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MOTIVATION AND ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES AMONG ECCE STUDENTS

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Abstract: This research study titled "Career Motivation, Perspectives, and Anticipated Challenges Among ECCE Students in Choosing ECCE as a Career", investigates the factors shaping the professional pipeline of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector in Malaysia. The study aims to explore what motivates students to pursue a career in this ECCE field, how students interpret their future profession and the anticipated challenges they might face in the workforce. The study employed a qualitative case study design and data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed via deductive thematic analysis. The findings revealed that students' motivations are multifaceted, categorized into intrinsic, extrinsic, and altruistic drivers. Regarding professional identity, participants expressed a "dual identity", they view themselves as skilled educators, yet they perceive society continues to undervalue the profession as "babysitting". Finally, students identified severe structural workplace barriers, including inadequate salaries, high child-to-teacher ratios, physical exhaustion, which leads many to view upward mobility into lecturing or administration as necessary for a sustainable career. The study concludes that while an internal sense of "calling" and altruism successfully attract individuals to the ECCE profession, these factors are insufficient for long-term retention in the face of systemic undervaluation. The key takeaway is that workforce stability requires systemic changes, specifically wage parity and enhanced professional recognition, to align societal status with the critical importance of early childhood development.

Keyword: early childhood care and education (ECCE), career motivation, professional identity, anticipated challenges, ECCE students

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is globally recognized as a foundation for lifelong learning and holistic development, as emphasized in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4.2) (Ngadni & Sammy, 2025). The quality of ECCE is closely linked to the quality of educators who choose to enter and remain in the profession. Yet, despite its significance, the ECCE sector continues to face persistent challenges in attracting and retaining qualified professionals, raising critical questions about what motivates students to pursue a career in this field.

In this research, "perspectives" refers to the subjective frameworks that shape students' professional identity focusing on how they see themselves, whether as "real" teachers or caregivers and their perceived professional value, which encompasses awareness of undervaluation, lack of recognition, and social status (Williams, 2012; Kim, 2010). These perspectives are crucial in understanding how future educators conceptualize their roles and the systemic barriers that influence their career trajectories.

In Malaysia, similar workforce challenges heighten concerns about sustaining a skilled ECCE pipeline. Issues of undervaluation, low remuneration, and limited career progression continue to undermine the profession's appeal, making it essential to explore how ECCE students view the field before entering the

workforce. This study therefore examines the multifaceted aspects of career choice among ECCE students, investigating the motivating factors that lead them to the profession, their perspectives on professional identity and value, and the challenges they anticipate along their journey.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Malaysia's ECCE sector has expanded rapidly in response to national policies emphasizing early childhood development. ECCE is understood as providing care and education for children from birth until about six years old (Rahmatullah et al., 2021). It is a unique profession that combines caregiving and pedagogy, often described through the concept of "educarers," requiring specialized knowledge and skills distinct from other teaching levels (Lumsden & Musgrave, 2023).

Despite its critical role in shaping lifelong learning outcomes, the profession is often perceived as "babysitting" rather than skilled pedagogy, leading to societal undervaluation. Globally and in Malaysia, the ECCE workforce faces a shortage of qualified educators, threatening progress in child development outcomes (Ngadni & Sammy, 2025). The quality of ECCE is directly linked to the qualifications and professionalism of its educators, making workforce sustainability a pressing concern.

Understanding ECCE students' career motivations and choices is vital for ensuring a sustainable pipeline of future educators (Ngadni & Sammy, 2025; Wang et al., 2024). Motivation plays a central role in shaping an individual's decision to enter and remain committed to teaching (Simaremare et al., 2025). These motivations can be categorized into three broad types:

- Intrinsic motivations: internal drivers such as personal fulfilment, passion for children, and commitment to the subject.
- Extrinsic motivations: external factors including salary, job security, benefits, family-work balance, and job transferability (Simaremare et al., 2025; Yüce et al., 2013; Nyarko et al., 2024).
- Altruistic motivations: the perceived social utility of teaching, encompassing the desire to contribute to society, make a meaningful impact, and promote social equity.

Previous studies highlight that while intrinsic and altruistic motivations often drive entry into the ECCE field, structural challenges such as low salaries, high child-to-teacher ratios, and limited recognition undermine retention. According to Simaremare et al. (2025), investigating student expectations and perspectives is crucial because their initial, often idealistic, perceptions of the profession may differ significantly from the realities they encounter, potentially reshaping their career aspirations.

This research situates itself within this context, exploring how ECCE students reconcile their sense of calling with the systemic challenges of undervaluation, limited career progression, and societal perceptions of the profession.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although ECCE is globally recognized as foundational for child development, the profession in Malaysia continues to suffer from systemic undervaluation. Students entering the field often face a dual identity: they see themselves as educators, yet society frequently perceives them as caretakers. This mismatch between

self-perception and societal recognition contributes to instability in the sector, with motivated individuals at risk of leaving due to unsustainable working conditions.

The ECCE workforce faces a persistent shortage of qualified professionals, driven by external factors such as low compensation, demanding workloads, and limited career progression opportunities (Ngadni & Sammy, 2025). While existing research has examined workforce turnover and economic variables, much of it relies on quantitative approaches that overlook the lived experiences of ECCE students and practitioners (Williams, 2012; Laney, 2025). There remains a significant gap in context-specific studies that explore how ECCE students' motivations, professional perceptions, and anticipated challenges interact with systemic barriers (Simaremare et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024; Li & Guo, 2024).

Specifically, insufficient attention has been given to how students reconcile their initial, often idealistic, expectations with the realities of undervaluation, limited recognition, and structural constraints (Lumsden & Musgrave, 2023). Addressing this gap is essential, as understanding students' perspectives provides an evidence base for targeted early interventions, refinement of teacher education curricula, strengthening of career decision self-efficacy, and policy development aimed at improving retention (Simaremare et al., 2025; Ngadni & Sammy, 2025).

Ultimately, the sustainability of Malaysia's ECCE workforce depends on identifying how students construct their professional identities in a context that often devalues their work. Without such insights, the sector risks ongoing instability and the loss of passionate individuals who are critical to advancing child development outcomes (Hagemeyer, 2025).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the career motivations that influence ECCE students to choose ECCE as a career?
2. How do ECCE students perceive the Early Childhood Care and Education profession?
3. What challenges might ECCE students face in choosing ECCE as a career?

METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative case study design situated within the interpretive paradigm. The interpretive paradigm emphasizes humanistic and naturalistic inquiry, allowing the researcher to explore lived experiences in authentic contexts (Muzari et al., 2022). A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the depth of ECCE students' motivations, perspectives, and anticipated challenges, focusing on meaning-making rather than statistical generalization (Creswell, 2014). The design was guided by Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and Self-Efficacy Theory, both of which highlight the interaction between personal beliefs and environmental influences in shaping career choices. This theoretical lens enabled the study to examine how students' confidence and identity are sustained despite systemic undervaluation of the ECCE profession.

A pilot study was conducted to ensure clarity and relevance of the semi-structured interview questions. Two ECCE lecturers at QIU, with expertise in qualitative research, reviewed the instrument for face validity.

Their feedback confirmed that the questions were accessible to students without practicum experience and aligned with the study's objectives. The final interview guide was refined accordingly and approved for use.

The target population comprised undergraduate ECCE students at QIU, specifically those in their second and third years of study. These cohorts were selected because they had progressed beyond introductory coursework and could articulate more developed professional perspectives. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants with relevant academic backgrounds and career aspirations (Creswell, 2014). A total of ten female students participated, consistent with qualitative inquiry standards that prioritize depth of insight over breadth of coverage. However, this study is limited to only one educational institution and the sample consisted solely of female students. This may limit the diversity of perspective and generalisability of the findings to broader ECCE student populations.

Table 1
Participants' Data

Participant	Year of Study	Gender
Student A	Year 2	Female
Student B	Year 2	Female
Student C	Year 2	Female
Student D	Year 2	Female
Student E	Year 2	Female
Student F	Year 3	Female
Student G	Year 3	Female
Student H	Year 3	Female
Student I	Year 3	Female
Student J	Year 3	Female

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method. This format allowed for conversational yet focused discussions, enabling participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring coverage of the study's objectives (Mashuri et al., 2022). The interview guide was structured around the three research objectives: career motivations, professional perspectives, and anticipated challenges. Each session was conducted one-on-one, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Probing techniques were employed to encourage elaboration and explore emerging themes.

Data analysis followed Creswell's (2014) linear and hierarchical approach, moving from raw textual data to thematic interpretation. A deductive framework guided by SCCT and Self-Efficacy Theory was applied. The process involved transcription of interviews, repeated reading of transcripts to gain overall meaning, and systematic coding using the 6Rs strategy (Robust, Reflective, Resplendent, Relevant, Radical, Righteous). Codes were then aggregated into major themes, which were represented through narrative passages supported by direct quotations. Finally, themes were interpreted in relation to SCCT and Self-Efficacy Theory and compared with existing literature to identify convergences or divergences. This systematic process ensured that the essence of students' professional identity and vocational drive was captured authentically.

Rigour was established through multiple strategies to ensure trustworthiness. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation and member checking, which validated the accuracy of findings.

Dependability was achieved by maintaining a detailed audit trail that documented the research process for consistency. Confirmability was safeguarded through reflexivity and transparent documentation, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in data rather than researcher bias. Transferability was supported by providing rich, thick descriptions of participants and contexts, enabling readers to assess applicability to similar settings.

Ethical protocols were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants signed informed consent forms, were assured of confidentiality, and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity, and all data were securely stored for five years before destruction, in line with social science research standards.

In summary, this methodology provided a rigorous framework for exploring ECCE students' career motivations, perspectives, and anticipated challenges. By employing purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis guided by SCCT and Self-Efficacy Theory, the study ensured that students' voices were authentically represented. Ethical safeguards and trustworthiness measures further strengthened the integrity of the research.

FINDINGS

Career Motivations

The study revealed that ECCE students' motivations for entering the profession are complex and layered, reflecting a blend of personal passion, practical considerations, and altruistic values. Intrinsic motivations were the most frequently cited. One participant expressed *"I love teaching children."* while another participant shared that they *"feel comfortable and happy around children."* This suggests that intrinsic motivation remains a dominant entry factor into the ECCE profession, reinforcing the idea that emotional fulfilment plays a central role in career choice. Several participants referred to ECCE as a "calling," highlighting that their decision was not merely career-driven but rooted in a sense of personal fulfilment and emotional connection to the profession. This intrinsic motivation was often expressed in terms of self-satisfaction, enjoyment of teaching, and the desire to make a difference in children's lives.

Extrinsic motivations were also significant, though more pragmatic in nature. Students acknowledged that while financial compensation in ECCE is modest, the profession offers stability, predictable working hours, and opportunities for career transferability. One participant explained, *"In 5 years, I think I will be a lecturer. I want to lead all the future educators to do like me."* For some, the possibility of advancing into administrative or lecturing roles provided reassurance that ECCE could serve as a stepping stone toward broader career pathways. These external factors, though secondary to passion, were nonetheless important in shaping their career decisions. This indicates that while extrinsic factors are not the primary drivers, they function as stabilising elements that influence long-term career considerations.

Altruistic motivations reflected students' desire to contribute meaningfully to society. Many participants articulated the belief that ECCE educators play a critical role in shaping future generations, and that their work carries social utility beyond the classroom. One participant stated, *"I am passionate about working with young children and supporting their learning and development."* This sense of responsibility and commitment to social

equity reinforced their decision to pursue ECCE, even in the face of systemic undervaluation. This highlights that altruistic motivations are closely tied to students' perception of social responsivity, positioning ECCE as a meaningful and socially impactful career.

Perspectives on the ECCE Profession

Students' perspectives revealed a tension between their self-perception as professional educators and the societal view of ECCE as mere caregiving. Professional identity was strongly asserted by participants. They consistently described themselves as educators, emphasizing the specialized skills, pedagogical knowledge, and developmental expertise required to teach young children. One participant shared, *"It can be frustrating because, as an early childhood educator, we know the skills, the planning and the knowledge required, the teaching supports the young children."* Students rejected the notion that ECCE was simply "babysitting," stressing that their role encompassed holistic child development, including cognitive, emotional, and social growth.

Perceived professional value, however, was marked by frustration. Students expressed awareness of the undervaluation of ECCE in Malaysia, noting that society often fails to recognize the profession's importance. This created a "dual identity": while they viewed themselves as skilled educators, they felt externally perceived as caretakers. This duality was a recurring theme, shaping their sense of professional worth and influencing their long-term career outlook.

Anticipated Challenges

Students identified several anticipated challenges that could hinder their long-term commitment to ECCE. Structural and workplace barriers were the most prominent. Participants cited low salaries, high child-to-teacher ratios, and physical exhaustion as major concerns. One participant mentioned that *"I think the low salary and handling children, too many tasks to do, and handling a large number of children."* These challenges were seen as unsustainable for long-term retention, with many students predicting that they might eventually seek upward mobility into lecturing or administrative roles to secure more stable career pathways.

Social devaluation and career persistence also emerged as critical issues. Students expressed concern that the lack of societal recognition would erode their motivation over time. While intrinsic and altruistic motivations were strong entry points into the profession, participants acknowledged that these alone might not be sufficient to sustain them in the face of systemic undervaluation.

Thematic Analysis

Figure 1 illustrates the interrelationship between the three major domains explored in this study: career motivations, perspectives on the ECCE profession, and anticipated challenges. The diagram visually represents how these themes interact to shape ECCE students' professional identity and career outlook.

On the left, Career Motivations are divided into three categories: intrinsic, extrinsic, and altruistic. Intrinsic motivation reflects students' internal passion and emotional fulfilment derived from teaching young children. Extrinsic motivation encompasses practical considerations such as job stability, manageable working

hours, and opportunities for career advancement. Altruistic motivation highlights the moral and social dimension of teaching, where students view ECCE as a means to contribute positively to society and support children's holistic development.

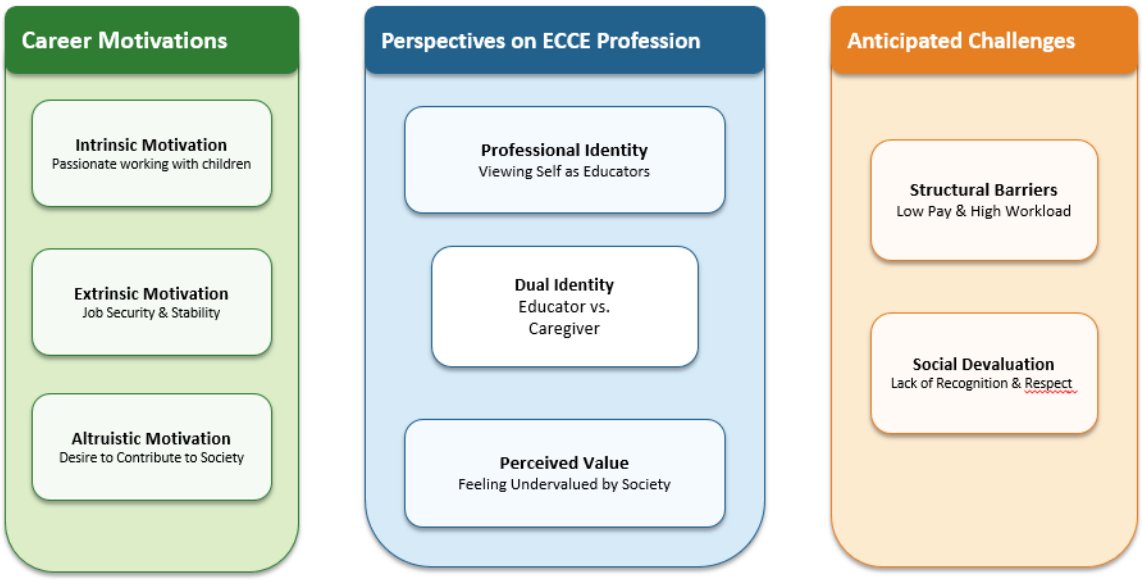
At the center, Perspectives on the ECCE Profession capture the dual identity experienced by students. They perceive themselves as professional educators equipped with specialized pedagogical skills, yet they are often viewed by society as mere caregivers. This tension between professional identity and perceived value forms the core of their lived experience, influencing their sense of pride, recognition, and long-term commitment to the field. The central icon depicting "Educator vs. Caregiver" symbolizes this duality, emphasizing the gap between self-perception and societal recognition.

On the right, Anticipated Challenges represent the external barriers that threaten workforce sustainability. Structural challenges such as low pay, high child-to-teacher ratios, and physical exhaustion are compounded by social devaluation and lack of respect for ECCE professionals. These factors collectively undermine retention and contribute to the profession's instability.

The arrows connecting the three sections demonstrate the progression from motivation to perception and ultimately to challenge. Students enter the field driven by passion and altruism, develop a professional identity shaped by their training and experiences, but encounter systemic obstacles that test their persistence. The map thus encapsulates the dynamic interplay between internal motivations and external realities, underscoring the need for systemic reforms to align societal recognition with the critical importance of early childhood education.

Figure 1

Thematic Analysis



Overall, the findings highlight the paradox at the heart of ECCE students' career trajectories. They are motivated by passion, altruism, and a sense of calling, yet they anticipate systemic challenges that threaten their persistence in the profession. Their perspectives reveal a dual identity: they see themselves as educators, but society often perceives them as caretakers. This mismatch between self-perception and societal recognition,

coupled with structural barriers such as low pay and heavy workloads, creates uncertainty about long-term retention. This study underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms. Wage parity, improved working conditions, and enhanced professional recognition are essential to align societal perceptions with the critical importance of early childhood education. Without such changes, the ECCE sector risks losing motivated individuals whose passion and altruism alone cannot sustain them in the face of undervaluation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight a paradox at the heart of ECCE students' career trajectories. On one hand, students are deeply motivated by intrinsic and altruistic factors. They describe ECCE as a "calling," driven by passion for children, personal fulfilment, and a desire to contribute meaningfully to society. These motivations align with global literature that emphasizes the importance of intrinsic and altruistic drivers in attracting individuals to teaching professions, especially in ECCE settings where emotional commitment and personal fulfilment are considered vital motivations for workforce entry (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). However, the study also reveals that these motivations alone are insufficient to sustain long-term retention in the face of systemic undervaluation.

The undervaluation of ECCE as "babysitting" undermines professional identity, creating dissonance between self-perception and societal recognition. Students consistently view themselves as educators, emphasizing their pedagogical expertise and developmental knowledge, yet they are externally perceived as caretakers. This dual identity reflects a broader global challenge in ECCE, where professional recognition lags behind the critical importance of early childhood education. Similar findings in international studies suggest that without elevating ECCE to the status of a respected profession, workforce instability will persist across many other countries experiencing recruitment and retaining workforce challenges within the ECCE industry (UNESCO, 2024; OECD, 2023).

Structural challenges further compound this issue. Low wages, high child-to-teacher ratios, and physical exhaustion were identified as critical barriers to retention. These findings resonate with global literature, which consistently highlights that professional recognition and wage parity are essential for workforce stability and long-term teacher retention (ILO & UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2023). Students in this study anticipated that upward mobility into lecturing or administrative roles might be necessary to sustain a long-term career, reflecting the inadequacy of current workplace conditions.

The dual identity expressed by students underscores the urgent need for systemic change. Without reforms that enhance professional recognition, improve compensation, and reduce structural barriers, Malaysia risks losing motivated individuals to other sectors where a similar trend reported in recent international workforce studies across both developed and developing ECCE context (UNESCO, 2024). The findings therefore emphasize that workforce stability requires not only attracting students through passion and altruism but also retaining them through systemic reforms that align societal perceptions with the critical importance of ECCE.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores that while ECCE students enter the profession with strong intrinsic and altruistic motivations, systemic undervaluation and workplace challenges threaten long-term retention. The paradox of professional identity where students see themselves as educators but are perceived by society as caretakers highlights the dissonance between self-perception and external recognition. Structural barriers such as low wages, high child-to-teacher ratios, and physical strain further exacerbate this challenge, making the profession unsustainable for many.

Workforce stability requires reforms that address these systemic issues. Wage parity with other teaching professions, enhanced professional recognition, and policies to reduce child-to-teacher ratios and physical exhaustion are critical steps. By implementing such reforms, Malaysia can align societal perceptions with the vital role of ECCE, ensuring that the profession is both sustainable and respected.

Ultimately, the findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature emphasizing that passion and altruism, while powerful motivators, cannot alone sustain a workforce. Systemic change is essential to secure the future of ECCE, safeguard the professional identity of educators, and ensure that early childhood development receives the recognition it deserves as a cornerstone of lifelong learning.

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