Article

The Unbearable Lightness of Being an Early Childhood Educator in Day-Care Settings [†]

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[†] In the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera explores the existential tension between weight and lightness, questioning whether life is better lived through fleeting, consequence-free choices—marked by lightness—or through decisions that carry meaning, responsibility, and a sense of rootedness—marked by weight. Early in the novel, Kundera draws on Nietzsche's concept of eternal return to suggest that if our lives were to repeat endlessly, every action would acquire immense weight; yet, if lived only once, as if with no return, everything might feel light, and precisely for that reason, unbearable. When we transpose this reflection to the world of early childhood educators in day-care settings, a similar paradox becomes evident. The profession is often romanticised as a natural extension of feminine instinct or love for children, shrouded in an illusion of lightness—the lightness of spontaneous care, innate vocation, and silent devotion. Yet beneath this idealised image lies the concrete, symbolic, and political weight of a profession marked by emotional labour, high demands, and a constant struggle for legitimacy. Here, lightness does not mean a lack of gravity—it means its concealment. These educators carry the weight of demanding working conditions, with high child–adult ratios, scarce resources, long hours, and intense physical and emotional exhaustion; insufficient social recognition, reflected in low salaries, institutional invisibility, and discourses that dismiss their pedagogical knowledge; deep emotional impact, resulting from the tension between affective involvement and the need to maintain professional boundaries, between the care they offer and the care they are denied. Just as Kundera reveals that rootless lightness can become unbearable, so too does this study show that the idealised, simplified view of early childhood education contributes to the silencing of suffering, the trivialisation of ethical commitment, and the devaluation of the intellectual labour that unfolds in the day-care settings. To reclaim weight—in this context—is both a political and epistemological act: it is to recognise that caring for and educating young children demands not only the body and the heart, but also thought, time, networks, and recognition. It is to say, with Kundera, that what seems light may, in fact, be the hardest to bear, and that the dignity of this profession lies precisely in the courage to carry that weight, together.

Abstract

This article explores how working conditions and professional well-being intersect in day-care settings, shaping early childhood educators' professional identities, especially at the start of their careers. Based on a qualitative and interpretative study involving a focus group with seven educators and thirty interviews across Portugal, the findings reveal a profession marked by overload, time pressure, institutional silence, and the invisibility of emotional labour. Yet, educators also demonstrate resistance, mutual support networks, and pedagogical reinvention. Wellbeing is conceptualised as an ecological and political issue, influenced by institutional structures, the absence of public policies, and cultural narratives that continue to devalue the profession. Special focus is given to novice educators, whose entry into the field is characterised by vulnerability, lack of guidance, and identity tensions, pointing to the urgent need for better initial training and institutional support. This article presents a critical analysis of professionalism in early childhood education and care, with implications for teacher education, including mentoring, supervision, and public policy development. It frames the work of early childhood educators in day-care as both an ethical commitment and a form of resistance. Ultimately, it amplifies educators' voices as knowledge producers and agents of

change, contributing to the pedagogy of dignity and the recognition of a profession often rendered invisible.

Keywords: early childhood educators; day-care settings; working conditions; professional wellbeing; emotional labour; professional identity; early

1. Contextual Framework

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in *creches*—the Portuguese term for day-care settings for babies and toddlers up to three years old—plays a fundamental role in children's early lives, providing the context in which first social bonds are established, essential practices of care are developed, and experiences that critically influence holistic development occur. Scientific research has repeatedly underscored the importance of the early years of life, recognising the first thousand days as an unrepeatable window of opportunity for the development of motor, cognitive, socio-emotional, relational, and linguistic skills. Research in neuroscience highlights that the first three years of life constitute a sensitive—and in many domains, critical—period in which the human brain shows particularly high levels of plasticity and responsiveness to stimuli (Britto et al., 2017; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). It is, therefore, a foundational moment in which the quality of interactions and the presence of emotionally available adults are crucial to the well-being and overall development of babies and young children (Cumming, 2017; Elfer, 2012).

It is in this timeframe—socially invisible yet intensely experienced by many young children in day-care centres, while others experience it within different family and community settings—that the foundations of attachment, emerging language, emotional self-regulation, autonomy, and a fundamental relationship with the world and others are built. It is also here that the possibility of a dignified childhood is often at stake, quietly overshadowed by the lack of recognition and value attributed to the earliest years, and by the silence of public and political discourse that so often ignores them. In this equation, the role of early childhood educators is absolutely central; these childhood pedagogy specialists must be professionals who think, feel, and act in an ethical, responsive, and emotionally available manner (Osgood, 2010; Tadeu, 2024). Pedagogical work in day-care settings is therefore inseparable from care and listening, requiring an attentive, sensitive, and affectively engaged presence (Elfer, 2012).

However, this demand for full presence, sensitivity, and commitment rarely finds a match in the actual conditions in which training, work, and professional development occur. The reality of many day-care centres in Portugal is marked by a dissonance between what theory advocates and what practice allows. Rather than being contexts that embrace the complexity of pedagogical work with babies and toddlers, one frequently observes the imposition of institutional logics dominated by instrumental rationalities and technical-bureaucratic approaches: unsustainable adult-child ratios, lack of institutional listening, absence of pedagogical supervision and reflective practices, time scarcity, emotional overload, and professional invisibility (Ntim et al., 2023; Osgood, 2010; Purper et al., 2023; Tadeu & Lopes, 2021).

These conditions do not merely affect educators' well-being; they profoundly compromise the quality of the interactions and relationships that are built—and which form the backbone of child and family-centred pedagogy—and the overall educational quality (Cassidy et al., 2017; Cumming, 2017; Cumming et al., 2020; Cumming et al., 2021; Jennings et al., 2020; Penttinen et al., 2020).

Between what is known to be high-quality and what is realistically achievable, a gap emerges, out of which exhaustion grows. This exhaustion is not only physical or emotional; it is also symbolic and identity-related, rooted in a persistent feeling of lack of recognition and of constantly falling short of the ethical ideal imposed by one's own professionalism (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). It is a difficult unease to name, made up of accumulated silences, unspoken tensions, and a weariness that goes beyond the body, because it permeates how educators perceive themselves and are perceived by others.

Adding to these factors is the absence of robust public policies that recognise and support the profession and its many challenges, which contributes to the erosion of professionalism in ECEC, the weakening of teaching identity, and the perpetuation of a socially devalued image of early childhood. The result is a vicious cycle of frustration, demotivation, and staff turnover, which weakens both individuals and educational settings (Folque & Vasconcelos, 2019; Tadeu, 2024).

This cycle is particularly critical for novice educators, who are often faced with inadequate initial training for dealing with the specificities of day-care work and a lack of reflective support in the early years of their careers (Tadeu & Lopes, 2021).

It is within this simultaneously tense and fertile scenario that the research presented in this article is situated. More than denouncing, this study undertakes an engaged listening to the voices of those who live and reinvent day-care settings from the inside.

Its aim is to understand how training and working conditions influence early childhood educators' professional well-being, and how these experiences intertwine with their identity construction processes.

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework developed from a critical dialogue between existing literature and the empirical material. It interweaves six interdependent conceptual axes—constructed through the articulation of theory and data—that allow for a dense and in-depth understanding of the experiences narrated by early childhood educators in day-care centres. These are (1) the construction of professional identities, (2) initial training, (3) working conditions, (4) professional well-being, (5) professional development, and (6) the condition of novice early childhood educators.

These axes are not presented as fixed categories but rather as ecological constructs that intersect and reverberate among themselves, illuminating the contours—at times blurred, at times painfully sharp—of pedagogical action in day-care settings. The aim is to call for a reading that goes beyond technical or normative discourses, seeking instead to look at educators' work from its margins—affective, ethical, emotional, and symbolic—and to acknowledge the invisible density of the daily life in which it unfolds.

1.1. Professional Identity in Educational Contexts: Between Tensions and Reinventions

The professional identity of early childhood educators is understood here as an ecological, processual, and contextual construct, formed at the intersection between the biographical and the relational, between the individual and the institutional (Lopes, 2008, 2009; Tadeu, 2024).

This conception allows identity to be conceived as the result of interactions between the subject and the social, organisational, and symbolic contexts in which they are embedded, acknowledging that its construction depends as much on lived experience as on the way that experience is validated or silenced (Beijaard et al., 2004; Dubar, 1997).

Within this framework, the ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), societal psychology (Doise, 2002), and the theory of double transaction (Dubar, 1997) are fundamental references for understanding the construction of self in educational contexts. Professional identity thus emerges as a process of symbolic negotiation and recognition (or lack thereof), which unfolds across the different systems in which educators live: from initial training to interpersonal relationships, from pedagogical practices to

public policies. It is a dynamic, relational, and contested construction, marked by tensions between the "self" and the institutional mechanisms that shape—and often limit—professional practice (Beijaard et al., 2004; Tadeu, 2024).

In day-care settings, the processes of constructing early childhood educators' professional identities acquire particularly challenging contours. Educators describe a structural tension between training models—which prove insufficient when faced with the ethical, emotional, and relational depth of working with babies (Tadeu & Lopes, 2021)—and institutional realities, shaped by instrumental logics that render invisible the complexity of pedagogical action in day-care centres. In many contexts, these logics align with what Solway (2000) refers to as a "pedagogy of results", oriented towards the production of normative and measurable outcomes, to the detriment of listening, ethical intentionality, and the uniqueness of relationships.

In this scenario, educators' work tends to be reduced to operational and routine functions, stripped of more than recognition. This dissonance is not merely technical; it is symbolic, and it generates frustration, identity ambivalence, and professional devaluation. In many cases, it results in silence. In others—though exceptionally—it gives rise to subtle micro-resistances, gestures of seeking recognition and ethical affirmation of professional agency (Moloney, 2010; Osgood, 2010).

These identities, in constant tension, are (re)constructed through interpersonal relationships, organisational climates, and educational policies that either recognise—or fail to recognise—the value, depth, and legitimacy of the work carried out in day-care settings (Kelchtermans, 2009).

The presence—or absence—of spaces for listening, support, and reflective supervision plays a determining role; it can sustain voice or crystallise silence, it can nourish belonging or corrode meaning because these identities are woven, day by day, between the visible and the invisible, between what is said and what remains unspoken, but also between what is expected of educators and what, in their professional contexts, they are actually allowed to be and to do.

1.2. Initial Training of Early Childhood Educators for Practice in Day-Care Settings

In the Portuguese context, the initial training of early childhood educators for pedagogical practice in day-care settings has been repeatedly considered deficient and poorly adapted to the specificities of this socio-educational context. As several authors highlight (Araújo, 2011; Cardoso, 2011; Tadeu, 2012), this training is generally superficial, characterised by brief and observational visits to day-care centres, without a true immersion in the complex reality of pedagogical practices with babies and young children.

The international literature also denounces this mismatch, pointing to the absence of content focused on early childhood development, collaborative work with families, and the importance of practices based on bonds and caring relationships (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017; Chu, 2016; White et al., 2016).

In the Portuguese context, curricular emphasis continues to fall on preschool education and its associated social actors, relegating to the background specific training for working with babies and toddlers. This situation may be due, as Mesquita (2022) suggests, to a lack of substantive knowledge among higher education lecturers regarding the issues related to early years pedagogy and practice, which hinders the articulation between theoretical content and the practical and educational demands of early childhood.

Thus, weak initial training not only undermines the early stages of professionalization for educators in day-care settings but also compromises the quality of pedagogical intervention and professional development itself. This training gap is not neutral; it reverberates in how educators position themselves, how their work is perceived, and how their professional identities are constructed.

The integration of effective and extended placements in day-care centres, accompanied by reflective practice and qualified pedagogical supervision, is essential to fill this gap, strengthening the formative *continuum* necessary for full professional practice in this specific context.

1.3. Working Conditions

Working conditions in day-care settings—the set of organisational, material, relational, and symbolic factors that frame a professional's practice within a given labour context—reflect the tensions that traverse ECEC as both a professional and political field. Far from being merely logistical or administrative issues, material, organisational, and symbolic conditions profoundly shape educators' professional experience, affecting their well-being, sense of belonging, and identity sustainability (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Cumming et al., 2020).

In a daily context marked by instrumental rationalities, technocratic logics, and a "pedagogy of results" (Solway, 2000), pedagogical work with babies and young children is frequently undervalued, rendered invisible, or mistaken for mere caregiving. The lack of time to plan, reflect, and think about action becomes a lack of time to feel it—impoverishing listening, emotional availability, and the quality of interactions.

As Tadeu and Lopes (2021) emphasise, the absence of protected time for collective reflection and pedagogical supervision is not merely a matter of management; it is an institutional form of denial of the complexity of work in day-care centres.

The absence of robust public policies that recognise and support the specific challenges of teaching in day-care settings contributes to the perpetuation of a cycle of frustration, turnover, and devaluation. As Folque and Vasconcelos (2019) point out, these conditions not only undermine professionals' well-being but also directly affect the quality of interactions with babies and young children, the fundamental building blocks of pedagogy in day-care centres

In this context, writing about working conditions is writing about social justice. It is to affirm that children's right to quality education is inextricably linked to educators' right to work with dignity, with time, with voice, and with recognition, because no humanising pedagogy is possible in contexts that dehumanise those who care.

1.4. Professional Well-Being

Professional well-being, understood as work-related well-being (Kwon et al., 2021), is, as evidenced in the literature, articulated across multiple interdependent dimensions: physical (concerning material working conditions), psychological (linked to emotional balance and sense of belonging), relational (focused on the quality of interactions), ethical (concerning coherence between values and practices), and institutional (associated with recognition, support, and organisational justice) (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Kwon et al., 2021). Far from being an internal psychological state or individual trait, professional well-being should be understood as a contextualised, processual, and relational construction. It is configured at the intersection between the individual and their working contexts, requiring an ecological and political lens, where working conditions, listening mechanisms, and recognition regimes are interwoven with history, training, professionality, and professional identities in ECEC (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lopes, 2009; Tadeu, 2024).

Regarding each of its defining dimensions: (1) the physical dimension refers to the concrete working conditions, intense rhythms, repetitive gestures, constant physical effort, and lack of protected time for breaks. In day-care settings, many educators face invisible yet exhausting physical demands, exacerbated by high child-to-adult ratios, lack of support teams, and absence of recovery time (Kwon et al., 2021). (2) The psychological

dimension relates to emotional stability, stress management, and the experience of meaningfulness in professional practice. Work in day-care involves a high affective load, requiring continuous emotional regulation, often in institutional solitude. Listening to families' concerns, mediating conflicts, and sustaining emotional vigilance often generate feelings of exhaustion and insufficiency, particularly among novice educators (Elfer, 2012; Mikuska & Fairchild, 2020; Purper et al., 2023). (3) The relational dimension is expressed in the quality of bonds established with children, families, and colleagues. Relationships marked by respect, reciprocity, trust, and care are essential to well-being. However, the absence of listening spaces and shared pedagogical visions—i.e., institutional cultures—can reduce these relationships to mere functional roles, fostering isolation and burnout (Campbell-Barr, 2019; Kelchtermans, 1996). (4) The ethical dimension emerges from the ability to act in accordance with one's values and pedagogical principles. Many educators experience a rupture between what they know to be pedagogically just and what institutional contexts allow them to do. This dissonance between "knowing" and "being able to act" leads to ethical suffering, demotivation, and silencing (Tadeu, 2024). (5) The institutional dimension concerns how educators' work is recognised and valued within organisational and political structures. The historical invisibility of this work, tied to a symbolic legacy of caregiving devaluation, undermines the sense of professional dignity (Campbell-Barr, 2019; Sarmento, 2002; Tadeu & Lopes, 2025).

It is within this dense and demanding terrain that emotional labour unfolds—a largely invisible yet structuring dimension of pedagogical practice in day-care settings, deeply entangled with professional well-being (Purper et al., 2023). Emotional labour, understood as the ability to manage one's own and others' emotions in contexts of high affective intensity (Purper et al., 2023), emerges among babies' and toddlers' cries and laughter, in the attentive listening to families' motivations and expectations, in mediating tensions among colleagues, and in the requirement of an empathic—and smiling—presence even in moments of extreme fatigue.

Being a form of labour—demanding, sensitive, and rarely named—it remains marginalised in institutional discourses and public policies, as though its affective intensity were a secondary matter, rather than the silent fulcrum of a profession in constant emotional exposure (Elfer, 2012).

Despite ECEC's growing visibility on political agendas, emotional labour remains largely absent from training curricula, education policies, and institutional cultures (Cameron & Moss, 2020; Elfer, 2012; Mikuska & Fairchild, 2020; Purper et al., 2023). This invisibility stems from the historical roots of ECEC as a professional and academic field (Campbell-Barr, 2019) and from technocratic conceptions of quality, which are focused on normative standards and measurable outcomes, ignoring the value of bonding, care, and feeling as legitimate and foundational pedagogical practices in day-care settings (Taggart, 2016; Tadeu & Lopes, 2025).

To assume well-being as a professional right—rather than an individual privilege—requires collective accountability. Without listening, without protected time for planning, assessment, and individual and collaborative reflection, without committed leadership and policies that affirm the dignity of day-care work, emotional labour will continue to be experienced as an open wound—silent, chronic, and normalised (Cumming et al., 2020; Kelchtermans, 1996; Ntim et al., 2023).

1.5. Novice Educators in Day-Care Settings

Entering the profession—particularly in day-care contexts—constitutes an especially delicate stage in early childhood educators' professional journeys. The so-called "reality shock" (Tardif, 2002) describes the clash between expectations shaped during initial training and the contingencies of everyday practice—often marked by high child-to-adult

ratios, absence of supervision mechanisms, limited recognition, and constant emotional demands.

In this context, the beginning of a teaching career does not merely represent a predictable phase of adjustment: it represents an identity- and affect-laden passage, suspended between the enthusiasm of arrival and the weight of a system that so often receives newcomers with haste, silence, and pressure. As shown by Keogh et al. (2012), early-career teachers experience an organisational and emotional intensification that compromises their professional agency and leads to early burnout. Survival strategies are often individual and solitary, revealing the lack of collective structures for support and belonging.

The day-care is, in most cases, the "gateway" to the profession, but also one of the spaces of greatest emotional exposure and symbolic fragility. As Tadeu and Lopes (2021) point out, working conditions in these contexts do not change significantly with accumulated experience: both novice and experienced professionals inhabit a landscape of structural vulnerability.

These educators, often placed in demanding environments without induction programmes, without protected time or pedagogically sensitive leadership, experience the start of their professional journey as a moment of isolation and intense emotional pressure. The lack of time, the excess of responsibilities, and the scarcity of institutional recognition contribute to the fragility of professional identity and to feelings of inadequacy (Cumming et al., 2020; Kelchtermans, 1996).

As Dubar (1997) explains, identity processes unfold in the tension between "being", "wanting to be", and "being able to be"; when contexts fail to embrace this tension, discomfort becomes embodied.

Still, even in adverse contexts, discrete micro-resistance practices emerge: educators who seek to reinvent themselves, creating spaces for listening with and for their colleagues, invoking their knowledge—even if unrecognised—to care with ethics and presence.

As highlighted by Moloney (2010) and Osgood (2010), these forms of professional reinvention, though often silent, are expressions of agency and a quest for recognition.

As O'Sullivan (2025) reminds us, it is through sharing and cultivating communities of practice that spaces of belonging can be built—where knowledge is woven through living together, and where well-being ceases to be a luxurious accessory and becomes an ethical imperative.

To think of teaching as a shared experience of vulnerability—but also of resistance and reinvention—is to recognise that professional development does not only begin when one is prepared; it begins when someone accompanies—and legitimises—your first act of care.

1.6. Professional Development in Day-Care Settings: Between Formative Continuity, Symbolic Resistance, and Ethical Care

The professional development of early childhood educators in day-care contexts cannot be understood as a linear path or a mere succession of externally validated skills. Rather, it is a situated, relational, and affective process, traversed by multiple systems of belonging, ethical tensions, and institutional conditions that shape—and sometimes limit—the very possibility of being an early childhood educator (Tadeu & Lopes, 2021).

The conception of professional development as an ecological construct (Lopes, 2008, 2009) allows this process to be understood as one that unfolds within and between various systemic levels: individual, relational, organisational, and societal. This perspective draws on the theory of double transaction (Dubar, 1997), the ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and societal psychology (Doise, 2002), shedding light on

how educators' development results from the interplay between who they are, who they wish to be, and what the material, symbolic, and human contexts allow them to be.

Within this framework, professional development is understood as an identity-driven, ethical, and reflective process that accompanies the entire active life of the professional and is deeply connected to their practice, context, and trajectory (Roldão, 2017). It is a dynamic phenomenon that goes beyond the acquisition of fixed techniques or knowledge, continuously nourished by experience, collaboration, and critical reflection.

The concept of Continuous Professional Development (CPD), as proposed by the *Orientações Pedagógias para Creche* (i.e., *Pedagogical Guidelines for Day-Care Settings*, Marques et al., 2024), is embedded in this ecological paradigm and is conceived as an integral part of a formative *continuum* that begins in initial training and extends throughout professional life. CPD is not limited to formal actions; it also includes informal and non-formal experiences—such as peer sharing, mutual observation, reflective supervision, and engagement in communities of practice—enabling educators to build, challenge, and deepen their knowledge in a situated and collaborative way.

Ongoing training, although often conflated with CPD, refers to structured actions, usually promoted by external entities, with predefined goals and content. While it can play an important role in professional development, when disconnected from the context and the concrete needs of educators, it risks being experienced as a bureaucratic or decontextualized process (Marques et al., 2024).

Lifelong professional development, as emphasised in the *Pedagogical Guidelines for Day-Care Settings*, entails a shared responsibility among professionals, employing institutions, and the State. This principle recognises that professional growth is not an isolated act, but an ethical commitment to educational quality and social justice (Marques et al., 2024). It requires institutional support mechanisms, policies that promote equity, and the recognition of knowledge that emerges from experience, listening, and ethical engagement.

However, studies show that educators' participation in CPD activities is often hindered by a lack of time, workload, absence of institutional incentives, and the limited impact of such activities on career progression (Cassidy et al., 2017; Nolan & Molla, 2018). Furthermore, many of these training opportunities fail to engage with the lived reality of day-care educators, overlooking the specific challenges of this context.

In this landscape, to develop professionally is not to improve in a neutral or technocratic sense; it is to resist the symbolic emptying of the profession, to reconfigure oneself through listening and ethical engagement, to care for the very possibility of caring. Promoting such development requires institutional recognition of the value of pedagogical work in day-care and investment in policies that sustain reflective, collaborative, and transformative practices (Flores et al., 2024; Jackson, 2020).

2. Methodological and Ethical Framework

This study is grounded in a qualitative approach, both comprehensive and exploratory in nature, anchored in the interpretive paradigm (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994), which values intersubjectivity and context. The meanings early childhood educators attribute to their experiences are not external to them; they emerge from their relationships, life paths, and the contexts they inhabit. Listening to these experiences, therefore, means recognising the lived as a valid site for the production of knowledge.

In line with this paradigm, a complexity epistemology (Morin, 2007) is adopted: one that resists reductive and fragmented views of educational phenomena. The construction of professional identities, teacher well-being, and emotional labour are not separate domains, but interwoven dimensions of a dense, contradictory, and unstable reality. To

investigate through the lens of complexity is to accept uncertainty, to value ambiguity, and to allow space for the emergence of the unexpected.

The overarching aim was to understand how working conditions in day-care settings influence early childhood educators' professional well-being and the construction of their professional identities. To this end, the study sought to (1) identify the organisational, relational, and emotional factors that affect well-being, (2) analyse the strategies of resistance, resilience, and pedagogical reinvention developed by the professionals, and (3) understand how educators interpret and construct their professional identity within the educational contexts in which they work.

These aims unfolded into guiding research questions that shaped both data collection and analysis: (a) How do educators describe their working conditions in day-care settings? (b) What impact do these conditions have on their physical, emotional, and relational well-being? (c) In what ways do these experiences influence the processes of constructing their professional identities?

Through these questions, the intention was not to remain at the surface of complaints or institutional diagnostics. Instead, the study sought to understand the lived experience from within, to grasp the meanings attributed by educators to their experiences, to listen for the invisible gestures of resistance and the silent modes of identity reinvention.

The intention of this research was not to describe behaviours or test hypotheses, but to understand the meanings constructed by educators regarding their working conditions, their strategies of resistance, and their ways of inhabiting the profession.

The chosen methodological tools—focus groups and semi-structured interviews—were conceived as spaces for listening, narrative co-construction, and reflective sharing. These tools are particularly suited to investigating tacit, implicit, and often invisible forms of professional knowledge, as they allow access not only to what is said, but also to what is silenced, hesitated, narrated with emotion, or reconstructed through memory.

More than collecting data, the goal was to create encounters between researchers and participants, between listening and speech, between what is lived and what is thought. It was within this relational space that we sought to understand—not merely describe—the unbearable lightness of being an early childhood educator in day-care settings.

2.1. Participants

A total of 37 female early childhood educators working in day-care settings participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 25 to 57 years, and they were based in various regions of Portugal (North, Centre, South, and islands). The sample was intentionally and heterogeneously composed through purposive sampling, with participants meeting the criterion of working with babies and toddlers up to three years old in day-care centres. Recruitment was carried out via institutional contacts and professional networks, and participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all educators. All participants held at least a higher education degree in Early Childhood Education—whether a bachelor's, licentiate, or master's degree, depending on the academic path available at the time of their training—and had between two and twenty-five years of professional experience. The group included professionals from both for-profit and non-profit private institutions, with varying profiles in terms of experience, institutional contexts, and professional roles. This diversity allowed for the collection of a broad and plural perspective on the conditions, challenges, and lived experiences in Portuguese day-care settings, encompassing both professionals with long-standing careers and nov-

ice educators at the start of their professional journey, whose voices are particularly valued in this study.

2.2. Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was carried out using two complementary techniques, which enabled the articulation of individual voices with collective meaning-making dynamics: (1) a focus group and (2) semi-structured interviews.

The focus group, held in person in February 2019 with seven early childhood educators, made it possible to explore collective meanings, dynamics of meaning negotiation, and emerging themes through discursive interaction (Morgan, 2010).

The semi-structured interviews, conducted between July and December 2020 in a virtual and synchronous format, involved 30 educators. This technique allowed for a deeper exploration of specific themes, access to underrepresented contexts in the focus group, and the inclusion of individual lived experiences (Quivy & Campenhoudt, 2008).

The interview guides for both techniques were organised into four thematic blocks: (1) perceptions of material and organisational working conditions, (2) emotional experiences of the profession, (3) interpersonal relationships and institutional support, and (4) social recognition and professional identity.

All sessions were recorded with informed consent, fully transcribed, and accompanied by field notes. The richness and depth of the narratives enabled a thorough analysis of the multiple dimensions of the research focus.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data were analysed using content analysis (Bardin, 2011), considered an appropriate technique for working with highly complex discourse, offering systematic possibilities for categorisation and inference (Amado et al., 2014).

The process began with exploratory readings and thematic coding based on the guiding questions and theoretical framework. The emerging categories were then refined and reorganised through successive readings and collaborative discussion among the researchers.

Triangulation of sources (interviews, focus groups, and field notes), techniques, and analytical perspectives contributed to the robustness and validity of the findings.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by a scientific and ethical committee of the host institution and was fully aligned with the Ethical Code of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) (Bertram et al., 2024) and the professional ethical principles of the Associação de Profissionais de Educação de Infância (APEI) (Moita & APEI, 2012).

The following guidelines were observed: (1) voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality were guaranteed; (2) a written informed consent protocol was implemented, including authorisation for partial or full quotation; (3) data were securely stored at the Research Centre of the host institution, with restricted access granted only to the researcher and the scientific supervisor of the project; (4) all data were permanently deleted upon completion of the project; (5) the results were returned to the participants and disseminated publicly in scientific formats (presentations and publications).

In this study, ethics is not merely understood as a formal requirement but as a political commitment to listening, to the dignification of professionals, and to the return of knowledge co-constructed with and for them.

3. Results

The analysis of the testimonies collected allowed for the identification of four key dimensions structuring the professional experience of early childhood educators working in day-care settings: (1) working conditions, (2) emotional labour and interpersonal relationships, (3) social recognition and professional identity, and (4) experiences of novice educators.

3.1. Working Conditions: Between Vocation and Exhaustion

"On days with staff absences, we're left alone with ten or eleven babies. That's inhumane." (Educator 14)

"I don't have time to eat lunch or even go to the toilet calmly." (Educator 10)

"I take work home, I plan at night. The time at the day-care is just for putting out fires." (Educator 12)

These statements illustrate a professional routine marked by constant demands, a lack of resources, and the absence of protected time for planning, rest, or reflection. In many institutions, child–adult ratios exceed recommended limits, undermining the quality of care and exposing professionals to high levels of physical and emotional exhaustion.

The phrase "putting out fires" frequently emerges to describe an experience of fragmented time—driven by urgency and immediate responses to the unforeseen—leaving no space for the reflective and pedagogical dimension of practice. This metaphor reveals a shared perception that work in day-care settings is reactive rather than proactive, and that organisational conditions do not allow the profession to be exercised with dignity.

Educators also report the constant overlapping of roles—caring, educating, planning, cleaning, supporting children and families, and training assistants—in a context where the lack of sufficient human resources forces them to juggle multiple tasks simultaneously. This enforced versatility is not seen as a sign of valued competence, but rather as a symptom of structural neglect.

Most participants associate these conditions with contractual precariousness and the underfunded nature of private, particularly non-profit, institutions. In such contexts, they feel pressured to justify every hour and every action, often within managerial logics that prioritise accounting over pedagogy.

The absence of breaks, the workload brought home, late-night planning sessions, and the constant feeling of falling short—of the children, the families, the profession, and themselves—converge into a lived experience of chronic exhaustion. Yet this condition is often normalised or rendered invisible through institutional discourses of vocation and devotion, as if love for children could justify everything.

"We do this because we love it, but love doesn't pay the bills!" (Educator 27)

This statement lays bare the tension between affective investment and the lack of material and symbolic recognition; what could be called a "wounded ethic": an ideal of care that, in practice, is sabotaged by the very conditions meant to uphold it.

3.2. Emotional Labour and Interpersonal Relationships: The Weight of Invisible Care

"We form bonds, we feel their pain. It hurts." (Educator 2)

"I provide emotional support to families, children, and assistants. But who supports me?" (Educator 11)

"Management doesn't intervene when there are conflicts. We're left to fend for ourselves." (Educator 32)

Emotional labour emerges across the educators' accounts as a fundamental component of their daily practice. Yet this labour remains profoundly invisible, undervalued, and unrecognised as professional knowledge.

Educators describe the emotional self-regulation, active listening, and empathic support they offer to children, families, and often colleagues as an integral—and exhausting—part of their work.

This emotional labour—silent, constant, and implicated—requires specific competencies, ranging from emotional self-awareness to deep empathy, the ability to form meaningful attachments, and the skill to navigate sensitive situations involving very young children and their families.

However, institutions rarely acknowledge this as part of the professional workload. Furthermore, formal emotional support mechanisms, such as reflective supervision, psychological accompaniment, or institutional listening spaces, are virtually non-existent.

In addition, relationships with colleagues and leadership are sometimes marked by tension, lack of mediation, and weak institutional support. When team conflicts or interpersonal difficulties arise, educators report feeling abandoned, with no space to share doubts, dilemmas, or distress. This professional loneliness deepens emotional strain and feeds feelings of isolation, powerlessness, and frustration.

"I love what I do, but sometimes I feel like I'm disappearing. As if I were invisible, as if what I do mattered to no one." (Educator 26)

Faced with such institutional neglect and lack of support, many educators build informal networks of mutual support. They seek out trusted peers, create moments for shared listening in corridors, during breaks, or in end-of-day text messages. These daily acts of resistance and peer care are among the few antidotes to the structural loneliness in which their emotional work is performed.

Still, these informal networks—though invaluable—do not replace the need for clear institutional policies of care for professionals.

The organisational silence surrounding educators' emotional labour, the normalisation of self-sacrifice, and the absence of formal listening and support practices contribute to a scenario of symbolic invisibility. This invisibility hinders the recognition of emotional labour as a professional skill, obstructs its social legitimisation, and reinforces the idea that being an early childhood educator is merely a matter of vocation or "having a way with children"—ultimately absolving educational organisations of responsibility for the emotional well-being of their staff.

3.3. Social Recognition and Professional Identity: Between Love and Struggle

"I've heard: 'You just play with them, don't you?' That hurts." (Educator 31)

"I have a university degree and I'm treated like a nanny." (Educator 19)

"Our identity is constantly being questioned." (Educator 28)

The early childhood educators who participated in this study frequently reported feeling undervalued both socially and institutionally. This devaluation manifests in both explicit and subtle discourses that diminish their pedagogical role, reducing it to a caregiving function. The persistent association of day-care settings with "care"—as opposed to "education"—contributes to the symbolic delegitimisation of the profession and to the weakening of these educators' professional identity.

This tension between caring and educating is not new, but it remains particularly pronounced in day-care contexts, where educators are often perceived as maternal substitutes—despite holding higher education degrees and engaging in highly demanding pedagogical work.

The lack of recognition from institutional leadership, families, and broader society fosters a sense of frustration and an ongoing struggle for legitimacy. This struggle unfolds on multiple fronts: in asserting their professional identity to colleagues and managers, in defending the specificity of day-care work to families, and in demanding public policies that acknowledge the complexity and importance of their role.

> "It's like we constantly have to prove that our work matters, that we are educators." (Educator 21)

Despite these adversities, many educators engage in acts of symbolic and practical resistance. They claim spaces for continued professional development, lead pedagogical projects, build collaborative networks, and adopt critical, politicised discourses about their profession. These practices are acts of resistance against invisibility and devaluation, contributing to the reconstruction of a more affirmed and socially recognised professional identity.

The oscillation between pride in the profession and recurrent feelings of devaluation creates an identity-based ambivalence that demands constant negotiation. This ambivalence, far from signalling fragility, reveals the complexity of a profession that is constantly contested, contested for recognition, for voice, for social standing.

> "I love what I do, but sometimes I wonder if it's worth it." (Educator 16)

This question echoes through the words of many participants. Their love for the profession is not denied—on the contrary, it is reaffirmed as the ethical driver of their commitment—but it is accompanied by symbolic exhaustion, born of the constant need to justify, assert, and defend themselves.

The identity reconstruction of early childhood educators is thus a continuous process of resistance, symbolic negotiation, and search for legitimacy. This process is both individual and collective, and calls for the transformation of institutional conditions, public policies, and the social representations that (de)construct the profession.

3.4. Novice Educators in Day-Care: Fragility and Reinvention

> "When I started working in day-care, I felt like I had unlearned everything I was taught at university. It was a shock." (Educator 6)

> "During the first few months, I cried almost every day. I constantly felt like I was failing, without knowing why." (Educator 3)

The entry into professional day-care settings is described by novice educators as a time of profound disorientation, anguish, and, at times, loneliness. This "reality shock" (Tardif, 2002) stems from the dissonance between the expectations shaped during initial training—grounded in models of quality, reflexivity, and attentive listening—and the concrete conditions of the institutions in which they are placed. The impact is further intensified when these professionals are offered no induction or structured welcome.

> "No one explained anything to me. I learned through trial and error, with many tears and a strong urge to run away." (Educator 22)

Many educators report a lack of time for initial observation, insufficient support from management or leadership teams, and an institutional culture focused on routines and task fulfilment, often at the expense of meaningful pedagogical practice. The absence

of structured supervision contributes to a sense of helplessness and accelerates emotional exhaustion early in their careers.

These experiences reveal a structural weakness in professional induction processes. The fact that many educators are left alone in demanding rooms—with infants or very young children—without preparation or support, can lead to entrenched feelings of incompetence, fear of failure, and overwhelming self-demand.

Despite this adverse context, signs of resistance and reinvention also emerge. Some educators describe how they sought to observe more experienced colleagues, build trust with support staff, study after hours, or join formal and informal peer networks for shared reflection and support.

> "I started meeting with two colleagues to share materials, plans, questions, and offload." (Educator 25)

These strategies highlight the potential for the collective construction of knowledge and mutual support—a potential that remains largely unrecognised and informal. Many educators note that it was within these peer networks, more than through institutional structures, that they found validation and encouragement.

The experiences of novice educators expose not only their vulnerability, but also the ethical strength of their commitment. Most report strong intrinsic motivation, a desire to do well, to better understand the children, and to build meaningful relationships. However, when this drive is not echoed institutionally, it turns into frustration, sorrow, and the risk of premature exit from the profession.

> "I nearly gave up. But then I attended a training session where I realised I wasn't alone, that other professionals were going through the same thing. That gave me the courage to stay." (Educator 4)

This final account underscores the need for structured induction and mentoring policies. The dignified welcoming of a new educator must not depend on chance or the goodwill of colleagues. It requires consistent institutional mechanisms, committed leadership, and an organisational culture that recognises that no one is born an educator—one becomes one, in relationship, in practice, and in the care one also receives.

4. Discussion

The findings presented support an ecological and politically situated understanding of the well-being and professional identity of early childhood educators working in day-care settings. Across the four dimensions analysed, a profession emerges that is demanding, emotionally intense, and yet structurally unprotected.

The following discussion draws on the theoretical framework to further explore the meanings behind the practices, dilemmas, and forms of resistance identified throughout the study.

4.1. Professional Well-Being as an Ecological and Political Phenomenon

The working conditions reported—excessive ratios, lack of time, and physical and emotional overload—demonstrate that well-being cannot be understood as an individual matter, but rather as a reflection of the institutional ecologies and power structures in which educators are embedded. The data confirm Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological approach, according to which the different systems that shape professional life interact in complex ways, influencing teacher development.

In this sense, well-being should be conceived as a collective right and as an indicator of organisational justice (Cumming et al., 2020). Its absence, as evidenced by the participants' accounts, undermines not only educators' emotional balance but also the quality

of their interactions with children, families, and colleagues, and ultimately the sustainability of the profession itself.

4.2. The Invisibility of Emotional Labour and Silenced Suffering

Early childhood educators' emotional labour remains largely invisible, undervalued, and naturalised (Purper et al., 2023). This invisibility prevents it from being recognised as a legitimate professional competence, reducing it instead to personal traits, temperament, or an innate sense of vocation. The literature highlights that such devaluation leads to prolonged and silent suffering (Elfer, 2012; Ntim et al., 2023; Purper et al., 2023), as evidenced by testimonies of loneliness, exhaustion, and lack of institutional support.

Educators take on the emotional care of children, families, and even colleagues, yet they are rarely cared for themselves. This paradox underscores the urgent need for institutional policies that offer emotional support, such as reflective supervision and ongoing accompaniment (Purper et al., 2023). As Noddings (2012) argues, care cannot be unidirectional—it demands institutional reciprocity.

4.3. Professional Identity in Dispute: Tensions and Resistance

The professional identity of early childhood educators in day-care settings is marked by ongoing symbolic dispute. Social representations that continue to associate day-care work with maternal and caregiving roles clash with educators' academic training and ethical-pedagogical investment. This identity dissonance is a source of suffering, but also of resistance (Purper et al., 2023).

The literature emphasises that professional identity is continuously (re)negotiated through interactions, discourse, and context (Beijaard et al., 2004; Dubar, 1997). Educators not only resist these reductive images but also construct alternative forms of affirmation: they invest in further training and, despite time constraints, strive to integrate intentional and reflective practices into their work. These actions may be understood as micro-resistances that challenge invisibility and assert the profession as a site of pedagogical knowledge-making (Purper et al., 2023).

4.4. Novice Educators: The Absence of Induction and the Seeds of Reinvention

The experiences of early-career educators reveal, with particular clarity, the fragility of institutional structures for induction and professional support. The clash between training and practice, the lack of guidance, and the pervasive feeling of solitude are recurring themes in the participants' accounts. These experiences echo the literature that exposes the institutional void surrounding the early years of teaching practice (Flores et al., 2024; Ntim et al., 2023).

Yet what emerges is not solely vulnerability. Even under adverse conditions, novice educators display a remarkable capacity for resistance, creativity, and the search for meaning. The establishment of formal and informal support networks, engagement in individual reflection, and an ethical commitment to children demonstrate that—even in the absence of structured policies—reinvention is possible. But it is precisely this potential that must be recognised and nurtured, lest it dissolve into early burnout or lead to professional abandonment (Ntim et al., 2023).

Building sustainable and dignified early-career pathways demands consistent institutional mechanisms: structured induction programmes, supervision, time for professional listening, and symbolic recognition. Without such conditions, solitude and turnover will continue to haunt the profession; symptoms of a field that, though essential, is still treated with unjustifiable lightness (Ntim et al., 2023).

5. Conclusions

To be an early childhood educator in a day-care setting is to walk a tightrope between vocation and exhaustion, between affection and overload, between listening to others and silencing oneself. The testimonies gathered in this study reveal a profession that is emotionally dense, intellectually demanding, and structurally neglected. A profession reinvented every day on the day-care floor, in the calming touch, the steadying gesture, the welcoming word, even when there is no time, recognition, or proper conditions (Ntim et al., 2023; Purper et al., 2023).

The unbearable lightness of being an early childhood educator in day-care is not a sign of fragility, but an expression of deep ethical commitment to children, families, and the very act of education. Yet this lightness becomes unbearable when it relies solely on individual effort and love for the profession, without the support of public policy, dignified institutional conditions, and meaningful social recognition.

This article sought to give voice to the educators—so often absent from political and academic discourse—and to contribute to the construction of a pedagogy of dignity. A pedagogy that recognises educators' knowledge as legitimate, that values emotional labour as professional competence, and that understands care as a transformative political act (Purper et al., 2023).

The implications of this study are multiple. At the level of initial training, it is essential to prepare future educators for the emotional, institutional, and ethical challenges of working in day-care through supervised internships and moments of critical reflection. At the institutional level, urgent action is needed to implement career-start support mechanisms—induction programmes, mentoring, and reflective supervision—that guarantee welcome, listening, and professional development from day one. At the level of public policy, it is imperative to recognise day-care as an educational space, to provide teams with sufficient resources, ensure dignified career paths, and make visible the value of the work carried out with and for young children and their families.

The experiences shared by novice educators make clear the need for robust institutional policies that address professional loneliness and the pervasive sense of incompetence felt in the early stages. The absence of support at this critical time is not merely an individual shortcoming; it is a systemic symptom. Valuing early-career educators is a precondition for ensuring the sustainability of the profession and the quality of educational practice (Ntim et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, this study has limitations. Although diverse, the sample is not representative of the national context and is based on voluntary participation. The qualitative nature of the research prioritises depth of understanding, and thus does not permit generalisation. The data were collected within a specific sociopolitical context—the Portuguese day-care system—which affects the transferability of findings to other settings.

Future research should include longitudinal studies, comparative analyses across different institutional models, and the integration of other voices—those of assistants, managers, families, and policymakers. Their absence limits the breadth of the analysis and precludes a more polyphonic reading of the contexts. It is also essential to promote and assess the impact of induction policies and supervision frameworks on educators' trajectories, with particular attention to the prevention of early attrition.

Moreover, it is imperative that public policies align with international commitments such as the United Nations (2015) Sustainable Development Goals, ensuring health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, and decent work. To value ECEC in these terms is to value the people—especially women—who make it possible.

It is equally important to stress that the power of this work lies precisely in its committed listening and in its capacity to return to early childhood educators what has so often been denied them: the possibility of being recognised as knowledge producers.

And that return is not a final gesture—it is the beginning of a process of speaking out, of symbolic reconstruction, and of collective transformation.

What this article ultimately tells us is that no one should begin or walk their professional path alone. That institutional silence must be interrupted by policies of listening. That care for children, their families, and professionals—must be a collective calling. And that, in the unbearable lightness of certain beginnings, it is urgent to weave networks that sustain, support, and embrace.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

APEI	Associação de Profissionais de Educação de Infância [Association of Professionals in Early Childhood Education]
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EECERA	European Early Childhood Education Research Association
FST	Foundation for Science and Technology
OPHC	Operational Program for Human Capital

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