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Research Paper

The impact of work-related wellbeing and workplace culture and climate on intention to leave in the early childhood sector

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ABSTRACT

High-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) enables families to participate in paid employment and promotes positive outcomes for children. Maintaining a stable ECEC workforce is critical to these endeavours. However, the retention of qualified early childhood educators is a pervasive problem globally. While much has been written about reasons for leaving the sector, there has been less attention to the 'intention to leave' stage. This study used a mixed-methods approach to explore how work culture and climate and work-related wellbeing support early childhood professionals' decisions to stay in or leave the profession, and whether there are significant differences between educators' and centre directors' intention to leave. Quantitative findings of survey responses from 713 early childhood professionals suggest that one in three respondents intended to leave the profession, more than half of these within five years. Emotional exhaustion predicted intention to leave in both groups. For centre directors, higher personal accomplishment and older age also predicted higher likelihood of intending to leave. For educators, lower satisfaction with pay and benefits and lower qualification level predicted intention to leave. Qualitative findings highlighted participants' (n = 97) reasons for intention to leave the sector: feeling undervalued, increased demands with inadequate support, and workforce issues. Understanding these factors may assist in designing interventions to prevent intention turning into a decision to leave, and therefore improve workforce stability. This is especially timely in the Australian context, when attention to supporting the ECEC workforce is high on the political agenda, and real structural and organisational change is possible.

There is widespread agreement that educators are key to providing quality experiences for young children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, which benefits children, families, and society (McDonald et al., 2018; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021). In relation to outcomes for children, evidence shows that high-quality educator–child interactions are linked to better cognitive and academic outcomes (Vandell et al., 2010), better self-regulation (Williford et al., 2013), more pro-social behaviours and more positive social–emotional behaviours (Grosse et al., 2022). Given that high-quality ECEC enables families to participate in paid employment (OECD, 2018), and particularly promotes positive outcomes for children who are disadvantaged (Bakken et al., 2017), maintaining a stable ECEC workforce is critical.

1. The Australian Early Childhood Workforce Crisis

The retention of qualified early childhood educators is a pervasive problem globally. For example, in large longitudinal monitoring studies, Bassok et al. (2021) and Bellows et al (2022) report that less than 40% of educators remained in the same service during the three year period, with turnover being particularly high for educators of toddlers, and educators who were new to the service. There is a similar workforce crisis in Australia (McDonald et al., 2018; Productivity Commission, 2023; Thorpe et al., 2023), bringing the potential for significant negative impacts for a large proportion of the country's families and children. Currently, more than 1.3 million children attend ECEC services in Australia, representing 48.3% of all children aged 0–5 years (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022). The ECEC workforce in Australia is around 216,000 with approximately 202,490 teachers and

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educators working in centre-based services. In Australia, a teacher has a three- or four-year university bachelor's teaching degree with early childhood specialisation. An educator can either have a certificate or diploma qualification. A certificate III is the minimum qualification required (taking six months to complete), whereas a diploma qualification involves more advanced content (taking approximately two years to complete). A centre director is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the early childhood service and for ensuring that it meets National Quality Standards. Centre directors have a minimum diploma qualification. They may or may not work directly with children.

As of January 2023, there were approximately 6,500 teacher and educator positions advertised on the internet in Australia, a rise of 228% since January 2020. Similarly, the number of centre director positions has doubled since January 2020 to over 300 vacancies as of January 2023 (National Skills Commission, 2023). Of those currently employed in the Australian ECEC workforce, over a quarter report that they intend to leave within the next 12 months; 46% think about leaving all or most of the time, and almost 75% intend to leave within three years due to excessive workloads, low pay and feeling undervalued (Fenech et al., 2022; United Workers Union, 2021). Staff turnover is high; more than one-third leave their positions each year, with significantly higher rates in rural/remote areas (Thorpe et al., 2020). Not only do ECEC staff in Australia move between services, seeking minor improvements in conditions, many leave the field altogether (Thorpe et al., 2023). In addition, commencement in and completion of early childhood initial teacher education programs are decreasing, and the majority of ECEC teaching graduates are choosing to work in the school rather than prior-to-school sector (Fenech, et al., 2022). The low uptake in and completion of specialist degrees in ECEC has been hampered by lower remuneration compared to the school sector (OECD, 2019).

At the same time, demand for and government investment in ECEC is increasing, to support parental workforce participation (Thorpe et al., 2023) and enhance child outcomes (e.g., the Federal Government's Early Years Strategy, funded kindergarten for 3-year-olds in Victoria, and the recently commenced Early Years Commitment in New South Wales which includes proposals for universal preschool access). To build, support and sustain a national ECEC workforce in Australia to meet these policy objectives, the Shaping Our Future (SOF) 10-year national workforce strategy was launched in 2021 (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2021a). This strategy outlines six areas of focus: professional recognition, attraction / retention, leadership / capability, wellbeing, qualifications / career pathways and data / evidence. The SOF is a call to action for all ECEC stakeholders to support the sustainability of the ECEC workforce, while recognising the complexity of this mission (ACECQA, 2021a).

Given the potential negative impacts of staff turnover in ECEC, it is important to understand what factors support early childhood professionals to remain in their positions, and what factors contribute to intentions to leave. It is also important to understand whether there are factors specifically related to job role (educators/teachers versus centre directors) that contribute to staying or leaving, as day-to-day responsibilities, relationships and tasks differ between these groups. Here, we report on findings from an Australian mixed-methods study that investigated the extent to which aspects of work climate and culture, and work-related wellbeing, contribute to intention to stay in the profession, and whether these factors differ between those who primarily work directly with children on a daily basis (e.g., educators and teachers) versus those with responsibilities for operation and managing a service (centre directors).

2. The Impacts of Staff Turnover

The attrition of educators in the ECEC workforce, framed in the literature as an issue of turnover, impacts the overall quality and wellbeing of all within a child care community. Firstly, when staff leave an EC service there are compromises to the continuity of relationships with children and families. For example, Cassidy et al. (2011) report that families can have trouble re-establishing trusting relationships when there is high staff turnover and may feel concerned about how well new educators understand their child and their needs. Similarly, Cryer et al. (2000) found that in classrooms with high turnover rates, toddlers were less likely to construct secure relationships with teachers. By contrast, where staff stay, relationships with children are more secure, and are likely to contribute to children's longer-term social and academic achievements. Even when educators stay, preoccupation and distractions incited by job dissatisfaction and thoughts of leaving may limit an educator's ability to provide sensitive and attentive care to children and families (Buettner et al., 2016). For example, Kwon et al. (2022) found that children's behavioural issues were indirectly associated with educators' intention to leave, through educators' depressive symptoms and lower commitment to the position.

Secondly, staff turnover creates burden for those who remain in their positions. Directors incur an additional administrative workload as they recruit new staff, and potentially reorganise existing staff, to comply with ratios and regulations (Cassidy et al., 2011). The morale of staff who stay in the service may also be affected by persistent turnover (Kwon et al., 2020), and they can experience an increase in workload and stress, which may further contribute to a cycle of negative work-related feelings (Whitebook et al., 2014). Schaack et al. (2021) reported that teachers interpret turnover as an interruption to their effectiveness and a disruption to children's learning and development. Teachers also report negative impacts of turnover, such as the need to train or acclimate new staff (whether casual, permanent, or redeployed from other classrooms), and to adjust to new staff members' practices, habits and philosophies (Cassidy et al., 2011).

Thirdly, staff turnover has significant financial costs. For services, these costs include recruitment (Kwon et al., 2020) and training costs, which impact the economic viability of some services (Sorenson & Ladd, 2020). Estimates of costs to recruit a new educator are around 26 weeks of average wages and training new staff costs around two-and-a-half weeks of average wages (SafeWork Australia, 2015). In broader terms, there are social costs to educators and teachers undertaking years of training, only to leave within a short time of entering the sector, or of completing higher levels of qualification (Thorpe et al., 2020).

3. Factors Impacting Intention to Leave

Drawing on previous evidence and theoretical frameworks, such as job resources and demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and holistic educator wellbeing (Cumming & Wong, 2019), we review below some key factors that may impact educators' intention to leave.

3.1. Work-Related Wellbeing

It is widely acknowledged that many early childhood professionals are passionate about their work; they show a high level of personal accomplishment and feel that they make a difference to the lives of the children and families with which they work (Ciucui & Robertson, 2020; McCormick et al., 2022). Some studies have found that educators who report greater positivity in such values, and more intrinsic motivation for entering the field (e.g., liking children and wanting to make a difference), are less likely to consider leaving (McMullen et al., 2020; Torquati et al., 2007; Wells, 2017). In a study of US educators, Herman et al. (2023) found that those who reported that work in ECEC was their 'calling' were less likely to report an intention to leave their role. However, a survey of Australian educators found the opposite relation; those who reported more intrinsic motivations for entering the field were more likely to report an intention to leave (Thorpe et al., 2020).

In relation to professional recognition from society and government, educators consistently report frustration with the low status given to the ECEC profession (Roberts et al., 2018; Thorpe et al., 2023) as contributing to their decision to leave the sector. Boyd (2013) found that

educators overwhelmingly indicated their work was meaningful and rewarding, but they also felt that directors and parents did not value them as professionals. Low pay, poor benefits, and an increasingly complex workload, with no additional planning or paid time to meet work demands, contribute to these feelings of frustration. The COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to the already high rates of turnover in the Australian context, highlighting the lack of recognition and respect educators received despite going above and beyond in their work with children and families (Eadie et al., 2021; McFarland et al., 2022). These issues are not new, and many studies examining the reasons for turnover have shown that factors such as inadequate pay and benefits predict job satisfaction and turnover intentions (McKinlay et al., 2018; Schaack et al., 2020).

Where work demands are high, but resources are poor, educators are likely exposed to persistent stress that can result in burnout and turnover. Burnout is characterised by both affective and cognitive aspects (Madigan & Kim, 2021): affective aspects include emotional exhaustion and cynicism/depersonalisation, while a cognitive aspect is feeling reduced efficacy and accomplishment at work. Emotional exhaustion involves feelings of being overextended emotionally, whereas reduced efficacy involves feeling incompetent or unsuccessful. There is evidence that emotional exhaustion predicts early childhood educators' intention to leave their position (Carson et al., 2017; Grant et al., 2019). In a recent meta-analysis, Madigan and Kim (2021) showed that low job satisfaction and high burnout explains a substantial portion of variance in teachers' intentions to leave. Similarly, Grant et al. (2019) found that high levels of stress and emotional exhaustion were associated with intention to leave a job. Madigan and Kim (2021) suggest that the link between emotional exhaustion and intention to leave is not surprising, as a depletion of resources and emotions can cause teachers to struggle with the everyday expectations of teaching. Similarly, a reduced sense of personal accomplishment may decrease motivation and self-esteem. Burnout can then cause teachers to avoid certain challenging aspects of their job, eventually resulting in leaving (Madigan & Kim, 2021).

3.2. Workplace Culture and Climate

Perception of the supportiveness of the workplace community as a resource – for example, positive relationships and collegiality with other staff, supervisors, and service leaders – is associated with lower levels of occupational burnout and, in turn, lower likelihood of intention to leave (Hur et al., 2023; Jeon & Wells, 2018; McKinlay et al., 2018; Zinsser et al., 2016). Schaack et al. (2021) reported that teachers who stayed described their workplace as collegial, with a collective sense of interdependence, trust and support with co-workers, and a sense of belonging to the organisation – feeling that they are part of something bigger, where there is a culture of acceptance and respect (see also Jones et al., 2019; McCormick et al., 2022; McGinty et al., 2008). In these same studies, by contrast, teachers who left described a lack of cooperation and collegiality in co-worker relationships.

Other studies, both in the US and Australia, have found similar relations between intention to leave and workplace culture and climate. A positive workplace ethos, characterised by high staff morale, positive staff recognition, participative decision making, strong and supportive leadership, and positive professional interactions, was negatively related to intention to leave (Thorpe et al., 2020). While McMullen et al. (2020) found collegial relationships (including items addressing acceptance and physical safety, being understood and respected by colleagues, and having a sense of community in the workplace) to be predictive of job satisfaction, these factors were not predictive of educators' intention to leave their current position or profession.

Acknowledgement of professional knowledge and skills that enable educators to make their own choices in their day-to-day work (autonomy and job control) also impacts their intention to leave or stay. Evidence shows that educators feel less job dissatisfaction and are less likely to contemplate leaving the field or their current position, when their professional knowledge and skills are utilised, where there is autonomy in daily practice and respect for decisions made, and where there is inclusion in curricular and service-wide decision making (e.g., Hur et al., 2023; McMullen et al. 2020; Schaack et al., 2020).

3.3. The Current Study

To ensure that children and families reap the rewards of consistent, high-quality ECEC, and in a context of crisis in the current Australian system, there is an urgent need to understand the key factors that influence educators to stay in or leave the profession. Press et al. (2015) highlighted the need for both qualitative and quantitative methods to illuminate the factors that sustain job satisfaction in the complex, demanding, and poorly understood work environment of early childhood educators. Here we report findings from a mixed methods study that examined to what extent the work culture and climate (co-worker and supervisor relations, teamwork, organisational climate, autonomy and decision making) and work-related wellbeing (personal accomplishment, emotional exhaustion, professional respect, pay and benefits) contribute to intention to leave or stay in the profession.

Building on previous work, we examined whether the factors predicting intention to leave differ for those in management positions (e.g., centre directors) compared to those working directly with children (educators and teachers, and other support staff). We are aware of only one other study that has examined this; Thorpe et al. (2020) found that those in managerial roles were more likely to report an intention to stay in their position and were less likely to leave within 12 months. Thorpe et al. (2020) suggested this may be because management roles afford better opportunities for increased pay and autonomy, security, and career status. Further evidence gained from the current study has the potential to inform both government policies and ECEC organisations about the factors that support retention of the whole workforce.

4. Methods

4.1. Participants

A total of 883 responses were received to an online survey conducted in March 2021. Respondents who provided basic demographic information but did not complete any of the measures were removed from the dataset ($n = 104$). An analysis of missing data indicated that participants who chose not to complete any of the measures in the survey were more likely to have a lower qualification (specifically no formal qualification) and were more likely to be very recent entrants to the profession (less than one year of experience). The remaining 779 participants responded to a question about intention to leave the profession. Of these, 66 participants indicated retirement as their only reason for leaving the profession. For the current analysis, these participants were excluded from the dataset. Participants who indicated retirement alongside other reasons for leaving were retained in the dataset. All further quantitative analyses focus on the remaining data of 713 participants (97.4% females; mean age = 42.38, $SD = 9.96$; 18 reported being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander). Additional participant demographics and work-related variables are shown in Table 1.

4.2. Materials and Methods

This study was approved by the researchers' university Human Research Ethics Committee, and was conducted in accordance with the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018). No information was collected in the study that could identify participants or services. An information statement was provided to all participants before they commenced the survey, and participants gave informed consent by starting the survey. Participants were free to complete as much or as little of the survey as they chose.

Table 1
Participant and Work-Related Characteristics (superscript figure indicates number of participants providing qualitative responses).

Participant variables	Valid *n* (%)	Work-related variables	Valid *n* (%)
Highest qualification		**Service type**	
No formal qualification	6 (0.8%)[2]	Long day care	451 (63.3%)[57]
Certificate	47 (6.6%)[6]	Preschool	238 (33.4%)[37]
Diploma	298 (41.9%)[43]	Other[a]	24 (3.4%)[3]
Degree	327 (46%)[44]	**ACECQA rating**	
Higher than degree	33 (4.6%)[2]	Excellent	38 (5.5%)[6]
Experience in the field		Exceeding	303 (43.8%)[39]
Less than 3 years	18 (2.5%)[1]	Meeting	303 (43.8%)[43]
3–5 years	74 (10.4%)[5]	Working towards[b]	48 (6.9%)[7]
6–10 years	134 (18.8%)[20]	**Age of children**	
11–15 years	113 (15.8%)[16]	Under 2 years	40 (5.7%)[5]
16–20 years	106 (14.9%)[14]	2–3 years	34 (4.9%)[10]
More than 20 years	255 (35.8%)[40]	3–5 years	305 (43.8%)[45]
Experience – current workplace		Mixed ages	317 (45.5%)[36]
< 1 year	79 (11.1%)[10]	**Location**	
1–2 years	93 (13.2%)[9]	Urban	432 (62.3%)[56]
3–5 years	184 (26.1%)[19]	Semi-rural	135 (19.5%)[19]
6–10 years	162 (23%)[31]	Rural or remote	126 (18.2%)[21]
11–15 years	89 (12.6%)[10]	**Work status**	
16–20 years	47 (6.7%)[8]	Permanent full time	437 (61.5%)[51]
> 20 years	51 (7.2%)[9]	Permanent part time	230 (32.3%)[35]
Position		Casual	22 (3.1%)[5]
Director[c]	423 (59.5%)[55]	Other	22 (3.1%)[6]
Teacher[d]	91 (12.8%)[11]		
Educator[d]	95 (13.4%)[15]		
Room leader[e]	45 (6.3%)[8]		
Assistant[f]	27 (3.8%)[3]		
Other	30 (4.2%)[5]		

[a] Other includes family day care, occasional care, and integrated services;
[b] Includes two instances of significant improvement required;
[c] A director is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the EC service and ensuring that the service meets National Quality Standards. They have a minimum diploma qualification and may or may not work directly with children.
[d] A teacher is degree qualified and an educator is diploma or certificate qualified, both work directly with children
[e] A room leader is an teacher/educator who is responsible for the children, staff, and running of a classroom;
[f] Assistant is a term used in some jurisdictions in Australia to refer to 'educators' with the minimum Certificate III qualification.

A mixed-method, convergent parallel design was used in the study. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time, they were analysed independently, and findings were triangulated to provide an overall interpretation of the data in relation to the research aim (see Fig. 1). It was intended that applying a mixed-methods approach to the research questions could provide more nuanced and detailed understanding of the data, which could be missed if using only quantitative or qualitative data (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Integration and interpretation of the quantitative and qualitative data can provide stronger evidence for conclusions, compared to a singular approach, thus, increasing the validity of the results and conclusions (Johnson & Christensen, 2004).

In March 2021 an information sheet, introduction to the research and survey link were emailed to each service listed on the ACECQA publicly available database of ECEC services. Centre directors then sent the survey information and link to their service's educators if they chose to. A reminder email was sent to services two weeks after the initial email. The survey remained open for four weeks. The online survey included items from the Early Childhood Educator Well-being Survey [ECEWS; Wong et al., 2022]. ECEWS contains items derived from standardised instruments and additional demographic and work-context questions developed by researchers from extant literature. It includes demographic questions based on those used in two other studies: selected questions from the You Bet I Care! (YBIC) survey (Centre for Families, Work, and Well-being, 2000); and questions from the Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work Project (Press et al., 2020). The remaining survey items address psychological, physical, and work-related well-being, along with items addressing the work environment. Only results for work culture and climate and work-related wellbeing are reported here.

4.3. Quantitative Data Collection

4.3.1. Work Culture and Climate

Teamwork and Organisation Climate. We used two scales from the Work Environment Scales of the Work Health Check (WHC; Gadinger et al., 2012) to capture teamwork and positivity of the organisational climate. The scale 'teamwork' (TW, 5 items) measured individual assets and perceptions as well as organisationally shared norms of support and collective action for mutual benefits (e.g., "people support each other when problems arise"). The scale 'positive organizational climate' (POC, 6 items) integrated the extent to which employees' input for improving existing work conditions was valued by the company management, the quality of leader–subordinate relationships and the employees' commitment to the organisation's mission (e.g., "the management values our suggestions for improvement"). Note that due to an administration error, POC item 4 was omitted ("our supervisor supports us in difficult situations"). Participants responded on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). In the current sample, reliability was good for both scales (TW Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$; POC Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$).

Co-worker Relations. We used seven questions from the YBIC survey which asked respondents to indicate all phrases that describe their relationship with their co-workers most of the time. Example phrases include "my colleagues share personal concerns with me" and "my colleagues are not very helpful". The dependent measure was the count of positive responses; an indication of all four positive statements but none of the three negative statements would result in a maximum score of 7. The scale showed marginal reliability in the current sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .65$).

Supervisor Relations. We used nine questions from the YBIC survey which asked the respondent to indicate all phrases that describe their relationship with the person who supervises them. Example phrases include "supervises me too closely" and "appreciates the difficulties of balancing work and family responsibilities". The dependent measure was the count of positive responses; an indication of all five positive statements but none of the four negative statements would result in a maximum score of 9. The scale showed acceptable reliability in the current sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$).

Autonomy. We used seven items from the YBIC survey which capture how much autonomy the respondent has in common organisational decisions and actions. Example items include "ordering materials and supplies" and "planning daily schedule of activities". We included four additional items focused on influence regarding what shifts are worked, who is in the work team, when holidays can be taken and work coverage for staff absences. For all items, responses were provided on a three-point scale (very little influence, some influence, considerable influence), with higher scores indicating greater influence on decision making. The scale showed good reliability in the current sample

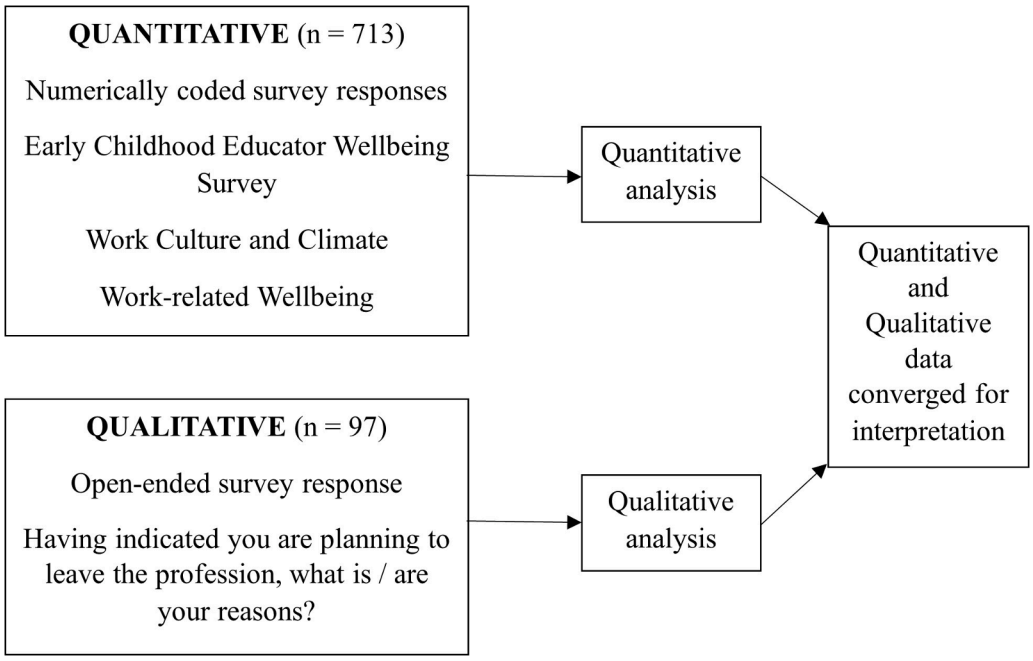

Fig. 1. Triangulation of Quantitative and Qualitative Data.

(Cronbach's α = .87).

Decision Making. We used an additional scale from the YBIC survey to examine how decisions are made in the workplace. Respondents were asked to indicate all items that apply to how decisions are made in the service most of the time. Example phrases included "people provide input but the decisions have already been made" and "people don't feel free to express their opinions". The dependent measure was the count of positive responses; an indication of all four positive statements but none of the four negative statements would result in a maximum score of 8. The scale showed acceptable reliability in the current sample (Cronbach's α = .78).

4.3.2. Work-related Wellbeing

Pay, Promotion and Benefits. We used seven items from the YBIC survey which aimed to capture perceptions of fairness and appropriateness of pay, adequacy of leave and benefits, and job progression and promotion. Example phrases included "my pay is fair considering my background and skills" and "my benefits are inadequate". Respondents were asked to indicate all items they agree with. The dependent measure was the count of positive responses; an indication of all four positive statements but none of the three negative statements would result in a maximum score of 7. The scale showed relatively low reliability in the current sample (Cronbach's α = .56); however, there was no identified item which, if removed, would have resulted in a substantial improvement in scale reliability.

Professional Respect. This item came from the YBIC survey. Participants were asked to indicate which groups they felt generally respected them as a childcare professional (your own family; families of children in the service; others working in the childcare field; professionals in other fields; friends; public at large). The dependent measure was a sum of the chosen responses (range from 0 to 6). The scale showed marginal reliability in the current sample (Cronbach's α = .66).

Emotional Exhaustion and Personal Accomplishment. The Maslach Burnout Inventory – Educator Survey (MBI-ES) (Maslach et al. 1996) is a widely used measure of burnout based on three dimensions: depersonalisation (unfeeling and impersonal responses in work life); emotional exhaustion (feeling overextended and exhausted by work); and personal accomplishment (feeling competent and successful at work). Our previous use of this scale indicated floor effects and poor reliability of the depersonalisation scale (Wong et al., 2022), so in the current study we only used the emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment scales. Respondents indicated on a 7-point scale (0 = Never, 1 = A few times a year, 2 = Once a month or less, 3 = A few times a month, 4 = Once a week, 5 = A few times a week, 6 = Every day) the frequency with which they experienced emotional exhaustion (e.g., "I feel emotionally drained from my work", 9 items; Cronbach's α = .92) and personal accomplishment (e.g., "I feel exhilarated after working closely with the children in my care", 8 items; Cronbach's α = .74). The dependent measure was the mean score across all items in each scale (range = 0 to 6).

4.3.3. Qualitative Data Collection

There was one qualitative question in the ECEWS that was analysed for this study. For participants who answered "yes" to the question "Are you planning to leave the profession?" a follow-up question was asked; "Having indicated you are planning to leave the profession, what is/are your reasons"? Participants were given seven choices to select from (they could select more than one) and were also given the option of providing a free-text response if their reasons were not captured by these options or if they wished to provide more information about their selected responses. There were 175 participants who provided open-text responses to this question. Participants who gave one-word responses such as "retirement' or "age" (n = 78) were removed from analysis, in order to focus on the more rich and in-depth responses. Thus, the qualitative responses analysed totalled 97 (95 respondents identified as female, 2 preferred not to answer; 6 respondents identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander). Other personal and work-related characteristics of respondents providing qualitative data are shown in Table 1.

4.4. Data Analysis

4.4.1. Quantitative Data

To address the question of whether those in management positions differed from those in non-management positions in the reasons for intending to leave, we compared the scores of leavers versus stayers on all measures for each role type. Initial analysis of the descriptive data indicated that all variables were non-normally distributed (Shapiro Wilk p's < .002); thus, comparisons of stayers and leavers were conducted

using a non-parametric Mann-Whitney test. While the group comparisons provide evidence on which individual measures stayers and leavers differed, these individual comparisons do not account for the covariance that is inevitable between the measures. We conducted logistic regression to examine the unique predictors of intention to leave (stay = 0, leave = 1). Analysis was conducted using Mplus V8.7 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2021) with MLR estimation (maximum likelihood with robust standard errors), which does not assume normality of data distribution or independence of observations. To avoid the listwise deletion of missing data, we also used integration = montecarlo. All predictors were entered as observed variables (i.e., a scale summary score) rather than latent constructs with item level indicators, to limit the number of parameters being estimated. Total years of experience, qualification level, and age were also included in the analysis. All predictor variables were allowed to covary. The logistic regression was also run as a multi-group analysis comparing those in management positions with those in non-management positions. This was done using the KNOWNCLASS option in MPlus and the calculation of new parameters to compare simple slopes of the two groups for each predictor.

4.4.2. Qualitative Data

Qualitative analyses of the open-ended text responses were guided by phenomenology, which suggests that important knowledge can be gained through understanding others' experiences. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify, analyse and report patterns in the data. Rather than use a deductive approach where the themes are constrained by frameworks and theory, we used an inductive analysis process to ensure new emerging themes were captured. This approach ensured we could describe participants' views and experiences without imposing preconceived categories.

To begin the coding process, one of the researchers familiarised themselves with the data by organising all the open-ended responses into one Word document, reading and re-reading the responses and making memos and notes throughout the document about potential initial codes. A second researcher then read through this document and added memos and notes. The two researchers then met and collaboratively discussed and further refined the initial coding structure. The two researchers then separately coded the responses according to the agreed upon initial coding structure. The researchers then met again to discuss and resolved any discrepancies. From this discussion, the broader themes were identified to interpret the underlying meaning of the data. Both coders have more than ten years of experience conducting qualitative studies and engaging in qualitative data analysis.

5. Results

5.1. Quantitative Results

A total of 239 participants (33.5%) indicated an intention to leave the profession. Of these, 41 (17.2%) indicated intention to leave within 1 year, 132 (55.2%) within two to five years, and 66 (27.6%) within six to 10 years. Based on their reported position, participants were classified as either in a management position (centre director) or a non-management position (teacher, educator, room leader, assistant, or other staff). Intention to leave responses were categorised as a binary variable – leavers versus stayers. There was no significant association between intention to leave and position, with 38.4% of non-management and 31.2% of management respondents indicating an intention to leave, χ^2 (1) = 3.67, p = .055.

Initial analysis compared the scores of leavers versus stayers on all measures for each role type (see Table 2). For those in management positions, stayers reported lower emotional exhaustion, higher satisfaction with pay and benefits, higher professional respect, more positive teamwork and supervisor relations, a more positive organisational climate and greater autonomy. The strongest effects were for emotional exhaustion and autonomy. There were no differences between stayers and leavers on personal accomplishment, co-worker relations or decision making. For those in non-management positions, stayers reported more positive work-related wellbeing and work culture and climate on all measures, except for co-worker relations where there was no difference. The strongest effects were found for emotional exhaustion, decision making, and pay and benefits.

Table 2
Comparisons of Stayers and Leavers for Each Position Type.

	Management position			Non-management position		
	Leavers	Stayers	Effect size	Leavers	Stayers	Effect size
Work-Related Wellbeing						
EE	3.73 (1.28)	2.47 (1.33)	.50***	3.70 (1.32)	2.37 (1.39)	.51***
PA	4.93 (0.75)	4.95 (0.83)	.02	4.72 (0.70)	4.93 (0.08)	.21*
Pay & Benefits	2.88 (1.37)	3.57 (1.42)	.28***	2.42 (1.43)	3.41 (1.36)	.39***
Prof. Respect	3.15 (1.41)	3.77 (1.59)	.23**	2.93 (1.56)	3.61 (1.43)	.25**
Workplace Culture and Climate						
Co-workers	5.36 (1.58)	5.61 (1.51)	.09	4.76 (1.68)	5.13 (1.54)	.14
Teamwork	3.97 (0.77)	4.22 (0.64)	.19**	3.51 (0.87)	3.97 (0.78)	.32***
Supervisor	5.75 (2.43)	6.82 (1.90)	.25***	5.27 (2.45)	6.45 (2.24)	.29***
POC	4.08 (0.65)	4.30 (0.55)	.21**	3.70 (0.74)	4.05 (0.69)	.29***
Autonomy	2.50 (0.38)	2.67 (0.34)	.30***	1.87 (0.43)	20.1 (0.45)	.20*
Dec. Making	6.56 (1.50)	6.87 (1.29)	.11	4.18 (2.36)	5.60 (2.17)	.40***

Note: For the Mann-Whitney test, effect size is given by the Rank-Biserial Correlation. EE = emotional exhaustion, PA = personal accomplishment, POC = positive organisational climate

Logistic regression of the whole sample revealed three significant unique predictors – higher satisfaction with pay and benefits, lower emotional exhaustion, and younger age were all associated with decreased likelihood of intention to leave (see Table 3). Odds ratios are interpreted as the change in odds for a one-unit change in the predictor variable; for example, a one-unit increase in emotional exhaustion results in 96.2% (1.962 – 1) higher likelihood of being in class 1 (intention to leave), while a one-unit increase in pay and benefits resulted in 14.2% (1 – .858) lower likelihood of being in the intention to leave group. For each 1 unit (1 year) increase in age, there was a 4.4% increased likelihood of being in the intention to leave group.

Subsequently, the logistic regression was run as a multi-group analysis comparing those in management positions with those in non-management positions. (see Table 4). This showed that, aligned with the overall findings, lower emotional exhaustion was associated with

Table 3
Logistic Regression Estimates and Odd Ratios for the Prediction of Intention to Leave.

Predictor	Standardised estimate	p	Odds ratio
Emotional Exhaustion	.439	<.001	1.962
Personal Accomplishment	.099	.071	1.322
Pay & Benefits	-.098	.047	0.858
Professional Respect	-.093	.080	0.872
Co-worker Relations	.108	.052	1.169
Teamwork	-.088	.186	0.772
Supervisor Relations	-.026	.642	0.974
Positive Organisational Climate	-.002	.979	0.994
Autonomy	-.110	.059	0.616
Decision Making	-.037	.533	0.958
Total Experience (years)	.093	.094	1.149
Qualification Level	.088	.073	1.303
Age	.190	<.001	1.044

Table 4
Logistic Regression Estimates and Odd Ratios for the Prediction of Intention to Leave for Each Position Type, and Significance of Slope Comparisons (p).

	Managerial			Non-managerial			
Predictor	Standardised estimate	*p*	Odds ratio	Standardised estimate	*p*	Odds ratio	Slopes comparison
EE	.506	<.001	2.305	.416	<.001	1.923	.339
PA	.239	.001	2.076	.048	.546	1.149	.077
Pay/Benefits	-.031	.614	.949	-.186	.023	.742	.148
Prof. Respect	-.091	.238	.866	-.139	.089	.810	.710
Co-workers	.084	.251	1.141	.142	.122	1.237	.657
Teamwork	-.070	.455	.796	-.167	.094	.596	.509
Supervisor	-.052	.420	.945	.060	.596	1.064	.385
POC	.061	.455	.797	.064	.558	1.258	.373
Autonomy	-.108	.104	.513	-.012	.894	.934	.363
Dec. Making	.007	.936	1.009	-.095	.308	.885	.420
Total Exp	.063	.400	1.117	.142	.083	1.267	.508
Qualification	.018	.771	1.067	.171	.012	1.795	.111
Age	.278	<.001	1.070	.071	.404	1.017	.055

Note: EE = emotional exhaustion, PA = personal accomplishment, POC = positive organisational climate

significantly lower intention to leave in both groups. The original finding of higher pay and benefits being related to lower likelihood of intention to leave was more heavily driven by those in non-management positions, while the original finding related to age was driven more strongly by those in management positions. Two additional findings emerged in this sub-group analysis; for managers only, higher personal accomplishment was associated with higher likelihood of intending to leave; note that personal accomplishment was a non-significant predictor until emotional exhaustion was entered into the regression model. Secondly, for those in non-management positions only, holding a *lower* qualification was associated with higher likelihood of being in the intention to leave group. Finally, while there are some differences in what predicts intention to leave in each group, the comparisons of simple slopes revealed that none of the regression estimates for individual predictors differed significantly across the groups.

Those participants who reported an intention to leave were also asked to indicate their reasons. Participants were given seven choices to select from (they could select more than one). The most frequently selected reason was work responsibilities, which was particularly high for those in management positions (71.2% of those intending to leave selected this response). The second highest was low valuation of the early childhood sector (see Table 6).

5.2. Qualitative Results

Given the aim of this study was to better understand intention to leave in the ECEC sector, the open-text responses to the survey question, "Having indicated you are planning to leave the profession, what is/are your reasons?" were analysed. Initially, 11 codes were identified (see Table 5). From these initial codes, three main themes emerged from the data, focused on participants' reasons for intention to leave the sector: feeling undervalued, increased demands with inadequate support, and workforce issues: equity and quality. These broad themes also capture the categories of responses participants could select from in the quantitative data collection (see Table 6).

Table 5
Initial Codes and Themes in Qualitative Data Analysis.

Initial Codes	Broader Theme
Low status in society Low priority from Government bodies Poor treatment during COVID-19 lockdowns	Feeling undervalued
Administrative and regulatory overloads Expectations of EC workforce to fill a gap Too many competing demands Lack of work / life balance	Increased demands with inadequate support
Underpaid for the expectations Power and gender structures within the sector Lack of quality staffing Inadequate ratios	Workforce issues: Equity and quality

5.3. Feeling Undervalued

Many of the participants indicated that in the ECEC sector there were pervasive feelings of being undervalued – by government, society, and the families with whom they work. Participants expressed that the important, highly skilled, and complex work they do continues to go unrecognised, particularly in comparison to those working in schools:

> Lack of support from employer body and lack of work conditions compared to teachers in primary sector. We are undervalued and the expectations from Department and cluster management are unrealistic, and do not support staff wellbeing. (P206, Centre Director)

Participants also expressed frustration with the Australian Government in general, and specifically a "lack of value especially during COVID-19. [They] pick and choose when we are essential" (P260, Centre Director). Other comments included:

> [The] Government [is] changing funding criteria constantly e.g., Federal funding [was] utilised to ensure that we remained open during the worst of the pandemic in 2020. [But the] free kindergarten fee policy has annihilated our budget for 2021 and we are now reliant on donations from parents to pay wages. This is insulting to the profession. (P418, Centre Director)

5.4. Increased Demands with Inadequate Support

Participants expressed that their work was becoming increasingly complex and demanding, and that they had inadequate support. One sub-theme that emerged was administrative and regulatory overload. Many felt that the administrative expectations due to regulatory requirements were unrealistic and unachievable. Centre director participants also noted that administration interfered with their core work with children. For example:

> The ever-changing landscape of compliance; having to be on top of so much legislation regarding business compliance as well as childcare compliance to the Regulation as well as the standards. The ever-present stress of A&R [NQS assessment and rating process]. (P35, Centre Director)

Another subtheme was expectations of the ECEC workforce to develop skills beyond their roles – notably, "more expectation that teachers will upskill to deal with additional needs" (P283, Teacher) and step into roles they previously had not filled. This was due to the increasingly complex needs of families and children with whom they work, and services being unavailable or inadequate to meet the needs of

Table 6
Frequency of Selected Reasons (including coding overlap to the broader qualitative themes) for Intention to Leave (total, management, non-management), and Example Qualitative Responses.

Reason	Frequency (total %, management %, non-management %)	Qualitative response
Wages (Workforce issues: Equity and quality)	121 (52.6%, 48.5%, 58.2%)	"Recognize that a Diploma qualified is worth more than $26.01c per hour!! – we can go to Woolworths and get paid more than this and have not a big responsibility like ECE." (P260, Centre Director)
Work responsibilities (Increased demands with inadequate support)	136 (59.1%, 71.2%, 42.9%)	"Our administrative workload is overwhelming, hours unpaid each week, and continues to increase each year. We never feel that we are keeping our head above water with it. There is very little time and energy left for doing our main role – that of teaching the children." (P340, Centre Director)
Working hours (Increased demands with inadequate support)	109 (47.4%, 56.1%, 35.7%)	"Overworked, no time off last year, excessive unpaid at home work required." (P82, Educator)
Work duties do not correspond to training (Increased demands with inadequate support)	18 (7.8%, 10.6%, 4.1%)	"We have a lot of children with trauma backgrounds and we are the first point of call to provide early interventions. Allied health interventions the waitlists are huge, there is no chance of KIS [Kindergarten Inclusion Support] funding so essentially we have to suck it up and deal with complex needs" (P260, Centre Director)
Ambiguity of work assignments (Increased demands with inadequate support)	14 (6.1%, 5.3%, 7.1%)	"Managing a centre that offers long day care and integrated funded kinder, my role is more akin to that of a school principal, not a 'manager'." (P22, Centre Director)
Poor career progression prospects (Feeling undervalued)	49 (21.3%, 18.2%, 25.5%)	"I am going to go to an independent school because working for the [State name] Department of Education has become untenable … I am a Lead Teacher twice over (recently renewed) I have led a previous site to two Excellent ratings and yet I still feel undervalued." (P239, Centre Director)
Low valuation of EC sector (Feeling undervalued)	135 (58.7%, 58.3%, 59.2%)	"Families and the wider community do not value the work and expertise we have. We are just baby sitters!" (P345, Teacher)

children and families":

> Inclusion needs of children is going through the roof and the ability to provide staff support and/or find ISF [inclusion support funding] staff that have experience with inclusion needs is extremely hard and is becoming very stressful. (P414, Centre Director)

Other centre directors noted the added burden of supporting the emotional and mental health of families and staff: "Impact of community trauma and staff mental health concerns that I support … becomes a heavy weight to carry" (P496, Centre Director).

Finally, another sub-theme that emerged from the data was too many competing demands. Participants felt like they were being pulled in many different directions and overstretched beyond their abilities to attend to these demands. For example:

> Managing a centre that offers long daycare and integrated funded kinder, my role is more akin to that of a school principal, not a 'manager.' I am responsible for all grants/funding/community liaisons. I have over 30 staff and over 150 children attending. I am on call 24/7 for all staff needs and child needs. (P22, Centre Director).

> Stress from ever growing expectations, red tape, responsibilities, and parents expect more and even communicate out of hours through Storypark [Online documentation and communication portal]. (P283, Teacher)

Both educator and centre director participants expressed that these competing demands impacted their home life as well, noting that "the workload is chewing into personal time significantly" (P345, Teacher). There was also an overall sense that the "stress, pressure [and] demands outweigh the fulfilment" (P219, Centre Director) that they can gain from their work, and that there is "significant interference on family life, health, and wellbeing" (Participant 192, Centre Director). Finally, one participant commented:

> I will be turning 57 this year and feel that the hours and level of responsibility and pay do not allow for a good work/life balance with the focus always being on 'work' and not so much on 'life'. Our industry is so under-valued and I feel I am getting too old to fight this. (P689, Centre Director)

5.5. Workforce Issues: Equity and Quality

The third theme highlighted in the qualitative responses relates to workforce issues. Specifically, several participants discussed power and gender issues in the workforce. Several expressed the desire to move into more gender-balanced professions. For example: "wage disparity between men and women is highly evident in this female majority industry" (P22, Centre Director), and "I'm actually looking forward to working in a more gender-balanced industry" (P464, Centre Director). Others expressed concern over unfair power structures within the ECEC sector. For example:

> Hierarchical power structures exist, and women are categorised by other women by predominantly race, and education. Women who are less educated are often relegated to doing cleaning and changing nappies and voices are muted or devalued. Although our frameworks are organised around equity and equality it is predominantly white educated middle-class women whose voices dominate the sector and have more access to social mobility in the field. (P37, Educator and Room Leader)

Finally, a perceived lack of quality staffing was a predominant subtheme in relation to centre director participants' intention to leave the profession. For example:

> The demands of the job in relation to staffing the centre with quality staff and then keeping the morale of the staff in a positive light is very demanding. Relief staffing is also a big challenge in this industry. When you talk about quality staff this is reflected on the quality of the training being provided to the students. The training is not realistic to the industry requirements. (P307, Centre Director)

Additionally, centre director participants mentioned the impact of supporting the needs of staff members as a reason associated with their intentions to leave the sector: "low quality pedagogy in the sector and

tired of constantly mentoring and supporting to build on practice. It just becomes exhausting" (P105, Centre Director).

6. Discussion

There is no disguising the fact that the ECEC workforce in Australia is in crisis; reports of staff shortages, stress and high turnover have resulted in the closure of rooms and, in some cases, the entire service (Centre for Policy Development, 2022). Findings from our study revealed that one in three respondents intended to leave the profession, more than half of these within the next five years.

An initial comparison of stayers and leavers indicated some similarities across workforce roles. In both centre director and educator/teacher roles, stayers reported lower emotional exhaustion, supporting the findings of Grant et al. (2019) and Madigan and Kim (2021), and higher professional respect, mirroring the findings of Roberts et al. (2018) and Thorpe et al. (2023). Stayers also reported better supervisor relations, better teamwork, a more positive organisational climate and better pay and benefits, and greater autonomy in daily aspects of their work, supporting the findings of Schaack et al. (2021).

In contrast, there were work role differences for personal accomplishment and decision making. For educators/teachers, stayers were more likely to report higher personal accomplishment and greater involvement in decision making; there were no such differences for centre directors. Extant research (e.g., McMullen et al., 2020) supports these findings, though few studies have differentiated intention to leave between work roles. For the remaining indicator in our study, relationships with co-workers, there was no difference between stayers and leavers in either position.

While we observed differences between stayers and leavers on many indicators of work-related wellbeing and workplace culture and climate, analysing each indicator separately fails to capture inevitable covariance. That is, it is unclear which of these indicators are essentially explaining the same variance in leaving decisions, and which are unique predictors. The logistic regression analysis helped to tease this apart.

6.1. Work-Related Wellbeing

Several of the work-related wellbeing factors were found to be significant; one of the unique predictors of intention to leave was adequacy of pay and benefits. More positive ratings of pay and benefits were associated with lower likelihood of intention to leave, with the subgroup analysis showing this was largely driven by educators/teachers. This was also apparent from the qualitative responses, which highlighted the possibility of getting similar pay in jobs with much lower responsibility, and excessive workloads that resulted in many hours of unpaid (often unseen) work. Lower qualification level was also associated with increased intention to leave for educators; it is likely that these are the lowest paid employees who realistically could move to a lower responsibility job for similar wages, as was articulated in the qualitative responses. This is not an unusual finding, and results from previous studies indicate that even when teachers feel fulfilled by their job and are in supportive environments, those who receive lower wages are more likely to report an intention to leave (Schaack et al., 2020). Pay is one of the most discussed topics within the literature on EC educator wellbeing (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014), with low wages being a long-standing problem for the sector and having a negative impact on the EC field at large.

One action proposed in the Thrive by Five Workforce Action Plan[1] is an immediate pay rise for educators and teachers, comparable to the salary and conditions of the school education sector. This comparability is important, as existing research frequently connects the lack of articulation of early childhood education graduates into the ECEC sector, and loss of existing teachers, to the more desirable pay, conditions and status of teachers working in schools (Fenech et al., 2022). The Australian Government has committed to strengthen the capacity of the Fair Work Commission to order pay increases for those working in low-paid, female-dominated industries, such as the ECEC sector, as well as providing additional benefits, such as a child care discount, to reduce out-of-pocket expenses for those working in the sector (ACECQA, 2021a).

A second unique predictor of intention to leave, for centre directors and educators/teachers, was emotional exhaustion – feeling emotionally drained, burnt out and frustrated by their job. This is clearly illustrated by both our quantitative and qualitative data. Of those respondents reporting an intention to leave, 71% of centre directors and 43% of educators/teachers indicated work responsibilities as one of the reasons for leaving, and 56% and 35% of centre directors and educators/teachers respectively indicated work hours as a reason for leaving. These findings were echoed in respondents' qualitative responses which voiced concerns about overwhelming administrative and regulatory workloads (see also Schaack et al., 2021), and that workloads were becoming increasingly complex but with little in the way of additional resources. For centre directors, this included dealing with the increasingly complex needs of children and families, while struggling to get timely support from allied professionals, and dealing with the increasing mental health concerns of staff, and family trauma.

These findings support those of Kwon et al. (2022), whose research indicated that a lack of resourcing to support children's complex behaviours indirectly contributed to educators' intention to leave. Such pressures also impacted work/life balance, where workload ends up spilling into home life. Hall-Kenyon et al. (2014) note that initiatives to support access to and quality of ECEC programs result in changing job roles and increased workload. While EC professionals recognise that this is part of their job, frustration comes from not having the resources – mental health supports, planning time, stable numbers and health of colleagues – to meet the demands. Such findings were also reported by Schaack et al. (2021), where leavers expressed a lack of external support, such as allied support staff. In contrast, teachers who stayed in their job were more likely to indicate a focus on self-improvement to handle these new demands (e.g., professional development). Such findings also potentially have implications for initial teacher education programs. Djonko-Moore (2022) found that educators who expressed a desire to remain in their position had more undergraduate coursework focused on diversity. These educators felt that their teacher education programs better prepared them for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse children and helped them to work effectively with children from diverse backgrounds, compared to those who were unsure about their desire to remain in their position.

Additionally, for those in centre director positions only, an unanticipated finding was that those who were higher in personal accomplishment were also more likely to intend to leave the profession. This was a non-significant predictor until emotional exhaustion was added into the regression, suggesting a possible interaction between emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment. That is, even in the context of high personal accomplishment, high emotional exhaustion results in those in centre director positions being more likely to indicate an intention to leave. These findings concur with those of Carson et al. (2017) and Grant et al. (2019), indicating relationships between high emotional exhaustion and intention to leave among educators; however, their studies did not include centre directors. Qualitative responses of feeling undervalued despite previous success in leading centres, and of being an essential service during the pandemic but being undervalued from multiple levels of government and society, add context to these findings. Older age also predicted higher likelihood of intention to leave for centre directors; while this could relate to older centre directors being more likely to be closer to retirement, participants who only expressed retirement as a reason for leaving were excluded from the analysis. Qualitative responses indicate an exhaustion of 'being too old

[1] https://thrivebyfive.org.au/workforceplan/

to fight' the ongoing challenges associated with work, and the continued imbalance of work and home life.

6.2. Workplace Culture and Climate

In contrast to the indicators of work-relating wellbeing, none of the indicators of workplace culture and climate were found to uniquely predict intention to leave. This does not mean such predictors are not important, but potentially may share overlapping variance with work-related wellbeing, or their impact on intention to leave could be mediated by wellbeing. Previous findings, such as those of Schaack et al. (2021), showed that those who left their positions almost unanimously indicated that a lack of workforce collegiality influenced their decision to leave. While based on only one question, our qualitative findings are invaluable here as they diverge somewhat from the quantitative data. In particular, the opportunity to expand upon reasons for leaving indicated equity issues in the workforce that we had not previously been aware of – mainly focused on relationships within a female-dominated profession, and a perceived lack of equity in role opportunities for the diverse EC workforce. Our qualitative findings also clearly highlighted the strong feelings of a lack of professional respect from many levels of society and governance. Finally, while Ciuciu and Robertson (2020) reported a lack of professional agency as part of a set of factors contributing to educators' intention to leave, there were few qualitative responses that clearly aligned with autonomy. Some centre directors commented on concerns over staff quality and the availability of relief staffing, and on their inability to take holidays and to be constantly available. However, it is possible that the tool we used to assess autonomy – which focused on autonomy in organisational decision-making – was more aligned with the role of the director, and did not capture e.g., autonomy in pedagogical decision making for which teachers and educators are primarily responsible.

All of these findings suggest a complexity and uniqueness of workplace culture and organisational climate in the EC field that may not be adequately captured by the quantitative data, or by the limited qualitative data that could be captured with one written response. Future research concerning intention to leave should include more robust and comprehensive opportunities for qualitative data collection, for example, through in-depth interviews with participants from a wider range of roles within the service. Future work should also consider a strengths-based approach, investigating why staff stay, as well as leave the profession.

To summarise, the current findings suggest that for many participants, the emotional and practical demands of their role outweigh both the resources available (Schaack et al., 2020), as well as the rewards. This inference is supported by the proportion of participants who listed and voiced work responsibilities as the key reason for intending to leave the sector, along with inadequate wages, low valuation of the sector and high work hours. With inadequate resources and supports, the fulfilment that has enabled many to continue in the sector has been dramatically eroded. These factors, along with the exhaustion evident in the open-ended responses, suggest that many in the Australian ECEC sector are experiencing a critical accumulation of risk factors (Ciuciu & Robertson, 2020; Wells, 2015) that is contributing to intentions to leave the profession.

6.3. Implications

Having recognised some of the key factors that influence intentions to leave, the next question is what supports are needed to help mitigate these negative influences. Our qualitative findings suggest that an additional job demand for centre directors is to support teachers and educators that are ill-prepared for the work. It is critical then, that both initial teacher / educator preparation programs, and on-going professional development opportunities, meet the needs of the sector, particularly regarding working with diverse children and families, and in supporting colleagues and families experiencing trauma. Such professional development may also provide opportunities that offer lower qualified (and lower paid) educators routes through which to progress their careers by taking on specific responsibilities. Whether or not such opportunities ultimately result in lower turnover intentions is a topic for future study.

Once in the sector, interventions are necessary to retain and sustain educators. Whilst there is a lack of evidence about what works to support retention in ECEC, there is some evidence that clinical supervision has contributed to retaining service managers (Wong et al., 2024). Some authors advocate supporting individuals, for example, encouraging better coping or emotion regulation strategies that would improve work-related wellbeing (including job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion; Chang, 2013; Jeon & Ardeleanu, 2020) and in turn, impacting intentions to leave (Madigan & Kim, 2021). For example, Wang et al. (2022) found lower levels of emotional exhaustion and quitting intentions in 'adaptive copers'; they were less likely to disengage both cognitively and behaviourally (avoidance of problems, social withdrawal), instead engaging in problem solving and social support coping strategies. In contrast, the strongest intentions to leave were found among 'social-withdrawal copers', who tended to disengage from problem situations, withdraw from others and engage in self-criticism. Schaack et al. (2021) note that while all teachers in their study expressed frustration with trying to fulfil a long list of work duties, teachers who stayed were more willing to get creative with trying to find planning time, for example, during naptime, or by taking lunch with another teacher to co-plan. In the terms of Wang et al. (2022), this again implies a level of adaptive coping, with teachers actively seeking solutions to cope with workload.

Similar results in other studies (e.g., Grant et al., 2019; Jeon & Ardeleanu, 2020) have led to suggestions that professional development focused on cognitive reappraisal might be beneficial for EC professionals (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). However, such "self-help" could also be viewed as an additional stressor for an already overburdened workforce. In addition to individually focused interventions, and in keeping with our holistic conceptualisation of well-being (Cumming & Wong, 2019), we advocate for system-level support to reduce the daily stressors faced by the workforce. Interventions could include appropriate professional recognition through increases in pay and benefits, simplification, streamlining and coordination of administrative burdens across programs (Kagan, 2015), funding and resourcing that allow for programming and planning time for educators (Schaak et al., 2021), rotation of age group with whom educators work (Bellows et al., 2022), and improved public recognition and respect (Roberts et al., 2018). Ultimately, the hope is that such interventions would result in fewer educators, teachers and centre directors experiencing emotional exhaustion and burnout, increased job satisfaction and higher workforce retention.

6.4. Limitations

The cross-sectional nature of the data precludes any discussion of direction of causality; someone who has already decided to leave their job may be more disengaged and report greater psychological distress (or vice versa). Future longitudinal studies should be conducted to explore causal relations between workplace culture and climate, work-related wellbeing and intention to leave, and how these change over time. Further research is required to examine whether intention to leave results in actual turnover, and to understand what factors support a leaver to become a stayer.

The data collected in the study was exclusively self-report in nature and did not assess more objective measures of teachers' work-related wellbeing and job resources. Relying only on self-reports is susceptible to response bias (e.g., hindsight) and may result in inflated relations due to common method bias. Future studies incorporating other sources of data (e.g., physiological data on teacher stress, factual reports of turnover) should provide a more comprehensive set of findings with which

to evaluate the replicability of the present results. Furthermore, several measures, despite being used widely in the research literature, showed marginal reliability, with the Pay, Benefits, and Promotion scale in particular showing low reliability. Given the scale only allowed binary responses (agreement or disagreement with each statement) it is likely that this failed to capture more nuanced perspectives of adequacy. For future research, we recommend separating pay and benefits from promotion opportunities, and providing an opportunity for a rating of adequacy. As indicated earlier in the case of autonomy and decision making, it is also possible that some of the measures capture the responsibilities of some job roles more than other. Further research trying to understand the work culture and climate of all staff in the workplace should ensure that measures appropriately capture the wide range of roles and responsibilities that may be unique to each position.

As there is no central database in Australia for reaching early childhood teachers / educators directly, the database used was considered the most efficient distribution mechanism. However, the response rate may have been affected by the invitational email being sent to an overall service email address. This may explain the disproportionate number of responses received from centre directors compared to teachers and educators. The analysis of missing data also indicated that individuals who were lower qualified and less experienced were more likely to discontinue completion of the survey measures; as such the findings presented here should not be taken as representative of this cohort. We also cannot rule out the possibility that a biased sample responded to the request for participation, although it was not explicitly stated that the survey would ask about intentions to leave the sector.

7. Conclusion

With a swath of strategies, initiatives and reforms currently under discussion and being implemented at the state/territory and federal level in Australia (ACECQA, 2022), a sustainable, valued, high-quality ECEC workforce is critical to the success of these reforms over the next decade. It is hoped that investments in the workforce through implementation of the Shaping Our Future initiatives (ACECQA, 2021a, 2021b) will result in a more stable workforce with long-terms benefits to children, families, educators and the ECEC sector. It may be, however, that alongside system-level reforms, continuing attention is needed by researchers to the catalysts for intentions to leave converting – or not converting – into turnover. It appears that emotional exhaustion is a key contributor to intention to leave for both educators and centre directors. Our findings, as well as those of other researchers, point to the compound effect of multiple, increasingly complex job demands and a paucity of resources as the dynamic leading to emotional exhaustion for educators and centre directors.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Rebecca Bull: Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – original draft. **Laura McFarland:** Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Tamara Cumming:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing. **Sandie Wong:** Conceptualization, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Data availability

Data are accessible on the University Data Repository and will be made available for all reasonable requests. We cannot make it publicly accessible because of restrictions of the original consent. Intention to Leave Data Respository (Original data) (Macquarie University Data Respository).

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