

Early Childhood Education and Care professionals in Ireland have been coping with an onslaught of policy implementation, poor pay, and precarious working conditions, coupled with a lack of recognition as a profession. In February 2020 they took to the streets of Dublin in protest. Then the pandemic closed down services, leaving them in an even more precarious position. Montessori and Early Childhood Professionals Ireland (MECPI) surveyed members of its community to examine the effects of lockdown on an already stressed profession.

Introduction

Since 2014, warnings have been issued about the impact of financial instability and precarious working conditions on the mental health and well-being of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector (Matson & Bowers, 2014). It is of growing concern that ECEC professionals, and in turn children in their care, may be exposed to a looming mental health and well-being crisis. The RTÉ *Prime Time* exposés in 2013 and 2019 showed the impact on children when the financial instability, precarious working conditions, and mental health and well-being of the professionals who care for them are left unchecked and unsupported.

Between 2018 and 2019 the sector saw an employee turnover rate of 23% (Pobal, 2019), and in February 2020, 30,000 ECEC professionals took to the streets of Dublin calling for investment, recognition, and better working conditions. A predominantly young female profession is currently living and working in precarious conditions. This raises the question: What about the children in their care? Many instances of professional love (Page, 2017) are observed in Montessori and Early Childhood Professionals Ireland's (MECPI)' community of practice as professionals put children's needs above their own. But this cannot be sustained. We know that children's development is significantly influenced by quality interactions with their educators in ECEC (Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, 2017). What happens to children when ECEC professionals break under the pressures of precarious working conditions?

Since 2013, as administrators of MECPI, we have observed and grown concerned about the levels of stress, issues of mental health and well-being, and financial poverty experienced by ECEC professionals. In March 2020, the country went into lockdown as a result of Covid-19. We decided, as part of a wider longitudinal project,

The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on ECEC Professionals

How Lockdown Affected a Cohort Already at Breaking Point



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to disseminate one survey within the community of practice to examine the impact of the pandemic on the lived experiences of ECEC professionals before, during, and after lockdown. 615 members responded, representing every county in the Republic of Ireland. In this article we offer the responses and voices of ECEC employees.

Finances and mental health

426 respondents identified as being employed in an ECEC service. 98% identified as female, with the largest cohort aged 25–34 years. After the Covid lockdown, there was a substantial drop (14%) in full-time employment, and 10% said they were no longer working. Part-time and sessional employment remained somewhat unchanged, but there was a noticeable drop in the hourly rate earned post-lockdown. The number of employees earning minimum wage (€10.10 an hour) rose to nearly 20%.

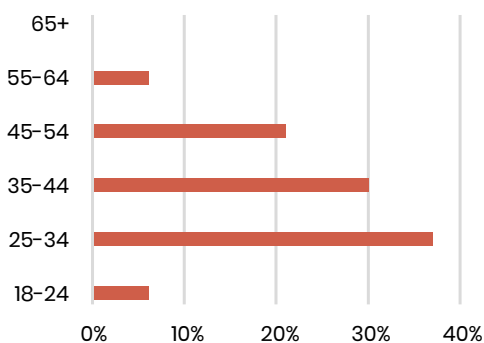


Figure 1: Age range of employees

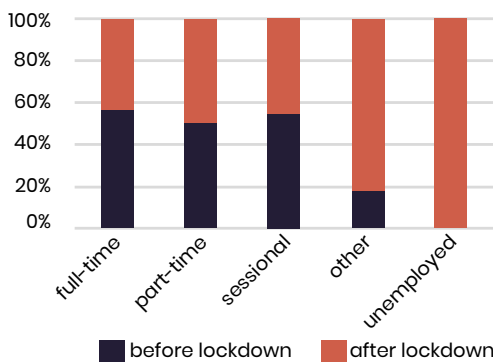


Figure 2: Employment status before and after lockdown

“ A predominantly young female profession is currently living and working in precarious conditions.

When asked to indicate their financial status before lockdown, 43% of employees said they could not afford unexpected financial expenses, and 7% said they were living on the poverty line. After lockdown, 53% of employees said they could not afford unexpected expenses, and 14% said they were living on the poverty line. A number of respondents named pay rates as a contributing factor to poor mental health and well-being:

“I have a level 8 degree and I’m coming into my 5th year of working in the same crèche, and I’m now making less money than I did when I started. It has severely impacted my mental health, and I’m considering leaving the profession.”

When asked to rate their mental health and well-being before the lockdown, 46% of employees said it was positive, and 23% said it was very positive. After lockdown, 29% said their mental health and well-being was negative, and only 19% said it was positive.

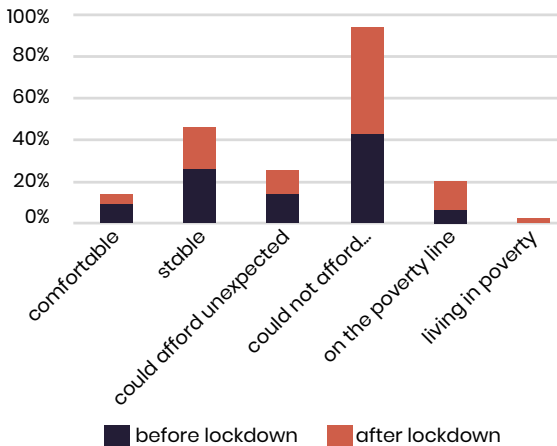


Figure 3: Financial status of employees before and after lockdown

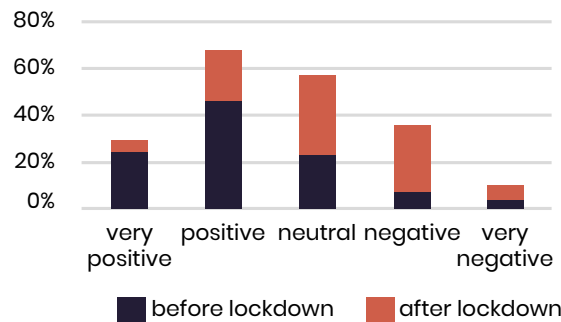


Figure 4: Mental health and well-being before and after lockdown

Stress, demoralisation, and leaving ECEC

Before lockdown, over half of employees said their stress levels were average; after lockdown, stress levels had risen dramatically: 39% said their stress levels were above average. They indicated experiences of anxiety due to finances and working conditions:

“I feel I will be leaving the sector in the coming months, as the stress and anxiety from the job is getting too much and for so little pay.”

Nearly a quarter of respondents said the Covid-19 lockdown gave them time to consider leaving their careers due to demoralisation, financial hardship, and working conditions:

“I am at breaking point and can’t take any more.”

“Feeling demoralised ... we have a shed as a staffroom but can’t be in there with someone from another pod. I don’t relish winter, having lunch in my car. Our workload has increased but [we] have been given no extra time to clean. Really want a change of career.”

Some respondents questioned the value of their labour and the cost of completing further qualifications when they are not recognised and valued as a profession – particularly compared with their primary and second-level counterparts. Many cited stressful and precarious working conditions combined with the lack of a professional salary and recognition as contributing factors to their stress, which only increased during the lockdown period:

“I have an honours degree, and the conditions within the sector are so bad I feel like I wasted 3 years studying for an undervalued and underpaid sector. ... The pandemic has highlighted the poor working conditions but has in no way changed them. I feel it’s worse now than ever before.”

The perceived lack of government recognition, in light of the importance of ECEC in opening up the economy, left many employees disillusioned:

“[It] showed me how little the government cares about us as a sector, meaning they need us but are unwilling to pay us correctly.”

A chance to relax

An interesting theme that emerged from the responses was the sense that the lockdown period gave some employees a break to relax from the stresses of working in the sector: ‘Lots of time to reflect and think about best practice.’ Others said it gave them an opportunity to relax and reaffirm the love they have for their profession. However, most indicated relief: ‘a break from long hours at work for little pay’, with some saying they were ‘less stressed than when in work’.

Conclusion

In a time of global unrest and stress, during which the novel coronavirus has disrupted the day-to-day lives and economies of people all over the world, it is interesting to note that a significant number of ECEC employees in Ireland felt rested, relaxed, and less stressed than in their daily working lives. It is concerning that almost a quarter of employees, having rested and reflected, indicated their intent to leave the sector.

The survey offers an insightful indication of the mental health and well-being of ECEC employees. They have referred to low wages, stressful working conditions, and lack of recognition as impacting them negatively; even more so after lockdown. We know the impact on children's development when the adults in their lives cannot sustain quality interactions with them. If ECEC employees are not given a stable regular income, in the form of a professional salary, with professional working conditions, it is our children and society who will ultimately pay the price.

Note: *Thank you to the members of the community of professional practice who completed this survey. We understand and acknowledge the emotional burden placed on you to continually put in the unpaid labour of educating others about the precarity of your lived experiences. Thank you to the administrators who facilitate professional conversations and supported (and many times counselled) ECEC professionals in their times of distress: Lee Herlihy, Valerie Gaynor, Annemarie Kelly, Ann Keating O'Neill, Clair Battle, and David King.*

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ENDNOTES

1. Montessori and Early Childhood Professionals Ireland (MECPI) is an online community of professional practice which has been in existence since 2008. It has just over 7,000 members in varying positions in the ECEC sector across Ireland and is operated by voluntary administrators. See www.earlychildhoodprofessionalsirl.com for more information.



Teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions.

- Diane Ravitch