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"Who I Am at Work". Sources and Determinants in the Work of Nursery Childcare Workers

„Kim jestem w pracy" – źródła i determinanty w pracy opiekunów w żłobkach

KEYWORDS

sources of childcare workers, determinants of childcare workers, nursery caretaker, ECEC, ECEC in Poland, professional identity, professionalization

ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which childcare workers position their professional experience in their work (sources) and explores how they perceive their work as childcare workers (determinants). This exploratory study focuses on the experiences and perceptions of childcare workers. Twenty individual interviews were carried out with qualified childcare workers. The transcriptions were analysed using thematic analysis to explore perceptions of sources and determinants of strategies, which was described in the context of U. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. The model reveals that a childcare worker's professional role forms the basis for their self-perceptions, with the mesosystem emphasizing the crucial influence of beliefs and behaviours of other childcare workers, directors, parents, and children on shaping their professional identity, while the exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem collectively contribute to the dynamic and time-dependent construction of this identity within the broader societal and cultural context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The professional experience of childcare workers is analysed in light of the needs for strengthening professional practice, as well as advocating for the implementation of policies that ensure better professional status. The determinants influencing strategies in their work were identified as mental costs, attitudes toward the profession, successes and failures, and the atmosphere in the facility, emphasising the importance of managerial support and the need for clearer tools to address challenges in childcare.

SŁOWA KLUCZE

źródła pracy opiekunów, determinanty pracy opiekunów, opiekun w żłobku, żłobki w Polsce, tożsamość zawodowa, profesjonalizacja zawodowa

ABSTRAKT

W artykule zanalizowano sposoby, w jakie pracownicy opieki nad dziećmi pozycjonują swoje doświadczenie zawodowe w praktyce pracy (źródła) oraz jak postrzegają swoją pracę jako opiekunowie dzieci (czynniki determinujące). To badanie eksploracyjne koncentruje się na doświadczeniach i postrzeganiu swojej pracy przez opiekunów. Przeprowadzono 20 indywidualnych wywiadów z wykwalifikowanymi pracownikami opieki nad dziećmi. Transkrypcje zostały przeanalizowane przy użyciu analizy tematycznej w celu zbadania postrzegania źródeł i determinant strategii, co opisano w kontekście modelu ekologicznego U. Bronfenbrennera. Model ujawnia, że zawodowa rola opiekuna dziecka stanowi podstawę dla jego samooceny, przy czym mesosystem podkreśla kluczowy wpływ przekonań i zachowań innych pracowników opieki nad dziećmi, dyrektorów, rodziców i dzieci na kształtowanie ich tożsamości zawodowej, podczas gdy egzosystem, makrosystem i chronosystem wspólnie przyczyniają się do dynamicznej i czasowej konstrukcji tej tożsamości w szerszym kontekście społecznym i kulturowym (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Doświadczenie zawodowe pracowników opieki nad dziećmi zostało zanalizowane w kontekście potrzeb wzmacniania praktyki zawodowej, popierania wdrożenia polityk zapewniających lepszy status zawodowy. Czynniki determinujące strategie w ich pracy zostały zidentyfikowane jako koszty psychiczne, postawy wobec zawodu, sukcesy i porażki oraz atmosfera w placówce, podkreślając znaczenie wsparcia ze strony kierownictwa i potrzebę klarownych narzędzi do radzenia sobie z wyzwaniami w zawodzie opieki nad dziećmi.

Introduction

The professionalization of childcare workers stands as a frequently discussed and researched subject in various scientific reports (Dalli, 2008; Moss, 2010; Osgood, 2010; Miller & Cable, 2011; Chalke, 2013; Rauschenbach & Riedel, 2016; Keary et al., 2020). However, these studies exhibit variations in research perspectives, theoretical approaches, and the cultural context within which the research is conducted. In this article, I assert that professionalization is a process in which childcare workers shape their professional identity through a multifaceted interplay of sources and determinants. This analysis only provides a snapshot of the larger professionalization process.

In the literature on the subject, the concept of identity encompasses various meanings. What unifies these diverse meanings is the notion that identity is not a fixed attribute but a relational phenomenon (Osgood, 2010). Identity development occurs in the intersubjective field and is best described as a continuous process, i. e. an ongoing interpretation of oneself within a specific context, recognised as such (Gee, 2001).

In this context, identity can be seen as a response to the question: "Who am I in my work?", posed frequently. Some studies link professional identity to self-images as a woman and mother, rooted in a specific culture (Osgood, 2012). It is argued that these self-images, coupled with the policy situation regarding Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), significantly influence the actions of childcare workers. Other research focuses on professional identity in relation to the roles played by central governments, private associations, and educational reform (Geiss & Westberg, 2020). Additionally, professional identity can mirror what childcare workers themselves deem crucial in their work and professional lives, drawing from both personal experiences (Gajek & Wysłowska, 2023) and background (Osgood, 2012; Keary et al., 2020). It appears that all perspectives on professional identity are interconnected. Against this backdrop, the research goal is formulated to explore the perceptions of sources and determinants shaping childcare workers' professional experience.

Conceptualising Work

The concept of professional identity, which is not straightforward, can be described as simultaneously stable and temporary, individual and collective, subjective and objective, biographical and structural, resulting from various socialization processes that jointly construct individuals and define institutions (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). This concept is dynamic, multifaceted, and cannot be separated from the concept of personal identity.

In the context of U. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, interactions between an actively developing individual and their constantly changing socio-cultural environment are emphasised. At the central point of socioecological interactions is the human individual, a person, who is both the direct initiator and recipient of influences from various environments and social systems. The description of the individual may take the form of biological gender, age, physical characteristics, as well as personality traits. Professional identity pertains to who a person is, and it is perceived as a continuous process of identification, interpretation, and reinterpretation of experiences (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

In the ecological model, a childcare worker assumes and fulfills their professional role, which becomes the foundation for their thoughts and beliefs about themselves. In the mesosystem, it is important for childcare workers to perceive the beliefs, emotional attitudes, and behaviors of other childcare workers, directors, parents, as well as children. This directly influences the style of shaping the professional identity of childcare workers. The exosystem refers to one or more social systems (other nurseries, training sessions, colleagues from other nurseries, previous work) in which the

individual does not directly participate, but the processes and events occurring in these systems impact or are influenced by what happens in those systems. The macrosystem is constituted by culture, including cultural values and religion, which determine specific social norms, reflected in social behaviours subject to moral judgments. In this context, the entire system of nursery organisation in a given country, history, and the evaluation of the functioning of this system by society are included. The chronosystem allows us to understand that the construction of professional identity is subject to the evaluation of time and continuous transformations through the accumulation of experience over years of work (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

ECEC Context in Poland

In Poland, there is a constant lack of properly qualified childcare workers in childcare centers (Sadowska, 2017). As pointed out by Katarzyna Sadowska, a Polish childcare worker has no opportunity for professional advancement. The legal framework of education inscribed in the teaching profession in Poland does not include people working in nurseries, which clearly affects how nursery employees perceive self-education, education and qualifications. Moreover, the Act on the Care of Children under the Age of Three, extended and amended in 2017, led to the broadening of persons entitled to work as childcare workers, thus lowering not only the required qualifications but also the standard of work (Sadowska, 2017). These problems are not unique to Poland. The issue of training for the profession of an early childhood educator is still not fully defined. However, the research conducted by L. Telka shows that nursery employees have taken a grassroots initiative (self-education) to transform their way of perceiving a small child. They are able to develop this approach to pupils, which in Poland is called "accompanying in the development" (Telka, 2023a, 2023b). Despite the consistent European policy towards Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), on the basis of which, in the first decade of the 21st century, intensified activities began to increase the availability of childcare facilities for children under the age of 3, this increase did not go hand in hand with the education and pedagogical preparation of childcare workers. On the contrary, this trend has led to the reduction of qualification requirements. Although this has also resulted in a diversification of nursery care services in urban areas through privatisation, in poorer areas such diversification is limited (Noailly & Visser, 2009; Bastos & Cristia, 2012; Ünver, Bircan & Nicaise, 2020). In Poland, there is no core curriculum for the education of children under the age of 3, in contrast to preschool education (in Poland: children aged 3–6), where the requirements for the teaching profession are also defined and all teachers are required to have higher education. These trends are also known from other studies,

and their main sources should be sought in the under-funding of care facilities for children under the age of 3, as well as the lack of consensus with regard to the link between early childhood education and the quality of the care environment (Manning, et al., 2019).

In this work, unless otherwise stated, it was decided to use the term childcare worker as defining a person taking care of children, regardless of the number of years worked in a facility or in education. The terms manager and director are used interchangeably in this article. In childcare centres, there are different solutions regarding the naming of the management staff. In public nurseries the title manager is prevalent, since there is only one director for all nurseries, as in Warsaw (74 nurseries), and the situation is similar in all large cities in Poland. On the other hand, in private nurseries, there is sometimes a director, a manager, an educational director, etc. However, the idea, the scope of tasks, and responsibilities are very similar, at least in the aspects that are the subject of the presented research. It was also decided to use the term nursery or childcare centre to define the place where children up to 3 years of age are cared for. In Poland we have an integrated system of institutional care, and the differences are mostly organizational with regard to the number of children, childcare workers and the methods of financing (public and private).

Theory and Methodology

The aim of the article is to examine the ways in which childcare workers position their background in their work practice (sources), and to explore how they perceive their work as childcare workers (determinants). This study also aims to explore the experiences and perspectives of childcare workers, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of their professional dynamics.

Participants and Research Material

Twenty individual interviews were conducted with nursery childcare workers. The methodology for this study was qualitative and interpretative (Creswell & Poth, 2016). It holds the capacity to produce information concerning the subjective, distinctive, and evolving characteristics of childcare workers in a nursery setting. The research results presented here are part of a research project on the professionalization of childcare workers in nurseries. These were in-depth interviews with childcare workers employed in private (10 childcare workers) and public (10 childcare workers) nurseries in Warsaw. The study used a diagnostic survey method, or, more precisely,

an interview technique. Each interview lasted about 90 minutes. The interviews consisted of 26 questions, and the part presented in this article contained half of them. Distinguishing between the two types of institutions served to check whether their organisational structure (private/public) has a noticeable impact on communication, the quality of the organisation, as well as the sense of professional identity (this part of the project is to be published separately). The differentiation of institutions when examining childcare workers is already justified in the literature (Crompton, 2000; Vincent & Ball, 2006). The research was conducted in 10 nurseries. The analysis of the interview data took place using MAXQDA 2022 software, sorting the data using 13 themes in thematic analysis created from the questions. The study was positively assessed by the bioethical commission of the Maria Grzegorzewska University. All respondents were apprised of the intricacies of data processing and the methodological protocols employed in the study. This encompassed the provision for participants to discontinue their involvement without incurring any adverse effects – an option not exercised by any of the subjects. Subsequently, they expressed explicit consent for their inclusion in the study.

Characteristics of Childcare Workers

The age, years of work, and experience of the childcare workers varied. Some had university degrees while some were of secondary education level with a completed childcare worker course. The table shows the data in detail (Table 1). All the respondents were women, which reflects the overall ratio of people working in this profession (99.3% of women in Poland). In the study, an important factor with regard to the childcare workers in the study was the number of years worked. It was decided to examine childcare workers with both short and long-term work experience, and in this way we wanted to obtain information about the transfer of tacit knowledge between childcare workers. Primarily, this transfer is carried out by those with many years of experience, so it was an important factor to study two or more childcare workers with short and long-term experience employed at a single nursery. Two nurseries were included in the study in which there were no childcare workers with long-term work experience.

Table 1. Participants in Interviews

Childcare worker	Age	Education	Type of nursery	Experience (years)
W1	31	Secondary school	public	2
W2	24	Secondary school (during studies)	private	3
W3	34	Secondary school (during studies)	public	6
W4	22	Secondary school (during studies)	private	2
W5	49	Secondary school	public	5
W6	27	Secondary school	private	4
W7	37	Higher education	private	5
W8	52	Higher education	public	30
W9	25	Higher education	private	1
W10	24	Higher education	private	4
W11	57	Secondary school	public	37
W12	38	Higher education	public	20
W13	49	Secondary school	public	4
W14	42	Higher education	public	4
W15	23	Secondary school (during studies)	private	2
W16	29	Higher education	private	5
W17	32	Secondary school	public	5
W18	37	Higher education	public	15
W19	43	Higher education	public	4
W20	24	Secondary school (during studies)	private	3

The data from the interviews was analysed by the researcher using thematic analysis techniques, defined as a method of identifying, analysing and reporting data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following steps were used: transcription and creation of a project using MAXQDA 2022 software, theme generation, searching for topics in interviews, adding new theme, and creating a report. According to the thematic analysis, the data was analysed at one level (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and guided by questions (semi-structured interview). A semantic approach was adopted. New themes were generated and added as needed (there were only two new themes in the

process). Some of the topics discussed during the interview overlapped. Based on this, common categories were created. For example, questions like: "Can you tell me about your cooperation/relationships with the parents of the children you work with?", and: "What strategy do you use when talking to parents?", were combined into the "Strategies with regard to parents" theme. All other statements made by participants during other questions that related to this theme were also added. Thus, the coding process involved both top-down and bottom-up approaches.

Recruitment Procedure

Recruitment of participants from public nurseries took place through the Warsaw Nursery Network. For caregivers in private nurseries, invitations to participate were sent to several dozen nurseries in Warsaw. In response to the researchers' invitation, caregivers interested in participating in the study contacted the researcher to arrange an interview. Ultimately, 10 childcare workers were recruited from 4 public nurseries, and 10 childcare workers were recruited from 6 private nurseries.

Findings

Sources of strategies in the work of childcare workers in nurseries

In accordance with the adopted theoretical and methodological approach, sources of strategies in the work of childcare workers were sought in statements theme as (1) knowledge and skills from education; (2) shaped as a childcare worker; (3) childhood experiences; (4) sources of ideas; (5) professional development. The detailed data on the number of theme fragments for individual themes is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Determinants

Code	Number of codes
mental costs	17
attitude to the profession	31
failures and successes at work	44
the atmosphere in the facility	36

Knowledge and Skills From Education

The childcare workers declared that through education, they learned about the rights of children:

> We had a lot during our studies about… proper communication with the child, treating the child as a partner in conversation, that we need to talk to the child in a certain way. We learned about non-violent communication, that we need to approach them with total respect and just treat them as human beings who require respect and attention from us. (W3)

> The school helped me understand that a two-year-old child does not have developed self-control. If you tell them not to do something, they may not understand. They just want to do it, so they do it. (W20)

These rights mainly concern the childcare worker having knowledge about the child, allowing them to treat the child with dignity, age-appropriately, and according to the child's needs. Six caregivers related their knowledge from education to the area of communication with parents, such as:

> I learned how to approach parents, how to talk to parents, what to say, what not to say, how to communicate. For example, we know that we cannot diagnose, we cannot directly tell the parent what we suspect; we have to communicate more cautiously. (W9)

> Most skills, I believe, come from experience rather than studies. Studies build confidence in me at this moment, making it easier for me to communicate with parents. (W2)

From the childcare workers' statements, it is evident that during their studies they learned how to communicate with parents, and they are confident through acquired knowledge and competencies. Two childcare workers perceived their studies as not contributing to their skills, considering the knowledge purely theoretical:

> Honestly, no skills, just purely theoretical knowledge. The work I do now as a daycare worker has practically nothing to do with my studies. I didn't even do internships in daycare, so it had little in common. (W16)

In the caregivers' statements, a contrast is evident. While for one caregiver, studies did not develop her childcare skills; for another, they provided not only new knowledge about children but also a safety net in case of the need to change jobs:

> Studies help me realize that I have to constantly look for something new, and not to stand in one place, thinking: 'I already know it; I've learned it; and that's it'. There's always something new to learn… Studies were a turning point. I felt safe to the extent that when things started going wrong at work, I knew I could go to another place. (W8)

Such job security in the event of a job change relates to the acquired qualifications during studies. If a caregiver has higher education, they can work in a kindergarten, school or another childcare institution. Without higher education, this option is not available, a situation that applies to many Polish childcare workers, as working in a nursery only requires having a caregiver course.

Shaped as a Childcare Worker

Three caregivers mentioned that other childcare workers, especially in their early years of work, had a beneficial influence on their profession:

> Definitely important were the stories of other caregivers who have forty years of experience. Since I started working, well, in such profession, I've heard so many different stories, various experiences with parents and children. How it used to be, how it is now, and I think that had a significant impact in the sense that I could gain a lot of distance, both with parents and everyone else. (W3)

Additionally, the caregiver adds that currently, aside from colleagues, she has support from the nursery manager, especially in resolving more challenging issues related to parents:

> If I can just discontinue the conversation, if they are unhappy about something, I can say: 'Please go to the manager', and the manager doesn't give us problems because she always says: 'Tell them to call me and close the door', or something like that. So, we have a lot of freedom in this regard. If we have any problems with them, we can direct them higher, which is a big advantage. Because we have a lot of work, and we don't have time to argue with parents, especially if it's after 4:00 PM. I'm alone, I still have thirteen children, and I can't stand with a parent in the dressing room because, of course, until 5:30 PM, the children who are the most... those with whom parents can't cope at home. (W3)

Five caregivers believe that their empathy, sensitivity, positive disposition, and love for children influence the type of childcare workers they are. Four caregivers think that they inherited some character traits from their parents or grandparents, e. g.:

> My mum contributed a lot to this; she always wanted the best for us, you know, like every mum. So, she always took care of us. She wanted us to have the best of everything, so here I can also say that it's just maternal care, and I guess you can sometimes treat the children in the nursery as if they were all your own children. (W9)

One caregiver had opposite feelings; her difficult childhood, filled with misunderstanding and a lack of affection and care, became motivation to work with children:

> I thought about my own life and looked at what was missing from adults; what I didn't have. In a sense, I never had anyone to go to with my problem; no opportunity to talk. And I would like to give it to the children in the nursery. I know it can be frustrating at times because you can't always meet every need of a child, even though you try. (W15)

The remaining caregivers talked about how their work experience influences the type of childcare workers they are. This may suggest that years of experience determine the work style of childcare workers. It would be interesting to explore this further, perhaps through focus groups where several childcare workers could exchange their experiences.

Childhood Experiences

This theme emphasises attempts to reconstruct childhood experiences of childcare workers in the context of their current work. The overwhelming majority of caregivers (19) did not attend nursery, but their memories extend to preschool or school times, or even home experiences. These data align with the situation in Poland in the 90s, where about 1% of children under 3 attended nursery, and in the early 2000s, where it increased to 1.98% in 2003.

> In the nursery, especially on the playground, I play with the children, run, laugh, play hide and seek, just like in childhood, drawing a flower with a stick in the sand. (W1)

The 80s, 90s, and early 2000s in Poland marked the formative childhoods of the childcare workers participating in this study. They did not attend nursery, and the majority of their parents worked. For six of them, childhood memories are filled with recollections of a lack of time for the child and strict disciplinary methods, including physical violence.

> I heard many times, 'if you misbehave, I'll send you to an orphanage', or children were beaten. (W6)

> I was definitely harshly judged at home for various things, constantly compared to other children. I also had very limited freedom of action. (W7)

> Grandparents taught me such submission, that I exist only to not have my own opinion, not have my own ambitions, but to fulfill what someone above has imposed on me, and this is a traumatic experience. (W15)

Three caregivers recalled their childhood as filled with freedom and play with various important people, most often with their mothers but also with fathers, grandmothers, and grandfathers:

> I had very little freedom, and I think I'm a bit obsessed with it. I really don't like when children's freedom is violated, when their boundaries are crossed; and then something in me is stirred. (W8)

The previous research conducted by Connelly and Clandinin (1999) and Schaefer (2013) demonstrates that the identity of educators is linked to their own school experiences, teacher education programs, and early years of teaching.

Sources of Ideas

It would seem that knowledge about proper work planning with children and cooperation with parents is acquired through formal education. However, during the analysis of the research material, no relationship was found that might link the formal education process to the strategies used at work. Childcare workers claimed that, at the beginning of their professional careers, they learned by observing the work of colleagues. Simultaneously, they predominantly sought inspiration and childcare-oriented ideas on social networking sites, such as Facebook or Pinterest, as well as from other websites.

The sources of ideas for activities come from three different nursery organisations. First, childcare workers independently (usually 3–4 caregivers in a group) create a monthly plan and, according to this plan, they look for ideas for activities with children.

> At the end of the month, we plan work for the next month, and all four of us do it together […] in the nursery; we have access to old educational and developmental plans which we use to make copies, with various minor changes. (W3)

Second, some childcare workers use ready-made plans published in methodological books for nurseries and preschools, modifying these plans for the children in their group. The third group of childcare workers declares that they use a calendar of unusual days:

> We have a calendar of unusual days at work, where various days are marked, such as crayon day, teddy bear day, Winnie the Pooh day. I look for ideas on the Internet or most often from the *eduzabawy* website. Additionally, on the Instagram, I follow several profiles such as 'project nursery', and that's where I get inspiration. (W20)

From the statements of the respondents, it is evident that childcare workers are engaged in the work and education of children, as well as in improving their skills through continuous updating of activities conducted for children. However, it seems that the knowledge of how to conduct activities for children is not formulated in any binding documents. Therefore, childcare workers, in the face of many tasks and responsibilities related to caring for children in various areas of work, operate intuitively.

Professional Development

In this theme, childcare workers were encouraged to consider their professional development needs. Higher education was not a basis for this question, but it seems that it may provide a context for responses regarding professional development. Specifically, during the interview, five childcare workers were pursuing bachelor's studies in caregiving and education, after which they would be qualified to work in a nursery, school club, community centre, or as school teachers. Nine childcare workers had higher education. The remaining six caregivers did not have higher education, and only one of these six caregivers was contemplating it.

Three caregivers appreciate the value of online training that can be attended while at work:

> We have a lot of online training that is done during work [...] or outside of work; it's really hard for me at the moment, as I live only with my husband and children. I don't have a grandmother or grandfather here, no one to help us. (W1)

Regarding the topics of training, one group of caregivers declared a need for improvement in educational, disciplinary, and child development psychology themes. The second group expressed a need for practical training, such as play pedagogy or sensory play:

> I really want to do sensory play, although I know that you can also buy various kinds of books and stuff, and it's cheaper, and you can have it with you all the time. Because these sensory play courses really cost huge amounts money. (W6)

Determinants of Strategies in the Work of Childcare Workers in Nurseries

The issue of the factors accompanying strategies in the childcare worker's profession relate mainly to individual circumstances, such as (1) mental costs; (2) attitude to the profession; (3) failures and successes at work, and (4) the atmosphere in the

facility. A numerical representation of the above themes is provided in Table 3. The second problem area noted above is often difficult and latent, and here the childcare workers openly disclosed their attitude to their work, as well as the professional costs and the accompanying atmosphere.

Mental costs as the first theme discussed here are associated with unsuccessful relationships with parents, the nursery manager and colleagues. It is interesting and worth emphasising that none of the childcare workers associated the mental costs incurred with difficult relationships with children, although they experience such. It is only what happens to them later in contact with the parents or the nursery manager that causes this part of the work to be associated with the loss of health, chronic stress, and the decision to change jobs. The second factor of the strategy – the attitude towards the profession – is related to the fact that the work of a childcare worker is perceived by them as low paid, hard, and physically difficult work, where, on the one hand, many women struggle with back pain problems, and, on the other hand, they do not see the possibility of doing this work in a different way while maintaining a balance between being there "for the children" and completing their tasks e.g., related to cleaning the rooms and other facilities in the nursery.

Another theme that emerged from the research relates to the successes and failures in the work of a childcare worker. The respondents willingly talked about their successes. These are most often attributed to situations when hard work with a group of children or a single child with, for example, sensory integration disorders, is appreciated in the form of praise combined with some form of gratification from a parent or nursery manager/director. The vast majority of childcare workers associate their failures with unsuccessful relationships with parents, most often when parents resist undertaking remedial action, such as consulting a psychological and pedagogical counseling center, despite evident indications. The childcare workers very often notice some impediment in a child, try to discuss it with the parents, and consider themselves to have failed when the parents do not want to cooperate with them, reporting: *there is nothing wrong with my child* (W3); *we are unable to get through to the parents that the child needs help* (W5).

It is evident from the statements of the respondents that the atmosphere in the nursery is established by the owner/manager/director. They are responsible for the atmosphere prevailing at the facility. Several childcare workers emphasised that the most important aspect is the teamwork of childcare workers who work together with a group at any given time; and because they are responsible for the task, they cope with it, knowing how important it is in everyday work. Childcare workers work better when they are responsible for the atmosphere in the facility, although this is dependent not only on them having full responsibility for the tasks entrusted to them, but also on real freedom, unfettered by the control of the manager. *The occurrence of*

the above-mentioned control was articulated by the respondents: my manager asks other colleagues about me; she asks about my work, or drops by and says: 'I saw you writing to those parents, well, well'. (W10)

Given the above, there is an apparent lack of clearly articulated tools to deal with such problematic situations. Moreover, not all childcare workers have, or feel able to share, knowledge on how to deal with such situations, whilst meetings with the manager/director of the nursery usually fail to solve the problem or transfer the resolution of the matter onto the manager: *we were told to send such parents to the manager and haven't had any problems with parents not wanting to follow nursery staff recommendations since then* (W18). This problem is known in the literature, yet researchers continually find that support for childcare workers is lacking (Sollars, 2022). The specificity of the presented research material shows that, in this context, we are dealing mainly with masked knowledge. All the costs, successes, failures, workplace atmosphere, have the hallmarks of knowledge concealed by childcare workers.

Table 3. Sources

Code	Number of codes
knowledge and skills from education	27
what influenced me most as a childcare worker	20
my own childhood experiences	34
sources of ideas for working with children	24
education	45

Discussion and Conclusions

Earlier studies (Osgood, 2010; Langford & Richardson, 2022) have shown that in early education, the child, their needs, and their development, are placed at the centre, while the well-being of the educator is completely ignored. The research shows that a childcare worker is not an object in early childhood education, but a subject. The authors of these studies do not negate the value of children's experiences; they simply show that, in the center of practice and policy of early childhood education, the experiences of women-caregivers go unnoticed (Langford & Richardson, 2022). From the fragments of interviews with childcare workers, a whole spectrum of experienced inspirations for being a childcare worker came to light, from their own childhood, most often in the form of maternal care and attention and a good teacher figure, through the support of other female childcare workers, and, finally, from the

satisfaction derived from the profession. For some of the women, their conversation with the researcher was the reason to reflect on many aspects of their work. On several occasions, surprise and gratitude were expressed that research was being conducted into childcare workers.

In the first stage of their work, the childcare workers appreciated the value of working with experienced colleagues, especially if they had the opportunity to work with a person who was interested and involved in teaching them. Working with children is a specific area of experience, which is improved primarily under the supervision of an experienced professional, and childcare workers stated that significant value in their work comes from the support of other colleagues, and this is consistent with the previous research (Jones et al., 2005; Eckhardt & Egert, 2020; Hakim & Dalli, 2018).

Practical knowledge concerning, above all, ways of dealing with a group of children, strategies of conversations with parents, or persuading children to various behaviours, is acquired informally by creating various verbal and visual dependencies between childcare workers, parents and the manager (observation). The theme of professional development in the statements of childcare workers was emphasised by the caregivers as neglected in the Polish education system. The research has shown that the quality of education depends on the well-being of childcare workers (Goouch & Powell, 2017; Page & Elfer, 2013), so we suggest paying more attention to these issues.

The study involved interviewees with various work experience. There was a tendency that childcare workers, without the support of experienced childcare workers, struggled with many problems, most often concerning ways of coping with parents in difficult and conflicting situations, with children having difficulties in adapting or having sensory integration disorders. These childcare workers supported themselves through their own enquiries, most often on the Internet or in the form of participation in training courses for nursery staff. It is valuable to strengthen the nursery environment, particularly caregivers, by enhancing their well-being. In developing a deeper identity, it is important not only to acquire knowledge and develop skills, but it is also crucial to identify, integrate, and engage in actions for the community one is a part of. It is important for educational experiences that childcare workers participate in to have a practical nature, especially reflecting in their daily work. Furthermore, childcare workers should receive greater support in this regard.

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