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## Self-efficacy and well-being of female teacher educators for early childhood care and education during COVID-19

Mary G. Clasquin-Johnson 

Department of Inclusive Education, College of Education, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa  
clasqmg@unisa.ac.za

Hasina B. Ebrahim 

Department of Early Childhood Education, College of Education, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

In light of the devastating effects of COVID-19 on early childhood care and education (ECCE), with this study we aimed at illuminating the self-efficacy and well-being of ECCE teacher educators, from the perspective of 9 participants in 7 higher education institutions (HEIs) across 5 South African provinces. The study, conducted by 2 ECCE teacher educators, was informed by the feminist ethics of care, combined with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, to understand self-efficacy, and Seligman's PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishments) theory of well-being. Semi-structured, online interviews using Microsoft Teams was used to produce the data. The findings reveal aspects that compromised self-efficacy and well-being, as well as aspects that energised them. All the participants reported that their institutions were under-prepared for the pandemic. They recognised that they lacked work-life balance and were at risk of burnout. Despite this, their resilience enabled them to develop a deeper interest and stronger commitment to their work, largely because of the support they had received from their colleagues. From the findings of the study we recognise that strong self-efficacy sustained teacher educators' professional practice despite the pandemic affecting their well-being in a negative way. In the context of building forward better and differently, this study points to the importance of developing responsive well-being programmes for staff in higher education institutions and communities of practice that are responsive to the needs of female teacher educators.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic; female ECCE teacher educators; feminist ethics of care; self-efficacy; well-being

### Introduction

Teacher educators working in ECCE are expected to serve as role models of professional care and education for their students, since care is central to quality ECCE teaching practice (Venancio, 2020). As ECCE teacher educators, our aim is to increase our students' well-being, especially in the context of high uncertainty during the current global crisis (Murray, Heinz, Munday, Keane, Flynn, Connolly, Hall & MacRuairc, 2020). Can this be done in a self-efficacious manner while still maintaining one's own well-being? Is it possible to care for others without caring for ourselves? These questions motivated a qualitative study on the self-efficacy and well-being of female teacher educators for ECCE in South Africa during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Other scholars who have focused on this have highlighted increased stress, intensification of workload, extended working hours and uncertainty (Cutri, Mena & Whiting, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020) due to the under-preparedness of higher education institutions for the COVID-19 pandemic (Mpungose, 2020; Van Schalkwyk, 2021).

On 27 March 2020, the South African government implemented a strict national lockdown to contain the spread of COVID-19 and protect the health care system (Rabaglietti, Lattke, Tesauri, Settanni & De Lorenzo, 2021). The pandemic decimated South African ECCE programmes for children from birth to 6 years. Access decreased from 38% in 2018 to less than 5% at the height of the pandemic (Wills, Kotzé & Kika-Mistry, 2021). The massive recovery that is required necessitates the continued commitment to building professionalism of the ECCE workforce by teacher educators. This study was conducted during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, when South Africa moved from alert levels 4 to 3. Most staff in higher education institutions were still working from home. We wanted to determine how the pandemic and "the new normal" (Flores & Swennen, 2020:456) were influencing the self-efficacy and well-being of female ECCE teacher educators after more than a year of working from home. Although a substantial body of literature produced in 2020 and 2021 has focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced HEIs and academic staff (Landa, Zhou & Marongwe, 2021; Mpungose, 2020) very limited research has focused on the self-efficacy and well-being of female ECCE teacher educators working in South African universities.

The aim with this article was to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the self-efficacy and well-being of female ECCE teacher educators in seven HEIs across five provinces in South Africa during the first year of the pandemic and beyond. The focus on females is imperative considering the complexities that unravelled in their personal and professional lives during COVID-19.

### Literature Review

Following the World Health Organisation's declaration that COVID-19 was a global pandemic, the majority of HEIs hastily implemented drastic changes as a result of the abrupt shift to distance education and emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) (Cutri et al., 2020). This migration from physical to virtual space was

accompanied by technological challenges, increased stress, intensification of workload, extended working hours, changes in lifestyle, uncertainty and “technostress” (Rabaglietti et al., 2021:2). Remote learning has redefined learning, “shaking the very fabric of education” as well as the roles and responsibilities of academics (Harris & Jones, 2020:243). Consequently, there was an urgent need for all teacher educators to become proficient in teaching with technology and, in turn, train their students to deliver online teaching and learning (Foulger, Graziano, Schmidt-Crawford & Slykhuis, 2020:517). Amid all these pressures, the “academic scientific workforce are experiencing a state of chronic exhaustion known as burnout” (Gewin, 2021:489).

Scholars have observed that COVID-19 has created new inequalities while exacerbating existing ones (Cozza, Gherardi, Graziano, Johansson, Mondon-Navazo, Murgia & Trogal, 2021; De Henau & Himmelweit, 2021). Gender inequalities have deepened across all sectors of society including higher education (Ryan & El Ayadi, 2020). Female academics have endured increased responsibilities related to childcare, home schooling and caring for the elderly and sick (Berkhout & Richardson, 2020). Despite this care burden being invisible, its protracted nature erodes women’s well-being and productivity (Ellis, Steadman & Mao, 2020; Nash & Churchill, 2020). Research outputs by male academics have increased while those by females have decreased (Flaherty, 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020). This is attributed to female academics having less time for scientific writing during the pandemic and experiencing more stress due to the intensification of their work and care roles (Flores & Swennen, 2020).

In addition, many women have experienced the lack of physical distance from the home working environment as challenging, since it impinges on family space and private life (Chawla, MacGowan, Gabriel & Podsakoff, 2020; McGuire, Germain & Reynolds, 2021). The pandemic has eroded societal progress related to gender rights gained over generations (Safdar & Yasmin, 2020:692). While much of the focus has been on academic mothers, single female academics have experienced a loss of motivation, impaired concentration, loneliness and isolation, leading them to question the significance of their work during a pandemic (Utoft, 2020).

HEIs need to prioritise the well-being of all stakeholders, including female academics, by encouraging them to abandon the notion that the lack of work-life balance represents personal failure (Guy & Arthur, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). Instead, female academics should be encouraged to practice self-care, grow through their relationships and counter stress and burn-out by

identifying priorities, setting boundaries, chunking time for academic writing, multitasking and collaborating with others (Branicki, 2020; Johnson, 2020). While there is consensus that ERTL has caused anxiety and uncertainty, it also presented opportunities for positive, intentional change, including innovations designed to stabilise the situation, rethink practice and deal with uncertainty (Ellis et al., 2020).

The gap in the existing scholarship that we sought to address was the self-efficacy and well-being of female teacher educators for ECCE – particularly since they were working in a care profession during the COVID-19 pandemic. While they have historically cared for others (Murray et al., 2020; Venancio, 2020), it was uncertain whether they were taking care of themselves.

### Conceptual Framework

This study was informed by a conglomerate of theoretical ideas stemming from the work of Bandura (1988), Diener and Seligman (2004) and Gilligan (1982). The eclectic mix was necessary to engage with self-efficacy and well-being of female teacher educators as complex phenomena.

Firstly, the feminist ethics of care perspective was valuable to reflect on the common experiences of the gendered dimensions of the pandemic in relation to caring for ourselves and others (Branicki, 2020; Gilligan, 1982). In the study, care was recognised as a “generative, intentional activity to foster growth, empowerment and self-actualisation” (McGuire et al., 2021:31). This recognition was based on our awareness that COVID-19 necessitated female academics to reflect on themselves and their priorities while focusing on their personal health and well-being (Cozza et al., 2021; Guy & Arthur, 2020). In addition, they needed to recognise self-care as self-preservation and be realistic about what could be achieved in pandemic times (Utoft, 2020).

Secondly, we applied Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory to determine how participants’ self-efficacy was influenced by COVID-19 (Bandura, 1988). We analysed participants’ individual interviews by considering whether or not each participant had (i) developed a deeper interest in the activities in which they participated, (ii) formed a stronger sense of commitment to interests and activities, (iii) recovered quickly from setbacks and disappointments and (iv) viewed challenging problems as tasks to be mastered. Conversely, weak self-efficacy focused on whether or not each participant (i) avoided challenging tasks, (ii) believed that difficult tasks and situations were beyond personal capabilities, (iii) focused on personal failings and negative outcomes and/or (iv) quickly lost confidence in their personal abilities.

Thirdly, we drew upon Seligman’s PERMA

theory to understand how the pandemic had influenced female ECCE teacher educators' well-being by paying attention to their experiences related to positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishments as these are essential to flourish as human beings (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2018). However, we concur with Bates' (2011) critique of the PERMA theory for excluding health, safety, security, hope and control over one's own life. In the context of the current global crisis, these aspects are crucial, and we, therefore, added them to our discussion.

As we interacted with the participants, we became increasingly aware of our feelings of empathy and compassion since the participants' experiences mirrored our own, so it was instinctive to express care and concern for them (Gilligan, 1982). We regard this as an asset that could enable female ECCE teacher educators to transform themselves to promote participatory, inclusive and democratic relationships by embedding a feminist ethics of care approach to foster connection, responsiveness and responsibility in their work and personal lives (Gilligan, 1995; McGuire et al., 2021).

These concepts guided our data analysis and enhanced our understanding of the lived experiences of female ECCE teacher educators during the pandemic. We agree with Gilligan (1993) that the expectation that women should have the ability to establish a work-life balance and maintain boundaries during a crisis is unrealistic. By combining a feminist ethics of care perspective with a deeper appreciation of the requirements for self-efficacy and well-being, we were able to reflect on how a collective, inter-relational approach could be foundational for a transformative post-pandemic world (McGuire et al., 2021).

### Methodology

We adopted a phenomenological qualitative research approach and purposefully selected nine female teacher educators from ECCE programmes in seven HEIs in five provinces, based on their expertise and experience related to early childhood teacher education for birth to 9 years. Eight of the nine members were part of a national ECCE teacher education project (2017–2020). They also played prominent roles in ECCE teacher education in their respective institutions.

All the participants had over 10 years' experience in teacher education in HEIs and had completed their Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) studies. Seven participants were senior lecturers and two were associate professors. In addition, they were diverse in terms of race, culture, language, type of institution, and marital and parental status.

Semi-structured, online interviews were

conducted with the individual participants using Microsoft Teams after each participant had signed a letter of informed consent and understood the purpose of the study. We encouraged participants to reflect on how their work had changed and what the consequences for their self-efficacy and well-being were.

Our questions focused on female ECCE teacher educators' experiences of training teachers during the pandemic, how their roles and responsibilities had changed, the support they had received to perform their responsibilities, the changes required in ECCE teacher education given the pandemic, and what further support they required. Two themes that emerged from the interviews were: (i) aspects energising self-efficacy and well-being and (ii) aspects compromising self-efficacy and well-being.

All participants were fluent in English and hence the interviews were conducted in this language. All the participants were known to us. This had several advantages, including that it was not necessary to establish initial rapport.

Before the internet, online interviews would have been impossible, and we would probably have conducted telephonic interviews. The availability of Microsoft Teams made data collection much easier. It was also more convenient to record and transcribe the interviews and send copies to the participants for member checking via electronic mail (email). We were pleasantly surprised that the online interviews seemed to have a therapeutic value for ourselves as well as the participants. There were frequent remarks of "*I'm not imagining this. You're articulating what I'm thinking and feeling.*" Throughout the data collection and analysis process, we had a growing awareness that what we were experiencing individually and collectively was not normal, yet it was being normalised and that we had an obligation not to remain silent.

The data were analysed using an adaptation of the six phases of thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). To familiarise ourselves with the data, we repeatedly read each participant's transcribed interview and assigned initial codes. This was done separately to ensure intercoder reliability as recommended by Nieuwenhuis (2016). We then compared and merged our codes after reaching consensus to ensure accuracy and consistency. We then searched for themes according to Bandura's categories of self-efficacy and Seligman's pillars of well-being. This was followed by carefully reviewing the emerging themes and then defining and naming the themes. Finally, we wrote up our research findings as reported in this article.

Ethics clearance was obtained from our HEI. Part of the project focused on the contextual issues influencing capacity building of ECCE teachers.

The impact of COVID-19 and understanding of the teacher educators' experiences formed an integral part of the study. To comply with institutional ethics regulations, we obtained informed consent. We reassured participants that their privacy and anonymity would be protected.

### Findings

Two major themes emerged from our data analysis, namely (i) aspects compromising and (ii) aspects energising self-efficacy and well-being. Each theme was accompanied by three related sub-themes informed by the participants' responses to our semi-structured interview questions. In addition, they were shaped by Bandura's categories of self-efficacy and Seligman's pillars of well-being and our literature review.

#### Theme 1: Aspects Compromising Self-efficacy and Well-being

The following three sub-themes emerged from our data analysis: (i) South African HEIs were under-prepared for the pandemic, (ii) a lack of work-life balance and (iii) warning signs of burnout.

##### *South African higher education institutions were under-prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic*

According to eight of the nine participants, the HEIs at which they were employed, were under-prepared for the pandemic. All the participants were employed at institutions that had online learning platforms prior to the pandemic.

*As an open distance e-learning [electronic learning] institution, we shouldn't have been affected by COVID-19 ... I think it was a massive wakeup call that exposed gaps, which created an opportunity to start filling those gaps (Participant 3 [P3]).*

*For many of us, it started out as emergency and remote teaching, but with a focus on emergency. Our university didn't take a long break when the lockdown started. We went home and immediately the university started online training. Most of us had used our online platform but not to its fullest extent. (P8)*

*We've always had this white elephant of the Moodle platform, where lecturers could engage via an online space in teaching ... where discussions and quizzes could take place. But before COVID-19, some people didn't pay much attention to it (P9).*

Based on the selected excerpts above, it appeared that very few HEIs had fully utilised their online learning platforms prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

##### *Lack of work-life balance*

We employed the PERMA theory to analyse the participants' responses in relation to (positive) emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishments, that constitute the five pillars of

well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2004). By focusing on the participants' emotions, we were able to recognise their frustration, stress, loneliness, anxiety, uncertainty and exhaustion, as revealed below.

*It is very stressful. With remote teaching, remote workshops, remote meetings, everything just piles up ... we are really overloaded ... From last week, I started walking because that's what I used to do. I got so tired and I said to myself, 'My heart can stop any minute.' This remote thing, it's not good for our well-being. (P1)*

*I tend to get into this room at 8 am and leave at 8 pm. There's a lot of work that we've got to do in preparation for our online lectures. Our managers are expecting too much because we've also got to report on a weekly basis about our (online) lectures. (P4)*

*There are so many things that we need to submit within a short period of time and you also have to extend your working hours. Working like this has changed me. I think it's made me to forget that I have to satisfy this body. (P7)*

The participants explained that working remotely was accompanied by increased stress, the intensification of their workload, extended working hours and changes in lifestyle, which negatively affected their well-being. This is consistent with the findings of Guy and Arthur (2020) as well as Rabaglietti et al. (2021). It is worth emphasising here that many HEIs appeared to be unrealistic about what could be achieved during a pandemic, as Utoft (2020) observed.

##### *Warning signs of burnout*

The data reveal that after more than a year of working remotely, all the participants were increasingly showing warning signs of burnout, although only P3 used the term "burnout" to describe how she was feeling.

*We spend so much time on work which takes time away from our families. I think we need to have some days when we don't have meetings ... when we can focus on research (P1).*

*There needs to be a better support system ... I'm in desperate need of leave. But I just can't take it and so I have to just keep pushing through and I will reach a point where I'm going to burnout because of it. We hear at meetings, 'your mental health is important' and so forth, but there isn't any practical solution to this. (P3)*

*Then there's the supervision of large numbers ... and you've got to publish articles (P4).*

*It was especially difficult last year this time. We were literally teaching or trying to manage online learning every day of the week. We didn't even think, 'It is Sunday. It's a rest day, just try to recharge' ... and the children were in stress. It was difficult being a mother, an academic and someone who is concerned about the quality of ECD [early childhood development] in South Africa. So, all of that was quite overwhelming. (P8)*

Consistent with the literature (Chawla et al., 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020), all nine participants said that

the intensification of their work intruded on family time and their private lives.

## Theme 2: Aspects Energising Self-efficacy and Well-being

The second theme that emerged was aspects energising self-efficacy and well-being. This theme included three related sub-themes: (i) deeper interest and strong commitment, (ii) rapid recovery and (iii) support from colleagues in a community of practice, as discussed below.

### *Deeper interest and strong commitment*

Despite all the participants experiencing complex challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic (cf. Theme 1), their responses to our interview questions revealed strong resilience (Diener & Seligman, 2004) and determination to maintain their professionalism.

*We had to make it work, and our university has this culture of positivity as an approach so they rely on our goodwill and our 'we can do it' attitude and then we go with the flow ... I sometimes get irritated by the culture, but essentially it lifts me up. (P8)*

*We were initially somewhat blindsided by the pandemic. We were not anticipating having to do any kind of online training. So, we decided to make use of WhatsApp because my research shows that most people, even in impoverished communities, have access to android phones. So, we developed little info bites which we shared with the practitioners. (P2)*

*I needed to change my way of teaching. I needed to shift away from just giving them the content, to getting them to engage with knowledge in different ways, through discussions online, through forming WhatsApp buddies and different techniques (P5).*

P8 categorised her institution's pressure on staff to cope as an "institutional culture of positivity" and although she found it annoying at times, she experienced it as uplifting, believing that it prevented negativity among staff. We questioned whether this approach silenced female ECCE teacher educators to accept the abnormal as normal, rather than offering practical strategies for enhancing their well-being.

### *Rapid recovery*

Viewing challenges as learning opportunities enabled the participants to recover rapidly from setbacks. In addition, their responsiveness to the challenges they had experienced revealed strong resilience, consistent with Diener and Seligman's (2004) requirements for strong self-efficacy.

*With the pandemic, we've had to have more contact, more interaction and more sharing of ideas ... teams developed tools that have been shared across the programme (P2).*

*I think when we got over the biggest shock, we realised that we can still do quality teaching, learning and assessment, even if it's on another platform. If we just think creatively and*

*innovatively and differently about what quality is and how to present it in different formats. (P8)*

*We were all forced to work in different ways and to think differently ... learn new skills, think about how you're going to engage and connect with your students, still making it interesting where students can get the benefit of learning from your classes, but also thinking in new ways about assessing your students ... making sure that your assessment is still authentic, reliable and valid. (P9)*

The participants were able to adopt a balanced perspective. Although the challenges related to the pandemic had negatively influenced their well-being, they were able to recognise the positive aspects of online teaching as well as the benefits of the changes that would endure beyond the pandemic.

### *Support from colleagues in a community of practice*

Several participants lamented that they had perceived their institutional management as more concerned about students and the institution's reputation than about the well-being of staff. In addition, the participants experienced the institutional wellness programmes as impersonal and aloof.

*They have all these programmes, wellness programmes and stuff. But I mean, when you're teaching, you don't have time to attend something on how to become more emotionally aware or to preserve your emotional sense of well-being. So, I think that there needs to be more support from management. (P5)*

*Even though we've got that unit for wellness, I don't know how best they can do it holistically, in terms of looking at the well-being of a person and also in terms of time management (P7).*

*I think it is more removed. So, it's up to you to go and click on the link and to book an appointment with someone, which most of us won't do. You have to go in search for it. And then I'd like to ask you, 'Where do you find the time to go and invest in your own wellness?' (P8)*

The perceived inaccessibility of staff wellness programmes motivated staff to take the initiative to support one another in a community of practice as articulated by the participants below.

*Every second week we come together and share ideas. So, we have that kind of support within the division because we engage with one another. We've got a WhatsApp group where we assist one another and it's very engaging. What helped me, was collaborating with a colleague. (P1)*

*Who I am as a teacher educator, my identity was being challenged and my sense of my knowledge and who I am, and my expertise was constantly being challenged and there was no kind of support that was coming from management. You went to your colleagues when you needed some sort of emotional support. (P5)*

*We broke into smaller groups, assisting each other and bridging that gap between face-to-face and*

*online teaching. In smaller groups people could feel safe in asking questions so we didn't leave it just to the IT [information technology] department to do the training for professional development. We also took it upon ourselves to have small groups. The younger generation then played a more prominent role. (P9)*

Consistent with Rabaglietti et al.'s (2021:2) notion of "technostress", all the participants reported fatigue due to the intensity of online engagements. Despite describing themselves as "teamed out" and "zoomed out", the participants valued their access to technology.

## Discussion

The findings show that the aspects compromising self-efficacy and well-being could be attributed to South African HEIs, like others worldwide, being under-prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. This led to a lack of work-life balance and chronic exhaustion. The drastic changes that accompanied the abrupt shift to ERTL were accompanied by increased stress, intensification of workload, extended working hours and uncertainty (Cutri et al., 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). HEIs need to be better prepared by planning for disruptions before they occur (Mpungose, 2020; Van Schalkwyk, 2021). From a theoretical perspective, the aspects that compromise self-efficacy did not lead to weak self-efficacy (Bandura, 1988). Instead, the participants' resilience and commitment to their work allowed them to develop a deeper interest in the activities in which they participated, form a stronger commitment to their work, recover quickly from setbacks and disappointments and view challenging problems as tasks to be mastered (Bandura, 1988). In addition, although their well-being was compromised, their engagement and relationships with their colleagues sustained them, enabling them to find meaning and recognise their accomplishments despite the challenges they had experienced (Seligman, 2018). The aspects compromising self-efficacy and well-being are discussed further below.

Although the participants responded rapidly to the challenges they had experienced and developed a deeper interest in online teaching and learning activities (Bandura, 1988) to become proficient as recommended by Foulger et al. (2020) as well as to enhance support to their students, this came at a personal cost since their well-being was overlooked in their haste to take care of others. This is consistent with the literature on the effects of the pandemic on female academics (Ellis et al., 2020; Nash & Churchill, 2020). P8 described the care burden that confronted many female academics during the pandemic related to caring for her children, students as well as her preoccupation with the urgent need to enhance the quality of ECCE in South Africa. As P1 and P4 revealed, female academics were finding it particularly challenging

to find dedicated time for research, consistent with the findings of Flaherty (2020) and Utoft (2020). This compelled them to use their evenings and weekends for academic writing and research. Consequently, all nine participants were struggling to achieve a work-life balance, describing themselves as "*online 24/7*" and "*working non-stop*." All nine participants pointed out that more time spent working meant less time for their families and to rest.

All nine participants were aware that they were increasingly taking strain and manifesting warning signs of burnout after more than a year of working from home. They described feeling unfit and unhealthy, which was a growing source of concern and stress (Cutri et al., 2020). This was attributed to the intensification of their workloads and their extended working hours, which left little time for rest (Rabaglietti et al., 2021). Although burnout is inherent in academic work, the pandemic has accelerated the process (Gewin, 2020). Despite this, the participants somehow kept "*pushing through*" (P3). One might therefore have anticipated weak self-efficacy (Bandura, 1988). This was not the case, as we have shown and discuss further in the following section.

The findings show that the aspects energising self-efficacy and well-being were (i) deeper interest and strong commitment, (ii) rapid recovery and (iii) support from colleagues in a community of practice. All the participants demonstrated a willingness to rethink their practice and optimise the opportunities for positive, intentional change (Ellis et al., 2020), thereby demonstrating deeper interest and stronger commitment (Bandura, 1988). Consistent with the findings of Landa et al. (2021), Mpungose (2020) and Van Schalkwyk (2021), P2 highlighted the inequalities in South Africa regarding unequal access to data and devices such as laptops. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the inequalities that existed prior to the pandemic (Cozza et al, 2021; De Henau & Himmelweit, 2021). P2 was concerned that online teaching was not possible for many students, especially those living in remote rural areas, prompting her HEI to use android phones and WhatsApp.

From a theoretical perspective, the aspects that energised self-efficacy (Bandura, 1988) and well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2004) show that the participants recognised that urgent changes were necessary which enabled them to implement appropriate innovations, tailored to their specific contexts. The findings of this study are consistent with those of Ellis et al. (2020) since the participants sought to stabilise the situation through their rapid recovery from the disruptions and their willingness to adapt their practices to respond to the challenges they encountered (Bandura, 1988). In particular, the participants' ability to recover

quickly can be attributed to their profile as leaders in the ECCE field in their institutions. All their responses reflected their determination to enhance the quality of ECCE teacher education and to demonstrate their humanness by caring for others.

Although some of the participants experienced isolation and loneliness, access to online platforms allowed them to maintain their relationships with their students, colleagues and family members. Relationships were not only vital to their well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2004), it enabled them to operationalise a feminist ethics of care in their collaborative interactions with their colleagues to foster connection and responsiveness (Gilligan, 1995; McGuire et al., 2021) in their work, as articulated by P1, 5 and 9 above.

From the perspective of the PERMA theory, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to ill-being of female ECCE teacher educators who expressed frustration, exhaustion and discontentment (Diener & Seligman, 2004) since there were aspects of their work and home lives that they felt they were no longer in control of (Berkhout & Richardson, 2020). Although all the institutions had wellness programmes in place, it was up to individual members of staff to find the time and motivation to access these, rendering support from management inadequate. Moreover, the participants struggled to find meaning in some of the new demands imposed on them and were very aware of the health, safety and security risks (Bates, 2011) during the global health crisis.

Despite the above, all nine participants manifested all four categories of strong self-efficacy (Bandura, 1988). In other words, all the participants developed a deeper interest and stronger commitment to the online teaching and learning tasks in which they had engaged, while striving to sustain their research and postgraduate supervision roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, their rapid recovery from the disruptions revealed that they viewed the numerous challenging problems that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic, as tasks to be mastered, motivated by caring for their students and colleagues (Bandura, 1988; Gilligan, 1982). Their capacity to care was enormous and enabled them to “push through” even though the warning signs of burnout were undeniable and growing. We attribute this to the profile of the participants. They were leaders who regarded themselves as change agents in the ECCE field prior to the crisis who found the courage to continue to demonstrate a strong commitment to their profession. Care is the sustaining force that will carry them through, on condition that they recalibrate to prioritise self-care to restore their well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2004).

## Conclusion

In pandemic times an influential frame for action is

captured in the actions related to “build forward better – and differently” to radically transform early childhood care and education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020:3; Save the Children, 2021:iii). Global communities should collaborate with ministries of education to establish more resilient systems for quality, inclusive education for all children to “stay healthy and keep learning” (Save the Children, 2021:iv) while protecting the most vulnerable groups and providing support to restore livelihoods, enhance equity and sustainable growth (Vu & Savonitto, 2020:1). Crucial to meeting this goal is the scaling-up of ECCE teacher recruitment, professional development, and the provision of well-being support.

Similarly, HEIs should recognise the importance of a care-led recovery programme from COVID-19 (De Henau & Himmelweit, 2021) and the need for systemic changes at institutional level. This should include prioritising the well-being of all stakeholders (Harris & Jones, 2020) and providing ongoing training for teacher educators to become proficient to teach with technology and to train their students to deliver online teaching and learning (Foulger et al., 2020). Furthermore, visionary leadership and management must strengthen strategic planning (Van Schalkwyk, 2021) so that HEIs are better prepared for the next crisis or pandemic (Mpungose, 2020). This can be done by establishing responsive well-being programmes and supporting communities of practice (McGuire et al., 2021). Foregrounding care to restore female ECCE teacher educators’ individual and collective well-being (Guy & Arthur, 2020) should be prioritised alongside practical measures to mitigate the intensification of their work (Cozza et al., 2021; Vohra & Taneja, 2020).

We propose that care should be a key strategy in any pandemic recovery programme. This must start with ourselves as we cannot avoid self-care any longer. Moreover, self-care will enable us to continue to care for our students, colleagues, and our families. Care is also our strategy to transform teacher education in the early years in a post-pandemic world.

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## Authors’ Contributions

MGCL and HBE conceptualised the study, collected and analysed the data, wrote the article and reviewed the final manuscript.

## Notes

- i. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.

- ii. DATES: Received: 4 September 2022; Revised: 20 July 2023; Accepted: 1 November 2023; Published: 29 February 2024.

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