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Reimagining Work in the ECD Sector: A Systematic Review of Workplace Flexibility and Practitioner Well-Being

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Abstract: This systematic review (2013-2023) examines how workplace flexibility influences job satisfaction, well-being, retention, and professional development among Early Childhood Development practitioners (ECDPs) and managers. Guided by PRISMA and assessed with AMSTAR 2, the review screened 13,804 records, excluded 13,648, and retained 152 empirical studies for analysis. The synthesis reveals that flexible work arrangements (FWAs)—including remote work, flexi-time, compressed weeks, and job-sharing—consistently enhance practitioner well-being, increase job satisfaction, and improve retention rates across diverse educational settings. However, widespread adoption is constrained by financial limitations, logistical challenges, and institutional resistance, particularly within South African ECD centres where operational hours often exceed statutory limits. Key enablers identified are strong managerial support, clear policy frameworks, and investment in digital infrastructure, which together foster a supportive culture that encourages practitioner commitment. Practical recommendations urge managers to develop context-specific FWA policies, secure leadership buy-in, and address financial barriers, while policymakers should create supportive regulatory frameworks and fund necessary training and technology. The authors call for longitudinal research to assess long-term effects of FWAs and to refine implementation strategies that balance organisational needs with practitioner health and development.

Keywords: practitioners; workplace flexibility; well-being; work-life balance; early childhood educators

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1. Orientation

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector in South Africa faces numerous challenges, including limited funding, long working hours, and inadequate workplace flexibility policies. Early childhood practitioners (ECDPs), who care for children from three weeks to seven years, experience high stress and limited institutional support (Rao & Karumuri, 2019; Wang, 2021). Many ECDPs work Monday to Friday from 07:00 to 17:00, often exceeding the maximum hours allowed under the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1997), resulting in fatigue, burnout, and health issues (Jeon et al., 2017). Although the Department of Basic Education (DBE) acknowledges the sector's importance (SADTU, 2019), structural issues remain. Globally, governments advocate flexible labour policies to improve practitioners' work-life balance (Cunat & Melitz, 2012).

Researchers such as Way et al. (2018) and Bal and Izak (2021) emphasise that workplace flexibility is central to the modern economy. Practitioners increasingly demand autonomy over work hours and conditions (Rousseau, 2005; Hill et al., 2015; Spreitzer et al., 2017). Over the past decade, international studies have examined flexibility from both managerial and practitioner perspectives, revealing benefits for productivity, job satisfaction, and well-being (Bal & Jansen, 2016; Wang, 2021).

Workplace flexibility involves adjustments to time, location, and workload, enabling balance between professional and personal life (Azar et al., 2018; Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020). Intrinsic motivators like personal growth and extrinsic factors such as working conditions influence practitioner satisfaction (Rao & Karumuri, 2019). Flexible arrangements—remote work, flexitime, job sharing, and compressed workweeks—reduce stress and enhance retention (Brough et al., 2020). Despite its advantages, South Africa's ECD sector remains rigid and slow to implement such practices (Griffiths, 2020).

Broader research (Kossek et al., 2015; Ray & Pana-Cryan, 2021) highlights flexibility's benefits for employees, managers, and society by supporting work-life integration and reducing stress. Yet systemic barriers—poor remuneration, limited training, and lack of accreditation—persist in the South African ECD context (Harrison, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the necessity of adaptable work structures (Haque, 2023; Atiku & Ganiyu, 2022). This study therefore explores workplace flexibility from both managerial and practitioner perspectives to identify strategies that enhance ECD working conditions and inform future policy.

Workplace flexibility refers to the ability to decide how, when, and where work is done, aligning organisational needs with employees' personal circumstances (Cañibano, 2019; Moen & Sweet, 2004). The main types include: **temporal flexibility** (flexible hours and schedules), **spatial flexibility** (remote or hybrid work), **numerical flexibility** (variable staffing and contracts), and **functional flexibility** (multi-skilling and task diversity). These mechanisms improve adaptability while supporting well-being (Tomlinson et al., 2018).

Hassard and Wolfram-Cox (2013) identify four paradigms framing flexibility: managerial (efficiency), human relations (well-being), critical (power dynamics), and postmodern (complexity). Using Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976), this study posits that when managers reciprocate practitioners' effort through supportive flexibility, ECDPs experience greater motivation, satisfaction, and retention (Rao & Karumuri, 2019; SADTU, 2019).

2. Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to examine the significance of workplace flexibility for both Early Childhood Development Practitioners (ECDPs) and managers of ECD centres, assessing its impact on job satisfaction, work-life balance, retention, professional development, and overall well-being. It further explores how workplace flexibility affects both groups within the Sedibeng District's ECD sector.

The primary research question guiding this study is: *How does workplace flexibility influence educators and managers in the ECD sector in the Sedibeng District regarding retention, work-life balance, job satisfaction, well-being, and professional development?*

Secondary research questions include:

- What factors affect practitioner well-being?
- What are the implications of workplace flexibility?
- Do practitioners and managers view flexibility differently?
- How does flexibility influence professional development?
- What are managers' perceptions of workplace flexibility?

3. Research Design and Method

3.1. Research Approach

A **qualitative systematic review** was undertaken to explore workplace flexibility's influence on job satisfaction, work-life balance, retention, professional development, and well-being among ECD practitioners and managers in the Sedibeng District. The study followed Tranfield et al.'s (2003) three-stage systematic review process as seen in Figure 1.

**Systematic Review Process for Workplace Flexibility
(Adapted from Tranfield et al., 2003)**

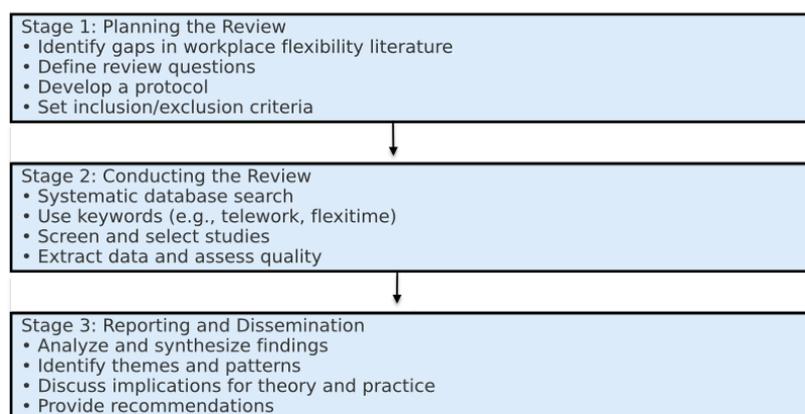


Figure 1. Systematic review process for workplace flexibility as adapted from Tranfield et al. 2003

3.2. Research Strategy

The systematic review approach enabled the researcher to collect, evaluate, and synthesise relevant literature from 2013–2023, ensuring findings reflected current trends and challenges. PRISMA (Page et al., 2021) and AMSTAR 2 (Shea et al., 2017) frameworks guided the systematic review to ensure validity, transparency, and reliability.

3.3. Research Participants and Sampling Methods

The study population comprised previously published research on workplace flexibility in educational contexts. Purposive sampling was applied using inclusion and exclusion criteria based on the PEOS (Participants, Exposure, Outcomes, and Studies) framework as seen in Table 1. The study included empirical, peer-reviewed literature in English that examined workplace flexibility's impact on practitioner well-being, using the PEOS framework based on PRISMA for selection. Both qualitative and quantitative studies were considered. Excluded were irrelevant, duplicate, incomplete, non-peer-reviewed, or non-English sources lacking empirical evidence.

Table 1. PEOS table as adapted from Page et al., 2021

1	Participants	Educators/teachers, principals/owners, practitioners, and managers that have implemented or partake in flexible work practices.
2	Exposure	Educators and corporate practitioners as well as managers in flexible work environments.
3	Outcomes	Improved well-being in the workplace, implications of workplace flexibility, various generational views on workplace flexibility, international and national trends on workplace flexibility, and the managers' perspectives on workplace flexibility.
4	Studies	Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies

3.4. Entrée and Establishing Researcher Roles

The researcher functioned as an independent, objective reviewer ensuring neutrality and academic rigour.

3.5. Data Collection Methods and Recording

Data were collected using database searches with keywords such as *workplace flexibility*, *well-being*, and *educational sector*. Records were organised digitally for analysis. Literature from 2013–2023 was sourced from databases such as EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, and Google Scholar using targeted keywords.

3.6. Strategies Employed to Ensure Data Quality and Integrity

PRISMA and AMSTAR 2 guidelines ensured research validity, transparency, and reliability. Credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and reflexivity principles were also applied to ensure data trustworthiness.

3.7. Data Analysis

Findings were thematically synthesised across selected studies. Eligible studies were critically appraised and thematically synthesised using AMSTAR 2 evaluation guidelines.

3.8. Reporting Style

Results were presented narratively, integrating qualitative evidence.

3.9. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the North-West University Ethics Committee (clearance number: NWU-01821-24-A4). Ethical standards for secondary data research were maintained through proper citation and transparency.

4. Results

A total of 13,804 studies were identified through electronic databases using specific keywords. After exclusions based on inclusion criteria, relevance, duplication, empirical basis, and access restrictions, 13,648 studies were removed. Filters such as date and language limitations refined the search. The PRISMA Flow Diagram (Page et al., 2021) illustrates this process as seen below. Of the sources reviewed, 44.51% examined workplace flexibility and flexible work arrangements, 8.54% focused on practitioner and educator perspectives, and 4.88% explored manager views and well-being. Additionally, 29.26% addressed teacher well-being, while 12.80% investigated the concept of compressed workweek and its implications for workplace flexibility.

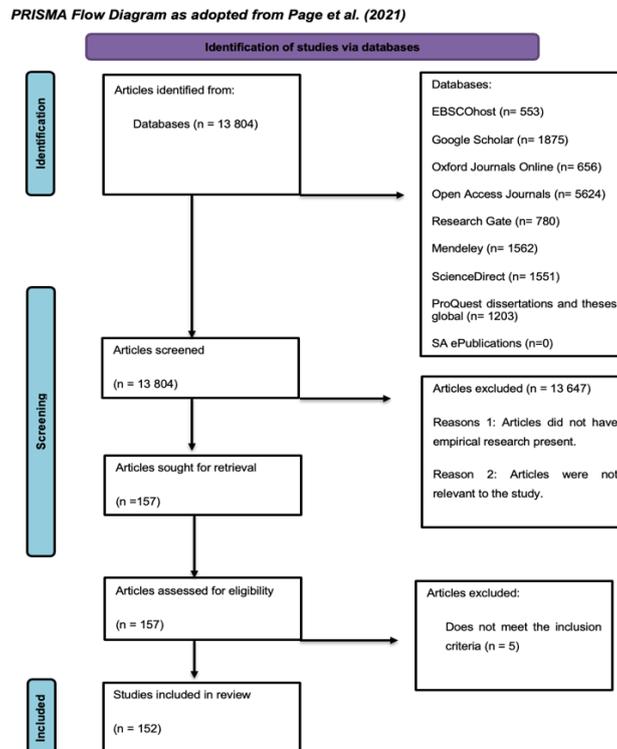


Figure 2. PRISMA flow diagram as adopted from Page et al., 2021

This study identified three main themes related to workplace flexibility. The first theme focused on perceptions and views on workplace flexibility. This included examining the perspectives of educators and managers on workplace flexibility, as well as understanding its impact on job satisfaction and well-being. The second theme explored implementation and variations in workplace flexibility. It investigated the most effective flexible work arrangements, the barriers to their implementation, and role of enablers and facilitators in supporting workplace flexibility. The third theme examined outcomes and the impact on retention and development. This included analysing how workplace flexibility influenced practitioner retention rates, its effect on professional development, and its overall impact on work-life balance and well-being.

The findings of the systematic review indicated that workplace flexibility significantly influenced practitioner well-being and job satisfaction across sectors. This review synthesized research to provide a comprehensive understanding of FWAs and their impact on educators, managers, and practitioners. Studies consistently showed that FWAs positively affected practitioner attitudes and

organisational outcomes. Sturman and Walsh (2014) found that aligning work hours with practitioner preferences enhanced job satisfaction and reduced turnover. Chia-Lin and Wei-Wen (2017) highlighted the well-being benefits of flexible scheduling among Taiwanese educators, while Wörtler et al. (2020) emphasised that tailoring FWAs to individual autonomy needs improved outcomes. Educators perceived workplace flexibility as essential for managing work-life balance and noted that supportive leadership improved well-being through FWAs (Press et al., 2015). Additionally, Van der Lippe et al. (2024) noted that socio-economic disparities in FWA access influenced job satisfaction.

From a managerial perspective, Koreshi and Alpass (2023) noted that FWAs played a role in enhancing practitioner well-being and organisational effectiveness and that FWAs benefited older workers managing caregiving duties, while Ahmad et al. (2018) reported that FWAs reduced turnover intentions among Malaysian practitioners. However, FWAs had mixed outcomes, as Gu, Wang and You (2020) found that effective personal time recovery reduced stress, while Kaduk et al. (2019) linked involuntary FWAs to work-family conflict. Within the education sector, FWAs helped manage stress and improve job satisfaction. Orlanda-Ventayen and Ventayen (2022) found that stress management policies reduced depression among educators and demonstrated that a flexible work environment contributed to well-being and autonomy, while Turner et al. (2017) found that a four-day school week improved staff morale.

5. Discussion of Results

This section discusses the themes identified in the systematic review, structured around the research questions and objectives. The study's analysis revealed three overarching themes, perceptions and views on workplace flexibility, implementation and variations in workplace flexibility, and outcomes related to retention and development. These themes were developed from a comprehensive synthesis of literature and are supported by key studies that provide depth and contextual understanding.

Theme 1: Perceptions and Views on Workplace Flexibility

Intrinsic factors such as personal and career growth and extrinsic factors like working conditions impact job satisfaction (Rao, 2019). Sturman and Walsh (2014) emphasised that aligning work hours with practitioner preferences enhances satisfaction and reduces turnover. Similarly, Chia-Lin and Wei-Wen (2017) found that flexibility mitigated stress and administrative burdens among Taiwanese educators, improving overall well-being. Wörtler et al. (2020) explored blended working arrangements (BWAs) and concluded that preferences for flexibility vary

by autonomy orientation, stressing that flexible policies must be tailored to individual needs to improve organisational attractiveness.

Theme 1a: Views of Educators and Managers on Workplace Flexibility

Educators often perceive flexibility as vital for balancing professional and personal responsibilities (Wörtler et al., 2020). Press et al. (2015) demonstrated that evidence-based flexibility policies alleviate staffing shortages and enhance retention in early childhood education. Van der Lippe, den Dulk and Begall (2024) investigated FWAs across nine European countries, finding significant socio-economic disparities in access and effectiveness. Their study revealed that managerial commitment is key to whether FWAs yield positive or negative results. Turner et al. (2017) further supported this, showing that a four-day school week improved staff morale and teaching quality, illustrating widespread support for flexible scheduling among educators.

Theme 1b: Impact of Workplace Flexibility on Job Satisfaction and Well-Being

Gu, Wang and You (2020) demonstrated that recovery experiences such as relaxation and psychological detachment reduce stress and insomnia among preschool teachers. This aligns with Mulholland, McKinlay and Sproule (2017), who found that non-teaching time and sabbaticals could mitigate workload stress, particularly for middle managers. Kaduk et al. (2019) reported that involuntary FWAs increase work-family conflict, burnout, and turnover intentions, underscoring that flexibility must be voluntary to be effective. Choi et al. (2017) highlighted that inclusive leadership, coupled with flexibility, enhances engagement and creativity, reinforcing the link between autonomy and well-being.

Theme 2: Implementation and Variations in Workplace Flexibility

Work-life balance and scheduling flexibility are key predictors of job satisfaction across contexts. Andrade, Westover and Kupka (2019) demonstrated that cultural differences influence responses to flexibility, suggesting that HR practices should be adapted locally to optimise outcomes. Using data from the International Social Survey Programme, their study underscored that one size fits all approaches are ineffective. Lu, Wang and Olsen (2023) examined the “flexibility paradox,” showing that while flexible schedules can improve work-life balance, they may also extend working hours. The benefits of flexibility, therefore, are unevenly distributed across gender and occupational groups, requiring targeted policy intervention.

Theme 2a: Most Effective Flexible Work Arrangements

Andrade et al. (2019) found that remote work significantly enhanced job satisfaction, confirming its value for practitioner well-being. Wheatley (2017) observed gender differences in the UK, noting that men benefited more from FWAs in managing household responsibilities than women. An et al. (2021), in a mixed-methods study

on teachers' transition to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasised the role of professional development, technology access, and communication in ensuring the success of FWAs. Collectively, the most effective FWAs include telecommuting, flexitime, compressed workweeks, and supportive environments, all of which improve satisfaction and work-life balance.

Theme 2b: Barriers to Implementation of Flexible Work Arrangements

Warmate et al. (2021) found that practitioners with mental disabilities face limited access to flexibility due to financial and policy constraints, calling for inclusive interventions. Managerial and organisational barriers also persist. Kossek et al. (2015) discussed "flexibility traps" such as reduced fairness perceptions, weakened culture, and work-life imbalance, advocating for systemic change in managerial practices. Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach that considers cultural, social, and technological contexts, ensuring that flexibility enhances, rather than undermines, well-being.

Theme 2c: Enablers and Facilitators of Flexible Work Arrangements

Organisational culture and leadership play critical roles in enabling FWAs. Wörtler, Van Yperen and Barelds (2020) found that trust and managerial support strongly predict successful implementation. Their mixed-methods study emphasised leadership commitment as essential to normalising flexible work. Similarly, Yadav, Rangnekar and Bamel (2016) found that transformational leadership characterised by motivation, inspiration, and change advocacy drives the adoption of FWAs, creating conditions conducive to employee empowerment and productivity.

Theme 3: Outcomes and Impact on Retention and Development

Workplace flexibility aims to balance professional and personal life and is strongly linked to retention and professional development. While FWAs bring many benefits, they can also blur work-life boundaries, increasing the risk of burnout. Laurijssen et al. (2024) highlighted this paradox, showing that flexible schedules may improve family time but also cause work to spill into personal hours. Effective management and clear boundaries are therefore crucial to avoid negative outcomes.

Theme 3a: Impact on Retention Rates

The well-being of practitioners significantly influences retention. Bigras et al. (2021) found that flexible working conditions helped alleviate stress among early childhood educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eadie et al. also reported reduced stress and improved well-being through remote work and flexible policies. Berkery et al. (2020) linked flexitime to lower turnover and higher profitability, demonstrating both human and economic benefits. These studies collectively suggest that flexibility fosters a positive social exchange between employees and managers, leading to greater commitment and workforce stability.

Theme 3b: Impact on Professional Development

Kwon et al. (2024) compared early childhood teachers' working conditions and found that flexibility supported both well-being and professional growth. Their survey-based study recommended policies that enhance flexibility as a strategy for professional development. Similarly, Royer and Moreau (2016) found that psychological well-being is central to long-term career development among Canadian early childhood educators. Their findings suggest that workplace flexibility provides the necessary support and autonomy for sustained professional growth throughout different career stages.

Theme 3c: Impact on Work-Life Balance and Well-Being

Farewell et al. (2022) applied the Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-R) to show that FWAs help alleviate workload stress by increasing control over schedules, thereby improving satisfaction and well-being. Geraci et al. (2023) explored remote teaching during COVID-19 and found that emotional intelligence training mitigated burnout and improved resilience. Similarly, Kwon et al. (2022) examined disparities in early childhood educators' physical and psychological well-being, emphasising that improved working conditions are essential for maintaining balance and overall health. These findings confirm that flexible practices are instrumental in promoting sustainable well-being across educational contexts.

The discussion highlights that workplace flexibility significantly affects practitioner satisfaction, retention, and professional development. Its success depends on voluntary participation, leadership support, and well-defined policies. While flexibility enhances well-being and productivity, poorly managed systems risk creating new inequalities and stressors. The findings advocate for evidence-based, context-sensitive, and inclusive approaches to implementing FWAs, ensuring that both organisational and individual needs are met effectively.

6. Recommendations and Limitations

This study has several limitations. The review was restricted to literature published in English within a specific timeframe, which may have excluded relevant research in other languages or more recent publications. The reliance on secondary data limits the analysis to the quality and scope of existing studies. Additionally, space and citation restrictions prevented inclusion of all potentially relevant sources. The article was also structured to align with the framework of the *African Journal of Practitioner Relations*, which influenced the depth of coverage.

Based on the findings, the study recommends that organisations, particularly within the Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector, adopt flexible work arrangements (FWAs) to enhance practitioner satisfaction, retention, and overall well-being.

Policymakers should develop supportive frameworks that facilitate the implementation of FWAs tailored to the sector's specific needs. Investment in infrastructure, digital tools, and training is crucial to ensure that practitioners can effectively manage remote or hybrid work models. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to assess the long-term impact of FWAs and generate more comprehensive evidence on their sustainability and outcomes.

7. Practical Implications and Contribution

The findings indicate that FWAs positively influence job satisfaction, well-being, and retention, particularly when supported by effective leadership and results-oriented workplace cultures. However, potential challenges such as professional isolation, managerial resistance, and logistical constraints may hinder success. Within the ECD sector, hybrid schedules and staggered models may offer practical solutions. Guided by Social Exchange Theory (SET), the study suggests that when practitioners perceive organisational support—such as flexibility policies—they are more likely to demonstrate commitment and satisfaction (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). This aligns with prior findings that flexibility reduces workload pressure and supports retention (Sturman & Walsh, 2014; Chia-Lin & Wei-Wen, 2017).

This study contributes to understanding the role of workplace flexibility in enhancing practitioner satisfaction and retention in the ECD sector. It identifies both benefits—such as improved well-being and engagement—and challenges, including resource limitations and misconceptions about feasibility. The findings offer guidance for policymakers and organisational leaders seeking to strengthen practitioner support systems. Overall, this review lays a foundation for future research, including forthcoming interviews that will expand the South African perspective on workplace flexibility.

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