"There for The Right Reasons": New Zealand Early Childhood Professionals'

Sense of Calling, Life Goals, Personal and Spiritual Values

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Abstract

Using a mixed-method approach, this present study examined the roles of calling and the relation between life goals and spiritual values among early childhood professionals in New Zealand. Among the 102 participants who completed the surveys, 24 participated in the follow-up individual interviews. In line with previous research, results showed that the five spiritual values—conformity, universalism, tradition, benevolence, and security—positively correlated with at least three intrinsic life goals, but showed a negative correlation with at least three of the four extrinsic goals. In addition, all non-spiritual values—self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, and power—correlated negatively with at least three of the intrinsic life goals. A similar pattern was found between the correlation between all non-spiritual values and extrinsic life goals. Interview data showed that participants who self-identified as having experienced a call to work with young children actively engaged with their calling. They also affirmed that their calling was experienced at a deeply personal and emotional level. Participants also recognized the important impact of life goals, personal and spiritual values on their work. This paper concludes with implications for future research and practice.

Keywords: sense of calling, life goals, personal values, spiritual values, early childhood education, New Zealand

"There for The Right Reasons": New Zealand Early Childhood Professionals' Sense of Calling, Life Goals, Personal and Spiritual Values

Introduction

People approach their work in many different ways, and different motivations and work orientations often serve an influential role in career choice and development. Assuming people have choices and freedom in the career paths they take, what they choose will reflect who they are and what they value. For example, one may argue that people who become pilots would have different underlying values than those who choose to work as kindergarten teachers.

Some researchers have argued along similar lines. For instance, studies showed that many education professionals have chosen a profession that matches their callings and abilities (e.g., Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2012; Kung, 2011; Serow et al., 1994). Consistent with this line of reasoning, others argued that teaching is not just a skilled, competency-based profession; on the contrary, from the humanistic point of view, teaching is a human experience based on meaningful relationships and the notion that the teaching self is central to teaching (e.g., Giles, 2007; Palmer, 1981;1998).

Indeed, education professionals' work orientation, life goals, and personal values influence the ways they make important instructional decisions related to the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (e.g., Palmer, 1981; 1998; Schraw & Olafson, 2008; Zeichner & Liston, 2013). Accordingly, this entails teachers helping students develop sound values and nurturing essential dispositions such as empathy, commitment, and a positive view of self and others that contribute toward a deeper sense of meaning and life purpose (Miller, 2019).

So what are early childhood education (ECE) professionals' orientations toward their vocation? How do ECE professionals describe their life goals and the impact of these goals

on their practices? How do ECE professionals perceive that their spiritual values affect their work with children? Research in these areas has not been done extensively, especially in the context of early years education in New Zealand. Guided by previous research, this study attempted to examine ECE professionals' sense of calling, their personal goals, and values in relation to their practice. Each of these, I believe, is a critical element in developing quality teacher education programs and improving ECE services. Using a mixed-method approach, this study aimed to develop a deep understanding of the participants' experiences of the call to work in the ECE sector, and to explore the meaning and patterns of ECE professionals' perceptions of their life goals, and personal values.

Background: Calling, Life Goals, and Personal Values

Calling

A look into the literature shows that there are several themes that consistently dominate calling definitions in the literature. Over the decades, scholars have conceptualized calling in different ways so that now many definitions of calling exist in the literature. A calling has been defined as a meaningful and prosocial career orientation, an internal pull toward an action or a line of work, as prompted by an external force such as God, societal need, family, or legacy (Duffy et al., 2009). Some conceptualized it as a psychological construct or a strongly held belief that one's life purpose is to fulfill a specific role, with an attitude that in so doing, his or her effort will make a meaningful contribution to the greater good of the broader society (e.g., Bellah et al., 1986; Kung, 2011). Another aspect that is used to describe calling is the notion that the sense of calling often requires substantial sacrifice, a deep sense of passion, and that strengths, gifts, or talents will be used in pursuing and fulfilling the calling (Coulson et al., 2013).

It has also been well identified and supported in the literature that viewing one's career as a calling is associated with positive aspects of career development (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Duffy et al., 2009). Many studies revealed that individuals who perceive their work as a calling are more likely to integrate their personal values into what they feel called to do, and use a wide range of strategies to connect their calling with work (e.g., Coulson et al., 2013; Duffy et al., 2012). For example, in Dobrow and Tosti-Khara's (2011) seven-year long study on a group of aspiring musicians, participants who viewed their career as a calling displayed more career commitment and enthusiasm, and were more likely to choose a music-oriented college program. Using a calling scale that assesses meaningful passion for work, these researchers reported a link between the presence of a calling in the participants' career and life satisfaction. Hirschi and Hermann's (2013) study which surveyed a group of German students at three time points over one year, showed that calling predicted an increase in career planning and self-efficacy. Findings of these studies suggest that calling may relate to positive work and well-being outcomes over time, and those who have higher levels of calling are more likely to experience personal meaningfulness and make sacrifice for the work they feel called to do (e.g., Elangovan, et al., 2010; Hall & Chandler, 2005).

Life Goals

Goals are generally referred to as personal strivings that people expend energy trying to achieve (e.g., Diener & Fujita, 1995; Emmons,1989; Zhang et al., 2014). Research shows that life goals and expectations about the possible selves that people hope to achieve help individuals gain a direction or a sense of purpose in life. Consistent with this line of reasoning, some studies have found that individuals who have a sense of value and identity in their life pursuits experience higher levels of meaning, and those with personal goal setting

and attainment plans are more likely to successfully manage adversity (e.g., Diener & Fujita, 1995; Frankl, 1963; Zhang & Zhang, 2017).

Prior research has also shown that life goals are often associated with overall well-being and self-actualization, significantly negatively correlated with anxiety and physical problems (e.g., Massey et al., 2008; Sheldon et al., 2004). For instance, Schmuck, Kasser, and Ryan (2000) found that college students' intrinsic goals (e.g., affiliation, sense of community feeling) are associated with a myriad of benefits for both physical health and psychological well-being. In addition, those who have high expectations of success adopt future orientation attitudes and are therefore less likely to engage in risky and reckless behaviors such as substance abuse, alcohol consumption, and promiscuous sex (Palfai & Weafer, 2006; Ravert, 2009).

In a nutshell, the benefits of having life goals have been well identified by many researchers. These developments reflect a growing interest in this aspect of personal life within the broader context of society. This is rooted in a consistent interest and search for significance and meaning in life, and more specifically, in the area in which most people spend the majority of our waking hours and energy—our work.

Personal Values

Values are commonly defined as guiding principles in an individual's life (Schwartz, 1992). Although personal values can be abstract, they motivate actions and are often reflected in behaviors. For example, they guide us to set goals and motivate us to achieve those goals (e.g., Kasser et al., 2002; Schwartz & Huismans, 1995). This line of research has been extended to suggest that personal values are the motivational components of purpose and life meaning (Reker & Wong, 1988), and that spiritual values in particular positively

correlate with high levels of life satisfaction and are associated with better mental health (e.g., Diener & Fujita, 1995; Zhang, et al., 2014).

According to Schwartz's circumplex model, there are four broad types of values: self-transcendence, conservation, self-enhancement, and openness to change (Schwartz, 1992). *Self-transcendence* refers to universalism (e.g., understanding, appreciation, and tolerance) and benevolence (e.g., preservation and enhancement of the welfare of others). *Conservation* includes values of tradition (i.e., commitment and acceptance of the ideas provided by traditional culture or religion), conformity (i.e., restraint of impulses that will likely harm others and violate social expectations), and security (i.e., harmony and stability of society, of relationships, and of self). *Self-enhancement* includes power and achievement, while *openness to change* refers to values of self-direction, stimulation, and hedonism. More specifically, self-transcendence and conservation values are often referred to as *spiritual values*, as they are especially relevant to the pursuit of spirituality (Boswell et al., 2001), while self-enhancement values are commonly known as *non-spiritual* values. According to Kasser et al. (2002), compared to other general values, these spiritual values help form higher personal goals as they direct personal development and are conducive to well-being.

In summary, in its essence, human beings' ultimate concerns over the existence and meaning of life, as well as the central motivating aims in life have often found expression in one form or another through their calling, life goals, and personal values. Building upon the literature that has been reviewed, for the purposes of this study, a *calling* is operationally defined as an internal pull that arises from external sources such as God, societal need, and family legacy, toward an action or a career that provides personal meaning and purpose and is used to serve others in some capacity (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Dik et al., 2009). *Life goals* are conceptualized as desired states and outcomes that people seek to achieve. In the present

study, they refer to enduring personal goals that include what one plans for, carries out, and seek to accomplish during the next ten years (McAdams, 1994; Zhang et al., 2014). More specifically, these goals include intrinsic goals, which refer to service, health, personal growth, and relationship, and extrinsic life goals, which include fame, financial success, physical appearance, and power. In line with Schwartz's model, *spiritual values* are broadly defined to include the self-transcendent values (namely benevolence and universalism) as well as three conservation values (tradition, conformity, and security), and the non-spiritual values are the three self-enhancement values which include self-direction, stimulation, hedonism (Schwartz, 1992). Based on the literature, it was hypothesized that ECE professionals' intrinsic life goals are positively correlated with whether they hold spiritual values. In contrast, extrinsic goals did not have similar association.

Methodology

In this study, I focused on early childhood professionals due to situating my larger study in the context of early years care and education. Ethics approval to conduct this study was obtained, and all participants provided informed consent to partake in the study and were assured of their anonymity and right to withdraw their data up to the point of analysis.

Study Design

The present study was conducted using a mixed-methods approach, with a qualitative component giving context to the quantitative results. While the survey focused on the correlations between the participants' life goals and values, the interviews enabled an in-depth qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying personal experiences and perspectives on complex issues. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods provided a better understanding of ECE professionals' work orientations and personal goals

and values, while at the same time ensuring that the limitations of one type of data are balanced by the strengths of another (Cohen et al., 2018; Punch, 2013).

Participants

Invitation to participate went out to a wide range of early childhood service providers in New Zealand who passed on this invitation to their colleagues and circles of friends, so participation was self-selected. Participants (N=102) included 79 certified early childhood teachers and 23 other professionals who were either teacher aides, home-based educators (who were not required to be certified ECE teachers at the time of the study), or administrators. Of the participants (n=98/102) responding to demographic information, 86 were female and 12 were male; 75 were native New Zealanders, with the rest (n=27/102) being immigrants from other countries. Participants' mean age was 33.6 years (SD=1.96). About 42.2% (n=43/102) of the participants identified themselves as Christian, 21.6% (n=22/102) as Catholic, 8.8% (n=9/102) as Hindi, 7.8% (n=8/102) as Buddhists, and 5.9% (n=6/102) as Muslim. About 13.7% (n=14/102) of the participants said they had no religion, were not currently practicing any, or religion was not important to them. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Instruments

The Aspirations Index, which measured life goals, and the *Schwartz' Value Survey,* which was used to assess the participants' personal values*,* were both presented to the participants.

The Aspirations Index. The index was adapted from Kasser and Ryan's studies (1996; 2001) which demonstrated the measure's test-retested reliability and internal reliability. Participants were presented with a set of personal goals (as listed in the *Aspiration Index*) they might have and would like to achieve in the next 10 years. Using a 1 (not at all

important) to 5 (of supreme importance) scale, participants rated the importance that the goals be attained. In this present study, the timeframe *the next 10 years* was used to help participants focus on the goals that were specific, achievable, and personally important to them; this timeframe also set this measure apart from other broad life goals that may resemble value measures.

These life goals items were drawn from eight domains of life: four of which are defined as "intrinsic" (personal growth, community contribution, relationship, and health), and four defined as "extrinsic" (financial success, physical appearance, fame, and power). Example items include "To work for the betterment of society" (community contribution), "To be famous" (fame), "At the end of my life, to be able to look back on my life as meaningful and complete" (personal growth), "To have an image that others find appealing" (physical appearance), and "To be rich" (financial success).

Schwartz' Value Survey. To date, Schwartz' Value Survey (SVS; Schwartz, 1992) is the most widely used measure of personal values. The ten values in the SVS include: conformity, tradition, benevolence, universalism, security, self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, and power. In line with Schwartz's model, in this study, spiritual values are defined broadly to include the self-transcendent values (namely benevolence and universalism) as well as three conservation values (tradition, conformity, and security), and the non-spiritual values include self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, and power (i.e., social power/authority). All Cronbach's alphas fell within the range of 0.77 to 0.80.

Individual Interviews. Among the 102 participants who completed the surveys, 24 (ages 23-45; M=35.5, SD=3.1) agreed to participate in the follow-up individual interviews. Seventeen of the interviewees were female and seven were male who lived and worked in

various regions across New Zealand. As semi-structured interviews allow freedom for researchers to follow up answers to get more information or to clarify the participants responses (Cohen et al., 2008; Punch, 2013), individual semi-structured interviews were seen as appropriate for this study. A semi-structured protocol with 12 open-ended questions was used to elicit further information and capture participants' perceptions of the sense of calling, life goals and values. All questions were pilot tested and two experts in the field were invited to review the items and provide feedback regarding the clarity of items, their meaning, and their wording. Each interviewee was interviewed for about 30 minutes.

Findings and Analysis

Survey Data Analysis

To test the links between the participants' spiritual values and life goals, correlational analyses were performed and calculated. Although the focus of this study was on spiritual values, all ten values in the SVS were measured: conformity, tradition, benevolence, universalism, self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, and security. All participants were presented with the ten values and asked to rank order the importance of the values.

The correlations between the values and life goals are examined using the SPSS software and are presented in Table 2. Two sets of correlational findings are particularly relevant to the purpose of the study. First, the five spiritual values—conformity, universalism, tradition, benevolence, and security—positively correlated with at least three intrinsic life goals. As also presented in Table 2, all the spiritual values negatively correlated with at least three of the four extrinsic goals. Second, all non-spiritual values—self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, and power—correlated negatively with at least three of the intrinsic life goals. A similar pattern was found between the correlation between all non-spiritual

values and extrinsic life goals. In particular the extrinsic life goal *power* exhibited a positive correlation with all of the five non-spiritual values, and all non-spiritual values correlated positively with at least two of the four extrinsic life goals. In sum, these patterns of correlations between values and life goals are consistent with prior research (e.g., Schmuck et al., 2000; Zhang et al., 2014) and provide evidence supportive of the present study.

Interview Responses

To give voice to the attitudes captured in the surveys, I reported results of the follow-up interviews partially in narrative statements, with quotes drawn from participants as supportive evidence. Though space allows for only some of the participants' statements to be presented below, these statements are a compilation of detailed information representing rich descriptions of the themes that evolved from the data analysis.

The focus of the interviews was on ECE professionals' experiences of the sense of calling, as well as the impact of their personal goals and spiritual values on their work with young children. Data analysis was based on the transcribed version of participants' responses to the interview questions. Participants' responses were first transcribed, categorized, and labeled in the open coding process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The raw data were then analyzed for distinctive features of participants' perceptions and experiences of calling to work with young children as well as their life goals and spiritual values. A list of emergent and recurring themes in the transcripts was then created. Quotes were selected based on richness of content which allowed for a deepening appreciation of the notions of calling, life goals, and spiritual values narrated by the participants. This led to the next stage, the axial coding process, in which concepts were generated and relationships among components were identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Next, the data were read through and coded again. Lastly, themes were compared with existing literature and the originally coded themes.

Main themes that evolved from the data analysis include: (a) perceptions of the calling; (b) experience of the calling to work with young children; (c) the influence of calling on practice; (d) life goals for the next 10 years; (e) the influence of life goals on practice, (f) the most important values in life, and (g) the influence of values on practice. These main themes are presented in Table 3.

Perceptions of the Calling. In keeping with characterizations commonly noted in the literature, data accrued from the interviews indicated that many participants conceptualized a calling as a multi-faceted construct (Coulson et al., 2013; Kung, 2011). Some of the core calling themes identified by the participants include: passion for the profession, personal and professional identities, meaningful contribution (e.g., making an impact on young children), sacrifice (e.g., I won't become rich for being a teacher but I am going to stick to it), a sense of destiny and life purpose (e.g., I've always known I would be a teacher), and awareness of their roles (e.g., My role as an ECE professional is to support the children's learning the best I can).

When the participants were asked about their perspectives of calling, they appeared to be mindful of the nature of the vocation/calling. For example, one teacher (Participant 12) commented:

> I'm not hugely spiritual but I am always interested in the spiritual side of my life. I personally believe that each person has a unique role to play in this world. We are just like different pieces of a puzzle, and we are all called to fulfill our God-given destiny and fit together like puzzle pieces. I know I am here for the right reasons.
>
> Participant 16, an ECE teacher, emphasized the importance of calling in her identity by stating "Being a teacher is something I have evolved into… I can't see myself not being a teacher."

It also appeared that having a calling meant different things to different people. Some participants think of a calling as something they always loved to do or something they would rather do than anything else. For example, Participant 8, an experienced teacher who had been in the field for 9 years, said, "I always feel that the purpose of my life is to be a teacher who makes an impact in the next generation." Another ECE professional (Participant 11; who worked as shadow teacher for young children with autism) reflected:

> My calling as a Christian is to bring glory to the holy name of God. I believe that the way I live and relate to others, including the children I work with, is a direct reflection of the name of God.

In addition, interviewees consistently stated that they were committed to their work to the extent that they were willing to give up more lucrative jobs (n=12/24), opportunities to pursue hobbies (e.g., recreational sports; n=8/24), personal time, or different lifestyles (n=4/24). For example, one Māori female teacher shared that she was always drawn to children who needed support most (in her case it was the Māori children who had special needs) and she would always do everything she could to step up and support them. She would stay after school to talk to parents who had concerns about their children whenever there was a need.

Over half of the participants (n=16/24; 67%) described working with young children and that teaching was something they always wanted to do as a calling. The following statements describe how these participants felt about their calling:

> It's a very noble calling to work in the ECE sector. I am passionate about maximizing the best in people (the children) to bring out their greatest potential (Participant 12)

> In all my life I always wanted to have my own ECE center. I believe in holistic

education and I wanted to run centers based on my personal philosophy of education

(Participant 22).

Is there something, though, that characterizes all teaching young children and

distinguishes it from other professions? I believe that there is. I used to think teaching

was a job. And then I thought it was a profession. And now I'm of the opinion that

it's a calling, and for this I was made (Participant 21).

Teaching is my life's work. I have a sense that I am doing what I was born to do…it is

something I *have* to do (Participant 24).

Teaching fits into my life priorities. The teaching role and associated work are highly

salient, and constantly present in my awareness (Participant 19).

However, not all participants felt that working as an ECE professional was central or

something that they felt called to. In fact, a small percentage of the participants (n=3/24;

12.5% of the interviewees) indicated that they did not attempt to work in the ECE sector

though they did not mind. Another two teachers (8.35%) came to the field of ECE for

immigration purposes, with one explaining that she ended up enjoying teaching and would

not want to change her career. Participant 1, a teacher's aide who had been in the field for

about three years, stated, "I am working three days per week in the childcare program, and I

have another part-time job and other tasks to do for the rest of the week. My role (as a

teacher's aide) is one of the important things to do but I do not see it as more than that, it is

not the *only* priority in my life."

Experience of the Calling to Work with Young Children. Some (n=8/24; 34% of

the interviewees) indicated that "being called" was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. An ECE

principal (Participant 20) described her experience:

Since I was a child, I always wanted to be an ECE teacher. The teaching role I have now is the focus of my life…and I perceive it as something that I *am*.

Some participants (n=4/24; 16.7% of the interviewees) reported that though they had experienced an internal pull (e.g., from God, a societal need) to the profession, it still took them some time to find their way into the ECE profession. They also emphasized that they were not able to deny or say "no" to their calling even though initially they did not like this career path. Furthermore, these participants reported that their calling directed them internally towards obtaining a sense of hope, meaning, and peace. Participant 4 further explained that a person who is "called" is someone who will feel out of sorts in some way if he/she leaves the field. A teacher's aide (Participant 21) reflected:

The time of my searching held many doubts. In fact, initially, I did not want to be called and was not happy when I felt the calling…working with young children was not what I wanted…But now I do love what I do, it is interesting, I guess God has changed my heart. I also feel that whatever God desires for me to do for Him, I will love to do it.

Yet there was something right about heeding the call. Alternatives do not seem meaningful or satisfying. The following quotations are examples of the main points made:

My calling to teach gives me the enthusiasm and a strong desire to make a difference to children in their early years (Participant 17).

Following the call to teach has made my life hopeful, purposeful, and satisfying (Participant 14).

Some ECE professionals were new to the field and faced many challenges, so how did they cope? How does their calling help them and guide them? Again participants were overwhelmingly in agreement that an ECE professional with a calling will find a way to the

vitality of the work. Despite challenges and struggles, the field holds something better than all of this. Some participants noted:

> No matter what the circumstances, it is possible to go further into the subject matter and learn from others (Participant 16).

> Remembering the calling from God encourages and strengthens me, especially when I face challenges at work. It is my life that makes up the curriculum (Participant 15).

The Influence of Calling on Practice. Interviewees were asked about the influence of calling on practice. One participant (Participant 13) reflected:

> The call to teach made my life meaningful, and more importantly, constantly inspires me to be the best possible teacher for my children. I am excited about my role and the potential for creating positive changes in the lives of the students.

> Another teacher (Participant 14) who worked in an ECE program targeted at low-income and/or broken families explained how she perceived the influence of calling on her work:

> Because of the calling, every day I remind myself of the one thing that I must do for the students: creating happy memories and bringing hope into their lives, especially the lives of those from dysfunctional families. I wanted to give the children skills, the skills that they can take with them and use for life.

> Some commented that they wanted to teach well because of the potential impact those children may have on society more generally. Some participants revealed that they were able to find inspiration at work and attain life meaning and job satisfaction. The comment below illustrates the main points they made:

> My calling helps me to become an effective agent of change (Participant 7).

It came as no surprise that teachers who had a deep sense of calling and purpose also wanted to constantly improve on their work with children. Replies from the participants varied but all showed that their perceptions of calling were unique to them. For example:

I am very thankful that I found my calling. I believe that my work provides a significant and meaningful contribution to the broader society, and I am always eager to know more about ways to improve my teaching (Participant 9).

My calling has helped me to stay loyal (I have been in the field for about 15 years) as an ECE teacher, and often reminds me of my contribution to the common good, that is, my students (Participant 4).

In summary, interview data indicated that participants who self-identified as having experienced a call to work with young children actively engaged with their calling, affirmed that their *calling* was experienced at a personal level deeply, and has positively impacted their work. Findings of the interviews also showed that there are several themes which resonate with the literature (e.g., Coulson et al., 2013; Duffy et al., 2012). These include: (a) a subjective sense that the call to work with young children is an integral component of the ECE professional's identity; (b) that one's identity and destiny are encompassed by the calling; and that (c) there is something transcendent about the calling.

Life Goals for the Next 10 Years. A large proportion of participants (n=11/24; 46%) expressed a desire to lead a fulfilling life, to thrive at work, and to manage their work-life boundaries, and to make meaningful contributions to the development of young children and a positive future society. Interestingly, all these goals belong to the same goal category: intrinsic goals. Some participants (n=6/24; 25%) said that they did not have any specific life goals or plans for what they would like to achieve in the next 10 years; they also indicated that they were still "searching".

About 75% of the participants (n=16/24) indicated that they had some very specific life goals for the next 10 years or so. Goals the participants indicated include a) to become a mentor for new teachers; b) to become a permanent staff and eventually a New Zealand citizen/permanent resident; c) to become a manager of an ECE center; d) to become a fully certified teacher; e) to stay healthy and active; (f) to work at a government agency and advocate for ECE policy change; (g) to continue to make a positive impact in the lives of young children and their families; and (h) to be able to buy a home.

The Influence of Life Goals on Practice. How do ECE professionals describe their life goals and the impact of these goals on their practices? Interestingly, participants consistently stated that their personal goals had a significant impact on their practices. Three of the participants (16.7%) who previously worked in the business sector decided to pursue a career in ECE. The following comment from one of these teachers (Participant 17) is representative of the reasons for this big change:

> In the past, I had more income but job satisfaction was low. Now as a teacher, I want to make a difference in the lives of young children. Every day I can think of many ways to make a positive impact…and to reach my goal! Happiness and pleasure are no longer my goals (Participant 2).

> One interviewee served as a teacher's aide (Participant 7) at the ECE program for over 13 years. She mentioned that since her life goal was to leave a legacy of compassion and kindness after she retired one day, every winter, she raised funds to buy winter clothes for children in need. Because of what she did, her ECE center had been organizing coat drives for children from low-income families in her community for a couple of years.

Palmer (2003) explained that teaching should be done in a way that enhances the human condition and advances social justice, and for this to occur, teachers should never stop

asking the most important questions "Who is this child, and how can I nurture his or her

gifts?" (p. 377). Interestingly, participants of this study expressed similar sentiments:

> I found that due to the repetitive nature of teaching, you know, sometimes you have to
>
> teach the same simple skills to the same child again and again, or repeat the same
>
> materials year after year…I easily lose my passion as an adult, but keeping my life
>
> goals at the forefront of my mind certainly helps (Participant 1).

A few participants indicated that their goals help them in various ways. One teacher

mentioned that in the current context of the pandemic, her life goal for the next few years is

to make the world a more beautiful and peaceful place. She not only wanted to transmit

knowledge to her students, but also a passion to seek out the beautiful things in this world.

Therefore, she often told stories to expound on the importance of a positive attitude and a

good set of values.

The Most Important Values in Life. With respect to values in life, the majority of

the participants recognize the importance of spiritual values in both of their personal life and

professional services. For example, about 70% of the participants (n=17/24) indicated that

tolerance and respect for others were the most important ones, followed by the protection for

the welfare of nature (63%), preservation and enhancement of the welfare of others (61%), as

well as a commitment to others and work (57%). Seven (30%) of the participants agreed that

there are absolute standards of right and wrong which are often provided by traditional

cultures or religions.

> As educators, our experiences and culture influence how we think about child
>
> development, just as our beliefs and values play a role in the type of learning
>
> environment we foster, and how we nurture young children under our care.
>
> (Participant 2)

Another ECE worker (Participant 3) commented:

> I believe in the preservation value. The effective teaching of young children benefits
>
> society. Unfulfilled and/or unhappy children will grow to be unhappy adults who lack
>
> personal meaning.
>
> Consistent with the findings of studies conducted by others (e.g., Duffy & Blustein,

2005Royce-Davis & Stewart, 2000) on the role of spirituality played in the participants'

career development, about 37.5% of the participants (n=9/24) believed that their spiritual

struggles affected their career choices and development. In addition, about 21% (n=5/24)

recognized the importance of spiritual values at different points in their career decision-

making process, in particular the integration of personal values in decision-making.

The Influence of Spiritual Values on Practice. How did professionals perceive that

their spiritual values affect their work with children? And what impact did an ECE

professionals' values (of teaching and life in general) have on his/her work with young

children? The majority of the participants (n=17/24; 70.8%) indicated that their personal

spiritual values play an important role in their work, and that these values helped them to be

more intentional in fostering young children's spiritual development.

Another teacher (Participant 6) commented that one of her most important values was

to show "compassion for fellow earth mates". Therefore, in her daily work at the center, she

always tries her best to inspire her colleagues and children under her care to generously serve

others. She daily reminded herself to always encourage children with kind words and

thoughtful deeds:

> Since I was young, I was sensitive to the suffering and trials of others. Perhaps the
>
> ultimate motivation for showing grace to others stems from an appreciation of the
>
> limitations of being human and the belief in a Higher Power.

Another participant (Participant 13) similarly described his experience:

Since I was a child, my parents always taught me not to value money, instead, the

way they lived their lives showed that they valued education and helping children.

However, some participants (n=15/24) who were teachers also indicated that their

initial teacher education training did not cover any topic in the area of a teacher's inner life or

spiritual development, and they struggled to integrate their values into practice. Two teachers

commented that they would benefit from participating in professional development on this

topic.

One senior ECE professional highlighted how his personal values in particular

influence his work with young children:

Because I believe in the importance of benevolence values, in our center, I always

share with my staff ways to teach the children voluntary concern for others' welfare.

We crafted many lessons to teach children how to be helpful, honest, forgiving,

responsible, loyal etc. (Participant 12).

Another female participant explained how she perceived the impact of her spiritual

values on teaching:

I always think that benevolence and conformity values both promote cooperative and

supportive social relations. As the only Māori teacher in the center, I am very much

aware of my spiritual values of the Māori culture which I bring into the program.

Fortunately, my manager always encourages me to teach them to our children

(Participant 4).

Among the 83% (n=20/24) of participants who considered their values as important to

their work, the majority (n=17/24) reported that spiritual values are not just about having

them, it is about living them. One participant further expanded this perspective to explain that "How I teach is exactly how I live. It's not anything different." (Participant 9)

Conclusions and Discussions

This study was motivated by a desire to know how ECE professionals perceive their work, and to clarify the relationship between ECE professionals' life goals and personal values. Using a mixed-method approach, this study examined the roles of calling and the relation between life goals and spiritual values among early childhood professionals in New Zealand.

In line with previous research, results showed that spiritual values positively correlated with most intrinsic life goals but showed a negative correlation with at least three of the four extrinsic goals. Furthermore, the categories of qualitative analysis results were largely consistent with quantitative correlation findings, and the main qualitative findings also illustrate the existence of important variable relationships. For example, most of the life goals the participants set for themselves were mainly intrinsic goals. In addition, about 70% of the participants recognized the role of spiritual values played in personal growth and service (*spiritual values*). For instance, the majority of the participants (n=17/24; 70.8%) indicated that their personal spiritual values play an important role in their work, and that these values helped them to be more intentional in fostering young children's spiritual development (intrinsic life goal). Interviews also suggested that participants self-identified as having experienced a call to work with young children and actively engaged with their calling. They also affirmed that their calling was experienced at a deeply personal and emotional level, and recognized the important impact of life goals and personal values on their work.

Study Limitations

This study was limited in several ways. First of all, it used the stratified random sampling nationwide and the sample size is small (N=102) and may affect generalizability. The second limitation is about the analysis method which only established the correlation of variables, and was not able to analyze the influence of the variables of the population background of participants. Another limitation stems from the fact that the study was conducted in one country only. In order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of ECE professionals' work orientations, life goals, and values, future studies in other cultures should be carried out to further examine early childhood professionals' experience of the call to teach and other aspects of life, such as subjective well-being.

Implications

Despite the limitations, the findings from this research are highly salient. The main strength of this present study is that it was the first to directly investigate the relationship between calling, life goals and spiritual values of ECE professionals in New Zealand. As also noted, this study helped ECE professionals in New Zealand gain a public voice for their profession, as it was intended to be.

Findings of this study and previous research also call for teachers to develop a strong sense of professional and personal identity in terms of being proud of upholding their profession. The essence of considering teaching as a calling is that this deep calling motivates educational professionals to seek out opportunities to live out their personal values so as to be able to offer the best quality of learning to their students. Therefore, personnel preparation and training programs will do well to provide opportunities that engage pre- and in-service ECE professionals in reflection on calling, life goals, and values, which as a result can open up space for voice, passion, and renewal (Casbon, et al., 2005). These opportunities will create a nurturing, optimal environment promoting well-being in higher education.

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