional theory of stress further highlights the importance of coping to an individual's experience with stress (Eddy et al., 2019). Although early childhood teachers may experience the same types of job-related stress, the differences in their ability to adapt to those stressors can bring about different experiences with stress and different overall outcomes. Coping strategies mediated the effect of job-related stress on early childhood teachers' feelings of emotional exhaustion (Pogere et al., 2019).

### ***Parental Interactions May Cause Stress***

Working with children's parents or guardians is a requirement of an early childhood teacher and is often identified in the literature as a source of contextual stress (Eadie et al., 2021; Peele & Wolf, 2021). Faulkner et al. (2016), in a study of early childhood teacher focus groups, found that interacting with parents and meeting the needs of parents were significant predictors of job-related stress. Faulkner et al. (2016), in a qualitative study of early childhood teachers, found that interactions with parents and meeting the needs of the students' parents were sources of job-related stress for teachers.

Depending on the program type, early childhood teachers can spend a significant portion of the child's day with them. They desire to create a partnership with the parents or guardians of each child to optimize that child's growth and development. However, teachers commonly encounter parents or guardians who are not interested in communicating with them or blame them, especially if a teacher needs to share information related to a child's behavior problems or needs (Roberts et al., 2019). A

source of frustration for teachers is also those parents who do not seem to care about their child's education (Andrew et al., 2018). Viotti et al. (2019) found that early childhood teachers also identified managing unrealistic parental expectations as a source of job-related stress.

### ***Program Leadership***

The review of the literature found that the quality of a program's leadership can have a significant influence on early childhood teachers' coping strategies and feelings of job satisfaction, as an adverse work climate has been identified as a source of stress for early childhood teachers who have expressed an intent to leave the profession (Jennings, 2019). Early childhood teachers need a positive relationship with their program leadership to counter the effects of job-related stress (Jeon & Wells, 2018).

Teachers who do not feel supported or appreciated by their program leadership often negatively characterize their work environments (Eadie et al., 2021; Kwon et al., 2020). A negative work environment is characterized by feelings of tension and discomfort, conflicts with administration and coworkers, and poor communication with management (Ahmad et al., 2020; Kwon et al., 2020). Dealing with a lack of consistency in program operations or poor leadership can magnify the stress from a demanding profession and create an interest in leaving the field, as can unrealistic expectations from center administrators (Glazer, 2020; Kwon et al., 2020).

Conversely, a supportive work environment can promote teacher retention (Andrew et al., 2018). Jeon et al. (2018) found that a positive work environment was directly correlated with early childhood teachers' feelings of well-being and that ongoing

support (relationship with center director or administrator) and feelings of workplace satisfaction were positively associated with reducing early childhood teacher turnover. Support positively correlated with a lower turnover risk, as were relationships with colleagues (Eadie et al., 2021).

Early childhood teachers want to feel supported by their administrators. Andrew et al. (2018) and Jeon et al. (2018) found that teachers who felt supported by their administrators reported low burnout levels. Conversely, Schaack et al. (2021) found that teachers who left the field were more likely to have wanted help in their classroom but did not receive it, and found their work environments combative, constraining, and lacking in support and were more likely to decide to leave. In an earlier study, Schaack et al. (2020) identified teachers' appraisals of the psychosocial aspects of their workplace climate had a significant impact on their intentions to remain in the profession. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) also found a positive correlation between lack of administrative support and turnover in teachers. Job satisfaction is a multidimensional concept that includes the emotional connection with a supportive supervisor and colleagues.

Early childhood teachers want to feel respected and valued, and they want administrators to hear their needs and be responsive (Kwon et al., 2020). Teachers also need to hear that their administrators appreciate them. Supportive leaders impact the level of fulfillment teachers feel in their work and are essential in creating a positive, supportive climate (Schaack et al., 2020; Stormont & Young-Walker, 2017). Providing teachers support is necessary to combat further the demands placed on teachers by their

work with children and their families (Al-Adwan & Al-Khayat, 2017). A positive work environment is needed for teachers to be effective, which creates a more stable program for the children and families enrolled (Jennings, 2019). Cumming (2017) found that quality work environments, support from colleagues, and autonomy were positively associated with higher job satisfaction and lower stress.

### ***The Workplace as a Community***

A sense of community within an early childhood education setting positively impacts a teacher's sense of well-being and their ability to cope with job-related stressors. Newberry and Allsop (2017) and Thorpe et al. (2020) found a direct correlation between the workplace setting and an individual's decision to remain in the profession. A workplace that brings forth a sense of community is one that feels warm and comforting, promotes respect for all, allows teachers to feel respected and understood as well as safe and valued (McMullen et al., 2020). Staff morale, involvement in decision-making, and respect are other factors identified in creating that sense of community (Thorpe et al., 2020). Teachers who feel socially connected to their workplace and supported by their peers can exchange ideas and troubleshoot concerns with children or the daily classroom routine (Ahmad et al., 2020; Blochliger & Bauer, 2018; Schaack et al., 2020). According to Zhou et al. (2020), positive social support in the workplace can buffer teachers' feelings of exhaustion because of job-related stress. This connection helps teachers' feelings of self-efficacy in their work. A positive school culture enhances teachers' satisfaction and motivation, as does their commitment to their work and the children in their care (Atmaca et al., 2020).

### ***Teacher Commitment and Intrinsic Motivation***

Some teachers use a commitment to teach as a means of coping with the demands of their work with young children. Early childhood teachers care deeply about children, believe that work is meaningful and rewarding, and are motivated to make a difference in the lives of their students (Atmaca et al., 2020; Kwon et al., 2020). Teacher commitment encompasses the connection between teachers, their place of employment, and the early childhood profession, as well as their belief in the effectiveness of the work they are doing with children, their willingness to put forth the physical and emotional effort for their work, and their desire to continue (Grant et al., 2019).

Several researchers have described how early childhood teachers' intrinsic motivation is related to their commitment to staying in the profession. Andrew et al. (2018) found that many early childhood teachers identify the students as the reason for remaining in the teaching profession as the work with students is meaningful and worthwhile. Teaching is a profession in which individuals are intrinsically motivated to make a difference in the lives of children (Grant et al., 2019). The greater the intrinsic motivation, the more likely the teacher will remain in the profession, despite job-related stressors. Stormont and Young-Walker (2017) found that early childhood teachers' commitment levels directly impacted the effects of job-related stress. A commitment to the work comes from the work with students and the degree to which a teacher feels committed to their workplace.

The level of identification with their place of employment and feelings of ownership or contribution to the program's overall success is a positive buffer for the



effects of job-related stress (Ponnock et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2020). According to Zhou et al. (2020), organizational commitment consists of three dimensions: affective, normative, and continuance. Affective commitment consists of the emotional bonds that a teacher feels with their center or program, often cultivated by positive daily work experiences. Normative commitment is the feeling of obligation a teacher has to their work location. Continued commitment recognizes the social and emotional costs of leaving their students and program.

### **Competence in Teaching**

*Competence* is defined as having a sufficient level of knowledge or skill for a particular skill or task (Herman et al., 2020). Within the coping-competence-context theory, competence is indicative of the connection between stress and classroom practices, specifically in terms of their interactions with students (Herman et al., 2020). Differences in early childhood teacher preparation, feelings of self-efficacy in teachers, and working with children who display behavioral challenges were featured prominently in the research. Barni et al. (2019) found that teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy were positively associated with strong academic outcomes for students. Viotti et al. (2019), studied several hundred childcare providers and found a positive correlation between perspectives of competence and intent to remain in the profession.

### ***Teacher Preparation***

The amount of preparation a teacher receives before entering the classroom affects their experience with job-related stress. There is a wide range of preparation requirements for teachers within early childhood education programs, experience

working with young children, and knowledge of child development and effective pedagogy (Stormont & Young-Walker, 2017). Some programs will require their teachers to possess an associate or bachelor's degree, whereas others require only a high school diploma. This is consistent in most states (Bassok et al., 2021). According to the NAEYC (2018), this lack of coherence in teacher preparation and qualification has created an inconsistent and undervalued profession. Jeon and Wells (2018) researched early childhood education teachers and found that teachers' educational preparation was significantly associated with turnover. Teachers who had obtained an associate degree, or higher, were more likely to remain in their teaching position than teachers with no educational background. Eadie et al. (2021) found that professionally prepared teachers have a more profound knowledge of child development, practice effective pedagogy, and react less to children who exhibit challenging behaviors.

Teachers must be prepared for the program in which they are working and have an orientation of the program's values and beliefs and an orientation to the job requirements and what is entailed in working with children (Kwon et al., 2020). Less experienced and prepared teachers tend to report higher stress levels, especially as they have not had adequate time to develop their identity as a teacher and develop their professional values and goals (Kim et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). If teachers are not appropriately prepared in the knowledge of child development and the significance of attachment, they may also struggle in developing relationships with the students in their classroom.

### *Continuity of Care in Early Childhood Classrooms*

A significant amount of literature identified the secondary impact of early childhood teacher stress on children's growth and development (Jennings, 2019; Jeon et al., 2019). Becker et al. (2017), in a study of early childhood classroom teachers in the Midwest, found that perspectives of workplace stress directly impacted the level of conflict that teachers had with their students. Jeon et al. (2019) found that when early childhood teachers report a high level of stress, they perceive their students as having more behavioral issues and lacking social skills.

The relationships between early childhood teachers and their students can predict their social-emotional competence and academic achievement and may have a more significant effect on children's positive outcomes than a teacher's level of education or training (Becker et al., 2017; Garner et al., 2019). Children who experienced continuity of care scored higher on self-control and social competence skills and exhibited fewer behavioral challenges than children who experienced a change in their teachers (Kwon et al., 2020; McMullen et al., 2020). Teachers who develop close relationships with their students have warm, positive interactions and gently guide their development. In contrast, teachers who struggle in developing relationships with children experience conflict and frustrated interactions (Becker et al., 2017). Chronic stress experienced by early childhood teachers can negatively impact children's overall development and learning, especially regarding their social and emotional development (Jennings, 2019; McMullen et al., 2020). Children enrolled in classrooms with teachers who report high levels of stress have a physiological reaction to their experiences in the classroom, as these

teachers are less likely to be emotionally responsive to their students and engage in positive interactions (Eadie et al., 2021; Herman et al., 2017). High salivary cortisol levels have been found in children, and over time, stress is exhibited through worsening behavior (Eddy et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2017). Teachers can impact children's success in school by the relationships they develop with their students (McNally & Slutsky, 2017). Teachers who demonstrate sensitivity and positive behavior support, are responsive to every child, and engage in positive teacher-child relationships have confident and engaged students in learning (Eadie et al., 2021). However, if job-related stress impacts how teachers view their students, particularly their behaviors, these positive relationships will not develop (McNally & Slutsky, 2017).

### ***Teaching Children with Behavioral Challenges***

Managing challenging behaviors makes early childhood teachers even more at risk for experiencing stress and deciding to leave the profession (Eadie et al., 2021; Stormont & Young-Walker, 2017). Jeon et al. (2018) surveyed early childhood teachers and found that children's challenging behaviors were positively associated with teachers' feelings of emotional exhaustion. Teachers who reported a higher number of children with problematic behavior in their classrooms were more likely to report feeling emotionally exhausted (Schaack et al., 2020). Emotional exhaustion directly predicts teachers' intentions to leave the profession (Schaack et al., 2020).

Jeon et al. (2019) found that teachers who experienced high stress evaluated students' behavior and social competence critically. Gupta (2019) found that early childhood teachers who experienced depression because of job-related stress do not

provide needed emotional responsiveness to their students, which can cause those students to show more aggression toward others. These teachers also are less likely to use evidence-based behavioral intervention strategies in the classroom to address this behavior (Eddy et al., 2019). Failure to address behavioral challenges appropriately in the early years can place a child at risk for academic loss and other school-related trouble (McNally & Slutsky, 2017).

### **The Context in which Teaching Occurs**

*Context* is defined as the interrelated aspects of an experience (Herman et al., 2020). Regarding early childhood teaching, context is the school systems and policies that impact that teacher (Harris et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2020). Context is things within an organization, responsibilities assigned to the teacher, or events outside of the workplace that impact the teacher's feelings of job-related stress. Jeon et al. (2018) investigated over a thousand early childhood teachers across the United States and found that a positive work environment was associated with teachers' feelings of well-being. Ainsworth and Oldfield (2019), Carroll et al. (2020), and Redding and Henry (2018) found that context was the most important predictor for teachers' adaptation to job-related stress.

### ***Organizational characteristics of the Child Care Program***

Organizational characteristics, such as the number of students in a classroom, the amount of paperwork teachers are expected to complete, and the amount of program funding has been found by multiple researchers to have a direct impact on early childhood teachers' perspectives of job-related stress (Jeon & Wells, 2018; Perryman &

Calvert, 2019; Schaack et al., 2020). Early childhood teachers carry a heavy workload between completing daily paperwork requirements, managing a classroom of young children, and navigating other program requirements such as completing developmental screenings or ongoing child assessments (Sjödin & Neely, 2017). These teachers receive insufficient (or non-existent) planning and preparation time, with the most common reason being that staffing levels are inadequate within the program. During the day, breaks for teachers are too short, non-existent, or spent in the classroom while children are napping (Blochliger & Bauer, 2018). Blochliger and Bauer (2018), in their study of teachers, found a significant association between workload and feelings of burnout in teachers. Poor working conditions, long hours, and low salaries and benefits are additional organizational characteristics that can impact teachers' stress and work in high-poverty communities with large minority populations (Kim et al., 2020).

Another source of organizational stress for early childhood teachers is role conflict when they are asked to act in a manner that conflicts with their professional or personal beliefs (Schaack et al., 2020). Role conflict can occur because of cultural and child-rearing beliefs, teaching practices, or philosophical orientation to the field of early childhood education, especially if they do not align with the program in which they are teaching (Santoro, 2019; Schaack et al., 2020).

### ***Expanding Early Childhood Teacher Responsibilities***

The literature review recognized a shift in the job demands of early childhood teachers. The earliest childcare programs were known as 'nursery schools,' where parents brought their children for care and socialization. Over the decades, the field of early

childhood has evolved into a kindergarten preparation program, with a tremendous expansion in the responsibilities of early childhood teachers. In the last several years, a spotlight on early childhood programs has placed increased pressure and accountability on teachers to ensure adequate student academic outcomes (Al-Adwan & Al-Khayat, 2017; Gagnon et al., 2019). These teachers are now responsible for developing children's emergent literacy, math, and science skills and their social-emotional development, in addition to managing daily meals and rest times and changing diapers (Gagnon et al., 2019; Schaack et al., 2020). Despite these added responsibilities given to early childhood teachers, they are often compensated less than those working in the fast-food industry. Early childhood teachers ranked between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> percentile for average earnings for all occupations and often need to utilize public assistance and have a second job to make ends meet (Roberts et al., 2019). Glazer (2018) studied teachers who had left the profession and found many teachers had become frustrated with a curriculum that they were forced to implement and were measured against.

Early childhood teachers are also welcoming a diverse group of children into their classrooms, including children for whom English is not their first language, children who have experienced trauma, children with medical or behavioral needs, and children with intellectual or developmental disabilities (Schaack et al., 2020). Depending on the program in which they are working, early childhood teachers are also responsible for conducting child screening and assessment, developing daily lesson plans across developmental domains, differentiating instruction for every child, supervising other teachers, and working with coaches to improve their teaching practice (Schaack et al.,

2020). From a reward-imbalance perspective, when the demands of teaching exceed the resources available, stress can occur.

Compassion fatigue, also known as secondary trauma, can develop in teachers caring for young children who have experienced trauma (Levkovich & Gada, 2020). Levkovich and Gada (2020) found that most teachers have helped at least one child (and their family) as they experienced trauma, causing teachers' emotional, behavioral, and physical responses. Emotional exhaustion is a positive predictor of adverse teacher outcomes over time (Eddy et al., 2019). If early childhood teachers are already at risk of experiencing secondary trauma, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a more unstable environment for these teachers.

### ***The Impact of COVID-19 on Early Childhood Teachers***

The impact of COVID-19 on the early childhood teaching profession has been profound, and the aftereffects of dealing with this virus will be felt for years (Nagasawa & Tarrant, 2020). Early childhood teachers were found to be as worried for the health and safety of their students as they were for their loved ones (Dayal & Tiko, 2020). Most teachers are not trained in trauma-informed care, and their supervisors are not adequately prepared to give the supervision teachers need while facing this unprecedented crisis (Nagasawa & Tarrant, 2020). In a profession in which the relationship between the early childhood teacher and student is essential and cultivated daily through face-to-face interaction, teachers struggled to create that relationship via Zoom or telephone.

Teachers working remotely have been found to rate their emotional well-being worse than teachers working face-to-face or teachers whose programs are closed, as they



are missing the opportunity to form social-emotional bonds with their students while trying to teach via the computer (Nagasawa & Tarrant, 2020). Unfortunately, more information is needed to understand the burden placed on early childhood teachers by remote learning, supporting children and families through hardship, and their own personal and professional demands created by COVID-19 (Eadie et al., 2021). Qualitative research is needed to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' job-related experiences during this global crisis.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

After reviewing the literature, I found evidence of several factors related to early childhood teacher job-related stress and evidence of the residual impact of that stress on the children in the classroom. The gap in practice that this study addresses is how early childhood teachers experience and cope with job-related stressors and their decisions to remain in or leave the profession. Additional research was needed to understand the impact of this stress on early childhood teachers to understand better what can be done to mitigate the effects of stress and encourage teachers to remain in their positions. I designed this study to understand better the impact of job-related stress from the perspectives of current and former early childhood teachers using semi-structured interviews via telephone or zoom. In Chapter 3, I described the research design and rationale, my role as researcher, and the methodology, including instrumentation and the procedure for recruiting participants. I also defined the data collection and analysis plan and the steps I took to create a trustworthy and ethical study to examine the perspectives

of teachers experiencing job-related stress and the impact of that stress on the decision to remain in or leave the profession.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of job-related stressors and how those stressors impact their decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession. Early childhood teachers are critical to developing young children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. The gap in practice that this study addressed was how early childhood teachers experience and cope with job-related stressors and their decisions to remain in or leave the profession. Additional research was needed to understand early childhood teachers' experiences so that efforts might be made to mitigate the effects of job-related stress and reduce turnover. This chapter provides information regarding the research design and rationale for this study and explains my role as the researcher. I explain participant selection and participation processes and how data was collected and analyzed. Finally, I discuss ethical procedures for this study as well as how I established trustworthiness.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The following questions were used to address this research:

- RQ 1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of job-related stressors?
- RQ 2: What strategies are early childhood teachers using to cope with job-related stressors?
- RQ 3: How do job-related stressors impact teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the profession?

The research tradition selected for this study was a basic qualitative approach. A basic qualitative study is designed to contribute to the fundamental knowledge of an issue (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In this study, I was interested in understanding early childhood teachers' experiences involving job-related stress and how it affected their choice to remain in or leave the profession. Early childhood teachers are leaving the profession, with 46% of teachers leaving their positions each year, and 61% of teachers reporting describing their work as often or always stressful (Jeon & Ardeleanu, 2020; Kwon et al., 2020). Investigating early childhood teachers' experiences involving job-related stress helped address how that stress impacts their decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession.

Interviews are often used in basic qualitative research. Using interviews allows the researcher to discover what may not be otherwise obvious through observation alone. Interviewing is an iterative process as the researcher gathers information, analyzes it, and compares it to what is known about the phenomenon under study (Babbie, 2017). In discussing job-related stress and the impact of that stress on decisions to remain in or leave the profession, guided interviews were the best method for understanding early childhood teachers' unique experiences. I conducted semi-structured interviews by telephone or Zoom to explore early childhood teacher stress and how that stress impacted their decision to remain in or leave the teaching profession.

I considered using a case study approach for this study, but decided not to choose this tradition because it is more appropriate for studying individual cases in significant depth than a widespread phenomenon. Although I was interested in exploring experiences

of individual early childhood teachers, the focus of this study was in finding a heterogeneous mix of participants. I also considered an ethnographic study, but this approach typically involves the researcher spending a significant amount of time in person with the participant (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Finally, I considered using a grounded theory approach to this study. Grounded theory is typically used for the result of developing ideas as a result of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). My purpose for this study was to understand the experiences of early childhood teachers with job-related stress. In the future, I hope to continue my research in looking at specific strategies that programs can utilize to help alleviate teachers' stress.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the sole researcher in this study, I was an active participant in the interviews. I purposely designed this study to find teachers outside of my community to reduce the likelihood of personal or professional relationships with study participants. My background as an early childhood teacher, administrator, trainer, and college instructor could have led to biases regarding examination of job-related stress and the impact on decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession. I acknowledged that I was biased toward any early childhood teachers who did not possess a bachelor's degree, as I believe they are not as prepared for classroom success. To minimize my bias, I followed the interview protocol while interviewing participants. The bracketing process is also recommended to mitigate effects of researcher bias during qualitative interviewing (Burkholder et al., 2020). I used reflexive journaling to bracket my assumptions and values during data collection and analysis.

## Methodology

### Participant Selection

The study population included early childhood teachers who were currently teaching as well as former teachers who decided to leave the profession and gain employment outside of early childhood education. Current or former early childhood teachers must have been employed in the field for a minimum of 1 year to have been eligible to participate and possess a minimum of an associate degree in an education-related field. I interviewed a total of 12 early childhood teachers. Six of these teachers were currently working in the field, and six were former teachers who decided to leave the profession. Former early childhood teachers were eligible to participate if they had left the profession within the past 5 years. Participating teachers had taught children between birth and prekindergarten in a licensed childcare center. Head Start and Early Head Start teachers, state-funded school readiness program teachers, and those who taught in public, private, and corporate childcare centers were encouraged to participate. Individuals who worked in family childcare homes or provided unlicensed care in their or the child's home were not included in this study, as the focus of the study was understanding the impact of job-related stress that came from working in a larger program.

Purposive sampling was used to obtain participants via the Walden University participant pool and the NAEYC *Hello* message board, using a study invitation to recruit participants. Once the first study participants were identified, I used snowball sampling to

recruit additional participants. Snowball sampling involves using current participants to identify other potential participants (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Once I received contact information from interested participants, I emailed them a consent form for participation and asked them reply to the email with the words ‘I consent’ within three days. Once the consent was received via email, I scheduled the interview with the participant. If consent was not received within 3 days, I did reach out and remind the individual to reply with the words “I consent,” and I also ensured that all questions were answered. If there was no reply, I moved on to another potential participant. I continued this process until I had recruited 12 current or former early childhood teachers that met the criteria to participate in my study. Six of these teachers were currently working in the field, and six were former teachers who decided to leave the profession.

According to Burkholder et al. (2020), small sample sizes are appropriate for a study where participants know the phenomenon under study and narrow research objectives. I concluded the interviews once I had reached the maximum number of participants. However, I was also confident that data saturation has occurred, as there was no longer new or relevant information emerging from the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### **Instrumentation**

In this qualitative study, I conducted semi-structured interviews by telephone or via Zoom using interview questions (see Appendix A) as the means to collect data. Interview questions were written to elicit information from early childhood teachers regarding their experiences with job-related stress and how that stress impacted their

decisions to remain in or leave the profession. Interviews are a source of rich information for researchers (Burkholder et al., 2020). In semi-structured interviews, the researcher has identified interview questions to ask participants that relate to the study research questions as well as additional probing questions that may be needed to elicit further information on a topic.

I also utilized an interview guide (see Appendix B) to ensure consistency with each interview. This interview guide provided space to record the date, start and stop time of the interview, and demographic information on the teacher being interviewed. The guide also contained information that was read to open the study, such as the study purpose, informed consent, the interview questions and probes, and the closing statement.

Interview questions and probes were created to answer the research questions. They were designed to explore the depth of early childhood teachers' experiences of job-related stress and how that stress impacted their decisions to remain in or leave the profession. To ensure construct validity, I asked three early childhood teachers, two current and one former, to review the interview questions to ensure they would provide information to answer the research questions. I also conducted two practice interviews with one current and one former early childhood teacher to become comfortable with the interview protocol and the recording tools utilized.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

I utilized the Walden University participant pool to recruit teachers for this study as well as the NAEYC *Hello* message board, using a study invitation. Once I received notification that a teacher was interested in participating, I emailed the study consent



agreement to read and asked for a reply to the email with the words 'I consent'. Once the indication of consent was received, the interview was scheduled at a time most convenient for the participant. A confirmation email was sent to the participant the day before the interview.

Data collection took place using semi-structured interviews conducted via telephone or Zoom, using the interview guide (see Appendix B). As the sole researcher for the study, I collected the data. For telephone interviews, I used the speakerphone function of my iPhone and recorded audio via my laptop. I asked every participant for their consent to record the conversation. For interviews conducted via Zoom, I audio recorded the interviews. Participants were not required to enable their webcam for the interview, but I did have my webcam enabled so that participants could see me. I interviewed 12 early childhood teachers, who possessed a minimum of an associate degree in an education-related field and who had been employed for at least 1 year to gain insight on early childhood teachers' experiences of job-related stress and how that stress impacted their decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession. Six of these teachers were currently working in the field, and six were former teachers who decided to leave the profession. Former early childhood teachers were eligible to participate if they had left the profession within the past 5 years. Each interview took between 45 to 60 minutes to complete. The entire data collection process took two months to complete.

Semi-structured interviews took place with questions designed to elicit information on early childhood teachers' experiences with job-related stress and how that stress impacted their decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession. Semi-

structured interviews are typical in qualitative research and allow the researcher an opportunity to probe participants for additional information on their responses to focused research questions (Burkholder et al., 2020). The interview guide (see Appendix B) structured the conversation between me and each research participant and served as the instrument of inquiry on early childhood teachers' experiences of job-related stress and how that stress impacts their decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession.

Interview dates and times were scheduled based on availability of the research participants and were limited to two interviews per day. Participants were greeted warmly on the day of the interview. After introducing myself, I reviewed the interview protocol, including informed consent, confidentiality, the rights of study participants, the purpose and importance of the study, and their participation. I made sure there were no questions before we got started, reminded them that the interview would take between 45-60 minutes, and obtained their permission to record the interview. The interview guide (see Appendix B) was utilized with each interview to ensure that participants were asked the same questions in the same order. I established trust and rapport with each participant by being warm and engaging to ensure that they felt comfortable speaking with me. I paused during the interview to check for any questions they had. After the interview, I thanked the participant for their time and reminded them that I would send them a two-page summary of the study findings and invite them to share any additional comments.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The analysis of qualitative data is a recursive process in which the researcher moves back and forth within the data, looking for meaning (Braun et al., 2017). To

organize the data analysis for this study, I used Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (2006) to conduct a theoretical thematic analysis of the data.

Phase 1 of analysis is to become familiar with the data. After each interview, I sent the audio recording to a web-based service called Transcribe, which uses artificial intelligence to translate audio files into text while ensuring privacy. Once the text was received, I compared the audio and text to ensure accuracy. To immerse myself in the data, I began with an inductive analysis, actively reading and rereading participants' responses several times, making notes in the margins of the transcript and identifying potential codes. Once that was completed, I then conducted a deductive analysis. I used the a priori codes from the framework; coping, competence, and context to review the data. Using memos, I created a list of ideas about what is contained in the data and why I found this data interesting as I worked through this first phase.

In Phase 2 of analysis, I focused on using a priori and open codes to organize the data into initial codes. Coding is the process of identifying pieces of data that are of interest to the researcher and are relevant to the phenomenon under study (Braun et al., 2017). Using the conceptual framework as a guide, I used a priori coding, coding data segments that were relevant to the coping-competence-context theory of teacher stress. Once I had finished a priori coding, open coding was used with each transcript to code other relevant pieces of data. To organize myself during this phase, I used color-coded highlighting to go through each transcript several times to ensure that I had captured the relevant data. I created a codebook while analyzing the data to track my a priori and open coding.

Once I was confident that I had identified all existing codes and placed them in appropriate categories using axial coding, Phase 3 of analysis was identifying emerging themes. In this phase, categories were expanded and collapsed to become themes that were used to answer the RQs. A visual representation was helpful in this phase, so I created a Microsoft Excel document to organize the data pertinent to each code and category. I then looked at the codes organized under each category to identify emerging themes within the data. Phase 4 of the analysis was reviewing and refinement of themes. The first level of review and refinement in this phase was to look at each theme's data points to ensure that they were relevant and create a discernible pattern for that theme. The second level of review was to look at the entire data set to ensure that the identified themes accurately reflect meanings uncovered within the data analysis. Once this was established, Phase 5 of the analysis process was defining and naming the emerging themes. I created a detailed analysis for each theme, identifying the meaning behind each theme and how the themes related to each other as well as to the overall data. During this phase, I identified whether there were any subthemes within the themes. I also utilized member checking within the phase, sending a two-page summary of the study findings to study participants and inviting them to share feedback within 3 days of receipt of the summary.

The sixth and final phase of analysis is reporting of the data, which is written to tell the story of the data so that it convinces the reader of the importance and validity of the study. In this phase, I ensured that my reporting contained enough evidence of the

themes I had identified within the data and was written as an analytic narrative that answered the research questions posed within the study.

### **Trustworthiness**

Credibility in a qualitative study means that data collected aligns with the research questions (Burkholder et al., 2020). Ravitch & Carl (2021) described establishing credibility as the ability of the researcher to design a study that will address complexities that are a part of qualitative research and have a seamless transition between research methods and findings. I used member checking, also known as participant validation, to establish the credibility of this study. Study participants were provided a summary of the themes found after data collection. They were invited to give feedback on those themes within three days of receipt of the summary. With member checking, I ensured that an accurate representation of the experiences of early childhood teachers with job-related stress had been captured and how that stress impacted the decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession.

Transferability refers to the quantitative concept of external validity or the degree to which findings from a study can be generalized to the population of interest for the study (Burkholder et al., 2020). Although the purpose of qualitative research is not to generalize the findings from the sample to an entire population, every study needs to have meaning (Burkholder et al., 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I established transferability by using a variety of means to recruit participants, either by the Walden University participant pool or early childhood social media websites. I also used snowball sampling once initial participants have been interviewed.

Dependability refers to the stability of research data. It is established when there is consistency within data collection, data analysis, and the sharing of results, with any adjustments in methodology explained by the researcher (Burkholder et al., 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Dependability is also established when the data a researcher has gathered answers the study's research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Once all interviews were transcribed and the data analyzed, I utilized a peer debriefer to ensure the accuracy of the data. I found a peer debriefer who was familiar with the phenomenon of early childhood teacher stress, but unconnected to me or the study. Also known as dialogic engagement, the role of the peer debriefer is to provide critical feedback on the data analysis, whether the findings of the study are logical and grounded in the data, and if the interpretations are reasonable. A peer debriefer is essential to creating a rigorous and valid study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Confirmability is established when other knowledgeable researchers arrive at the same conclusions while reviewing the data within a study (Burkholder et al., 2020). Qualitative researchers seek to have confirmable data and are clear about any biases and prejudices that may impact interpretation of data from their study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I used an audit trail to establish confirmability in this study. An audit trail provides a detailed description of data collection and theme identification and information on how decisions were made throughout the study and are derived from memos and reflexive journals created during data collection and analysis (Burkholder et al., 2020).

## **Ethical Procedures**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed this study before I began recruiting participants and collecting data. I completed all necessary IRB documents to ensure that the board had the information to determine ethical procedures had been designed to reduce any potential harm to the human subjects. I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative's (CITI) human subjects' protection training module and followed the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice in this study (Burkholder et al., 2020).

This study did not cause harm to the participants. I did not have any personal or professional affiliation with any participant in this study. Before data was collected, I emailed a consent form to the potential study participant. This consent form described the purpose of this research, the length of time for participation, and the measures taken to ensure that any identifiable information is kept confidential. Participants replied to the email with the words 'I consent' indicating their willingness to participate in the study.

Before beginning the interview, participants were reminded of the purpose of the research study, their rights as a research subject, and the measures taken to maintain their confidentiality. I periodically checked that participants were comfortable enough to continue with the interview questions during the interview process. Participants could stop at any time during the interview process. I reminded study participants of their rights again when they were contacted to provide any feedback on study results.

Data was kept confidential. Identifiers such as P1, P2, etc., were created to protect the identities of all study participants. Interview data was stored on a password-protected

computer within my home office. Data will be kept for 5 years as required by Walden University and to ensure confidentiality. After 5 years, upon final approval by the research committee, recorded materials will be erased, any paper copies will be shredded, and computer files will be deleted.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I provided information about the design of this research study and the rationale for choosing a basic qualitative approach to the study. I explained my role as the sole researcher and described the steps to manage researcher bias. I described the methodology for selecting participants and the process involved in developing the interview guide for use with participants. Information on the data collection, analysis, and storage procedure was shared, as were steps taken to ensure an ethical, trustworthy study. In Chapter 4, I include the results of the study, including participant demographics, data collection and analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and the research results.



## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of job-related stressors and how those stressors impact their decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession. The research questions used in the study addressed early childhood teachers' perspectives of job-related stressors, strategies early childhood teachers use to cope with job-related stressors, and how job-related stressors impact teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession. I sought participants by using the Walden University participant pool, the NAEYC *Hello* discussion board, and snowball sampling. Those who replied "I consent" were scheduled for an interview via Zoom or by telephone. Interviews were scheduled at a time most convenient for the participants. I used the audio recording function on Zoom to record the conversation with each participant and then sent each audio file to an online transcription program to be transcribed verbatim. Phone interviews were recorded using an audio recorder within Microsoft Word. The interview transcriptions were analyzed using a priori, open, and axial coding to identify emerging themes to answer the research questions. Chapter 4 includes the results of the study, including a description of the selection of participants, participant demographics, and the procedure for data collection and analysis.

### **Setting**

I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews from my home office using Zoom or the telephone. The participants for this study were 12 early childhood teachers; half of whom were current teachers, and the other half were former early childhood

teachers who had left the profession. Participants were recruited using maximum variation and snowball sampling and had experienced job-related stress. Participants were from across the United States and had all been employed in the field for a minimum of 1 year, reporting their teaching experience as ranging from 4 years to 35 years.

There were no unplanned situations that affected the analysis of the data during this study. Ten interviews were conducted via Zoom, and two were conducted via the telephone. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed by using Transcribe, an online transcription service. I then began the coding and analysis process.

### **Demographics**

This study was conducted with participants who resided across the United States. A total of 12 early childhood teachers participated in the study, six current and six former teachers. All 12 participants earned a minimum of an associate degree in education or a related field and worked in a licensed setting for a minimum of 1 year. Former teachers had left the field within the past 5 years. Teaching experience ranged from 4 to 35 years. Each participant was assigned a code at the time of their interview. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants' code, gender, number of years in the field, state of residence, and whether they were a current or former teacher.

**Table 1***Research Participants*

Participant identifier	Gender	Number of years in the field	State of residence	Current (C) or former (F) teacher
P1	F	12	Indiana	F
P2	F	15	Georgia	F
P3	F	4	New York	C
P4	F	35	North Carolina	C
P5	F	11	California	F
P6	F	30	North Carolina	C
P7	F	9	Texas	F
P8	F	21	Kentucky	F
P9	F	8	Ohio	C
P10	F	9	California	C
P11	F	10	Tennessee	F
P12	F	12	Illinois	C

**Data Collection**

Data collection began once I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB approval number for this study was 01-04-22-0751168. I used maximum variation sampling and snowball sampling in the recruitment of participants for this study. I began recruitment by posting information on the study in the Walden University participant pool. After receiving approval from NAEYC, I also posted information on the study within their *Hello* discussion board, which widened my access to potential study participants. Once a participant expressed interest in participating in my study, a consent form was emailed which explained the purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, privacy measures, and the voluntary nature of the study. I asked the potential participant to reply to my email with the words "I consent" if they were interested in participating in the study. An interview was then scheduled at a date and time most convenient to the participant.

The data collection process took 2 months. Ten of the participants chose to participate via Zoom, and two participants chose to be interviewed via telephone. Participants were offered a range of dates and times from which to choose for their interview. Each participant was interviewed once, and the length of the interviews were between 45–60 minutes. I asked each participant the same series of questions to ensure reliability of the data. At the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, the elements of the consent form, and the interview process. I began each interview by collecting demographic information to obtain participants' state of residence, number of years teaching in the early childhood field, and whether they were a current or former teacher. After each interview, I took notes of my thoughts and feelings about each interview in a reflexive journal to help manage any potential bias. Interviews on Zoom were recorded using the audio recording feature. Participants were told to leave their cameras off during the interview if they chose to. The audio record feature via Microsoft Word was used to record the interviews that occurred via telephone.

After finishing each interview, I expressed my appreciation to the participant for their time and willingness to participate in my study. I shared they would receive a summary of the study findings once I was finished with data analysis. Before concluding my time with each participant, I made sure there were no additional thoughts or questions about the topic. I also reminded participants they could reach out to me anytime if they had any additional thoughts or questions after the interview concluded.

The audio recordings from each interview were transcribed verbatim. Recordings and transcripts from the interviews were stored in my home on my password-protected

computer. All the data collection steps that were identified in Chapter 3 were followed exactly as written. There were no unexpected issues that took place during the data collection process.

### **Data Analysis**

In this basic qualitative study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives of job-related stress and how that stress impacts their decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession through conducting one-on-one interviews with current and former teachers. Each participant was asked the same questions in the same order. After completing each interview, I sent the audio recording to Transcribe, an online transcription service, to transcribe the audio recording into a written word document. I reviewed each transcript to ensure accuracy and made necessary corrections when the transcription software transcribed a word or phrase incorrectly. These written transcripts were necessary so that I could analyze participants' comments line by line for data analysis purposes. I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for the analysis of data: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining, and naming the themes, and writing the report. There were no unexpected conditions encountered during the data analysis process.

While examining the data, I used an inductive analysis to determine the themes. I read through each transcript twice to familiarize myself with the data. Then, I assigned the a priori codes of coping, competence, and context to relevant pieces of data. Next, I used open coding to assign codes to other pieces of data that were relevant to the early childhood teacher's experience with job-related stress and the impact of that stress on

decisions to remain in or leave the profession. Once a priori and open coding were completed, I used axial coding to create categories from the codes. I then examined the categories to ensure that they were appropriate, collapsing and reorganizing them as needed. As I did this, themes emerged. Next, I reviewed the themes again to ensure that the data I had collected did support each theme. I spent a significant amount of time verifying each of them to ensure that they were logical and that it was clear what each theme was about. Once this had been completed, I wrote my findings.

### **Phase 1: Familiarizing Myself with the Data**

Once each interview had been transcribed into text via Transcribe, I listened to the audio recording while following the transcript to ensure that the interview had been transcribed accurately. I corrected any errors that I noticed in the transcription, which provided an opportunity to further immerse myself in the data. Once corrections had been made, each interview was printed and was assigned an alphanumeric code to ensure the privacy of each participant. I read through each interview a second time, after ensuring accuracy, to become familiar with the data. During this phase I did not engage in coding, but I did make notes in the margins of each transcript.

### **Phase 2: Generating Codes**

A priori coding, open coding, and axial coding were all used to analyze the interview transcripts. A priori coding was used first. The codes of coping, competence, and context were identified based on the study's theoretical framework, the coping-competence-context theory of teacher stress. I read each transcript twice during a priori coding, using highlighters to identify key words and phrases. I color coded the

transcripts, using a different color to represent each of the three a priori codes. The a priori codes, participant identifier, and a sample of quotes from the interviews that correspond with each code are depicted in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Examples of A Priori Codes*

Code	Participant Identifier	Excerpt
Coping	P8	“Well, I am a very spiritual person. So, a lot of prayer, and having bible verses in my pocket.”
	P9	“I started therapy.”
	P10	“I literally would just go home and sleep.”
Competence	P2	“I felt that if I were going to be in a profession, I needed to stay ahead and learn what the latest research was saying.”
	P4	“We plan things out 22 months in advance.”
	P11	“It’s that, you know, we know about child development. We know what we’re looking for. We know indicators of concerns and red flags, and you know we know all those pieces.”
Context	P1	“It was a private, licensed NAEYC accredited program.”
	P3	“I believe it’s public. It’s hard to get into, but it’s definitely public.”

Next, I engaged in an inductive analysis of the data by using open coding. I went back through the transcripts line by line, looking for pieces of data that provided meaning to the study. These pieces of data were highlighted, using various highlighter colors. I also made notes in the margins on each transcript. Upon completion of a priori and open coding, 44 total codes were identified. Table 3 depicts a sample of the open codes, participant identifiers, and excerpts from the interviews that support the identification of that code.

**Table 3***Examples of Open Codes*

Code	Participant Identifier	Excerpt
Extrinsic motivation	P8	“The small, quiet, almost unnoticeable moments are what I treasure most.”
	P7	“Their perspective on life was just such a gift.”
Teacher recommendations	P1	“Give us 15 minutes a day to touch base with one another and learn from one another.”
	P2	“Teachers must take care of themselves. Mentally you have to. Physically too.”
Self-care	P3	“I would go to the gym and work out every morning before work.”
	P11	“I go to the park and go for a walk or meet up with friends and grab lunch.”
Parents of the students	P4	“Parents would have these heightened expectations.”
	P7	“The parents are a huge stress.”
Stressful tasks	P6	“Head Start has a lot of requirements that give you stress.”
	P11	“That was a high stress time because they expected us to, you know, have exactly 36 stuffed animals in the center and count out how many books we had in the classroom.”
Inadequate pay	P5	“Generally, I spent about 60 hours a week on my job and ended up getting paid for 40 hours and not paid very week for 40 hours either.”
	P11	“No one goes into education thinking they’re going to be a millionaire, but it would be nice to be able to put gas in my car.”
Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic	P11	“It’s been really hard these past two years with parents, just being so out of sorts and so worried about what’s going on.”
	P12	“If I didn’t take my children outside, they would go nowhere all day long. They’re in the same room all day.”
Impact on the teacher’s family	P2	“I was always mentally fatigued with making sure I was there for my personal children, but also making sure I was there for my job.”
	P7	“I had to be present for my kids and my husband as well.”
Exhaustion	P1	“Physically the job is more tiring than people realize.”
	P8	“I was so tired I could barely walk to my car.”
Expectations	P5	“I’m also thinking of completely leaving the teaching field because the expectations are just superhuman.”
	P7	“I was needing to do too many things there. I was constantly being pulled in too many different directions.”

Once a priori coding and open was completed, I used axial coding to develop categories from the data that had been coded. Codes were copied into a Microsoft Excel file from the a priori and open coding. I grouped codes together that were similar. If codes had the same meaning, they were condensed until all the codes had been placed into categories. There was a total of 11 categories, and the category names were determined by the meaning of the different codes within each category. Table 4 depicts a



sample of the open codes, categories, participant identifiers, and relevant quotes from the interviews.

**Table 4**

*Examples of Open Codes and Categories*

Category	Code	Participant identifier	Excerpt
Daily routine	Teaching tasks	P5	“There was an expectation that diaper changing would be a high-quality teaching time.”
		P8	“We did family style snack, then we went into our circle time.”
	Non-teaching tasks	P3	“Developing and prepping lesson plans to guide children through the day.”
		P10	“I’m the one that welcomes all children at the door, getting them out of their cars and greeting the parents.”
Additional responsibilities	COVID safety	P10	“I accidentally became the COVID guru of our program, I stay on top of the 75 thousand pieces of information coming in at any particular time.”
		P5	“We are cleaning and sanitizing, pretty much anything and everything these days.”
	Center involvement	P3	“I help with student fundraisers or volunteering for school events.”
		P6	“Monthly playground checks, fire alarm drills, daily attendance. We do assessments too.”
Feelings	Feelings toward students	P12	“I’m more short with my students than I ever should be. It’s hard because it does come out in my classroom.”
		P1	“You kind of think of the children as your own and you internalize what they’re going through.”
	Feelings toward job	P2	“I would often say, how am I going to fit all this in?”
		P7	“I just took things very personally and very conscientiously.”
Job-related stress	Expectations	P4	“So much unfairness in the system of early childhood education.”
		P11	“Expectations of how they wanted us to run our classroom day-to-day was put in place by people that have never ran a classroom before.”
	Behavior problems	P7	“The behavior problems in my classroom were so severe that the director completely avoided my room.”
		P9	“Behavior problems in the classroom and the judgement that goes on with the other parents.”
Physical effects	Tired	P1	“Physically the job is more tiring than people realize.”
		P10	“I literally just have to go home and sleep.”
	Chronic issues	P8	“I developed a very serious shoulder situation called frozen shoulder and ended up needing surgery.”
		P7	“I had been sustaining injuries for almost the entire time and I have an underlying health condition.”
Reasons for leaving	Financial	P11	“I had gotten to a point where I was like, I really need to consider what I want the rest of my life to look like.”
		P1	“The extras that were asked of me were a lot for the salary I was making.”
	Stress	P2	“I was stressed. I would cry all the time, or I would shut down and just not do anything because I didn’t know what to do towards the end.”
		P8	“The expectations to deal with all these things that I didn’t see as being part of the classroom.”

### **Phase 3: Searching for Themes**

After completing coding in Phase 2, the categories were examined for emerging themes. Categories were combined that contained similar meanings or characteristics. This was done to further refine the data, and during this process, themes emerged. There were four themes that were identified from this analysis: (a) Early childhood teachers are overwhelmed by multiple job-related stressors, (b) Working in early childhood is physically and emotionally demanding, (c) Teachers possess the skills needed to cope with job-related stress, and (d) A lack of benefits, support, and resources effect early childhood teachers' decision to leave the profession. Thematic analysis was used as I evaluated and refined these themes with the data and verified the connection between these themes and the research questions.

### **Phase 4: Reviewing the Themes**

During this phase, I engaged in a review of the themes to ensure refinement. Once I was satisfied that these themes sufficiently correlated with the data gathered during the interviews and answered the research questions of this study, I returned to the transcripts and read them again to ensure that the themes made sense with the information shared by the study participants. I also looked for any additional data related to the themes that I may have missed during the earlier stages of analysis. Once this had been completed, I sent the results of my data analysis to my peer debriefer to have them provide feedback. A peer reviewer was chosen that could assist me in fully examining my data analysis, challenging whether the findings of this study were logical and grounded in the data, and if my interpretations were reasonable. Using a peer reviewer was an additional technique

I chose to enhance the reliability and validity of this study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The peer debriefer found my findings to be logical and grounded in the study data and provided reflective dialogue that assisted in clarification of the study's themes.

### **Phase 5: Defining and Labeling Themes**

There were no revisions to the themes during this phase. The results of the analysis identified four themes related to the study's research questions (see Table 5). These themes that were identified from the analysis of the data were used to answer the study's research questions.

Every participant identified experiencing stress related to their position as an early childhood teacher. Participants described feeling that others expected them to be superheroes with the number of responsibilities given to them both inside and outside of the classroom. Participants described their feelings of exhaustion at the end of each workday, and some described the physical toll that the work had taken on their bodies. Participants identified how important it was to have time to connect with others at their workplace to be able to talk about the stress of their work. Finally, participants shared how being given regular breaks would make a difference in early childhood teachers' ability to cope with job-related stressors and willingness to remain in the profession. Table 5 is a sample of the categories and themes that emerged during thematic analysis of the data to answer the study's research questions.

**Table 5***Categories and Themes*

Category	Theme
Daily Routine	Theme 1: Early childhood teachers are overwhelmed by multiple job-related stressors.
Additional responsibilities	
Physical effects	Theme 2: The work is emotionally and physically demanding.
Feelings	
Coping techniques	Theme 3: Coping skills help early childhood teachers remain in the profession.
Intrinsic Rewards	
Financial compensation	Theme 4: A lack of benefits, support, and resources affect early childhood teachers' decision to leave the profession.
Access to materials	
Work-based support	

**Phase 6: Producing the Report**

The final phase of data analysis for this study was to conduct a concluding analysis of the themes that emerged from the data and to write the final report. After completing the analysis in the above-mentioned phases, I have verified that the themes answer the research questions. I did not find evidence of inconsistent findings in the data, so no further analysis was required. The themes were used to provide information on the research questions: RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of job-related stressors? RQ2: What strategies are early childhood teachers using to cope with job-related stressors? RQ3: How do job-related stressors impact teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession?

## Results

In this study, I explored the perspectives of early childhood teachers experiencing job-related stressors and how those stressors impacted their decisions to remain in or leave the profession through a basic qualitative study using semi-structured interviews. In this section, I share the results of the data that was collected through interviews with 12 current and former early childhood teachers in which I asked eight open-ended interview questions. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were designed using the conceptual framework to answer the research questions.

The first research question focused on teachers' perspectives of job-related stressors. Interview questions 1 and 4 addressed this research question as I sought to understand the responsibilities associated with their position and their self-identified sources of job-related stress. Interview questions 2 and 3 contributed to an understanding of the things the teachers enjoyed about their work as well as the things they did not enjoy.

The second question focused on the techniques that teachers use to cope with job-related stressors. Interview questions 5 and 6 addressed this research question as I sought to understand how each teacher felt at the end of the day and what they did to counteract those feelings.

The focus of the third and final research question was on the impact of job-related stressors on early childhood teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the profession. Questions 7 and 8 addressed this research question. In addition to asking the research

questions, I used prompts or asked follow-up questions as needed during the interview to ensure that I understood the participant.

## **Theme 1: Early Childhood Teachers are Overwhelmed by Multiple Job-Related Stressors**

### *Context*

The early childhood teachers that participated in this study worked in a variety of settings including public and private programs and Head Start. One of the participants taught in a university lab preschool. All the programs that participants taught in were licensed. Some of the programs had received a quality rating from their states' quality rating and improvement system, and two of the participants' programs were NAEYC accredited.

When asked about a typical day in the classroom, early childhood teachers shared similar tasks as part of their day. Teachers were responsible for setting up their classrooms in the morning to prepare for the children's arrival. They greet their students at arrival and take them through the course of a school day which includes large and small group time for learning, meals and snacks, outdoor time, and rest. Early childhood teachers communicate with the parents of their students at drop off and pick up times, and throughout the day, for those programs that use an electronic app for communication. For those teachers that care for younger children, diapering, feeding and potty training may also be part of their workday. Early childhood teachers were also responsible for completing screenings and assessments on their students. Several of the teachers shared

that they were using a screening tool called Teaching Strategies Gold, to complete those assessments.

Many of the teachers were responsible for cleaning their own classrooms throughout the course of the day as well as at the end of the day after the children had gone home. The teachers shared that this had always been part of their responsibilities, but there was more expected with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Additional Responsibilities*

In addition to working with their students, the participants shared additional responsibilities they were required to include into their workdays, and it was often during the discussion of these additional responsibilities that feelings of stress and frustration were shared. Several of the participants shared that they felt their administrators expected them to be ‘superhuman’ with the number of responsibilities given to them.

Examples of those additional responsibilities were shared by the participants. As P3 shared:

I would say parent teacher conferences, student fundraisers, volunteering for school events that we have at the school, or planning monthly holiday parties, for whatever holiday is coming up. And every year we have to do the annual stars checkup, a summer program, prep for the summer program and prep for the upcoming school year.

P4 stated “I have to multitask. I keep track of children’s folders, go into a portal, and record the attendance for children receiving subsidy. I do monthly playground checks

and fire alarm drills.” P5 shared the amount of additional work that was expected in her program:

We were supposed to do an observation of each child every two weeks, a lengthy observation. We also had different kinds of developmental checklists that we were supposed to do once a month. We also had environmental checklists and a parent engagement improvement plan. We had to do the ITERS twice a year and then come up with an improvement plan, and we also had to do CLASS. It was rush, rush, rush all throughout the day just to keep on top of what was going on. And I’m not even talking about, you know, working with the children or enjoying them or anything like that.

P7 echoed the feeling of constantly being pulled in too many directions.

With additional responsibilities often comes additional time that is required to complete these responsibilities. As P1 stated:

All of the extras, the extras got to be a lot. I was pretty much there from 7:30 to 5:30, and that didn’t count my commute either. It was a lot of responsibility for the salary I was making.

P5 also shared about the additional time that was required to complete additional responsibilities, saying “generally I spent about 60 hours a week on my job and ended up getting paid for 40 hours, and not paid very well for 40 hours either.”

### ***Job-Related Stress***

There was no singular cause of early childhood teacher job-related stress.

However, many of the participants shared similar stressors, despite the differences in



geographical location and program of employment. One of the most identified sources of stress were the parents of the children in their care. P2 shared “The parents’ expectations weren’t realistic. Every parent was not supportive of what we were doing in class and those conversations were not pleasant at all. I felt like I was being attacked for teaching.”

P8 said “I feel like some parents just think we’re a babysitter, and I feel like there’s times to where you just don’t feel appreciated.” P12 also identified the lack of respect from parents, stating “It’s the lack of respect. It’s just kind of implied that we’re sort of just babysitters or caregivers.” P10 shared her experience on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on parents:

It’s been hard these past two years with parents just being so out of sorts and so worried about what’s going on that they’ve become very mean and accusatory. I think they’re just convinced that it’s the Wild West here.

The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was mentioned in every interview by the participants. Two years of dealing with the uncertainty of health and safety has impacted early childhood teachers. As P2 shared:

The burnout is real, especially with COVID. It’s so different than what we were used to and everybody’s adjusting. But at the end of your day, you’re concerned about your health. You don’t want to get sick or get anyone else sick. We’ve had some teachers leave because they just could not cope.

P10 stated “The past couple of years it’s been masking or not masking. It’s been testing or not testing. We have parents on both sides of the spectrum and the back and forth has been stressful to navigate.” P12 agreed “Nobody tells you how to handle the

stress, and it's a lot worse with COVID. Everyone is isolated in their classrooms. No one talks to each other.”

The push toward academics was shared as another source of job-related stress. P5 shared:

There is a lot of pressure for academics without the understanding that they best way for kids to learn is to have them play, as it helps them develop their ability to think symbolically and develop their executive function skills that are necessary for success in school.

P8 agreed “it’s becoming more of a push down from the elementary. It’s just trickling down into our three-year-olds and our two-year-olds and it’s sad to me.”

Staffing concerns, or specifically a lack of staff, was mentioned by some of the participants as another source of job-related stress. P1, a former teacher, explained “turnover was a problem. You can’t leave those children out of ratio. If no one else is there, you must stay.” A lack of available staff often was the cause for a teacher’s extended day, often without additional compensation. P7 shared that she was promised some extra help in her classroom because of having students with challenging behaviors, but that never happened. She verbalized her frustration, saying “I just couldn’t, I couldn’t keep taking hits and not getting support.”

Advocating for things your students’ need was another source of stress that was mentioned. P5 shared that there were things she needed for her classroom, but because of a lack of funding, she would have to buy them herself. P7 shared “The least favorite part of my job was having to fight so hard to get the children what they needed and having so

many people who were in leadership positions, who should have known better, fighting me on that.” P11 said “early childhood teachers are expected to do so much, and the expectations don’t match the resources that are given. I was expected to move mountains with little to work with.”

## **Theme 2: The Work is Emotionally and Physically Demanding**

### *Feelings*

Almost every teacher that was interviewed described some version of feeling exhausted at the end of their workday. P1 shared “You’re just drained. You can’t really focus on anything. There were days I cried all the way home. You can’t really deal with anything else until you’ve had a little down time to refocus.” P5 admitted “I would come home from work crying every day.” P7 stated:

I was just really strung out. You know, I was pulled in so many different directions and then I was just not getting enough respite. I just felt unrelenting stress. The anxiety that I was experiencing was so overwhelming that I actually had to start taking a sleep aid. Otherwise, my mind was racing too much.

P8 added:

I had a hard time shaking off whatever was troubling that day at the end. I just took things very personally and very conscientiously. I got hung up too much on the tiny little details and did not sleep. You felt beat up physically, mentally, and emotionally.

P10 identified her feelings as “Complete and utter fatigue. I’m so exhausted. I come home and sleep about two or three hours, and then I get up and shove food in my face and then I go back for a full night of sleep.”

P3 shared one of the reasons why teaching is so exhausting “It’s just them (the children) depending on you all the time. So, you have to be ready, to be there for them. They are tiny humans with big emotions and are still trying to figure things out.” P2 shared the struggle of trying to balance feelings of exhaustion with having your own children, describing at the end of the day:

I was always just mentally fatigued with making sure I was there for my children and my school children. My own children would come in and be so excited, just talking and talking, and I had to be conscious that I was there in the moment with them even though I wanted to put cotton in my ears and take 30 minutes for myself.

P5 shared the importance of paying attention to early childhood teachers’ feelings, saying:

The environment is better for the kids when their teachers are supported. Early childhood teachers give so much from their hearts, and they need to feel ok. If you’re not supported, it takes a lot more effort to feel ok.

P12 agreed on the need to feel supported, stating “I don’t like feeling like I don’t have value and the work I’m doing is not important.” Unfortunately, these feelings of not being supported sometimes can be seen in how teachers interact with their students. P12

also shared “I’m more angry with my students than I ever should be. It’s hard because it does come out in my classroom.”

### *Physical Issues*

Several early childhood teachers described the physical toll that their work in the classroom had on their bodies. P1 shared:

Physically the job is more tiring than people realize. There’s a lot of bending and scooting and being on the floor and picking up kids who need moved from other areas. Especially when they’re having, you know, that emotional upset. So, it was tiring. I went home tired.

P8 expressed:

I was so tired I could barely walk to my car, and I would just kind of sit there and think I’ve got to drive home, how am I going to do that? So, the physical exhaustion, it took a huge toll on my knees. I also ended up needing to have shoulder surgery. You feel beat up. I was in constant physical pain and couldn’t sleep much.

P14 added “So at the end of the day, I will sit on the rug in the reading area with my back against the wall because my back hurts by that part of the day.” A different physical ailment was described by P7 “The lack of time to deal with your personal needs, like just, you know, getting urinary tract infections all the time because you don’t have time to go to the bathroom.”

### **Theme 3: Coping Skills Help Early Childhood Teachers Remain in the Profession**

#### *Coping*

There was a wide variety of responses from the teachers when asked about how they cope with their job-related stress. P1 identified several solitary activities that helped her relax at the end of the day, which included “deep breathing techniques, riding a stationary bike, doing Yoga or just having quiet time to get out of my head space and move on.” P2 also preferred to engage in a solitary activity, sharing she would “go to my room and sit in silence so I could be at peace and not have to think about anything.” P4 chose a different way to cope with stress and shared “I make a habit of going regularly for a massage and facial. I pretty much love on me.” P5 identified the common way most of the participants cope with stress, saying she would “talk to my husband, talk to my co-workers, I would also walk and sometimes even meditate.”

There were unique responses from a few participants. To cope with job-related stress, P9 shared that she’s “started therapy again.” P8 spoke of the importance of relying on faith to help her cope with stress, sharing “I relied on prayer and carrying bible verses in my pocket. Oh, my goodness, the amount of prayer that I put up going to work in the morning! And remembering my calling.” P6 also relies on prayer to help her cope with stress as well as “eating a lot of chocolate.”

Again, the physical demands placed on early childhood teachers was emphasized. P7 enjoyed going to Yoga, the chiropractor for an adjustment, or having a deep tissue massage to cope with stress. However, the physical toll that the job took on her body

often made her unable to engage in these techniques and created the feeling that she “was blocked consistently from my coping mechanisms.”

### ***Enjoyment***

When the study participants were asked about what they enjoy about being an early childhood teacher, the responses were immediate. They all talked about the joy that comes from working with young children. P4 identified “The joy of seeing them reach their developmental milestones! It’s life rewarding, more than what money can buy. P5 added “I love being with the kids. The kids are amazing, and I like feeling like I made a difference in their lives.” P6 shared “I love watching the kids grow and watching how much they’ve learned and how they remember. When we sit down and have our learning time, that’s my favorite part of the day.”

P8 explained:

The thrill of each day is different. You never know what’s going on to happen and to see their perspective on life was such a gift. The hugs, I miss that. I miss the love; you know there’s just nothing like a three-year-old who thinks you are the best singer, and you can’t carry a tune for nothing.

P10 described:

It’s those small, quiet, almost unnoticeable moments, when you have a little person come up to you, slip a little hand into your hand, and tell you something funny or witty or sweet. Those are the things that just bring me the most joy.

P7 shared a story about one of her students who was nonverbal and had visible disabilities when asked about what she enjoyed about being an early childhood education teacher:

This little boy was terrified of the slide. The other students in the class were very vested in his success, and they saw me, one day, trying to encourage this little guy to go down the slide. The kids came over to the slide and some of them went close, sitting behind him or off to the side. They were just talking to him, cheering for him, saying his name, and clapping for him. And you know what? He went down the slide!

### ***Reasons for Staying***

The participants who are currently teaching all admitted to having thoughts of leaving the field. However, their commitment to the field of early childhood education has kept them engaged.

When asked if she'd ever considered leaving the field, P6 stated "every once in a while, but then I'm like, what would I do any different because this is all I know." P9 has left the field in the past and returned. She shared "I don't know what else I would do, it's not like there's something screaming my name unless I go into advocacy. I really care about the issues that affect my children's lives." P10 agreed, stating:

I have absolutely considered 'What am I doing?'. You know, I could be making more money somewhere else. I could be doing something that doesn't tear me down. But I truly believe this is kind of a calling, to be in this field. And despite its challenges, I'm not really wanting to give up. So, I often just stick it out.



## **Theme 4: A Lack of Benefits, Support, and Resources Affect an Early Childhood Teachers' Decision to Leave the Profession**

### ***Reasons for Leaving***

For those former teachers, making the decision to leave the profession was not an easy one because of their feelings of commitment to the profession. P1 shared that when COVID hit, her program was shut down. She saw that as a natural time to leave as the work was becoming more stressful than enjoyable. P7 agreed sharing:

You have this career in early childhood and just finally get to a place where no, I just can't go back. I can't do this again. Makes me sick to my stomach to think about it anymore, really. It was that bad.

For P2, the decision to leave the profession was to protect her mental health, sharing "I was stressed, I would cry all the time, or I would shut down and just not do anything because I didn't know what to do towards the end." P8 made the decision to leave because of some significant program changes, sharing:

We were called in and there were some huge changes that were coming because of a grant that we received. It was probably good for the program, but it was a huge change, and I was like, yikes, I don't know if I can do that.

Study participants who were still employed in the field have thought about leaving the profession. P4 shared that she's strongly considering leaving the field because of her age. The demands of the job are weighing heavily on P5, who shared that she's thought about "completely leaving the teaching field because the expectations are just superhuman, and teachers don't really make a living wage."

### ***An Opportunity to Rest***

A common topic mentioned by several of the participants was the lack of opportunity for early childhood teachers to be able to rest and relax. Several of the early childhood teachers did not have any ‘down time’ during their day and had their lunch break and planning time taken away, or shortened significantly, because of a lack of staff. P7 stated “I was exhausted and never got a sufficient break. I never got a few minutes to unwind during the day and never got enough respite.” P8 described it as “having that very short lunch break and then having to just, you know, dig deep and go do it all again.”

Paid time off, or the lack thereof, also was discussed. In addition, the commitment to their students weighed heavily on the decision to take a much-needed day off. As P6 shared “You know that you can call in sick. But the reality is, you know if you call in sick, we didn’t have subs, so there you were just thinking about your classroom and what was going to go down.” P11 explained:

You are constantly with these groups of little ones, and you’re kind of, in some cases, a surrogate parent. There’s never a break unless you want to use your own personal time, but then a lot of schools don’t really supply paid time off. Like maybe you get a week if you’re lucky. I think that’s a huge contributor to teacher stress.

### **Discrepant Cases**

During the data analysis of my research, I did not find evidence that would contradict the findings, so further analysis was not required.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness criteria is used in qualitative research to establish that the findings of the research study are credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Burkholder et al., 2020). To address content validity, an early childhood professional reviewed my interview questions for clarity and to ensure that they would provide sufficient data to answer my research questions. In addition, I conducted two practice interviews, one with a current early childhood teacher, and one with a former early childhood teacher, to become familiar with the interview guide prior to conducting my first interview. Using the semi-structured interview format allowed the participants the chance to share their perspectives of job-related stress and how that stress impacted their decision to remain in or leave the teaching profession.

### **Credibility**

Credibility is the most important aspect in establishing trustworthiness, as it asks the researcher to link the findings of the study with reality to demonstrate the truth of the study's findings (Burkholder et al., 2020). I established credibility with multiple data collection strategies, including recorded interviews, transcriptions, reflective journaling, and member checking. Once the interviews had been completed, participants received a summary of the study findings and were invited to provide additional comments as well as any corrections if I'd misrepresented information. I did not receive any comments or corrections from the participants. I did engage in reflective journaling during the interview process to capture my thoughts and feelings about each interview.

**Transferability**

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized to other settings (Burkholder et al., 2020). To ensure transferability, I provided a detailed methodological description of the study as well as details of data collection and the participants who participated in this study. Maximum variation sampling was used to ensure that data was collected from early childhood teachers in a variety of geographical locations in the United States, to ensure that a wide array of perspectives on job-related stress could be collected.

**Dependability**

Dependability is important in establishing trustworthiness as it establishes the findings of a research study as consistent and repeatable, or that another researcher could look at the data gathered and arrive at the same conclusion (Burkholder et al., 2020). I established dependability in this study by describing the study design in detail as well as the process for collecting data. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure that data was collected accurately. I did not have the need to conduct any follow-up interviews. I maintained a reflexive journal during each interview to record my personal thoughts about the information shared and to limit personal biases during data collection and analysis. I used an interview protocol to ensure that participants were asked the same questions in the same order. Before beginning each interview, I reminded participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The emergent themes were compared to the current research literature to validate the study findings.

## **Confirmability**

Confirmability is the final element of trustworthiness and ensures that the research study findings and are derived from the data and not from researcher bias. To ensure confirmability, I put my pre-conceived ideas of what causes job-related stress for early childhood teachers aside as I conducted each interview. Using a reflexive journal allowed me the opportunity to document my thoughts, feelings, and personal biases as they came up. During the data analysis, in development of the codes, themes and findings, I utilized an external auditor to review my work. The auditor has worked in the field of early childhood education for multiple years and is familiar with the topic of job-related stress.

## **Summary**

In Chapter 4, the data analysis and findings of the study were reviewed. This study was designed using three research questions and explored early childhood teachers' perspectives of job-related stressors and the impact of those stressors on decisions to remain in or leave the profession. One-on-one, semi-structured interviews were used during the data collection process to understand the perspectives of 12 early childhood teachers, six former and six current, who experienced job-related stress. During data analysis, I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework of thematic analysis to analyze the findings. Four themes emerged (see Table 5) that reflected the perspectives of the 12 participants. These themes encompassed the perspectives of early childhood education teachers' experiences with job-related stress, and how that stress impacted their decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession. Trustworthiness was achieved

during this study with credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability was established during data collection and the data analysis process.

Completing the analysis of data allowed the research questions to be answered:

RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of job-related stressors? RQ2:

What strategies are early childhood teachers using to cope with job-related stressors?

RQ3: How do job-related stressors impact teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the

teaching profession? Two themes emerged from RQ1, one theme emerged from RQ2,

and one theme emerged from RQ3. Once the coding process had been completed, four

themes emerged in the data: (a) early childhood teachers are overwhelmed by multiple

job-related stressors; (b) the work is emotionally and physically demanding; (c) coping

skills help early childhood teachers remain in the profession; (d) a lack of benefits,

support, and resources effect early childhood teachers' decision to remain in the

profession.

The first theme that emerged from the data, reflecting RQ1, was: (a) early

childhood teachers are overwhelmed by multiple job-related stressors. Every participant

shared that they'd experienced job-related stress. Teachers feel that they are expected to

be superhuman as they are given multiple responsibilities in addition to the work they do

with the children. They are impacted by staffing issues within programs, often being

expected to stay overtime to maintain classrooms in ratio or to provide coverage. They

discussed having to spend their own money to get the necessary materials that are needed

for teaching or having to 'fight' with administration to get resources. Participants shared

that the parents of the children in their care often held unrealistic expectations about what

their children should or should not be learning in the classroom. They discussed how parents often treated them with a lack of respect, and the participants also shared that the ongoing pandemic has eroded parents' feelings of trust in their children's teachers. The pandemic has also impacted classroom practices, causing isolation within classrooms and worries about teachers and children getting sick.

The second theme that emerged from data analysis, reflecting RQ1 as well, was:

(b) the work of an early childhood teacher is emotionally as well as physically demanding. The emotional impact was described by almost every participant as feeling sheer and utter exhaustion at the end of each workday. This exhaustion resulted in participants describing wanting to come home and go right to sleep, or to spend time alone, away from family members. Participants also described the physical impact of working with young children on their bodies, with several identifying that they had to have surgery as a result of years of the physical toll on knees and shoulders from getting down to the children's level or having to pick children up.

The third theme that emerged from the data analysis, reflecting RQ2, was: (c) coping skills help early childhood teachers remain in the profession. Teachers' coping methods were varied. Several of the participants shared that they engaged in some form of exercise to counter the effects of stress by walking, doing Yoga, or riding a stationary bike. These were chosen because the participant could engage in the activity without having to socialize with anyone. Quiet time, away from family members, was another popular way that participants shared that they were able to cope with stress. For some, a short time away was all they needed to feel recharged enough to return to their evening

tasks. For others, time asleep is what worked for them. Other coping mechanisms shared were engaging in therapy, relying on faith, and enjoying chocolate.

The fourth and final theme that emerged from data analysis was: (d) a lack of benefits, support, and resources affect early childhood teachers' decision to leave the profession. The subject of lunch breaks came up frequently in the interviews. As a result of being short staffed in programs, teachers are not getting an opportunity to take a lunch break, or any kind of break, away from their students. At times, they are not even given the opportunity to use the restroom during the day. Teachers are also not given time to lesson plan during a workday, which means they must do this work outside of their paid hours and are uncompensated. Lastly, teachers shared their frustration with the lack of time off. Childcare centers rarely close, so this combined with programs having a lack of staff means that teachers are overworked and overtired. Unlike their elementary teacher counterparts, early childhood teachers do not typically get snow days, professional development days, or a summer break.

In Chapter 5, I will review an interpretation of the results of this study and limitations of the research as well as recommendations, implications, and the potential for positive social change. Interpretations of the findings for each theme will be discussed in detail and connected back to current research as well as to the research questions. Limitations will be discussed in detail as well as implications for the study and the possible opportunities for positive social change. Finally, I will provide a conclusion and close the chapter with my reflection on the study.



## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers experiencing job-related stress and the impact of those stressors on decisions to remain in or leave the profession. Data were collected from one-on-one semi-structured telephone and Zoom interviews with 12 current and former early childhood teachers from across the United States. Participants shared their experiences with the stress that came with their work in the field of early childhood, how they were able to cope with that stress, and the impact of that stress on their decisions to remain in or leave the profession. Six of the participants were current early childhood teachers, and the other six were former teachers. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) early childhood teachers are overwhelmed by multiple job-related stressors; (b) the work is emotionally and physically demanding; (c) coping skills help early childhood teachers remain in the profession; and (d) a lack of benefits, support, and resources affect early childhood teachers' decision to remain in the profession. Understanding the perspectives of the participants will help lead to a greater understanding of how to support early childhood teachers experiencing job-related stress so that they stay in the profession. Chapter 5 includes the findings and connects them to the current literature as well as the conceptual framework. The study implications, limitations and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

I began data collection after receiving approval to conduct research from Walden University's IRB. The data findings and interpretations were developed from conducting

12 one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, the literature review, and the conceptual framework of the coping-competence-context theory of teacher stress. This study addressed three research questions:

- RQ 1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of job-related stressors?
- RQ 2: What strategies are early childhood teachers using to cope with job-related stressors?
- RQ 3: How do job-related stressors impact teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession?

During the interviews, I asked the participants eight open-ended questions about their experience with job-related stressors, the techniques they used to cope with the stress, and the impact of those stressors on their decisions to remain in or leave the profession. Findings in this study helped to expand knowledge and substantiate information on early childhood teachers' experiences with job-related stress and the impact of that stress on decisions to remain in or leave the profession. Four themes emerged based on the responses to these questions as well as any follow-up questions asked during the one-on-one, semi-structured interviews: (a) early childhood teachers are overwhelmed by multiple job-related stressors; (b) the work is emotionally and physically demanding; (c) coping skills help early childhood teachers remain in the profession; and (d) a lack of benefits, support, and resources effect early childhood teachers' decision to leave the profession.

The themes were directly connected to the Herman et al.'s (2020) coping-competence-context theory of teacher stress. The findings supported the coping-competence-context theory, which provides an understanding of the pathways that an early childhood teacher's work environment, feelings of competence and coping skills contribute to, or provide a buffer against, their experience with job-related stress and impacts their decision to remain in or leave the profession. According to the coping-competence-context theory of teacher stress, there is a correlation between teacher stress and adverse teacher outcomes. The participants in this study described a variety of coping skills that they used to cope with the stress that came with their work with children and their families, allowing them to return each day ready to provide an environment rich for learning. Competence was identified in the ways that participants worked to mitigate the effects of job-related stress so that it did not impact the children in the classroom. Many of the participants described purchasing materials with their own money, or working after hours, preparing materials, to ensure that their students had the tools they needed for learning. Context was the most discussed pathway by the participants as the school systems and policies were described that contributed to their feelings of stress.

### **Theme 1: Early Childhood Teachers are Overwhelmed by Multiple Job-related Stressors**

Work overload is a negative stressor for early childhood teachers (Pogere et al., 2019). Theme 1 indicated that early childhood teachers who participated in this study are overwhelmed by multiple job-related stressors. Teachers expressed that there were multiple responsibilities expected of them outside of their normal classroom tasks, which

caused them to feel stressed. These responsibilities included completing classroom assessments and counts for their state's quality rating system or their center's accreditation, planning parent events, and participating in fundraising. Job stress can arise from excessive demands placed on teachers and feeling a lack of control over that stress (Roberts et al., 2019). Participants described feeling like they were pulled in too many different directions and that administration and parents expected them to be superheroes. They felt a lack of control over their time, focus and energy. As participant P7 shared "I was needing to do too many things there. There wasn't enough of me. I was constantly being pulled in too many different directions." P5 agreed stating "The expectations are just superhuman."

The COVID-19 pandemic is another example of excessive demands placed on teachers with a lack of control over that stress. Early childhood teacher well-being was negatively impacted by the pandemic, with teachers reporting feelings of anxiety and depression because of dealing with sustained issues (Correa & First, 2021). The pandemic was the catalyst for participant P1 making the decision to leave the profession "When COVID hit, our program was spiraling. We were shut down off and on. It was becoming more stressful than enjoyable, we had so many additional responsibilities." The fear of the unknown, regarding the pandemic, also weighed heavily on the minds of some participants. P12 stated,

we are fully open now, but we have a whole group of three- and four-year-olds who have not received a vaccine. And we have adults taking care of them. What's

the best medical thing here? How do we support them if they get sick? What rights do the teachers have to keep themselves healthy?

P7 agreed:

At the end of the day, you're concerned with your health. You don't want to get sick. You don't want to get someone else sick, but you still must do your job. And so, it's a lot. We've had some teachers who just had to leave because they could not cope.

Fear of the unknown also weighs on parents, who then take their stressful feelings out on the teachers. P10 stated "It's been really hard the past two years on the parents, they're so out of sorts and worried about what's going on that they've become very accusatory and mean."

Early childhood teachers need to perceive a balance between the demands of the job and resources available to them (McMullen et al., 2020; Puertas Molero et al., 2019; Schaack et al., 2020). But several participants mentioned a lack of resources when asked what they did not enjoy about being an early childhood teacher. P11 shared "Early childhood teachers are expected to do so much, and the expectations don't match the resources that are given. They expect us to move mountains." P5 agreed saying "We wouldn't have the basics. There would be things that I would need for my classroom, and I would have to buy them myself. A lot of teachers either aren't willing to or can't do that." P7 echoed the frustration, sharing:

My least favorite really was having to fight so hard to get the children what they needed and having so many people, who are in leadership positions and should

have known better, who kept fighting me on that. I had to buy my own curriculum! That was not okay. It wasn't okay that I was being put in that position or felt like I needed to.

Workplace climate is important for teachers' feelings of well-being and retention (Schaack et al., 2020). The findings of this study indicated that early childhood teachers feel overwhelmed by the multiple responsibilities placed on them outside of their direct work with the children in their classroom. Participants shared how they felt that others expected them to be superheroes in completing all their classroom work as well as work outside of the classroom. The evidence of this theme was also observed in the literature review in Chapter 2.

### **Theme 2: The Work is Emotionally and Physically Demanding**

The second theme that emerged from this study was that the work is emotionally and physically demanding. Occupational burnout is a term used to describe the cumulative effects of emotional and physical exhaustion and has been found to be as high as 56% of early childhood teachers (Schaack et al., 2020). P1 shared "physically, the job is more tiring than people realize. There's a lot of bending and scooting and being on the floor and picking up kids." Specific physical injuries were shared by some of the participants, and in a couple of cases, these injuries were identified as the reason for a departure from the field. P7 shared:

I have osteopenia. My bone density is not what it's supposed to be, and so my lower back and hips are vulnerable areas. I got injured when one student was going after another. I tried to intervene and ended up falling and hurting my hip. I

remember thinking, I can't be disabled from doing this job. That's not going to be on the table.

P8 shared "I developed a very serious shoulder situation called frozen shoulder and ended up needing shoulder surgery that year. So, I was in pretty much constant physical pain and couldn't sleep much."

The emotional demands of the work in this field were also verbalized by every participant. The psychological demands place an early childhood teacher at risk for the negative demands of job-related stress (Jeon et al., 2019). Consequently, higher levels of stress and emotional exhaustion are aligned with early childhood teachers' intentions to leave the profession (Grant et al., 2019). When asked how they felt at the end of a typical workday, mentally exhausted was the way the participants described their feelings. When asked to describe what mentally exhausted feels like, P1 said "You're just drained. You can't really focus on anything. It's hard to describe, you're just so worn out emotionally from the day. There were days I cried all the way home." P2 shared "It's just like I don't want to hear anything else. I can hear what you're saying, but I'm not really comprehending. I'm not processing what you're saying." P10 added "It's just complete and utter fatigue. I am just wiped out, but that's what the stress does to me." P8 elaborated on her feelings of exhaustion:

I had a very hard time shaking off what was troubling in the day. I just took things very personally and very conscientiously. I got hung up too much on the tiny little details and did not sleep. You felt beat up.

Peele and Wolf (2021) asserted the importance of understanding teacher's mental health to support teachers' overall well-being. The findings of this study support that assertion. Participants shared the emotional exhaustion they felt at the end of each workday and expressed how that exhaustion affected their relationships with their own family members. Participants also described the physical toll that this work had on their bodies. I found evidence of the theme of emotional exhaustion in the literature that I reviewed in Chapter 2, but I did not observe the perspective of physical exhaustion in the literature.

### **Theme 3: Coping Skills Help Early Childhood Teachers Remain in the Profession**

The third theme in this study is that coping skills help early childhood teachers remain in the profession. As discovered by Carson et al. (2017), early childhood teachers use a variety of coping strategies to mitigate the effects of job-related stress. The strategies that were identified can be classified into three subcategories, which are physical health reprieve, cognitive health reprieve, and adult communication (Pogere et al., 2019). Some of the participants used a combination of all three of the strategies. For example, P1 used the technique of deep breathing for her cognitive health reprieve, and Yoga or stationary bike riding for a physical health reprieve. She also recognized the importance of using coping techniques, sharing "I really couldn't teach them (the children) good social/emotional and regulatory coping skills if I didn't also have them for myself and model those same skills." P11 shared that she would work out in the morning or go for a walk for her physical health reprieve or meet up with friends on the weekend and have lunch for her adult communication reprieve. P5 also used a variety of



techniques, sharing “I would talk to my husband, talk to my colleagues, I would walk, or I would meditate.” P8 shared “I’d go to Yoga, or to the chiropractor. I would also see friends or family.”

A different means of examining coping skills looks at categorizing strategies as either emotion focused or problem-focused, depending on how the individual views the stressor (Herman et al., 2020). The strategy selected often depends on the individual’s belief that something can be done to change the source of the stress. Problem-focused strategies are chosen when there is a belief that something can be done; conversely, emotion focused coping strategies are chosen when the belief is nothing can be done (Pogere et al., 2019). P2 shared her use of problem-solving coping, saying “I know this sounds crazy. But sometimes it was the creative part of planning a lesson that helped me cope. If it was fun to me, it was also sort of a stress release as well.” P9 shared that she’d started therapy again, with her therapist telling her “You’re going to have to learn to lower your standards” to be able to cope with expectations.

Emotion-focused coping strategies were shared by other participants, with sleep being the number one technique mentioned. Those teachers who feel the most overloaded apply these sorts of techniques (Pogere et al., 2019). P3 shared that her strategy was “A good nap. If it was a rough day I just, try and sleep on it so I’m not angry the next day.” P10 also talked about sleep, sharing “I’m exhausted. I sleep two or three hours, get up, shove food in my face, and then I go back to sleep for the evening.”

Eddy et al. (2019) stated that interventions to reduce early childhood teacher stress may need to focus on more than just teaching coping skills. The findings from this

study found that teachers possess a wide variety of coping skills. Participants shared the techniques that worked best for them, and identified in some cases, that their coping skills were not enough of a buffer to counteract the effects of their job-related stress. The evidence of this theme was also observed in Chapter 2.

#### **Theme 4: A Lack of Benefits, Support, and Resources Affect Early Childhood Teachers' Decision to Leave the Profession**

The final theme identified is that a lack of benefits, support, and resources affect early childhood teachers' decision to leave the profession. One of the easiest ways to create a supportive workspace is to ensure that the teachers can take a break during their workday. Carson et al. (2017) used the term micro-break to describe the process of giving early childhood teachers a few minutes of rest or reprieve, which helps them rejuvenate and can counter their repeated exposure to job-related stress. Kwon et al. (2020) agreed with this, stating that programs should provide more breaks throughout the year, both during the workday and at regular intervals throughout the school year. The cumulative effect of a lack of breaks were articulated by P7 who shared “without sufficiently getting a break, I was just really strung out. I was pulled in so many different directions and was not getting enough respite.” P8 shared “The lack of time to deal with your personal needs...there's no time for self-care. There really isn't.”

A supportive space to buffer the effects of job-related stress can also come from programs providing opportunities for teachers to be able to connect with each other strictly with the purpose of support. P1 shared:

Even if it were 10 to 15 minutes a couple days a week to touch base with each other and learn from each other. Just to kind of support anxiety people might be feeling, like a kind of emotional support team.

P2 agreed and said “Mentally teachers have to take care of themselves. They need a safe, nurturing environment as much as possible to know that you don’t need to do it all on your own and that’s ok.” P3 identified that she has thought about leaving the profession, but it’s the bond she has with her co-workers and students that has kept her from making that decision. P6 agreed and shared “working with really good people is a good thing because we love each other up and we keep each other motivated and going.”

Grant et al. (2019) identified that early childhood teachers’ perceived working conditions impacted their intentions to remain employed at their job or within the field. The findings of this study suggest that working conditions are important to a teacher’s well-being. Participants shared their perspectives on how a lack of benefits, support and resources has impacted their satisfaction with working in the field of early childhood. The evidence of this theme was observed in Chapter 2, along with new evidence that emerged.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Possible limitations to this study included the sample size, the COVID-19 pandemic, and researcher bias. This study was limited to current and former early childhood teachers of children from birth to age five who had a minimum of one year of experience in the field and wanted to talk about job-related stress. They also had to possess a minimum of an associate degree in early childhood education or a related field.

I excluded former teachers if they had been removed from the field of early childhood for more than five years. I also excluded family childcare providers as well as any teachers who did not work in a licensed program or center, and I excluded teachers outside of the United States. I also limited the sample size to 12 participants, so I was only able to gather perspectives from a small number of teachers. I had several interested teachers that I was not able to interview once I had reached my quota of participants.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic was referenced by almost every participant. For some of these participants, the effects of dealing with ongoing issues was a major source of stress. I found myself wondering how they may have reported their experiences of job-related stress before the pandemic, or whether they would still be employed in the field.

Researcher bias was also a limitation to this study. As an early childhood college instructor and former childcare center director, I had my own personal views about the stress that early childhood teachers experience from the stories shared by my students and the perspectives of my former employees. To address my biases, I kept a reflective journal to document my thoughts as I interviewed the participants on their experience with job-related stress. In qualitative research, it is essential for the researcher to identify any pertinent biases, assumptions, experiences, and expectations that may impact the trustworthiness of their study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To ensure maximum variability in my sample, I sought participants outside of my state of residence and across the United States to ensure that I had no personal relationship with them as well as participants that had a wide range of experience. This study did confirm some of the findings from the

current research and the conceptual framework regarding early childhood teachers' experiences with job-related stress, as well as the impact of that stress on decisions to remain in or leave the profession.

### **Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers' experiences with job-related stress and the impact of that stress on decisions to remain in or leave the profession. Participants in this study identified that they are overwhelmed by multiple job-related stressors. The most identified stressors were placed upon them by parents, by administrators, and by the COVID-19 pandemic. Multiple participants shared that they felt they were expected to be 'superwoman' to accomplish the multiple tasks and responsibilities each day. They shared that they wish administrators and parents would recognize that they can only be expected to do what is reasonable, and not more than that. Participants also shared that the work is emotionally and physically demanding, describing physical issues that arose from multiple years of working with young children and emotional issues that come from being utterly exhausted at the end of each day.

The participants identified that they have coping skills but did indicate that a lack of breaks and a supportive worksite impacts the decision of an early childhood teacher to leave the profession. Teachers know what method of coping works best from them. What they do wish for is an opportunity for a supportive workspace; to be able to use the restroom when needed, take a lunch break away from the children, have other adults to talk to about their work, and to be able to take a day off without the guilt and worry of

leaving their program understaffed. The study findings support the gap in research on early childhood teachers' experiences of job-related stress. The following are recommendations for future research.

The first recommendation is to replicate this study and widen the participant pool to early childhood teachers of children from birth through third grade. A study that focuses on a wider population of teachers may demonstrate if job-related stressors are the same for those teachers working in an elementary school program as they are for the teachers working in early childhood programs.

The second recommendation is to conduct a study with teachers who receive support via reflective practice or reflective supervision as part of their program. Several of the participants shared that they wished they had the opportunity to talk with other co-workers or administration about the job-related stress that they'd experienced. Many of these participants were also parents of young children and described the dilemma of trying to find ways to cope with the stress of the day while still being present for their own children. The results from a study of this nature may show the importance of providing this support to early childhood teachers who are experiencing job-related stress.

The final recommendation would be to replicate this study and focus only on men who are currently or were formally employed as early childhood teachers to understand their perspectives of job-related stress and how that stress impacts their decisions to remain in or leave the profession. Although men were not excluded from this study, all

the participants were female. The perspectives of male teachers may provide additional insight on the shared challenges or different causes related to job-related stress.

### **Implications**

The goal of this study was to understand the perspectives of early childhood teachers' experiences of job-related stress and the impact of that stress on decisions to remain in or leave the profession. Participants in this study expressed that they are overwhelmed by multiple job-related stressors, and they also shared how the work is emotionally and physically demanding. Participants identified that they have coping skills but did indicate that a lack of breaks and a supportive worksite impacts the decision of an early childhood teacher to remain in the profession.

The results of this study have implications for early childhood education administrators. This study may lead to administrators developing intentional strategies for providing opportunities for early childhood teachers to consistently be given daily break time away from their students, planning time for the following week's activities as well as time to use the restroom when needed. Early childhood teachers want to feel that their mental health matters, and a break away from the children provides teachers with an opportunity to rest and recharge themselves for the remainder of the day. A break for planning time also reduces the burden on early childhood teachers having to do their planning at home and during unpaid time which creates resentment and contributes to feelings of stress. The plan might be to hire someone to cover teachers' breaks and planning time, or for administrators to cover them. Whatever plan is developed must be followed consistently.

Positive social change may occur if early childhood administrators recognize that the demands placed on early childhood teachers are creating feelings of overwhelm and exhaustion and are able to reduce some of those demands so that teachers are free to focus on the children and their learning. Administrators could devise a plan to support teachers in their completion of ongoing child assessments and other tasks that might be specific to licensing or quality rating designation within a particular state. This plan might help teachers feel less overwhelmed with the demands placed on them.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of job-related stressors and the impact of those stressors on decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession. The results of my study filled a gap in practice. Research exists on teacher stress, but little research exists about how early childhood teachers experience and cope with job-related stressors and how it affects their decisions to remain in the profession. The results of this study demonstrated how much job-related stress that teachers experience daily and how that stress impacts them both physically as well as emotionally. Teachers indicated that they often feel overwhelmed and that others expect them to be superheroes in what they are expected to accomplish. The results of this study also demonstrated that teachers possess the coping skills needed to cope with job-related stress, but they want to be provided breaks and a supportive workspace so that they can have paid planning time, a lunch break away from their students, and the opportunity to take a day off without feeling guilty because of a lack of classroom coverage.



It is my hope that my study will lead to deeper knowledge of the job-related stress experienced by early childhood teachers and how this stress affects decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession. The information from this study may inform early childhood program administrators and policy makers on the importance of paying attention to teachers emotional and physical health and providing support to teachers who feel overwhelmed. This study may also support positive social change by ensuring early childhood teachers receive regular break periods from their classroom to engage in planning, self-care, and relaxation. If teachers feel supported and rested, they will be best equipped to support the children and families in their care and remain in the early childhood profession.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What are (were) your responsibilities on a typical day in your classroom? What additional responsibilities do (did) you have during the week? Month? Year?
2. What do (did) you enjoy about being an early childhood teacher?
3. What do (did) you not enjoy about being an early childhood teacher?
4. Do (did) you experience job-related stress? What are (were) the sources of stress related to your job?
5. When you go (went) home at the end of your workday, how do (did) you feel?
6. How do (did) you cope with the stress you experience(d) related to your job?
7. Have you ever thought about leaving the field of early childhood education? (or for those individuals who left the field: what made you decide to leave the field?)
8. Is there any additional information that you would like to add concerning early childhood teacher stress?

Follow up prompts that may be used to elicit further information:

What did you mean by.....?

Tell me more about.....

You mentioned.....

What do you mean by.....?

Please give me an example of ...?

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

Date of interview:

Method of interview recording:

Start/End of interview:

Name of interviewee:

State in which interviewee resides:

Current or former teacher:

Number of years teaching:

Type of program they are teaching in, or taught in (i.e., public, private or Head Start program):

Age group of children in classroom (i.e., infants, toddlers, preschool, pre-k)

***Introduction:*** Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. As you know, this interview will contribute information to a research study intended to explore the experiences of early childhood teachers' experiencing job-related stressors and the impact of those stressors on their decision to remain in or leave the teaching profession. You have reviewed the informed consent form, but as a reminder, you may decline to answer any question you do not wish to answer or withdraw from the interview at any time. This interview will take approximately one hour. With your permission, I will be making an audio recording of the interview and taking notes.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

### **Interview Questions:**

Q1: What are (were) your responsibilities on a typical day in your classroom? What additional responsibilities do (did) you have during the week? Month? Year?

Q2: What do (did) you enjoy about being an early childhood teacher?

Q3: What do (did) you not enjoy about being an early childhood teacher?

Q4: Do (did) you experience job-related stress? What are (were) the sources of stress related to your job?

Q5: When you go (went) home at the end of your workday, how do (did) you feel?



Q6: How do (did) you cope with the stress you experience(d) related to your job?

Q7: Have you ever thought about leaving the field of early childhood education? (or for those individuals who left the field: what made you decide to leave the field?)

Q8: Is there any additional information that you would like to add concerning early childhood teacher stress?

Possible follow up prompts that I will keep visible as I interview each participant:

-What did you mean by.....?

-Tell me more about....

-You mentioned.... Tell me more.

-Can you expand more on .....?

**Conclusion:** Thank you for your time today. I am very grateful for your contribution to this study. As a reminder, I will send a copy of this interview transcript within one week for you to review and a copy of the data results once compiled for your feedback. May I contact you as well if I need any clarifications? Thank you.