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## **“That’s What You Want to do as a Teacher, Make a Difference, Let the Child Be, Have High Expectations”: Stories of Becoming, Being and Un-becoming an Early Childhood Teacher**

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*Abstract: This article explores the experiences of four individuals who changed careers into early childhood teaching in Victoria, Australia and later left the profession. The study was conducted with a narrative inquiry approach and reveals insight into motivations for becoming an early childhood teacher (ECT), experiences of being an ECT and factors that lead to un-becoming an ECT. Participants were motivated by pragmatic reasons such as career advancement and family-work compatibility alongside intrinsic interest when becoming an ECT. They entered the profession eager to support children’s learning and development. However, their experiences compromised their health and wellbeing and inhibited them from teaching as they envisioned. The findings of the study hold implications for policy makers, employers and higher education in effort to retain and sustain ECTs.*

### **Introduction**

It is well known that Early Childhood Teachers (ECT) play a vital role in providing learning-rich programs that support children’s life-long social, emotional and learning outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; O’Connell, Fox, Hinz & Cole, 2016). However, ECT shortages and attrition are real problems that threaten the quality of educational experiences offered to young children (Vonderen, 2016). A shortage of ECTs is being felt internationally and nationally. For instance, New Zealand currently fall short 300 ECTs each year due to teacher attrition alone (Wolfe, 2019). Long-term shortages are forecasted in New Zealand, with enrolments in ECT tertiary education declining rapidly (Hipkins, 2018). The United Kingdom also report great concern, claiming a shortage of nearly 11,000 ECTs (Save The Children, 2018). Likewise, Australia is experiencing nationwide ECT shortages, alongside inadequate tertiary education enrolments to meet future demand. O’Connell (2019) explains that within the next four years, one-third of all Australian preschools may lack a qualified ECT. The demand for qualified ECTs is due to become even greater in Victoria from 2020 as the Victorian Government will begin extending kindergarten programs to three-year-old children (The Department of Education and Training, 2019).

This paper reports on research that explores factors that attract individuals to become an ECT, and how their experience of being an ECT led them to unbecome. The insights of this paper aim to cast light on issues pertaining to the attraction and retention of ECTs in the Early Childhood (EC) profession.

## **Motivators for Becoming an Early Childhood Teacher**

The decision to become a teacher is consistently attributed to three motivators; extrinsic (financial, job security, work conditions); intrinsic (the belief that one should be a teacher); and altruistic (contributing to society) (Bastick, 2000; Wyatt-Smith et al., 2017). Extrinsic motivators for becoming a teacher can be associated with an individual's perception that teaching is compatible with family life (Williams & Forgasz, 2009). Perceptions of teachers' working conditions, hours and holidays can be attractive motivators for existing parents and those yet to enter parenthood (Thorpe, Aliwood, Brownlee, & Boyd, 2011).

In Western society, research has found that the attraction to teaching is formed mostly by the intrinsic and altruistic motivators to shape the future of and work with children (Thomson & Palermo, 2018), alongside an innate calling to teach (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2011). Overall, it appears as though individuals perceive teaching as an avenue to effect change by being a role model to young people who contribute to society (Watt & Richardson, 2007; Thomson & Palermo, 2018).

## **Experiences of Becoming to Being an Early Childhood Teacher**

These motivations suggest that an individual's teacher identity begins emerging before they become a teacher (Chang-Kridel & Kingsley, 2014). As a dynamic and multifaceted concept, teaching identity assumes the idealism of what an individual perceives teaching to be, a self-concept of who the individual wants to be as a teacher and how their professional status is perceived by others (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Moloney, 2010). In addition, teachers' professional identity is fostered by professional autonomy, whereby an individual has a high level of decision-making over their work, including service and curriculum operations (Jones, Hadley & Johnstone, 2017).

Studies that have explored the professional identity of early career ECTs share similar findings of individuals being highly motivated by their passion for children's learning. This passion includes the self-concept of wanting to be an effective teacher that works in the best interest of children's learning and development, and having a sense professional pride in their planning and programming style (Chang-Kridel & Kingsley, 2014; Pearce & Morrison, 2009). Overall, studies show that ECTs are mostly optimistic about their career when they first become a teacher.

The professional identities of ECTs are particularly dynamic as Ohi (2014) argues, they can be perceived as an educator, leader, communicator, advocate, pastoral care provider and administrator. These different identities are sometimes not known to beginning teachers, until they commence their role of being a teacher. Accordingly, teachers can experience a mismatch between their expectations and the realities experienced in their first years of teaching, therefore turning their optimism into hopelessness (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Pearce & Morrison, 2009).

When ECTs commence their employment, their sense of being is shown to thrive on relatedness with colleagues and managerial leaders (Jones et al., 2017; McKinlay, Irvine & Farrell, 2018). In a study of 229 ECTs, Jones et al. (2017) found that relatedness, which involves reflective thinking and deliberation with a team, strengthens ECTs professional identity as they support each other to make professional decisions about practice. Relatedness with colleagues fosters a community of practice whereby ECTs feel valued by their colleagues and develop a sense of belonging (Moloney, 2010). This is instrumental in shaping a teacher's identity, and therefore their overall sense of being (Jones et al., 2017; Moloney, 2010; Pearce & Morrison, 2009). Nolan and Molla (2017) argue that for beginning ECTs,

effective mentoring is one way to foster relatedness. Their study of close to 300 ECTs, including mentors and mentees, found that involvement in a mentoring program can enhance ECTs confidence of their emerging teacher identity and promote their professional agency.

Individuals who have left the teaching profession frequently express disappointment in their experience of relatedness with colleagues. This often relates to inadequate support in managing workloads, managing challenging student behaviour and being placed in roles individuals were not trained for (Gallant & Riley, 2014). A culture of trust between teachers and their managerial leaders is essential for successful partnership. However, when teachers do not feel supported in who they strive to be as teachers, they are left feeling frustrated and disillusioned (Miller et al., 2008). Such feelings are exacerbated when teacher's professional autonomy is inhibited due to feeling controlled and having to practice in ways that do not align with their professional perspective (Parker, 2015; Pearce & Morrison, 2009). This may inflict an experience of arrested development in which individuals lose any hope of things improving. Consequently, teachers may feel undervalued, professionally isolated and demotivated (Gallant & Riley, 2014; Hongboontri & Keawkhong, 2014).

### **Lack of Recognition, Disillusionment and Demoralisation: The Road to Un-becoming**

The sense of being an ECT is also influenced by how their expertise is recognised by centre management, colleagues and the community (Jones et al., 2017; Moloney, 2010; Pearce & Morrison, 2009). Whilst ECTs frequently report feeling a low sense of professional recognition (Moloney, 2010), it does not mean that recognition cannot be attained. ECTs can experience higher levels of professional recognition through the reflective discussions and collective decision making involved in relatedness (Jones et al., 2017; Pearce & Morrison, 2009). Recognition can also be experienced through remuneration such as salary and working conditions (Moloney, 2010).

EC teaching is a divided system illustrated by differing levels of qualifications, fractured funding structures and diverse providers. One such divided system in Australia is the range of awards and agreements that are offered to ECTs which are intended to recognise their expertise, and determine their salary and working conditions. For instance, in Victoria, Australia, ECTs may be offered The Educational Services (Teachers) Award (ESTA)<sup>1</sup> or The Victorian Early Childhood Teachers and Educators Agreement (VECTEA)<sup>2</sup>. The ESTA and VECTEA offer substantial differences in salary and working conditions despite ECTs adhering to the same regulatory requirements (Productivity Commission, 2011). For example, an ECT employed full time under the ESTA receives just two hours per week of administrative time. This can be compared to 12.5 hours per week for those under the VECTEA. Furthermore, ECTs employed under the VECTEA receive substantially more annual leave per year. This is concerning as ECTs with the same qualification and level of experience, but employed at different EC centres may not be equally recognised through their salary and working conditions.

For a beginning ECT, such arrangements of being employed under an award or agreement that offers poorer remuneration could have a detrimental effect on their emerging sense of being. For instance, incommensurate conditions can instil the feeling of low professional status and compromise an ECT's professional identity, confidence and self-esteem (Moloney, 2010). Furthermore, inadequate time to attend to administrative duties

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<sup>[1]</sup> ESTA is one enterprise agreement that lays out the terms and conditions of teachers' work (Australian Education Union 2016).

<sup>[2]</sup> VECTEA is considered the benchmark amongst enterprise agreements that lay out the terms and conditions of ECTs' work, including wage, leave and workload (Australian Education Union 2016).

force ECTs to undertake work outside of paid hours, which negatively impacts job satisfaction (Jovanovic, 2013). Accordingly, ECTs may experience disillusionment between their expectations of becoming a teacher, and what their reality actually is. This may lead to a combination of emotional exhaustion, psychological distress, mental health issues and teacher attrition (Zinsser, Christensen & Torres, 2016).

In response to disillusionment, individuals may choose to leave EC teaching. This highlights the decision to leave teaching as a response to workplace frustration rather than a strategic career move (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2014). Although literature attributes disillusionment to a lack of individual resilience and burnout, this inaccurately implies that resilience is associated with innate abilities (Mansfield, Beltman & Price, 2014; Luthar & Brown, 2007). Instead, resilience is nurtured by the “relational and organisational conditions in which they work and live” in conjunction to individual characteristics (Gu & Day 2013, p. 35). Therefore, while resilience can be nurtured, it can also erode due to lack of support and workplace stress. The current study argues that issues of resilience and burnout are often mistakenly labelled for what is actually an experience of demoralisation (Santoro, 2011). An experience of demoralisation appreciates that teaching is relational work in which teachers find moral value. However, when consistent workplace frustrations inhibit teachers from doing the work they love, they are unable to access the moral rewards of teaching. Consequently, individuals encounter demoralisation and no longer feel they can continue to teach (Santoro 2011).

Research exploring motivations for becoming and un-becoming an ECT is scarce, with primary and secondary school teachers being the focus within literature. Capturing the voices of ECTs respectively is important as these individuals work under different regulatory authorities, curriculum frameworks, salary and conditions than those in primary and secondary school settings.

A clear understanding of why individuals choose to become an ECT and why they leave the profession may be useful for attracting and retaining future ECTs. Such insight is timely as the demand for ECTs in Australia is trending upwards. Additional ECTs are required to fill shortages and to meet increases in population, kindergarten enrolments, workforce qualification requirements and the expansion of three-year-old kindergarten in Victoria (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; The Department of Education and Training, 2019).

## **Methodology**

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of becoming and un-becoming an ECT from individuals’ who had recently left their EC career to pursue other occupations. EC education in this study refers to degree-trained teachers who taught children aged 4-5 years within long day care kindergartens and free-standing kindergartens. Narrative inquiry was identified to be a suitable research methodology as it allowed the researcher to explore the individual within the story alongside the temporal, social and institutional influences surrounding their lived experiences of becoming and un-becoming an ECT (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

## **Research Methods**

A strength of narrative inquiry is the use of conversational storytelling rather than more formal interviews (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Conversational storytelling is an interview technique that generates a narrative based on a conversation between the researcher

and the participant on a selected topic. The social construction of researcher and participant narrative provide for a deep understanding of experience (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007). In this study, the interviews were structured with some pre-determined questions that invited participants to discuss their reasons for becoming an ECT, their experiences of being an ECT teacher and reasons for un-becoming. Having a repertoire of questions ensured that consistent and purposeful data were collected, while also allowing flexibility to insightfully explore participant responses (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008).

Each interview was conducted over approximately 90 minutes, either face to face at the University or on the phone. Interviews of this length allowed the researcher to engage in a storytelling experience that was open-ended and discovery-orientated to ensure that the data collected captured participants' "point of view, experiences, feelings, and perspectives" (Minhat, 2015, p. 212). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Prior to analysis, all participants had the opportunity to review their transcript and request changes to be made.

### **Participants**

Four individuals participated in the study. The participants were all female, worked as a teacher within a Victorian funded long day care or free-standing kindergarten, held a teaching degree at the time and left the profession within the past five years. The participants were recruited through criterion sampling to ensure "knowledge of the phenomenon by virtue of their experiences" (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 539). To confirm eligibility to participate within the study, they each completed a criteria survey prior to their involvement. Ethics approval was granted by the University prior to the research being undertaken.

The four participants and their pathways into EC teaching will be introduced in the following paragraphs; pseudonyms have been given to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

#### ***Laura***

Laura commenced her journey into EC education by completing a Certificate III in Children's Services across one year while working casually as an educator. As she continued working in the field, Laura undertook a two-year Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care at TAFE before working as an educator for seven years. With her EC training and experience behind her, Laura was able to complete a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education across two years rather than three years. During her final year of studies, Laura worked as a teacher in a three-year-old kindergarten before securing herself a qualified teaching role within long day care. Laura remained in her teaching role for one year before leaving the position.

#### ***Barbara***

Seeking a change of career into EC education with a master's degree in an unrelated field behind her, Barbara undertook a Graduate Diploma of Early Childhood Education to qualify her for EC teaching. During the 12-month course, Barbara worked as a family day care educator. Upon completion of her studies, Barbara successfully applied for and taught in an Aboriginal early learning centre for three years. In her following teaching roles, Barbara

worked for an organisation for four years across two long day care services, with two years teaching at each service.

### ***Irene***

Following on from six years of primary school teaching, Irene undertook a Graduate Diploma of Early Childhood Education over 12-months to qualify for EC teaching. During her studies, Irene undertook casual relief teaching in local kindergartens before obtaining a role as an ECT towards the end of her studies. Irene worked in a rural sessional kindergarten for five years before leaving the profession.

### ***Robin***

Robin entered EC education following the completion of a Certificate III in Children's Services. While working as an educator for three years in a council-run early learning centre, Robin completed a Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care. She continued working as an educator for another three years before becoming the centre manager. During her six years as centre manager, Robin undertook a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education before undertaking an ECT role within a long day care centre. However, her new teaching position and the position that followed were short lived, with Robin leaving both positions within a few months.

## **Data Analysis**

Aligned with a narrative inquiry design, data was analysed in two stages. The first stage of restorying aimed to unpack the stories to understand their composition and make sense of the data (Clandinin, 2013). The transcripts were read to locate key elements and identify its beginning, middle and end. These were rewritten into chronological stories in consideration of temporality, sociality and place (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each of the composed stories were reviewed by the participants to ensure accurate representation of their lived-experience was captured.

In the second stage, thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) was used to interpret, compare and contrast commonalities across the stories. Coding was used to identify common themes which were organised into larger units of abstraction to allow for broad patterns of data to emerge, inclusive of variations unique to each participant's story (Riessman, 2008).

## **Findings**

### **Reasons for Becoming an Early Childhood Teacher**

All four participants were mature aged and the decision to become an ECT was for a career change. The choice of EC teaching as their new career was fuelled mostly by pragmatic reasons, including having better family-work compatibility. For example, Laura who was working in the finance and banking industry at the time of her decision to become an ECT explained:

*I couldn't see a way that I'd move up or my income would increase, or that it would be family-friendly... so when my son did go to kindergarten I thought, this*

*is my year, I'll move away from the work that I've been doing so I can be available to him. (Laura)*

Irene, who was a primary school teacher at the time of her decision to change careers similarly believed that EC teaching would be more family-friendly as there were more opportunities to gain part-time employment. Irene explained “being in a small town, it (teaching position) was only three days a week and because I had young children, three days a week was great”.

Thomson and Palermo (2018) describe these motivators for becoming an ECT as reflecting participants' personal utility values, such as wanting job stability, a higher salary, and the ability to balance work with family responsibilities. These extrinsic motivations are commonly cited by career changers who are looking for job security, professional prospects and a stable and reasonable income (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015). Some participants also held intrinsic and altruistic motivations as they perceived EC teaching as being a stimulating and rewarding career that would promote personal and professional development. For example, Robin commenced her journey into EC education when she became a parent. Her desire to learn more about children's development for the purpose of being a good parent led to her undertaking a Certificate III at TAFE where she discovered her passion for working with young children.

*when I looked into it (parenting course), they were really expensive and I thought if I did the Certificate III...I can learn even more. I ended up going to TAFE and I did my certificate and that's how it started.*

Irene and Barbara, who was a palliative nurse at the time of her decision to become an ECT, discussed that their interest of working with young children was a driving factor for their decision to become an ECT. Irene explained, “while working in primary teaching that nurturing side of me was going ‘oh, maybe I could do more if I could have seen them as a 4-year-old instead of the 6-year-old’”. Barbara reflected, “it (nursing) was getting my spirit down, there was no enjoyment in it. I thought about what lifts my spirit up, and that is young children”.

The process of becoming an ECT was for some participants a drawn-out process, requiring commitment and ongoing passion. The lengthiest of journeys involved the completion of a Certificate III, followed by a Diploma of Children's Services and then the completion of a Bachelor degree in Early Childhood Education. Although a long experience, Laura was drawn to it by a distinct pathway between the Diploma and the Bachelor degree which reduced the length of her study, expressing that “privileged could be the word... not having to start a degree and doing four years, coming through the pathway was a great incentive”.

Having already completed Bachelor degrees, Barbara and Irene undertook post-graduate studies which they enjoyed, but expressed feeling not fully prepared. Barbara explained that her course “wasn't enough, I didn't learn enough about planning”. While Irene recollected, “I felt a little bit underprepared. To have had a bit more of a variety of experiences probably would have been beneficial”.

### **Experiences of Being an Early Childhood Teacher and How These Led to Un-becoming**

During the process of becoming an ECT, each participant entered the profession with an emerging professional identity that informed both their expectations of the field, and how they practiced teaching. For example, Barbara who had completed a health-science degree for her previous career drew upon this knowledge as a teacher to support children and families with vulnerable backgrounds:

*Using my skill and experience, I found a program for children with drawing on big sheets of paper... it was so beautiful, it was their work... it was a bit of art therapy, from the hospital I used to work at... that's what you wanna do as a teacher, make a difference, let the child be, have high expectations. (Barbara)*

Robin and Laura worked as EC educators while completing their degrees. Having an established idea of teaching identity from their work experience, they placed high expectations on the role of an ECT. Robin explained, "I wanted to move into a long day sector to make those differences and bring up the quality within long day care". While Laura reflected:

*(I believed) I would be valued as a teacher with all the prior experiences... I felt like I could advocate more for children with that degree... I absolutely understood why I was there and the role I played in being a teacher in that environment... that kind of knowledge and authority. (Laura)*

The development of participants' emerging professional identities were driven by hope, passion and a sense of determination to make a difference to the profession and the lives of children and families. However, this was immobilised by a variety of factors during their short time of employment, leading to their un-becoming.

### *Experiences of Relatedness and Support*

Support from managers, colleagues and professional networks was discussed by the participants as not just important, but as necessary for their being as an ECT. Barbara reflected on the support she received:

*I was involved in a mentoring program where new teachers were mentored in their workplace. That was really good because it was a hard environment as a new teacher going into an Aboriginal centre and she mentored me through that first year. That helped me a lot. (Barbara)*

Irene noted benefits of collegial support:

*I do appreciate having someone else to bounce some ideas off, back and forth about "what do you think about this" and then having someone who is willing to share an idea, push back a little bit or take it a little bit further. (Irene)*

Despite support being praised as important, the data reveals that a lack of support emerged as a prominent issue among all participants' experience of being an ECT, affecting their sense of belonging and the development of their professional identity. Lack of support was largely experienced with managerial leaders and appeared as the disavowal of teaching practice which inhibited participants' professional autonomy. For Barbara, one instance was the blatant rejection of her kindergarten program by her manager:

*the manager there (long day care) didn't like the program I had... she was interfering all the time. She wanted me to be a certain way...I couldn't be myself.*

*We're registered teachers and they (managers) have no teaching experience but they oversee the program. I should oversee my program... She wasn't a teacher; she's got a Diploma. Teachers are supervised by teachers, not by people who have got Diplomas. (Barbara)*

Similar experiences were had by Laura who reflected that her educational leader disregarded her teaching practices and requested a new teaching program be implemented.

*The educational leader who was new to the role was... putting forward a certain way to plan and some of the educators were quite experienced... my position was that someone's telling us how to plan, but we know how to plan... I put*

*forward saying something to the effect of “that way of planning looks great but there’s great work that we’re already doing”. (Laura)*

Lack of support further presented itself in barriers that consistently prevented participants from progressing in their teaching. For example, Robin encountered constant requests that interfered with her ability to be in her teaching role. For instance, running the service during her manager’s leave, and changing her program to accommodate requests of educators from other rooms within the service. Robin reflected, “there was not really a lot of time to actually teach...you might have a situation where you can do some teaching but it was so few and far between”.

Engaging with necessary support was difficult and left participants feeling disappointed. For Irene, working in a rural setting made engaging with immediate support problematic. However, even when support was sought, she found the response was devoid. Irene explained:

*management were two hours away... you couldn’t get immediate support for anything... I did a couple of referrals to the preschool field officer over the years but generally speaking, they didn’t come... support is hard to access, you ask for it and it doesn’t come. (Irene)*

Challenges in receiving support that recognised the professional identity and capabilities of the participants made it difficult for them to progress in their being as an ECT. Instead, participants had to forgo their teaching practices because, as expressed by Robin, “I felt like my hands were tied all of the time”.

### *Experiences of Working Conditions*

Participant reflections on being an ECT revealed working conditions that inhibited their professional autonomy and prevented them from being the teacher they envisioned. Working conditions such as inadequate administrative allotments for duties such as programming and planning, and long working hours were frequently mentioned by the participants. This restricted participants’ growth as an ECT and imposed an experience of arrested development. Whilst one participant, who was employed under the VECTEA, was satisfied with their administrative arrangements, the remaining three participants found their administrative allotments were not enough to deal with the “administrative burden”.

Barbara and Robin were employed under the ESTA and had up to three hours allocated to administrative tasks per week. These two participants found their administrative allotments the most inadequate which interfered with their ability to become the teacher they wanted to be. Barbara explained her experience:

*I didn’t have entitlements as a teacher, I had three hours planning per week for 30 children... I was taking all this work home with me and still wasn’t getting enough done. I was falling in a big heap... I couldn’t plan the way I wanted to, and things were half-done. (Barbara)*

Robin, who worked in long day care, spoke about her dissatisfaction that her teaching qualification made no difference to the time that was allocated to administrative tasks:

*I was still rostered on (face to face contact with children) 38-39 hours a week. Whereas in sessional kinder you’re doing sessional kinder and admin hours. I didn’t have any admin hours to speak of, at one centre I had about two hours a week. (Robin)*

With inadequate time for administrative tasks, the participants found their working hours to be long and would undertake administrative duties in their own time. Robin explained:

*I didn't have anything that I really needed in terms of resources, in terms of support, in terms of anything to be able to teach and half the time I'd bring things from home or pay for things... it was just too hard on a daily basis. (Robin)*

Not only was this burdensome, but also made it difficult to balance family commitments, an important factor in becoming an ECT for most of the participants, including Irene who was employed under the VECTEA and still felt the effects of administrative burden:

*my hours didn't fit with picking up my kids so instead of working three days a week...I would work an extra day...but then often there'd be a few tail ends of things so quite often it would stretch out over five days. (Irene)*

### ***Experiences of Professional Isolation and Demoralisation***

The absence of professional support, inadequate administrative allotments and long working hours inflicted the participants with a sense of professional isolation and demoralisation. Overall, the participants felt disconnected from their colleagues and the broader teaching profession. Robin captured this sentiment through her statement:

*you were a square peg in a round hole because you were a teacher, and you only need one of them usually at a centre, so you are kind of on your own. Anybody else that you're around is either a centre director, diploma or certificate trained, and they feel that you're doing a different role to them, so they treat you differently and don't support you or include you because you're a teacher. (Robin)*

Barbara, who also worked in a long day care, felt a similar sense of professional isolation, explaining "I felt alone, isolated and it shouldn't be like that, you should be part of a team".

This feeling was also experienced by Irene who worked in a rural sessional kindergarten and reflected, "we would meet (with other teachers) once a term, which was great, but still very isolating when you're only seeing other teachers once a term".

The experience of professional isolation was met with a lack of professional recognition from colleagues and managers, causing participants to feel demoralised. Robin and Barbara reflected on their value within their workplaces, comparing their working conditions to being the same of an educator:

*I thought we'd be given a little bit more respect as kindergarten teachers but it was minimal respect...in fact it was often the opposite...as far as they were concerned, you were diploma qualified educator whether you had a Bachelor degree or not. If you were a kindergarten teacher, it meant nothing. They didn't really know what a kindergarten teacher did, or what it meant. (Robin)*  
*They (managers and colleagues) think that we're educators, I don't want to be educator. I'm a teacher. Your identity as a teacher is completely eroded. They (managers) take them out of that award (VECTEA), and they've got this other award (ESTA) and its eroding teachers away. They shouldn't be allowed to use it. (Barbara)*

The participants found themselves consistently unable to attend to their role as an ECT due to working conditions that were unsupportive of their professional identity and responsibilities. Santoro (2011) argues that when individuals are consistently inhibited from practicing as teachers, they become demoralised and are no longer able to do the work they aspired to do.

### The Journey to Un-becoming

The participants entered EC teaching feeling hopeful about their new careers, passionate about children's learning and determined to make a difference. However, the compounding effects of their experiences left participants aggrieved and exhausted. All participants recognised that their work was becoming unbearable and impacting their wellbeing. The story for two participants ended with the support of psychologists due to their experience of chronic stress leading to depression and anxiety. Barbara spoke of her experience, "I ended up in a big awful mess... I was a really good teacher and they destroyed me, absolutely destroyed me". Irene explained, "I went to a psychologist and as I was telling them my stories, they said 'I think it's a really toxic environment and the best thing you can do is get out of there'".

In reflection of their decision to leave EC teaching, three participants remarked on their sense of relief. All participants felt vindicated in their decision to leave the profession and held little intention of returning. Laura revealed, "I don't know if I could ever go back to being the permanent teacher in a service". Irene similarly shared, "I've got the qualification but I cannot bring myself to go back... I just don't miss the stress of trying to be everything to everyone".

As Robin highlights in her statement below, the experience of being an ECT did not meet their expectations of who they wanted to become which ultimately led to their un-becoming:

*the role, as a kindergarten teacher, doesn't exist in my mind the way I thought a kindergarten teacher would...you might have a good day, you might have a good moment, you might have a situation where you can do some teaching but it was so few and far between that it was just way too frustrating for me to continue as a kindergarten teacher. (Robin)*

### Discussion

Participants became ECTs as career changers in pursuit of work that was compatible with family life. Although three participants of the current study did express interest in working with children, these motivations appear to play in the background of their story while pragmatic reasons present as primary motivators. The pragmatic motivations of the participants are extrinsically driven and are in contrast to the dominate themes amongst literature that identify contributing to society and working with children as primary motivators for individuals to enter a teaching career (e.g., Bastick, 2000; Wyatt-Smith et al., 2017). This suggests that career changers may hold different values when choosing to become an ECT, compared to those entering teaching as a first career, supporting Richardson and Watt's (2005) argument that "family circumstances and responsibilities play an important role in the pull into teaching as a career change" (p. 487). As such, the need to change careers for personal and professional reasons may act as an initial push, with the intrinsic interest in young children and EC education helping to steer the change of direction.

The findings highlight that alternative pathways into EC teaching are important to support individuals who may find themselves interested in becoming an ECT later in life. Participants undertook varied educational pathways into EC teaching, including vocational education and training combined with an ECT degree, or post-graduate ECT studies. They were highly appreciative of their opportunities to fast-track their studies, and also balance paid work with study. However, the benefits of these opportunities for ECT's professional identity may be called into question if they are not receiving effective mentoring upon

employment. In particular, participants who studied 12-month post-graduate courses reported feeling not fully prepared to be an ECT. Supporting previous research, the participants found support and guidance from mentoring and relatedness with colleagues as essential to supporting their transition and clarifying their expectations of being an ECT (Nolan & Molla, 2016, 2017). Unfortunately, not all ECTs have the opportunity to receive such support which the current study shows may leave beginning ECTs vulnerable and with mismatched expectations.

Similar to previous research (Chang-Kridel & Kingsley, 2014; Pearce & Morrison, 2009), the participants entered their teaching careers passionate and optimistic that they would make a difference to children's learning and development. Their narratives describe an expectation for what they believed they would achieve as an ECT. This emerging identity of themselves as a teacher thrived with the support of mentors, colleagues and managers. This is unsurprising as literature has well identified that a work culture that supports ECTs' agency is important for their emerging professional identity (Jones et al., 2017; Molla & Nolan, 2017; Pearce & Morrison, 2009).

Comparatively, findings of the current study reveal an absence of the conditions that support and sustain ECT's identity and practice. Instead, circumstances of deficient managerial support, minimal professional autonomy, inadequate administrative allotments, long working hours, and disrespect of teaching identity and practices were found. These conditions inhibited participants from embodying their professional identities while being an ECT. The narratives explored in the current study suggest that allowing ECTs to commence their careers with the assumption that their professional learning and emerging identity will be well-nurtured when entering the field may be short-sighted, and in actual fact be detrimental to their experience of being an ECT and their retainment in the profession.

Participant experiences are comparative to findings of Overton (2009) who identifies low levels of managerial support, lack of authority and repudiation of work as disempowering. Consequently, the professional identity of ECTs is eroded as they feel devalued (Overton, 2009). Such findings are reflective of the current study in which participants were disempowered due to absent professional recognition from their managerial leaders. In turn, participants felt disrespected, devalued and questioned their positions in their workplaces. Devaluing experiences impinge on ECT's professional integrity and "challenges them to the point of breaking, silence their professional voices, and force them towards early retirement and premature career changes" (Overton, 2009, p. 8). The disruption of professional integrity was found to compromise the mental health and wellbeing of participants in the current study. Alarmingly, all participants recognised their experiences of being an ECT negatively impacted their wellbeing which led two participants to seek psychological support.

An underlying thread of absent professional recognition is found throughout each participants' narrative. This brings into question the degree of recognition the EC profession is given if destitute conditions such as absent support and inadequate working conditions are permitted despite ECTs holding the same qualification level as primary and secondary school teachers. Absent professional recognition for the EC profession is reflected in the divided system that ECTs work within, which is "highly stratified and beset by inequalities" (Moloney, 2010, p. 184). The demeaning conditions of an unequal system is evident in the current study whereby participants were divided between employment under the ESTA and VECTEA. While all participants experienced professional disregard, the two participants employed under the ESTA expressed the most dissatisfaction with their working conditions and believed that their qualification was regarded as insignificant by their managers and colleagues. This was evident in working conditions that bestow inadequate time and support

to complete administrative and leadership tasks which compromised the participants' confidence and health.

Participants did not leave EC teaching in response to a single event, but rather in response to constant and accumulative challenges. Although some persevered for up to seven years in their teaching positions, the continuing challenges of absent support, inadequate administrative allotments, long working hours and debilitated professional agency contributed to participants' protracted processes of un-becoming an ECT. They experienced an inhibited ability to teach, which led to issues of arrested development and professional isolation, leading finally to demoralisation. It was not until participants were no longer able to healthily deal with their circumstances, and believed things would not improve, that they decided to leave. Howes and Goodman-Delahunty (2014) explain such a decision to leave teaching to be a reactive response to workplace frustration rather than a deliberate career move.

## Conclusion

While the findings of the current study are comparable to previous research that explore teacher attrition, this study provides unique insight into the conditions of EC teaching. This contribution of knowledge is significant as teacher attrition research focuses on primary and secondary school contexts and are devoid of EC perspectives. Primary and secondary teaching contexts are not reflective of EC contexts, where different regulatory authorities, curriculum, salary and conditions are applied. Of particular concern is the lowered professional recognition of ECTs in comparison to primary and secondary trained teachers which may affect attraction and attrition.

Whilst the motivations of participants in the current study are not representative of all ECTs, they do provide valuable insights into the expectations career changers have about their future career. These are important findings in the current climate of EC teaching in Australia and internationally, where there are increasing reports of ECT shortages due to reduced enrolments in EC teaching courses, and high levels of attrition (Campbell, 2019). For policy makers and employers, strong consideration should be given to how EC teaching can provide consistent working conditions that fairly and equally recognise ECTs as qualified teachers. In addition, mentoring should be made more widely available for beginning ECTs, as research clearly identifies effective mentoring programs support the transition from becoming to being. Furthermore, higher education providers should reflect upon how they nurture realistic expectations of the life of an ECT. Finally, without the existence of a uniformed professional award for ECTs, unequal and demeaning conditions that compromise their personal wellbeing and professional identity and practice will remain.

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