

An Examination of Mental Health Discourse in Pre-Service Child Education Programs and Its Impact on Workplace Stigma

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INTRODUCTION

- In Ontario, educators' well-being is considered foundational to support children's mental health and socioemotional development (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).
- While extensive research exists on fostering positive mental health in children, there is a lack of research focusing on the mental health of Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) (Kassen, 2016).

Many ECEs feel **underprepared** due to **insufficient training** and seek professional development, which **often neglects their well-being** (Barton, 2023).

High demands, low wages and emotional labour increase **ECE burnout, stress** and **mental health issues**, worsened by the pandemic (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001; Powell et al., 2021; Barton, 2023).

Despite growing mental health awareness, many educators feel **unsupported** due to **generic initiatives, scarce resources**, and a **culture of silence** (Barton, 2023; Cumming, 2017).



This study explored whether pre-service programs address educators' mental health and how pre-service awareness and knowledge of this topic impacts the stigma surrounding mental health challenges in the workplace.

METHOD

- The data that was used in this study was collected from 2020 to 2021 through semi-structured interviews with students from the University of Guelph in the Child Studies program, and Conestoga College students in their ECE program.

MEASURES

Demographic Information

Age, year of study and gender.

Mental Health in Pre-Service Programs

Are conversations concerning the mental health of educators happening in pre-service programs?

Workplace Stigma

How does pre-service awareness affect the stigma around educators' mental health?

DATA ANALYSIS

- 25 interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo, and an inductive coding approach was applied to allow themes to emerge directly from the data.
- Thematic analysis was conducted to group patterns into broader themes, so insights were grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than pre-existing hypotheses.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Age

N= 25 adults
ranging from ages
18-31 (\bar{X} = **21.4**).

Gender

Women: n= 24 (96%)
Men: n= 1 (4%)

Year of Study

1st year: 4%
2nd year: 20%
3rd year: 24%
4th year: 40%
5th year: 12%



RESULTS

1. Overarching Theme: Faculty and Curriculum Support Student Well-being but Overlook Educator Mental Struggle

THEMES	1. Putting yourself first.	2. Clear divide between mental health and mental illness discussion.	3. Recognizing student struggles, neglecting professional ones.
SUB-THEMES	1.1 Disingenuous mental health initiatives.	2.1 The medical vs. social model of mental illness.	3.1 Child well-being focus, not educator.

2. Overarching Theme: Mental Health and Illness Related Stigma are Ever-present in the Workplace.

THEMES	4. The impact of mental illness on job performance.	5. The pressure to be the perfect educator.	6. The fear of judgment.	7. Silence in the workplace.	8. The need to shelter the children.	9. Educators with mental illness bring unique perspectives	10. Being open about mental struggle would be beneficial.
SUB-THEMES	4.1 "Leave your issues at the door".			7.1 Comfortability in disclosure is context-dependent.		9.1 ECE students hope for future generations to dismantle stigma.	10.1 Honesty is the best policy.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

- The present study serves as evidence that **pre-service training neglects educator mental health**, leaving students with an impression that **struggling with mental illness is incompatible with being an ECE**.
- Without proper education on mental health, ECE students enter the workforce **unprepared** for the profession's challenges, increasing the likelihood of **burnout** and **silent struggles**.
- These findings have significant implications for informing potential **curriculum changes** that integrate mental health education into ECE training to ensure that future educators are **better prepared** to navigate the emotional demands of the profession.
- I recommend conducting **longitudinal research** that follows pre-service students into the workforce to get exact details as to what was missing from their education and how it is **presently affecting them**.