

## ANALYZING THE LEISURE ACTIVITIES FROM THE WORK OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

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### **Abstract:**

*Our research focused on assessing the leisure time of early childhood educators and the adverse factors that come from their work, as well as the relationship between these factors. Quantitative, cross-sectional research was conducted on an online Hungarian language profession-specific platform. Non-random, convenience sampling was used to interview early childhood educators working 40 hours per week (n=279). Our data collection was carried out using standard (CD-RISK-10, WBI-5) and self-designed questions. For our analysis we used correlation analysis,  $\chi^2$ -test, ANOVA test Kruskal-Wallis test ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). Almost 2/5 of respondents felt they did not have enough free time, more often those who were in a relationship ( $p < 0.05$ ) and those with lower education ( $p < 0.05$ ). Activities and their co-occurrence with other forms of leisure activities were associated with higher levels of resilience ( $p < 0.05$ ), while feelings of well-being were increased by active and experiential forms of regeneration ( $p < 0.05$ ). Among the forms of leisure activities the exercise (running, walking, swimming, gymnastics), while in case of experiential activities the time spent with friends and family, and creative activities - crafts significantly influenced the resilience ( $p < 0.05$ ), and the feeling of well-being ( $p < 0.05$ ), but cultural experiences also had a positive effect on latter area ( $p < 0.05$ ). Increases in both well-being and resilience were associated with lower levels*

*of perceived job strain ( $p < 0.05$ ). The mean of these pressures was higher for those who perceived they did not have enough leisure time ( $p < 0.05$ ). In case of more frequent presence of experience activities the burden of working days is less tiring ( $p < 0.05$ ). The profession of early childhood educator is also accompanied by workloads, which can be reduced mainly by the regular presence of a variety of leisure activities and their combination, which leading to a better general well-being and more flexible adaptation in daily life.*

**Keywords:** *Early childhood educator; leisure; mental well-being; workload*

## Introduction

In the last decade, leisure habits and recreational trends have been undergoing a continuous transformation. Subjective quality of life is closely related to well-experienced leisure and overall well-being (Kim, 2010; Hawkins et al., 2004). Indeed, recreation is a primary means of improving subjective quality of life, through which human needs are met to directly improve quality of life, but also indirectly through renewed work capacity and health (Abraham et al., 2014).

As a teaching profession, infant and early childhood educator is also one of the professions in which a person's whole personality is involved in the education and care of the children entrusted to him or her. Professionals give of themselves mentally, physically and emotionally in order to carry out their work to the best of their ability, both in terms of the tasks set and those expected of them. This professional work puts both the mental and physical health of early childhood educators to the test (Fináncz et al., 2020).

Mansfield et al. found that educators who have personal resources (e.g. motivation, efficacy), contextual resources (e.g. well-functioning human relationships) and appropriate life management and coping skills (e.g. problem solving, self-care, work-life balance, active leisure) are more resilient and show higher levels of well-being (Mansfield et al., 2016). The disease-preventive role of physically active leisure time is undisputed

(Meneton et al., 2016), but the negative impact of hours spent passively in front of a television or monitor is becoming increasingly evident, with higher body mass index, body fat ratio, higher incidence of cardiovascular disease, and lower physical activity levels (Xie et al., 2018).

In Singh's study on teachers' recreational activities, 35% of the respondents were physically inactive, 51% were moderately active and 14% were highly physically active (Singh et al., 2021). In Delfino et al.'s study, 58% of the responding teachers (n=245) preferred primarily passive forms of recreational activities (Delfino et al., 2020). Kinczel's preference for passive leisure time activity was also confirmed in his study (Kinczel, 2020). The effect of physical activity on overall health have been reported in several studies, with a reduction in chronic low back pain (Shiri et al., 2017), the incidence of chronic musculoskeletal pain (Santos et al, 2020), and increases psychological well-being (Dinnyés et al., 2020). People who exercised in their leisure time also reported several positive effects (Kinczel et al., 2020), feeling more refreshed, and having a better mood and more positive thoughts (Kinczel, 2020).

According to the results of Pfau et al., respondents (n=331) perceived the most important positive effects of sport to be helping concentration and stress relief (Pfau et al., 2020). Active leisure time is also associated with the amount of leisure time spent with friends and playing sports (Dinnyés et al., 2020). Social relationships may also play a key role in mediating appropriate problem coping patterns (Hideg, 2020). Bouillet and colleagues investigated the resilience of early childhood educators and measured a correlation with the social support of their friends and family members (Bouillet et al., 2014). Teachers' resilience and commitment to the profession also positively influence

the outcomes of students, who are more likely to achieve positive outcomes (Day, 2008).

Recreational sport is closely linked to physical and mental health and can have long-term effects. Delfino and colleagues found that, regardless of gender, age and socioeconomic status, higher levels of leisure-time physical activity among individuals included in their study were associated with more favourable dietary habits (higher consumption of fruits, vegetables, dairy products and cereals) (Delfino, et al., 2020). Abós and colleagues' study of a control group of teachers (M age = 46.81 years) found that leisure-time physical activity had a positive effect on job performance, job satisfaction, engagement and relationships with colleagues for teachers in the intervention group (Abós et al., 2021).

Based on a research in Hungary, early childhood educators showed mild depressive symptoms regardless of their job role, but low levels of burnout were measured, which was explained by the protective role of working with young children (Fináncz et al., 2019; Fináncz et al., 2020). Csima and colleagues' survey of early childhood education professionals showed a more favourable picture of health status and health behaviour compared to the Hungarian population as a whole (Csima et al., 2018).

Our research aimed at assessing the quantitative and qualitative indicators of the leisure time of early childhood educators and the presence of difficulties in their work as early childhood educators. We also explored the preference for leisure activities and their relationship with mental well-being. We also aimed to gain an insight into whether certain types of leisure activities could help to counteract factors indicating work-related stress.

## Method

The research was descriptive, cross-sectional and quantitative. Data were collected online in groups specific to the profession of early childhood educator. The respondents were early childhood educators working 40 hours per week in a group of day-care centres, selected by non-random, convenience sampling. Questionnaires that could not be evaluated (23) were excluded. After considering the selection criterion, 279 questionnaires were processed. The survey was carried out using self-designed and standard questionnaires (CD-RISC 10 (Járai et al., 2015) and the WBI-5 version (Susánszky et al., 2006). Descriptive statistical methods were used to process the data, as well as correlation coefficient calculation (Pearson, Spearman) ( $p < 0.01$ ) and chi-square test ( $p < 0.05$ ) to determine the relationship between two variables, ANOVA test and Kruskal-Wallis test were used to determine the differences between means (Pakai et al., 2013; Karamánné Pakai et al., 2015).

## Results

The mean age of participants was 38.4 years ( $SD=11.7$ ), of whom more than 50% (147) were married, 24% were in a civil partnership and 16.1% were unmarried. Of those interviewed, 53% lived in a city, 26.1% in a county town and 20.4% in a village or commune. According to the answers to the question on educational qualifications, the majority of early childhood educators had a university or college degree (56.2%), 37.2% had a profession specific degree and 6.4% had a high school degree. All respondents reported working 40 hours per week in a childcare group. The mean number of years working as an early childhood educator was 11.7 years ( $SD=11.5$ ).

In our survey, we assessed the leisure time habits of early childhood educators. We considered it important to assess this because the amount of time spent on rest and recuperation and the quality of that time also have a major impact on health. 37.99% of early childhood educators indicated that they did not have enough leisure time, 32.62% said that they had enough leisure time and 29.39% said that they had perhaps enough leisure time, which showed no correlation with place of residence (chi-square 2.618 p=0.624), but marital status (chi distribution 17.0 p=0.03) and educational level (chi distribution 9.65 p=0.047) were found to be differentiating factors. 2/3 (61.1%) of those with a high school degree, while only 1/3 (35.75%) of those with a profession specific degree said that they did not have enough leisure time. Half of single people (53.3%), while 1/4 to 1/4 of married people (27.2%) and cohabiting couples (26.9%) said that they had enough time off.

We also sought answers to the question about the content and frequency with which the respondent early childhood educators spend their free time. Exercise, nature walks, socialising, education, arts and crafts, reading, relaxing, sleeping, wellness, gardening, watching television and internet surfing were among the alternatives for leisure activities. The frequency of eleven types of recreational activities was measured using a 6-point Likert scale, of which 3 were for active, 4 for passive leisure and 4 for experiential. 15.41% run, walk, swim or exercise daily and 35.48% do some form of physical activity weekly. Reading is the weekly activity of choice for 40.26% of early childhood educators. Weekly gardening is practised by 27.96%, watching TV by 53.77% and choosing sleep as a form of relaxation by 71.88%. Among professionals, 37.63% go on monthly nature walks and 25.54% do arts and crafts. 75% of respondents can find time for family and friends' get-togethers in every six months. 55.43% of the respondents

have the opportunity to go out for cultural activities (concerts, theatre, museums) every year, while 34.78% never spend their free time doing so. Almost half of the respondents (45.2%) regularly took part in two types of leisure activities, 38.7% in one type and 16.1% in three types, which were not significantly influenced by the respondents' educational level (chi-square 3.366 p=0.499), place of residence (chi-square 2.227 p=0.694) or marital status (chi-square 8.186 p=0.416).

For recreational activities, the combination of passive activities and experiential activities was preferred by 1/3 (33%) of the sample, with almost equal proportions of those who chose a combination of passive (18.6%) or experiential (14.7%) or active + passive + experiential leisure activities(16.1%), with a negligible number of those who chose active + experiential (6.1%), active + passive (6.1%) and active recreation only (5.4%). Our research also examined the relationship between psychological resilience and general well-being as measured by quantitative and qualitative indicators of leisure activities. We measured respondents' resilience levels using the 10-item version of the Connor-Davidson Resilience Questionnaire (CD-RISC 10). Responses to the questions were scored from 0 to 4 according to the scoring guidelines of the standardized questionnaire. A higher score indicated a higher level of resilience. The average score of the responding early childhood educators after aggregation was 28.26 points (min: 0, max:40, SD:8.99). A shortened version of the WHO Well-Being Questionnaire (WBI-5) was used to assess the general well-being of the respondents. On a four-point Likert scale, responses were to be marked looking back over the previous two-week period, with a higher total score indicating a higher state of well-being. Based on 279 responses, a mean score of 8.82 was measured (min:1, max:15, SD: 2.61). The mean values of resilience increased in proportion to the number of leisure activities the individual engaged

in (one type 27.52; two types 28.10; three types 30.51) (Figure 1). The differences between the means of resilience were statistically significant, as confirmed by the Kruskal Wallis test ( $U(279.2)=8.022$   $p=0.018$ ). In contrast, the mean values of the sense of well-being did not differentiate with increasing number of types of leisure activities (one type 8.84; two types 8.48; three types of actions 9.69) ( $U(279.2)=5.926$   $p=0.052$ ).

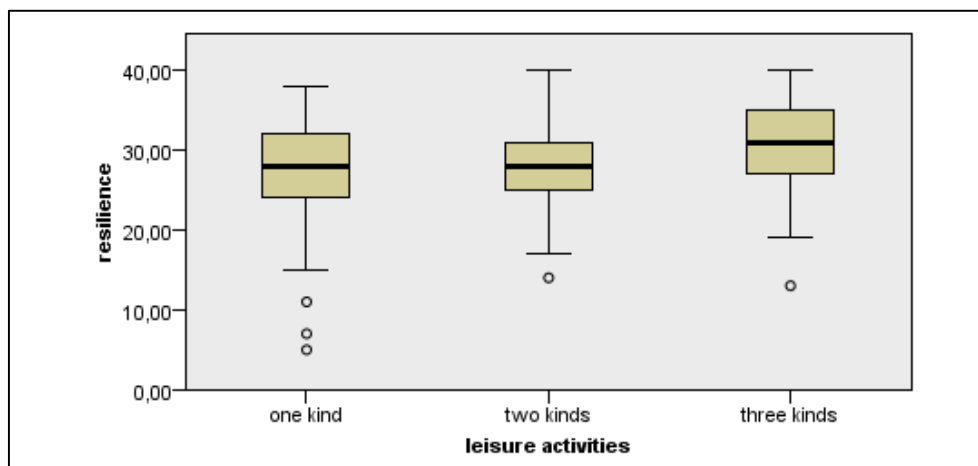


Figure 1. Quantitative indicator of leisure activities of early childhood educators based on the mean values of resilience (n=279)

We also compared the types of leisure activities with the indicators of mental health, and found that active activities ( $M=30.87$ ) and their co-occurrence with other leisure activities (active + passive + recreational  $M=30.51$ ; active and experiential  $M=29.29$ ) showed higher levels of resilience than passive recharging activities (active + passive  $M=27.65$ ; passive  $M=26.42$ ) ( $U(279.2)=14.58$   $p=0.024$ ) (Figure 2.). The general well-being was more typically enhanced by recovery actions with an active and experiential focus (active + experiential  $M=10.12$ ; active + passive + experiential  $M=9.69$ ; experiential  $M=9.12$ ; active  $M=9.27$ ; passive  $M=8.5$ ; passive + experiential  $M=8.28$ ; active + passive  $M=7.94$ ) ( $U(279.2)=14.263$   $p=0.027$ ).



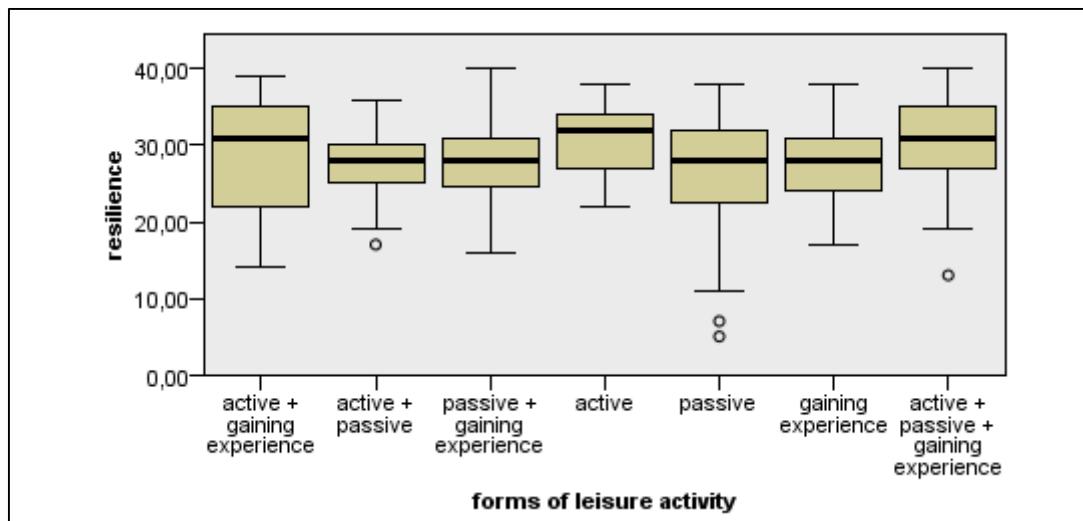


Figure 2 Quality indicator of early childhood educators' leisure activities based on the mean values of resilience (n=279)

The association between the frequency of each leisure activity and well-being and resilience was examined using Spearman's rank correlation. Within the domain of physical activity (running, walking, swimming, gymnastics) ( $r=0.144$   $p=0.016$ ), social time with friends and family ( $r=0.158$   $p=0.008$ ) and creative activities - crafts ( $r=0.167$   $p=0.05$ ) showed a positive but weak relationship with individual resilience levels. An increase in the time interval of performing the aforementioned recreational activities was associated with higher levels of resilience. In contrast, cultural experiences ( $r=0.263$   $p<0.001$ ), social gatherings ( $r=0.258$   $p<0.001$ ) and creative activities and crafts ( $r=0.215$   $p<0.001$ ) significantly increased the sense of well-being. There was evidence of a positive directional relationship of moderate strength between the variables examined.

Subjective perceptions of the time available for rest and recharging were also studied in relation to individual resilience levels and general well-being. Researched factors of mental health showed higher mean values for perceived leisure time as sufficient (resilience  $M=29.93$ ; well-being  $M=10.02$ ) compared to individuals who felt they had no time to recharge (resilience  $M=27.3$ ; well-being  $M=7.89$ ) (Figure 3). Differences between the

means were also confirmed by ANOVA test for significant differences (resilience  $F(2,278)5,415$   $p=0.005$ ; overall well-being  $F(2,278)18,616$   $p<0.001$ ).

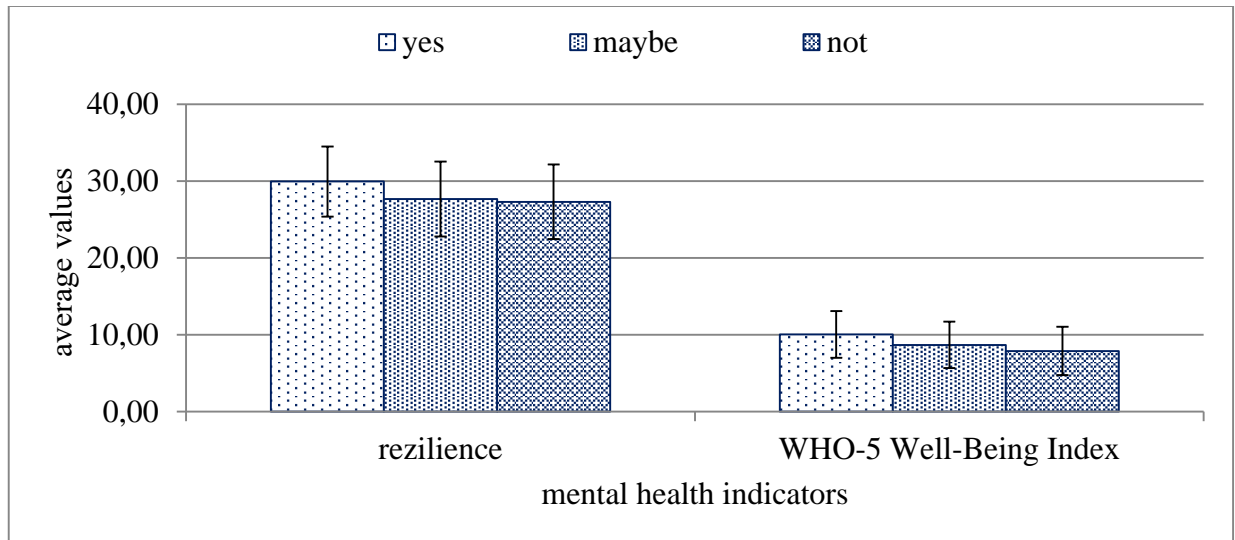


Figure 3 Mean scores for mental health factors based on subjective perception of sufficient leisure time (n=279)

The professional nature of the work of early childhood educators and its complexity mean that situations and factors may arise that may cause difficulties. It was important for us to find out to what extent the factors we have identified are a burden for early childhood educators in their daily work. Professionals were asked to mark their responses on a five-point Likert scale, scored from 0 to 4. The maximum was 32, which indicated a higher level of strain in daily work. When measuring the difficulty of the early childhood educator's job, the mean score was 13.06 (min:0, max:30, SD:5.54). The most significant strain of the early childhood educators' job was the care and education of children with special educational needs and the keeping of records. The distribution of the extent to which the work of early childhood educators was difficult is shown in Figure 4.

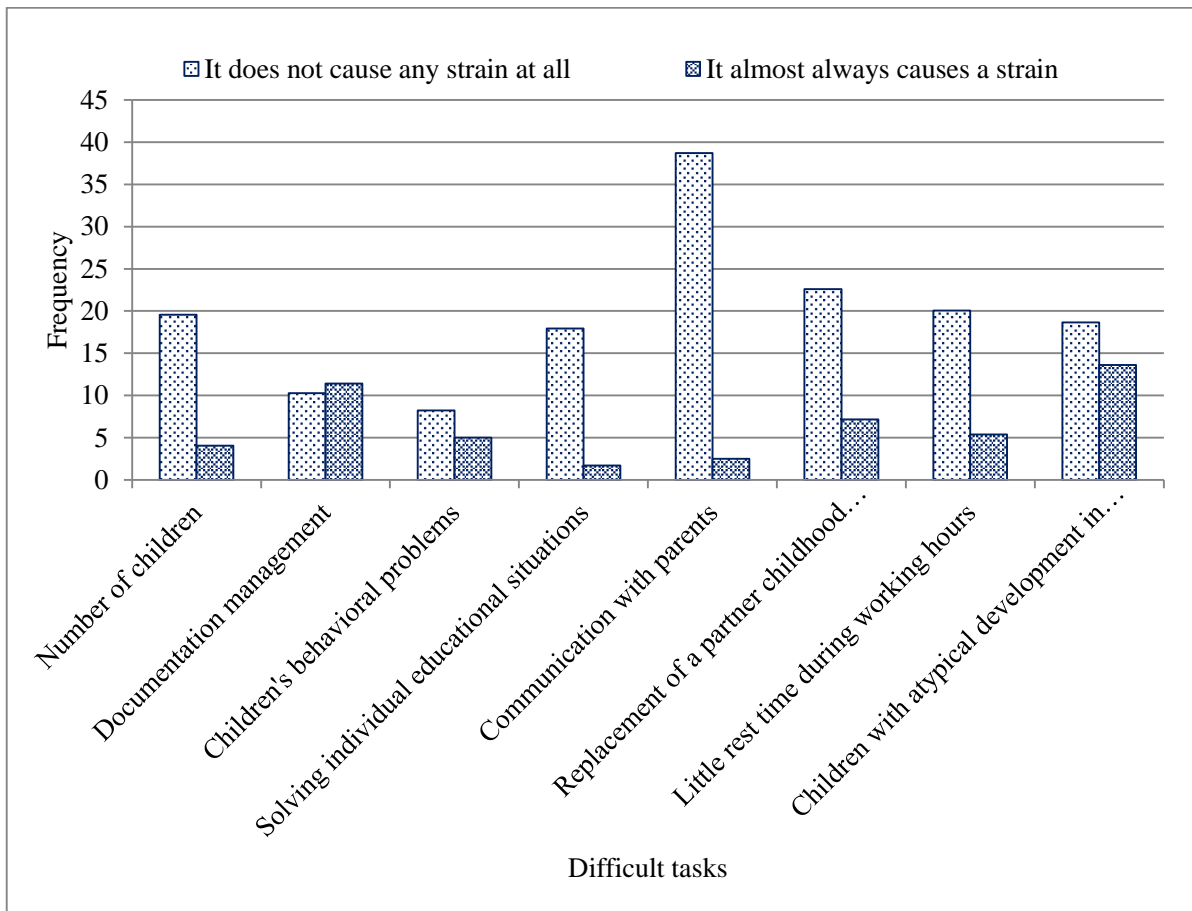


Figure 4 Tasks and workload of early childhood educators during the day (n=279)

The next questions in our survey asked how responding early childhood educators' leisure time habits were related to their overall occupational stress. Professionals who perceived that they had leisure time (M=11.49) reported lower levels of workload compared to those who perceived that they did not have time for recreation (M=14.83) ( $F(2,278)10.021$   $p<0.001$ ). Both the quantitative ( $U(2,279)=1.428$   $p=0.49$ ), and qualitative ( $U(6,279)=2.113$   $p=0.909$ ), indicator of recreational activities showed no correlation with the degree of work-related strain felt. A weak negative correlation between each leisure activity and job strain was found, with recreation being associated with less job strain (social recreation  $r= -0.177$   $p=0.003$ , cultural recreation  $r= -0.138$   $p=0.021$ ).

We hypothesised a correlation between the level of resilience and the perceived lower workload resulting from job duties. The results showed a strong but weak negative rela-

tionship ( $r = -0.222$   $p < 0.001$ ) between the questions, i.e. the lower the resilience level, the higher the perceived workload of the early childhood educators. The relationship between the degree of job-related strain and the general well-being of early childhood educators was also examined, and a negative relationship of moderate strength was demonstrated between the variables ( $r = -0.389$   $p < 0.001$ ). The higher the degree of job-related strain of early childhood educators, the lower the proportion of the WHO well-being index.

### Conclusions

Nearly 2/5 of early childhood educators felt that they did not have enough free time, while only 1/3 felt that they had enough free time, which was more common among respondents with higher education ( $p < 0.05$ ) and single parent status ( $p < 0.05$ ). Almost half of the respondents regularly engaged in two types of leisure activities, with a predominance of passive activities or a combination of both. Nearly 1/5 of the sample preferred only passive leisure activities, 1/3 preferred passive and experiential activities and 16.1% preferred a combination of active, passive and experiential activities. The preference for passive leisure activities among educators has been confirmed by international and national research (Delfino et al., 2020; Kinczel, 2020; Singh et al., 2021). In Susánszky's study, the mean score of the well-being index of tertiary graduates was 8.8 (Susánszky et al., 2006), which is the same as in our study ( $M = 8.82$ ). An increase in the number of leisure activities performed regularly ( $p < 0.05$ ), active activities and their co-occurrence with other forms of leisure activities ( $p < 0.05$ ) were associated with greater resilience, while a sense of well-being was increased by active and experiential forms of recreation ( $p < 0.05$ ). More favourable subjective perceptions of the time available for rest and recharge were evidenced by higher mean values of resilience ( $p < 0.05$ ) and gen-

eral well-being ( $p < 0.05$ ). These results are in sync with the research of Mansfield et al. (Mansfield et al., 2016) and Dinnyés et al. (Dinnyés et al., 2020). In terms of active leisure activities, physical activity (running, walking, swimming, gymnastics), social time spent with friends and family, and creative activities (arts and crafts) had a significant effect on resilience ( $p < 0.05$ ) and well-being ( $p < 0.05$ ), but cultural experiences also had a positive effect on the latter ( $p < 0.05$ ). In addition to our own results, other studies (Kinczel et al., 2020; Pfau et al., 2020) have also confirmed the positive effects of active leisure activities on mental health. Furthermore, our study highlighted the important role of experiential activities in recreation for mental health protection.

For professionals, the most significant workload associated with their daily work was the care of children with atypical development and the management of documentation, while the least difficult was communication with parents, which has been shown in other studies (Clipa et al., 2015; Szelezsánné, 2016). The presence of workloads in other areas of the human sector has also been confirmed (Khatatbeh et al., 2022; Khatatbeh et al., 2021; Fusz et al., 2021; Schiszler et al., 2016). The lower level of resilience of early childhood education professionals, the greater strain they felt in performing their tasks ( $p < 0.05$ ), which was associated with a lower level of well-being index ( $p < 0.05$ ). The mean of these strains was higher for those who perceived that they did not have enough leisure time ( $p < 0.05$ ). The more frequent presence of experiential activities (social entertainment, cultural recreation), the less tiring the workload of the working day ( $p < 0.05$ ). The communication and cooperation between professionals, in which they can share knowledge and resources among themselves may play a role in reducing and counteracting negative effects (Bársonyné Kis K. et al., 2015), as well as according to

our results, a higher level of resilience and a combination of active and experiential leisure activities, which are varied and regularly performed.

In their study, Rohani et al. list a number of factors that promote the development of leisure activities for teachers, such as training, learning about different leisure sports, providing professional publications, and creating motivation plans and incentives to support the implementation of leisure activities (Rohani et al., 2022), which, based on our results, are primarily targeted at professionals with secondary education. To achieve this, organisational support and the presence of an adequate sports infrastructure are essential. Sport can be an excellent tool for health promotion in the workplace, as it is associated with better mental health, can effectively reduce stress and has a positive impact on workers' workload (Kinczel, et al., 2020; Hidvégi et al., 2017). Organizational development in the workplace should be a priority, which should include increasing the level of community resilience (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014; Cumming, 2017). Strengthening both education and cohesion within the work group can lead to higher levels of resilience and be associated with improved well-being, which is essential for high levels of performance in early childhood care tasks.

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