

*Stress Incident Record (SIR):*

Exploring work-related stress in New Zealand-based early childhood  
education teachers.

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of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business (MBus).

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## Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Ana Tapueluelu

Date: 10/12/2020

In accordance with the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH), the final ethics approval for this research project was granted on 29 August 2019 (Ethics Approval Number 19/196). (See Appendix A).

## List of Abbreviations

COR	Conservation of Resource theory
ECE	early childhood education
ERO	Education Review Office
ESW	Education support worker
MBIE	Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment
MOE	Ministry of Education
MSD	musculoskeletal disorders
NZ	New Zealand
SIR	Stress Incident Record

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*Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint – Isaiah 40:31*

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## ABSTRACT

With the rise of international literature on stress and wellbeing, there is a need to explore stress-related experiences specifically in our ECE sectors in New Zealand. For the purpose of this study, 'early childhood education teachers' referred to both qualified and unqualified teachers within their profession. This study recruited 10 participants who are currently working as ECE teachers to participate in this study. Teachers responded to a face-to-face interview asking questions about the proposed research questions. The aim was to use the Stress Incident Record (SIR) method to capture stress-related experiences that are specific to ECE teachers to better understand potential stressors in their area of work, coping mechanisms that are used and whether there were any social support mechanisms available to assist them when experiencing stress. The theoretical framework used in this study was the Conservation of Resource (COR) theory. This study adopted a qualitative research methodology using face-to-face in-depth interviews with open-ended question to collect data. Teacher participants included 1 male and 9 females, and all are currently residing in Auckland.

The major findings of this study suggests that stressors that are experienced by ECE teachers in their profession does not occur in single events but unfolds in series of events. Therefore, it is important for ECE centres to ensure that ECE teachers are well equipped with sufficient resources to be able to deal with stressors that they experience in their profession. The three main stressors identified in this study were organisational stressors, social stressors, and contextual stressors. Organisational stressors that were identified were workplace surprises or unexpected events and lack of staff resource; social stressors were communication breakdown between management-teachers and parents-teachers and contextual stressors that was identified was the challenges of working with special needs children.

In terms of coping strategies, the findings from this study found that ECE teachers tends to use more emotion-focused coping strategies as compared to problem-focused coping

strategies. This study also found that within the ECE environment, there is a major reliance on social support which is consistent with the findings of Erdiller & Dogan (2015). This suggests that ECE teachers are social beings and consider their work environment and their distribution of resources in that manner.

As most research in this area has been conducted overseas, this study helps to fill a gap in the New Zealand literature on stressors experienced and coping strategies used in the ECE profession.

## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the study

I have been working in the early childhood sector since 2017. I started my career as an administrator in a Tongan Centre in Mangere. I had completed my Bachelor of Business degree in 2013 and was a stay-at-home mum while I commenced my studies towards my masters. I had no intentions whatsoever of working since I was busy with my children and was taking full time classes at that time, until the administrative position was advertised at our church preschool. The opportunity could not have come at a better time because I needed work experience at a job where I can still be around my children and still have time to study. I then applied for the position and got the job.

From an outside view, the job of an ECE teacher was easy, but as time passed, in my free time, I would talk to the teachers and assisted them on the floor with the children. As an administrator, I was dealing with paperwork, parents, enrolments and third parties to the centre just to keep the centre running, which was easy if you ask me because everything was clearer and easier on paper. But, as I became a manager, paperwork was more complex than what was seen on the surface. As I got to know the children and the teachers, every day was a new day. Children came from different background, different families with different behaviours. There were days that were calm and there were days that was chaotic. Every day had its own stories and events and for the teachers, their experiences within the centre were clearly more challenging than it looked. On the floor, everything seemed fine, but as time passed and I would speak to them in the staff room or in a different context, what I perceived to be fine on the surface with their smiles as they worked with children on the floor was different from what they described. From then on, I was inspired to tell their story through this research.

## 1.2 Rationale for the study

The purpose of my study is to explore common stressors that are occupation-specific to early childhood teachers, what their coping strategies are and if any, what social support are available to them when they experience stress incidents. To date, there has been an increase in the number of studies focusing on stress in the early childhood sector globally, but there continues to be a scarce amount of information and research around what coping strategies are available to them. Despite the claims and reports released by agencies such as Education Counts, ERO and the MOE regarding the concerns of ECE teachers in the sector here in NZ about their work conditions, there continues to be a lack of support within the sector. Therefore, I hope that my study will help find a solution to assist ECE teachers in reducing work-related stress and addressing these concerns raised.

## 1.3 Defining the term 'stress'

Teacher stress is defined as an emotion experienced by teachers that is negative or unpleasant in their profession as teachers (Kyriacou, 1987). These emotional responses are mediated by the perception that the demand on the teacher is a threat to his or her self-esteem or wellbeing and by personal coping mechanisms which are activated to reduce perceived threat (Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995b; Kyriacou, 1987). To measure stress, it can either be subjectively; based on the worker's perception of the environment or objectively; based on the actual characteristics of the environment (Hurrell et al., 1998).

## 1.4 Research Questions

### *Overarching question*

How do early childhood education teachers understand and cope with stress in their profession?

Leading to:

Three sub-questions to address in this study:

1. How do early childhood education teachers in New Zealand experience work-related stress?
2. What coping strategies do early childhood education teachers in New Zealand use to manage experienced work-related stress and are these strategies effective?
3. What sources of social support are available to New Zealand based teachers that experience work-related stress?

These research questions were also used to shape the main interview questions in this research.

## 1.5 Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach known as Stress Incident Record (SIR) which is an open-ended method developed by Newton & Keenan (1985) that links coping behaviours to sources of stress in work settings, therefore providing comprehensive information about the stress-coping process (Newton & Keenan, 1985; O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1994). What differentiates SIR from other methods that has been used in the research of stress is that the SIR is able to target a specific occupational group, and it differs from traditionally used approaches by its use of open-ended questions (Keenan & Newton, 1985; Narayanan et al., 1999). The SIR is also modelled upon behavioural

interviewing; thus, emotive terminology in the structure and design of the research is avoided as much as possible (O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1994).

The SIR method typically uses questionnaires as a method of collecting data, however, this study has used face-to-face interviews. The reason that face-to-face interviews were used in this study is to address a limitation that was encountered in previous research by Keenan & Newton (1985) where questionnaires have been used and found that some respondents provided limited information naturally putting a constraint on the content analysis. However, with an interview, respondents can be probed to elaborate on the incident to gain more specific and detailed response because it is important to ensure that events are described specifically and that it specifies the exact nature of the stressor and why it was a problem for them (Narayanan et al., 1999; O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1994).

## 1.6 Structure of the thesis

There are six chapters in total to this thesis. Each chapter will be briefly summarised in the following paragraphs. This chapter started with an overview of this whole research project starting with discussions on where my research ideas came from and how my experiences working in ECE led to deriving this topic. The research questions that guided this project were provided with the Conservation of resource (COR) theory introduced as the theoretical perspectives underlying this thesis. The choice of methodology used was also introduced the findings were summarised in this chapter.

In chapter two, the review of relevant literature is presented using both international literature as well as the limited amount of literature in New Zealand.

Chapter three details the methodology used and how it underpins and works in this research. This chapter features a justification as to why face-to-face interviews were used and why the SIR method was used as opposed to other methods. Ethical considerations of this study were also addressed.

Chapter four presents the common themes that have emerged from the data analysis process. Overall, 8 main themes that has helped to address the research questions were identified from the data: organisational stressors, social stressors, contextual stressors, emotion-focused coping, problem-focused coping, avoidant coping, peer support and organisational support. Each of these themes were described and analysed based on the theoretical framework with relevant quotes from the participants provided as examples.

Chapter five presents a discussion of the research findings in relation to the relevant literature.

Chapter six features the conclusion of this thesis. In this chapter, research questions as well as methods are reviewed. Implications of the study are considered, and strengths and limitations of the study are discussed. Suggestions are also made for future possible research.



## CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

“No one ever questions the fact of stress in childcare work” (Mattingly, 1977, p. 127). One of the first statements acknowledging stress as an occupational concern in early childhood teachers. Generally, in the area of occupational stress, teaching has been recognised as one of the most stressful occupation in many countries (Faulkner et al., 2014; Kokkinos, 2007; Tsai et al., 2006). Over the years, there has been a rise in international research highlighting an important link between ECE teachers’ wellbeing and their capacity for providing high quality care. Though the link has been recognised, there continues to be a limited amount of research examining stress in the context of childcare providers (Corr et al., 2014; Cox et al., 2018; Cumming, 2017; de Schipper et al., 2008; Faulkner et al., 2014). Studies that have further looked into this link suggests that increased level of stress amongst childcare providers will result in less quality caregiving (de Schipper et al., 2008; Goelman & Guo, 1998).

However, it is evident that when teachers were provided with sufficient instructional support to ensure high teaching quality and student engagement, as well as emotional support to monitor students’ long-term progress, they were more likely to experience reduced work-related stress (Wong et al., 2018). Studies also shows that teachers who have access to coping strategies are less likely to report stress than those with fewer coping resources (Betoret, 2006; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

While there has been a steady increase in the amount of research on stress in the ECE sector, there is still a scarce amount of information and research around what coping strategies are available to them (Cancio et al., 2018). Teachers who have access to coping resources are less likely to report stress than those with fewer coping resources (Betoret, 2006). Consequently, in order to gain the right information to provide the right

support for ECE teachers, there is a need for further research to explore teachers' experience of stress within their specific teaching context (Faulkner et al., 2014).

## **2.2 The importance of ECE teachers**

"The early childhood profession is not for the faint of heart. The impact we have today will be felt tomorrow and for generations to come. Hence, our legacy will be revealed" (Phajane, 2014, p. 421)

ECE teachers constantly faces overwhelming challenges in meeting their professional obligations. They must keep children physically safe, emotionally secure, provide instruction to meet learning outcomes, and communicate effectively with families and co-workers. Further adding to the stress of ECE teachers are demands and accountability that includes large amounts of paperwork and documentation (Whitaker et al., 2015). Aside from the traditional roles and responsibilities, they are now expected to serve as curriculum specialists, health care providers, family counsellors, adult educators, program managers, child advocates, child development experts, mental health specialists, nutrition specialists, and many other roles (Zaslow & Martinez-Beck, 2006). Amid these working conditions, there are also stakeholders' demands and government requirements where ECE teachers also take on a variety of roles which comprises of; education, documentation of children's learning, upholding ECE philosophy and practice, maintaining compliance of regulations and licensing criteria, administration and housekeeping duties related to the day-to-day operation of the ECE centres. These all have to be maintained continuously while providing and caring for the children's daily needs in terms of meals, diapering and emotional support (Goelman & Guo, 1998). What a teacher knows, how a teacher feels, and how a teacher behaves have a meaningful impact on the emotional and academic outcomes of each child in her classroom (Cassidy et al., 2019).

ECE teacher stress has long been recognised and raised dating back more than five decades. Mattingly (1977) identified that a vital stress-producing conflict exists between the workers' need and requirement to give is that they can never give enough. Children's needs are often much greater than what personal resources can satisfy which can put a physical and emotional strain on the childcare worker when these children's needs are not met. He also added that another major stress-producing component existing within childcare work is that regardless of how well a ECE centre is able to minimise stress to enhance quality of care and wellbeing of childcare workers, there will still be other stress factors that continues to exist (Mattingly, 1977). Nonetheless, to minimise stress, and to assist childcare workers to deal with stress, it is important to identify stressors, acknowledge that these are stressors that exist as a part of the ECE profession, recognise the consequences it can cause, and explore coping strategies that can be made readily available within the childcare sector to be able to assist childcare workers in dealing with work-related stressors within their profession.

## **2.3 Theoretical framework**

### *Conservation of resources (COR) theory*

To better understand stress that is specifically work-related to ECE teachers, the theoretical framework that will guide this study is the COR theory by Hobfoll (1988; 1989).

At its core, COR theory is a motivational theory that explains much of human behaviour based on the ever-changing need to obtain and preserve resources for survival (Halbesleben et al., 2014). COR theory has also been central for advancing an understanding of stress in the workplace. The model outlines both the circumstances that causes stress and the consequences of stress (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000; Westman et al., 2004).

While Lazarus & Folkman (1984) defines stress as a state that occurs when demands exceeds coping resources, Hobfoll (1989) argued that this is inaccurate and misleading and that it is only in the case of the most severe stressors are people in the state which they will experience extreme level of stress. Reason being is that, an individual will typically and naturally acquire coping resources that may meet demands fully or partially alleviating stress (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000).

The underlying tenet of the COR theory is that individuals have a basic motivation to obtain, foster, and protect those things that they value (Hobfoll, 1989). The things that these individuals' value is then referred to as resources. Resources is defined as anything that is perceived by the individual to help attain his or her goals and while it is a broad definition of resources, a goal-directed definition will help us understand the basic properties of resources within the context of COR theory (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

The COR theory outlines four basic categories of primary resources which are; objects (e.g. car, food, house), conditions (e.g. good marriage, job stability), personal characteristics (e.g. high self-esteem, self-confidence), and energies (e.g. money, credit, insurance). To preserve these primary resources such as car, house, and food; secondary resources are needed which are things such as money, insurance, credit, family or a good marriage and work. So, having one or more major resources will typically be linked with having others, while lacking major resources will typically be linked to lacking others. Subsequently, these resources attract each other and are rarely found apart (Hobfoll, 1989; Westman et al., 2004).

According to the COR theory, an individual will experience psychological stress when they are; threatened with resource loss, lose resources or they fail to gain resources following a resource investment. So, for an event to be deemed as stressful, it is when the event where the change or transition was associated with a negative component or caused a loss of resource that it became stressful.

To obtain, retain and protect these resources, three corollaries of the COR theory help to predict and to lend themselves to build complex strategies to counteract stressful conditions.

The first corollary is that individuals must invest resources in order to limit loss of resources or gain resources. Say an ECE teacher were to receive a promotion to a supervisory role. That teacher then will have to plan the investment of her resources; investing time and energy for the extra responsibilities and paperwork that comes with a supervisory role and expecting some payoff in terms of future gain like more pay and more authority to lead the team. If she were to carry out this role successfully with the resources she has already invested into the role, she has now gained on other resources such as an increase to her sense of mastery, self-esteem, and job stability. If she fails in the role, her initial investment of resources has now led to a depletion of her sense of mastery, a decrease in her self-esteem, and may be a threat to her job stability. In contrast, she will avoid upcoming challenges and tend to pass on those new assignments to other staff. This change is now associated with a negative component which can lead to stress on the ECE teacher.

The second corollary of the COR theory states that individuals with greater resources are less vulnerable to resource loss and more capable of resource gain, and on the other hand, those individuals who lack resources are more vulnerable to resource loss are less capable of resource gain (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). A solid example of this would be the social support an individual has. People who have a strong network of social support have a safety net that they can fall back on when they experience stress. Therefore, when they experience stress, they have their network to turn to for help in managing challenging tasks providing them with necessary advice and emotional support.

For an ECE teacher in their profession, a strong network of social support can be from other experienced ECE teachers, supervisors, or management; and when faced with a challenging task like a difficult child, they can call upon them to help meet the challenge

by giving them advice and emotional support on how to meet the child's needs and help them gain greater resources. In contrast to this, an ECE teacher who may lack social support with no strong network, he or she is likely to be more deeply affected by stressful circumstances. The absence of someone to share the burden or the issue with them will mean that they will have to go at it alone which will disadvantage them emotionally and mentally.

The third corollary of the COR theory has emerged when we realise that stress does not occur as a single event but rather, it will unfold as a chain of events (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). Hobfoll (1989) states that there are two emphases on this corollary; that those who lack strong resource pools are more likely to experience cycles of losses and that initial losses will cause further losses if stress is not dealt with properly. An example of this would be a teacher who is overworked and underpaid. Being overworked means investing extra hours into work to complete the extra load of work which will result in the depletion of energy resource. This means that she is now too exhausted when she gets home from work to deal with kids and family or to invest in her health with leisure such as going to the gym or meeting with friends. This becomes a cycle that is ongoing and ultimately, she makes the decision to leave her job. In contrast to this, she may find a new centre to work at where she meets a new team with a different work ethic in sharing the workload, strengthening her professional network which will result in an increase in confidence and increase in her sense of mastery as a teacher. Either way, this shows that stress is not a single event because the resources an individual is motivated to obtain, retain, and protect work collectively together and will entail a chain of events when one or more is affected.

To put this into perspective, the COR theory assumes that childcare workers are individuals that are within their own right to obtain, retain and protect resources that they value. In a study by Erdiller & Dogan (2015) examining teacher stress amongst Turkish ECE teachers, it concluded that ECE teachers are social groups and that they should be considered as such because within their workplace and profession they do not perceive

themselves as isolated beings, but they define their resources, gains and losses based on their social contexts (Erdiller & Dogan, 2015).

In a demanding role with the focus solely on the children with limited resources, it can serve as a threat to their current resources and can result in psychological stress for them. Thus, without sufficient coping resources for ECE teachers to be able to help them deal with the stress that they experience in their profession, it may result in the depletion of their resources resulting in psychological stress.

## **2.4 ECE in New Zealand**

ECE has been around for as early as the 1800's. In NZ, ECE has developed significantly over the years with different organisations providing ECE services though the one common goal is to educate and care for children that are too young to be admitted to school (McDonald, 1993). The establishment of the free kindergarten movement in Dunedin first started dating back to 1889, the play centre movement in Wellington in 1941, the consolidation of the childcare movement in the 1960's, the emergence of Maori preschool movements in the 1970's and Te Kohanga Reo in 1980's (McDonald, 1993). As an active sector in the education industry, like many other countries, its focus maintained on the children alone, their education needs, and now that ECE is well established here in NZ. It is also important to explore the needs of these teachers while they are in their profession.

According to statistics released by the Ministry of Education (MOE), there are more than 30,000 adults employed in the NZ ECE sector and while the rest of the world varies in ECE, NZ's ECE sector is known for its diversity in service types and the ranges of organisations delivering ECE services (*Annual ECE census 2019: Fact sheets*, 2019; *Teachers in early childhood education*, 2019). Organisations delivering ECE services includes play centres, Kōhanga Reo, home-based services, kindergarten, education and

care and other service types. Languages used in ECE settings is also evidently increasing, with now 77 different languages spoken by children and adults in ECE services (*Language use in ECE*, 2019b) and to acknowledge this, languages are celebrated across schools nationally on set weeks every year (*Pacific Language Weeks*, 2020).

Children with special learning needs also vary in the ECE setting further adding to the diversity. These include children with physical disabilities, autism, health impairments and health challenges. Further to this, there is also the diversity in families, including immigrant and refugee families and families who are from religious and socioeconomic backgrounds (Shuker & Cherrington, 2016).

While diversity makes ECE in NZ stand out from the rest of the world, there is also a complexity in rules, regulations and funding and these are applied differently across the sector (*Opinion: ECE in New Zealand and what we could be doing differently*, 2017).

In NZ, workers are entitled to optimal health in the workplace and government agencies like the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), and WorkSafe NZ are charged with ensuring this. WorkSafe NZ policy in line with the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 requires that employers shall provide workplaces that are without risk to health and safety and that all reasonable steps are taken to ensure that there is low risk of injury and illness (Bates, 2018; WorkSafe, 2017). However, without proper enforcement in the ECE sector, the overriding attitude that ECE environments should cater to children leaves childcare workers in their working spaces without adequate consideration of their needs. For example, noise protection, proper rest breaks, annual leaves, adult furniture, and sufficient paid sick days.

With the rise of international literature on ECE teachers' stress and wellbeing, there is a need to explore stress-related experiences specifically in our ECE sector in NZ (Cramer & Cappella, 2019; Erdiller & Dogan, 2015; Whitaker et al., 2015). While the focus of early childhood has been on the child's health and safety and wellbeing, there has been less



focus on the health, safety, and wellbeing of ECE teachers. ECE teachers are faced with specific issues and risks on a daily basis; from hard physical work, exposure to childhood infectious diseases to the stressful nature of 'emotional labour' (Bates, 2018).

In a recent nationwide survey of 601 ECE teachers by Gibbons et al., (2016), several issues from ECE teachers were raised regarding their current work conditions. These work conditions includes issues such as; poor teacher to child ratios, long working hours, understaffing, lack of time to develop relationship with children, insufficient management support and risk of emotional and physical burnout (Gibbons et al., 2016). Gibbons et al., (2016) has also argued that while this is the current situation here in NZ, Australia is also experiencing the same concerns.

## **2.5 Identifying stressors amongst childcare workers**

Over the years, researchers have begun to look more into identifying specific stressors in the ECE sector. Teacher stress has been defined by Kyriacou (1987, p. 146) as an emotion experienced by teachers that is negative or unpleasant such as frustration, tension, anxiety, anger, and depression as a resulting aspect of working as a teacher. These emotional responses are mediated by the perception that the demand on the teacher is a threat to his or her self-esteem or wellbeing and personal coping mechanisms are activated to reduce perceived threat (Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995b; Kyriacou, 1987). To measure stress, it can either be subjectively based on the worker's perception of the environment or objectively based on the actual characteristics of the environment (Hurrell et al., 1998).

To recognise how to best cope with stress in the ECE profession, stress needs to be understood within the occupational context in which it occurs. Over the years, social change and economic requirements have influenced and challenged the teaching profession. These challenges have resulted in government agencies and employers

demanding more accountability from teachers (Erdiller & Dogan, 2015; Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995b). Study shows that teachers who have negative experience within their working environment tend to either leave the centre they are currently at or seek a different career path overall where they can experience a more positive environment (Grant et al., 2019). This study draws on prior literature and research specifically examining stress among ECE teachers. It will look into stressors in two different perspectives – that of the environment itself and the perception of the environment.

### 2.5.1 Stress factors – *Environmental factors*

There are several factors that relate to teacher stress. There can be individual and organisational factors that contributes to stress. A study by Erdiller & Dogan (2015) examined the level of teacher stress experienced by Turkish ECE teachers showed that individual factors such as the teachers' gender, age, years of experience, teachers' marital status, age group of children and their monthly income are factors that contributes to ECE teachers' stress in Turkey. The ECE workforce is dominated by female teachers, and research have looked into the emergent issues that prevent males from considering ECE as a profession and have identified barriers such as low salaries, family, recruitment of males, negative attitudes towards male ECE teachers and the stereotypical perception of the occupation. However, in respect of men that are currently practising ECE as a profession, findings suggest that male teachers tend to experience more distress and have more difficulty in issues related to discipline and motivation in their work compared to female colleagues. In addition to this, there is also the stereotypical perceptions of the occupation and the negative attitudes towards males as ECE teachers. In the research by Cooney & Bittner (2001) male participants expressed feelings of being a minority member of the ECE profession and how things such as family culture and parents' perception of male ECE teachers is a barrier preventing them from doing their jobs.

Tasks such as changing their child's diaper is a concern in which parents are against it to be done by male ECE teachers.

When considering male teachers in a profession such as ECE, as the COR theory suggests, stress occurs as a result of a threat to resource loss, a threat to resource gain or the inability to gain sufficient resources following a significant resource investment (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000; Hurrell et al., 1998). Additional factors that prevent males from entering the ECE profession such as low salaries and negative attitudes towards male ECE teachers would only serve as threat to their personal resources and negative attitudes from parents' perception of male ECE teacher would make them question their ability to gain resources in future if they were to invest time, energy, and other resources in the profession. Further to this, research suggest that there are gender differences in coping strategies; women tend to be prosocial copers where they tend to depend on social interactions, while men tend to be more antisocial copers which is more likely to result in depression and feelings of anger (Erdiller & Dogan, 2015).

#### *Time pressures*

As ECE teachers, there are a lot of pressure and expectations that comes with the role because there are various of unexpected things that can happen each day, and some days, there will not be enough hours to get things done. A study by Kelly & Berthelsen (1995) used daily personal entries over a 2-week period to investigate stress amongst a group of ECE teachers. The study found that time pressure, dealing with non-teaching tasks, meeting children's needs, maintaining ECE philosophy and practice, issues with parents of the children and attitudes and perceptions about ECE programs were major sources of stress for ECE teachers. Epstein (2015) examined stressors on ECE teachers in Montessori and found that of the six stressors identified, time pressure caused them the most stress. Time and energy are important primary resources that an individual invests into work with the expectation that they would, in future, gain further resources because of this initial investment. Teachers enter the profession with a high level of commitment and desire to make a difference to the child through education and provision

with the expectation that in return, they would gain further resources following the investment of their time, energy and other resources – however, when other stress factors are in play working against the investment such as; extra responsibilities, more paperwork, issues with parents, challenging children, this can in turn add more pressure on the wellbeing of the teacher. If the time and energy that has originally been invested in the role was enough for a successful turnout, that teacher has now gained on other resources such as sense of mastery and self-esteem. However, if the time and energy that has been invested was not sufficient and has resulted in the task being unsuccessful, the original investment has now led to a depletion of her self-esteem and her sense of mastery leading to other resource losses causing stress for the teacher. If not dealt with properly, this can turn into a bigger issue if the teacher does not have a coping mechanism to alleviate the stress.

#### *Low pay – teachers say they are overworked and underpaid*

Low pay and being overworked has long been historically recognised as a major stressor for teachers (Bakker et al., 2007; Curbow et al., 2000; Faulkner et al., 2014) and in a NZ context, this especially applies to ECE teachers. ECE teachers in NZ has always been on the low end of the pay scale compared to other teachers in the industry. Recently, the government has taken steps in addressing pay parity issues by contributing over \$151 million towards lifting the wages of those at the bottom of the ECE pay scale. However, those who are currently working in the sector says that it is difficult to see how that commitment will be achieved anytime soon as pay parity is still a long way off given the current ECE teacher shortage in NZ (Walters, 2020).

Other than creating job stress for teachers, low wages also leads to a decline in work engagement and work motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2006). Work engagement is known to be enjoyment drawn from work that can help balance stress and burnout for an individual. A work-engaged employee will see his or her work as meaningful and will be more able to face adversity and negative setbacks (Bakker & Leiter, 2010; Nislin et al., 2016).

### *Overworked in a sector with ECE teachers' shortage*

Similar to the survey mentioned above by Gibbons, Farquhar and Tesar (2016), a survey completed in 2018 presented by ChildForum (2018) was advertised widely through the NZ ECE sector where 900 people working in ECE responded to the survey. Results identified factors of work-related stress for this group were; overwork, exhaustion, bullying, and dealing with difficult issues and further to this, both teaching staff and supervisors were experiencing this (Alexander, 2016; ChildForum, 2018). These findings were also consistent with the findings of Gu, Wang & You (2010) where work overload on ECE teachers has been on the rise. Given the current shortage in qualified teachers in NZ, particularly in the ECE sector, the pressure has increased on current teachers and staff to maintain demand and keep services running. Centres are reportedly waiting from six months to a year to recruit staff, all while centres are still being built (Walters, 2020). In 2018, the NZ government released figures showing a substantial decline of ECE teacher trainees from 6760 to 3615 in 2016. This means that the teachers shortage issue will remain for the long term (Hipkins, 2018). The teacher shortage in the ECE sector has also added tension to ECE teachers being overworked to uphold demands as teachers have reported feeling both physically and mentally drained. Some have reported being very run down and stressed but are finding it hard to take time off due to the lack of qualified teachers. Similarly, teachers whom have had injuries on the job, have also reported not having any choice but to go on floor and work as there are no other qualified teachers to fill in for them (ChildForum, 2018). Being overworked and undervalued has long been identified as a stressor within the childcare profession (Galinsky, 1988; Hyson, 1982), but unfortunately in NZ, while support packages have been distributed and announced to address teacher shortages and low pay in schools, the same package did not apply to ECE (Reynolds, 2018).

### *Work-related conditions*

While there are organisational work conditions that involves workplace issues and relationships, there is also the work-related conditions for ECE workers that involves

being physically in contact with children on a daily basis (Curbow et al., 2000). ECE teachers in their roles and pregnant teachers are unfortunately exposed to a range of diseases and sustain various injuries through work practices and environments. For example; those with pre-existing medical conditions are at particular risk of environmental factors such as infections, heavy and repetitive lifting, excessive noise, and poor air quality (Bates, 2018). A study by Baumgartner et al., (2009) identified that common stressors in childcare work were work conditions and amongst work conditions, *noise*, was the most reported. This is a finding that is consistent with a survey conducted on ECE teachers in NZ where hearing loss has come up as one of the most common stressors (ChildForum, 2018). While quiet spaces are required by the current Ministry of Education (MOE) regulations and licensing criteria for ECE centres (Education, 2008) for the health and safety of children, there is no regulations to limit those noise levels. Excessive noise in ECE is a risk to every human in the environment as noise level contributes to hearing loss and voice injury for teachers (Bates, 2018). A teacher has reportedly shared with Education Central (2018) that because of a child directly screaming in her ear, she has suffered hearing loss. Though she fought for the hearing aids to be paid for, the medical professional would not accept that ECE services are noisy places or that a child screaming directly in your ear could damage it. Consequently, she has had to fund her own hearing aids, causing much stress for her (*Off the record: the realities of being an ECE teacher*, 2018).

Included in the findings of the survey by ChildForum (2018), ECE teachers have reportedly been punched, kicked, bitten, randomly hit, badly bruised by children, slipped, tripped, back problems and bad posture due to the heavy lifting of furniture and children, neck problems, hand problems, twisted pelvis, sprained ribs, shoulder injury due to a heavy child unexpectedly jumping on it, hearing loss due to children directly screaming in their ear and many more (Alexander, 2016; ChildForum, 2018; *Off the record: the realities of being an ECE teacher*, 2018). Apart from noise and hearing loss, musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) injuries were also one of the most common. MSDs

are injuries that effect the muscles, joints of the human body and ECE teachers are particularly susceptible to these injuries due to the physical nature of their work. Causes of MSDs on ECE teachers are physical tasks such as awkward lifting, carrying, bending, and squatting and as they engage in teaching. Particularly in the roles of teachers, they are required to spend lengthy periods of time interacting, playing, instructing children while on the floor or seated on child furniture (Bates, 2018). A study by Erick & Smith (2011) on MSDs shows that when teachers engage in long periods of sustained physical work, combined with poor working conditions and emotional stress, the occurrence of MSDs is significantly increased (Erick & Smith, 2011).

The reality of working in ECE is that a teacher will never know what to expect on a daily like when a child will unexpectedly jump on their back or scream in their ear, nor when the constant bends, squatting and awkward movement will take a toll on their body.

From this, we know that environmental stress factors play a huge role in contributing to stress on ECE teachers. These are factors such as time pressures, low pay, being overworked in a sector with teacher shortage and job-related conditions that includes being physically in contact with children daily. Through the lens of COR theory, it helps us to understand how environmental factors can cause stress. Based on the first corollary of the COR theory, time and energy are primary resources and to limit resource loss one must invest resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). However, due to the nature of the role of an ECE teachers, other factors can work against this investment such as extra responsibilities, challenging children, and more paperwork.

Other environmental factors such as low pay, overworked and other job-related conditions has proven to be events that has unfolded into other chains of negative events for ECE teachers. The third corollary of the COR theory identifies that stress does not occur as a single event but it unfolds as a chain of events, thus, when those who lack strong resources pools are more likely to experience cycles of losses and that their initial losses will cause further losses if stress is not dealt with properly (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). Factors such as low pay means an individual is lacking income as a

primary resource increasing their vulnerability against further resource loss. An individual who is overworked means they will have to invest extra time and effort into completing the extra load of work resulting in the depletion of energy and is now at a point where she is exhausted and have no time for family or friends or to invest in her health and leisure. The depletion of energy then suggests that the initial investment of resources such as time and energy has resulted in further losses and at some point in time, she will then decide to leave her job.

Baumgartner et al., (2009) suggests that future research should investigate work-related stress of childcare workers and use the effectiveness of coping strategies specifically to address stress. Interventions should also deliberate the complexity of workplace stress in childcare environments and seek to offer childcare providers with tools that will address as many components of stress as possible (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014; Jeon et al., 2017).

Aside from the environmental factors, the perception of individuals also plays a part in stress experienced.

### 2.5.2 Stress factors – *Perception of the environment*

#### *Bullying and job security as a threat*

In the midst of the issue of low pay, being overworked and the ECE teacher shortage in NZ, another stress factor for ECE teachers in NZ is bullying, to an extent that has sometimes resulted in their job security being threatened. A downside to this, is that these types of issues including injuries on the job and health issues as a result from the job are being normalised as being a normal part of the day-to-day role of being an ECE teacher (Alexander, 2016; ChildForum, 2018; Walters, 2020). This in turn can build into an environment where bullying can take place in a sector which is now already known to have a culture of workplace bullying (Bates, 2018).



Survey shows that a quarter of all staff surveyed and approximately 34% of qualified teachers working in general teaching positions at kindergarten and childcare centres, reported that they've experienced bullying in their profession both emotionally and mentally and have had management blame them for being bullied (ChildForum, 2018). Bullying took place in the form of staff being made to feel that their job was at risk if they did not comply with what they viewed as unfair or unrealistic especially if that staff is not fully qualified or registered, being threatened with teacher registration not being signed off for endorsement, their non-contact time for paperwork being reduced or taken away or being afraid that they would lose their jobs if meetings outside of work hours were not attended. If a staff was injured or had health issues on the job, they also felt that they could not report it to anyone in fear of any negative responses (Alexander, 2016). In an environment that is toxic, with no supportive relationship on the job between staff and management, this can produce stress for childcare workers which can lead to staff losing *stability and trust in the workplace* (Galinsky, 1988; McClelland, 1986).

#### *Lack of social support*

The lack of social support in the workplace has been identified in multiple studies as a major stress for childcare workers. This specifically applies to childcare workers who work from their homes as home-based childcare providers. Home-based childcare providers may experience more feelings of isolation from other adults because they regularly lack co-workers (Curbow et al., 2000; Faulkner et al., 2014; Nislin et al., 2015).

In New Zealand, the number of home-based services has significantly increased by 98% from 241 services in 2008 to 476 services in 2017. Statistics released by the Ministry of Education (MOE) shows that home-based services have younger children attending and for longer hours compared to those attending other ECE service providers (*Annual ECE census 2019: Fact sheets*, 2019). A combination that can be stressful for childcare workers given studies shows that they may experience additional feelings for isolation from other adults and lack social support from home.

A study by Nislin et al., (2015) on childcare workers in Finland examining stress regulations and the demands and resources they come across at work revealed that a positive experience of social support, especially support from supervisors, had a substantial association to better resources and higher-quality educational work in ECE. Consistent with the finding of Bakker et al., (2004) and Schaufeli et al., (2009) they argued that social support in the ECE setting is important in reducing the load imposed by the demanding aspect of the job (Nislin et al., 2015; Schaufeli et al., 2009).

#### *Public's perception of childcare workers as 'babysitters'*

A study by Faulkner et al., (2016) on childcare workers in the USA focused on identifying work-related stressors and examining the impact of identified work-related stressors on their well-being. Findings showed that parental interaction and the public's perception of childcare workers as babysitters were the most common stressors for them as childcare providers. Like the findings of Faulkner et al., (2016), Gerstenblatt et al., (2014) identified the lack of professional treatment that childcare workers were receiving from parents was an ongoing stressor as well as the public's perception of childcare workers as babysitters rather than professionals. Additional to these findings, was the importance of establishing a professional identity for home-based childcare providers to alleviate work-related stress. In their study, the public's perception of childcare providers as "babysitters" were frequently discussed in their focus groups. Childcare workers felt that they were undervalued and the lack of respect and value for them as professionals were a source of frustration and stress for them. The study recommended that further research needed to specifically explore ways that could support childcare workers in home-based childcare workers in building and solidifying a professional status to mitigate work-related stressors (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014).

#### *Parents as stressors*

In a childcare setting, ECE teachers share in some of the exciting moments of a child's development; their first step, first word and even their first friendship with another child

which can become hard to separate from the child as the child grows up and moves into the next level of education (Hyson, 1982). As an ECE teacher, they then develop close relationships with these children who attend ECE and play the role as the second parent for these children as well as the role of educating and trying to unlock the child's learning potential as they grow. Study shows that a stable relationship with non-parental providers will provide children with a safe and healthy environment to develop emotionally and cognitively (Faulkner et al., 2014; Whitebook et al., 1998). However, as a result of social change, teachers are faced with increased parental and community expectations (McClelland, 1986).

As a result of social change, there has been continuous changes to standards of educations, regulations and curriculum which has increased parental and community expectations regarding teaching practices and their roles as ECE providers. There are also changes to family structures such as stepfamilies, single parent families, parent's employment patterns are changing due to economic changes and nowadays more parents are working compared to previous years. As a result of these changes, parents and caregivers are often finding it difficult to participate in their children's schooling and communication with parent's has become harder over things such as childcare fees (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014; Goelman & Guo, 1998; Manlove, 1994). Children are also being sent to school unwell which is a risk to other children and staff addition children are not being collected on time which is extra time and extra work for childcare workers to mind those children until they are picked up (Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995a). Often teachers would feel that a child's problems can be resolved if the parents would listen and act on their suggestions, but when parents are spoken to about any issues or learning set-backs about their child, they are often ignored or rejected in an angry manner (Hyson, 1982) but until they listen and seek a medical diagnosis or attention for their child, childcare workers will have to deal with the difficulties on a daily basis until something has been done (Baumgartner et al., 2009).

While there are environmental factors, the perception of individuals also plays a part in causing stress amongst ECE teachers. These are stress factors such as bullying in the workplace, lack of social support, parents as stressors and the public's perception of ECE teachers as 'babysitters. Like environmental factors, studies have focused on identifying stressors rather than identifying coping strategies or support that can be provided for ECE teachers in addressing these stressors (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Faulkner et al., 2014). Faulkner et al., (2014) also highlighted the importance of assisting parents in communicating and working in a collaborative relationship with ECE providers. Proven to be a critical resource in reducing stress, social support is especially important in the face of work-related stress as well as the stress that occurs in altering work and private life (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). It is important to address stressors such as bullying and lack of social support in the workplace because an environment that is toxic with no supportive relationships on the job can produce stress and lead to staff losing stability (Galinsky, 1988; Gerstenblatt et al., 2014).

Due to constant social and economic changes, parents, and the public's perception of ECE providers as babysitters have continued to be stressors. These have been identified as ongoing stressors often leading to extra work and other stressors. The third corollary of the COR theory states that stress does not occur in a single event but unfolds into other negative events (Hobfoll, 1989). This highlights the importance of exploring coping strategies that can aid ECE teachers in dealing with stress or as much stress as possible because stressors within the ECE profession tend to show that they occur in multiple events rather than in single events. This is consistent with Baumgartner et al., (2009) who has argued that stressors identified by childcare providers did not occur in isolation as single events, but in fact overlapped which highlights that providers rarely experience a single stressor at any given time. They also noted that an overlap of stressors may make it difficult for childcare providers to pull apart the stressful situation and identify the underlying problem or source of stress to address it correctly (Baumgartner et al., 2009).

## 2.6 Coping with stress

In this study, the COR theory aids in identifying ways to cope with these stressors. The COR theory postulates that ECE teachers work in a high-demand environment with limited resources and without adequate coping resources to alleviate stress, it may result in further depletion of individual resources resulting in them experiencing emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and lack of personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001). Thus, for an individual to better cope with stress, they must establish strong resources. Acquiring multiple resources will ensure a reservoir of resources and will increase availability of alternative resources for coping when stressful events are experienced (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000).

While there are limited studies on the coping strategies used specifically by ECE teachers, this study will draw on similar studies from other samples such as school teachers and special needs teachers to identify coping strategies that have been used within the sector. There have been various types of coping strategies that researchers have identified. Stober & Rennert (2008) presented a study on the perfectionism in school teachers in relations to stress appraisals, coping styles, and burnout identifying two coping strategies which were used by teachers to be active (also known as adaptive) coping and avoidant coping. Cancio et al., (2018) completed a study on special education teacher stress and coping strategies and found that most special needs teachers used adaptive strategies which is also known to be active coping strategy.

However, a study by Baumgartner et al., (2009) focusing on uncovering common stressful factors and coping strategies amongst childcare providers identified three coping strategies which were: problem-focused strategies, emotion-focused strategies, and avoidant strategies.

Active or adaptive coping (Stoeber & Rennert, 2008) or otherwise known as problem-focused strategy by Baumgartner et al., (2009) refers to individuals who view potential stressors as challenges, rather than threats and would focus more on addressing the

issue that has led to the stress. This can include getting advice or support from an experienced teacher or a more knowledgeable person. Social support in the COR theory is very critical in alleviating stress. To preserve resources and to meet one's needs, an individual will strive to maintain social support. Having a pool of support means that when stress occurs, an individual is able to gather advice and emotional support to better manage challenges (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). In addition to the emotional support that can arise from a relationship with colleagues, the distribution of vital teaching tips and behavioural management advice can be critical in helping to cope with stress (Beltman et al., 2011; Cancio et al., 2018).

Avoidant coping on the other hand is an individual who may become overwhelmed with the stressor and chooses to avoid the issue overall and to leave their profession or their workplace instead of addressing it (Evans et al., 2004; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). Also identified by (Baumgartner et al., 2009) is a strategy where an individual may choose to distract themselves with other events like taking time out of the room. A strategy that can be critical when not addressed because the issue may linger and occur time and time again resulting in the individual having to invest more time and energy in dealing with it over and over and eventually, this depletion of energy can result in more losses of resources resulting in further stress and ultimately the teacher will choose to leave the profession (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000).

Another coping strategy is emotion-focused strategy which is a strategy that seeks to reduce emotional reactions to stressful events by self-talking to encourage themselves of positive things, taking time out to meditate, if religious – taking time out to pray for strength and humbleness or taking a time out away from the whole event that has occurred (Baumgartner et al., 2009).

Of the strategies identified, Baumgartner et al., (2009) identified that for handling workplace stress, there was a huge reliance of ECE teachers on emotion-focused or avoidant strategies. Reasons presented with this was that the common stressors that were identified within the study were work conditions and work events which were often

not perceived to be within the power of the individual childcare worker to address. Consequently, providers will seek to reduce their stressful responses using emotion-focused coping strategies because addressing the stressor directly is outside of their control as childcare providers. Another interesting finding by this study is that when problem-focused strategies were used, it was often to address child or parental needs or client factors for that matter which are factors that are more within the control of the childcare provider compared to the workplace-specific stressors (Baumgartner et al., 2009).

In another research by Wagner et al., (2013), it examined coping strategies used by ECE teachers and it concluded that ECE teachers who used problem-solving coping experienced higher job satisfaction and control, felt that they had more job-security and reported less stress. While individuals who used avoidant coping reported feelings of exhaustion, frustration and felt more amount of stress and pressure on themselves (Wagner et al., 2013).

From these findings, we can suggest that coping strategies for ECE teachers may defer amongst individual ECE teachers depending on the perception of control within their role. Which can mean that with the work-related and environmental stressors that they perceive not to have control of, ECE teachers will tend to use more emotion-focused strategies, other stressors such as client factors and perceived environmental factors that they perceive to have control of, they will tend to use a more problem-focused strategy.

While there are coping strategies targeted at single stress events, Baumgartner et al., (2009) also identified that the relationship between multiple stressors and coping strategies remains unclear. Through the lens of COR theory, we have identified that most stressors occurring in the ECE sector does not occur as a single event but unfolds in a number of events. Therefore, it is important to note that while we can focus on single stressors and its coping strategies, it is also important to take into consideration the relationship of multiple stressors and coping strategies and the ability of an ECE teacher

to take apart multiple stressors to identify the underlying problem or stressors to address it.

## **2.7 Social support mechanisms**

Social support mechanisms refer to the assistance provided by social network and has long been identified as an effective coping mechanism for stress and burnout in the organisational setting (Lin, 2006; Taylor et al., 2004). Social support can be in the form of emotional support, informational support, and instrumental support (Zhang & Zhu, 2007). Like coping strategies, there is also limited studies on social support mechanisms utilised by ECE teachers in their profession. Therefore, this study will draw on similar studies from other samples in education.

Social support can range between organisations and different sectors, however, coaching, collegial support and in-service training have been found to strengthen teachers' practices and workplace experiences (Moolenaar, 2012).

Collegial support is the exchange of professional information and personal support via direct interpersonal contacts with peers (Moolenaar, 2012). This can be mechanised through regular meetings or more naturally through direct visits into a colleagues classroom to discuss matters (Cramer & Cappella, 2019). This is an effective way that can allow a teacher to be more precise on discussing matters as they are in the context of their working environment which can make it easier for them to explain matters that they want to express. Regular meetings on the other hand, can allow the sharing of information and advice amongst peers, they can discuss and address issues where it can be documented and used if these issues will arise in future.

Coaching involves direct efforts of a trained professional such as direct observation and feedback to improve the trainee's learning and application of specific teaching methods (Sheridan et al., 2009). An ongoing support of coaching, particularly with teachers who



are new to the field, will assist them in gaining knowledge and information from the feedback that they can receive from their coaches. This can enable them to learn on the job and pick-up essential knowledge resources and experiences to deal with any stressors or events that they may encounter while working. Evidence indicates that high quality, high-dosage trainings and coaching can support ECE teachers (Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

## **2.8 Summary and conclusion**

Generally, it is known that teaching has been recognised as one of the most stressful occupation in many countries over the years but in an ECE context, though there has been a rise in international research highlighting an important link between ECE teachers' wellbeing and their capacity for providing high quality care, there still continues to be a limited amount of research examining stress in the context of childcare providers (Corr et al., 2014; Cox et al., 2018; de Schipper et al., 2008). However, studies that have had a further look into this link suggests that increased levels of stress amongst childcare providers will result in less quality caregiving (de Schipper et al., 2008).

Although there has been a steady increase in the amount of research examining stress on ECE teachers, there is still a scarce amount of information and research around what coping strategies are available to them (Cancio et al., 2018). Stress in the ECE profession has long been recognised dating back to 1977 by Mattingly, but to date it is a subject that is still under-researched particularly regarding how teachers cope with the stressors that they encounter on a daily basis. Therefore, it is important to identify stressors specific to ECE teachers, and it is also equally important to explore coping strategies that can be made readily available to them to be able to assist them in dealing with these work-related stressors.

A motivational theory that helps to understand stress that is specifically work related to ECE teachers is the COR theory. COR theory has been central for advancing our understanding of stress in the workplace and how an individual will typically use his or her resources to cope (Hobfoll, 1989). It is also particularly helpful in predicting what can cause stress specifically to an individual.

In the literature above, we have drawn from research on ECE teachers to help us identified stressors specific to ECE teachers based on two perceptions; that of the environment itself, and the perception of the environment (Kyriacou, 1987). Environmental factors were identified as time pressure, low pay, being overworked in a sector with teacher shortage and job-related conditions. Perception of the environment factors were namely due to bullying in the workplace, lack of social support, parents as stressors, and public's perception of ECE teachers as babysitters, but although these has been identified as common stressors amongst ECE teachers, it is also important to note that there could be more stressors now due to the continuous social and economic changes increasing parental and community expectations regarding teaching practices and their roles as ECE providers (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014).

Another important aspect to note is that stressors experienced by ECE teachers did not occur in single events but occurred as multiple stressors (Baumgartner et al., 2009). This was consistent with what we have recognised amongst the stressors through the lens of the COR theory. That stressors did not occur as single events, but it unfolded in a number of negative events as highlighted by the third corollary of the COR theory (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). Therefore, rather than just looking at ECE stressors as a single event, it is also important to look at how multiple stressors can affect ECE teachers and what coping strategies that can be used for multiple stressors.

So, while there is increasing studies on specific stressors amongst ECE teachers, there is still a limited number of studies on coping strategies specific to ECE teachers. This study drew from both generalised research on coping strategies on teachers and two specified research on coping strategies on ECE teachers to identify and compare coping

strategies (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Wagner et al., 2013). From this comparison it has been identified that for ECE teachers, their coping strategy deferred depending on their sense of control of the issue or the stressor. Thus, they tend to use more of emotion-focused strategies rather than problem-focused strategies.

Like coping strategies, there is also a limited number of resources in relations to social mechanisms that are specifically used by ECE teachers within their profession. Drawing on other samples of research, we find that social support mechanisms such as collegial support and coaching has been found to strengthen teachers' workplace experiences and practices (Cramer & Cappella, 2019; Moolenaar, 2012).

In conclusion, research on work-related stress in the childcare profession has been cumulative over the past two decades. Due to multiple demands and changes over the years, and because sources of stress may vary between countries, research have mainly focused on the specific work-related stressors that teachers' experience, but little focus has been cast on coping strategies used by teachers. While it is important to identify stressors that are specific to ECE teachers, it is also important to identify coping strategies that can support them in their roles as we understand more about their job as teachers and not enough about how they cope and use resources as individuals.

This study sought to address these gaps by attempting to address the following research question and sub-questions:

How do early childhood education teachers understand and cope with stress in their profession?

Sub-questions:

1. How do early childhood education teachers in New Zealand experience work-related stress?
2. What coping strategies do early childhood education teachers in New Zealand use to manage experienced work-related stress and are these strategies effective?

3. What source of social support are available to New Zealand based teachers that experience work-related stress?

## CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an outline of the methodology and approaches used in this study. Using the Stress Incident Record (SIR) as a qualitative approach, face-to-face interviews and open-ended questions as methods, this research sought to examine how early childhood education (ECE) teachers in New Zealand (NZ) experience and cope with stress in their profession and what sources of social support are available to them when they experience stress. A discussion is also provided on the ethical considerations that were fundamental to all stages of this study.

This research aims to explore how ECE teachers understand and cope with stress in their profession by identifying how ECE teachers experience work-related stressors, what coping strategies that they use to address these stressors, and if any, what social support mechanism are available to them when they experience these stressors.

This chapter will outline and justify the methodology adopted for the research seeking answers to the research questions. The indicative research paradigms and the chosen methodology will be described and justified as how they relate to this study.

A paradigm can be defined as the basic belief system or world view that guides the investigation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Epistemology is the philosophy of knowledge or how we come to know (Trochim, 2000). Epistemology is intimately related to ontology and methodology; as ontology involves the philosophy of reality, epistemology addresses how we come to know that reality while methodology identifies the practices used to attain knowledge of it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Krauss, 2005)

This research is positioned within the realism paradigm, using qualitative research as the chosen methodology with face-to-face interviews using the SIR method as a guide for focussing on the phenomena of interest and to gain insights and answers to my research questions.

### 3.2 Methodological approach

Many qualitative researchers believe that the best way to understand any phenomenon is to view it in its context and the best way to understand what is going on is to become immersed in it and to move into the culture or organisation being studied and experience what it is like to be a part of it. Qualitative researchers do not assume that there is a single unitary reality apart from our perceptions since each of us experiences from our own point of view, each of us experiences a different reality. As such, the phenomenon of 'multiple realities' exists (Krauss, 2005).

As mentioned above, this study is positioned within the realism paradigm. Realism is a philosophical paradigm that has elements of both positivism and constructivism and within the realism paradigm, both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are seen as appropriate for researching the underlying mechanisms that drive actions and events (Healy & Perry, 2000). Realism recognises that there are differences between reality and people's perception (Krauss, 2005). As we speak of the topic of stress, individual's perception of stress can differ based on the environment itself or their perception of environment. Some individuals may also experience stress but may not perceive it as stress thus not realising that they are in fact experiencing stress.

While positivism concerns a single concrete reality and interpretivism multiple realities, realism concerns multiple perceptions about a single, mind-independent reality (Healy & Perry, 2000). Hence, realism is the best fit for the research because the participants narrated their experiences of stressful incident as perceived by their unique multiple realities within their real settings which are the ECE centres that they work within. Participant's voices are their multiple perceptions which is included as quotes on the data analysis chapter as evidence while the stress incident that they experience is the single, mind-independent reality.

The ontology of realism assumes that the research is dealing with complex social phenomena involving reflective people (Healy & Perry, 2000). Rather than nomothetic,

direct cause and effect, paths, realism research discovers knowledge of the real world by naming and describing broad, generative mechanisms that operate in the world (Perry et al., 1999). In other words, a social phenomena such as stress in this study, by their nature are fragile, so casual impacts are not fixed but are contingent upon their environments. In contrast to positivism research, the desire of realism research is to develop a family of answers that cover several contingent contexts and different reflective participants (Krauss, 2005). Stress can be perceived in multiple ways, through multiple emotions, in multiple events so it was important as a researcher to keep in mind each participant's individual differences and their lived experiences of stressful incidents as I analysed the emerging data. This research was most suitable within the qualitative paradigm due to the sensitive nature of the topic of stress and so for the questions to be answered in an honest and responsive way, it was also important that the participants and I worked collaboratively in a trustful space. This meant taking them out of their work environment, conducting the interview in a more trustful space for them to be able to answer the interview questions in an honest narration.

In an epistemological view, realism is neither value-laden nor value-free, rather, realism researchers are value-aware (Krauss, 2005). Realism in an epistemological view recognises that perceptions have a certain quality of being easily shaped or moulded and that our knowledge of reality is a result of social conditioning, and therefore cannot be understood independently through an individual but through the experiences of multiple ECE teachers in similar contexts which are ECE centres. Thus, a participant's perception for realism is a window to reality through which a picture of reality can be triangulated with other perceptions and so, realism relies on multiple perceptions about a single reality (Healy & Perry, 2000).

### 3.4 Research Design

#### 3.4.1 Interviews

As defined, interviews are a way of gathering information through a conversation (Berg, 2008). In-depth or also referred to as semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face to gather information for the purpose of this study. These interviews were conducted face-to-face in a meeting and was later changed to being conducted via Zoom due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Zoom interviews were mutually agreed upon and did not in any form hinder the data collection.

It is important that questions were logically structured in a sensible and helpful order to reduce the memory work on both participant and interviewer (Howitt, 2016). With the help of the SIR method, questions itself were ordered in a way that allowed the participant to explain in detail about their experiences and to specifically answer the proposed research questions of this study. The structure was based on the actual incident, their subjective perception of stress based on the incident, their emotional and physical reactions to the incident, and whether there were any support mechanisms that were available to them. Referring to the actual interview questions on **Appendix D**, all the main questions were asked with supportive sub-questions to follow up and help them understand and answer the main questions to provide more detail. Advice and assistance were also sought from an ECE consultant and AUTECH representative to ensure that the language used in the questions were appropriate with the participant group: ECE teachers.

Before each interview, informed consent was gained from each participant with their rights to withdraw from the research at any stage. Participants were asked to set aside 30-45 minutes of their time for the interview, however, interview times were flexible depending on the progress of the interview. An in-depth interview was the best choice for the interviews because the participant can be probed on details about the specific topic of stressful incidents and as the interviewer, I was prepared extensively for the



interview with the ability to absorb a lot of information during the course of the interview to be able to question and probe effectively.

To keep the conversation going without any disruption, the interviews were recorded using two devices; my iPhone with the Otter application installed for instant recording and transcription and a voice-recorder as a back-up so that if one of the two devices malfunctioned, I would still have a back-up device with the interview recording.

An advantage of in-depth interview is the flexibility that allows an interviewer to rephrase questions appropriately in ways for the participant to better understand what is asked and to probe the participant to provide more detail into the incidents that has occurred. This then pushes the data far wider than has been expected. The data collected from the interview was then rich and detailed enough for an extensive and labour-intensive coding process (Howitt, 2016).

#### 3.4.2 Stress Incident Record (SIR)

Past studies and researches that has been completed on work-related stress has relied on traditional rating scales and quantitative methods which are close-ended measures that requires respondents to report on stress conditions at work with no specified time periods (Narayanan et al., 1999). This research used a qualitative approach known as Stress Incident Record (SIR) which is an open-ended method developed by Newton & Keenan (1985) that links coping behaviours to sources of stress in work settings, consequently providing comprehensive information about the stress-coping process (O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1994).

What differentiates SIR from other methods that has been used in the research of stress is that the SIR allows an analysis of occupation specific stress and it differs from traditionally used approaches by its use of open-ended questions (Keenan & Newton, 1985; Narayanan et al., 1999). The SIR is also modelled upon behavioural interviewing;

thus, emotive terminology in the structure and design of the research is avoided as much as possible (O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1994).

Rather than using questionnaires as a method, this research has used face-to-face interviews. The reason that face-to-face interviews have been used in this study is to address a limitation that was encountered in previous research by Keenan & Newton (1985) where questionnaires have been used and found that when using a questionnaire, some respondents provided limited information naturally putting a constraint on the content analysis. However, through interviews, respondents can be probed to elaborate on the incident to gain a more specific and detailed response as it is important to ensure that events are described specifically and that it specifies the exact nature of the stressor and why it was a problem for them (Narayanan et al., 1999; O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1994).

Further to this, rather than describing the incident as 'stressful', the questions in the interviews will be re-worded asking the participant to think of a job-related event that has had a disruptive effect on their work (O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1994). The purpose is to remove the term 'stress' overall which may prompt individuals to make up incidents that they have not coped with or bring up negative and personal incidents rather than job-related incidents. All questions in the interview, and languages used in the interview will avoid emotive terminologies (refer to **Appendix D**).

SIR or otherwise known as Critical Incident Analysis (CIA) involves asking individuals to describe a stressful event based on three elements; the antecedents or circumstances in which the stress occurred, their response(s) to the situation along with the responses of other people and the consequences of both their own and other individuals' behaviour (O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1994).

### ***Three elements of the SIR***

#### *1. Description of the stressful transaction*

The first step in the SIR is to interview individuals to attain a detailed description of the job-related event that they have experienced recently in which they believe to have had

a disruptive effect on their work, have placed demands upon them or cause them problems or difficulties in their profession. It is important that these experiences are described specifically to attain the exact nature of the incident. After participants give a detailed description of the incidents, they will be asked why the incident was a problem for them and what is it about the incident that made it disruptive for them. These further questions will allow us to understand participants' perception on stress and the psychological strain associated with that specific incident (Newton & Keenan, 1985; O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1994).

## *2. Responses to the stressors*

The second step of the SIR is to ask individuals to describe what actions they took in response to the incident that occurred or simply 'how did you handle the situation?'. This will illustrate specific behaviours which the individual has displayed in response to the stressor. The key to this step is to ensure that behaviours or actions displayed by the participant are elicited and a description is provided of that person's behaviour. Even if there were no actions displayed, follow up questions should allow individuals to indicate any internal responses or emotions that they felt. It is also important to know of responses that other people around have taken reacting to the disruptive incident. In some situations, the actions of other people may be as important on outcomes than those of the participants', therefore it is important to obtain information about the coping 'resources' available to and utilised by individuals in stressful incidents (Newton & Keenan, 1985).

In comparison with other research methods on stress, the key component of step two of the SIR is the detailed description of the responses displayed by the participant when confronted with the disruptive event rather than stating how they felt. This response can either be direct action taken by the individual to deal with the event himself/herself or to seek assistance from others (Newton & Keenan, 1985; O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1994).

## *3. Behavioural consequences*

The third step of the SIR is obtaining from the individual a description of the outcome or consequences of their behaviours during the disruptive event. Firstly, focusing on the description of the outcome and secondly, the individual's evaluation of the outcome to evaluate the effectiveness of the persons' coping behaviours. This can involve asking the individual what happened as a result of what their reaction to the disruptive event and how did they feel about what happened (O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1994).

#### *4. Modifications to SIR method*

This research used a modified version of the SIR used in Narayanan, Menon, & Spector (1999) research on stress in the workplace and instead of looking into the consequences of both individual and other individuals' behaviour as a third step, this research seeks to identify support mechanism (if any) are available to NZ ECE teachers when experiencing a disruptive work-related incident. This method also has a particular focus on stressful incidents, rather than typical occurrences at work which will allow the participant to reflect on stressful incidences that they have recently experienced within their work. This modified version of the SIR focused on four aspects based on the four research questions; the stressor, the coping strategy, support mechanism available to them as ECE teachers, if any, and whether there were any barriers to coping at all.

Firstly, stress here is the idiographic aspect of the experience of the stressful event (Narayanan et al., 1999). The first research question of this study focuses on how ECE teachers in NZ experience work-related stress – so the focus is on the stressful incidents rather than the typical circumstances at work based on a time frame of 6 months or 180 days. This will follow up with sub-question asking about what it is about the event that made it a problem for them to understand their subjective perception of the stress incident and how the event made them feel to find out their emotional responses to the incident.

The second research question explored coping strategies that ECE teachers in NZ use to manage the work-related experiences that they perceived to be stressful. Participants

were asked what actions they took in response to the stressful incident to obtain information about the psychological strain associated with the stress incident.

The third research question of this study was to find out what support mechanism (if any) were available to ECE teachers in their profession when they experience stressful incidents. To probe them further for a detailed explanation, this question was further clarified with sub-questions such as whether they talked to anyone about the stressful event or whether they turned to anyone to help them deal with the event and what kind of support was provided to them by others to deal with the event.

Finally, they were also asked whether there were any reasons at all that may prevent them from sharing to anyone about the event, just to find out whether there were any barriers to coping within their profession as ECE teachers.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

After the participants had finalised the transcripts of their interviews, these transcripts were then examined by me using the qualitative method of grounded theory which builds on established procedures for open-ended inductive theory-building research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This analysis progressed through several recognisable phases; identifying first-order codes, aggregating first-order coders into theoretical themes or otherwise known as second-order codes and theoretical coding – identifying overarching dimensions, and theoretical frameworks (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The analysis began by using an open coding approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This open coding approach focused on the stressful events that were experienced by the ECE teachers over the last 6 months. The stressful incidents identified by the participants were labelled as the first-order codes. There was a total of 9 first order codes collected from the data.

From the stressful incidents identified by the participants, these were then refined to determine theoretical themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This meant going back to the initial transcripts, re-reading the stressful incidents to understand individual's subjective perceptions of stress to develop, relate and segregate these stress incidents into categories which then became our second-order themes. This process helped to assimilate our initial 9 first-order codes into 5 second-order themes; lack of staff resource, workplace surprises and unexpected events, employee-employee communication, teacher-parent communication, and challenges of working with special needs children.

The last step was to conceptualize the second-order themes into higher-order theoretical dimensions. Again, revisiting the transcript, reading through the incidents and second-order codes to identify patterns, tracing sequences of linkages between the second-order themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). From there the final three themes of stressors were developed: organisational stressors, social stressors, and context/institutional stressors.

### **3.6 Rigour and trustworthiness of data**

The quality of a qualitative research is produced in the planning, design and the making of the research. Trustworthiness and credibility shows us the ethical approach that has been implemented by the researcher in specifying the research designs, techniques, methodology and decisions that were used in the data analysis and why they were used (Flick, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). In any qualitative research, the value lies within each participants' individual views, rather than seeking to generalise the findings to an entire population or social group (Mutch, 2005).

Validity and credibility are significant to any research study that is commenced to ensure that the data collected and the methods utilised to attain the findings can be trusted (Flick, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). To ensure validity the researcher needs to consider factors

such as honesty and richness, the participant's perceptions, and the fairness of the researcher (Flick, 2007).

For this study, I have utilized the following techniques and methods to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of my research. Due to the nature of the topic of stress, all participants were distinctly informed of all aspects of the research project and these were precisely outlined on the information sheet (see **Appendix B**). Before they were interviewed, I have once again outlined their rights as participants and reminding them that they can choose to pass a question if they do not feel like answering as well as their rights to stop the interview at any time. As the researcher, I implemented an open and honest approach with all participants in every stage of carrying out my research which increased the trustworthiness and credibility of my research.

As part of the ethical preparation of this study and prior to interviews being carried out, the research questions and information sheet were reviewed by an ECE consultant and a representative from AUTECH for feedback to ensure that the material and language used were appropriate for the targeted population within their work context and environment.

Final approval of all transcripts was sought from each participant to ensure validity and credibility of my research findings and the report. Authenticity is a vital facet of research that guarantees that the information and data gathered is honest and accurate in every aspect (Flick, 2007).

### **3.7 Research Process**

#### **3.7.1 Research Participants**

This research was open to all ECE participants regardless of age, gender, and ethnicity. Participants were required to be currently teaching in an ECE centre in Auckland, NZ, at the time of the research. For the purpose of this research, participants include both

qualified teachers and unqualified teachers. Qualified teachers are teachers who hold qualifications and has met the initial requirements for entry to the teaching profession, while unqualified teachers have the teaching experience but therefore do not have the qualifications (*Teachers in early childhood education*, 2019). Though the terms are different, both carry out the same roles within their professions. So, to better understand and capture stress within the ECE sector, both qualified and unqualified teachers were included as participants in this research.

Participants are also reminded before the interview starts of two important aspects of confidentiality; that as a participant, all information regarding this research and all interviews and materials are strictly confidential, and a reminder to participants not to identify other people and names during the interviews. In the case that a participant has accidentally mentioned names, I will then take all reasonable and practicable steps to ensure that any names or place/centres mentioned in the interview will be given anonymity.

### 3.7.2 Participant Recruitment

Overall, I recruited by using 3 approaches. First approach was done by contacting centres through emails and phone calls, second was by centre visits and thirdly by snowball sampling through the participants that I had already gained from the other approaches. Snowballing was the most successful in recruiting participants. Existing participants were given the option to recruit other participants that they may know would be interested in participating in the study. After their interviews, existing participants were given the 'Information Sheet' (refer to **Appendix B**) to pass on to other potential participants.

Participant recruitment was initiated by contacting centres around the Auckland area through centre emails, phone calls to their centres and centre visits to speak to their managers about the proposed study. Multiple centres were involved, and the sample is



big enough for the research that participants will not be easily identifiable and maintain their anonymity.

Recruitment was more difficult than I had anticipated as teachers were busy and had other commitments during the weekend and evenings. The invitation to participate by email was initially sent out to 22 centres across Auckland. I had searched up and googled different centres all over Auckland so that participants were not clustered in a location that was only near me. Of all the invitations that were sent out via email, there were 2 participants who returned an email to me to express their interest of participating. I also found that most centres responded more to centre visits for recruitment rather than them being emailed because out of all the centres that were contacted by email regarding the research, two centres responded stating that they cannot participate in this study as their teachers would like to devote their time to children alone due to current staff shortage.

Seven centres were contacted by phone. From these 7 centres: 2 of them had apologised that they cannot participate as they are already participating in another thesis, 3 of those 7 centres answered that they will pass on the Information Sheet to their staff and 2 of those centres I had spoken to their managers and they also apologised that they would not be able to participate as they are short staffed and therefore their teachers are very busy.

Another approach was by visiting centres in person. I had visited 5 different centres that I had contacts within and successfully recruited 2 participants. Through snowball sampling, these two participants recruited the remaining 5 participants.

This study aimed to recruit a minimum of 25 participants who were currently working in ECE and a total of 10 participants were recruited and interviewed. Of this total, 5 participants were qualified while the remaining 5 participants were unqualified.

All information about the research and interviews were provided first to potential participants as an invitation to participate via the Information Sheet and Consent Forms. No personal information and contact details were obtained directly from potential

participants until they first express their interest. Consent was obtained prior to the start of the interview. Information sheets detailing the study were left at the centre and emailed directly to the centres to pass on to interested participants.

### 3.7.3 Background of the participants

In Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis, the participants are not referred to by their names, but instead through the coding system used, they are referenced as Participant 1, 2, 3 and through to Participant 10.

**Table 1: Demographics of participants**

Participant	Age	Highest Qualification	Ethnic Group	Qualified or non-qualified
1	29	Diploma in Teaching (ECE)	Pacific Islander/Maori	Non-qualified
2	28	Diploma in Teaching (Level 6)	South American	Non-qualified
3	31	Bachelor of Teaching (ECE)	Pacific Islander/Maori	Qualified
4	26	2 <sup>nd</sup> year student (BEd)	Pacific Islander/Maori	Non-qualified
5	40	Diploma in Teaching (ECE Level 5)	Pacific Islander/Maori	Non-qualified
6	58	Bachelor of Education	Pacific Islander/Maori	Qualified
7	48	Bachelor of Teaching (ECE)	Pacific Islander/Maori	Qualified
8	28	Bachelor of Education	Pacific Islander/Maori	Qualified
9	38	Master of Education	Pacific Islander/Maori	Qualified
10	33	3 <sup>rd</sup> year student (BEd)	Pacific Islander/Maori	Non-qualified

### 3.7.4 Data Collection

Face-to-face interviews were conducted by myself as the researcher. The timeframe of the interviews took 3 months due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Each interview took an average of 20 minutes to interview each participant.

The interview consisted of four in-depth open-ended questions and seven sub-questions to help clarify their answers. Interviews were recorded using an audio recording device to keep the conversation flowing without any disruptions from typing or handwriting responses.

Interviews were held at the local library, or at venues that were convenient to the participant and that they felt comfortable in. Due to the nature of the topic of stress and especially regarding participants' role as teachers, no interviews were held at any of the participants' workplaces to ensure that participants were open and comfortable in answering the questions during the interview.

#### *Transcription of the data*

The transcribing of the interviews was done by myself as the researcher. All interviews were recorded using two devices; an iPhone with the Otter application from the Apple store installed and a Sony mono digital voice recorder. Two devices were used to ensure that there was a back-up device and avoid any malfunctions that would result in losing any interview data. All data that were obtained through the interview were transcribed after the interviews. Transcripts were then returned via email to participants and given the opportunity to review and edit their transcripts before handing in a final copy for the analysis.

### **3.8 Ethical Consideration**

A researcher should at all times ensure that participants are safe from harm and are protected from unnecessary stress and to avoid leaving participants feeling vulnerable or exposed in negative ways (Cacciattolo, 2015). Before undertaking this research, it was important to consider and acknowledge the ethical standards and requirements set by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC). This is to ensure that this research is carried out in a fair and accurate manner and that all rights of the

participants were reserved in relations to; confidentiality, privacy, mutual respect, good faith, minimised risks, truthfulness and limitation of deception, avoidance of conflict of interest, research adequacy, respect for intellectual property, cultural sensitivity, participation was purely voluntary and full consent was granted.

This research was designed to maintain an element of aroha (care) which involves acknowledging the essence that the ECE teachers/participants works in. Consultation was sought regarding the nature of the topic and the documents prepared for distribution for the research and the language used in to ensure that it was appropriate and fit for ECE teachers/participants. Data obtained from the participants were treated with absolute confidential throughout the research process.

All research designs and procedures were granted approval by the ethics committee (AUTEC) on the August 29, 2019, (AUTEC Reference number 19/196 – see **Appendix A**).

### **3.9 Summary and conclusion**

This chapter outlined the methodological approach and the research design that was used to gather the data for this research. This chapter has also explained the selection of the Stress Incident Record as a methodology and why face-to-face interviews were used as opposed to using questionnaires. It has also highlighted the importance of gaining Ethics approval from AUTEC to ensure that both the participants and the researcher are kept safe and accountable.

## CHAPTER 4: Research Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the data collected from 10 interviews with participants who were currently teaching in ECE centres. As discussed in the previous chapter, research data were collected from ECE teachers. Due to the nature of the topic of stress, and to allow participants to better express and answer questions about their role as teachers, interviews took place privately in a place where the participant felt comfortable to allow them to open up and not withhold any information.

The interview questions indicated on **Appendix D** consisted of 4 main questions solely written to answer my research questions and some sub-questions were also included to help participants clarify their answers in a more detailed response. The purpose of the face-to-face interviews conducted on ECE teachers were:

- To identify and examine disruptive events and stressors that are specific to ECE teachers including their subjective perception of the stressor.
- To identify and examine the psychological strain associated with the stress based on what actions they took in response to these stressors to be able to cope with it.
- To identify (if any) what social mechanism was used to cope with the stressors.
- To identify any barriers that may prevent ECE teachers from coping with these stressors as they occur.

A total of 10 interviews were conducted with participants and the data were then transcribed and collated into common themes. To validate and illustrate the findings from these interviews, quotes from the interviews were extracted as they serve to emphasise the voices of participants to allow a true portrayal of their experiences and views. Findings will be analysed using Hobfoll's COR theory.

The following sections will present the findings based on the themes that were derived from the analysis. **Table 2**, **Table 3**, and **Table 4** below presents these findings. In general, it was found that the most common stressors experienced by ECE teachers were workplace surprises and unexpected events; lack of staff resource; management/teacher communication; teacher/parent communication, and special needs teacher stress. In terms of coping strategies, the most reported were cognitive ability, disengagement coping and social support. For social support mechanisms, the most used were peer support and organisational support mechanism and finally, the main barrier to coping was identified as lack of professional identity as an ECE teacher.

## **4.2 STRESS AND ECE TEACHERS**

**Table 2: Stressors identified among ECE teachers in NZ.**

Question one: In the last 6 months/180 days, have you at any time experienced an event or an incident that had a disruptive effect on your work as an ECE teacher?		
Description / Data extract (1st Order)	2nd Order	Overarching Theme
“we had a power cut at 7 in the morning, I arrived at work, I was getting my coffee ready, me and my manager we were discussing what we have planned for the day and suddenly, boom! Lights out. What happened was that there was an accident and a car hit the power box, so we were not going to get power for the whole day. They made us stay open, from head office they made us stay open. Even though we call MOE and MOE told us to shut down. Basically because of COVID like a temperature should not be below 18 degrees, well you know the policy they sent to all of us, and despite all of that, they forced us to stay open” (Participant 2)	Workplace surprises and unexpected events	Organisational stressors
“it’s the lack of time to get paperwork stuff done..yeah and plus its due to a lot of things like how staff has been absent like one teacher was in an accident and had to stay home for a couple of weeks and, that caused a shortage in our staff and it was hard to find non-contact time and update my paperwork and also just frequent absences from the teachers” (Participant 3)	Lack of staff resource	
“if one teacher is off, that’s the time I feel frustrated...I remember one day like that with 40 children attending and the 4th teacher was working but she finished early..that’s the time I feel frustrated because it’s too much for us, and plus you know the multicultural, different ethnic groups coming in and different cultures, you know, different behaviours” (Participant 6)		
“when you plan activities for the day for indoor and you look forward to being indoor but than it gets busy because there’s a shortage in staff and then you’re moved outside and you don’t have anything planned for outdoors” (Participant 7)		
“for myself as a teacher, the most annoying thing for me is miscommunication between myself and colleagues..it just interrupts the day and if it wasn’t for miscommunications, our day will flow normal and there will be no disruptors and all the other dramas that comes along with it” (Participant 8)	Employee/Employee communication	Social stressors
“so we had a conversation as a team, and we spoke about how to stand together like everone complained..but when people were asked individually they were like No! no I’m fine! But we’re not fine..I didn’t agree with this..so we spoke at out staff meeting the following week about how we need to stand together, like don’t say you’re against something when we are a team but than individually you’re in favour” (Participant 5)		
“parents too, they could be telling us something different, and then they’ll go on to another teacher and tell them something different and some of them will expect us to do different routines but from our side sometimes we wouldn’t be able to..we won’t be able to meet their expectations becahse its not only one-to-one, its one to 10 children” (Participant 8)	Teacher/parent communication	
“I’m not comfortable with all parents and I think it’s also more of them being uncomfortable as well not having that trust between you and them and they have different expectations that they expect you to do at school but at home they ignore it like toilet training, they expect you to do it at school and they don’t do it at home” (Participant 5)		
“as teachers our everyday situation is disruptive like special needs children..it’s becoming more common now to have chilren like that and it takes one child to ruin the whole dynamic of the classroom like one child will have different things like language barriers, behavioural issues and theres no trigger or pattern in the child, its just random, one minute they’re happy and the next is different so you have to stop everything and attend to the child” (Participant 9)	Challenges of working with special needs children	Context/institutional stressors
I just started two weeks ago, and they put me in the role to look after a special needs child without experience, I would rather gain experience first before working them because if something happens to that child, everything is going to be on me especially with the parents (Participant 1)		

#### 4.2.1 Work-related stress experienced by ECE teachers in NZ

Of the ten participants that were interviewed, Participant 4 stated that she did not experience any disruptive events within the last six months.

Though Participant 4 has expressed that she did not experience any stress or disruptive events within the time span given, her perception of stress within her role as an ECE teacher is just as valid as all other participants. As teacher stress is defined in the previous Chapter, it is an emotion experienced by teachers that is negative or unpleasant which has resulted from aspects of his or her work (Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995b; Kyriacou, 1987). So, for a teacher to perceive stress, he or she must have a negative or unpleasant experience that is a threat to his or her self-esteem or wellbeing. For Participant 4, though she might not have perceived stress, her indication of tiredness shows that she has experienced stress. Tiredness is a negative emotion that is a symptom of stress (Kyriacou, 1987).

*“No, I have not experienced any disruptive events as I am a non-qualified casual only needed to fill in for teachers, and I really don’t see teachers stressed out this year. Due to COVID, it has been quiet this year as parents keep most of their kids home, so I’ve only been tired and not really frustrated or stressed” (Participant 4)*

The remaining nine participants identified various stress incidents that they have experienced. From these experiences, responses were narrowed down to themes of stressors. The following themes will help illustrate the different stressors experienced by ECE teachers in NZ which has been categorised into three main themes of stressors: *organisational stressors, social stressors, and contextual/institutional stressors.*

#### 4.2.2 Organisational Stressors

Organisational stressors are situations in the workplace that create an imbalance between the demands placed on individuals and their abilities to cope (Finney et al., 2013). These are stressors that exist in all industries and fields, including the education



sector and these stressors could be caused by higher management, such as having policies that promotes poor autonomy, low respect and inadequate staff (Chan et al., 2018). Based on the data collected from the interviews, it was evident that organisational stressors experienced by participants. These organisational stressors were *workplace surprise or unexpected events* and *lack of staff resource*.

#### *Workplace surprise or unexpected events*

Organisations increasingly face surprises with regularity, yet there is still little known about how they develop the responses to unexpected events that enable their work to continue (Bechky & Okhuysen, 2011). Workplace surprise or unexpected events are defined as any event that happens unexpectedly, or any expected event that takes an unexpected turn (Cunha et al., 2006). Though a variety of surprises and events can make life within the workplace interesting, too much variety can create distress (Hyson, 1982).

Findings from the interviews shows that unexpected and unpredictable events that occurs in the day-to-day profession of an ECE teacher can cause stress. An example of this is Participant 2 who recalled a power cut in the middle of winter in their centre that overall disrupted their daily routine in numerous ways:

*“we had a power cut at 7 in the morning, I arrived at work, I was getting my coffee ready, me and my manager we were discussing what we have planned for the day and suddenly, boom! Lights out. What happened was that there was an accident and a car hit the power box, so we were not going to get power for the whole day. They made us stay open, from head office they made us stay open. Even though we call MOE and MOE told us to shut down. Basically because of COVID like a temperature should not be below 18 degrees, well you know the policy they sent to all of us, and despite all of that, they forced us to stay open”*  
(Participant 2)

For this participant, the loss of power within the centre is immediately a loss of resource of power and a threat to her wellbeing and the wellbeing of the children that they are

providing care and learning for, especially given that this event has happened in the middle of the winter season. The lack of power resource signifies that there is now a lack of resource to cope with this surprise. They, as ECE teachers now cannot provide nor cater for these children or themselves in full capacity in terms of food, learning and activities, and warm environment. The lack of power means the computers, internet and printer is down, therefore there will be less activities available for children to keep them engaged and occupied, there is also no appliances functioning to provide hot water for baby bottles, warm food or warm beverages for both children and teachers. Based on the the licensing criterias for running the centre, there is also no power to ensure warm water for water taps that are accessible to children for washing their hands or bathing them for hygiene and safety reasons which must be warm water but maintained below 40 degrees celsius. Additionally, indoor temperatures must be maintained above 18 degrees celsius at all times, and due to COVID-19, indoor temperature requirements were to be maintained above 16 degrees celsius.

When asked about her emotional response to the incident her response was:

*"I felt very abandoned, that's the feeling I felt, abandoned...that even though MOE sent through direct guidelines, like this is what we need to do, that was override..and I thought that's really wrong, because that's not protecting my well-being as a teacher, and not the wellbeing of the children either..I don't think that was the best practice" (Participant 2)*

Another example of this would be Participant 3 who recalled one of his registered staff being involved in a car accident which unexpectedly took her off work for a prolonged period of time. The lack of staff resource within the centre then was associated with other negative events following closely such as a pile-up of paperwork and having to invest time outside of work to get paperwork done and updated.

*"it's the lack of time to get paperwork stuff done..yeah and plus its due to a lot of things like how staff has been absent like one teacher was in an accident and*

*had to stay home for a couple of weeks and, that caused a shortage in our staff and it was hard to find non-contact time and update my paperwork and also just frequent absences from the teachers” (Participant 3)*

For this participant, it is apparent that there is a threat to his time resource due to the lack of staff resources. The absence of a teacher is also unexpected at times especially if it is due to an injury, accident, illness or sickness which means that anything that was planned for the day or the week will then have an unexpected turn. However, for this participant, as a result of the lack of staff resource, it then has resulted in a series of event such as having to give up non-contact time for paperwork in order to cover for the staff that is absent. As a result of giving up non-contact time for an ongoing period, with the addition of other staff being absent, paperwork then keeps adding up unless he finds time outside of working hours. Investing extra hours into work to complete the extra load of work will then result in a depletion of energy resource which is demonstrated by his emotional reaction to the disruptive event:

*“it builds anxiety and it makes me feel anxious, not just at work but also at home, you get so tired thinking of all that is happening at work especially as a supervisor managing the day-to-day stuff” (Participant 3)*

*As demonstrated above, while we were only interested in single events that leads to stress, we also find that these events are connected over a period of time and can unfold into other series of negative events resulting in stress for ECE teachers. The third corollary of the COR theory states that stress does not occur as a single event, but rather unfolds as a chain of events (Hobfoll, 1989).*

#### *Lack of staff resource*

NZ's ECE sector faces several longstanding challenges that includes staff shortages, an over-reliance on non-qualified workers, and more recently, an oversupply of ECE providers (Kenny, 2020). Given the circumstances that the supply of ECE teachers is currently at in NZ, the context in which staff shortages is at in the ECE sector can often

lead to other stressful events in the profession. Findings from the interviews suggest that this is the case. When asked whether she experienced any disruptive events, Participant 6 recalled a day that they all of a sudden had full attendance for the day and one of their teachers had to finish early for the day leaving just three of them teachers with a total of 40 children.

*“if one teacher is off, that’s the time I feel frustrated...I remember one day like that with 40 children attending and the 4<sup>th</sup> teacher was working but she finished early..that’s the time I feel frustrated because it’s too much for us, and plus you know the multicultural, different ethnic groups coming in and different cultures, you know, different behaviours” (Participant 6)*

Another example of this would be Participant 7 who recalls:

*“when you plan activities for the day for indoor and you look forward to being indoor but then it gets busy because there’s a shortage in staff and then you’re moved outside and you don’t have anything planned for outdoors” (Participant 7)*

When asked about her response to the disruptive event she states that:

*“it doesn’t really affect me because where we are as teachers we do have to be open for whatever and I tell them yeah I can come..I talk to my supervisor and the supervisor is always thankful that I always accept when they ask to fill in and do what they want” (Participant 7)*

Similar to participant 6, participant 7 has a network of social resources that she would collaborate and work with together with when disruptive events such as the lack of staff resource happens. The absence of a staff decreases coping resources, therefore, they would have to reshuffle and make use of the currently staffing resource that they have in order to manage and supervise children.

A major feature of the lack of staff resource is the reliance on social resources such as co-workers that they work closely with as a team and having supervisory support. As

Hobfoll states on his second corollary, individuals with greater resources are less vulnerable to resource loss and more capable of resource gain, and individuals who lack resources are more vulnerable to resource loss and less capable of resource gain (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). For an ECE teacher in their profession, a strong network of social support which can be from experienced teachers, supervisors or management, this can help them face challenging tasks, give them advice and emotional support on how to face the task and also help them gain greater resources.

#### 4.2.3 Social Stressors

Social stressors consists of social animosities, conflicts with co-workers and supervisors, unfair behaviour, and a negative group climate (Dormann & Zapf, 2002). Research on social support at work has shown that lack of support has negative consequences, highlighting the importance of personal relationships in organisations in comparison with task-related and organisation-related issues. Social stressors and lack of support are identical; however, they tend to be negatively correlated. One can assume that there is a relationship between job stressors and social stressors. If there is time pressure, there may be a supervisor who is responsible for it (Dormann & Zapf, 2002).

Findings from the interviews suggests that social stressors contribute to the strain on ECE teachers within their profession with *management-employee communication, teacher-parent communication, and teacher-special needs children communication*.

##### *Management/Teacher communication*

Communication is a key aspect in schools. Quality management systems consider communication to be one of the most components in schools. The managers must interact with their teaching staff, their students, parents and communication amongst teachers is a key factor in planning and intervening in teaching processes (Diaz et al., 2016). Such communication will allow the sharing and contribution of important

knowledge amongst all parties (Andersson, 2019). Findings from the interviews suggests that teacher/teacher communication and teacher/parents communication are stressors amongst ECE teachers.

For participants, this is occurring and an example of this is Participant 8:

*“for myself as a teacher, the most annoying thing for me is miscommunication between myself and colleagues..it just interrupts the day and if it wasn’t for miscommunications, our day will flow normal and there will be no disruptors and all the other dramas that comes along with it” (Participant 8)*

Another example of this is Participant 2 whom spoke with her team regarding an event and they all agreed to stand as a team and complain but when asked individually, their answers were different:

*“so we had a conversation about it as a team, and we spoke about how to stand together like everyone complained because it was cold, we couldn’t do our job properly and it was unsafe and best practice and we all complained..but when people were asked individually they were like No! no I’m fine! But we’re not fine..I didn’t agree with this..so we spoke at our staff meeting the following week about how we need to stand together, like don’t say you’re against something when we are a team but than individually you’re in favour” (Participant 2)*

In this specific stressor, we can assume that ‘communication’ is the resource in these events based on the goal-directed definition of resources as anything that is perceived by the individual to help attain his or her goals (Halbesleben et al., 2014). The emphasis is on the perception that a resource such as communication in this matter could help an individual attain a goal such as social support within the workplace.

Such as Hobfoll’s second corollary, there is a reliance on social support. For an ECE teacher in their profession, a strong network support especially within their teams of experienced ECE teachers, they are able to better manage challenging tasks and gain

greater resources when communication remains a key resource factor between them to strengthen that line of support.

#### *Teacher/parent communication*

Studies conducted in preschool and educational levels emphasises the importance of enabling parents to assist their children in their learning at home and to inform them about their studies at school concluded that there was a positive relationship between teacher-parent communication and their children's success (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Ozcinar, 2020). While a teacher-parent communication is ideal, it can be somewhat of a challenge for ECE teachers. When asked about a disruptive event, teacher and parent communication was identified as a stressor:

*“parents too, they could be telling us something different, and then they’ll go on to another teacher and tell them something different and some of them will expect us to do different routines but from our side sometimes we wouldn’t be able to..we won’t be able to meet their expectations because its not only one-to-one, it’s one to 10 children” (Participant 8)*

Another example of this is Participant 5 who stated that:

*“I’m not comfortable with all parents and I think it’s also more of them being uncomfortable as well not having that trust between you and them and they have different expectations that they expect you to do at school but at home they ignore it like toilet training, they expect you to do it at school and they don’t do it at home” (Participant 5)*

The COR theory assumes that individuals are somewhat strategic in how they determine resource investment, even if those investments do not seem objectively wise. Participant 5 and 8 has invested time and experience as resources to try and meet the expectations of parents, also to try and gain their trust, while she is also aware that the parents themselves are not investing the same resources into the child at home in order to have an effective outcome of what is been expected.

The concept of trust in this matter is however not a resource in accordance with the COR theory but rather a 'resource signal' that investment of resources will help the individual realise his or her goals of achieving more resources (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2012). While she is fully aware that her investment will not gain any further resources, she continues to do so to maintain communication and a relationship between them as teachers and the parents.

Particularly in an ECE context, parents are a valued asset within the industry, they are the clients or otherwise known as the customers when it comes to ECE. Through the lense of COR theory, organisations and individuals may value resources differently (Halbesleben et al., 2014). While ECE teachers can view parents as stressors, organisations will view parents and their children as valuable resources; they are the source of funding within the centre and their children are the purpose of operation. Therefore, what parents also view as valuable (i.e. their jobs) will also be valued by the organisation. It is also known that firms assign greater value to resources that can potentially complement the resources that they already possess, and in this case, parents are an important resources that complements and enhances the values of organisations, thus keeping them happy and content is a key goal.

#### 4.2.4 Contextual Stressors

In the stress literature, contextual stressors refers to those which deal with working or organisational characteristics, working conditions, student behaviour problems, the need for professional recognition or prestige, level of specialisation, teacher-student ratio, lack of resources and type of centre (Cano-Garcia et al., 2005; Dick & Wagner, 2001).

##### *Special Education teacher stress*

Research indicates that the job of a special educator is difficult, demanding, and more stressful than that of general educator as special educators face increasing or large



caseloads, lack of clarity in their roles, lack of administrative support and minimal collaboration with colleagues (Bettini et al., 2017; Cancio et al., 2018). When asked about disruptive events, participants recalled finding it challenging to deal with special needs children due to inexperience and the lack of support from the MOE.

*“as a teacher our everyday situation is disruptive, like working with special needs children...it’s becoming more common now to have children like that and it takes one child to ruin the dynamic of the classroom, like one child will have different things like language barriers, behavioural issues and there’s no trigger or pattern to it, it’s just random, one minute they’re happy, and the next is different so you have to stop everything to attend to the child” (Participant 9)*

When asked about her emotional response to the disruptive event her response was:

*“there are times when you are frustrated, you’re frustrated because you want assistance because there are 39 other kids..I feel frustrated not because of the child, but frustrated that there are no support within the ministry system..these kids are funded by the government but they don’t bring any learning assistants who are currently trained to deal with these children..I can do my best you know..whatever I can to support, but there are extra needy things that I can’t cater for them..I want these kids to succeed too” (Participant 9)*

Another example of this would be Participant 1:

*“I just started two weeks ago, and they put in the role to look after a special needs child without experience, I would rather gain experience first before working with them” (Participant 1)*

When also asked about her emotional response was, her reply was:

*“it was stressful for me because I knew I needed to be careful because if something happen to that child, everything is going to be on me especially with the parents” (Participant 1)*

The COR theory assumes that individuals are faced with limited resources of time and energy, and in response to lengthy periods of high demands and low resources, they demonstrate reduced energy and do not complete responsibilities (Hobfoll, 2011). Dealing with special needs children as well as catering for other children's demands and needs requires a lot of time and energy. For these participants, demand is much greater than the resources that they can provide. There is only so much that they can give with the amount of experience they individually have. In addition, it is also identified that there is limited support from the MOE. Though, these children are funded, there is no physical support or experienced support to assist with these children. Consequently, the lack of support further adds to the strain on teachers managing special needs children.

The second corollary of the COR theory suggests that social and collegial support is a resource that can reduce effects of high demands on teachers and attrition of which is absent in these events.

## 4.4 Coping Strategies and ECE teachers

**Table 3: Coping strategies used by ECE teachers in NZ**

<i>Question two: Describe what actions you took in response to this job-related event that has disrupted your work</i>		
Description / Data extract (1st order)	2nd Order	Overarching Theme
"I will talk to my team about it and we decide on how we can work together to fix things" (Participant 6)	Social support	Emotion-focused coping
"I talk to my colleagues and especially our head teacher and ask them for advice on how to deal with things" (Participant 8)		
"I would ask around the teachers I work with for advice on how to help the child" (Participant 1)		
"We will speak about it as a team and we always support each other and help each other when things happen at work and also at home" (Participant 2)		
"I talk to my supervisor and the supervisor is the only person I talk to for help and they're always thankful that I actually speak to them" (Participant 7)	Supervisory support	
"I would sometimes talk to the administrator or the manager for support but not always but I find that it helps when we have prayer group in the mornings before work and it helps when I pray about it" (Participant 3)		
"with no experience, I went home and searched up what to do to deal with special needs children, I also would ask around the other teachers about what the child is like and how they help the child. And as weeks goes by, I started to feel that relationship with the child..so like right now I don't blame them because I know it's my job to look after that child and I felt that it was within my role to take action" (Participant 1)	Cognitive ability	Adaptive Coping (Problem-focused coping)
"I spoke to the other two teachers that we have to make sure our ratio is right and its one teacher to 10 children..I asked the other two teachers to make a group inside to..the main points that day is that we set up the environment like one table with play dough, one table for writing and one table for collage and everything like that to make them engage and keep them busy..if we leave them to play around and run around, that will frustrate us but that's what we talked about and it worked..we took photos for evidence and they were all sitting down on the table and after that we keep supervising for their safety" (Participant 6)		
"I will redirect them to another activity, we sometimes do some breathing strategies just to cool them down or we have our favourite special box that we bring out and it's a special time when they can pick out a toy from there..so it kinda just takes them away rather than heating them up more and more and just trying to find what the kid is interested in..so I redirect them to what they are supposed to do and as a reward I praise them like 'I love how you've done that'..but just to ensure that they have that special reward for them so that they're back on track" (Participant 9)		
"Because I was the one that spoke to the mother before, I didn't feel comfortable speaking to her again to tell her that her child had been in another accident..I feel sad and feel sad for the child too, a bit anxious at times..so firstly I tended to the child to see if they're okay and to comfort them and see what needs to be done and we talk amongst ourselves with my co-workers to see what happened, then we record the incident to be reported to the parents and I spoke with my co-worker and I asked her if she could talk to the mother to pass on the information..once I talked with my co-worker I felt relieved" (Participant 5)	Disengagement coping	Avoidant coping
"It annoys me, and it makes me sad and angry at times, but I just do the work because I know I have to do it because I am a reliever at the time so I have to leave being a teacher aide to cover whoever is away" (Participant 10)		

### 4.4.1 Emotion-focused coping

Emotion-focused coping involves more responsive strategies that are typically employed to handle stress that has occurred such as seeking emotional and social support, positive

reinterpretation through growth, acceptance, and it can also include turning to religion as a source of comfort (Baumgartner et al., 2009).

### *Social Support*

In the COR theory context, social support is defined as social interactions or relationships that provide individuals with actual assistance or with a feeling of attachment to a person or group that is care and loving (Hobfoll et al., 1990). Social support can be in the form of having supervisors or other experienced ECE teachers who are work colleagues, or having support on a more personal level such as a husband, father, or family members that an individual that gain emotional support from. An individual who has a pool of support means that they can gather advice, knowledge resource and emotional support as well as help to manage challenging tasks and in return gain greater coping resources. Based on the findings from the interview, the most common types of social support were support from work colleagues and supervisory support. There were also evidence of religious support and family support, but the most common were the support given by colleagues and supervisors.

### *Support from colleagues/team*

Support from colleagues were the most evident amongst the participants. Examples of this support are the following participants:

*“I will talk to my team about it and we decide on how we can work together to fix things” (Participant 6)*

*“I talk to my colleagues and especially our head teacher and ask them for advice on how to deal with things” (Participant 8)*

*“I would ask around the teachers I work with for advice on how to help the child” (Participant 1)*

*“We will speak about it as a team and we always support each other and help each other when things happen at work and also at home” (Participant 2)*

### *Supervisory support*

Supervisory support was also commonly used as a form of social support amongst the participants. Examples of supervisory support are the following participants:

*“I talk to my supervisor and the supervisor is the only person I talk to for help and they’re always thankful that I actually speak to them” (Participant 7)*

There was also supervisory support in a religious aspect in which a participant recalls that it also helps when they have prayer groups in the morning before work. Though it is evident to one participant, this participant’s view is just as important as other participants as it seems he and his team have prayer groups in the mornings before work commences for the day.

*“I would sometimes talk to the administrator or the manager for support but not always but I find that it helps when we have prayer group in the mornings before work and it helps when I pray about it” (Participant 3)*

The second corollary of the COR theory suggests that people will strive to maintain social support both to meet their needs to preserve particular resources and that individuals with greater resources are less vulnerable to resource loss and more capable of resource gain (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 1990). With social support as a resource, participants will have a safety net that they can fall back on when they experience stress. Thus, when a stress incident occurs, they have their team or their supervisors to turn to for emotional and mental support. In addition to this, the social support they have means that they can vent and unload any negative emotions to them. Another advantage of social support especially in the workplace is that you can use it as a platform to share knowledge and information amongst your peers and work colleagues. This can help these participants gain knowledge resource on how to manage challenging tasks or how to deal with stress incidents as they arise.

#### 4.4.2 Adaptive Coping (problem-focused coping)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, teachers that have access to coping resources are less likely to report stress than those with fewer coping resources (Betoret, 2006). Adaptive coping or active coping refers to individuals who view potential stressors as challenges, rather than threats and will focus more on addressing the issue that has led to the stress. Based on the findings from the interviews, participants have utilised an adaptive coping strategy called *cognitive ability*.

##### *Cognitive ability*

Cognitive ability is the term used for a broad range of mental skills and processes needed carry out tasks (Alarcon et al., 2013). It is an individual's ability to plan, learn, think abstractly, and solve problems (Malanchini et al., 2020). To have cognitive abilities, is almost like having a safety net of strategies and a plan that you can fall back on when issues arises. In that way, when the same issues occurs again, you already have a safety plan, or you already know how it can be dealt with. This reduces the effect that negative issues or incidents have on individuals. Therefore, to limit resource loss, findings shows that participants uses cognitive ability as a coping strategy.

An example of this is Participant 1 who was unexpectedly put in to working with a special needs child without experience. She then took it upon herself to manage it herself, gather knowledge resource from other experienced teachers as well as do her own research to gain experience and knowledge on how to work with special needs children:

*“with no experience, I went home and searched up what to do to deal with special needs children, I also would ask around the other teachers about what the child is like and how they help the child..and as weeks goes by, I started to feel that relationship with the child..so like right now I don't blame them because I know it's my job to look after that special child and I felt like that it was within my role to take action” (Participant 1)*

Another example would be Participant 6 who recalled a busy day with full attendance and they were understaffed. To cope with this, she planned to ensure their ratio was right, set out a plan on how to cope with the full attendance and spoke to the remaining two teachers about it to help her implement that plan and as a result it had worked in their favour and they took photos as evidence of this successful plan:

*“I spoke to the other two teachers that we have to make sure our ratio is right and its one teacher to 10 children..I asked the other two teachers to make a group inside to..the main points that day is that we set up the environment like one table with play dough, one table for writing and one table for collage and everything like that to make them engage and keep them busy..if we leave them to play around and run around, that will frustrate us but that’s what we talked about and it worked..we took photos for evidence and they were all sitting down on the table and after that we keep supervising for their safety” (Participant 6)*

Another example of this would be Participant 9 who has children with special needs in her class in which she has to assist and deal with separately when they need attention. As a teacher she already has a plan on how to deal with events as such:

*“I will redirect them to another activity, we sometimes do some breathing strategies just to cool them down or we have our favourite special box that we bring out and it’s a special time when they can pick out a toy from there..so it kind of just takes them away rather than heating them up more and more and just trying to find what the kid is interested in..so I redirect them to what they are supposed to do and as a reward I praise them like ‘I love how you’ve done that’ but just to ensure that they have that special reward for them so that they’re back on track” (Participant 9)*

Consistent with the COR theory, cognitive abilities can be viewed as a resource that an individual can use to attain goals by planning and strategising. This allows the individual

to have a reservoir of resources that he or she can use to overcome incidents and issues when they happen.

#### 4.4.3 Avoidant coping

Avoidant coping is a coping strategy where an individual may choose to distract themselves with other events like taking time out of the room or they may become overwhelmed with the stressor that they choose to avoid the issue over all (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Evans et al., 2004; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008).

##### *Disengagement coping*

Disengagement strategies are generally emotion-focused, as they primarily aim to help individuals reduce negative emotions associated with stressors in ways that do not include addressing the event or cognitively processing how they feel about it. Those with disengagement coping style prefer to try to regulate their emotions by avoiding stressors (Shoss et al., 2016). Stated otherwise, individuals with disengagement coping styles tends to prefer those coping strategies that allow them to cope while avoiding the actual problem at hand. Based on the findings from the interview, participants were using disengagement coping as coping strategies.

An example of this is Participant 5 who had recently had an incident happened to a child at their centre and because she was the teacher that spoke to the child's mother regarding two other incidents that the same child had been involved in days prior to the third incident, she did not feel comfortable to be the one speaking to her again to tell her that there has been another incident.

This participant reported feeling sad and anxious that this has happened and although she was not at fault for the incidents, as a teacher she no longer felt confident enough to speak to the child's mother. As a way of regulating her emotions and to avoid this stressor and another confrontation with the mother, she had tended to the child to ensure her



safety and to see whether there were anything further that needed to be done, she recorded the incident and had spoken to the rest of her co-workers to ask if one of them can speak to the mother in her place.

*“because I was the one that spoke to the mother before, I didn’t feel comfortable speaking to her again to tell her that her child had been in another incident..I feel sad and I feel sad for the child too, a bit anxious at times..so firstly I tended to the child to see if they’re okay and to comfort them and see what needs to be done and we talk amongst ourselves with my co-workers to see what happened, than we record the incident to be reported to the parents and I spoke with my co-worker about it and I asked her if she could talk to the mother to pass on the information..Once I talked with my co-worker I felt relieved” (Participant 5)*

Another example of this is Participant 10 who recalled feeling very annoyed, sad and angry at the frequent absences of teachers within their centre. Given the staff shortages that is common amongst ECE centres in NZ, it is often hard to find a replacement for teachers and in this case, this participant takes on two different roles when a staff is absent from work. When these incidents occurs, it raises negative emotions for her, she then feels it is a part of her role as a reliever to carry out the work as well as be a teacher aide and as a result she completely ignores her emotions and carries on with the work. So, rather than getting help with the stressor, she disengages herself from the event and the emotions she feels as the incidents happens. As a result, the stressor is not addressed nor does she cognitively process it to help her process it in the future when the event happens again.

*“It annoys me, and it makes me sad and angry sometimes, but I just do the work because I know I have to do it because I am a reliever at the time so I have to leave being a teacher aide to cover whoever is away” (Participant 10)*

With these participants, disengaging from the disruptive events that they experience not only passes on the responsibilities to supervisors or other superiors, especially if you are

a reliever, but it also circumvents negative emotions associated with the incident by withdrawing themselves.

#### 4.5 Support mechanisms and ECE teachers

**Table 4: Support mechanisms used by ECE teachers in NZ**

<i>Question three: What social mechanism (if any) did you se to cope with this event?</i>		
Description / Data extract (1st order)	2nd Order	Overarching Theme
"It is centre policy that we have weekly staff meetings where we review and plan things with the rest of the team, this is where we talk and see what went well and what didn't go well, and who we can better approach those things as it happens again" (Participant 3)	Policies and procedures	Peer Support
"it is within our policies that we must call our supervisor when we need something like if we need staff to cover and she can come and help or she can bring another teacher in to help but yes when we are in need it is one of our policies to call the supervisor for help" (Participant 6)		
"the company provides us with three therapy sessions if we really need it for support, they pay for the three sessions" (Participant 2)		Organisational Support
"when it gets overwhelming in the classroom we have something called a "bumblebee" that is used as an emergency signal to the office than they know to send an SLT to come and help - its rare to send one but that's how you can send for help if things are too much" (Participant 9)		

One of the main questions that this study seeks to find was whether there were any support mechanisms available to ECE teachers in NZ to be able to cope with work-related stressors that they experience. These were mechanised through the centres' policies and procedures that are in place.

Findings from the interviews showed evidence of peer support and organisational support mechanisms. Though peer support and organisational support were evident, for support mechanisms, the reliant on social support between colleagues were also evident through this, but without a mechanism in place to enable this effectively. As previously discussed when considering coping strategies, participants relied on social support for emotional support and to turn to for assistance with challenging tasks that they face within the workplace in the form of sharing knowledge and information amongst themselves as a team.

At the mention of support mechanisms that were present or provided for them, majority of them still referred back to social support from their colleagues or from their supervisors as a personal choice to do so while others made it clear that it was the centre's policy that they speak to their peers to review what had happened and to get help.

#### 4.5.1 Peer support

Peer support refers to the system whereby individuals with lived experience of a particular provide support for others (Barker et al., 2018). In the context of this study, it refers to a system where ECE teachers with previous experiences of work-related incidents can provide support for other teachers. When participants were asked about what support mechanisms that were available to them it was clear that there policies in place to help direct these teachers. An example of this would be Participant 3 who stated that:

*“it is centre policy that we have weekly staff meetings where we review and plan things with the rest of the team, this is where we talk and see what went well and what didn't go well, and how we can better approach those things as it happens again” (Participant 3)*

Another example of this would be Participant 6:

*“it is within our policies that we must call our supervisor when we need something like if we need staff to cover and she can come and help or she can bring another teacher in to help but yes when we are in need it is one of our policies to call the supervisor for help” (Participant 6)*

Peer support is not only effective in the sharing of knowledge and information amongst their team but as described by Barker et al., (2018), peer support have a unique capacity in which individuals can help each other based on shared affiliation and a deep understanding of specific experienced.

#### 4.5.2 Organisational support mechanism

Organisational support reinforces employees adaptability to the organisational environment and it is an employee's general belief that an organisation values their contribution and cares about their wellbeing (Arasanmi & Krishna, 2019). Support mechanisms provided by the organisation was evident from the findings. An example of this was Participant 2 who stated that the centre she works for provided therapy sessions for ECE teachers if they were ever needed:

*“the company provides us with three therapy sessions if we really need it for support, they pay for the three sessions” (Participant 2)*

Another example of this would be Participant 9 who states that they have a system in place which lets the office know in confidence that they need help within the classroom so that they can send someone to assist:

*“when it gets overwhelming in the classroom we have something called a ‘bumble bee’ that is used as an emergency signal to the office than they know to send an SLT to come and help – it’s rare to send one but that’s how you can send for help if things are too much” (Participant 9)*

#### 4.6 Barriers to coping and ECE teachers

To help with further understanding ECE teachers' work-related stressors here in NZ, participants were also asked whether there were any reasons at all that may prevent them from coping with work-related stressors. All but one of the participant had answered that there were no barriers at all that would prevent them from speaking to someone about disruptive events that they faced. Perhaps the misunderstanding was within the question that was asked itself, but though the question was clarified as to what barriers that may prevent them from coping, the answer was still a no to this question. However,

although there was not many responses, the opinion of this participant still serves as a valid response in this study and I feel it is still important to express her view. From this participant, it was clear that she felt her professional identity as a teacher was not considered by the organisation she works with, and this serves as a barrier to her coping with stressful events that she experiences as an ECE teacher.

#### 4.6.1 Professionalism of ECE teachers

Teaching, particularly in preschool or primary grades has been interpreted as an act of caring. Over the years, ECE teachers have struggled to gain and maintain a professional identity within their field of work where building teachers' professional identity includes the interactions of personal values and experience, the societal context, organisational culture, and professional experiences (van den Berg, 2002).

Studies showed that professional identities of ECE teachers were interconnected with their self-identities and work identities with their professional identities constantly reconstructed through interactions amongst other ECE teachers, students, parents, and society (Chiou, 2007; Kao & Chen, 2017). Research also shows that teachers' identities affects how they use resources to resolve work-related issues and how they perceive their work experience, motivation, efficacy, commitment, and job satisfaction (Day, 2002).

An example of this is Participant 2 who stated that the only reason that would prevent her from dealing with stressful situations is the lack of professional identity she has at her work place and her fear of a negative response:

*“referring to the event that I told you, when I spoke up, I got called unprofessional, so those type of situations makes me not want to speak up because if you’re going to think that I’m less of a person because I am trying to defend my rights and what I think, I’m trying to advocate for the children’s rights as well, than what’s*

*the point of speaking up..that would be the only thing that may push me down for dealing with stressful situations..knowing that there is a problem, we need to speak up about the problem but if you speak about the problem, you're a naughty child" (Participant 2)*

Regardless of how ECE teachers are viewed, maintaining a professional identity has proven to be a barrier to coping with work-related stressor based on the findings from the interview as different perceptions exists for both individual and organisation.

#### **4.7 Summary and conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated findings from the face-to-face interviews of 10 participants in total with the purpose of identifying stressors that are specific to ECE teachers, what coping strategies that they used and if any, what social mechanisms were available to them and lastly, to identify any barriers to coping.

In general, it was found that all participants experienced stressors through organisational stressors, social stressors, and contextual stressors. Further to this, it was also found that stress in ECE teachers did not occur in single events but over time in unfolded in series of other negative events.

In terms of coping, all participants used emotion-focused coping strategies and problem-focused strategies and there was also evidence of the use of avoidant coping strategies. In addition to this, findings shows that there is major reliance on social support amongst ECE teachers where when stress incidents happen within the centres, ECE teachers would rely on social support to alleviate stress.

All participants have also expressed that peer support and organisational support is a form of support mechanism during their experiences of stress and these were mainly mechanised through the centre's policies and procedures that are already in place.

Participants were also asked whether there were any barriers to coping with the stress that occurs within their roles. All but one of the participants expressed that there were no barriers to coping for them, however one participant expressed that maintaining a professional identity as an ECE teacher was a barrier for her because as she speaks up about issues within their centre, she is called unprofessional.

In the following chapter, aspects of these findings will be discussed in detail.

## CHAPTER 5: Discussion

### 5.1 Introduction

The following discussion highlights the themes emerging out of the findings. In the previous chapter, 8 themes were identified through the thematic analysis of the face-to-face interview data. These themes are shown in **Table 2**, **Table 3**, and **Table 4** above. The common stressors identified by participants were organisational stressors, social stressors, and contextual stressors. In terms of coping strategies, problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping were used by participants.

Social support mechanisms that were used by participants tied back to social support but there were some evidence of peer support and organisational support being used. And lastly as a barrier to coping with stressors the professional identity of ECE teachers was identified.

This chapter will discuss the findings in the previous chapter with implications and its link to the literature review provided in Chapter 4.

### 5.2 STRESSORS AND ECE TEACHERS

Over the years, social change and economic requirements have influenced and challenged the teaching professions. These challenges have resulted in government agencies such as the MOE and the Education Review Office (ERO), and employers demanding more accountability from teachers (Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995b). NZ specifically, social change and diversity have added to the many contextual changes in ECE adding to further demands on ECE teachers. Diversity in culture, religion, language, family structures, socio economic backgrounds and physical abilities in children such as autism and health challenges. In addition to this, there is also the complexity of rules,



regulations, licensing criteria for the centres that must be adhered to and more (*Annual ECE census 2019: Fact sheets*, 2019).

There were three main themes of stressors highlighted in the findings in this study. These stressors were organisational stressors, social stressors, and lastly contextual/institutional stressors.

### 5.2.1 Organisational Stressors

#### ***Workplace surprise or unexpected events and lack of staff resource***

For all participants, the concept of organisational stressors was a common stressor. By definition, the concept of organisational stressor is when a situation or an event occurs within a workplace that creates an imbalance between the demands placed on an individual and their abilities to cope (Finney et al., 2013). Organisational stressors can occur in any industry but as for the education sector in particular, this can often be caused by inadequate staff, low respect and higher management such as having policies that promotes poor autonomy (Chan et al., 2018).

In this study, it is situations such as surprise or unexpected events (as cited in Cunha et al., 2006 and Bechky & Okhuysen, 2011) and the lack of staff resource that were the main cause of organisational stressors amongst all our participants. For that reason, when surprises or unexpected events or lack of staff resources occur in ECE centres, it creates an imbalance between the demands placed on ECE teachers and their abilities to cope.

With surprises and unexpected events, whether the event involved the child, an ECE teacher, the centre or organisation itself, these events can affect the day-to-day operation of the centre and take a toll on ECE teachers as teachers are eventually the ones that will cop the effect of the event. From the analysis of this study, it showed that surprise or unexpected events that occur within ECE centres are interconnected and can

result in a series of other events within the centre. The issue of surprise or unexpected events that occurs within the centre is that when it happens, depending on what the event is, an individual will either have the specific resources to handle the stress or lack the resources that is needed to deal with it. The ability to deal with the stress event then lies in the individuals' ability to pay attention to changes in resources and how they can self-regulate to decide how to best invest resources.

From our findings, participants have conveyed various surprise and unexpected events and while we were only interested in single events that lead to stress, it was also found that these events were connected over a period of time and had eventually unfolded into other series of negative events resulting in stress for ECE teachers. The third corollary of the COR theory states that stress does not occur as a single event, but rather unfolds as a chain of events (Hobfoll, 1989). This eventually will result in the depletion of energy for ECE teachers. When a teacher is exposed to several surprise and unexpected events as such without the right coping resources, it will then result in stress.

The literature has not yet discussed this, so a suggestion is made on how to assist ECE teachers in alleviating stress caused by surprise and unexpected events. Makikangas et al., (2010) suggested a way of deflecting the effect of a downward spiral of resource loss, job resources and flow at work has proven to mutually interact with each other over time resulting in an upward spiral of resources (Makikangas et al., 2010; Salanova et al., 2006). Flow has been defined as the optimum experience that is the consequence of a situation in which challenges and skills are equal (Ellis et al., 1994). Job resources are physical, psychosocial, social, or organisational aspects of the job that help the person to cope with demands, increased learning, and development as an employee, and are useful in achieving work-related goals (Makikangas et al., 2010).

An individual who has flow will acquire resources such as having feelings of control, and balance between challenges and skills and having job resources would be having social support and clear goals at work (Makikangas et al., 2010). This suggests the importance of proper training for ECE teachers within the different contexts of their roles. Similar to

this, studies such as Bakker et al., (2004) and Mauno et al., (2007) have identified job resources to be autonomy, performance feedback, social support, opportunities for professional development, and coaching by the supervisor. Workplace stress cannot be stopped at once when it occurs given that these are surprise and unexpected events that can happen at any time. But teachers can be armed with the skills and knowledge to cope with these stressors.

Therefore, to assist ECE teachers in dealing with surprise or unexpected events that occur within their profession and to prevent a negative spiral of events, it is important to implement teacher trainings, professional developments that can increase workflow and job resources for ECE teachers. This can be in the form of professional mentoring and coaching and having an effective review system in place where all voices are heard, and goals are made clear for all parties. This can help to increase job resources as well as increase workflow.

### ***Lack of staff resource***

In such a demanding situation with the focus solely on the children with limited resources, it has served as a threat to teachers' current resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). This study demonstrated that stress in ECE centres should take into account the multiple sources of stress that comes through the ECE centres, spilling over from work, personal lives, and other matters. Events that occur outside of work or even individual factors can affect teacher stress at work which can be associated with other negative events. An example of this was presented in Chapter 4 (p.65) which demonstrated how an accident involving one of the ECE teacher resulted in her absence for a prolonged period. Though this happened outside of work, it resulted in a staff shortage in the centre. This was associated with other negative events such as a pile-up of paperwork for the participant and she then must invest time outside of work to get paperwork done. What was meant to be time for herself to rest or spend on leisure or time with friends and family friends has now become invested in work at home. As this is ongoing, situations like this will

often result in emotional and physical exhaustion. Overall, for participants there was an imbalance of resources to cope with the demands of the events that had occurred.

When there is a lack of staff resource, one can argue whether why not just find a cover for the absent teacher. The position in which staff shortage in NZ is currently at is complex. NZ's ECE sector faces several challenges which includes staff shortages, a huge reliance on non-qualified workers and the most recent, an oversupply of ECE providers (Kenny, 2020). The funding process itself is also complex as only registered teachers are funded while non-registered or unqualified teachers are not funded. Therefore, an absence or a lack of registered teaching can also result in a decrease of funding for the organisation from the MOE (Education, 2020). Thus, a lack of staff resource is a decrease in coping resources for both teachers and organisation.

Walters (2020) explained in her article following a survey on ECE teachers in NZ that given the current teacher shortage in the ECE sector in NZ, the pressure has increased on current teachers and staff to maintain demand and keep services running. Centres are reportedly waiting from six months to a year to recruit staff, all while centres are still continued to be built (Walters, 2020). Government figures are also showing a significant decline in ECE teacher trainees which means that the issue of teacher shortage will remain for the long term (Hipkins, 2018). With the issue of teacher shortage, if not dealt with properly, it can lead to teachers being overworked and exhausted. These are important issues that should be taken into consideration by policies and regulations that surrounds ECE. Given that teacher shortage is an increasing matter, the government, organisations should consider this issue as well as individuals who are looking to make a career in ECE. Building more centres amid a teacher shortage is only adding to the staff shortage. Instead of building more centres, governments and organisations should instead invest in the current centres that are operating and strengthening their current staffing by investing in them in terms of training, professional development, pay parity, and improving their current work conditions.

A study in our literature by Erdiller & Dogan (2015) on ECE teacher stress in Turkey showed individual factors such as the teacher's gender, age, years of experience, teacher's marital status, age group of children and their monthly income are factors that contributes to ECE teacher stress in Turkey. While it obvious that the ECE workforce is dominated by female teachers, the ECE sector in NZ can also consider looking into the emergent issues that prevent male from considering ECE as a profession and liberate the stereotypical perceptions of the occupation as this can help in bringing more workers into the industry.

So, for organisational stressors, we find that every day is a new day with its own activities and unexpected events. Whether it is surprise or unexpected events or a lack of staff resources, this study finds that it often results in a series of other events that follows closely through after the other. This study also finds that amid organisation stressors, stress in ECE centres should also consider the multiple sources of stress that comes through the ECE centres spilling over from work, personal lives, and other individual matters outside of the centres. Apart from the events identified by the participants, other surprise, or unexpected events within ECE includes teachers being constantly exposed to a range of diseases and sustain various injuries through work practices and environments and being physically in contact with children on a daily basis (Bates, 2018; Baumgartner et al., 2009; Curbow et al., 2000).

Like the Turkish educational system, NZ also has a centralised educational system, and all the educational and occupational decisions and practices are made, applied, and supervised by the MOE and other related ministries such as ERO. Erdiller & Dogan (2015) argued that given the current structure of the ECE sector, teacher stress should be considered within the broader context of organisational stress. MOE need to claim responsibility in providing resource passageways to make sure that employees become more productive (Hobfoll, 2011). Particularly in the NZ ECE context, there are a lot of factors that can contribute to the surprise and unexpected events that occurs in ECE centres. Especially in such a diverse environment where anything can happen during the

operation hours of a centre and particularly in a sector with an ongoing issue of teacher shortage. It is vital to consider the importance of ensuring that ECE teachers are equipped with sufficient and the proper work-related resources within the organisation that they work for. Managers should also consider how they can provide teachers with these resources which can be through coaching, supervisory support, performance feedback and social support.

### 5.2.2 Social stressors

For all participants, social stressors have emerged as one of the most common stressors. The concept of social stressors arises when there is conflict with co-workers and supervisors, social animosities, behaviour that is unfair, and a negative group climate (Dormann & Zapf, 2002). Research on social support at work has shown that lack of support has negative consequences, highlighting the importance of personal relationships in the workplace.

This study has demonstrated that stress in ECE centres should consider the importance of maintaining a proper communication channel amongst different parties that collaborate within the centre. This study found that a breakdown in communication amongst ECE teachers can disrupt their relationship and cause stress. We have also identified that there is major reliance on social support in ECE and with a great line of communication between parties within ECE, this can strengthen social support amongst teachers. Examples of this from our findings were presented on Chapter 4 (p.68). This can be management-employee communication, teacher-parent communication, and teacher-special needs children communication which can all contribute to the strain on ECE teachers in their profession.

From our analysis in Chapter 4, we find that there is a huge reliance of ECE teachers on social support within their profession. Communication in the workplace is considered a

vital resource that can help individuals attain goals such as social support, so it is important that an effective system of communication is implemented and maintained within centres (Halbesleben et al., 2014). These can be knowledge or vital information that can assist all parties in the operation of the centre. Hobfoll's second corollary suggests that a strong network of support, especially within a team of experienced ECE teachers can help them to better manage challenging tasks and gain greater resources when communication is maintained as a key resource amongst them (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Managers, ECE teachers and parents will all have different priorities, different tasks, goals, and as a result they would value resources differently, therefore, the work would be around aligning their values and perspectives so that everyone can be on the same page.

Communication is established where there is trust and confidence. ECE teachers are at the front line of work daily. They work closely with children, and though their profession focuses on the children, they will be able to provide essential information that can help managers as well as parents gain more insight into the child for parents as well as effective ways of running the centre for management. Therefore, more involvement from managers and parents are a vital aspect for effective communication in ECE. Involvement for managers would mean being present when they are needed and speaking to teachers in the context of their workplaces as teachers would better explain incidents and issues more concisely and quickly in their environment. Managers can also seek feedback or advice from teachers about matters before making major decisions that can affect the centre. The sharing of information and knowledge between hierarchy can help make effective decisions with running the centre. It can build trust and confidence between teachers and managers and can allow an even flow of information and knowledge resource within the centre.

Teacher/parent communication is also vital as it plays a huge part in their children's learning. Hill & Tyson (2009) and Ozcinar (2020) underlines the importance of enabling parents to assist their children with their learning at home as it can result in a greater

outcome of their children's progress and learning concluded that there was positive relationship between teacher-parent communication and their children's success. While this is the ideal situation, ECE teachers have identified that communication between themselves and parents were stressors. Interaction between teachers and parents is a key factor in planning and intervening in teaching processes (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Diaz et al., 2016). At times, teachers will often feel that a child's problems can be resolved if the parents would listen and act on their suggestions, but when parents are spoken to about any issues or learning set-backs about their children, they are often ignored or rejected in an angry manner, and until they listen and seek a medical diagnosis or attention for their child, childcare workers have to deal with the difficulties on a daily basis until something has been done (Baumgartner et al., 2009).

As mentioned, it is important to align the values and perspectives of management, staff, and parents so that it can strengthen the communication system between them. Diaz et al., (2016) highlights the importance of communication within the education environment where the interaction between managers, teaching staff, students, and parents are a key factor in planning and intervening in the teaching process. These will allow the sharing and contribution of important knowledge amongst all parties (Andersson, 2019; Diaz et al., 2016). Thus, it is important that managers provide support and maintain a robust line of communication between them, teachers, and parents.

Considering these findings, as mentioned above, this study also found that there was major reliance on social support within these centres. Strengthening the form of communication amongst teachers, parents and management can help gain a strong network support within the centres where all parties can share resource, information, and resource amongst each other. Consistent with Erdiller & Dogan (2015)'s study finds that ECE teaches define their resources, gains and losses based on their encounters within their social contexts and that teachers are social groups and should be considered as such as they do not perceive themselves isolated beings in their profession and workplace (Erdiller & Dogan, 2015).



### 5.2.3 Contextual Stressors

For all participant, contextual stressors were also identified as a stressor for ECE teachers. In the stress literature, contextual stressors refers those dealing with working or organisational characteristics, working conditions, student behaviour problems, level of specialisation, teacher-student ratio, lack of resources and type of centre (Cano-Garcia et al., 2005; Dick & Wagner, 2001). Working with special needs children has proven to be a stressor for ECE teachers. An example of this was that of Participant 9 (Chapter 4, p.71) who stated that working with special needs children was becoming more common now and it takes one child to ruin the whole dynamic of the classroom. She also stated that the frustration was not the child as she also wants them to succeed but it was because there was no support from the ministry system.

Research indicates that the job of a special educator is difficult, demanding, and more stressful than that of a general educator as special educators face increasing or large caseloads, lack of clarity in their roles, lack of administrative support and minimal collaboration with colleagues (Bettini et al., 2017; Cancio et al., 2018).

In 2012, MOE and ERO released a report on the inclusion of special needs children in early childhood education. This was to recognise that all children and their families have the rights to access high quality early childhood education and that this right was not affected by disability (ERO, 2012). While the intention of this policy is with great importance and serves a great purpose, this study questions its current practice.

Inclusive practices allow ECE teachers to support individuals needs within the regular context. Despite the principles of inclusion underlying legislation and policy and its inherent presence within the curriculum, research suggest that inclusion in actual practice varies widely from service to service (*Inclusion of children with special needs in early childhood services*, 2012; Purdue, 2009).

To help put this policy into practice, the MOE funds the employment of education support workers (ESW) through either their special education or a small number of providers a maximum of 15 hours a week (3 hours a day). ESWs then works alongside ECE teachers to support the inclusion of children with the highest needs with the guidance of early intervention specialists and a team consisting of the parents, family, specialists education practitioners, educators, and health professionals to help support the inclusion of the child in the service (*Inclusion of children with special needs in early childhood services*, 2012). However, with this help in place, it still proves to be a challenge to ECE teachers based on how the help is practiced.

Firstly, this inclusion policy and funding only applies to children who have been diagnosed and are three years of age and older. Children that have been diagnosed but are younger than the age of three are to wait until they turn three before receiving this support. Which means that until this child has reached the age of three, they will remain under the support of the ECE teachers with all the other children. Any interruptions caused by the child to the class will just have to be dealt with by the ECE teacher and the current experience that they have in working with special needs children until the child turns three to receive early intervention help. This study calls to extend this age limit to include children that have been diagnosed before the age of three. Though the focus is on inclusion, it is also important to extend this focus to the intervention that is provided for these children for an effective. This can help both the child in need as well as the ECE teachers providing the care for special needs children at early stages of their lives. Extending the eligibility age for this intervention and inclusion can aid these children academically progress at a young age, it can also help ease the load on teachers as they do not have to wait until the child turns three to get help within the classroom.

Second to this, MOE funds a ESW worker for a maximum of 15 hours a week (3 hours a day) excluding school holidays, who works alongside an early intervention specialist and a team consisting of the family, specialist education practitioners, educators, and health professionals to help support the inclusions of the child in the service. While the

support is only for a maximum of 15 hours a week, the child is enrolled from about 20-35 hours the centre. It is also emphasised that the role of the ESW is not intended to replace the role of ECE teachers or provide fulltime one-to-one support for special needs children (ERO, 2012). Which means that they will not always be present to assist with the child. In some centres, they are still in the waiting list for an ESW worker so while they wait, they must utilise current staffing resource to assist with these children. A study on the inclusion of special needs children suggests that additional support other than what is already provided by the teachers is needed to ensure that all the needs of the child are met and that for some students, this might involve a division of time between the regular classroom and another location such as a special class (Ashman, 2005).

Each child with special needs is different, they will have different needs, need different kind of support and while some can do just fine with the three hours with the ESW worker a day, there are some children that need extra support compared to others. From our findings, participants spoke about their frustration that the ministry does not provide sufficient help to help these kids because they can only do so much for these children but there are extra needy things that they cannot provide help with (limited resources). They also spoke about how one child can have many challenges such as language barriers, behavioural issues and there is no trigger or pattern to it and when specialists and family visits to observe progress, most times the child is fine, but the minute that they leave, there is automatically a change in the child. This shows that though ECE teachers values these children, they also face the challenges of working with them with limited resources of experience and time and energy. If continuously exposed to this in a lengthy period of time, it can lead to stress and exhaustion (Hobfoll, 2011). Despite the trend towards a more inclusive practice, research has indicated that regular classroom teachers are not convinced of the effectiveness of the approach (Cook, 2001, 2004).

There are no questions asked about the importance of inclusion for special needs children, however, the implementation of practice differs amongst centres and can cause stress amongst ECE teachers. In addition to this, there is also the lack of teaching

expertise and limited allocated planning time and resources (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Caring for these children does not have a one-size fit all solution, different children have different needs and require different help. There are also children who can be a danger to themselves and other children that need constant supervision. As participants have stated, sometimes special needs children have their best moments when they are there to observe, but there are days in which the child requires one-to-one help for the duration of the day that they simply must give up time with other children to help the child. Given the current state that staff shortage is here in NZ, there needs to be more help provided to ECE teachers to alleviate the workload on them. In suggestion, the MOE can look into extending the funded hours per day for special needs children, especially children that have more needs than others so that they are able to have extra time with ESW both for their safety as well as their learning needs. Children who have vulnerable needs and have more issues than others. Mainstream teachers can also be provided training in terms of curriculum differentiation and instructional strategies on how they can be better able to manage children and their various needs.

### **5.3 COPING STRATEGIES AND ECE TEACHERS**

#### **5.3.1 Emotion-focused coping**

For all other participants, they also used emotion-focused coping which involves more responsive strategies that are typically employed to handle stress that has occurred such as seeking emotional and social support, positive reinterpretation through growth, acceptance, and it can also include turning to religion as a source of comfort (Baumgartner et al., 2009). This study demonstrates that the use of emotion-focused coping strategies has been effective in alleviating stress in ECE teachers. From the findings, we have identified social support as a form of effective emotion-focused coping strategies that was used by ECE teachers in their profession.

When dealing with stressors, this study found that there was a major reliance on social support amongst participants. Social support are social interactions or relationships that provide individuals with actual assistance or with a feeling of attachments to a person or group that is care and loving (Hobfoll et al., 1990). Social support can be in the form of having supervisors or other experienced ECE teachers who are work colleagues. It can also be support on a more personal level such as a husband, father, or family members that an individual can gain emotional support from. An individual who has a pool of support means that they can gather advice, knowledge resource and emotional support as well as help to manage challenging tasks and in return gain greater coping resources. There were two types of social support that participants used: support from colleagues/team and supervisory support whereas support from colleagues was the most common, followed by supervisory support.

There was also evidence of religious support in which a participant recalls that it also helps when they have prayer groups in the morning before work. Though it is evident to one participant, this participant's view is just as important as other participants as it seems he and his team have prayer groups in the mornings before work commences for the day.

In a study by Baumgartner et al., (2019) identified that ECE teachers tend to use more emotion-focused strategies as opposed to using problem-focused strategies. This shows that teachers tend to rely more on their 'individual' capabilities to deal with issues instead of taking actions to address the actual issue. This could be because of the major reliance on social support within the findings where participants will often turn to their colleagues and supervisors in times of needs. The continuous sharing of knowledge and information amongst them then allows them to be more focused on addressing the stressor rather and setting a strategic plan for any future similar events.

However, although this study found that ECE teachers used both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies, the use of problem-focused strategies were more commonly used as compared to emotion-focused strategies. Baumgartner et al., (2009) suggested

that ECE teachers tends to use emotion-focused or avoidant strategies on work-related stressors or organisational stressors in which that they do not perceive to have the power of control over, while the use of problem-focused coping strategies was often to address child or parental needs or client factors that they perceive to have more control of.

### 5.3.2 Adaptive coping (problem-focused coping)

All participants used adaptive coping as a means of coping with stressors that they experienced in their profession. This study demonstrates that the use of adaptive coping or otherwise known as problem-focused coping has been effective in alleviating stress in ECE teachers. This type of coping focuses on addressing the issue that has led to stress. In an ECE context, this study found that teachers used cognitive ability as an adaptive coping strategy. This is when an individual is able to plan, learn, think abstractly, and solve problems (Malanchini et al., 2020).

For a teacher to have cognitive ability, it is almost like having a safety net of strategies and plan that they can fall back on when issues arise. In that way, when the same issue arises again, they already have a safety plan and know how to better deal with the issue. To have the ability to plan and strategise, an individual is better equipped to adapt when issues arise. As such, ECE centres should take into consideration how they can better implement problem-focused coping strategies such as cognitive ability to help teachers cope with daily stressors within their professions. Cognitive ability is a resource that individual can use to attain a reservoir of resources that an ECE teachers can use to overcome incidents and issues when they happen. Wagner et al., (2013) completed a study on perceived coping styles amongst ECE teachers. They tested different types of coping styles such as confrontive coping, distancing, avoidance, accepting responsibility and planful problem-solving and found that there were only two types of coping which demonstrated a significant relationship with ECE stress. Avoidance coping was associated with greater self-reported perceived stress while planful problem-solving was

significantly related to lower self-reported perceived stress. This supports our findings that cognitive ability is an important resource to have as an ECE teacher. An individual who is able to plan, learn, think abstractly and solve problems will be more equipped to handle stress and perceive less stress compared to others (Malanchini et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2013). Wagner et al., also argued the importance of staff meetings in the ECE environment as it was closely related to better working conditions in ECE.

### 5.3.3 Avoidant coping

In contrast to this, this study also demonstrates that participants have also used avoidant coping. Avoidant coping is defined as a coping strategy where an individual may choose to distract themselves with other events like taking time out of the room or the stressor may be too overwhelming for them that they choose to avoid it all together (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Evans et al., 2004). A form of avoidant coping used in this study by participants was disengagement coping. This type of coping primarily aims to help individuals reduce negative emotions associated with stressors in a way that does not include addressing the event or cognitively processing how they feel about it (Shoss et al., 2016).

For participants, disengaging from the disruptive events that they experience not only passes on the responsibilities to supervisors or other superiors, especially if you are a reliever, but it also circumvents negative emotions associated with the incident by withdrawing themselves. The issue with this type of coping used by our participants is that although it can help temporarily, in the long term it can take a toll on ECE teachers. Participants reported feeling annoyed, and angry as a response to incidents that they experience that they choose to ignore (Chapter 4, p.79). This study also finds that this type of coping strategy is often used by non-qualified teachers and relievers. Although, they may not perceive it as stress at the time, but this negative emotion was associated with a disruptive event and annoyed and angry are symptoms of stress. A study by Evans

et al., (2004) found that the use of avoidant coping strategies by ECE teachers were a significant predictor of depersonalisation and in addition to this, those who reported using avoidant coping strategies and working greater hours per week also reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion (Evans et al., 2004). A strategy can be critical when it is not addressed as the issue may linger and occur time and time again resulting in the individual having to invest more time and energy in dealing with it over and over and eventually, this depletion of energy and resource can result in more losses of resource (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000).

#### **5.4 SOCIAL SUPPORT MECHANISM AND ECE TEACHERS**

When participants were asked about support mechanisms that were available to them, majority of participants referred to social support from their colleagues or from their supervisors as a support mechanism and some participants made it clear that it was their centre's policy that they speak to their supervisors for help.

This study demonstrates that peer support and organisational support mechanisms were utilised by ECE teachers. In discussing social support mechanisms, again, it is still clear that there is a major reliance on social support between colleagues even without a proper mechanism in place, it was clear that ECE teachers are social beings and should be considered as they do not perceive themselves as isolated beings in their profession and workplace (Erdiller & Dogan, 2015). Therefore, when determining social support mechanisms that would work best for ECE teachers within their profession, it is also important to consider it in a social context.

Peer support as identified in our findings was mechanised through centre policies where it was required that centres held weekly staff meetings for reviews and planning for different events that they encounter and that it was also within their policy that they call their supervisor when there is need for something. Though recognised in our literature



review as collegial support, the findings from this study are consistent with that of Cramer & Cappella (2019) and Moolenaar (2012) where the use of collegial support has been proven to be an effective mechanism of social support. This is mechanised through regular staff meetings and regular visits into ECE teacher's workplace contexts. Evidence indicates that high quality, high-dosage trainings and coaching can support ECE teachers (Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

In terms of organisational support, support mechanism provided by the organisation were in the provision of three therapy sessions for ECE teachers that were free of charge if it was ever needed and have a system in place that lets office know in confidence when things get overwhelming for them as teachers and that they needed help in the classroom which was something called a 'bumble bee' that they would send with someone to the office and they would then automatically know to send help.

## **5.5 BARRIERS TO COPING WITH STRESSORS**

Of the ten participants, 7 of them had responded that there were no barriers at all that would prevent them from speaking to someone about disruptive events that they faced in their profession. The question was reclarified as to whether there were any barriers that may prevent them from coping and the answer remained the same. However, for Participant 2, it was clear that she felt her professional identity as a teacher was not considered by the organisation, she works for which served as a barrier to her coping with stressful events.

Though it is the experience of one participant, I feel it is still valid to express her view as an ECE teacher. An example of this is Participant 2 who stated that the only reason that would prevent her from dealing with stressful situations is the lack of professional identity she has at her work place and her fear of a negative response:

This is consistent with our literature where a recent survey on ECE teachers shows that teachers felt that there are things that they could not disclose to management or employers such as injuries or health issues due to fear of a negative response (ChildForum, 2018). Studies showed that professional identities of ECE teachers were interconnected with their self-identities and work identities and with their professional identities frequently reconstructed through interactions amongst other ECE teachers, students, parents, and society (Chiou, 2007; Kao & Chen, 2017). Research also shows that teachers' identities affects how they use resources to resolve work-related issues and how they perceive their work experience, motivation, efficacy, commitment, and job satisfaction (Day, 2002).

## **5.6 Summary and conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the important findings of this study and its relevance to the literature. Common stressors, coping strategies and social support mechanisms were highlighted. Implications were also discussed. The following chapter presents the conclusions of this research, discusses implications in details and provides future research possibilities.

## **CHAPTER 6: Conclusions and recommendations**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This final chapter presents a summary of key conclusions followed by an analysis of the strengths and limitations of this study. The implications for this study are proposed and the chapter concludes with recommendations for future research within the ECE sector.

### **6.2 Conclusions**

#### **6.2.1 Conclusion one: How do early childhood education teachers in NZ experience work-related stress?**

This study concludes ECE teachers in NZ experience work-related stress through organisational stressors, social stressors, and contextual stressors. These were organisational stressors such as workplace surprise or unexpected events and the lack of staff resources. Social stressors were stressors such as management-employee communication and teacher-parent communication and contextual stressors was working with special needs children.

When ECE teachers experience organisational stress, this study finds that while we were only interested in single events that lead to stress, events were connected over time and had eventually unfolded into other series of negative events resulting in stress for ECE teachers. This study also demonstrated that stress in ECE centres should also consider the multiple sources of stress that comes through the ECE centres spilling over from work, personal lives, and other matters occurring outside of the centres. Overall, Erdiller & Dogan (2015) confirms that given the current structure of the ECE sector, teachers stress should be considered within the broader context of organisational stress. Especially in such a diverse environment where anything can happen during the operation hours of the centre and particularly in a sector with an ongoing issue of teacher

shortage. Therefore, it is vital to take into account the importance of ensuring that ECE teachers are equipped with sufficient knowledge and the proper work-related resource to deal with stressors that they encounter.

Social stressors on the other hand were a communication issue where the lack of communication between either the ECE teachers and management or parents and teachers. This study also finds that there was a major reliance on social support for ECE teachers. Erdiller & Dogan (2015) emphasises that stress amongst ECE teachers should not be considered as an isolated and individualistic phenomenon but as an outcome of collective and cultural understandings as ECE teachers do not perceive themselves as isolated beings in their profession or workplace. Teachers are social groups and should be considered as such because they define their resources, gains and losses on their encounters within their social contexts (Erdiller & Dogan, 2015). Therefore, a breakdown in communication amongst these important parties can disrupt their relationship and the sharing of important information and knowledge for planning and intervention purposes (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Diaz et al., 2016). Confirmed by Hill & Tyson (2009) and Ozcinar (2020), their studies underline the positive relationship between teacher-parent communication and their children's success. Diaz et al., (2016) also underlines the importance of communication within the education environment where the interaction between managers, teaching staff, students, and parents as it will allow the sharing and contribution of important knowledge amongst all parties which is a key factor of planning and intervening in the teaching process (Andersson, 2019; Diaz et al., 2016).

Contextual stressors such as working with special needs children has also arose as a stressor. The inclusion of children with special needs and disability is of great importance within the community, however, the implementation and practice of this policy from the MOE has led this study to question its influence on the stress on ECE teachers that help put this policy into practice and carry out the day-to-day role in helping these children. Even with the principles of inclusion underlying legislation and policies to aid in putting

this inclusion policy in practice, research suggests that the inclusion in actual practice varies from service to service (Purdue, 2009).

#### 6.2.2 Conclusion two: What coping strategies do early childhood education teachers in New Zealand use to manage experience work-related stress and are these effective?

This research concludes that the coping strategies used by ECE teachers in NZ to manage work-related stress are problem-focused coping strategies, emotion-focused coping strategies and avoidant coping strategies. Of these three coping strategies, the most commonly used amongst them was emotion-focused coping strategy. Confirmed by Baumgartner et al., (2019), this study found that ECE teachers use more emotion-focused strategies as opposed to problem-focused strategies as teachers tends to rely more on their 'individual' capabilities to deal with issues instead of taking actions to address the actual issue. From the findings of this study, it can argue that ECE teachers tend to use more emotion-focused coping strategies due to their major reliance on social support as the continuous sharing of knowledge and information amongst them to help them deal with the stressor.

Problem-focused coping was also used. Proven to be an effective coping strategy through the use of cognitive ability, studies such as Wagner et al., (2013) supports the use and importance of cognitive ability as a problem-focused coping strategy as it was associated with lower perceived stress amongst ECE teachers. For an ECE teacher to utilize cognitive ability as a coping strategy, it means that he or she will be able to plan, learn, think abstractly, and solve problems (Malanchini et al., 2020). To have the ability to plan and strategise, an individual is better equipped to adapt when issues arise.

Avoidant coping strategies on the other hand can have the opposite effect as it is often identified by researchers to be associated with higher perceived stress amongst ECE teachers (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Erdiller & Dogan, 2015; Wagner et al., 2013). This

study supports these findings, as results from the findings shows that this is particularly used by unqualified or non-registered teachers.

### 6.2.3 Conclusion three: What sources of social support are available to New Zealand based teachers that experience work-related stress?

This study concludes that social support mechanisms that were available to NZ based teachers that experience work-related stress were peer support and organisational support. Peer support, or otherwise recognised in our literature review to be collegial support was proven to be an effective way of strengthening work related practice and experience in ECE teachers (Cramer & Cappella, 2019; Moolenaar, 2012). These social support mechanisms were implemented through regular staff meetings for discussion and planning and regular direct visits by management to ECE teachers within their workplace contexts. Regular visits to ECE teachers to their workplace environment can enable teachers to better discuss and express themselves or any issues that they may in proper context. Teachers also reported that these were also enforced through their centre policies.

Organisational support was also available to ECE teachers. Though it was not as common as peer support, it is still important to note that some centres have organisational support mechanisms in place such as centres providing free therapy sessions for their teachers and having systems in place where teachers can comfortably request for help from the office when things become overwhelming for them.

## 6.3 Implications of the research

There are several implications from the findings of this research. One of the main findings from this research is that stress in ECE teachers does not occur in single events but rather unfolds as a chain of events. The first implication that this study suggests that ECE

centres invest in providing teachers with job resources and increase workflow at work as these two have been proven to mutually interact deflecting the effect of a downward spiral of resource loss (Makikangas et al., 2010; Salanova et al., 2006). This can be in the form of professional mentoring, coaching, and executing an effective review system in place where all voices are heard, and goals are made clear.

The second implication of this study suggests that ECE centres should also consider the multiple sources of stress that comes through the ECE centres, spilling over from work, personal lives, and other matters. Though events may occur outside of the centres, it can unfold into other series of events interrupting the operation of the centres.

The third implication of this study is that the reality of teacher shortage within the sector should be considered by the policies and regulations that surrounds ECE. It should also be taken into consideration by governments, organisations and those who are choosing ECE as a profession. Although there is a staff shortage, centres are still being built. The government and organisations should instead consider investing in the current centres that are operating and their current staff in terms of training, teaching resources, professional development, pay parity and improving their current work conditions.

The fourth implication of this study suggests the importance of aligning the values and perspectives of management, teachers, and parents to strengthen communication between these parties and increase involvement between all parties.

The fifth implication to this study recommends reviewing the inclusion policy so that it is not a one-size fit all policy for special needs children. It also needs to include children under the age of three and consider extending funding hours so that those children who need the one-to-one help are receiving it more compared to those children who do not need it.

The sixth implication to this study suggests the training and use of cognitive ability amongst ECE teachers as a coping strategy. Providing teachers with the training for this can enable them to better strategise and plan so as stress incidents occur over time,

they have a reservoir of resources to draw so that they are more confident in dealing with stressors.

#### 6.4 Research limitations

**Limitation 1:** A limitation of this study is the paucity of geographical variability in research sample. This study originally sought to keep within the Auckland region, however, in terms of generalisability, I feel that it should have generalised to explore across a larger geographical area within NZ given that the aim was to explore stressors amongst NZ ECE teachers.

**Limitation 2:** This research makes no claims of generalisability or generalisation due to the sample size of only 10 ECE teachers in NZ. The aim of this study was to recruit a minimum of 25 participants, however, only 10 participants were recruited.

**Limitation 3:** 9 out of the 10 participants were Pacific Islanders/Maori in ethnicity. This may be a limitation and needs to be further explored as studies in the literature review points out that there are cultural differences in perceived stress and social support (Leifels, 2020; Zhang & Zhu, 2007). New Zealand itself as well as the ECE sector is greatly diverse, therefore, future research needs to explore the research question with culture and diversity in mind to acquire a different perspective of stressors.

**Limitation 4:** 9 out of 10 participants were female. Similar to Limitation 3, this may also be a limitation and needs to be further explored. From the literature review, the stereotypical view of male teachers was identified as a stressor. Study also found that male teachers perceived stress differently compared to females as well as used different coping strategies compared to female teachers (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Erdiller & Dogan, 2015). Therefore, future research needs to explore the research questions with a more gender balanced sample to gain another perspective of stress within ECE teachers.



## 6.5 Concluding comments

This study has offered an opportunity and a platform for ECE teachers to share their voices and experiences within their profession. I hope that this research will contribute to highlighting the important role that they as ECE teachers fulfill and carry out for our community and that they feel empowered as teacher to maintain and withhold our ECE sector at its highest standard. This research is merely the tip of the iceberg on the current issue of stress amongst our ECE teachers in NZ, therefore further research is required to raise and create awareness so that it can add more value to the current findings. This was a topic that hits close to home and I hope that this will shine the light on the issue of stress and entice a trend of research within this topic.

This has been my first time undertaking a research project, and while it has come with its many challenges, the knowledge I have gained with it is invaluable and the feeling of accomplishment that accompanies it when I know I have completed it is much more rewarding than I have ever expected. With this I say thank you to all the ECE teachers in our country holding it together for children. Know that you are all valued.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Ethics Approval



#### Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology  
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ  
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316  
E: [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz)  
[www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics](http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics)

29 August 2019

Marcus Ho  
Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Marcus

Re Ethics Application: **19/196 Stress incident record: Exploring work-related stress in New Zealand-based early childhood education teachers**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 27 August 2022.

#### Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted. When the research is undertaken outside New Zealand, you need to meet all ethical, legal, and locality obligations or requirements for those jurisdictions.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz). The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K O'Connor'.

Kate O'Connor  
Executive Manager  
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: [anavaivela23@live.com](mailto:anavaivela23@live.com); Tagonei Mharapara

## Appendix B: Participation Information Sheet



6 July 2020

### Title of Project

*Stress Incident Record (SIR): Exploring work-related stress in New Zealand-based early childhood education teachers.*

### An Invitation

My name is Ana Tapueluelu and I am a master's student in AUT University. I am inviting you to participate in a research project that I am leading entitled, '*Exploring work-related stress in New Zealand-based early childhood education teachers.*' Your agreement to take part in this study would be greatly appreciated.

### What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this research is to explore common stressors that are occupation-specific to early childhood teachers here in New Zealand, what their coping strategies are and if any, what social support are available to them when they experience stress incident at their workplace. The focus of this research has come about due to concerns regarding the working conditions of teachers such as; insufficient management support, poor teacher to child ratios, long working hours, under-staffing and risk of emotional and physical burnout. In order to better provide the right support to ECE teachers here in New Zealand, there is a need for research to explore teacher's experiences of stress within their specific teaching context.

*The findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations.*

### How were you chosen for this invitation?

I would like to invite you to participate simply because of your important role as an ECE teacher. All ECE teachers are invited to participate in this research whether you are qualified, non-qualified, registered, non-registered. Simply, if you carry out a role as an ECE teacher then the same invitation is extended to you. This research will involve a face-to-face interview in which you will be contacted after you express interest to let me know the best time and place for the interview. **You must be currently working in the ECE sector – Auckland based.**

*To mitigate any potential conflict of interest, this study will exclude participants that has/have any type of working relationship with or is a family member of myself as the primary researcher.*

### How do you agree to participate in this research?

If you would like to participate in this research, please email me on [anavaivela23@live.com](mailto:anavaivela23@live.com). The data collection will commence by **Monday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2020**, so please do express your interest as soon as you can.

I hope that you will volunteer to be one of a minimum of 25 participants with whom we can work closely to gather deep and valuable information. The more participant we can recruit, the more information we can be able to gather. If you do know other ECE teachers that may be interested in





participating, please let me know or you can pass on the information for them to participate. Whatever your unique position is as an ECE teacher, I would like to hear from you.

If you are interested in participating, a *Participation Consent Form* will be given to you. You will be asked to read and sign the Consent Form and return it back.

*Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage or disadvantage you. You can withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of data may not be possible.*

**If you would like to participate, what would you need to do?**

- Email me on [anavaiveia23@live.com](mailto:anavaiveia23@live.com) or call me to express your interest
- You will then be given a Participation Consent Forms
- You will need to read, understand and complete the Participation Consent Form and return it to me.
- After you express of interest, I will contact you to book the best time and arrange a place in which you will be available to have the face-to-face interview.
- If there is any point in this process that you have any questions at all regarding this research, please do not hesitate to contact me or ask me.

**How much time you may need for the duration of the interview and where will the interview take place?**

Participants will need to allow a maximum of 30 minutes for the interview. Depending on your location and time, I will be booking a room in the local library near you for the interviews to take place in.

**If you participate, what are the benefits?**

We will offer you a token of our appreciation (*koha*) upon the completion of the interview. However, the greatest benefit of participation will likely be the outcome of this research that will enable us to understand and identify common stressors amongst ECE teachers here in New Zealand and most importantly to be able to better provide the right support to ECE teachers here in New Zealand.

**How will your privacy be protected and who will transcribe the interviews?**

You may feel concerned about being interviewed or via your interview recording. For example, you might be concerned that participation will influence your relationship with colleagues.

We would like to reassure you that all interview materials and interview recordings will remain confidential and only be viewed by myself. Any questions that you may feel you do not want to answer, you have the rights to pass the question and if at any point you feel uncomfortable during the interview and may want to stop the interview, you can indicate to stop the interview. You will be given the opportunity to review and edit the transcript of your interview. No dissemination of your interview materials will happen without your explicit permission.

*All interviews will be recorded and transcribed by myself only.*



#### **How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

While there are no discomforts or risks expected in this project, we acknowledge that there may be instances where some of our questions may provoke some discomfort. In this case, we would like to refer you to services at AUT Health, Counselling and Wellbeing.

AUT Health Counselling and Wellbeing is able to offer three free sessions of confidential counselling support for adult participants in an AUT research project. These sessions are only available for issues that have arisen directly as a result of participation in the research and are not further other general counselling needs. To access these services, you will need to:

- Drop into our centres at WB219 or AS104 or phone +64 9 921 9998 North Shore campus to make an appointment. Appointments for South Campus can be made by calling +64 921 9992.
- Let the receptionist know that you are a research participant and provide the title of my research and my name and contact details as given in this Information Sheet.

You can find out more information about AUT counsellors and counselling on <http://www.aut.ac.nz/being-a-student/current-postgraduates/your-health-and-wellbeing/counselling>.

Other counselling support that is available after hours:

- Lifeline 0800 543 354
- Youthline 0800 376 633 or Free TXT 234
- Outline (Rainbow Support) 0800688 5463

#### **What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

You will have until *Friday 24<sup>th</sup> July 2020* to register your interest in participating in this research. After you register, I will be contacting participants to book interview time and dates.

#### **Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

Yes, you will receive a copy of the findings upon the completion of the research project.

#### **What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns in regarding the nature of this research should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisors, Marcus Ho, [marcus.ho@aut.ac.nz](mailto:marcus.ho@aut.ac.nz), +649 921 9999 ext 5448 or Tago Mharapara, [tmharapa@aut.ac.nz](mailto:tmharapa@aut.ac.nz), +649 921 9999 ext 5082.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, Kate O'Connor, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz), +649 921 9999 ext 6038.

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on (date final ethics approval was granted), AUTEK Reference number (reference number).



## Appendix C: Participant Consent Form



### Consent Form – Participant for Interview

*Project title: Stress Incident Record: Exploring work-related stress in New Zealand-based early childhood education teachers*

*Project Supervisor: Dr Marcus Ho and Dr Tago Mharapara*

*Researcher: Ana Tapueluelu*

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 22 November 2019.
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that this interview will also be recorded and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature: .....

Participant's name: .....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Date:

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 29 August 2019 AUTEK Reference number 19/196.**

*Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.*

## Appendix D: Interview Questions



### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Working Title: Stress Incident Record (SIR): Exploring work-related stress in New Zealand-based early childhood education teachers.

1. In the last 6 months/180 days, have you at any time experienced a job-related incident that had a disruptive effect on your work as an ECE teacher?  
*(An event that made you feel anxious, annoyed, upset, or frustrated, or aroused your feelings in any other way)*
2. (In this specific event) can you please tell me in as much detail as you remember, what was it about this event that made it disruptive or made it a problem for your role as an ECE teacher? (subjective perception of stress) (description of the event)
3. How did this negative event make you feel? What emotions did you feel as this negative event happened? *(feelings/emotions) (affect)*
4. After the disruptive event occurred, how did you try make sense of it? (thinking/cognitive)
5. Describe what actions you took in response to this negative job-related event that has disrupted your work.
  - a. What specific actions or behaviour(s) did you display when it happened?
6. Describe what happened as a result of your actions or behaviours in response to the job-related event?  
*(this is to obtain information about the psychological strain associated with the stress incident)*  
*(behaviour in response to the incident)*
7. In your profession as an ECE teacher, what support mechanism (if any) is available for you to use to be able to manage job-related events that have a disruptive effect on your work or create unexpected pressure in your work?  
*(Did you talk to someone about the event? did you turn to someone to help deal with the problem? What actions did they take or what kind of support did they provide to help you deal with the problem?)*
8. In your profession as an ECE teacher, are there any reasons at all that may prevent you from effectively managing negative job-related events that have a disruptive effect on your work or create unexpected pressure in your work?



*Additional Information:*

1. Age (number only): \_\_\_\_

2. Ethnicity: - Which ethnicity do you mostly identify with?

<input type="checkbox"/> New Zealand European (E.g. Kiwi/Pakeha)
<input type="checkbox"/> Non New Zealand European (E.g. British/Irish)
<input type="checkbox"/> New Zealand Maori
<input type="checkbox"/> Pacific Peoples (E.g. Tongan/Fijian)
<input type="checkbox"/> African (E.g. South African/Kenyan)
<input type="checkbox"/> Asian (E.g. Filipino/Indian)
<input type="checkbox"/> Middle Eastern (E.g. Turkish/Jordanian)
<input type="checkbox"/> Other: Please specify –
.....
.....

3. First or highest ECE qualification:

<input type="checkbox"/> Diploma of Teaching (ECE)
<input type="checkbox"/> 3-year Diploma of Teaching (ECE)
<input type="checkbox"/> 3-year Diploma of Teaching (ECE) + 1-year upgrade to Bachelor of Teaching
<input type="checkbox"/> Advanced Diploma of Teaching (ECE)
<input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor of Teaching
<input type="checkbox"/> Degree conjointly with a Bachelor of Teaching Degree
<input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor of Teaching (ECE)
<input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor of Teaching (ECE Pasifika)
<input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor of Education
<input type="checkbox"/> Postgraduate Qualification in Teaching/Education
<input type="checkbox"/> Other: Please specify -
.....
.....