EXPLORING SUPPORTS FOR THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION WORKFORCE: UNDERSTANDING DEMANDS AND RESOURCES

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Linking Statement

The importance of experiences that occur during the first few years of life has been firmly established (Housman, 2007; Shonkoff et al., 2009). Early childhood (EC) educators play a pivotal role in supporting children who are cared for in home and center-based child care settings during this sensitive developmental period (Tabroni et al., 2022; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Their interactions and relationships with young children convey safety and acceptance, support children to regulate emotions and behavior, and scaffold development across domains (Nguyen et al., 2020; Vandenbroucke et al., 2018; Williford et al., 2013). Early educators report that they take pride in their work, believe their work is meaningful, and feel they are positively impacting the lives of young children and their families (Kwon et al., 2021; Schaack et al., 2020). When they have the support that they need, including access to training and professional development, respectful relationships with colleagues and program leadership, and feel their voices are being heard, EC educators are better able to provide high quality support to the children and families they serve (Slot, 2015; Xia et al., 2023).

Early educators’ well-being, job demands, resources, and the supports (or lack of supports) available to them, are associated with their work engagement and interactions with children (Cassidy et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2021). Higher workloads, job constraints, stress, and a lack of available resources (e.g., compensation, benefits, supportive relationships with leadership and colleagues), negatively impact educators’ interactions with children and the quality of care they are able to provide (Grining et al., 2010; King et al., 2016). Notably, EC educators consistently report contending with challenges in the workplace, including high rates of turnover, and a lack of benefits, compensation, training opportunities and resources, issues that have worsened in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bassok et al., 2020; Whitebook et al., 2018). Understanding factors that contribute to and buffer the effects of stress and professional demands for early educators is more urgent in the face of these COVID-19 related challenges experiences placed on them and the children and families they serve (Daro et al., 2022; Farewell et al., 2022; Heilala et al., 2022).

This three-manuscript dissertation seeks to better understand and center the experiences of early educators, specifically examining how they use the resources and supports available to them to meet the extraordinary demands of their work. This information has implications for determining how best to intervene and offer support in ways that maintain their agency and reflect the realities of the classroom context.

The ECE Workforce

We use the term early childhood (EC) educators[1] to describe the professionals who work with young children in a variety of child care settings including family day homes, privately owned centers, faith based centers, Head Start, Early Head Start and other publicly funded programs (International Labor Office, 2014). Although the EC developmental stage includes children from birth to eight, the focus of these three papers is on the experience of educators working in pre-k settings with children younger than five (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015; McLean et al., 2021). Attempting to describe the ECE workforce as a whole is a challenge, as there is variability in provider roles, credentials, education, training experiences, resources, and compensation, which are often tied to program type and geographic location (McLean et al., 2021). However, understanding similarities and difference between early educators has implications for understanding strengths and sources of support for the workforce, as well as addressing the challenges they face.

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[1] Language used to describe job titles and settings in ECE (e.g., childcare, daycare, teacher, educarer, provider, caregiver, educator) often conveys meaning, capturing the politics and the value placed on the profession. One nuance is the distinction that is often made between care and education, with more value and cultural capital typically placed on education. We argue that care and education are not separate in ECE (or beyond), and that care for children's physical and emotional needs is essential in supporting their development across domains, requiring experience, knowledge, expertise, planning and intentional scaffolding. Within this three-paper dissertation, we primarily refer to individuals in the ECE workforce as early educators, or early childhood educators, aside from instances where data were collected from participants under a different designation. By doing this, our intention is to eliminate the distinction between care and education, and to assert that all providers who work with children are educators.

Depending on the source, estimates place the number of early educators in the United States at around two million and the number of children in their care at roughly 12 million, although this number initially decreased during the pandemic (Whitebook et al., 2016). The workforce is almost exclusively female and is racially and ethnically diverse; 37 percent of center-based staff and home providers identify as Black, Hispanic, Asian or another non-white identity[2]; this number increases to 49 percent for home-based providers who are compensated for child care but are not part of state registries (Whitebook et al., 2016). Regulations for training, credentials and education of providers vary by state and setting. Thirty-five percent of educators working in center settings have obtained a bachelor's degree, 17 percent an associate's degree and 18 percent have completed a high school or equivalent degree. Fifteen percent of those working in family day homes have obtained a bachelor's degree, 16 percent have obtained an associate's degree and 29 percent have a high school or equivalent degree (NAEYC, 2021; Whitebook et al, 2016). Findings on the association between educational attainment and the quality of care EC educators provide have been mixed and notably, many early educators obtain training and experience through professional development training or more informal channels such as on the job experience and peer mentorship (Manning et al., 2019; NAEYC, 2020; Slot et al., 2015). Importantly, educational attainment depends on access, finances and the time and resources required to take advantage of these opportunities, which act as barriers for many early educators (NAEYC, 2020). Compensation for providers does not typically keep pace with educational attainment and early educators with bachelor's degrees are paid less than individuals in other fields with the same level of education (McLean et al., 2021; Whitebook et al., 2014; 2018).

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[2] The data collected did not further specify what race or ethnicities were defined by this category.

Child care is one of the lowest paid occupations within the United States, with providers paid an average of $11.65 per hour and $24,230 yearly (MacLean, 2021; Occupational Employment Statistics [OES], 2019). Despite decades of advocacy work, pay for EC educators does not meet the living wage for *one* individual in 40 out of 50 states, which means that at least 10 percent and up to 34 percent of providers live below the poverty line, depending on the state and whether they financially support others (MacLean, 2021). Although there has been some movement towards collective bargaining rights for EC educators in certain settings (e.g., family day homes) and professional organizations such as The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) have made efforts to unify and advocate for the ECE workforce, wages have remained low, benefits are not guaranteed in many settings and channels to advocate for improved conditions are limited (MacLean et al., 2021; NAEYC, 2003; 2009; 2020; Stavely, 2020; Whitebook et al., 2014). Less than five percent of child care workers (compared to 45 percent of elementary and middle school teachers) are part of a union, which would allow them to negotiate for improved compensation and work conditions (Hirsch & Macpherson, 2018). Educators who work with infants and toddlers make less income per year ($8,375 on average) than those working in preschool settings, which disproportionately harms Black and Latinx women who are more likely to work with younger children and already contend with a racial wage gap, being paid roughly $0.78 less per hour than White providers (Austin et al., 2019; Whitebook et al., 2018).

This lack of adequate compensation results in many EC educators struggling to meet their own and their family's basic needs with roughly half of providers accessing public supports and many reporting that they experience significant financial stressors (Whitebook et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic, resulting center closures, high rates of turnover and instability in work hours has exacerbated these issues, placing many programs and workers in crisis (Daro & Gallagher, 2020). Working during the pandemic, in many cases without health care or benefits such as paid sick leave placed additional risks and stress on providers (Markowitz et al., 2020; Sonnier-Neto et al., 2020). Early educators were also more vulnerable to pandemic-related health and mental health issues due to continuing work and a higher prevalence of stress, depressive symptoms, obesity and physical ailments than the general population prior to the pandemic (Berger et al., 2022; Gould, 2015; Martin et al., 2022; Schmid & Thomas, 2020).

Despite the low pay, child care providers have relatively high job demands and a lack of time, support and resources to complete them (Jeon et al., 2021; Jian-Bin et al., 2021; Kwon et al., 2020; 2021). Before the pandemic, early educators endorsed experiencing higher levels of stress, depressive symptoms, and burnout than the general population; reporting high job demands (e.g., documentation, observation and assessment, behavioral challenges, staffing shortages, turnover) and a lack of supports (e.g., breaks, paid planning time, adequate staffing, training, professional development) to manage them Jeon et al., 2018; Jeon & Wells, 2018; Kwon et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2019). Based on data collected from early educators and families throughout the pandemic, needs and job demands have increased, while resources and support remain limited (Farewell et al., 2022; Weiland et al., 2022). Related, program directors and leadership, an essential source of support for EC educators also report high levels of stress, increased bureaucratic responsibilities and a lack of resources which interferes with their ability to focus on pedagogy, professional development and supporting educators in their programs (Kristiansen et al., 2021).

Even in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, providers continue to demonstrate creativity, flexibility and resilience as they adjust to shifting roles and demands. They report seizing opportunities to connect with and meet the needs of young children and their families, feeling supported by colleagues, being motivated by those around them, and using positive coping strategies to manage their stress (Berger et al., 2022; Bigras et al., 2021; Dayal & Tiko, 2020; Daro & Gallagher, 2020). These findings are aligned with previous research pointing to personal resources helping early educators navigate high job demands with limited professional resources, thus buffering the impact of stress and high demands (Becker et al., 2017; Li et al., 2021; Tait, 2008). Importantly, establishing community with colleagues and the value, joy and meaning that providers find in their work have also been associated positively with their well-being (Cumming, 2017; Fenech & Watt, 2022; Schreyer & Krause, 2016).

Job-Demands and Resources Model

Early educators' experiences balancing the complex demands of their work with limited resources makes the Job-Demands and Resources (JDR) model a useful framework for understanding how they perceive and engage with different workplace responsibilities and supports (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). The JDR model theorizes that stress, burnout, well-being and engagement in the workplace is a function of the balance (or imbalance) between personal and professional resources and job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). The JDR framework has been used frequently in ECE research to understand the relatively high levels of stress, turnover and burnout among early educators and which resources protect against adverse outcomes (Eadie et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Schaack & Stedron, 2020). As is common in other care professions (e.g., nursing), early educators often see their work as part of their identity, or a personal calling, rather than solely a profession (Thorpe et al., 2020). While this may buffer the negative impact of stressors and demands, it can also contribute to a willingness to work without adequate compensation and/or in suboptimal conditions, which ultimately has negative implications for providers and the children in their care (McLean et al., 2021).

Demands and Resources in Context

Importantly, the demands placed on EC educators and the resources available to them occur within a larger context informed by community, culture, policy, economics and larger systems (Boles, 1980; McLean et al., 2021). These structures and power dynamics shape everything from geographic locations of centers, to measures of program quality and school readiness, educator professionalization, compensation and program funding. Intersectional racial, ethnic, linguistic, citizenship, disability status and gender identities of both children and educators have historically and continue to be associated with structural inequities that influence access to and experiences in ECE settings, as well as the resources and supports available to children, families and providers (Austin et al., 2019; Early et al., 2010). Despite decades of research and substantial evidence firmly establishing the importance of early experiences, child care work continues to be undervalued, a fact that is reflected in the lack of financial compensation, recognition and respect for this gendered work (Brennan & Mahon, 2011). Even within the field and movements to professionalize the workforce, academic skills and school readiness (positioned as requiring more advanced skills and education for providers) are emphasized rather than celebrating the value in care work and explicitly connecting it to children's well-being and development (Boyd, 2013). The connections between childcare and motherhood and the free labor provided by those in caregiving roles that the economy rests upon, as well as a discomfort with tying caregiving to financial motivations or compensation are rooted in historical and present day capitalist and patriarchal power structures, as well as neo-liberal feminist perspectives that devalue this work while also simultaneously depending on it (Garbes, 2022; Halperin, 2020). Working from a critical paradigm means making these structural inequities visible, and advocating for shifts in the field to improve conditions for educators, children and families. Research, policy, movements within the field, educator practice and each interaction inside a classroom offers opportunities to maintain or disrupt these dynamics. McLean and colleagues (2021) at the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment assert:

> Continuing to pay early educators poverty-level wages out of an expectation that women, especially women of color, will continue to do this work for (almost) free — either out of love for children or because they have few other options — perpetuates sexism, racism, and classism in the United States. Disrupting historical notions of early education and care as unskilled and of little value requires social recognition of early educators' crucial contributions and a re-imagining of the entire early care and education system. Early educators' poor working conditions are not inevitable, but a product of policy choices that have consistently let down the women who are doing this essential work.

Contributions of this Three-Paper Dissertation to the Current Literature

This three-paper manuscript employs the JDR framework and applies a critical lens to understand early educator's experiences, strengths and needs. While previous research has captured resources and demands in EC settings prior to and during the pandemic, research on how educators compensate for the lack of resources available to them, as well as the assets and strengths that support them to meet children's needs is limited (Cassidy et al., 2016; Farewell et al., 2022; Jeon et al., 2021). The current three-manuscript body of work seeks to fill this gap in the literature by (a) centering EC educators' perspectives and voices, (b) identifying internal capacities, resources and supports that facilitate contextually relevant, meaningful and sustained changes in systems and practice, and (c) maintaining educator agency in determining solutions to challenges in the field.

This dissertation builds on itself, initially examining time available to educators as a resource to offset added work demands (Paper 1). Next, a book chapter on classroom management in ECE (Paper 2) provides practical information that can be directly applied to practice. Importantly, this chapter acknowledges systemic factors that shape classroom practices, and advocates to provide additional, much needed resources to early educators. Last, a mixed-methods case study (Paper 3) captures educators' understanding of how they balance resources available to them with professional demands, how this impacts their well-being and work and solutions they envision to address challenges in the field.

Paper 1, Value in Time: Associations Between Early Childhood Educators' Time Stress and Curriculum Implementation

Paper 1 examined stress related to time descriptively in a sample of 107 EC educators, employed in public, private and Head Start programs prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The JDR model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) was used as a framework to examine the association between educators' time stress (i.e., their perception of the balance between the time available to them and their responsibilities), and their implementation of a comprehensive curriculum being piloted. The majority of the sample reported stress-related to time constraints and mean time stress for the sample was rated at moderate levels. A multi-level model determined that the majority of variation in time stress was at the individual level, pointing to personal and classroom level factors as potential contributors. There were also significant differences in time stress ratings between programs, although these were small. Educators' ratings of time stress were not significantly correlated with curriculum implementation, including measures of implementation fidelity and coach ratings of participants' engagement. There were moderate negative correlations between time stress and positive perceptions of the curriculum and time stress and the value educators found in curriculum components. These findings point to the importance of balancing resources and demands— and specifically, ensuring that educators have adequate time available, before introducing additional demands or a novel intervention. Time to plan, reflect and adapt interventions to their classroom context, may help early educators to find value in new practices and perceive the changes they are making more positively.

Paper 2, Book Chapter: Classroom Management in Early Childhood Education

This chapter on classroom management (CM) in ECE explored how early care settings offer opportunities for providers to rethink previous definitions of CM, and imagine a more inclusive, child-centered and strengths-based framework. The chapter is intended for use by early educators and seeks to synthesize research in the field, while taking knowledge and expertise gained through practice into account. The chapter provides information, guidance, and resources for providers to engage in the following CM practices (a) reframing "challenging," behaviors as communicating a need, (b) engaging children and supporting their agency in the classroom, (c) building relationships with children and families, (d) establishing classroom community, and (e) reflecting on personal and systemic biases that impact perceptions of children's behaviors. The chapter explicitly connects the resources available to early educators to their well-being, the care they provide and their use of effective CM practices.

Paper 3, "Somethings Gotta Give": Learning from Early Childhood Educator's Experiences Navigating Demands and Resources in and Beyond the Pandemic Context

Paper 3 is a mixed methods case study that centers early educators in the conversation currently occurring about where to target supports, what resources are needed and future directions in the field of ECE. Using data collected via surveys and interviews, this study sought to better understand how EC educators understand their work, supports available to them and their well-being in the current context. Participants also shared solutions for the challenges they, their colleagues, children and families were experiencing. Findings indicate that early educators see their stress and resource limitations such as lack of coverage, compensation and professional support as negatively impacting their work. Although participants perceived allocation of resources as largely outside of their control, they reported using a variety of strategies (e.g., unpaid labor, prioritizing demands, advocating/negotiating for resources, receiving help from colleagues, focusing on the importance of their work) to assert their agency and navigate between demands and resource at the classroom and program level. Further, participants pointed to the importance of systemic solutions to addressing issues in the field, including adequate compensation and benefits, improved work conditions, coordinating across systems, integrating ECE, services and public schools and increasing awareness of the importance of early development and ECE.

Conclusion

This three-paper dissertation seeks to draw attention to and place value on the work that EC educators do, while exploring how best to support them. Understanding and prioritizing EC educators’ perceptions of their experiences and the resources they need is necessary to address the longstanding inequities in the field of ECE. Each paper explores an aspect of the JDR model and seeks to better understand the relationship between demands, resources and educator’s well-being, work-engagement and practice. The support and resources provided to early educators in the form of compensation, benefits, staffing, time, professional development and recognition are directly related to the quality of care they provide to children and contribute to the well-being and retention of this deeply dedicated workforce (Cassidy et al., 2016; Li et al., 2021).

Brief Note on Positionality[3]

Each manuscript in this three paper dissertation has been shaped by my experience working in childcare, and my respect for EC educators. Working alongside, observing and having conversations with EC educators has contributed to my understanding of this work, and how I see the dynamic processes that unfold in classroom settings and communities- complexities that I find it hard to capture in my research. I do not separate my identity as a practitioner from my role as a researcher and aligned with critical frameworks, do not seek to be objective, but advocate to dismantle inequitable systems and practices within ECE, rebuilding in ways that prioritize care, justice and equitable distribution of resources to each EC educator, young child and family. The resilience and dedication of early educators in the face of barriers and limited access to resources is impressive and we can only imagine what these professionals would be capable of if provided with the resources they and their supporters have long been advocating for (Whitebook et al., 2014).

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[3] For a more extensive positionality statement see Appendix A.

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Appendix A

Extended Positionality Statement

I have been drawn to ECE research and specifically research that focuses on EC educators, because of my identity and experiences as a child care provider. I have been drawn to qualitative and mixed methodologies because I do not see my role as a researcher as separate from who I am as a person and I do not want to appear objective, but to critically examine and disrupt practices in ECE that are causing harm to educators and the children they care for. I have chosen to pursue my graduate degree because of my work in child care and in my research I aspire to reflect the nuances and realities of life in the classroom, in particular drawing attention to educators' experiences and the political and structural factors that shape them.

My knowledge, beliefs, and worldview (and therefore my lens as a researcher) have been shaped by my experiences and identity. Being born in the United States within a financially secure family meant that I had access to early experiences that would be considered enriching, and that I have been exposed to euro-centric cultural norms regarding child development, learning and behavior. I was given freedom to explore the world around me and was safe doing this. When it was time for me to attend a home daycare and then preschool, my family had access to settings that would be considered high quality. As a White female, I did not experience exclusion or limits to my autonomy within child care settings. Awareness of the ways in which my privileged racial identity has shaped my experiences was important in my role as an educator and continues to be something I examine as a researcher to ensure that I am not forcing my worldview onto others or missing important information due to my own blind spots, thus reinforcing inequities and causing additional harm.

Both of my parents worked in education and I was also steeped in the idea that public school was an equalizer and a way of bettering one’s circumstances. This was passed down to me from my parents and them from their parents. I was first introduced to Black Studies, and gender studies during college and it was through exposure to tenets of intersectionality, critical race theory and critical feminist frameworks that I began to deeply explore, and question the narratives I had absorbed about myself, my family’s history, opportunity, equal access to education and equity in the United States. I am very thankful for this experience of learning about and becoming more fully aware of how racism, classism and sexism are ingrained within cultural institutions, including public education. I applied these ideas to my work in daycare, which was my first job after attending college. I had not studied child development or education, and was taught much of what I know about scaffolding the development of and caring for young children through applied, on the job learning, reflection on practice, informal mentorships, and teaching as part of a team with more experienced educators.

As part of an early childhood education fellowship I worked full time in a classroom in a university affiliated daycare program, took courses on child development and learning pedagogy, and spent time reflecting on my practice and observations of children in the classroom. It was in this environment that I grew to love teaching young children, specifically, engaging in child-directed and project-based curriculum in which children have agency over their learning and experiences in the classroom. Our program was racially and ethnically diverse, accepted school readiness funding and offered a sliding scale for tuition; some of our costs were offset by funding from the university. I didn’t realize at the time that this type of resourced early learning environment was rare or the ways in which access to such experiences is restricted. However, working in this setting made me realize what children and educators are capable of when provided with respect, resources and opportunities for continued growth and collaboration.

Later, while teaching kindergarten in the Dominican Republic for a year, I struggled to apply the frameworks for child development and learning I was accustomed to using in classrooms in the United States. Reflecting back on my time teaching there, I realize that I came into the situation without knowledge of the cultural context and that I made assumptions about what families prioritized or valued based on norms from my own culture and experiences. More recently, I have begun to examine my beliefs about child development, autonomy, quality in childcare and developmentally appropriate practice, which I had considered to be truths, rather than knowledge and frameworks rooted in particular cultural contexts and norms (Souto-Manning & Rabadi Raol, 2018).

My research is informed by my time spent working in child care and has been made possible in large part by my privileged identity as a graduate student. I now benefit from cultural capital and access to funding and resources I did not have as an early educator. My income is currently higher than it was when I worked in daycare, and this has given me the luxury to continue learning and exploring ideas that I am interested in without financial anxiety, or the need to work additional jobs. I am acutely aware of the privilege I had in being able to switch professions and to have an option not afforded to others in the ECE workforce. Nothing made this more striking than experiencing the pandemic and comparing my day to day life learning and working remotely to colleagues who remained at work in person. Although they faced many stressors as they continued to care for young children, experienced stress, uncertainty and risks to their health, I was also impressed the continued community they experienced and the meaning they felt in continuing to be a source of support for young children and families whose lived had been upended by the pandemic. My personal connection to this topic and my deep respect for early educators is ever present as I plan for, reflect on, interpret results of and frame my research.

In Relation to the Paper 3. For paper 3 (the mixed methods case study in this three paper dissertation), my positionality is as both an insider in the field of EC education and an outsider to the early education community where the study took place. While I believe my experience teaching and my understanding of the responsibilities of educators and classroom routines is an asset, I also have not worked in EC education during the pandemic, an important piece of the context for the current study. Additionally, I am not from the community where I collected data and the locations where I grew up and taught were demographically, politically and culturally different. It was important for me to continue to examine the ways in which my previous experiences and personal lenses influenced how I perceived situations and the meaning I ascribed to information I collected. I relied on reflexive processes such as journaling, data memos, entering spaces (virtual and in person) with an open mind, member checking, information shared by community partners, and the perspectives of my research team to reflect on how I was interpreting data. I also tried to be aware of the ways my power as a student and researcher impacted the dynamics in my relationships with community partners and participants.

Notably, I had not met the educators I interviewed prior to our first meeting. It was important for me to establish trust, convey respect and build relationships with participants. I also strived to be aware of balancing the information I needed to collect for my study and my community partner with the demands and responsibilities already placed on educators. A change I made was to eliminate classroom observations as an element of my study. This was both based on participant feedback and weighing the time demands with feeling as though I had collected enough information to answer my research questions during interviews.

Paper 1

Value in Time: Associations Between Early Childhood Educators' Time Stress and Curriculum Implementation

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Abstract

Early Childhood (EC) Educators complete a variety of job related responsibilities daily in addition to directly engaging with children. EC educators consistently report not having sufficient time or resources to complete these responsibilities during the work day. This imbalance between demands and resources is associated with stress, burnout, work satisfaction, motivation and educators' ability to engage with and implement curriculum (or other evidence-based interventions) effectively. The current study used the job demands and resources (JDR) model to examine time-related stress in a sample of 107 EC educators from a variety of program types as they implemented a novel comprehensive curriculum being piloted. Moderate levels of time stress were reported in the sample. While the bulk of variation in time stress was at the individual level, there was also significant variation in time stress at the program level. Time stress was not correlated with measures of implementation fidelity or participants' engagement with the curriculum, but was negatively correlated with positive perceptions of the curriculum and the value educators found in curriculum components. These findings have implications for rolling out and implementing interventions in ECE settings and point to the importance of the availability of non-contact time as a valuable support for early educators to complete job-related responsibilities and invest time in learning and applying novel interventions.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Curriculum Implementation, Time Stress

Value in Time: Associations Between Early Childhood Educators' Time Stress and Curriculum Implementation

Early childhood (EC) educators[4] perform a variety of responsibilities in addition to caring for and ensuring the safety of young children in their care; these include maintaining the classroom environment and materials, completing documentation, communicating with families, observing, completing assessments, and individualizing learning experiences (Harrison et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2015). Time to plan, prepare materials and reflect is necessary for educators to implement developmentally appropriate curriculum and engaging in the responsive, intentional interactions that scaffold learning and promote children's future academic and social-emotional success (Markowitz et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2020; Williford et al., 2013). EC educators fulfill these responsibilities while being paid an average of \$11.65 per hour, often without benefits or compensation for duties completed during personal time (Kwon et al., 2018; 2019; Mclean et al., 2021; Whitebook et al., 2018). While EC educators typically report that their work is fulfilling and makes a difference in children's lives, many also indicate that additional support, including compensated non-contact time[5], is necessary for them to provide quality care and manage responsibilities (Schachter et al., 2020; Zucker et al., 2021). It is often this lack of time and resources or the recognition that they are needed, rather than the demands or nature of child care work, that causes dissatisfaction and stress for providers (Jeon & Wells, 2018; Johnson et al., 2021).

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[4] Professionals who work with children five and under across settings. We intentionally use this term to highlight that education in EC encompasses supporting children with activities of daily living (e.g., providing comfort, feeding, toileting), and maintaining the environment. All of these practices and routines support the development of young children and require knowledge of child development and teaching practice, planning, intentionality and specific skill sets. We hope that use of this term acknowledges the work EC educators do and brings attention to the inequities present in the ways this work is valued.

[5] Compensated time spent on job responsibilities aside from directly caring for children (Hamel, 2021).

In the current study the job demands and resources (JDR) model (Demerouti & Bakkar, 2011) was used as a framework to better understand time as a resource for EC educators implementing curriculum. We examined variability in reported time stress across a variety of classroom-based program types as well as the relationship between time stress and implementation of the curriculum being piloted, including engagement with and perceptions of the curriculum. This study provides useful information from an understudied area to support curriculum use in EC settings and ranslate research to practice in ways that are feasible for providers.

Job Demands and Resources Model

The JDR model conceptualizes workplace well-being as the interplay between personal and professional resources and job demands (Bakker et al., 2005; Demerouti, 2001). When sufficient resources are available, the impact of demands is buffered. Thus stress and burnout tend to be lower, while well-being, work satisfaction and engagement are higher (Bakker et al., 2014; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bettini et al., 2017). This framework has been applied to understand EC educators' well-being as a function of the balance between access to resources and the high job demands placed on them (Farewell et al., 2021; Lipscomb et al., 2021; Nislin et al., 2016). Within this study, we were interested in examining time specifically as a resource, conceptualizing time stress as educator's perceptions of an imbalance between their work-related responsibilities and time available to complete them.

EC Curricula

EC curricula have the potential to support children's learning across domains by providing educators with a framework for aligning experiences and instruction with learning objectives (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Wong et al., 2008; Yoshikawa et al., 2013; Zaslow et al., 2016). Effective curricula engage educators with the *what* (materials, content, environment) and *how* (pedagogy, practices) to support learning (Burchinal et al., 2016; Chazen-Cohen et al., 2017). In light of findings linking use of curricula to measures of program quality and positive child outcomes (Clements et al., 2011; Klein & Knitzer, 2006; Yang et al., 2019), NAEYC (The National Association for the Education of Young Children) and Head Start require them (Dahlin & Squires, 2016; NAEYC, 2019). The majority of states provide guidance for programs to select research-based pre-k curricula and some states (e.g., Louisiana, Virginia) are moving to require evidence-based curricula in all state-funded pre-k programs in the next few years. These initiatives (and effective use of curricula more broadly) require educator engagement, including time devoted to planning, observation, reflection and professional development to increase knowledge, deepen, and apply new teaching practices (Boat et al., 2010; Chazen-Cohen et al., 2017; Grisham-Brown & Pretti-Frontczac, 2003).

EC Provider Time and Demands

Between 44 and 52 percent of respondents to surveys of EC educators across settings reported not having a daily break or planning time and cite coverage as a barrier (Kwon et al., 2020; 2021; Whitebook, 2018). Educators from Head Start programs are less likely to endorse having time to plan or reflect to improve teaching (Jeon & Wells, 2018). Providers and directors report that planning and break times are dependent on teacher-child ratios, staff availability, and whether children sleep at rest time (Hamel, 2021; Whitebook et al., 2018). Turnover, ubiquitous in the field, exacerbates coverage issues, which in turn increase job stress and additional turnover (Cassidy et al., 2011).

Although limited, research has examined EC educators' perceptions of how time constraints influence their professional engagement (Birbili, & Myrovali, 2020; Bullough et al., 2014; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012), and how they address them, including multi-tasking while caring for children and completing work-related responsibilities during personal time (Rose & Whitty, 2010). Methods such as time use diaries have been employed to categorize (Wong et al., 2015) and map how providers divide and use time, or multi-task to fulfill competing demands (Harrison et al., 2019; Kusma et al., 2011). Drawing from a sample of 204 EC educators and program directors from NAEYC accredited centers, Hamel (2021) found that curriculum planning and preparation was most commonly reported to take place during non-contact time; however, 91 percent of providers reported not having enough non-contact time to complete responsibilities, and completed them while with children or during personal time (e.g., coming to work early, working at home or during breaks). These findings are consistent with qualitative work by Wells (2017) in which Head Start providers reported that classroom quality and their interactions with children were adversely impacted by a lack of time to plan lessons and complete paperwork; planning and reflection often took place during personal time or time with children. Grisham-Brown and Pretti-Frontczak (2003) examined how planning time was used by EC educators to individualize instruction for children with special needs, and also found that providers needed more time than was allotted, completed other job responsibilities during planning time, and finished work at home.

While some amount of multi-tasking is necessary in the classroom, sustained and consistent use of time with children to complete other job-related responsibilities takes educator's attention away from the children in their care, which can cause safety issues and reduce the amount and quality of educator's interactions with the children in their care- an essential component of program quality (Birbili, & Myrovali, 2020; Williford et al., 2013). Further, completing job-related responsibilities and planning during personal time is not an equitable or sustainable solution as it rests on the unpaid labor of early educators who are already inadequately compensated.

Time and Curriculum Implementation

Curriculum implementation involves familiarization with materials and objectives, planning of experiences and adjustments to scheduling and the environment (Piasta et al., 2015; Weiland et al., 2018). Acquisition of knowledge through training, use of strategies, assessments and observations to individualize instruction and provide in the moment scaffolding are also required to effectively implement curriculum (Boat et al., 2010; Grisham-Brown & Pretti-Frontczac, 2003; O'Donnell et al., 2008; Piasta et al., 2015). Thus, effective use of curricula requires access to both resources *and* the time to utilize them (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Wong et al., 2008; Zaslow et al., 2016). Despite spending the majority of non-contact time on curriculum-related activities, EC educators report that this time is not sufficient to complete these and other responsibilities (Hamel, 2021).

Understandably, time commitment is frequently cited as a barrier to implementation of a variety of interventions and practices in school settings (Durlak & Dupre, 2008). Conversely, time to reflect, allocation of provider time and schedule planning are linked to positive and sustained changes in practice and intervention effectiveness (Darling-Hammond, 2011; Hamre et al., 2017; Jewett & McPhee, 2012). Early educators cite time constraints, lack of support, and competing demands as barriers to implementing curriculum consistently and with fidelity (Birbili & Myrovali, 2019; Bullough et al., 2014; Burgess et al., 2010). Related, providers' initial perceptions of interventions and their feasibility predict both implementation, and outcomes (Domitrovich et al., 2019, McCormick et al., 2019; Ransford et al., 2009; Williford et al., 2017). Taking this into account, understanding educators' time-related stress and its relationship to their engagement with a new curriculum has implications for translating research to practice and providing appropriate supports to early educators when adding demands to their already heavy workload.

Current Study

There is a lack of consensus regarding the association between work- time supports such as non-contact time with teacher and child outcomes in EC settings (King et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2015). While job demands have been examined as predictors of educators' mental health and contributing factors to educator stress (Jeon et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2019), time available has not been explored as a protective factor. We sought to fill this gap by gaining a better understanding of the experience of time stress for EC educators and examining the relationship between their time stress and implementation of a new curriculum being introduced to them. Using data collected from a demographically diverse group of 107 EC educators serving infants, toddlers and preschoolers across a variety of program types as they adopted an integrated comprehensive curriculum, the current study provides a description of early childhood educators' stress related to time and the relationship between this and their perceptions of and implementation of a new curriculum.

Research questions explored: (a) to what extent EC educators reported stress related to time, specifically, the levels of time stress they reported experiencing and whether their reports of time stress varied more between programs or individual providers, (b) variation in time stress by program auspice, and (c) associations between EC educators' reports of time stress and their perceptions of the curriculum and the value of curriculum components, implementation fidelity, engagement with curriculum supports (e.g., coaching and professional development) and coach reports of their engagement during coaching meetings.

We predicted that the bulk of time stress would be at the individual level, but also anticipated that program-specific policies and climate would result in significant variation at the program level (Haydon et al., 2018; Madigan, 2021). Although findings on the association between program type and stress have been mixed, we predicted that time stress ratings would be lower for public and Head Start programs due to provision of planning time despite higher demands (Roberts et al., 2016; Whitaker, 2015). We also predicted that educators' reported time stress would be negatively associated with positive perceptions of the curriculum, the value they found in curriculum activities, and implementation fidelity.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were part of a larger implementation pilot of a newly adopted ECE curriculum (for more information see STREAMin3, Williford et al., 2018). Over the course of a year, data were collected from coaches and providers across 112 classrooms within 37 programs in a Southeastern state. The sample included 107 EC educators (*n*=107), who primarily identified as female (97.8 percent) and self-reported their race as White (65.1 percent), Black (30.2 percent), Asian (2.3 percent), and multiracial (1.2 percent). 1.2 percent identified their ethnicity as Hispanic or Latinx. Providers worked in publicly-funded (53.8 percent), Head Start (5.2 percent), private (29.5 percent), and faith-based (11.6 percent) programs. Providers had an average of 14.7 years teaching experience. Educational attainment varied, with 11.5 percent obtaining a high school diploma or equivalent, 5.8 percent having some college or technical training, 8.1 percent with a two-year degree, 40.2 percent with a Bachelor's degree, and 34.5 percent with a Master's degree, which is a more advanced level of education than is typical in the field which is likely related to the high percentage of public programs represented in the sample.

The average class size in the sample was 14, and the classes served infants (10.6 percent), toddlers (17.7 percent) and 3-4 year-olds (71.7 percent).

Procedure

This study was approved by the university Institutional Review Board. After consenting to participate, participants completed professional development sessions and worked with coaches as they implemented the curriculum from Winter 2019 to Spring 2020. Participants completed an initial survey, reporting on demographics and perceptions of the curriculum after implementing for several months, and also completed a final survey in Spring 2020. Providers also completed fidelity checks in Fall 2019 and Winter of 2020, reporting on percentages of curriculum components completed and the value they found in these activities. Coaches tracked contact with participants and engagement through bi-weekly engagement reports. Data were collected online via Qualtrics.

Measures

Time Stress. Participants reported on their stress related to time during the initial survey. This construct was measured using items from the Work-Related Stressors subscale of the Provider Stress Inventory (Fimian & Fastenau, 1990). Participants reported on two items using a scale from 0 (no stress/not noticeable) - 100 (highly stressful/extremely noticeable). Items included “There is little time to prepare for my lessons/responsibilities,” and “My personal priorities are being shortchanged due to time demands”. Ratings were averaged to create an overall time stress score ($\alpha = .72$).

Perceptions of the Curriculum. Participants’ perceptions of the curriculum were reported within the initial survey after implementation began, and again within the final survey. Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with items on a scale from 0 (not at all) - 100 (very much). For example, “Participating in STREAMin3 has been manageable for me this year,” “Participating in STREAMin3 has been worth the time it is taking,” “Participating in STREAMin3 has been stressful for me” (reverse scored). The mean of items was calculated to create a composite perception score (α=0.94).

Implementation Fidelity. Implementation fidelity was assessed by the number of curriculum activities providers reported implementing weekly during fidelity checks. Providers self-reported how many days that week they had implemented each activity (e.g., setting up the arrival provocation, supporting core skills, group activity, group story, learning games, activity cards) from 0 (not at all) - 5 (maximum possible) days. This value was divided by the number of opportunities available to create a percentage of activities completed and the overall mean was calculated for a total implementation fidelity score.

Value of Curriculum Components. Participants reported the extent to which they found parts of the curriculum an asset to their teaching practice in fidelity checks. They rated the value they found in each curriculum component completed, from 0 (not at all valuable) - 100 (very valuable). An average was taken of these ratings to determine a mean value rating (α = .85).

Engagement with Supports. Participants’ engagement with implementation supports was captured by the number of coach meetings, professional development, and action plans completed. Coaches offered bi-weekly meetings and documented contact with providers in weekly engagement reports in order to determine if providers engaged with coaching as expected. Coaches also reported on attendance at professional development sessions and completion of action plans. Percentage of full meetings attended, number of PDs and action plans completed were calculated as separate variables.

Participant Engagement. Participants' engagement during meetings was reported by coaches for each full meeting attended. Coaches responded to seven items on a scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) - 5 (Strongly agree), for example "The participant was actively engaged during our meeting," and "The participant completed steps planned in previous meeting." These items were averaged to create an overall engagement score.

Data Analysis

Data were cleaned, and exploratory and descriptive analyses were conducted using Stata version 16.1. R version 3.6.2 was used to analyze imputed data with mice (van Buuren & Groothis-Oudshoorn, 2011) and miceadds (Robitzsch & Grund, 2021) packages. Variables included in analyses were examined for normality. Descriptive analyses of providers' ratings of time stress overall and individual time stress items were run.

In order to determine whether time stress varied more at the individual or program level, a multi-level, linear mixed effects model with clustering at the program level was fit to the data (Bates et al., 2015). This model estimated variation between providers and programs by pooling results from multiple analyses of imputed datasets. The intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC), was .31, indicating 31% of variance at the program level which warranted the use of a multi-level model, with nesting of providers within child care programs.

To determine whether program type was associated with provider-reported time stress, the program type variable was added as a predictor to the linear mixed effects model, clustered at the program level. This model was run with imputed data in Stata. Based on previous literature, provider years of experience and class size were included as covariates (Baker et al., 2010; Bennett, 2005). To examine curriculum implementation factors associated with time stress, correlations between time stress and each variable were calculated with significance levels and confidence intervals using stata. Fisher’s Z transformation was used to pool correlation coefficients from each imputed dataset (Enders, 2010; Raghunathan, 2016; Van Buuren, 2018).

13 percent of providers had missing data on one or more variables, and missing data for individual variables ranged from 6.5 percent to 29.9 percent. The st0318 package (Li, 2012) for Stata was used to run Little’s (1988) chi-squared test for MCAR (Missing Completely at Random) or CDM (Covariate Dependent Missingness) to test the MCAR assumption for variables and covariates included in analyses. Although results were not significant, indicating that the MCAR assumption was met, multiple imputation (MI) by chained equations (MICE) was used in Stata to impute missing data since this approach has been shown to produce less biased estimates than listwise deletion (Enders, 2001; Enders & Bandalos, 2001). Analyses were run on the imputed dataset in Stata and R.

Results

Descriptive Results

Descriptive statistics regarding provider-reported time stress and variables related to curriculum implementation are presented in Table 1. Educators reported higher levels of stress associated with a lack of time to prepare for lessons and complete responsibilities than to personal priorities being shortchanged due to time demands. While 46.2 percent of providers in this sample rated their overall time stress at 25 or below, the rest of providers reported moderate to high time stress levels. Notably, over a quarter (26.9 percent) of providers in the sample rated time stress at levels of 50 or more (out of 100).

Variation in Provider Reports of Time Stress

The ICC was calculated to determine the proportion of variance in educator’s time stress at the program level, (ICC=.31), indicating that a substantial amount (30.5 percent) of the variation in time stress is attributed to the program, and 69.5 percent to individual factors. Results from the linear mixed-effect model indicate that there was slightly more variation in time stress within than between programs, with the estimated variance for the random effects residual, e_{ij} = 21.22(2.47), *p*=.001, 95% CI [16.39,26.07] and the estimated variance for random effects between programs u_{0j} = 14.06 (4.91), *p*=.004, 95% CI [4.43, 23.70]. When the program type variable was added to this model to determine whether provider ratings of time stress varied between program types, it was not significant, *p*>.05.

Correlations between Time Stress and Curriculum Implementation Variables

Correlations between providers' time stress and their perceptions of and engagement with the curriculum are presented in Table 2. There was a moderate negative correlation between reported time stress and positive perceptions of the curriculum (*p*= .002) and between reported time stress and the value providers found in curriculum components (*p*= .009). Measures of implementation fidelity (e.g., % activities implemented, meetings attended, PD attended, action plans completed) were not significantly associated with educators' time stress ratings, *p*>.05. Participants' time stress was not associated with coach ratings of their engagement during meetings, *p*>.05.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to better understand how EC educators experience stress related to time and associations between reported time stress and engagement with curriculum uptake. Results have implications for providing program level and individualized support to EC educators so that they have the resources they need to effectively engage with curriculum (and other interventions) to best support children's development and learning.

Prevalence of Provider Time Stress

The majority of EC educators in this sample were experiencing moderate levels of time stress, which is consistent with previous research on EC educator time and stress in general (Hamel, 2021; Kwon et al, 2020; Roberts et al., 2019). While a significant portion of reported time stress was attributed to the program where educators were employed, the bulk of variation rests at the individual level, indicating that educators are having different experiences within the same program. These findings suggest that supports at multiple levels, including individual and classroom level (e.g., consultation, coverage) as well as program-wide (e.g., staffing and coverage, time for breaks and planning, prioritizing requirements) and policy (e.g. adequate funding and regulations for programs) are needed to address this issue. Increasing awareness of the multiple responsibilities of providers and the lack of consistent, compensated time to complete work duties that are essential for their and children’s well-being has implications for policy and program decisions (Kwon et al., 2020; Whitebook et al., 2021). Intervention developers and regulating bodies can address time constraints of early educators by streamlining or reducing requirements, coordinating across systems so expectations are aligned and not conflicting or repeated and building in and advocating for non-contact time and coverage for educators to complete added responsibilities.

Associations with Implementation and Receptiveness to the Curriculum

As expected, providers with less time stress at the start of the pilot felt more positively about the curriculum and their ability to implement it. This is aligned with the resources and demands model (Demerouti et al., 2001) and research linking intervention demands and time constraints to lower levels of responsiveness to interventions (Durlak & Dupre, 2008; Dusenbury et al., 2010). Although curricula offer resources to educators and often provide accompanying implementation support (e.g., coaching, professional development), providers with high levels of time stress may still perceive them as less feasible to implement or not be able to devote the time necessary to implement them with quality. This has implications for engagement and uptake of curriculum, as educators' initial perceptions of an intervention are consistently linked to fidelity and sustainability (Domitrovich et al., 2019, McCormick et al., 2020; Ransford et al., 2009). Our findings point to the importance of providing structural support and resources to EC educators, including paid planning time and coverage to facilitate implementation and receptiveness to interventions.

Providers with less time stress found more value in the curriculum activities, routines and teaching practices than educators with higher levels of time stress. We predicted that having time to plan for activities and learning experiences, would be associated positively with the value providers found in the curriculum. Curriculum implementation requires close observation, assessment, set up of materials, and advanced planning so that providers can focus on scaffolding learning and individualizing learning activities (Boat et al., 2010; Farewell et al., 2021). When providers have the time to plan how to implement curriculum, they can adapt the curriculum to children's needs, teach intentionally and reflect to make changes, which may also enhance their perception of a curriculum's value.

We found no associations between providers' time-related stress and fidelity of implementation or engagement during coaching meetings. Fidelity was moderately associated with how often providers met with their coach, and their relationship with their coach. It is possible that these supports addressed time constraints and stressors, or added planning and reflection time not previously available to educators (Artman-Meeker et al., 2015; Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010).

Limitations

There are several limitations that should be considered while interpreting the results of this study. Thirteen percent of data were missing; while statistical analyses indicated that there was not significant variation between observations with and without missing data, missing data was imputed and analyses were run on these estimated datasets.

Another limitation was that time stress was reported by participants. Educators' perceptions provide insight into and influence their actions in the classroom, but their reports are also shaped by individual differences and perceptions (Camburn et al., 2017; Desimone, 2006; Koziol & Burns, 1986). Because data on time provided to educators in this sample was not collected, it is not possible to differentiate what extent of time stress was linked to this versus providers' perceptions. Exploring these factors in future research is particularly important considering variation in time stress occurred at both the individual and program level (Kwon et al., 2019; 2020; 2021; Wells, 2017). Relationships between variables cannot be interpreted as causal due to analyses used; thus, directionality of the associations reported cannot be established. Additionally, the time stress variable may be confounded with other types of stress.

Conclusions and Implications

Curricula have been proposed as a way to increase EC program quality (Markowitz et al., 2018; Schachter et al., 2020; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). While curricula provide many benefits for children and educators, for these to be realized providers need the time to plan for quality implementation (Burchinal et al., 2016; Chazen-Cohen et al., 2017). Coaching and professional development are strategies to embed these processes into curriculum implementation, but opportunities for providers to engage in this work on a regular basis through build in planning and non-contact time would support capacity building within programs, sustain progress and ensure efficient resource use (McLeod et al., 2019; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009).

Findings from the current study suggest that attention to resources and demands, in particular targeting ways to increase time available to EC educators is a promising avenue for increasing their receptiveness to and capacity for engaging with interventions in meaningful ways. Further research on time stress, both descriptive in nature, as well as causal, that examines its effects on practice, program quality, and child outcomes is needed to better understand how best to plan for and provide EC educators with the time they need to develop as professionals and meet children's needs.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

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Ethics approval/Consent to participate: Programs and teachers voluntarily participated, and all procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Virginia.

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Paper 1 Tables

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean (SD)	Range
Time Stress	32.38(25.52)	0-96.5
Time Stress item 1, Lack of time	40.12(28.71)	-
Time Stress item 2, Priorities shortchanged due to time demands	24.65(28.91)	-
Perception of the curriculum	56.06(22.64)	10.20-97.29
Fidelity (proportion of activities completed)	.60(.24)	0-1
Value Ratings	68.17(19.95)	12.5-100
Meetings attended	9.57(4.69)	0-24
PD Sessions attended	8.18(2.62)	0-11
Action Plans Completed	.24(.142)	0-1
Coach ratings of engagement	4.03(.35)	3-4.9
Teacher-Coach Relationship rating	84.45(19.60)	12.83-100
Years of Experience	15(8.84)	1-37
Class Size	14.22(4.22)	7-22

Note. Total Sample (*n* = 107)

Table 2

Time Stress and Curriculum Engagement Correlations

Variable	*M*	*SE*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Time stress	32.02	2.99	—										
2. Positive perceptions of the curriculum	55.99	2.54	−.36**	—									
3. Fidelity (percentage activities completed)	.59	.03	-.18	.52**	—								
4. Teacher ratings of curriculum activities value	66.73	2.32	-.30**	.64**	.52***	—							
5. Number of meetings with coach	9.52	.56	−.16	.31***	.36**	.43**	—						
6. Number of professional developments attended	8.21	.31	−.02	−.17	.04	.07	.48**	—					
7. Action plans completed (percentage)	.24	.02	.16	−.19	-.13*	−.25*	−.58**	-.20	—				
8. Coach ratings of engagement	4.02	.04	.17	−.29**	.39***	.24*	.32**	.26*	-.23*	—			
9. Teacher-coach relationship rating	84.39	1.98	-.20*	.50*	.25**	.33**	.09	-.11**	.05	.09	—		
10. Teacher years of Experience	14.88	1.04	.08	−.28**	-.23	−.13	.03	.18	-.15	-.10	-.09	—	
11. Class size	14.27	.51	.26**	−.51**	-.18	−.33**	−.16	.32**	.08	. 05	-.25*	.27**	—

$^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Paper 2

Classroom Management in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Classroom Management (CM) is typically defined as the practices used by educators to prevent or manage disruptive behavior and maximize student engagement and learning. In this chapter, we explore how early childhood education (ECE) offers opportunities to expand on this definition to imagine a more inclusive, child-centered and strengths-based model of classroom management. Classroom management in early childhood education includes examining children's behavior and adult perceptions of behavior in context. With adult trust and supportive CM practices, young children deepen their understanding of how their actions impact others, and what it means to care for themselves and others. Opportunities for teachers to use effective and inclusive CM occur throughout the day and are embedded in routines such as mealtimes and transitions. We present several goals for CM in early childhood education, including, establishing authentic relationships with children and families, examining personal and systemic biases to disrupt them, working toward community and prioritizing children's well-being. Frameworks for understanding and responding to children's behavior and evidence-based practices are examined in the context of a child-centered model of classroom management.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, teaching practice, classroom management

A Note About the Language Used in this Chapter

While this book chapter and the title of the book it has been published in use the term classroom management, to describe a set of practices used by educators to cultivate community, engagement and connection in ECE settings, we want to point out that this wording is not aligned with our approach and philosophy. We believe it is important to acknowledge the power of language and the ways in which language both reinforces and reflects power structures while shaping our realities and perceptions (Okan, 2020). The term classroom management both reflects an implicit agenda of control or management over children's bodies and actions and also has connections to capitalism, including methods for managing worker's productivity, efficiency and outcomes (Kocka, 2016). With this framing, as is often reflected in CM discourses, noncompliance is seen as interfering with established goals (i.e. school readiness, "learning," completing work) and needing to be controlled, stopped or punished (Hursh, 2000). The term management implies that individuals are being controlled or externally motivated by a "manager" and that they lack agency over their own actions, priorities and decisions that shape their environment. This language both reflects reality (e.g., the historical and present day use of educational settings as sites of control, enforcement of agendas of those in power, focus on outcomes) and shapes our thinking (i.e., seeing educator's role as supervising and maintaining control and an inability to do this as reflecting on the educator or child rather than structural inequities) (Casey et al., 2013; Klees et al., 2020). This language is especially problematic taking the racialized and gendered inequities in classroom management practice in ECE settings (and beyond) (Casey et al., 2013). It would be our preference to call this chapter and the practices we describe as "Cultivating Engagement, Connection and Community in ECE Classrooms."

Classroom Management in Early Childhood Education

In settings that serve young children, classroom management (CM) is rooted in everyday routines and connections that serve as points of reference for the group. As children separate from caregivers, wash their hands, listen to stories, work together in centers, share meals, greet classmates, rest and play, they deepen their understanding of how their needs connect to those of a larger community. Early educators play an essential role in this process as they work to understand and meet young children's physical and emotional needs, creating opportunities for children to care for themselves and others.

Classroom management is often defined as the strategies and systems used by educators to promote on task behavior while preventing and managing disruptive behaviors, with the goal of maximizing time children spend engaged in learning (Henley, 2007; Skiba et al., 2016; van Driel et al., 2021). However, this definition does not map entirely onto early childhood education (ECE) settings where learning is not separate from being cared for and occurs during all parts of the day (e.g., during meals and transitions). Additionally, young children are constantly learning how to be with others while navigating the classroom environment (Blair & Raver, 2016; Jung, 2020; Rosanbalm & Murray, 2018). Educators can use practices to meet children's needs and support their development. Practices that help children to feel physically and emotionally safe, cared for, heard, unconditionally accepted, and connected to themselves, their teachers and their peers, are part of effective CM.

In this chapter we examine CM from a child-centered perspective, shifting from the goal of maintaining order to providing opportunities for each child to fully develop and find their role within the classroom community. Approaching CM from a child-centered perspective means that teachers trust young children to consider and act on deep questions, including how their actions impact others, how to respond to injustice and what it means to have agency (Adair & Sachdeva, 2021; Neuman et al., 2000; Shalaby, 2020). Shalaby (2020) captures this conceptualization when she asserted that CM is a response to the questions: " 'How will we be in a genuine community together?,' 'How will we keep everyone safe, happy and well?,' 'What will we do when harm or conflict happens in our community?,' and 'How will we take extra care of the most vulnerable among us?'" (p.43).

In this chapter we: (a) review CM in ECE, exploring how children's behaviors are perceived and regulated and the ways that methods not grounded in an understanding of context have been harmful, (b) describe current tensions in conceptualizing and enacting CM practices in ECE, (c) offer frameworks to guide understanding of CM, (d) outline key strategies aligned with these frameworks, and (e) acknowledge constraints unique to ECE as well as resources that can facilitate a shift toward CM from a child and community centered orientation.

CM in an ECE Context

The birth to five period lays the foundation for children's future cognitive and social-emotional development (Denham et al., 2003; Diamond, 2012). The relationships teachers form with children and the priorities and norms they set within the classroom, serve as the primary context outside of the home for young children to make sense of the world around them and their place within it (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Housman, 2017; McNally & Slutsky, 2018; Williford et al., 2013, 2017). Access to affirming experiences and care in well managed classrooms provides space for young children to continue developing their sense of self and role within the community (Diamond & Lee, 2011; Shonkoff & Philips, 2000; Zelazo & Carlson, 2012). In ECE, this learning is woven throughout the everyday routines and interpersonal exchanges that occur as children care for themselves and their peers National Association for the Education of

Young Children [NAEYC], 2005; Neuman et al., 2000; Shalaby, 2020). Explicit scaffolding of children's social-emotional and problem solving capacities such as conflict resolution, communication, empathy and assertiveness support children's skills to relate to others. The emphasis on the link between children's physical and mental well-being and their engagement with learning has expanded beyond ECE as social-emotional curricula have been developed and applied to children and youth of all ages (Prothero, 2021; Regenstein, 2019).

Approaching CM from a child-centered and relational perspective is beneficial not just in ECE, but for children of all ages. This framework rests on the assumptions that children are entitled to affirming care and learning experiences, engage in behaviors that are not inherently positive or negative and are capable of fulfilling their potential when provided with strengths-based, culturally relevant expectations and support.

Reframing Challenging Behavior

Challenging behavior is defined as the behaviors and patterns of behavior that interfere with students' learning and relationships with others (Hemmeter et al., 2008; The National Institute for Care and Health Excellence, 2015). Discussions of CM often center around preventing or stopping behaviors adults perceive as challenging or disruptive. However, this definition does not consider that children's behaviors are a response to their environment and may convey important information about what they need to be successful in it (Jiron et al., 2013; Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2021). Behaviors can elicit assistance, support, attention, sensory stimulation and may help a child to avoid something they find distressing or difficult (The National Institute for Care and Health Excellence, 2015). Young children are sensitive to external stimuli and still developing the skills to consistently communicate their needs and respond to their own emotions (National Institute for Care and Health Excellence, 2015;

Whitters, 2020). When goals of CM shift from decreasing challenging behavior to understanding their function in order to meet children's needs, behavior is reframed as communication (Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning [CSEFL], n.d.; Jiron et. al., 2013). Observing behavior in context allows teachers to gather information about what is working or not working for a child and the group in the current environment (Shalaby, 2017).

Some behaviors cause physical harm or threaten the safety and well-being of others in the community (e.g., biting, hitting, kicking) and children should be told these behaviors are not permitted and why. However, interpretation of many other behaviors defined as "challenging" depends on when and where they occur and adult's attributions for them. These include non-compliance and emotion dysregulation, which are frequently cited as behavioral concerns in ECE settings (Buyuktaskapu-Soydan et al., 2018; National Institute for Care and Health Excellence, 2015).

Adult interpretations of and responses to children's behaviors are influenced by a variety of factors, including cultural norms and values. Adults decide if a child's behavior is acceptable and determine the consequences. Adults' personal experiences and biases shape their attributions and the ways they respond to children, which in turn has implications for children's development and well-being (Allen et al., 2021; Essien, 2019). If an adult deems a behavior disruptive and attributes it to something internal to the child and unlikely to change, this may cause tension or conflict, leading to restriction of freedom and fewer opportunities for the child to engage with others (Jung, 2020; Miller et al., 2017). Lack of access to these experiences means that the child misses opportunities for learning and connection that would support their social and emotional development. Unfortunately, exclusion from social and learning experiences or loss of access to materials is often used a consequence for behavior teachers perceive as disruptive (Acavitti & Williford, 2020; Emerson & Einfeld, 2011).

In practice, CM too often includes punitive responses to behaviors such as verbal reprimands, excluding children from social or learning opportunities, threatening punishment, and removing or restricting privileges. Such practices often exacerbate behaviors or create coercive cycles characterized by negative interactions with peers and adults in the environment (James et al., 2019a; Meek & Gilliam, 2016; Pierce et al., 2021). Even if these practices increase compliance or decrease the occurrence of behaviors that adults deem to be challenging, they do not support children's well-being, do not help children learn the skills they need to be successful, and are often delivered inequitably (Neitzel, 2018; Williford et al., 2021; Wymer et al., 2020). When a child is excluded, shamed, or labeled as a troublemaker, it has negative implications for their engagement in the classroom and their reputation with peers and adults (MacLure et al., 2012). Time out is a practice that falls into this category. There is evidence that brief (e.g., one to three minutes) and calmly delivered time outs provide children a break to calm down, increase compliance, and decrease behaviors that adults see as aggressive (Kazdin, 2013; 2017). However, time outs are typically not a logical consequence, do not repair harm done, and are often not used as intended. While having the choice to leave the group and calm down in a designated area (e.g., a calm down or cozy corner) can support children's ability to regulate, these areas may also be misused, with teachers sending children to them as a consequence, and thus implementing time out with a different name (Wymer et al., 2020). Conversely, CM practices that provide children with choices and opportunities to see and repair the consequences of their actions while remaining connected to the community are more likely to meet the needs of the group and individual children (Carter & Doyle, 2006; Hemmeter et al., 2006).

Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Curriculum as CM

It is difficult to differentiate between CM, curriculum and high-quality care in ECE. An enriching, developmentally appropriate curricula and environments support CM by engaging children while giving them ownership over their experiences (Burchinal et al., 2014; Carter & Doyle, 2006; Skiba et al., 2016). Understanding expectations, demonstrating empathy, resolving conflicts and sharing ideas support children to be part of a group and engage in learning. These capacities are also learning objectives for young children and often require intentional scaffolding and explicit instruction (Blair & Raver, 2016; Rosanbalm & Murray, 2018).

An educator's approach to curriculum and teaching shape their expectations and support for children's learning, autonomy and engagement, which sets the stage for CM (Reeve & Jang, 2006; Vitiello et al., 2012). If children are required to engage in activities that are a mismatch for their developmental stage, they will respond by engaging in behaviors that adults perceive as challenging (National Institute for Care and Health Excellence, 2015). When children have the freedom to play, explore the world around them and have a say over what happens in the classroom, they are more likely to remain engaged (Gagné, 2003). Agency over activities and classroom experiences allows children to practice modulating their actions and working toward goals (Savina, 2021). Providing opportunities for children to be agents of their learning conveys trust while affirming children's strengths and abilities (Benard & Slade, 2009; Bondy et al., 2007). This includes being involved in decision-making around content, includijg what to learn more about, and how to learn more about it.

The process through which effective CM is established is developmentally appropriate and intentional. Similar to curriculum or supporting children's learning in other areas, educators gather information and engage in reflection on practices in order to individualize for each child's as well as the larger group's interests, experiences and needs (Escamilla & Meier, 2018).

Systemic Inequities and Biases: Barriers to Equitable CM

Structural inequities and individual biases related to race, ethnicity, income, disability status, linguistic background and gender simultaneously shape how families, children, and children's behavior are perceived, while also restricting access to ECE environments and experiences that support equitable CM (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2016; Shewark et al., 2018). Biases impact how adults interpret and respond to behavior, including attributions for behavior and the type and severity of discipline used in response (Acavitti & Williford, 2020; Dobbs & Arnold, 2009; Gilliam et al., 2016).

Caregivers provide information explicitly and implicitly to young children about the world around them, including cultural norms and expectations (Belsky & Cassidy, 1994). Established norms for behavior and practice most often reflect the beliefs and values of the dominant culture. Notably, much of the research on child development and professional knowledge in the ECE field is based on the experiences of English-speaking, White, middle class children and their families (The National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2019; Jipson, 1991). When these perspectives are presented as objective truths, privilege is given to the values and experiences of certain children and their families (Fleer, 2003; Kincheloe et al., 2017; Soto & Swadener, 2002). Educators may be more likely to pathologize or misinterpret behavior when a child is a member of a culture or race different than their own or the dominant culture (Fleer, 2003).

Structural inequities also restrict access to ECE programs and shape classroom processes that impact children's experiences differentially depending on ethnic, racial, linguistic, and gender identities (Barnett et al., 2013; Johnson-Staub, 2017; Ready & Wright, 2011). Children in the same classroom may have different experiences related to autonomy over their learning and freedom of movement (Early et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2006; Tonyan & Howes, 2003). For example, classroom compositions consisting of a greater proportion of children coming from lower income households and African-American or Latinx children were associated with children having less free play time, less choice, more teacher-assigned activities and adult-centered teaching approaches (Early et al., 2010).

In addition, preschool teachers' goals have been found to focus on individual needs for children from middle socio-economic status backgrounds and on preparation for kindergarten, math and literacy for children from lower socio-economic status backgrounds (Lee & Ginsberg, 2007). Teachers used more didactic and adult-directed teaching strategies with children who were not White and more child-directed scaffolding with White children (Early et al., 2010). White children over three in childcare tended to have more interactions with adults, and more time for free play, while Black children spent less time playing and less time in educational, learning and goal-directed activities (Tonyan & Howes, 2003; Winsler & Carlton, 2003). Gender biases have also been observed to shape children's experiences in childcare, with boys engaging in more non-educational activities and girls engaging in more language arts and creative play (Tonyan & Howes, 2003). These inequities in access to culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate care are unjust, do not meet children's needs and detrimentally impact children from minoritized groups. It is increasingly likely that children will engage in behaviors that adults see as challenging in these settings or situations, because expectations are unfair and inappropriate (Lerkkanen et al., 2016).

Ineffective and inequitable CM practices also lead to exclusion through expulsion or suspension (Zinsser et al., 2014). Suspension and expulsions occur at alarming rates that are more frequent in early childhood settings than in older grades (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Stegelin, 2018). In a survey of 345 center directors, 82.9 percent of directors reported at least one suspension request, and 64 percent reported at least one expulsion request in response to challenging behavior in the previous 12 months (Clayback & Hemmeter, 2021). In addition, many children lose access to care through less formal methods of exclusion, for example, when a family is asked to repeatedly pick their child up early or told that their child's needs cannot be met within a program (Neitzel, 2018). These situations may occur in settings that do not allow formal suspensions or expulsions. Suspension and expulsion are harmful to children's development and result in negative long-term outcomes. These include lack of engagement, increased conflict with peers and adults and escalation of behavioral challenges in school settings (Gilliam, 2005). Due to individual and systemic biases, suspension and expulsion disproportionately impact children from minoritized groups, including Black boys, English-language learners and children with disabilities; thus, excluded them from beneficial early learning opportunities (Clayback & Hemmeter, 2021; Gillliam & Shahar, 2006; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2019).

A major issue in the field of ECE is how to enact CM in ways that limit how individual and systemic biases adversely impact children's access to and experiences in early care, while giving each child opportunities to bring strengths and perspectives to learn alongside others (NAEYC, 2019). Eliminating individual bias is not possible, however, moving toward a child-centered framework of CM where teachers reflect on systemic and personal biases and their own attributions for children's behavior provides a starting point. This lens can help educators understand the context a behavior is occurring in and support children to choose more effective responses.

Frameworks for Understanding and Enacting Equitable CM in ECE Settings

Critical Awareness of Context and Commitment to Promoting Equity in CM

Awareness of the ways in which systemic inequities impact the daily lives of individuals is a key precursor to engaging in equitable CM practices (Iruka et al., 2020). Classroom management in ECE is often framed as community building. The goal of community building is for all children to feel a sense of safety, belonging and ownership. This requires educators to explore and be aware of historical oppression and present-day inequities and how these forces shape the realities of children in their care (Shalaby, 2020). Reflection on individual identity, personal biases and the ways they shape interactions within the classroom must inform CM (Friedman & Mwenelupembe, 2020; Hooks, 2003; Iruka et al., 2020). Recognizing that all people bring beliefs and practices influenced by identity and experience promotes meaningful changes in perspective and practice (Gonzalez-Mena & Shareef, 2005). When paired with ongoing action and reflection cycles, awareness of individual prejudices and motivation to change can decrease bias in decision-making, which can directly impact CM practices (Wymer et al., 2020).

Culturally responsive CM practices include drawing on child and family strengths, and the ways in which culture shapes experience and identity. By recognizing nuance, and being curious about what informs children and families’ identities and perspectives, care providers can better understand and learn from children and families (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Iruka et al., 2020). Engaging in critical awareness and reflection on individual and structural biases as part of CM and curriculum serves several functions: (a) it disrupts individual biases that shape the ways educators perceive and respond to children and families, (b) it makes educators aware of the values and skills they prioritize and center in their classroom, and (c) it gives educators a framework to support young children as they explore questions related to justice, identity, and belonging (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995).

Although some adults may feel discomfort addressing issues of diversity and equity with children or believe young children are not developmentally ready to understand these concepts, young children recognize similarities and differences and strive for fairness and compassion (Adair & Sachdeva, 2021; Payne, 2018). Infants recognize others from their own race and begin to show own race preference between 6-13 months (Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Xiao et al., 2018). Five-year-olds randomly assigned to two groups were able to discern subtle nonverbal cues of teacher approval, and demonstrated group preference based on the messages communicated to them (Brey & Pauker, 2019). Without intervention or explicit guidance, children become aware of and often internalize biased messages communicated by those around them about gender, race, class, and ethnicity (Dunham et al., 2013; Shutts, 2015).

Young children are uniquely positioned to engage in social justice work, including questioning inequities and working toward the collective good, as they are just beginning to notice similarities and differences, are looking for agency over the world around them and have a sense of fairness (Adair & Sachdeva, 2020; Payne et al., 2020; Shalaby, 2020). All children benefit from a curriculum that explicitly acknowledges similarities and differences, addresses gender, race and cultural biases and works toward justice. Racial ethnic socialization, cultural socialization and acknowledgement of systemic biases are tied to positive outcomes for children from minoritized groups (Hughes et al., 2006; Umaña-Taylor, 2020). Children of all races and ethnicities were more likely to recognize discrimination and intervene after being given messages about the value of diversity (Apfelbaum et al., 2010). Children's awareness of and attunement to adults' biases make it important to address these issues as part of CM. Developing authentic relationships, creating space to engage in culturally responsive practices, and addressing behaviors from a place of care requires educators be dedicated to identifying and disrupting inequities so as not to replicate them in their interactions and classroom community.

Community

Applying a critical lens to building inclusive ECE classroom communities requires connection, listening and accountability (Bettez, 2011). Care, including meeting the physical and emotional needs of each child and the group, is a priority. Goals and values aligned with child-centered CM include promoting empathy, self-awareness, perspective-taking, social and group problem solving, curiosity and exploration (Wahman & Steed, 2016; Wisneski & Goldstein, 2004). Each community member plays a role that impacts others. Building genuine community requires the establishment of shared values while viewing differences as an asset or strength. Effective teachers and classroom managers show students that they are valued for being themselves and caring for others (Martin et al., 2012; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009; Wahman & Steed, 2016).

Relationships as a Foundation for Community Building

During the first few years of life, children depend on adults in their environment to meet their physical and emotional needs. Within close relationships, caregivers provide comfort in the moment, support children's regulation, and help them see the world as safe and predictable (Feldman, 2007). Co-regulation supports infants and young children to regulate physiological reactions to stress (Feldman et al., 2011). Later, relationships with supportive adults scaffold children as they learn to regulate their emotions, manage behaviors, and use coping strategies to work through distress (Erdmann & Hertel, 2019; Gillespie, 2015). Caregiver attunement (i.e., attention to children's emotional states and responsiveness to their needs) is associated with long-term social and emotional outcomes, including empathy (Feldman & Eidelman, 2007). Research shows that children in emotionally supportive daycare classrooms experience less stress over the course of the day than those in settings with less responsive caregiving (Hatfield et al., 2013; Hatfield & Williford, 2017). These supportive interactions, grounded in warm and connected relationships form the foundation of CM in ECE.

When children's needs are met through consistent responsive interactions, they develop self-efficacy and autonomy (Downer et al., 2010; Hamre et al., 2014; McNally & Slutsky, 2017). These interactions require caregivers to notice subtle cues and respond in sensitive and supportive ways, form authentic connections and be aware of each child's interests, preferences, and abilities (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Teacher-child relationship quality is consistently linked to social and emotional outcomes, which in turn support children's participation in the classroom community and their ability to have empathy and to care for others (Burchinal et al., 2014; Rucinski et al., 2018). Close relationships between teachers and the children they perceive as having behavioral challenges, can support these children's social development and act as a protective factor; despite the fact that such relationships may be more difficult to develop and sustain (Myers & Pianta, 2008; Nurmi, 2012).

It is common to conceptualize relationships as being contained between dyads and influenced by individual characteristics of each dyad member. The reality within classrooms is that relationships form an interconnected web and interactions create ripple effects felt by the community. A strained relationship between a teacher and child has an impact on the whole class by requiring additional time and energy, increasing teacher stress and sending messages about expectations and belonging to all children. Teachers cultivate community by setting the tone for peer relationships and group dynamics in the classroom (Howes et al., 2011). Teacher-child closeness, and teachers' positive behavior management practices were associated with children's perceptions of stronger peer relationships and support from peers (Hughes & Chen, 2011).

Although research in different contexts points to the importance of relationships in fostering children's sense of belonging and engagement with learning, research has also explored the ways in which cultural values shape these relationships (Graves & Howes, 2011; Gregoriadis et al., 2019; Ikegami & Rivalland, 2016). Identities and experiences of educators and children matter in how relationships are formed and sustained. Research shows that teacher and child race match is associated with teacher ratings of relationship quality (Murray & Murray, 2004; Howes & Shivers, 2006; Saft & Pianta, 2001), as well as teacher ratings of children's social and emotional competence and behavior (Graves & Howes, 2011).

Relationships can protect against educator bias. When teachers and students had a close relationship, teachers rated aggression in Black and Hispanic students as lower (Meehan et al., 2003). Teachers may vary the strategies they use in their interactions with children depending on how they perceive that child and their identity. For example, Langeloo and colleagues (2019) found that educators individualized the strategies they used during interactions to support multi-lingual children, including speaking in the child's home language, and using nonverbal communication. However, the authors also found that children whose native language was not English were exposed to unequal interactions and learning opportunities.

Collaboration between school and home is both an extension of teacher-child relationships and an integral part of CM in ECE settings (Fantuzzo et al., 2000; Ma et al., 2016). A child's caregivers and close relations are the main system in which they develop (Allen

& Steed, 2016; Price & Steed, 2016). Respecting families, including asking about and prioritizing their values, communicates that their perspective and input are welcome in the classroom (Cardona et al., 2012; Sheridan & Krawochowill, 2007). Being flexible and responsive to families' needs and choices, including hearing about their expectations and how they understand their child's behavior, is part of CM. Conversations with families about children's strengths, communicating on a daily basis and sharing positive information shows families that the educator genuinely knows and cares about their child (Fantuzzo et al., 2000). Teacher's positive perceptions of a child's caregivers was associated with a lower rated risk for expulsion, especially for Black boys who had not been previously expelled (Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2021). Close relationships between teachers and families promote empathy and understanding. Classroom community extends to children's families, and CM should reflect their vision for their child's care and education.

In sum, the relationships established between caregivers and young children serve multiple functions in the context of CM. First, by consistently responding to and meeting children's needs, adults help children self-regulate. Genuine relationships in which an adult knows about and conveys acceptance of all aspects of a child's identity, fosters connection and belonging to the classroom community. The ways in which educators frame and scaffold social interactions between children shape relatedness to one another and the group. Relationships with families grounded in mutual respect establish a working alliance necessary to understand and meet each child's needs. Such mutual respect aides in establishing effective CM.

Key Strategies and Applications of Classroom Management

An Inclusive Environment

Young children learn through directly observing and experiencing ideas and concepts. When children feel safe and their needs are met, they are eager to explore the world around them. Thus, classroom organization and the environment play a central role in CM in ECE (Berti et al., 2019; Doctoroff, 2001). The classroom environment can convey acceptance by being accessible to children of different abilities and by meaningfully reflecting the multiple identities of children and their families (Biermeier, 2015; Drew & Rankin, 2004; Mukhanji et al., 2016). Documenting and displaying children’s work communicates the value of children’s’ learning processes and encourages conversations and reflection with caregivers (Katz & Chard, 1996; Schroeder-Yu, 2008).

Classroom organization should be guided by and facilitate daily routines (Petrakos & Howe, 1996). Furniture and materials can be intentionally arranged to align with priorities and expectations. For example, classroom set up can afford opportunities for children to practice particular skills and ways of relating to others, while limiting opportunities for engaging in unsafe behaviors (Berti et al., 2019; Schroeder-Yu, 2008). Actions and activities are directed by making boundaries and expectations clear, and safety to explore independently fosters children’s autonomy in developmentally appropriate ways (Greenman, 1988). By presenting a variety of attractive, organized, accessible, hands-on materials, children are given freedom to experiment and direct their learning (Barrable, 2020; Beaty-O’Ferrall et al., 2010; Isbell & Raines, 2012; Mukhanji et al., 2016). Maintaining organization and labelling spaces for materials supports children’s planning as they find, use, and return items (Epstein, 2007). Increased amounts of time spent in free choice is positively associated with children’s independent abilities to regulate their actions (Goble & Pianta, 2017). Educators promote children’s regulation by keeping the classroom organized and clean; they can limit stimulation by keeping lighting, temperature, and sound at appropriate levels (Wohlfarth, 1986). Because young children are still developing the ability to self-regulate, attention to sensory aspects of the environment such as light, clutter, and color are necessary for creating an environment conducive to positive CM (Greenman, 1988; Wohlfarth, 1986).

Creating a variety of large and small spaces to facilitate independent, parallel, and cooperative play allows children to select a space that meets their needs in the moment. This provides opportunities for children to negotiate for space and materials, communicate their needs, share ideas, cooperate and work to resolve conflicts (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Young children are developing their identity and sense of self in relation to the world around them. Classroom management practices in ECE support children as they explore classroom environs. A classroom environment that is safe and stimulating supports engagement and offers opportunities for children to assert and express ideas and needs. When young children see the ways they shape their environment, they are better able to weigh and understand the outcomes brought about by their actions, which is an essential part of CM (Solomon & Henderson, 2016; Wohlwend, 2015).

Routines and Structure to Facilitate Classroom Management

Child-centered routines give children a sense of control and predictability (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Hemmeter et al., 2006). Knowing that their needs will be met allows children to fully engage in the classroom community and learning activities. Educators can be mindful when creating a schedule and intentionally sequencing activities. Setting aside long periods of time for children to become immersed in free play and limiting hurried transitions can prevent difficulties that may arise (The National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Seeing everyday routines, transitions and activities as opportunities for learning encourages educators to slow down the pace and not rush children through the care routines that are important to them.

Routines are everyday occurrences (e.g., mealtime, rest time, toileting, handwashing) that offer opportunities for connection and community building. Keeping consistent routines supports children in knowing what behavior is expected at different times. Such consistency, however, needs to be balanced with flexibility and adaptation to suit children's needs in the moment (Tonyan, 2015). Making sure that children understand the schedule, including the times when they will be able to make their own choices, by posting a visual guide, referencing the schedule, and asking children what comes next are all strategies that support children's understanding of daily routines that scaffold CM.

Care routines that are co-constructed by teachers, children and families with children's needs in mind foster connection. They provide opportunities for children to care for themselves and others while developing social-emotional skills (Howell & Reinhard, 2015).

Creating shared meaning during routines strengthens emotional bonds and children's sense of belonging to the community (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). For example, routines for greeting children and families when they arrive to the classroom and hearing from families regarding how they prefer to separate and say goodbye to their child can support children to manage emotions and make the transition into the classroom during a sensitive time (Hemmeter et al., 2006; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2013). Routines have salient meaning for children when educators take children's identity, home language and culture into account when creating them. Inviting families into the classroom to share their own traditions, including holiday celebrations, special events, stories, music and recipes, offers opportunities for sharing knowledge and culture (Derman-Sparks, 1989).

Transitions between activities are also an important part of the classroom routine to consider from a child’s perspective. Transitions can be an especially difficult time for young children. Expectations may be less clear and demands may increase (e.g., following multi-step directions, leaving a desired activity) (Vitiello et al., 2012). Children are vulnerable to becoming dysregulated due to physical needs such as sleepiness or hunger, or emotional reactions, such as disappointment at needing to leave an activity (Feldman, 2007). Preparing for transitions, including giving a warning ahead of time or setting a timer, gives children the opportunity to get ready. Making expectations simple and clear and giving children plenty of time helps them move smoothly to the next activity (Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, n.d; The National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009).

Creating Clear and Reasonable Expectations

Adults’ ideas about young children, how they learn, and their capabilities are shaped by cultural context. It is easy for a teacher to make assumptions about children’s understanding and awareness of expectations and social norms (Benard & Slade, 2009; Bondy et al., 2007; Henderson, 2012). Noncompliance, frequently reported as a “challenging behavior” in EC settings, can be a result of a variety of issues, including misunderstood, unclear or unrealistic expectations (Yilmaz et al., 2021).

Collectively establishing expectations is a potential solution. Creating and discussing reasoning for expectations as a group weaves together empathy and collective problem solving. By engaging in this process, children understand the purpose of expectations and how they serve the community (Gable et al., 2009; NAEYC, 2016). Expectations should be developmentally appropriate, within the capabilities of individual children and explained clearly. The reason for establishing and agreeing upon expectations is linked to keeping everyone safe and respecting the environment (Shalaby, 2017; 2020). The goal of establishing rules jointly in the context of CM is to provide opportunities for children to share and reflect on their responsibility to others, and how each individual's behavior impacts others within the community (McFarland, 2008). Creating rules together offers an opportunity to establish and affirm values that are reflective of the multiple identities within the group, and fosters internalization of rules (Laurin & Joussemet, 2017).

Expectations should be consistently revisited so that children can remember and reflect on them. Educators can do this by clarifying expectations and using reminders (e.g., having rules posted clearly, using cues and visuals, providing reminders before a change in expectations) (Downer et al., 2010; Hamre et al., 2014). Class meeting time can be used by educators to scaffold developmentally appropriate discussions about violations of community agreements and to brainstorm potential solutions (Martin et al., 2016; Shalaby, 2017).

Understanding Strengths, Needs, and Behavior in Context:

Part of the educator's role within CM is to know and understand the children in their care. Setting aside time for open-ended observation and/or one-on-one time with each child strengthens relationships and helps providers learn about the children under their care, including their likes, dislikes, experiences, strengths and areas for growth (Hojnoski et al., 2020; Voorhees et al., 2013). Notably, dyadic interventions in which teachers spend time with children show positive outcomes related to teacher-child relationships and teacher perceptions of children's behavior (Cook et al., 2018; Davidson et al., 2021; Williford et al., 2017).

Observation helps educators better understand behavior in context. Specific observation tools can be used to better understand behaviors, but this information should always be paired with knowledge of the particular child and the environment. Functional Behavior Assessments

(FBAs) can be used to document the context surrounding a child's patterns of behavior. Use of FBAs assists adults (i.e., teachers and family members) to better understand if something that happened before or after a specific behavior under scrutiny made it more likely for the behavior to occur, and what environmental factors might be contributing (Head Start Early Learning and Knowledge Center, n.d.; Gettinger & Stoiber, 2006; Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003).

The goal of FBAs should be to determine how adults respond to behavior and how context plays a role in the occurrence of target behaviors. Educators can use FBA information in planning to adjust and assess the effectiveness of changes to (a) the environment, (b) classroom routines and (c) teaching practices that have been shown to reduce the behaviors teachers perceived as challenging (Lambert et al., 2012; Voorhees et al., 2013). Documenting behaviors and surrounding ecologies in this way helps adults to understand behavior as communicating a need supports finding an alternate way to meet that need (Arthur-Kelly et al., 2017a; Hirschland, 2015). Recording and reflecting on context via the FBA process should also capture a child's strengths. Using the FBA as a lens, teachers can understand under what circumstances the child is able to demonstrate their skills, cope with distress and fully engage in classroom routines. When completed intentionally and paired with reflection, documenting behaviors through FBAs helps educators decrease bias in their reporting and perceptions of behaviors. Capturing data in this way may assist in the realization that a behavior is not as extreme or occurring as frequently as initially perceived. Strong relationships with families are also essential in this process. Open communication regarding families' expectations and strategies for managing behavior at home, as well as current stresses or changes affecting a child, may impact how they interact in the classroom environment.

Universal screenings and formative assessments of children's development across domains are also ways of gathering information to identify and meet children's needs. When administered and interpreted appropriately, screening measures can identify children who might benefit from additional support or interventions (Nores & Fernandez, 2018). However, measures must be intentionally selected to ensure that they are age-appropriate, measure relevant constructs and apply to the population of children with whom they are being used (Denham et al., 2016; The National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2019).

Collecting data on trends within a classroom, program, or district can inform training and professional development for teachers, and provide information on whether resources and support are being equitable distributed (Yun et al., 2021). Data can inform supports for individual children and changes in teacher practice and the environment, but care must be shown with language and framing of results (Meloy & Schachter, 2019; Yun et al., 2021). Universal screening measures are intended to provide information about a child's demonstration of a skill or knowledge in a particular context at a particular time and in relation to other children their age. Results do not present a full picture of a child's functioning or capacities. Ideally, assessments reveal both areas where children need additional support to further develop their abilities and also strengths unique to a child that might be leveraged to support their learning (Yun et al., 2021). Assessment results support child-centered CM when paired with other sources of information. Educators can use this information to plan learning activities, individualize support and refer a child in case of concerns about their development.

Responding to Behavior: Genuine Feedback and Community Problem Solving

Adult and peer reactions are powerful drivers of behavior (Duncan et al., 2000). Young children are attuned to the responses of others in their environment and learn from social feedback (Hester et al., 2009). It is by trial and error, or making mistakes and seeing how others react, that young children determine boundaries and the impact of their actions on others. Engaging with others provides opportunities for children to receive and respond to social feedback (Howe & Mercer, 2007; La Paro et al., 2012; Stirrup et al., 2017). Children learn from watching one another as well. Adults can draw on the richness of children's strengths by being attuned to the group and interactions, pointing out when children demonstrate empathy, resolve a conflict or navigate a difficult social situation, and by scaffolding or mediating interactions that are challenging for children to resolve independently.

Classroom management that is child-centered and strength-based promotes caregivers to deliver positive social feedback in the context of warm and responsive relationships (Sigler & Aamidor, 2005). When children have secure relationships with caregivers, they feel accepted and will be more likely to respond positively to praise and constructive feedback. Research shows that intentional and specific praise reinforces behaviors, increasing the likelihood that they will occur again (Kazdin, 2013; 2017). However, use of praise, behaviors typically praised and the type of praise used (e.g., individual versus group) may differ based on context and culture (Clegg et al., 2021). Within child and community-centered CM, praise can be used intentionally to emphasize shared values and draw attention to actions that are aligned with those values, such as caring for others in the community. Actions of individual children or the group can be acknowledged through educators' use of praise that specifically describes the behavior. The impact of actions on others and the community should be emphasized above compliance, for example, pointing out how a child's action impacted a peer.

Adults often unintentionally focus on and respond to the behaviors they perceive as negative. This may reinforce those behaviors by focusing on them rather than on constructive behaviors, thus increasing the likelihood they will occur again (Okonofu & Eberhadt, 2015; Gilliam, 2005). Pausing before responding to a behavior when safety is not an issue can act as a safeguard against harsh, instinctive, or rushed responding. In doing so, educators give children time to problem solve and give themselves time to assess whether the behavior is interfering with the child's learning or their relationships with others.

An educator's response to one child's behavior has implications for the whole community, for it sends a message about how violations of expectations or harm to another are addressed (Pautz, 2009; Shalaby, 2017). When a child's behavior puts physical or emotional well-being of others at risk, it is essential to bring this to the child's attention and set a limit. This supports the safety and well-being of the child who was hurt and establishes expectations for how to treat others in the community. Subsequently, the child who displayed the behavior can be given an opportunity to repair the harm done (Lawrence & Hinds, 2016). Educators intentional observation and reflection can contribute to their understanding of the function of a child's behavior and determine what type of need the behavior conveys (e.g., attention, skill development, environmental changes). Social problem solving can also be used to help children talk about the situation, label related emotions, brainstorm solutions and plan for what to do in similar situations in the future. Educators can provide scaffolding in the form of suggestions or open-ended questions, or use a more formal technique such as introducing and referencing strategies in a solutions kit (National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations, n.d). Such problem solving involves perspective taking and develops children's problem-solving abilities over time (Costello & Wachtel, 2009; James et al., 2019a; 2019b).

After clearly identifying the behaviors that are harmful to children's safety or interfere with a child's ability to engage fully in learning or relationships with others, it is helpful for educators to plan how to respond. Context should be taken into account to understand the underlying need that the child is conveying through his or her behavior. When determining a response to behavior in the moment, educators can consider the following:

- What feelings is this child's behavior causing for me and why?
- What factors are influencing how I am perceiving this behavior?
- What are my reasons for wanting the child to stop this behavior?
- Are these reasons aligned with my CM objectives and our community values?
- What way of responding (or not responding) would be aligned with the outcome I want, or the message I want to convey?
- How can my practice meet both the needs of this particular child and the group in this moment?

Engaging in self-evaluation and reflection on practice is a crucial part of CM (Arthur et al., 2017b; Escamilla & Meier, 2018; Ryan & Grieshaber, 2004). Although interaction cycles are bi-directional, adults have the power and skills to stop negative cycles. Educators can use information about the child and their strengths and challenges to tailor future interactions to support the child's well-being, success and inclusion in the classroom community.

Challenges and Supports for EC Educators

Early childhood educators demonstrate resilience in the face of limited resources, high job demands, limited resources and inadequate compensation (Whitebook et al., 2018). These issues of equity are directly linked to the same systemic injustices that shape children's experiences in ECE settings (The National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2019). Educators working in early childhood settings report that lack of benefits such as paid planning time and professional requirements, detract from their interactions with children (Jeon et al., 2018a, 2018b; Johnson, 2021; Whitebook et al., 2018). Educators' reports of challenging behaviors are linked to low professional investment, and work-related stress (Clayback & Williford, 2021; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014; Jeon et al., 2018b; Roberts et al., 2016). In- and pre-service ECE teachers consistently report needing more training to support children with regard to their behavior in the classroom (Hemmeter et al., 2006; Soydan, 2017). Requirements for provider training and experience vary, and degree and credential educational training programs may not comprehensively address CM practices (Jeon et al., 2018a; Roberts et al., 2016). It is also unclear how much training educators receive regarding culturally-responsive practices, including acknowledging and disrupting bias in the classroom (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Derman-Sparks et al., 2015; Kissinger, 2017).

Training and support, whether in the form of effective applied professional development, consultation, coaching, colleague mentoring or formal preparation and credentialling programs, should focus on supporting educators to develop CM practices that are relevant to the communities in which they are working (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Educators require support and resources to engage in these practices. This includes systems and policies that prioritize teacher mental health and well-being, including adequate compensation, class size, planning time, breaks and appropriate work hours (Whitebook et al., 2018). Moreover, the above well-being parameters decrease educator stress, which is linked to impairment and bias in decision making (Yu, 2016). Support from leadership and a collegial workplace culture are associated with educator agency and efficacy, which are also linked to effective use of CM practices (Ransford et al., 2009; Schachter et al., 2021; Whitaker et al., 2015).

We briefly describe two scalable educator support systems that can serve to enhance educators' CM in group-based EC settings: The Pyramid Model for Promoting Young Children's

Social Emotional Competence (Pyramid Model), and the Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMHC) paradigm. The Pyramid Model is a multi-tiered system of support that uses a continuum of evidence-based practices matched to student needs to improve outcomes for all students. This framework is specifically designed for ECE and care settings for use by teachers, home visitors, coaches, behavior specialists, mental health consultants, and program leaders to support young children’s social and emotional development (Fox et al., 2003; Hemmeter et al., 2006). The Pyramid Model starts with universal strategies to support all children in the classroom and moves toward more targeted interventions for children who require additional support (Fox & Hemmeter, 2009). Previous research consistently finds that children in classrooms that implement the Pyramid Model display better social skills and fewer challenging behaviors compared to children in classrooms that do not use the model (Hemmeter et al., 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2021).

Increasingly, ECMHC is being used at scale in states to support children who are reported to display challenging behaviors, support children’s mental health and well-being, and prevent suspensions and expulsions from group-based early care and education settings. In ECMHC, a mental health professional (i.e., “consultant”) is paired with the adults (i.e., caregivers, teachers, and families) who work with infants and young children in the settings where they grow and learn (Cohen & Kaufmann, 2005; Duran et al., 2009). By working with children and adults in a natural setting, consultants interpret behavior in context and draw on resources in the child’s environment. The consultant’s role is to establish an equal partnership that values the family’s perspective.

The use of ECMH consultation improves children’s social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health outcomes by building the capacity of the adults who interact with children and their families. Consultants use a strengths-based approach to problem-solve mental health or behavioral concerns with the adults who care for children, and guide them to interpret and respond to children’s challenging behaviors using an EC developmental perspective. In this way, ECMH consultation seeks to build on the ongoing, daily interactions between children and their caregivers to support children’s optimal development (Duran et al., 2009). Consultants’ work is responsive to the specific context, culture, and needs of the child and their setting. Early childhood mental health consultation is associated with decreases in teacher reports of challenging behavior and increases in positive social and emotional outcomes for young children, including increases in social skills, communication, and self-control (Hepburn et al., 2013; Perry et al., 2010). Families also report improvements in parent-child relationships (Hepburn et al., 2013). In addition, ECMH consultation is associated with improvements in the quality of teacher’s relationships with students, teacher-child interactions, and improvements in teaching practices related to social-emotional learning, classroom climate, and classroom quality (Brennan et al., 2009; Hepburn et al., 2013). Finally, ECMH is associated with decreases in educator stress and turnover, and has been studied as a potential way to decrease the use of exclusionary discipline (Albritton et al., 2019; Brennan et al., 2008).

Both the Pyramid Model and ECMHC are intended to be implemented in ways that promote equity in how adults respond to children’s behaviors, thus promoting effective CM that serves all children. The Pyramid Model practices include awareness and understanding of cultural factors that shape children’s behavior and development. Consultants use a reflection tool in their work with educators to identify and address areas of concern related to equity, including countering implicit bias and engaging in culturally responsive practices (National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations, n.d). Pyramid Model coaches and ECMHC consultants develop trusting partnerships with educators that allow for adults to examine their beliefs, attitudes, and biases about a child which, in turn, may lead to behavior change for both the educator and the child (Duran et al., 2009; National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations, n.d).

Conclusion

Effective CM practices include caring for and interacting with children, individualizing learning for each child and responding to challenging behaviors with patience and creativity. These practices require knowledge of child development, mindfulness in the moment and time for planning and reflection. Educators engaging in equitable CM practices problem solve and balance complex and competing demands while caring for children’s physical and emotional needs throughout the day and day after day (Faulkner et al., 2016; Johnson, 2021).

This chapter reviewed aspects of CM unique to ECE settings, the role of care in CM, and the ways in which young children learn through everyday routines, the ability to make meaningful choices and hands-on experiences. The importance of addressing issues of equity and decreasing bias through culturally responsive and social-justice oriented CM was emphasized, as were the roles of autonomy, care and relationships in cultivating genuine community. We conclude that child-oriented CM makes the shift from focusing on behavioral compliance to understanding behaviors in context and responding in ways that meet the needs of individual children and the larger group.

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Paper 3

“Somethings Gotta Give”: Learning from Early Childhood Educator’s Experiences Navigating Demands and Resources in and Beyond the Pandemic Context

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Abstract

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, early childhood (EC) educators, have remained dedicated to supporting the safety, development, and well-being of young children (Garrity et al., 2019). While the pandemic has drawn increased attention to the already vulnerable state of the child care system and the lack of resources available to programs and providers, only meager resources have been diverted to support them. As a result early educators continue to struggle to maintain their own physical and emotional well-being while meeting the heightened needs of children and families (Weiland et al., 2021). The current mixed methods case study focused on the experiences of EC educators employed in a small city in a Southeastern state two years into the COVID-19 pandemic. Applying a critical feminist understanding and placing he Job Demands and Resources Model in a more broad social and political context, it examined participant's perspectives of their responsibilities, the resources available to them, and the ways in which they see these factors impacting their work and mental health. Findings indicate that early educators perceive leaders at the program and state level as in control of the resources available to them. Early educators also saw leader's and the general public's awareness of their role and early childhood education (ECE) as influential. Educators used a variety of strategies to navigate the tension between the resources available to them and the demands of their work, the most notable being providing unpaid labor. Early educators suggested a variety of systemic oriented solutions for supporting their own, children's and families' well-being, including adequate compensation and work time supports, coverage, and increased access to additional resources and services specifically focused on mental and behavioral health needs of children and their families.

Keywords: Early Childhood Educators, Early Childhood Education, Job Demands and Resource Model

“Somethings Gotta Give”: Learning from Early Childhood Educator’s Experiences Navigating Demands and Resources in the Pandemic Context

The COVID-19 pandemic context placed immense pressure on and further strained pre-existing vulnerabilities within the disjointed systems that fund and deliver Early Childhood Education (ECE). At the same time, pandemic-related program closures affirmed how essential child care is, bringing renewed attention to systemic issues in the field (Bedrick & Daily, 2020; Hashikawa et al., 2020). Funding has been diverted to address the urgency of the situation and proposed relief for programs, providers and the families they serve opened up new avenues of support (Hardy & Gallagher Robbins, 2021; Partee et al., 2023). Now is an opportune time to leverage these shifts to advocate for sustained systemic changes that prioritize the interconnected well-being of children, families and care providers (Berger et al., 2022; National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020a; NAEYC, 2020b; Spiteri, 2021; Weiland et al., 2021; Roy, 2020). We join those advocating to move beyond returning to a pre-pandemic “normal” in which the needs of many children, families and providers were never being met (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Love, 2020; Roy, 2020). Instead we suggest re-evaluating priorities and values to imagine more equitable and just ways of providing early care and education (Allvin, 2020; Carter, 2021; Fraga, 2020).

Central to these efforts is retaining a qualified ECE workforce and maintaining the financial security, dignity, health, and well-being of these professionals (Hobbs & Bernard, 2021; NAEYC., 2020a; Park et al., 2020). This requires understanding personal and professional demands and needs, as well as strengths and available resources for the workforce. Early educators and families of young children served should be central in conversations about the future of the field. Educators are uniquely situated to identify the most pressing demands they, children and families are experiencing. They can indicate which resources and supports have been beneficial in the past and use this knowledge to set priorities. Additionally, understanding how experiences align or differ between communities, program types and individuals is necessary to guide targeted, individualized support and broader systemic changes (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014).

The current mixed-methods case study seeks to better understand the current state of ECE and how to move forward by exploring the perspectives and experiences of a group of EC educators from a variety of program types within a Southeastern state. Applying a critical feminist lens (Canella, 2000; Goldstein 1994; Yelland, 2005) to the Job Demands and Resources (JDR) Model, we sought to understand how early educators navigate the balance between job demands and the resources available to them and how they see the social and political contexts their work takes place in (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Markowitz et al., 2020). Participants identified their own and families' needs and proposed solutions for the challenges they see within ECE systems and their communities.

Early Childhood Education Promises and Tensions in the Current Context

Strengthening and sustaining ECE infrastructures should be a priority as communities work towards promoting the well-being of children and families after over three years of pandemic-related disruptions. Beyond providing care to children so that parents can work, safe, warm, stimulating and supportive ECE environments are associated with positive short (e.g., development of social-emotional skills) and long term (e.g., high school graduation, employment, home ownership) outcomes for children and families, benefits that ripple out into communities (McCoy et al., 2017; Shapiro, 2021). Access to affordable, reliable childcare for families and the working conditions of providers are interrelated issues of equity. While many families cannot afford or access care that is high quality and meets their needs, programs struggle due to lack of funding, the disjointed nature of ECE systems and work conditions that adversely impact provider's well-being and work (Beatson et al., 2022; Coffey & Khattar, 2022; Schilder & Sandstrom, 2021). As long as child care is operating within a for-profit system, limited availability and the high cost of care act as barriers for many families while the high cost of providing quality care is not sustainable for providers (Workman & Jessen-Howard, 2020). Pre-existing childcare shortages and barriers to ECE access have been exacerbated by program closures and provider turnover during the COVID-19 pandemic (Malik et al., 2020). Estimates place job loss at 88,000 or between 8.4 and 12 percent of the ECE workforce since 2020, with many early educators leaving the profession due to inadequate compensation, poor working conditions, lack of support, understaffing and increased levels of stress and burnout (Bassok et al., 2021a; 2021b; Coffey & Khattar, 2022).

The ECE workforce is made up predominantly of women and 38 percent of the workforce is women of color who are more likely to contend with both racial and gender wage gaps (Austin et al., 2019; Boyd-Swan & Herbst, 2019). Women of color and their families are also disproportionately impacted by child-care disruptions and lack of access to programs (Jalongo, 2020; Montañez et al., 2022). School and childcare program closures during the pandemic underscore the differential impacts of loss of childcare depending on gender. Mothers in heterosexual couples, who took on higher rates of unpaid caregiving during the pandemic than their spouses, were more likely to experience unemployment or declines in employment participation due to childcare responsibilities (labor was more equitable distributed for same sex couples) (Alan, 2021; Farré et al., 2021; Frey & Alajääskö, 2021; Zamarro & Prados, 2021). Longer school closures were associated with heightened gender gaps in unpaid childcare labor and women (regardless of their partner's gender identity) were more likely than men to report increased stress and higher levels of pandemic-related mental health challenges in their household (Frey & Alajääskö, 2021; Leap et al., 2022). Although the pandemic has exacerbated inequities in the field- and their related consequences, these issues pre-date the pandemic (Berger et al., 2022; NAEYC, 2020a; 2020b; Nagasawa & Tarrant, 2020; Weiland et al., 2021). There have also been many proposed solutions such as increasing access to high quality childcare through financial investments in the workforce and ECE infrastructure, and in policy to integrate and bolster ECE delivery systems. In order to promote these policies it is necessary to increase awareness of the role of ECE within the lives of children, families and communities. This includes deepening the public's understanding of the demands of child care work and the resources necessary for EC educator's to provide high quality, developmentally appropriate, child and family centered care while maintaining their own health and well-being.

Job Demands and Resources Framework

The Job Demands and Resources (JDR) model provides a framework for understanding early educator's abilities to manage job-related demands in relation to available supports and resources. The JDR model theorizes that stress, well-being and engagement in the workplace are a function of the balance (or imbalance) between demands (i.e., physical, psychological, social and organizational requirements) and resources (i.e., personal and professional factors that support completion of responsibilities) (Bakker et al., 2005; 2008; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Demands include both potentially rewarding stressors and constraints that interfere with an individual's capacity to meet goals and/or act in ways that are aligned with their values and priorities (Van den Broeck et al., 2010). Personal characteristics and resources such as knowledge, experience, self-efficacy and finding value or meaning in one's work may make job demands more manageable (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007).

The JDR model has been used to better understand well-being and work engagement of educators within and beyond ECE settings (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Granziera et al., 2021; Prieto et al., 2008). Research using the JDR model as a framework has attributed the high rates of health challenges and stress experienced by EC educators to limited access to resources in the context of relatively high physical, emotional and cognitive job demands (Heilala et al., 2021; Kwon et al., 2022; Kwon et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). Competing workplace responsibilities and a lack of time and resources available to complete them are associated with early educator stress, burnout, depression symptoms and intentions to leave the profession (Farewell et al., 2022; Nislin et al., 2016; Roberts et al., 2019). Conversely, availability of support and resources for early educators is positively associated with their work engagement, well-being and supportive interactions with children (Johnson et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Whitaker et al., 2015; Zinsser et al., 2013; 2016). Applied professional development, relevant training, professional learning communities and opportunities to collaborate with colleagues are resources associated with early educator's ability to engage in responsive interactions with children and meet the varied demands of their work (Burchinal et al., 2002; Schachter, 2015; Schachter et al., 2019).

Early Childhood Educator's Demands and Well-being in the Workplace

Early childhood educators who provide quality care are tasked with many responsibilities including meeting the physical and emotional needs of individual children and the larger group, keeping children safe, cleaning and maintaining classroom materials and the environment, supporting children's development across a variety of domains, observing, assessing and documenting children’s learning and routines, implementing curriculum, planning and preparing for learning experiences, communicating with families, and completing administrative tasks (Hamel, 2021; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). As essential workers, early educators around the world responded to increased work demands during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pramling et al., 2020). These included enforcing safety protocols (e.g., masking, social distancing, cleaning, sanitizing, quarantines), adjusting to multiple teaching formats (e.g., in person, hybrid, virtual), providing additional time, materials and support to children and maintaining communication with caregivers (Atiles et al., 2021; Bassok et al., 2021b; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020; Ford et al., 2021). Early educators met these demands while managing risks to their own, colleagues and family member’s health. Facilitating children’s social and emotional development and caring for physical needs in a safe environment forms the basis for EC educator’s work (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Phajane, 2014). Educators continued to fulfil this role, as both basic and social-emotional needs intensified for children and families coping with a range of challenges including disruptions to their routine, isolation, financial insecurity, loss of a loved one, illness, and mental health challenges (Aziegbe & Cook, 2020; Browne et al., 2021; Crawford et al., 2021; NAEYC, 2020a).

Early educators continue to assert their dedication to their work and the well-being of the children they care for (Markowitz et al., 2020; Randall et al., 2021). Despite the notable strengths demonstrated by EC educators before and throughout the pandemic, surveys across settings point to detrimental impacts on their mental and physical health as they work to meet the needs of children and families without adequate resources in a system already stretched thin (Hanno et al., 2022; Tarrant & Nagasawa, 2020; Swigonski et al., 2021). The increase in behavioral and mental health needs during the pandemic is especially troubling, as many educators frequently expressed concern over their ability to support children in these areas prior to the pandemic (Brock & Beaman-Diglia, 2018). Additionally, educator perceptions of behavioral challenges are associated with higher levels of stress, burnout and less supportive interactions with children (Cassidy et al., 2016; Jeon et al., 2018). Early educators experienced higher rates of stress, depression and health issues than the general population, prior to the pandemic and reported experiencing increased stress, anxiety and frustration and decreased levels of job satisfaction since the start of the pandemic (Berger et al., 2022; Jeon et al., 2018; Kwon et al., 2021; Pettit, 2020).

In addition to these demands, many early educators were contending with a lack of adequate resources, including benefits, compensation, training opportunities and mental health support, prior to the pandemic (Jeon et al., 2014; 2018; Jeon & Wells, 2018; Kwon et al., 2021; Ottem et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2019; Whitebook et al., 2004; 2016; 2018). Early childhood educators often report that work-time benefits such as planning time, breaks and non-contact time to complete job-related tasks are not consistently available to them (Kwon et al., 2020). These issues, which were already dire, have worsened due to additional turnover and lack of staffing during the pandemic (Kwon et al., 2020). The negative impact of coverage issues- and related- lack of benefits (e.g., paid sick days, time off, health insurance) and inadequate compensation have been exacerbated by increased health risks, center closures and employment disruptions (Bassok et al., 2020; Hanno et al., 2022; Markowitz et al., 2020; NAEYC, 2020a; Swigonski et al., 2021). Increased rates of providers have reported difficulty paying their bills and purchasing food for their households since the start of the pandemic (Bassok et al., 2020; Hanno et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2022). Early educators working in private settings reported more stress related to lack of benefits (e.g., healthcare, sick leave) than those in publicly funded programs and worried about employees coming to work sick due to lack of sick days and/or staff to cover their absence (Markowitz et al., 2020; Sonnier-Neto et al., 2020). Qualitative work has also captured educators experience of COVID-related stressors including financial insecurity, health risks and personal and professional anxieties (Dayal & Tiko, 2020; Logan et al., 2021; Partee et al., 2023).

Early Childhood Educator's Resources, Well-being and Engagement in the Workplace

Conversely, resources associated with the well-being of the ECE workforce in general, including job security, adequate compensation and benefits, have continued to predict educator well-being and retention throughout the pandemic (Bassok et al., 2021c; Bigras et al., 2021; Eadie et al., 2021; Markowitz et al., 2021; Whitebook & Sakai, 2003). Interestingly, smaller class sizes and ratios associated with declines in enrollment at the start of the pandemic were reported as a helpful support that offset increased pandemic-related demands (Bigras et al., 2021).

Respect and support of colleagues and leadership, as well as positive center climate were associated with well-being and decreased stress for early educators during the pandemic (Farewell et al. 2022; Heilala et al., 2022; Sokal et al., 2020). Leadership also supported EC educators by establishing clear safety measures and clarifying roles (Farewell et al. 2022; Heilala et al., 2022; Sokal et al., 2020). Relevant supports specifically tied to pandemic-related needs were more effective in buffering against the adverse effects of early educators' pandemic-related job demands (Sokal et al., 2020). Positive relationships with children's caregivers, recognition of work, job control and flexibility (with remote work) were also reported by educators as beneficial in responding to both general and pandemic related demands (Bigras et al., 2021; Farewell et al. 2022; Heilala et al., 2022; Sokal et al., 2020). A mixed methods study on early educator's well-being during the pandemic conducted by Quinones and colleagues (2021) pointed to the importance of community and solidarity among providers as they provided emotional and collaborative support for one another and advocated for recognition of the value of their work and the sacrifices being made by the workforce.

Personal resources and characteristics of early educators such as flexibility, creativity, resilience (i.e., the ability to adapt to challenging circumstances) and mindfulness were associated with managing increased stress and job demands during the pandemic (Farewell et al. 2022; Heilala et al., 2022; Matiz et al., 2020; Sokal et al., 2020). Early educators used a variety of coping strategies (e.g., seeking social support, faith and spirituality, mindfulness, focusing on positives, seeking information) to manage stress and fulfil the demands of their work, including meeting the increased social-emotional needs of children, families and colleagues (Berger et al., 2022; Bigras et al., 2021; Dayal & Tiko, 2020; Daro & Gallagher, 2020; Sokal et al., 2020). Early care providers consistently report being committed to and finding meaning in their work and a strong sense of professional identity has been shown to buffer the negative impacts of stress for child care providers (Wiltshire, 2023). This was an asset during the pandemic as educators drew on lessons learned from past challenges and found motivation in shared experiences and support from colleagues, leadership and families (Berger et al., 2022; Markowitz et al., 2020; Randall et al., 2021; Tarrant & Nagasawa, 2020).

Critical Perspectives and Need for Mixed Methods

While the JDR model captures the interaction between demands and resources occurring within the workplace, cultural, politics and context shape the availability of resources and magnitude of demands placed on workers. The ways in which early educators make meaning of their professional and personal identities, their work and the processes that shape their experiences have an impact on their well-being, professional engagement, motivation and intentions to remain in the profession (Meng et al., 2022; Schaack & Stedron, 2020).

Critical theories, which seek to question power dynamics and inequities related to gender, race, class, and other socially constructed statuses that embedded within systems are an ideal lens to examine these dynamics. This is especially true when considering the gendered nature of ECE and other care professions as well as the diversity of the workforce and intersecting identities of ECE providers (Battacharya, 2017; Cannella, 2000; Creswell, 2013; Parker & Lynn, 2002). The resources available to early educators can be understood in the context of the value placed on work traditionally done by women, many of whom are women of color, as well as structural inequities related to the identities and socio-economic statuses of the families and children they serve (Boles, 1980; Brennan & Mahon, 2011; Johnson-Staub, 2017; Lee et al., 2022). In order to make change, it is essential to understand and shift power dynamics that dictate the flow of resources and the recognition, respect and agency of these professionals (Yelland, 2005).

A critical understanding of early educator's work in the current context requires a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods (Corr et al., 2020; Mertens et al., 2010). Mixed methods creates opportunities for participants to share their lived-experiences and perspectives to elaborate on and place quantitative findings in context. By examining early educator's perceptions of their roles, responsibilities and well-being with a critical feminist lens, we can question "norms" and harmful beliefs (Richardson, 2022; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). Systemic issues require collective solutions and methods that shift power dynamics to center the voices of those whose perspectives have been marginalized. Mixed methods allows for a conversation between quantitative findings and the experiences of those the data describes to provide a richer understanding and create opportunities for nuance. Mixed methods are better equipped to explain and contextualize discrepant or surprising findings and to better understand tensions or contradictions within situations and processes (Fielding, 2009).

Current Study

For the current mixed methods study we applied a critical understanding of the JDR model to better understand the experiences, strengths and needs of early childhood educators in the context of the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data was collected as part of a community partnership in a Southeastern state. Research questions included:

1. What factors do early educators believe influence the resources and support available to them?
    a. What impact did they see the COVID-19 Pandemic as having on their work, demands and resources?
2. How do early educators describe their experience meeting work demands with the resources available to them?
    a. What are the implications of this on their mental health, well-being and work?
3. What solutions do early educators propose to address challenges they experience and promote the well-being of themselves, children and families within and beyond ECE settings?

We also examined whether participant perceptions differed by program type and funding auspice (e.g., public, private, Head Start). Consistent with previous research, we expected that educators would report high job demands and accessing limited or depleted personal and professional resources in an effort to meet them (Farewell et al., 2022; Weiland et al., 2021). However, we also wanted to capture educator strengths, sources of support and creativity as they problem solved and envisioned solutions to the challenges they experienced.

Mixed methods were required to answer these questions a qualitative data from educators further explained and contextualized descriptive results. Additionally, mixed methods allowed for understanding similarities and differences between educator's perceptions of quantitative findings, experiences and the current context. A sequential mixed methods design was utilized to integrate quantitative and qualitative survey data collected from a larger sample of early educators with qualitative data collected later during interviews with a smaller subset of the sample (Creswell, 2005; Cresswell & Creswell, 2017; Cresswell & Plano-Clark, 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012).

Location and Context

The current study took place in a mid-size city and surrounding rural regions in a Southeastern state; population of 80,569 (United States Census Bureau, 2019). The mean age of residents in 2019 in the mid-sized city was 28.3 years, old. In terms of racial and ethnic demographics, 62.3% of residents identify as not hispanic and White, 28.4% as Black or African American, 2.44% as Asian, 2.15% as Multiracial, .215% as American Indian or Alaskan native, and .307% as another race; 6.563% identify as hispanic (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Median household income is $46,409, which is lower than the national average ($65,712), with 19.5% of residents, living below the poverty line. Importantly, and relevant to the ECE workforce, there is a gender wage gap in the state that is larger than the national average, with men making 1.34 times as much as women (United States Census Bureau, 2019).

Data for the current study was collected from Spring of 2022 through Winter of 2023, spanning the second and third years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Masking and quarantining mandates had just been lifted. In the region there has been a total of 59,952 confirmed COVID-19 cases, and 841 deaths (Dong et al., 2022). Taking this context into account and documenting the ways in which it informs findings supports transferrability of the current study (Stenfors et al., 2020).

Methods

Participants

The sample of survey participants was drawn from early educators (e.g., teachers, child care providers, teaching assistants), leaders (e.g., program directors, administrators) and school staff who worked with children under five in a variety of program types. Programs were located in the mid-size city and surrounding rural regions described. The survey was distributed to 518 early educators and was completed by 115 for a response rate of 22.2 percent, which is in the typical range for online surveys (meta-analyses of survey response rates to online and emailed surveys place them between 20 and 40 percent) (Burgard et al., 2019; Cook et al., 2016; Fan & Yan, 2010; Fincham, 2008; Yun & Trumbo, 2000). Demographic reporting was optional; participant demographics, professional characteristics and work settings are shown in Table 1. The mean age of participants was 42.4 years (SD= 13.51) and ages ranged from 17 to 69. The average class size reported by participants was 13 children (SD= 4.58) and class sizes ranged from two to twenty-one children. On average, there were two adults present in a classroom, with an average teacher to child ratio of one to six. Nearly half of the classes represented had at least one child qualifying for special education services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan and 21.4 percent of classrooms had children receiving Birth to Three Early Intervention services.

Table 1
Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

	n	%

Gender		
Female	89	97.80
Male	1	1.10
Prefer to self-describe (non-binary)	1	1.10
Race		
Black	19	20.88
White	66	72.52
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	1	1.10
No response/prefer not to respond	5	5.49
Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latinx	2	2.20
Not-Hispanic/ Latinx	89	97.80
Years of Experience		
Less than 1 Year	4	3.48
1-5 Years	31	25.96
6-9 Years	20	17.39
10-15 Years	20	17.39
16 or more Years	40	34.78
Role		
Lead Teacher	77	66.96
Assistant Teacher	16	13.91
Program Leader	10	8.70
Special Ed Teacher	5	4.35
Paraprofessional	2	1.74
Other	5	4.35
Program Type		
Childcare Center (Private)	51	44.35
Preschool (Private)	18	15.65
Head Start/ Early Head Start	12	10.43
Public Pre-K (includes Special Education)	33	28.70
Family Day Home	1	.87
Ages Served*		
Infants (0-1)	37	32.17
Toddlers (2-3)	30	26.09

Pre-kindergarteners (4-5)	78	67.83

Note. This table shows participant demographics and characteristics and includes details about the programs where participants were employed. For race, ethnicity and gender reporting N= 91 and for all other categories N=115.
*Percentages for ages served exceed 100 because some programs served multiple age groups.

Interview Participants

A subset of eight survey respondents were interviewed. Four educators worked at public pre-k programs, one within a public special education program, three at private or faith based programs and one at an Early Head Start program. Table 2 provides interview participant demographics and characteristics. All participants interviewed identified as White and female. Our methods and limitations sections further discuss the lack of racial and ethnic diversity of the sample and related implications.

Table 2

Interview Participant Demographics and Characteristics

Pseudonym	Program Type	Age	Years of Experience	Gender Identity	Race/ Ethnicity	What should we know about you and/or your program?
“Ariel”	Private- left for a different private program	45	4	Female	White	It's a passion…if you don't have a passion for it. It's got to be way stressful. Because I, I mean, I don't have a passion for teenagers…but put me in a room of a bunch of toddlers and I'm just like, hey, what's going on? You know, it just feels natural.
“Brittney”	Early Head Start, worked in public pre-k prior	30	6	Female	White	I worked with women in recovery house and detoxing and crisis stabilization which helped me to see the family side of things.
“Sarah”	Private, Private Faith Based, left the field	41	2	Female	White	The kids don't have stability on teachers either. When they go home, the teacher next day, they'll have this teacher. It impacts the kids a lot. Because you got to think if they're gonna bond with you, you know, they've got a bond with that one person. Then the next day they come and that person is no longer there.
“Chloe”	Private	26	5	Female	White	We got Virginia readiness grant and so we've just had, we've had a ton more students come in the past two years, and from all sorts of different backgrounds. So it's definitely been two years of constant change.

"Billie"	Public Pre-k (in elementary school)	38	16	Female	White	Rural title 1 school- public pre-k, students must meet criteria to attend.
"Dana"	Public Pre-k (in elementary school)	62	32	Female	White	The Pre-K program I teach is considered an at-risk program. The families are wonderful but I feel they are often hesitant to participate and be active in their children's education for various reasons (lack education themselves, fear they will be judged, etc.)
"Lee"	Public Special Education Classroom Pre-k (in elementary school)	56	16	Female	White	I love my students like they are my own. I try to build good relationships with the parents of my students. I encourage a model of working together and keeping consistency between school and home.
"Leigh"	Public Pre-k (in elementary school)	50	32	Female	White	I have a Master's in education and have taught pre-k all 32 years.

Note. This table shows participant demographics and characteristics and includes details about the programs where participants were employed

Procedures and Materials

Data for the current study was collected as part of a needs assessment and service mapping project developed in partnership with a local non-profit within the community. This non-profit and community partner is part of a regional initiative with a mission to support families and educators working with children under five through professional development and training for the ECE workforce, implementation of a state quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), and partner with families. Leaders from the organization and EC educators from the public school system took part in survey design and approved interview protocols. All methods were approved by a university Institutional Review Board (IRB). Survey and interview participants received compensation for their time in the form of gift cards.

Participants from public, private and Head Start ECE programs in the region were recruited by the non-profit to complete the online survey in early April 2022 through: (a) an email listserv used by the school division to communicate with pre-kindergarten programs, (b) direct emails to a list of early childhood programs and providers and (c) an announcement at a conference for EC educators held by the non-profit. Descriptive analyses of quantitative survey items and preliminary coding of qualitative items were completed in late Spring 2022. Interview participants were then selected from 44 survey respondents who expressed interest in sharing more about their experiences. Survey results guided purposive sampling, in which participants were invited to participate based on their experiences and quantitative findings, with the goal of expanding on survey results and providing additional information to fully answer research questions (Johnson et al., 2020). Survey findings pointed to the importance of selecting participants to represent a range of ages and years of experience, program types (e.g., private, faith-based, public, public special education, Head Start) and ages of children served (e.g., infants, toddlers, pre-k). Because child and family needs were associated with educator's stress, well-being and required resources, we wanted to include a special education teacher in our group of participants. Additionally, we targeted participants who had chosen to leave their program due to high levels of stress or lack of support. Potential participants were contacted, informed about the interview process and asked to participate via email or phone calls depending on their preference. The eight educators who agreed to participate reflected a range of ages, program types and experiences. Despite efforts made to recruit a racially and ethnically representative group of participants (e.g., making additional calls to programs and home daycares, asking participants to identify colleagues, community partner recruitment effort) within time constraints, the final group of participants interviewed all identified as White and female.

Initial and follow-up interviews occurred in person and online via zoom using the Otter transcription program from May 2022 through February 2023. Participants were consented and given the option to choose a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. Transcripts were cleaned and de-identified; program names and other identifying information were removed. Qualitative data was iteratively analyzed by a team of eight undergraduates led and trained by the first author from August 2022 through March 2023. Member checking occurred during follow-up participant interviews when quantitative and qualitative findings were shared and discussed as well as after final analyses were completed, at which point they were shared with participants who were invited to provide feedback or clarifications.

Educator, School and Program Staff Survey: Quantitative Items

Survey items used in this study were part of the needs assessment developed jointly by the research team and community partners. The survey was exploratory and designed based on community partner input, a review of community needs assessments completed in other regions and research focused on the experiences of young children, families and early educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. After the survey was developed, members of the research team supported validity by (a) reviewing surveys with individuals with expertise and experience working in ECE, (b) completing cognitive interviews, with EC educators to increase clarity and decrease the potential for errors in responding to survey items, and (c) piloting the survey with a smaller sample of educators and school staff to assess time commitment and feasibility (Desimone & LeFloch, 2013; Gehlbach & Brinkworth, 2011; Hazel et al., 2016).

Educators selected responses from multiple options or rated the extent to which they agreed with statements on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale. They also reported on the extent to which factors impacted them on a 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal) scale. Items related to resources and supports available to educators included the following: (a) rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement: my school or program has the resources I need to address the needs of children under five and their families, (b) rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement: I have the support I need to address the needs of children under five and their families, and (c) who supports you at work (leadership, colleagues, mental health professionals, consultant/coach). The impact of the pandemic, turnover and coverage issues on educator's work and interactions with children were reported on in the following items: (a) rate the extent to which the COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted your relationships with the children in your care, (b) is teacher turnover an issue in your school or program (yes, no, unsure), (c) how often is lack of coverage or being short-staffed an issue in your school or program, (d) rate the extent to which staff shortages or lack of coverage impacts your work, and (e) rate the extent to which staff shortages or lack of coverage impacts your interactions with children.

Educators also reported on stress and anxiety symptoms they had experienced during the previous week. A composite of these symptom items was created to capture a total number of symptoms reported. Educators also reported on the extent to which these symptoms impacted their work and whether they had workplace supports to manage their stress and mental health concerns (yes, no, unsure). Educators selected from a menu of training needs and supports that they believed would help them to better meet the needs of children under five and their families (see Appendix A) and indicated whether they would like to collaborate with other professionals in their program less, the same amount, or more than they currently are.

Educator, School and Program Staff Survey: Qualitative Items

Participants who completed the online survey responded to several open-ended items related to their perceived support and resource needs. Open-ended text responses to each item were cleaned and iteratively coded as an additional qualitative data source. Open-ended items included the following questions, (a) What supports and resources do you need or wish you had, and (b) Is there anything else you would like to share?

Educator Interviews: Qualitative Transcripts

Eight participants were interviewed individually or in pairs during an initial 60 to 90 minute interview and individually during a 30 to 60 minute follow-up interview. Both interviews were conducted by the same member of the research team and completed via zoom with the exception of one interview that was conducted in person to accommodate participant preference. A semi-structured interview protocol (Adams, 2015) was used to elicit participant viewpoints and elaborate on quantitative results while allowing for flexibility to follow the lead and priorities of participants (see Appendix B). This format was selected because semi-structured interview approaches have been identified as appropriate for research in which a previous base of knowledge is available and the objective of the research is to capture participant's perceptions (Kallio et al., 2016). The semi-structured format also allowed for follow up questions based on participant responses (Adams, 2015; Galletta, 2012). Protocol questions were mostly open ended and constructed based on research questions, a review of the literature, preliminary quantitative findings, facets of the JDR model (e.g., asking educators about demands of their work and resources) and critical paradigms (i.e., inquiring about power dynamics and agency) (Kallio et al., 2016). For example, preliminary survey results indicated that some early educators did not see major impacts of the pandemic on children's development or needs while others did; this discrepancy was explored by incorporating related questions into interview protocols.

Six of the eight participants took part in a follow-up interview. Of the two participants who did not, one could not be reached and the other took part in member checking during a phone call due to time and technology constraints. A semi-structured interview protocol that incorporated information from final survey results (including educator responses to a visual representation of survey findings that was shared prior to the follow-up interview) and initial interviews was used. This created opportunities for putting participants in dialogue with overall findings and other participant's perspectives. This process also facilitated member checking to ensure that their viewpoints were being represented accurately (Birt et al., 2016).

Verbatim transcripts of both interviews were created using Otter Transcription services. Transcripts were de-identified, cleaned and coded as data-sources (Whittemore et al., 2001). During follow-up interviews established themes were repeated by participants and new themes related to research questions did not emerge (Saunders et al., 2018). This indicated that data saturation (i.e., the point at which data collection methods are not yielding new results) had been reached with the group of participants. Data saturation typically dictates when to stop collecting additional data and is considered an aspect of quality criteria in sampling and determining methods for qualitative research (Hennink & Kaiser, 2019; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013).

Quantitative Data Analyses

Survey Items. Descriptive data analyses were completed for multiple choice and rating scale response style survey items. Percentages of educators who endorsed responses to items were calculated and broken down by program type reported by participants (e.g., public, private, Head Start). In some cases five point scales were condensed to three or four points for ease of sharing results in visual figures. Mean scores and standard deviations for relevant items and composites were calculated. Chronbach's alpha scale reliability coefficient was calculated to establish internal consistency for individual items included within the stress and anxiety symptom composite with an estimate of α =.72 indicating acceptable internal consistency (Taber, 2018). All analyses were completed using Stata statistical analysis software.

Qualitative Data Analyses

Open-Ended Survey Items. Utilizing an iterative, inductive coding process, text responses to each item were reviewed by between two and three members of the research team and sorted by research question. A set of relevant themes and subcodes for responses were established for each item by individual team members before themes and codes were compared between team members (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021; Thomas; 2006). These themes were also compared to those determined during analysis of interview transcripts. We followed a collaborative, team-based approach to coding (Richards & Hemphill, 2018; Cascio et al., 2019). Overlap between themes as well as disagreements about potential codes were discussed until a final coding scheme that captured themes from interviews and survey items was created. Each response to relevant items was then individually coded using this final coding scheme by two members of the research team during thematic and pattern coding (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021). Coding pairs compared codes and discussed disagreements until they were resolved. Any items not resolved during this stage in the proves were brought for discussion to the larger group.

Interviews and Follow-up Interviews. The research team applied the same inductive coding process to interview transcripts. Transcripts were reviewed repeatedly in order to identify themes and patterns related to research questions during an open and in-vivo coding process (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021). As categories and codes became more defined, transcripts were re-analyzed systematically in an iterative process and the codebook was continuously updated (Vears & Gillam, 2022). The coding scheme for open-ended survey items was compared to and integrated into the codebook. Codes were also categorized in relation to research questions. Member checking occurred during follow-up interviews to determine if themes fully and accurately reflected information shared by participants. Additional information and corrections shared by participants were incorporated into the codebook. Themes and subcodes were compared to other sources of information, including relevant literature and the theoretical frameworks used to guide the study (e.g., JDR theory, critical theory, critical feminist theory) (Cannella, 2000; Kamenarac, 2021). After the codebook was finalized, text from interview transcripts was separated first into units of text and then into categories based on research questions. Text excerpts were then coded a final time using thematic and pattern coding (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021). Text excerpts from each transcript were coded by two members of the research team using a consensus coding process. Discrepancies or questions that were not resolved in coding pairs were brough to the larger group and discussed until consensus was reached (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). For example, the group discussed in detail whether an educator leaving a program was an act of negotiation and agency (i.e., attempting to set boundaries around their role and responsibilities) or a negative result of the resource and demands imbalance, settling on the latter interpretation.

Mixed-Methods Approach

Quantitative and qualitative data was integrated at the design, data collection and analyses stages of the current study (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Interviews provided opportunities to follow up, expand on, and clarify quantitative survey findings. Descriptive results were also linked to qualitative data in several ways. These included use of information from quantitative survey results to (a) identify participants for interviews, (b) inform interview protocols and questions, and (c) create a visual depiction of survey findings to engage participants. After analyses of qualitative data were completed, descriptive statistics were paired with related qualitative themes using a visual matrix to compare, contrast and complement findings (Greene & Caracelli, 1997). Potential explanations for similarities and differences between participants and data sources were explored during follow up interviews and a review of the literature. During these interviews participants were asked to elaborate on and/or explain their understanding of contrasting or surprising findings, for example, differing reports on the impact of the pandemic on their work (Buchbinder, 2011; Candela, 2019; Guba et al., 1994).

Validity, Reliability, and Methodological Integrity

Working as a team and discussing potential findings in a group provided opportunities for reflexivity (i.e., reflecting on researcher positionality and research context) and credibility (i.e., use of multiple types of data analyses and methods to increase trustworthiness of findings), which are essential quality criteria for qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stenfors et al., 2020). Team members reflected on their own identity and differing relationships to the subject matter, including potential connections, biases and blind spots through individual reflection and discussions with partners and the larger group. Data memos and reflexive journaling were completed by members of the research team throughout data collection and provided opportunities to identify personal reactions and perceptions of coders as they analyzed data (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Additionally a rich description of the larger context of the study and individual interviews, as well as documentation of processes and protocols was included to support transferability (Stenfors et al., 2020).

Credibility was also established through multiple member checks that occurred throughout data collection and after final analyses were completed. During follow-up interviews, participants were presented with a visualization and summary of survey results, quotes and themes from their previous interview in order to clarify differences and confirm that their views were being accurately represented (Caretta, 2016; Harvey, 2015). Aside from these written results, participants were asked follow up questions and presented with their own words and the research teams interpretations (Brear, 2019). After qualitative analyses were completed, participants were again sent a summary of overall themes and specific themes from their interviews via email and given the opportunity to provide feedback, clarify or further comment.

Author Positionality

Reflecting on researcher positionality is a critical part of qualitative and mixed methods (Holmes, 2020). Qualitative and critical paradigms work from the assumption that identity and social position shape experiences, perceptions and biases. Reflecting on identity and examining the ways in which social location shapes interactions with participants, data analyses and interpretation is necessary (Bhattacharya, 2017; Secules et al., 2021). Throughout this project, myself (the author) and the research team took time to reflect on positionality and to engage in reflexivity, identifying individual beliefs brought to the people and topic we were studying, positions that may change over time (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019; Wilson et al., 2022).

I am a fourth year graduate student in a combined clinical and school psychology program. Before enrolling in the program I worked as an early childhood educator with infants, toddlers and three year-olds for eight years, the majority of this experience taking place at a university affiliated, sliding scale program. My research is informed by my time spent working in childcare and is also made possible in large part by my privileged identity as a graduate student. I now benefit from cultural capital and access to funding and resources I did not have as an early educator.

In relation to the current study, my positionality is both as an insider in the field of ECE, and an outsider to the early education community I was collecting data in. The university I am affiliated also played a role in how participants perceived me and information they shared. Throughout this study, I needed to be mindful of my privilege as a researcher and a White, cisgender female, all aspects of my identity which shaped my own perspectives and participant's perceptions of and willingness to share information with me. It was important for me to continuously reflect on my own identity and previous experiences as an educator and to monitor my own assumptions and biases. I benefited from discussions and reflection with members of the research team who occupied varied positions in relation to the field of ECE and the community where data was being collected (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). These multiple perspectives added depth to our analyses and allowed for discussions around varying interpretations based on our personal experiences and viewpoints (Acker, 2000; Asselin, 2003).

Results

Results are organized by research question. The first part of research question one (What factors do early educators believe influence the resources and support available to them?) was answered using primarily qualitative methods. Quantitative results are presented for the second part of the question. For all other research questions quantitative results are presented before qualitative results and comparisons between method results are integrated into findings.

Question One Part One: Early Educator's Perceptions of Factors Related to the Availability of Resources

Qualitative Results: "Until they see the value of teachers more…I don't think anything's gonna change"

The first research question was related to early educator's perceptions of availability of supports and resources. Early educators identified (a) leaders at the program level and (b) at the division, state and federal level as in control of the resources available to them, while they also identified (c) awareness of ECE and the needs of young children (of leaders and the general public), and (d) respect and recognition for their work as influential factors.

Leaders at Multiple Levels. Early educators identified leaders within their program as primarily in control of the process of allocating and connecting them to often limited resources. This included decision-making about staffing, coverage, funding for materials and planning time. Leaders also acted as gatekeepers and connection points to mental health and behavioral professionals and services. They made decisions and set priorities around professional development and professional tools (e.g., curriculum, screening, information gathering and observation measures). Educators also identified leaders, institutions and agencies at the school division, state and federal level as in control of community resources and services available to families, funding (e.g., program, salary) and establishing expectations for their work at the systemic level (e.g., benchmarks, statewide assessments). Table 3 provides a description of themes and examples from interviews.

Awareness and Recognition. Early educators felt that these decisions about resource allocation were influenced by both leader's and the general public's awareness of early childhood development and ECE in general. This awareness was often linked to the respect and value EC educators felt that leaders, families and the public placed on their work. Early educators repeatedly expressed frustration at the ways in which their work was "not respected," misunderstood or devalued, stating that others perceived them as being there for "just play," or "babysitting," rather than intentionally planning and teaching. The following quote reflects these sentiments:

> I mean, we care for these children like our own and we take home their, you know, burdens and such and think about them at night and everything. And I don't think that the vast majority of people understand how invested teachers really are and they kind of take

> that for granted. And so it can be frustrating to us sometimes…all the people getting fed up with education right now that kind of bothers me. Chloe (private program).

Participants countered these perceptions with their own narratives. They described the importance of early development and affirmed their roles and responsibilities. Their stories and descriptions focused on the intentionality, planning and effort they engage in to promote children's learning across domains, including developing hands-on materials, preparing children for school and engaging with families. As one public school teacher stated, "as a pre K teacher we do just as much if not more work than teachers of every other grade," an early Head Start teacher added, "I really wish that people understood the importance of early childhood education…since it pretty much sets the foundation of the future of the child."

Participants from public programs, whose leaders may have had less training and experience related to specifically to early childhood and meeting the needs of young children reported that this lack of understanding had a direct impact on resources they received. For example, placing substitutes and assistants in older grades was prioritized over EC classrooms by administrators due to a lack of understanding of young children's needs and ideal ratios necessary to meet those needs. This topic was repeatedly brought up regardless of whether participants were being asked questions about their role, what resources were available to them or what changes they wanted to see in the field.

Table 3

Qualitative Themes: Early Childhood Educator Perceptions of Factors related to Resource Availability Outside of Themselves

Themes	Definition	Examples
Program Leadership	Specific references to program leadership (e.g., principles, administration, directors, leaders) playing an essential role in decision-making about distributing/allocating resources and support to EC educators.	And then I feel like she was the type of principal that was very hands off as long as you were doing your job. She wanted to be in the loop. So, she didn't she did not want to be blindsided about anything. If you needed something you come to her, but if you're doing your job, she leaves you like, you know, I'm saying and that that's the way she operated. Dana (public program)

Larger Systems	Reference to institutions, systems, political processes and/or leaders outside of an educator's program that influence the availability of resources (can be at the local, state or federal level), as well as expectations for educators.	The we got the [state] readiness grant or something like that. So that's been, I know, that's helped a lot of families out, especially those that are right on the border of qualifying for different programs. So it really takes away a big burden off of them. And we have students that are coming in through different grants as well. Chloe (private program)
Awareness	Awareness or lack of awareness and understanding of (a) child development/the importance of early development, (b) ECE, and factors unique to ECE settings, impacting resources, support and demands. Refers to awareness of leaders, the general public, families and colleagues.	I don't know if they couldn't find people to fill the position. I don't know if there was...I got the feeling…that there was just lack of concern in the administration you know, when you don't know what early childhood or special ed early childhood is, you don't understand the need for those people. Lee (public special education program) Yeah, that's one of the biggest reasons that I that I left because I just… it's yeah, it's really hard to watch that. And, for me, I use the word ignorance in the right way. They [director and colleagues] just don't know. They don't know. Ariel (private program)
Respect and Recognition	Respect, recognition and value or lack of respect, recognition and value place on the work EC educators do impacting resources, supports and demands. Refers to respect from leaders, the general public, families and colleagues.	It's not fair, but you know, but there's nothing we can do about it either. You know, I mean, until they see the value of teachers more than I don't think anything's gonna change, you know, anytime soon. Dana (public program) We just got like a little 5% raise and I'm like, for being here for 32 years… I just don't feel appreciated. Leigh (public program)

Note. This table shows general themes, theme definitions and examples of text excerpts coded in each category.

Question One Part Two: Pandemic-Related Impacts on Work and Resources

Quantitative Results

Most educators reported that the pandemic had impacted their relationships with children a little or moderately (43.4 percent for private, 61.6 percent for public and 77.7 percent of Head Start teachers). Smaller percentages of educators across program types (11.3 percent of educators in private and Head Start programs and 15.4 percent of educators from public programs) reported that the pandemic impacted their relationships a lot or a great deal. Responses differed by sector and educators from private programs perceived the pandemic as having less of an impact on their interactions with children than those from public or Head Start programs (45.3 percent of educators from private programs compared to 23.1 percent from public and 11.1 percent from

Head Start programs reported that the pandemic had no impact on their relationships with children).

Qualitative Results: "Yeah, maybe- maybe if I'd seen the chart before COVID, possibly."

Qualitative results were aligned with these mixed findings. While early educators reported (a) shifts in their responsibilities and (b) added demands caused by the pandemic, they continued to (c) see the same factors as influencing the resources available to them, children and families, with some participants reporting that (d) pandemic related changes and relief funding actually alleviated some of the pressure they experienced. Despite novel challenges, educator's continued to see their role as caring for children and their families and "doing the best I can" with limited resources. Educators worked around parent's schedules to facilitate engagement, sent materials home and problem solved to meet child and family needs in creative ways. COVID-related challenges that educators reported included disruptions in staffing and closures due to illness or lack of coverage and increased responsibilities as they adjusted to virtual or hybrid formats and safety protocols.

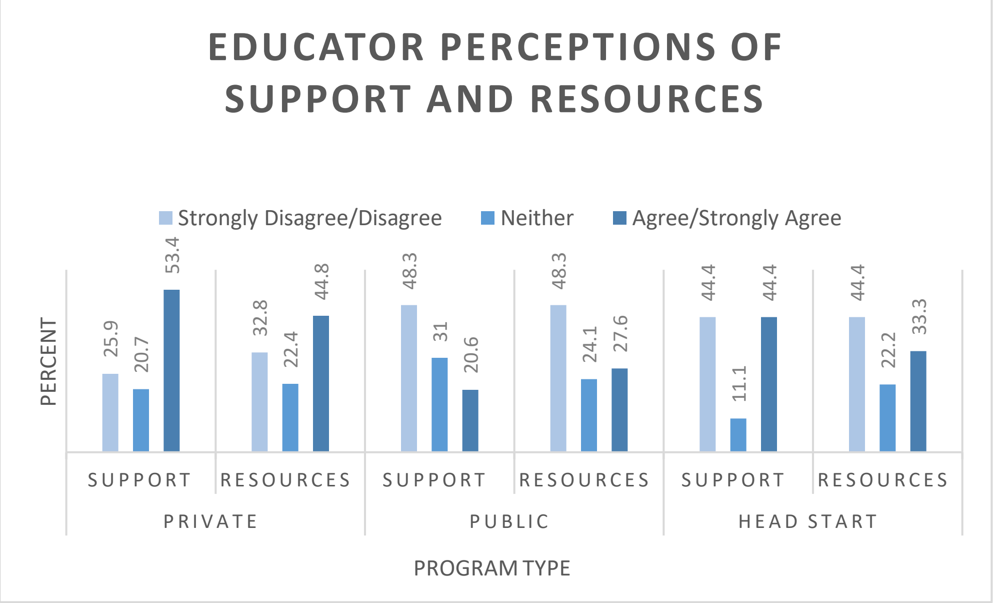
Many educator's pointed out that although the pandemic may have exacerbated pre-existing issues, they had been working with limited resources to meet high needs before the pandemic. Educators across program types reported increases in families' needs for basic resources as well as mental health, behavioral and social-emotional challenges, but noted that these issues had been present before the pandemic. An educator from a public program said "I mean, I think it's the same as before, but we get different kids every year. So, every year, you have different challenges." Participants also pointed to the fact that increased resources and supports, either those intended to mitigate pandemic-related demands, or center closures and consequences of decreased enrollment (e.g., smaller group sizes, days without children to clean and plan, time off) provided them with relief. Increased awareness of mental health and the importance of childcare as well as COVID-relief funding to offset tuition and pay for supplies were also positive aspects of pandemic-related relief efforts.

Question Two Part One: Educator Experiences Navigating Demands and Resources

Quantitative Results

Part one of our second research question asked how early educators experienced meeting professional demands with the resources available to them. Figure 1 presents descriptive statistics of educator's perceptions of support and resource availability within their programs. Across program types, at least 25 percent of educators indicated they do not have access to the resources and/or supports that they need to support children and families. Interestingly, higher percentages of educators from public and Head Start Programs felt that they lacked resources and support, disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statements "I have the resources I need" and "I have the supports I need" more frequently than educators in private programs.

Figure 1
Educator Reports of Within Program Support and Resources



Note. This figure depicts the percentages of educators from public, private and Head Start

Programs and the extent of their agreement with the statements, “I have the Resources I Need,” and “I have the supports I need.”

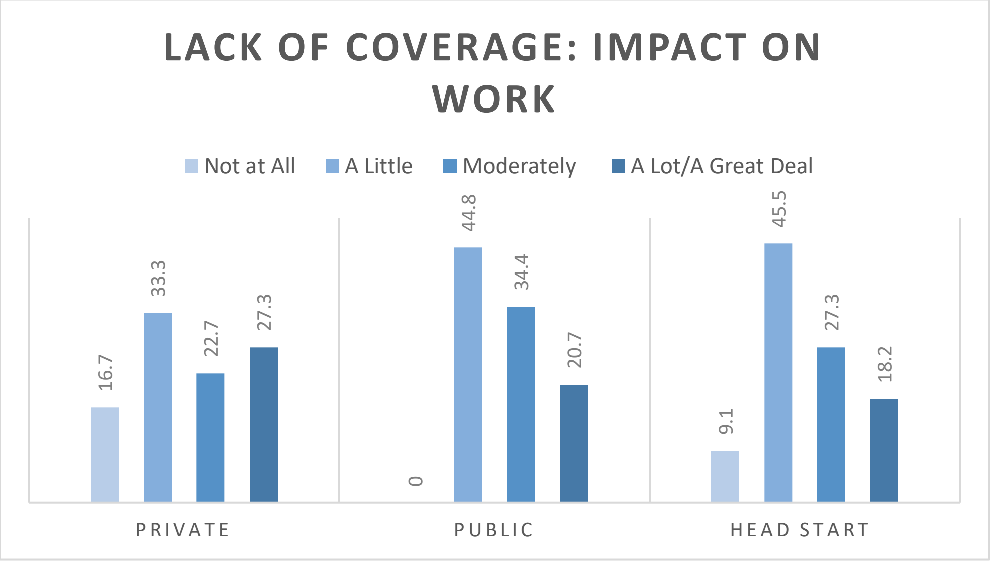
Consistent with previous data collected on pandemic-related impacts of turnover on the early childhood education profession, at least one third of educators across program types reported that turnover was an issue in their program (Bassok et al., 2021c; Bassok et al., 2021d). However, reported rates were lower within public programs (34.5 percent) and highest (63.6 percent) in Head Start programs. Despite differing levels of concern about turnover, lack of coverage was a frequent issue for educators regardless of program type (between 34.8 and 45.5 percent of respondents indicated that they have issues with coverage always or most of the time in their program).

Educators reported that this this lack of staffing and coverage had implications for their interactions with children and their ability to complete their work (see Figures 2 and 3). Educators from public programs were more likely to feel that a lack of coverage impacted their interactions with children and their work than educators from private programs (50 percent of educators from public programs felt that lack of coverage impacted their interactions with children moderately to a great deal in comparison to 27.3 percent of Head Start teachers and 32.1 percent of educators from private programs). Educators across program types were more likely to indicate that lack of coverage impacted their work than their direct interactions with children.

When asked to indicate who in their program supports them to complete job demands, educators from public and private settings most frequently reported their colleagues (84.8 percent from public programs, 62.9 percent from private programs and 75 percent from Head Start programs). As presented in Figure 3 below, there was variability in whether educators perceive leadership as a source of support, with higher rates of educators from public programs endorsing this versus private programs and Head Start Programs. Compared to other programs, educators from public programs were more likely to report that a mental health professional provides support to them.

Figure 2

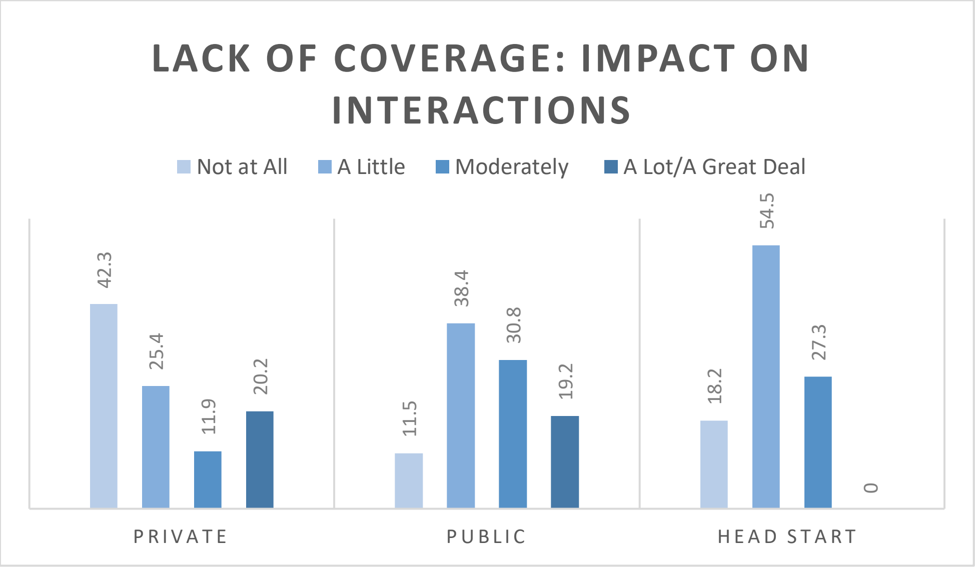
Educator Reports Lack of Coverage Impact on Work



Note. This figure depicts educators from public, private and Head Start Programs perceptions of the extent to which lack of coverage impacts their work.

Figure 3

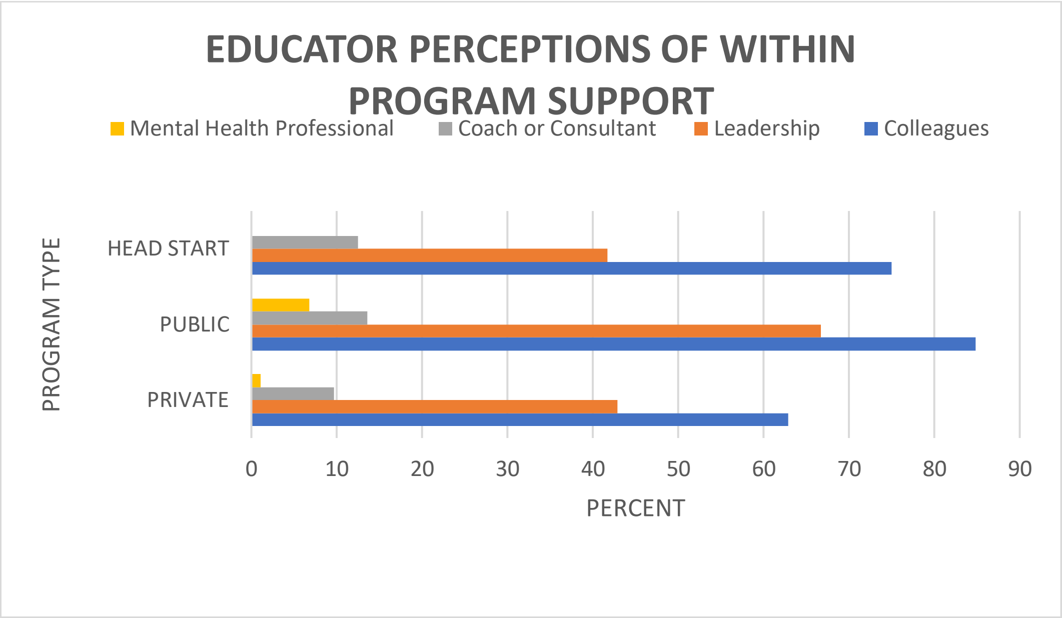
Educator Reports Lack of Coverage Impact on Interaction



Note. This figure depicts educators from public, private and Head Start Programs perceptions of the extent to which lack of coverage impacts their interactions.

Figure 4

Educator Reports of Within Program Support



Note. This figure depicts the percentages of educators from public, private and Head Start programs who report that mental health professionals, coaches or consultants, leadership and/or colleageus support them in the workplace. Leaders did not repond to this question.

Qualitative Results: "You just have to make it work because you want to…as crazy as that sounds"

Despite their perception that the flow of resources was largely outside of their control (e.g., leadership, awareness of ECE), educators from all programs reported using a variety of strategies to navigate the imbalance between the demands of their work and the resources available to them. The primary themes that these strategies fell into were (a) advocating for resource access, (b) negotiating/compromising to decrease demands and/or conserve resources, (c) using the self as a resource and (d) relying on a community of support within their program that they drew from and contributed to. See Table 4 for a description of themes and examples.

Advocacy and Negotiation. Early educators from public programs more frequently reported that they had agency in the process of accessing resources and reported using advocating or directly asking for a resource or support as a successful strategy more often than teachers from private programs. Educators described themselves as advocates for themselves, colleagues, children and families, and reported that they often needed to request access or apply pressure to attain needed supports and resources. Participants also described their attempts to negotiate or shift the balance between job-related demands and resources. For example, educators described only accessing resources when necessary or after other options had been exhausted. They also shared that they prioritized, multi-tasked and set boundaries around work-related demands in response to resource and support constraints. They did this with varying degrees of success, for example, Lee, a special education teacher in a public program said:

> I had a bumpy road when I started in the sense that my focus was, my mentality was, I was like focus on the kids don't worry about the paperwork and then I wasn't meeting deadlines…I had to back up and learn that the deadlines were just as important as the kids even though in the real world they're not.

Consistent with other research on educator's use of time, participants also described needing to "be flexible," and "multitask" to complete responsibilities such as documentation, planning and setting up for activities while directly providing care for children when they lacked time, coverage or other resources (Grisham-Brown, J., & Pretti-Frontczak, 2003; Harrison et al., 2019). Educators also reported a give and take of prioritizing or "letting things go," for example skipping outside time or not completing a planned lesson or activity due to lack of resources or coverage. Leigh, an educator from a public program described this saying, "and you can't stress about it. It's like, you know, you have this great lesson and you're finding out you're by yourself. It's like, well, if I don't get to it, I don't get to it."

Self as Resource and Part of a Community. Using the "self as a resource," was the most commonly reported strategy for completing job-related demands in the absence of resources, specifically non-contact time or lack of staffing. Lacking planning time and coverage was commonly reported as a challenge by participants and typically resulted in unpaid labor (e.g., working through breaks, coming into work early and leaving late, completing work at home, coming in to work on weekends). Ariel stated "But I mean, I don't know that I ever did lesson planning during nap time, when I was actually on the clock, I did all of it at home." Working for these additional hours outside of work was normalized to the point where several educators joked that they "wouldn't know what to do," or would need "a new hobby" if they had free time. Participants felt that this extra uncompensated labor was an unspoken expectation, as one educator said:

> And it was just, well, if you can't get it done during the 40 hours that I pay you then you're gonna have to do it. It was like it was my fault for not being a good enough teacher to get all the cleaning done. Brittney (Head Start program)

Leigh, from a public program echoed this saying, "they expect you to, you know, they don't say you have to, but I think there's that that understanding, you know, that expectation." Other educators reported purchasing materials and food for the classroom with their own money, coming into school on the weekends to set up their classroom, working through or during breaks and caring for children during lunch. Sarah, an educator from a private program described this, saying "nine times out of ten I had a kid with me because during that time, that kid would…like that nobody else wanted to deal with it, so that job would be with me."

Participants also indicated that they rely on program or school staff and colleagues to step in and provide assistance (beyond their typical professional responsibilities), through informal coverage arrangements, sharing materials and lesson plans, on the job training, mentorship and emotional support. When educators did not have enough coverage to take breaks or leave work for medical appointments, staff and colleagues would take children into their office or classroom and/or send staff from their classroom. Lee, (special education public program) stated “so we, we just kind of make it work…we help each other out.” These networks of support gave early educators relief and partially filled a gap in the absence of formal resources and supports.

Other pre-k teachers, with their shared understanding of the needs of young children and ECE were especially important for participants from public programs as they provided validation, emotional support and opportunities for collaboration in the context of mutually respectful relationships. Leigh explained, “and it's been like that for maybe, gosh, I used to be the only pre-K there so I'm kind of glad that I'm not the only one anymore. I like it better, because we can give ideas to each other.” Early educators interviewed provided understanding, recognition and emotional support to one another, “we genuinely want to support each other. It's not like, oh, this isn't my job, or this is part of my job. It's yeah, we're here to support.” This included celebrating successes and making small gestures to recognize, affirm and encourage one another. For example Billie shared, “I like to know, what people like, like, just me personally so I can, make them feel supported leaving a little something [for them].”

Table 4
Qualitative Themes: Early Childhood Educator Descriptions of Navigating Demands and Resources

Themes	Definition	Examples
Advocate	Strategies educators use to access resources and supports. Includes directly asking for, requesting, advocating for and demanding resources and support for themselves, families and children.	We fought really hard just to get library [time for class to go to library which gives teachers planning period]. Leigh (public program) I said, hey, I don't want to talk like this to administration, but you told me to keep you out of jail. This is kind of thing you go to jail for it's in their IEP, they have to have that assistant, that assistant has to be in her classroom. Lee (public special education program)

Negotiate	Strategies educators use to either limit demands and/or set boundaries, attempt to remove, limit and prioritize job demands and responsibilities. This theme includes being flexible, multitasking and creatively problem solving to cope with resource limitations. Also refers to conservation of resources (e.g., give and take), being strategic about requests for resources and support, and only asking for resources support after trying to solve the problem independently.	And you can't stress about it. It's like, you know, you have this great lesson and you're finding out, you're by yourself. It's like, well, if I don't get to it, I don't get to it. Leigh (public school program) And I said, you know, I have a student having lots of meltdowns. I've done everything I can think of. I'm kind of at a place where I need some help. Lee (public special education program) Yeah, I agree. I, my favorite description of a crazy multitasking part of my day is I was in the classroom by myself with the nine two year-olds and we would have music and movement and then a bathroom break. Ariel (private program)
Self as Resource	Educators putting in extra unpaid labor, time and energy to get their work done/fulfill their responsibilities. This theme captures educators completing work at home/outside of working hours coming in early and staying late at work, missing lunch or breaks, and spending their own money on classroom supplies.	Oh, my, you know, I come in and cook dinner, get it on the table. And then what I do, I go straight over there and open up that computer and start my, you know, schoolwork again, that was my life, you know, has been for 31 years. That's what I do. And yes, yes. And no other job do you have to, you know, bring all that home. Dana (public program) But then if I have a toddler over here that we're putting down, and they're crying, because they they're not ready for naptime. But as you know, it's quiet hours. So you're smoothing them patting them trying to get them down, the baby wakes up. So there's really no time during nap time to get any of this done, because you're still feeding and getting everyone together. And you can't really sit on your laptop and do it and let your co teacher do it all because then you're kind of getting out of ratio at that point, especially in the younger classroom…so yeah you do it at home. Brittney (Early Head Start program)
Part of a Community	Refers to relying on others and being part of a larger community and a team/community member. Educators are both supported by and offer support to colleagues to meet job demands in the absence of resources. They step in to help others with coverage and provide emotional support and mentorship (beyond their own job-related responsibilities) and also receive these supports from colleagues and program staff.	So I was by myself…and so, one of the other assistants from the other class would come up and make sure I got bathroom breaks if I needed help, you know, so we really work together as a team all of us together. Leigh (public program) I used to train people. And then they would put them in whatever room they were in. So, my room was a merry go round, because I was, you know, I would train somebody and have them for a couple months, and then they would put them where they need them. Ariel (private program)

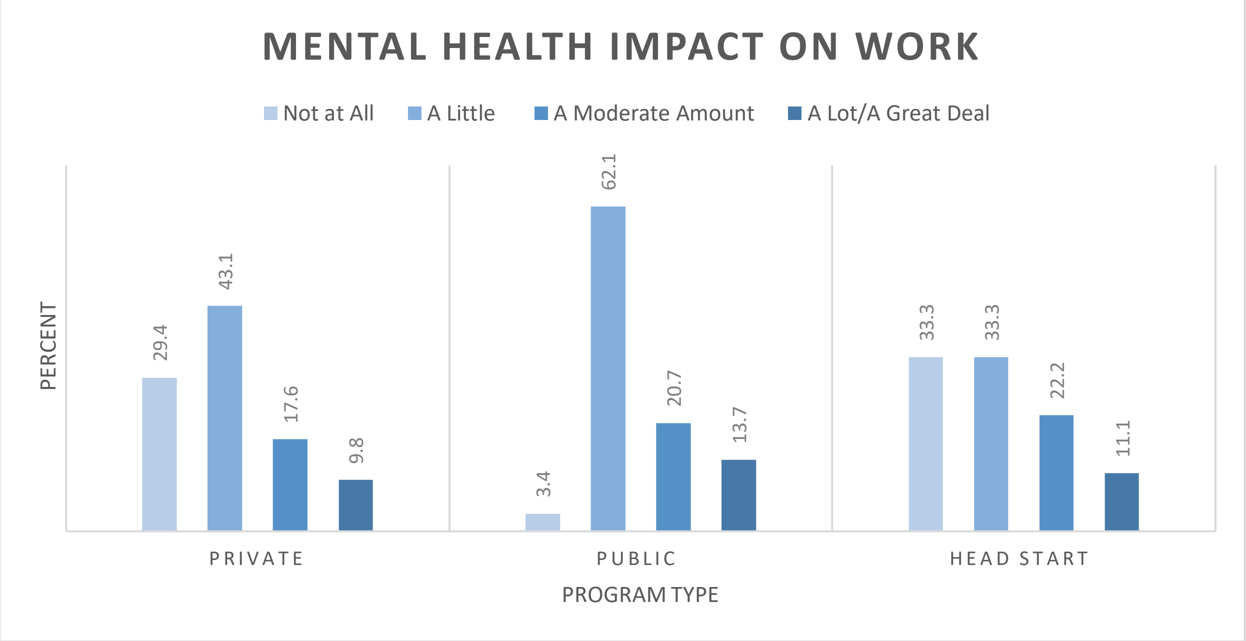
Note. This table shows general themes, theme definitions and examples of text excerpts coded in each category.

Question Two Part Two: Mental Health and Well-Being in Relation to Work

Quantitative Results

Part two of the second research question asked about implications of operating within the tensions of these limited resources and high demands on early educator's mental health, well-being and work. Early educators across program types reported experiencing stress and anxiety symptoms. When reporting on symptoms they had experienced during the previous week, educators endorsed experiencing: feeling overwhelmed (43.9 percent), headaches (28.5 percent), sleep difficulties (32.8 percent), difficulty focusing (26.7 percent), muscle tension (26.7 percent), feeling sad (12.9 percent) and breathing difficulties (5.2 percent). Participants on average endorsed about two out of seven symptoms and responses were fairly consistent across providers from different settings (private M = 1.76, public M = 2.39, Head Start M= 2.00). Educator perceptions of the impact of stress on their work is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5
Educator Reports of the Impact of their Stress and Mental Health on their Work



Note. This figure depicts educators from public, private and Head Start Programs perceptions of the extent to which stress and mental health impacts their work.

Qualitative Results: "Making it work" versus "Somethings gotta give"

Qualitative themes provide further explanation and context for these educator reports, as well as variability in educator's experiences of stress-related impacts on their work. Table 5 shows themes and examples. As educators spoke about the ways they thought about and met their work demands, two themes emerged related to their motivation and willingness to go "above and beyond" and "make things work" regardless of whether they were being compensated for their work. These were educator's perceptions of their work as being (a) more than a job, and (b) the rewarding aspects and joy they experienced as part of their work.

Educators described seeing many of their responsibilities as meaningful contributions to caregiving and their work as a “passion” or “calling.” They described the joy and meaning they found in their work as a motivating factor. As Brittney, the Head Start teacher stated, “I don't think I would ever leave work satisfied that I did everything…I think as an educator, we're always looking at ways to better ourselves and to make the classroom the best that it can be.”

Participants also described the tension between trying to “make it work,” for children and families, the high demands of their work and resource constraints. Leigh, from a public program stated, “yeah. I'm like, I don't mind doing it a little bit, but, you know, I just feel pressured sometimes to where, I can't do this because I have to have to get these lesson plans done.” Early educators referenced the toll that the high demands of their job and limited access to resources was creating for them and their colleagues both indirectly and directly discussing their mental health and well-being, indicating that the current state of the field was not sustainable. The (c) “somethings gotta give” theme captures this tension and participant’s statements that they and their peers are experiencing “exhaustion,” and “burnout.” Early educators mentioned experiencing stress related to a variety of professional (e.g., children’s behavior, high needs, competing or incompatible demands, conflict with leadership and colleagues) and personal factors (e.g., health concerns, illness or death of a family member, mental health issue of a family member, financial issues, a child with special needs). They consistently described stress as resulting from an imbalance between these demands and the resources available to them (e.g., lack of planning time, coverage issues, lack of access to training and mental health support).

Despite reporting that they experienced this tension, participants indicated that they tried not to let it impact their professional engagement by using a variety of personal coping strategies, seeking formal mental health and psychiatric treatment and focusing on the importance and meaning of their work. However, high levels of stress related to negative program climate, conflict and incompatible philosophies with colleagues and leadership resulted in two cases of turnover in private programs, one educator, Ariel leaving her program and another, Sarah leaving the field entirely. Additionally, three out of eight participants shared experiences of becoming overwhelmed and breaking down while at work. While it was rare for educators to make explicit connections between their mental health and interactions with the children in their care, one participant from a private program said that she had observed other teachers at the program she had left taking their stress "out on the kids," and another teacher from a public program described becoming overwhelmed and bringing a child to the principal's office, "I said I am done with him, and I can't believe I actually said that. But I think it was just not having one minute to myself during the day."

Table 5

Qualitative Themes: Early Childhood Educator Understanding of their own Mental Health and well-being in Relation to Their Work

Themes	Definition	Examples
More than a Job	Perceptions that early educators have around their identity, role and purpose related to their profession. Includes educators referring to their work as "more than a job," and/or a calling or passion. Also includes educators connecting the meaning and importance they find in their work to their willingness to work without compensation.	So I love it. I love this age group. I feel like over the years I've made a huge difference in a lot of parents lives. Our pre K program is for at risk children so it can be very challenging. And so I feel like I've made a huge difference. So that's what's kept me going. Dana (public program) I enjoy what I do, I think it's you know, a great environment, I love to be able to reach children, you know, this age at a time that they're just at a such an influential age, and now trying to build that teacher child relationship and with their families. Billie (public program) Things being off…It's not just you leave and it's over and you don't think about it anymore, I don't know, I carry it with me. Brittney (Early Head Start)
Joy and Rewards	Educator's descriptions of the rewarding aspects of their work including moments of joy and fulfillment they experience in their interactions with children, families and colleagues.	Or even just as the age they are, you know, like when they're excited, they're shaking or when they're, like sad or mad, you see that too, but I don't know, just that they kind of wear their heart on their sleeve. And you know, everything that's going on. That is just such like a fun age to work with. Chloe (private program) Just being with the kids to be honest [is rewarding]. So with that, like interacting with them. Sarah (private program)

Somethings Gotta Give	Educator perceptions of an imbalance between their role/responsibilities, job demands and time/resources/support available to complete them. Can be a reference to the lack of sustainability of the situation and/or direct negative impacts of the balance on their health, mental health, well-being and work.	And it is stressful, like you can't do your job and you can't do the things you most love and the most rewarding things. So …yeah. creates that cycle of like, things getting worse, almost and more stressful, because that builds up… Yeah, that survival mode of putting out fires is just very stressful…and I just I did tell our director that I felt like something needed to give a little because we can't keep doing this. I mean, it was exhausting. Dana (public program) But it's definitely burning out a lot of teachers. Ariel (private program)

Note. This table shows general themes, theme definitions and examples of text excerpts coded in each category.

Research Question Three: Proposed Solutions

Quantitative Results

For the third research question, we asked educators about desired supports and solutions to the issues they were experiencing. Early educators selected multiple options from a list when asked what supports and resources would help them to engage in their work. They most frequently selected (a) additional planning time (44.8 percent), (b) training and professional development related to mental health in young children (40.5 percent), (c) smaller teacher-child ratios/more staff (37.9 percent), (d) referrals and intervention for individual children (32.8 percent), and (e) resources to help families meet basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, housing, internet) (31.9 percent of respondents).

There was some variation in desired supports based on program type. While additional planning time and training related to mental health in young children were consistent needs for educators across program types, educators from private and public programs also reported wanting more staff and as resources for families to meet their basic needs more frequently than educators from Head Start Programs. Head Start teachers prioritized access to training and professional development on trauma informed care and understanding behavior more than educators from other program types. Educators from Head Start and public programs were more likely to indicate that additional time to collaborate with colleagues and other professionals was a desired support. Related, on a related separate survey item, 71.9 percent of educators from public and 66.7 percent from Head Start programs reported that they would like more opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, while 50 percent of educators from private programs reported this. Overall, planning time was the support most consistently desired by survey respondents, followed by mental health and behavioral supports and training in general.

Qualitative Results: "But I think that if the public sort of look into a classroom, it would be eye opening"

When early educators were asked what solutions they believed would support their own, children's and families' well-being while resolving issues in the field of ECE, their responses echoed and extended quantitative findings. These solutions fell into three categories: (a) systemic changes, including increasing awareness of ECE and child development, coordinating across systems that serve children under five, and increasing the availability of and access to resources and services, (b) structural investments to improve working conditions and provide support for the ECE workforce, children and families in school settings, and (c) aligned professional development and tools. Table 6 provides a summary of themes with examples. These solutions build on strengths and seek to improve existing supports and resources that participants reported are available to them. Solutions centered on systemic factors participants perceived as barriers to accessing resources (e.g., lack of awareness regarding ECE, lack of recognition for child care work, lack of coordination between systems, family engagement difficulties), resource limitations (e.g., turnover, staff shortages, lack of time, lack of training or inexperience of providers) and specific challenges that impact their work and the children in their care (e.g., high family and community needs, mental health challenges of children and families).

Systemic Changes: Increasing Awareness, Coordinating Across Systems, and Support for Children and Families. Increasing awareness of ECE and child development was consistently reported by educator's as a foundation for working towards solutions in the field. Participants suggested increasing awareness of leaders, the general public and families by sharing information via technology, social media and publicly posted QR codes within child care programs and other settings that families with young children frequent. Brittney (Early Head Start) shared:

> Yeah, I was really glad that I saw a commercial pop up from Zero to Three and actually talked about the importance of the first three years of a child's life, literally popped up, 90 percent of the brain is developed by the age of three. And I'm like, I'm so glad there's a commercial out about this right now, for people who are sitting at home watching it. I feel like, we need to have more of that trying to reach out to parents or family members or anything like that, to get knowledge out.

Related, participants also indicated the importance of coordinating across systems that serve young children and their families to leverage existing resources and provide opportunities for collaboration across systems. This included integrating behavioral, mental health and intervention services for children and families in ECE settings to make them more accessible, increasing availability of providers that serve young children in the community, increased communication between professionals and providing education and programs for families to support home-school alignment. Providers across program types also believed that incorporating ECE into the public school system would provide additional resources, and support to providers while affirming the importance of ECE and facilitating the transition to kindergarten. Additionally, resources to meet families' basic needs, provide caregiver education and provide intervention services were seen as complementary to the work educators were doing, and educators believes more community resources would lighten some of the job demands that are currently falling on their shoulders but are beyond their capacity to consistently provide.

Structural Investments: Compensation and Benefits, Non-Contact Time, Staffing, Mental Health and Behavioral Supports. Participants across program types referenced non-contact time, staffing, and compensation, as solutions to many of the daily challenges they experienced. Educators noted that coverage in the classroom and non-contact time allow them to provide one on one support for children, plan activities, and complete other work-related tasks such as documentation, communicating with families and maintaining the classroom environment. Consistent with quantitative results, planning and non-contact time was a priority for participants, as Leigh (public program) stated, "yeah. I mean, you have to plan the whole day, like when they come in, in the morning, they do choices, you plan what things you're going to have on the shelf for them to play." Dana, also from a public program differentiated what planning looked like for her versus educators in other grades:

> Because I mean, in the upper grades, not that they do this all the time, but they do have workbooks they can pull out or they can say here, go do this at your seat. Well, we can't do that everything has to be thought out…and it has to be either something made or manipulatives.

Building on current supports that address the mental health and social-emotional needs of children, as well as support for managing behavior in the classroom were also reported as desired supports by educators. This encompassed programs, services and professionals; for example, Ariel shared, "I would love to have a go-to person to talk about autism, and early signs of anxiety, and how do I handle this with this child." "More early intervention," and "behavior specialists," located within programs were also cited as needed resources. Additional mental health support was reported as a proposed solution across programs, however private programs reported currently having less access to mental health professionals and services in their programs than educators from Head Start and Public Programs. Billie (public program) summarized this saying, "In the public schools, I mean, I feel like we are at a little bit of an advantage, because we do have the bigger umbrella with resources that they've really started to pull in, especially in our county."

Aligned Professional Development and Tools. Solutions more commonly reported by educators from private and Head Start programs than those from public programs included professional development and aligned tools. However these were mentioned with the caveat that accompanying time set aside for taking part in professional development, as well as planning for individualizing and implementing new tools (e.g., curriculum, strategies)was necessary for educators and children to truly benefit. Participants also noted that these tools and trainings should be aligned with their priorities, needs and responsibilities, as well as state, division and program level requirements and standards.

Table 6

Qualitative Themes: Early Childhood Educator Proposed Solutions

Themes	Definition	Examples
Increase Awareness	Sharing information with and increasing awareness of the general public, families and leaders on (a) the importance of early development and (b) ECE, including the responsibilities of EC educators, impacts of early childhood education and factors unique to ECE settings.	That's what they need to see. They need to see the big picture and what we do…I mean, I've been a nurse today, you know, I've done this, I've done that, you know…but like I said, until they walk in our shoes, and for a while, they'll never really truly understand what we do day in and day out. Dana (public program) I agree, spreading the word. Getting it out into the public's eye is super, super important. Ariel (private program)

Coordination and integration	Increased coordination and communication between families, providers and systems that serve young children and families. Includes increasing access by integrating ECE, health, mental health and family support services, making ECE part of public school systems and sharing information about services available.	If everything was just in one place, if childcare and the school were just in one place, or if all the resources are put into one place, I feel like it would be so much easier for a lot of people. Instead of, you got to go over to [town name] for this here, then you got to drive down to [another town name] for this. That's a lot of traveling. Honestly, parents don't even have time for it. Brittney (Early Head Start) Yeah, we've been talking just other pre-K teachers and myself about programs for the parents that actually educate them…and I don't know how you go about it, per se, but you know, a community engagement kind of thing. Chloe (private program)
Community Resources and Support	Increasing the quantity of services and resources in the community that serve children under five and their families (e.g., ECE programs, service providers, community organizations, programs, family education, basic needs).	And I think the incentives of, honestly, the incentives...if the parent is getting something out of it, is how you're going to attract them- oh, you're gonna get the free diapers that you need or you're going to get this gas voucher. Brittney (Early Head Start)
Compensation & Benefits	Adequate compensation that reflects the time and work educators contribute. Benefits such as overtime pay, paid sick days, breaks, vacation time, compensation for time spent on PD and health insurance.	Obviously, a salary raise would be nice, but and then maybe some planning time. You know, that would be you know, so for me… fair pay and planning time. Not bringing my work home every night, you know, and because I'd like some family time. Dana (public program)
Non-Contact Time	Time built into the workday for educators to plan, collaborate with colleagues and complete responsibilities peripheral to direct care and interactions with children.	Now I do wish we can set time away to actually dive deeper into a curriculum. Ariel (private program) Just some planning time. I mean, we have to go out somewhere with these kids all day. And there is absolutely no planning time. That's rest time is when we usually plan and you can't really plan if your assistant is going to lunch that time. Leigh (public program) For my case it is [time] because we've had so many resources given to us, there's so many different websites you can go on to…there's, there's a lot of things to access, but there's just not enough time in the day to access it. Brittney (Early Head Start)
Additional Staff	Additional support staff, including substitutes, assistant teachers and paraprofessionals to ensure adequate coverage, opportunities for breaks or absences. Includes references to smaller class sizes and smaller teacher-child ratios which require staffing.	But then also, sometimes just having somebody there to kind of like, have your back and help you take care of the situation without like, like, I don't know, losing your mind, for lack of a better word. Sometimes, if you're in the room, by yourself for a while, you're the only adult in there just to like, see another adult come in the door is just like can make world of difference. Chloe (private program) In an ideal world? I wish our classes did go down… smaller class sizes. Dana (public program)
Mental Health & Behavioral Support	Availability and timely access to professionals, programs, services, and intervention that directly support children's social-emotional development and mental health and/or provide support for educator's to manage behavioral of mental health challenges within ECE programs.	But I feel this day and age, there's so many people...autism is growing, ADHD has increased significantly. There's so many other things going on right now, with mental health being one of our primarily resources we need to focus on. Brittney (Early Head Start)
Professional Development & Training	Continued education and training opportunities for educators to develop their skills and practice that are accessible and can be directly applied. includes program level training such as onboarding, credentialing and continued education programs and self-sought training and continued learning.	And I don't know how to, I don't know, besides getting them to do the right trainings… because I love to learn, and because I think it just makes me better at my job, I want other people to be better at their jobs, too. Ariel (private program)
Aligned Tools	Professional tools (curriculum, information gathering, screening, observation, assessment, communication), development of or changes to existing tools that are aligned with standards, regulations, and educator's priorities that save time, and improve practice.	I totally agree. I think there should be some sort of form...is there any, you know, health, you know, diet, things are just finding out more about the child before they're in our class. Chloe (private program)

Note. This table shows general themes, theme definitions and examples of text excerpts coded in each category.

Discussion

As we enter the fourth year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the childcare sector continues to struggle with turnover, program closures and a lack of resources and supports for early educators (Farewell et al., 2023; Partee et al., 2023). Despite these challenges, a dedicated workforce of ECE professionals remains, ready to pick up the pieces and move forward. This mixed methods case study explored how best to support and advocate with these professionals by capturing their perceptions of factors related to the resources and supports available to them, their experiences navigating the tension between the demands of their work and these resources and their proposed solutions to the challenges they and families experience. Our findings point to the importance of program, school division, state and federal leaders, who educators perceive as in control of distributing resources at the program level and beyond. Importantly, leader’s decision-making and the respect and recognition early educators receive is shaped by awareness (or lack of awareness) of the roles and responsibilities of EC educators, child development and ECE in general. Despite these outside forces shaping allocation of resources, participants also saw themselves as having agency and reported using a combination of strategies to access resources, set priorities and meet the demands of their work. They redefined definitions of supports and resources and described being part of interconnected communities where they both received and provided informal support to colleagues, the children in their care and families.

Importantly, for many providers, unpaid labor was normalized as part of the job and was an (often unspoken) expectation. These findings are consistent with data from the U.S. Department of labor indicating that typical problems in the childcare field include hours of work not being reported, providers working during breaks, providers staying late/coming in to work early, providers paying for their own classroom materials and lack of overtime pay (U.S.

Department of Labor, 2009). These issues have been present in the field for decades. In past surveys (Whitebook et al., 1982; 2014) 72 percent of staff reported working unpaid hours, 58 percent over 30 extra minutes daily. More recent reports by early educators indicate that not much has changed; a majority of early educators stated that they work extra hours each week and are not able to take assigned breaks despite being an hourly minimum wage (Whitebook et al., 2018). Consistent with prior research, educator's dedication to their work and to the children and families they served was a motivating factor and validation for completing these hours of unpaid labor (Herman et al., 2023; Leana et al., 2009). While educator's passion for their work is associated with some positive outcomes (early educators who experience their work as a calling, and have a deep commitment to their work report being more engaged and less likely to leave the profession), it also creates situations in which early educators and others in caring professions- fields dominated by women- are more vulnerable to financial exploitation (Herman et al., 2023; Leana et al., 2009).

Consistent with prior research conducted in the pandemic context using the JDR model, early educator's also described tension between the demands of their work and the lack of resources available, resulting in stress, fatigue and burnout (Farewell et al., 2022; Granziera et al., 2021; Quinn et al. 2022). Interestingly educators in private programs reported feeling that they had adequate resources and supports at higher rates than educators in public programs. This could be related to lower levels of need within these programs and/or a lack of awareness of resources and supports that would benefit them compared to early educators in public schools who are directly observe the resources educators in other grades receive and the resources and supports available within the larger school system.

Despite efforts to buffer the effects of these factors, educators across program types felt that they were stretched to the breaking point and their work and interactions with children were impacted. In several cases, educators contemplated or ended up leaving their program due to high demands and a lack of support and resources in the workplace. Cases where program climate was negative and colleagues and leadership interfered with educator's ability to work in ways that were aligned with their values were especially stressful, and associated with turnover. This is consistent with the research base that has established high rates of turnover in the field as well as factors associated with intentions to leave a program or the ECE field (e.g., emotional exhaustion, well-being, work conditions, benefits and compensation) (Grant et al., 2019; Hur et al., 2023). The solutions that early educators proposed for resolving issues in the field reflect the systemic nature of the challenges they experience in ECE and within their communities. They also focus on leveraging internal capacity and the strengths within the ECE workforce.

Leveraging the Current Moment for Change

While systemic issues in the field of ECE are longstanding, the pandemic has resulted in significant shifts in public perception and increased attention; news stories covering the childcare industry increased 90 percent from March of 2019 to March of 2020 (First Five Years Fund, 2022). Policies that increase access to high quality, affordable childcare have bipartisan support; in a national poll of voters, 72 percent indicated that they approve of investments in ECE with 84 percent saying it is an essential service and 79 percent indicating that the pandemic made them realize the importance of strengthening the child care system (First Five Years Fund, 2022). Additionally, as the early educators that participated in this study indicated, pandemic relief funding was instrumental in purchasing materials and providing families with access to programs. These funds have also been used to increase early educator compensation and benefits (typically through delivery of one-time bonuses), provide support for educator mental health, and professional development, with promising outcomes related to increased educator retention and well-being (Bassok et al., 2022; National Association of State Boards of Education, 2022).

Systemic Solutions to Promote Collective Well-being and Internal Capacity

The proposed solutions and desired supports reported by educators in the current study map onto the literature base and are aligned with calls from professional organizations and ECE advocates to prioritize improving work conditions and compensation for providers prior to and during the pandemic (NAEYC, 2020a; Shonkoff & Philips, 2000). First and foremost early educators should be paid a living wage and receive benefits such as healthcare and paid sick days (McLean et al., 2019; Whitebook et al., 2014). Currently the average wage for child care workers in the United States is $13.51 per hour and only 20.7 percent of providers have employer sponsored healthcare coverage; these inequities are directly related to the gendered nature of care work and marginalized identities of providers (Austin et al., 2019;). Further, financial instability and lack of benefits (e.g., sick days) put provider's safety and well-being at risk throughout the pandemic and directly resulted in decision making of many providers to leave the field (Bassok et al., 2021c). A "compensation first" approach, including paid time and incentives for completing continuing education, has been advocated for stabilizing the workforce, retaining qualified educators and attracting new providers to the field (Bassok et al., 2021b; McLean et al., 2019; Whitebook & McLean, 2017). Further, compensation and work-time benefits address a myriad of barriers to quality care provision (e.g., coverage, planning time, teacher mental health). Policies that ensure the sustainability of this funding and earmark a portion of it for early educator compensation and benefits would support the workforce and aid in recruitment and retention efforts. Further, funding can be made contingent on programs providing equitable pay for educators and state quality rating and improvement systems should include educator compensation and work conditions in their frameworks (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008; Whitebook et al., 2020).

Second (and related to compensation, retention and recruitment efforts), structural factors such as small class sizes and teacher-child ratios, breaks and time to plan are necessary and related to understanding of, respect and recognition for early educator's work. Educators reported that the most commonly used strategy for completing their job demands without adequate resources was use of personal time or unpaid labor. Understandably, planning time was the most commonly reported proposed solution, a finding that was aligned across methods. Planning time is often included in suggestions for educator supports and seen as necessary for engaging in developmentally appropriate practices related to program quality (King et al., 2016; Kwon et al., 2022; Tout et al., 2010). However, empirical research on planning time available to early educators and related outcomes is limited. The literature available points to the essential nature of this time and the multiple responsibilities educators complete during it (e.g., assessments, planning, creating materials for lessons and activities, communication with parents, communicating and collaborating with colleagues and/or leadership, documentation, cleaning, organizing and maintaining the environment) (Dever & Lash, 2013; Grisham-Brown & Petti-Fronzac, 2003; Hamel, 2021). Studies also consistently find that there is a lack of planning time available to early educators across program types (Hamel, 2021; Kwon et al., 2022; Rose & Whitty, 2010). Mixed methods research from Finland found that compensated time for planning, assessment and professional development positively impacted educator well-being and sense of professional identity; provider access to this time was also associated with more effective curriculum implementation (Heikka & Huiala, 2013; Heikka et al., 2021; 2022). Additional descriptive information and research on planning time in ECE is needed (Hamel, 2021). While research has examined how planning time is used, associations between planning time and outcomes for early educators, as well as methods for incorporating it should be explored. Educator’s agency and control over how they spend this time, as well as supports for early career educators to learn how best to use this time are promising avenues for future research. Planning time leverages and builds on capacities within programs and provides opportunities for early educator’s to reflect on and develop their practice in ways that are meaningful to them and the children and communities they serve (Heikka et al., 2021; 2022).

Additionally, participants reported that community and within program supports and resources to meet the “high needs,” of children and families would alleviate some of the demands currently placed on them (Patrick et al., 2020). This included coordination across systems and access to mental health professionals (e.g., early childhood mental health consultants, behavior specialists) and professional development related to mental health and behavior management, services and interventions that are associated with increased educator confidence and abilities to respond to their own and children’s mental health needs (Ritblatt et al., 2017; Stein et al., 2022). Without these foundational systemic supports in place and coordination across the multiple systems that serve children and families, educators may not have the capacity to engage with or be receptive to novel interventions, additional professional development, use of evidence-based curricula and tiered social-emotional interventions that have been shown to improve outcomes for both educators and the children they serve (Blewitt et al., 2018; Boyd et al., 2016; Hamre et al., 2017).

A potential policy solution to address compensation and structural issues in the field that was suggested by participants was integrating ECE into public school systems. Participants believed this would increase awareness of ECE and respect for providers, while also unifying the field and providing benefits and compensation to providers. However, as differences between provider experiences and public and private programs revealed, the unique aspects of ECE need to be taken into consideration when programs are incorporated into public schools and systems.

Establishing Awareness and Value of Early Educator's Work

Two of the interrelated driving forces educators reported as being linked to the resources available to them were awareness of child development and ECE and the value, respect and recognition they received for their work. The lack of status and respect afforded to child care professionals is reflected in previous literature that examines how early educators see their status in relation to other teachers (Hargreaves & Hopper, 2006).

Throughout the current study, educators sought to describe the rich, multi-faceted aspects of their job, the intentionality, knowledge and thoughtfulness behind their practice and their dedication to their work. They wanted to affirm that they were providing education and that they were teaching valuable skills that required planning, preparation of materials and expertise. At times educator's descriptions reflected the tensions between the value placed on academic and school readiness skills and focusing on care, play, social-emotional development and meeting children where they are. This tension has also been captured in research on the "intensification" of ECE and its impact on early educator work demands, workload, priorities and stress (Bullough et al., 2014). Another salient example of the tension between "education," and "care" reflected within the larger culture was the assertions of K-12 teachers (in the United States and abroad) during the pandemic that they were educators and not child care providers as they advocated for their own health and safety during the pandemic. This discourse reflected both a lack of understanding and devaluing of care work by framing it as below the status of educators and not part of teaching, while also sending a message about who is entitled to safety, agency and respect in the workplace (Whitebook et al., 2020). As Whitebook (2020) and colleagues assert:

> Why is the ECE workforce expected to shoulder so much of the care and education crisis in this country, with so little concern for their own safety and well-being? It is no coincidence that this expectation falls on early educators, who are poorer, less organized as a workforce, and more likely to be women of color than teachers of older children.

When examined, the connection between care work and gender, race, class, ethnicity and immigration status of providers is closely tied to the acceptance of working conditions and the unsustainable wages paid to childcare providers (Gibbons, 2020).

While changing the public's perceptions of early care and education is not easy work, opportunities for advocacy and education can be effective in shifting perceptions and resource allocation. As several participants suggested, building on existing initiatives and educating the general public around ECE and its value through accessible messaging and connection to resources may help to promote awareness and lead to changes in policy and/or investments. Professional identity is nuanced and research also shows that educators resist narratives that devalue their work and see opportunities for shaping others' perceptions through policy, advocacy, sharing information and interacting with colleagues, families the public (Hargreaves & Hopper, 2006; McGillivray, 2008; Murray, 2013). Similarly participants in the current study described taking on an advocacy role, and often find themselves educating others about their work and young children's development and learning. They reported that they closely work with families to establish relationships, collaborate and educate caregivers. Educators in public programs described themselves as "ambassadors" and felt their presence in elementary schools increased others awareness of ECE and its benefits through interactions and observation in their classrooms and their students success as they transition to kindergarten and beyond.

Public school teachers have benefited from access to avenues for collective bargaining and opportunities to share their perspectives and report on adverse workplace conditions (Whitebook et al., 2017). These coalitions and alliances could help early educators to advocate for compensation parity and recognition (Whitebook & McLean, 2017; Whitebook et al., 2018). Engaging in social justice and advocacy work as well as reflecting on identity and power dynamics with a critical lens can support early educators to better understand and counter factors that contribute to their professional status and working conditions. Additionally, the same protective factors that educators reported in the current study- finding meaning in their work, experiencing moments of joy, focusing on the impact they have on the children and families they serve, continuing to learn and grow professionally and seeking support from the communities they create with their colleagues, can strengthen professional identity (Lightfoot & Frost, 2015). As researchers we can draw attention to the depth, breadth and importance of the work that early educators do while amplifying educator voices and incorporating their perspectives and strengths in our work.

Role of Leadership

Importantly, program leaders can play a strategic role in supporting EC educators in the workplace. Participants across program types viewed leaders as a potential resource and influential in distributing resources. In order to accurately distribute resources leaders need to be aware of child development, the unique needs of young children and ECE practice and pedagogy. Since leaders also often determine demands and expectations for children and teachers, their understanding of early development and learning is essential (Kivunja, 2015).

This is especially important for leadership in public programs and within elementary schools who may be familiar with academic content and school readiness, but have less knowledge of ECE pedagogy and the hands on activities, play and care that support young children's development and learning (Kirby et al., 2021). Early educators expressed frustration regarding a lack of understanding of the depth and complexity of their work and the urgency of challenges they and the children in their care experienced. They saw this as directly influencing whether leaders sent substitutes or aides, provided planning time, supported their engagement with families and connected them and children in their care to mental health support staff and services. Educators who felt that they had the respect and understanding of leadership perceived leaders as taking their concerns and requests for help and resources more seriously. These findings are consistent with other qualitative work that captures the perceptions of early educators working in public school settings; participants saw leadership and administrators inaccurate ideas regarding their role as barriers to their formation of positive professional identity and as rationale for devaluing their work and not providing needed resources and supports (Tukonic & Harwood, 2015).

Leaders with an understanding of the importance of early development, developmentally appropriate practice and ECE can (a) act as advocates and spread awareness of ECE, (b) provide support and feedback to early educators around pedagogy, practice and professional development, (c) share relevant and useful information and resources, (d) support collaboration between professionals and with families, and (e) problem solve when issues arise (Gibbs, 2020; Heikkinen et al., 2023; Kirby et al., 2021). Effective leaders in ECE set positive program climate, provide emotional support and recognition and establish organizational values, priorities and protocols (Grantham-Caston & Dicarlo, 2023; Kirby et al., 2021). Providing consistency and clear expectations for job roles and responsibilities, training and professional development requirements, program onboarding and responses to behavior and mental health concerns of children within programs are especially important considering the fractured nature of the field and inconsistencies in expectations across systems, programs and providers (Kirby et al., 2021).

Similar to early educators, leaders also contend with high job demands, challenges and constraints. They have encountered financial insecurity, shifting roles, increased work demands and high levels of stress and burnout throughout the pandemic, while also employing problem solving and coping strategies to address these challenges (Bassok et al., 2020; Heikkenen et al., 2023; Korhonen et al., 2023; Logan et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2023). In the same way that intervening at the educator level is associated with positive outcomes for multiple children, support and professional development for program leaders regardless of setting type has the potential to positively impact multiple educators that the leader supports as well as the children and families served by the program (Kirby et al., 2021). While research has explored early educator work demands, stress and well-being, additional research on program leader’s roles, responsibilities and support across settings is needed to leverage these important sources of emotional, pedagogical and logistical support (Douglass, 2019; Fonsén et al., 2019).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study design sought to conform to the validity and reliability quality criterion for qualitative and mixed methods research, while accommodating realities of a community-research partnership (Leung, 2015; Levitt et al., 2018; Whittemore et al., 2001). This included triangulation, or corroborating information using multiple sources of information, reflexivity and participant checking which was completed at multiple points during data collection (Creswell, 2013; Levitt et al., 2018; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

However, there were several limitations related to the survey design and data collected via the online survey. Survey items and composites have not been psychometrically validated, as they were generated as part of the needs assessment. Although efforts were made to distribute the survey to a large sample of early educators employed in a variety of programs and to increase response rates (e.g., use of reminders, compensation), response bias likely shaped the sample composition. Respondents may not fully represent the population of EC educators in the region and the sample of educator's from Head Start programs may have been too small to fully represent the viewpoints of this population (Kost & de Rosa, 2018; Menon & Muraleedharan, 2020; Muñoz-Leiva et al., 2010; Revilla & Ochoa, 2017).

Of note, less than 1 percent of educators surveyed were from family day homes, so the views of providers working in these settings may differ from survey results, which primarily capture perspectives of educators working in publicly funded and private center-based programs. Gathering information from educators working in family day homes should be an avenue for future exploration. These providers may experience unique challenges related to providing care without the security, support system or resources available within larger programs, but also may experience benefits or protective factors such as flexibility, freedom and agency in their work (Butler & Modaff, 2008). Additionally, providers with no or limited internet access and those who speak a language other than English are likely underrepresented in our sample (Bethlehem, 2010). Educators experiencing higher levels of stress or time constraints may been less likely to complete the survey or opt to take part in interviews due to time and resource constraints (Bethlehem, 2010; Chang & Krosnick, 2009; Dillman et al., 2009).

A significant limitation of qualitative data collected via interviews was the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the sample of participants. Although participants were from a variety of programs and program auspices and the sample was diverse in terms of age and years of experience, the final group of eight interview participants were all White and female. This is a deficit considering the racial disparities in provider experiences in the field of ECE and during the COVID-19 pandemic, as intersectional identities likely would have influenced participant's experiences and perspectives in important ways (Austin et al., 2019; Lee & Parolin, 2021).

Previous research has established disparities in work conditions, compensation and well-being for EC educators associated with race, ethnicity, and immigration status (Austin et al., 2019). Further, data collected during the pandemic points to differential impacts on early educators of color, who were more likely to experience adverse effects of the pandemic than White educators due to pre-existing structural inequities (Markowitz et al., 2022). Early educators of color were also more likely to be impacted by race based trauma, and other forms of stress and mental health challenges related to experiencing micro-aggressions and systemic racism in their daily lives before and during the pandemic (Liu & Modir, 2020). Conversely, protective factors related to identity, sense of self and participation in communities or support networks that affirm identity, may play a role in shaping care providers experiences and practices. Qualitative research has examined the personal narratives of early educators in relation to their identity and the cultural and systemic contexts that their work takes place in, and this is a should continue to be a priority for research in the field, as intersecting personal and professional identities often overlap and inform one another (Archer, 2022; Chen, 2019; McGillivray, 2008; Poblete Núñez, 2020). Increasing awareness and advocacy through participatory action research also leverages educator strengths, expertise and knowledge while reinforcing professional identity and spreading awareness to others (Adriany et al., 2021; Åkerblom, 2022; Malm, 2004; Staiano, 2018).

Conclusion

Findings from the current mixed methods study shine a light on the essential work that early educators do. Educators showed ingenuity and creativity in the ways they navigated the limited supports and resources available to them. Just as educators most often reported that they and their colleagues compensated for the lack of resources available to them by relying on themselves and one another, it is clear that the ECE workforce and their dedication to their work is the force that binds the field together. While this labor often takes place outside the bounds of work hours, official job responsibilities and is not adequately compensated, early educators resist dominant narratives about the value and nature of their work by creating interconnected communities of care, finding joy and meaning in their work and firmly asserting its importance. Early educator’s dedication to their work is an asset, but simultaneously takes a toll on their mental health, well-being and work engagement as they operate under the tension of a system in which “something has to give.” Participants insisted on increasing awareness and recognition of their roles and, responsibilities, highlighting their nuanced understanding of systemic factors and the context their work occurs in. Perspectives from participants suggest that solutions to challenges in the field require resources, supports and coordination at multiple levels, with an emphasis on addressing systemic and structural issues and creating work conditions that support their ability to fully and meaningfully engage in their work.

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Appendix A

List of Desired Support Items

1. Mental health consultation
2. Classroom coaching
3. Smaller teacher-child ratios
4. More time to collaborate with mental health professionals
5. More time to collaborate with colleagues
6. Additional planning time
7. Increased support from leadership
8. Outside referrals and intervention for individual children
9. Additional training on mental health needs specific to young children
10. Training and resources related to trauma informed care
11. Resources for families to meet basic needs
12. Training on communicating and working with families
13. Training on understanding and interpreting behavior in context
14. In school or program interventions for children
15. Training on culturally responsive care
16. Other (please specify)

Appendix B

Interview Protocol and Follow-up interview Protocol Example

EC Educator, School Staff and Provider Focus Group Protocol

**Items relevant to the current study are highlighted*

Digital consent forms will be completed before participants join the focus group or begin an interview.

Introduction:
Facilitators will briefly introduce themselves, their role and the purpose of data collection and the study. They will remind participants of the information on the consent form regarding confidentiality (and protecting the confidentiality of other participants) and data use as well as use or audio recording devices. They will help participants to choose a pseudonym and encourage them to avoid sharing information that may reveal their child's identity (e.g., child's name, teacher or school name, etc.).

- What have the last two years been like for you?
  - What has it been like for children in your program?
  - For families in your program?
  - What was different about this time and the time before the pandemic?
    - Were some challenges the same?
    - What was new or different?

- Do you feel like other people understand what you do/the extent of your job?
  - What should people know?
  - What do you wish people knew?
  - If it comes up:
    - Benefits and compensation? Are these adequate?
      - Does this impact your work? How you feel about your work?

- How has COVID-19 pandemic impacted the mental-health, social-emotional and/or behavioral needs of your students?
- The resources available to you?
  - *Prompts/pushes:*
    - *Tell me more about that…*
    - *What do you see families experiencing?*
    - *What are you seeing/observing/experiencing?*

- In your opinion what are the most pressing mental health and behavioral needs of children under 5 and their families?
- How are you seeing this in the classroom?
    - *Prompts/pushes:*
        - *What was it like before the Pandemic?*
        - *Has the Pandemic changed things? How?*
        - *What has your response been?*
        - *What behaviors are you seeing?*
            - *Pull for attributions*
            - *How are you responding to them*

- Many teachers reported that they have children in their classrooms who do not qualify for early intervention or special education but who need additional support- most teachers reported several students. Has this been your experience? What is that like?
    - How do you support these students?
    - How does this impact you/your work/ other children's experiences?
    - What would better help you to support these children?
        - In the classroom
        - External resources

- What services or resources do children and families need?
- Do you recommend families seek services?
    - In your opinion what is impacting access?
        - Connection to resources vs availability?
        - What helps? What would be helpful?
    - Have you seen wait time impacting access to services?
        - How has that impacted children and families?

- How have you responded to the needs?
    - *Prompts/pushes:*
        - *How do you support children in the classroom?*
            - *Do you have the resources and support you need to do this?*
            - *What role do relationships play?*
        - *Communication with families*
        - *Communication with other professionals (mental health)*
        - *Communication with colleagues*
        - *Referrals: Do you feel like it is your role to refer families*

      - *Do you feel comfortable/ like you have the knowledge and information?*
      - *Awareness of resources available in the community?*
      - *Frequency, and comfort with talking to parents about mental health and behavioral services*

- What is your role in supporting children's and family's mental health/social-emotional development?
  - *Prompts/pushes:*
    - *Where do you see your responsibility in addressing the mental health needs of children under 5?*
    - *Have your role and responsibilities changed during the pandemic?*
      - *How so?*
      - *What has that been like for you?*
  - *What does this look like in the classroom?*
    - *Examples from survey: difficulty regulating emotions and behaviors, not following directions, defiance, tantrums, not getting along with others, hurting other children*
    - *How do you respond to needs? To behaviors?*
      - *What does it look like when [behavior/tantrum] occurs? Walk me through the process.*
        - *Look for examples of exclusionary practices**

- Does your school/program/institution have the resources you need to address the mental health and behavioral needs of children under 5 and their families?
  - What about in the community?
  - Many teachers reported not knowing about/being familiar with community resources- and said the same about families.
    - Where do you hear about resources?
    - What would be a way to spread the word about resources that are available?
      - If you knew about them would you recommend them? Use them yourself?
  - *Prompts/pushes:*
    - *What is helpful?*
    - *How do you use/make use of the resources available to you?*
    - *What is a barrier or gets in the way?*
    - *What do you need more of?*

        - *What would you have in an ideal world?*
        - *Who makes decisions about how resources are distributed?*

- Do you have the support you need to address the mental health and behavioral needs of children under 5 and their families?
    - Survey: many teachers reported wanting more time to collaborate with colleagues and other professionals.
        - Do you agree or disagree?
        - How would this help?
        - What gets in the way of this?
    - *Prompts/pushes:*
        - *What is helpful?*
        - *What do you need more of?*
        - *Who supports you?*
            - *What role does administration play in supporting you?*
            - *School climate (do school staff collaborate, are people positive, is there provider self-efficacy)?*
            - *In what ways are you supported?*
                - *Ongoing trainings*
                - *Consultation with other professionals*
        - *What would you have in an ideal world?*

- What helps you as you work to meet children's needs?
    - *Prompts/pushes:*
        - *Strengths/personal resources?*
        - *Meaningfulness of work?*
        - *Supports (Who? What?)*

- How are you meeting children and family needs with the resources that are available to you?
    - What resources are available?
    - What support is available?
    - From survey, what helps: leadership, strategies, SEL, communicating with parents, mental health professionals
    - From survey: Many teachers reported not having the resources or support they need to support children's well-being. Has this been your experience?
        - Can you explain?

        - From survey prompts, what is needed: smaller ratios, planning time, referrals, additional mental health training, training on interpreting behaviors
            - Also: resources for parents, more support, training, local resource list, materials, more staff, mental health support, compensation/$, coaching
    - From survey: most teachers reported that they are able to recognize when a child needs addl. Social and emotional support, and that they can id the child's need- do you agree?
        - What gets in the way of meeting the need?
    - *Prompts/pushes:*
        - *What has it been like?*
        - *Where do you get stuck or feel tension?*
        - *Where are things working well?*
        - *What advice would/do you give to other educators in your position?*
- Turnover
    - Has this been an issue in your program?
    - Why do you think some people leave? What makes people stay?
    - Have you thought about leaving? Do you plan to leave?
        - What keeps you doing your work? What would make you leave/stop?
            - Maybe: financial compensation, stress, support, climate?

- What does "support," look like/mean to you? How do you define support for EC educators? What about resources?
    - *Prompts/pushes:*
        - *Definitions of support?*
        - *Types of support?*
        - *How is it delivered?*
        - *How is it best received/form?*
        - *Is there enough? Not enough?*
            - *What factors contribute to the availability of support?*
        - *What support do you have?*
        - *What would you want more/less of?*

- How would you describe your well-being?
    - What about your colleagues?

- How would you describe your mental health?

  - Currently
  - Throughout the pandemic (maybe graph?)
  - Before the pandemic
  - Sustainability?
  - What about your colleagues?

- Are you experiencing stressors related to your work and professional life?
  - From survey: overwhelm, difficulty sleeping, → impact on work and relationships with children.
    - Talk about this/ what has your experience been?
  - *Prompts/pushes:*
    - *What are they?*
    - *Have there been additional demands, stress, worry, anxiety about health, increased needs of children and families?*
  - *Prompts/pushes:*
    - *To what extent (if any) does stress/ your mental health impact other aspects of your work?*
    - How do you cope with stress?
  - *Prompts/pushes:*
    - *What helps you to cope with stress?*
    - *What work supports (if any are in place) to support your mental health/well-being?*

- What helps you to cope?
  - Examples from survey: faith, exercise, breaks, support from family, colleagues, leadership, meaning in work

- Who/what supports you?
  - *Prompts/pushes:*
    - *At home? At work? In the community?*

- What additional supports would help you to better meet child and family needs?
- To meet your own mental health needs?
  - *Prompts/pushes:*
    - *training needs*
    - *Staff*
    - *Resources?*

- *Coverage, planning time*
- *Breaks and vacation days*
- *Counseling*
- *What do you feel the community of Lynchburg needs more of in terms of a support net for families, including mental health and behavioral services for families of children under 5?*
- *Specifically children who do not qualify for birth to three or have an IEP?*

- In an ideal world what supports would you have? What supports would children and families have?
    - *Prompts/Pushes:*
        - *What resources would be available?*
        - *What would this look like?*
        - *What would need to happen for this to occur?*
            - *Who is in control of these decisions?*

EC Educator, School Staff and Provider Focus Group Protocol- Follow-up (Ariel)

- Housecleaning
    - Consent forms
    - Pseudonyms
    - Identity: How do you describe yourself
    - Tech

- Expectations
    - Camera on
    - I may need to interrupt/redirect to make sure we cover things, but will save time at the end for you to share important information

- Reminder of Research Questions:

1. How do early educators describe their experiences balancing the demands of their work with the resources available to them to support the well-being of young children and families in the context of the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic?
    a. What factors do providers see as influencing the availability of resources and support for themselves and children, and how do they describe their role and agency in accessing them?
    b. Do provider perceptions their needs and the resources available to them vary by program type and funding?
2. How do early educators understand and describe their mental health and well-being in relation to their work?
3. How do early educators define support for themselves and what solutions do they envision for promoting the mental health and well-being of children, families and themselves during and beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic?

---INTERVIEW--

- Ariel- private program/Brittany early head start, birth to three
- Looking at the infographic- was there anything that surprised you?
    - What made sense?
    - Were there things you felt differently about or disagreed with?

- Themes from previous interview (this is going to flow like a discussion):
    - Role
        - Prioritizing children
        - More than a job- “Like, things being off. It's not like you just leave and it's over. And you don't think about it anymore. Like, I don't know, I carried it with me.“- passion, not profession
        - Communication with parents (restricted at A’s old job)- support and education for parents
        - Multi-tasking doing it all

        - Knowing what is going on with families
    - Responsibilities
        - Documentation, training, communication
    - Resources/supports
        - Trainings- seeking out info./learning
        - Seeking out information and resources online
    - Behavior mgmt. and MH
        - Different in each classroom and based on teachers
    - Teacher MH-
        - Burnout- what are your colleagues experiencing?
        - Turnover (at HS)- an issue "merry go round"
        - Behavior challenge IFSPs
        - Therapy, psychiatry, prevention
        - What services would support teacher MH?
    - Developmentally appropriate practice and respect for children
    - COVID
        - Relationships harder to build with distancing
        - Families exp stressors- formula shortages
    - Wishes
        - Pay overtime for teachers work- salary
        - More prep and planning time Supposed to lesson plan during nap- not possible- bring work home
        - Awareness- commercials about dev time
        - More trainings- shifts in understanding behavior
        - Not enough care slots
        - More parent support and trainings – with benefits
        - More opps to connect with and share info. with parents
        - Share information about resources- in common place
        - MH counseling- for adults- remove barriers like cost

---QUESTIONS---

- Has anything changed since we last spoke? How has this year been?
- What do resources and supports look like at your new program?
    - How has this year been for kids to adjust back?

- Pandemic- several years, do you feel like you're processing it now?
    - Has anything come up/looking back…
    - "A challenging."

- Balance of work and demands?
    - Thoughts about resources at different program types depending on funding?
    - Resources it would be helpful to have at private programs?
    - Who controls flow of resources? Who attends which programs?

- Mental health of teachers this year? talk a bit about teacher's physical and mental health…
    - Somethings got to give…we can't do this…
    - Impact on work
    - Turnover and coverage

        - Impact on stress, mental health and work?
        - Are teachers ok?

- Focus on relationships with parents when we last spoke- tell me a bit about relationships this year…

    - What is your sense of where families are at right now?
    - Parents/caregiver challenges with being engaged- mental shift
    - Young children? Behaviors?
    - What would you say the needs are now?
    - Advice to other teachers about this…? What helps?

- Talked a bit about behaviors- what would more support look like in an ideal world?
    - Noticing anything this year?
    - Balance between label/stigma and range of development
    - Why might families be worried about this?
    - What gets in the way of partnering?
    - What strengths do students bring? Families?

- Trauma piece-
    - What supports do communities need to prevent trauma, be trauma informed and support healing?

- Share a positive moment from the year so far… (child, group, colleague. family)

- What was a challenge from the past week ?

    - How did you cope/respond?
    - What helped…follow up?

⇒ What do you see as the future of the field of ECE?
⇒ Anything else you'd like to share?
⇒ How do you want use to describe you in paper?