

Understanding Sources of Teachers’ Stress and Support in Early Childhood Classrooms

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Introduction

- High-quality early childhood education (ECE) is consistently linked to positive developmental outcomes for children (Yoshikawa et al., 2013).
- The well-being of ECE teachers has been established as a critical determinant of classroom quality (Jennings, 2015) .
- Educator stress experiences affects the quality of care in ECE and childhood outcomes (Kwon et al., 2025).

Study Purpose

The purpose of the study was to understand:

- 1) What do teachers identify as primary causes of stress in their professional roles?
- 2) What supports do teachers find most helpful for reducing stress relief?
- 3) What program support and PD need do teachers desire to reduce their stress?

Theoretical Framework

The study was informed by an ecological framework of Early Childhood Professional Well-Being (ECPWB; Gallagher & Roberts, 2022). The framework proposes that teachers’ well-being is impacted by individual and contextual factors, with workplace factors playing a highly influential role.

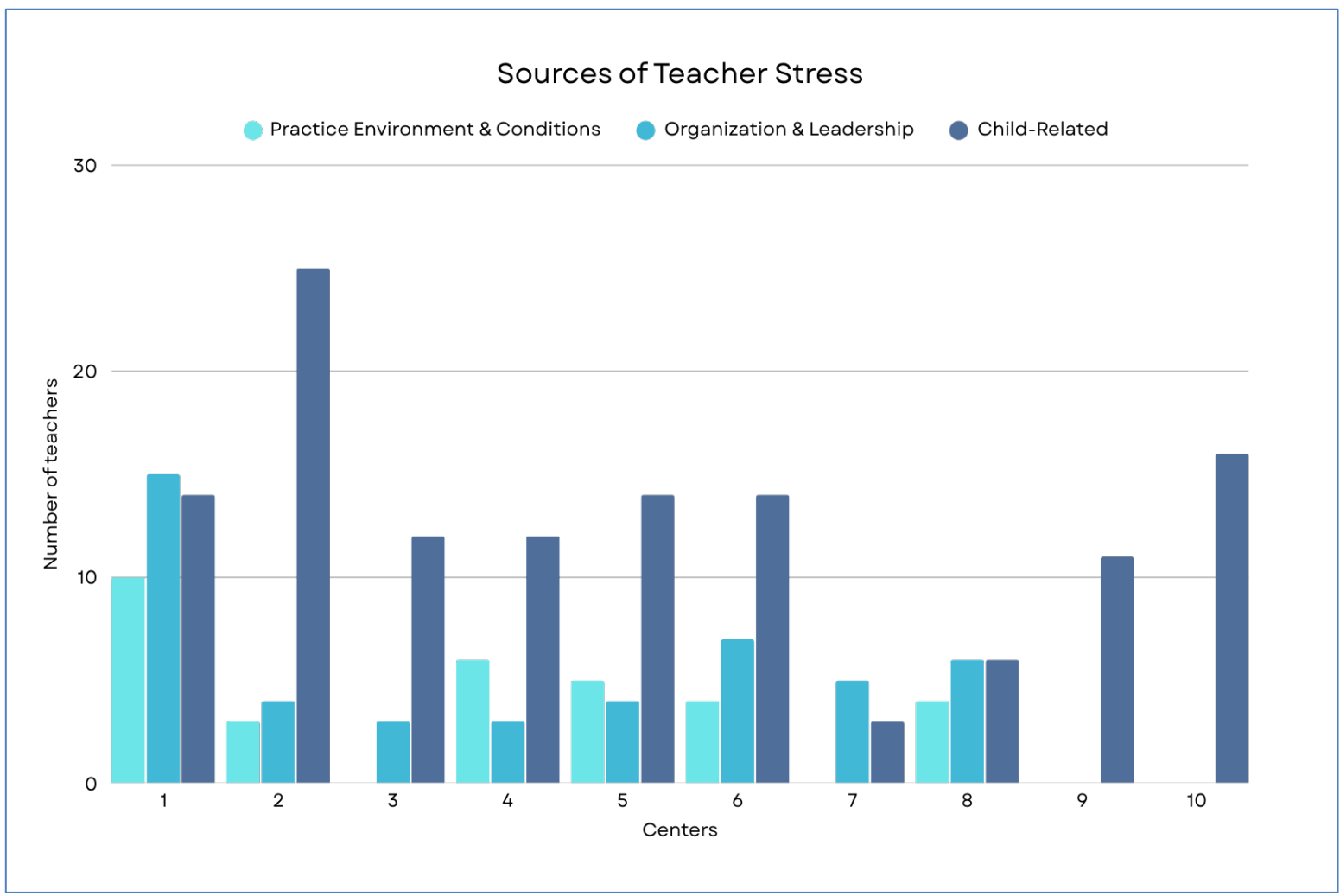


Gallagher, K.C. & Roberts, A.M. (2022). Early Childhood Professional Well-Being: An Ecological Framework Retrieved from the Buffett Early Childhood Institute website: buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/research

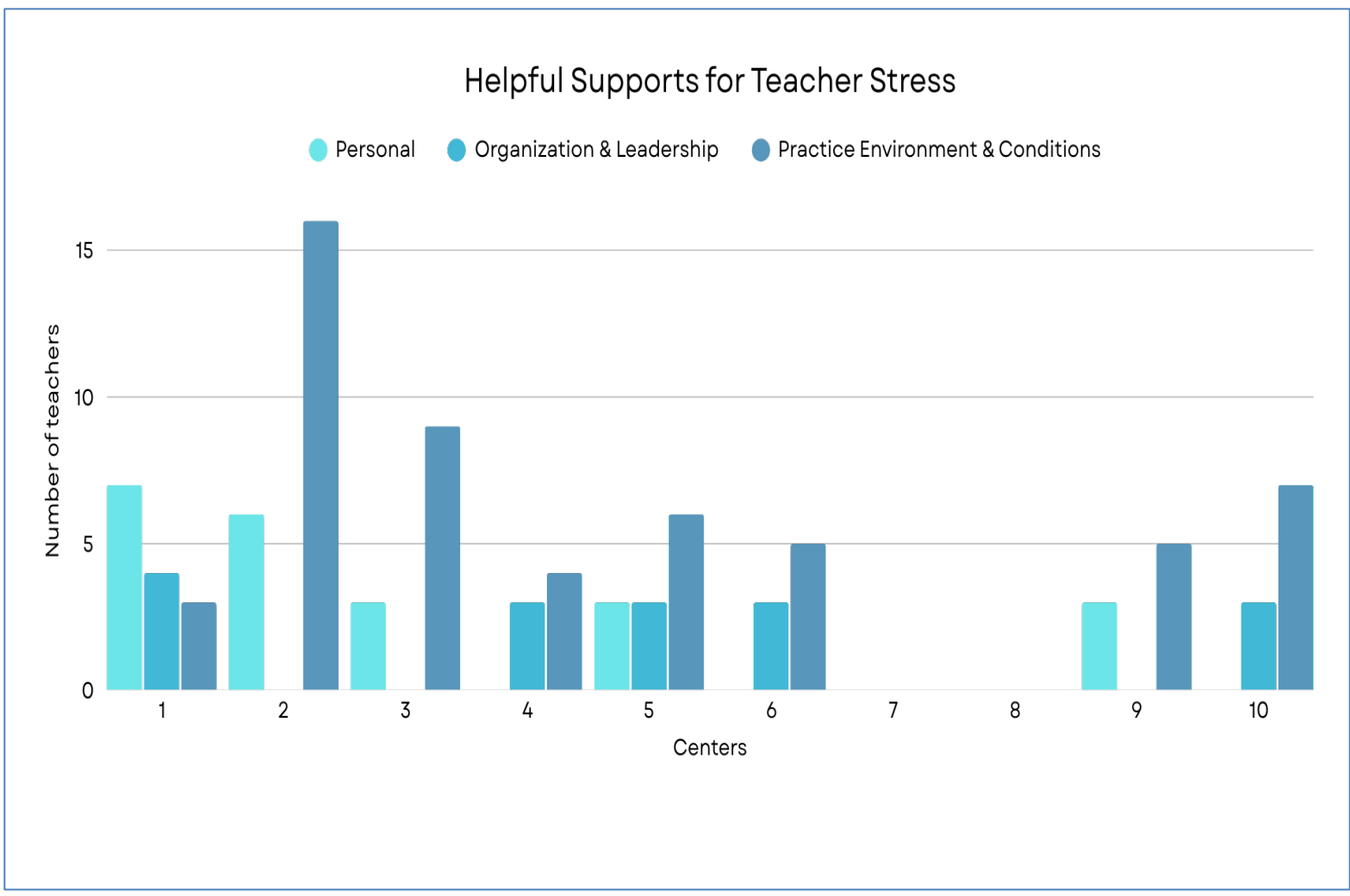
Methods

- Research–practice partnership survey (4 open-ended questions)
- 291 responding teachers from 10 Oklahoma Head Start sites
- Thematic coding applied, using ecological well-being framework
- Trustworthiness: blind coding, peer review, reflective journaling

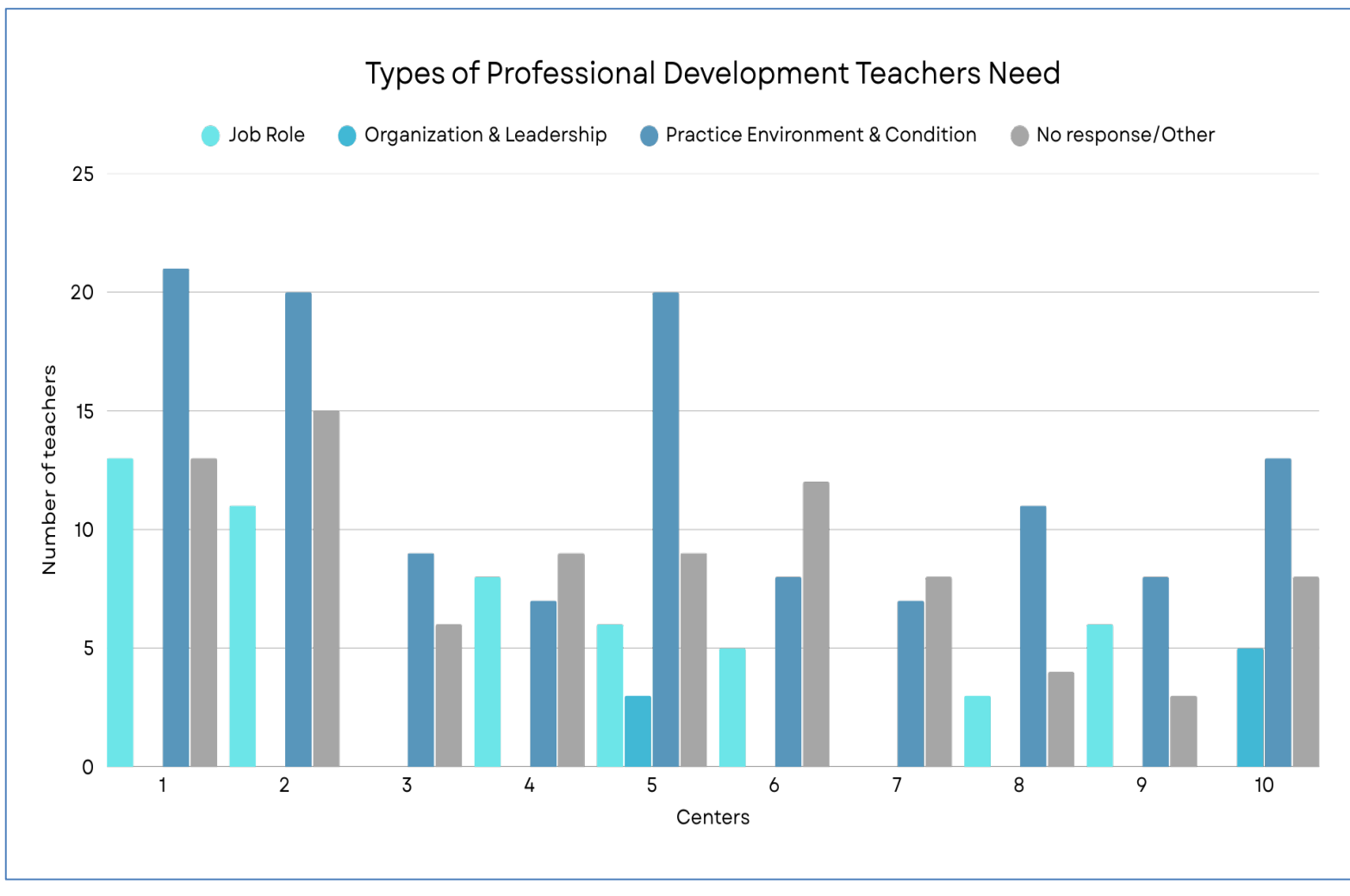
Results: Teacher Perspectives By the Numbers



Nearly half of teachers (46.2%) cited children’s behavior and exceptional needs, especially aggressive behaviors, as their main source of stress.



Many specifically requested trainings in established frameworks like the Pyramid Model and Conscious Discipline.



43% of respondents identified training in positive behavior support as their most pressing need, while 20% sought PD in areas such as family engagement, personal growth, and instructional strategies.

Results: Teacher Perspectives

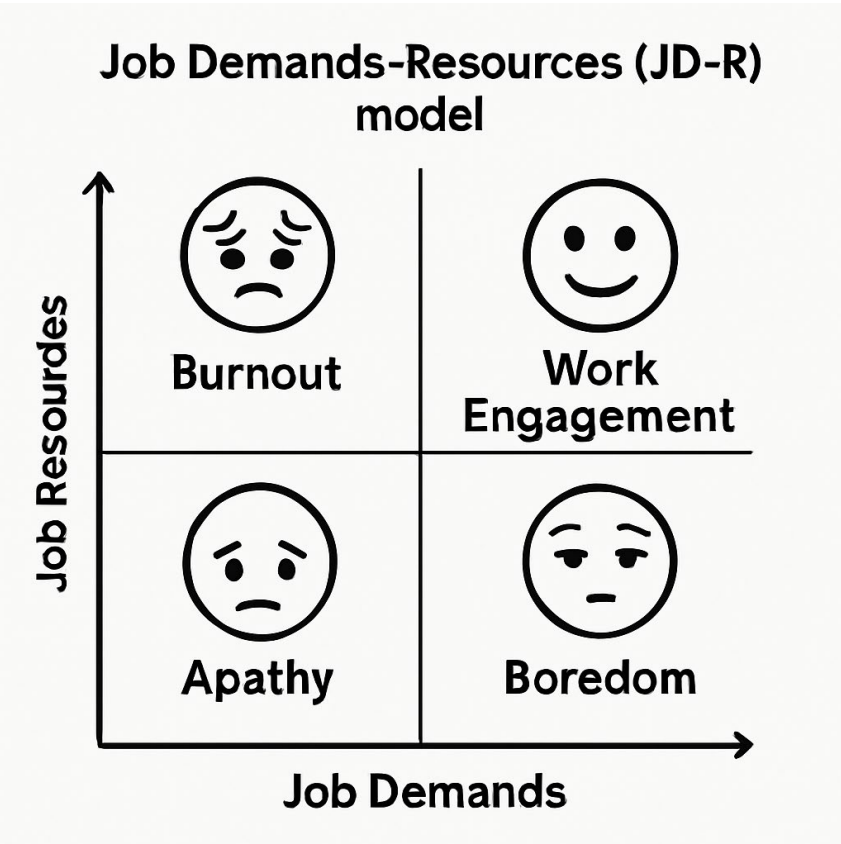
Enhanced resources temper high demands of work:
“Good staff, having better ratios of adults to children. Our school has consistently staffed the same third in each room, which has helped tremendously having a team of three....”

Relationships matter:
“I like my team. Although my leadership can be intense and critical, they occasionally help me brainstorm new ideas or solve problems, which I appreciate.”

Teachers feel underprepared to support children with high behavioral needs:
“The child(ren) with aggressive behaviors require a lot of attention and are making it harder for the typical children in the classroom.”

Discussion

- The ecological framework of ECE professional well-being guided the study’s design, supporting analysis of whether findings aligned with the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001).
- Findings suggest resilience improves when demands are reduced and resources enhanced—through manageable ratios, supportive relationships, and targeted professional development.
- Results reinforce prior research identifying PD and supportive organizational climates as protective factors against burnout (Sandilos et al., 2015; Whitaker & Dearth-Wesley, 2021).
- Teacher perspectives highlight the importance of mentoring, coaching, leadership responsiveness, and training in behavior support and family engagement.
- Despite investments in teaching and learning, relational stressors remain significant, particularly when managing classrooms that include children with high needs.



Conclusion and Recommendations

- **Practice:** Embedding mentoring/coaching with PD, fostering responsive leadership, and attending to staffing or group size may strengthen support for teachers.
- **Policy:** Sustainable funding could help maintain infrastructure that reduces stress and promotes well-being.
- **Systems:** Considering how policy, practice, and culture interact may illuminate ways teacher well-being shapes classroom quality and child outcomes.
- **Surveys:** Teacher surveys may provide useful, timely insight into workforce needs and supports.



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for References