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PROFESSIONALISM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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PROFESSIONALISM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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By
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ABSTRACT

This grounded theory analysis uses participant interviews and document analysis to further understand the lived experiences of teachers and leaders in Early Child Education. The thesis was set out to explore the following research questions: How do ECE leaders and teachers understand teacher professionalism? What is the role of whiteness and gender in teacher professionalism? and What is the relationship between the ideas of professionalism and the local context in ECE? The study finds that insiders have strong notions of professional conduct but that exploring *professionalism* was a site of contention for the participants. Two responses to issues of professionalism were found by this study. The first, constructive reimagining which expands the borders of professionalism to include ECE and the second, destructive reimagining which restricts professionalism in ECE to only certain individuals. The study also finds that race is impacting the professional lives of participants and that the concept of whiteness is a useful tool for understanding how race is experienced by participants. The thesis concludes with implications for research and practice.

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Developing a career in Early Childhood Education (education for children ages 0-5) has

been easy and seamless for me. From the first moment I stepped into a classroom to the

leadership role I hold today, I have felt confident in my ability as a leader, my knowledge of

child development, and have been treated with respect and deference by parents and

administrators. The ease of my career is at the center of my critical analysis of professionalism in

ECE. My identity as a white woman has opened doors for me and privileged me as someone

reliable, and this privilege gave me no reason to distrust my own place until I came across

critical race theory and in turn, critical whiteness studies. As a professor once quipped about

critical theory- once you put on the critical glasses, you'll never be able to take them off.

Statement of the Problem

ECE teachers and leaders wear many hats. They create curriculum, advise families, apply

bandages, unclog the toilets, and do everything in between. Due to the complicated nature of

these jobs, professionalism within ECE is constructed through daily interactions that are locally

specific (Skattebol et al., 2016). Codes of conduct are developed formally and informally by

those who are doing the work and they know best what it takes to be successful in their jobs.

However, in the neoliberal education context, the economic desire to have more and more

efficient and effective programs (Alcala et al., 2020) has created pressure to advance universal

competencies and standards to be used in all early childhood education classrooms, regardless of

the knowledge and codes of conduct developed by teachers (Delaune, 2019). Universal calls for

adherence to one set of professional standards decontextualize the requirements of being an ECE

teacher in unique environments.

Research shows that efforts at enacting quality control on ECE contexts in order to maximize output in the form of well-prepared future workers has had unintended consequences on the teachers these efforts rely upon. Teachers are called upon to change their teaching, implement best practices, learn new systems, and document all of this while also working to teach and care for young children. These changes are alluring as there is hope in the field that teachers of students ages 0-5 will one day be afforded the respect and wages they deserve, but in reality these changes cause more meaningless tasks to be completed in order for ECE programs to meet expectations on their ratings (Kilderry, 2015). The consequences of these changes are less engagement with meaningful teaching practice and more time spent producing evidence of meaningful teaching practice (Kilderry, 2015). While individual aspects of quality improvement are well-intended, put together there are too many for teachers to manage with intentionality and instead of helping teachers, quality improvement efforts decrease feelings of connection and belonging (Press et al., 2018). In addition, teachers aren't valued for creative problem solving and critical thinking, which are necessary skills, but instead for simplified production of rote practices (Delaune, 2019).

One of the ways neoliberal markets have attempted to regulate the ECE field is by applying market based strategies to professionalize the work (Osgood, 2006). These efforts have had negative and unintended consequences on ECE teachers and have caused deprofessionalization as teachers lose the feeling of agency they had before new strategies were implemented (MacCrimmon & Lakind, 2017). Teachers must choose between meeting the demands of their teaching (caring for children, planning and implementing activities, and communicating with families) and meeting the demands of "high-quality" agendas (filling out

paperwork, submitting things online, etc.). Finally, neoliberal attempts at professionalizing belittle the caring values of the field which historically has esteemed care and emotional connection over policy oriented ideology of a professional (Osgood, 2006). When judged by standards that don't fit the profession, ECE teachers are devalued.

Cannella (1997) has deconstructed the notion of professionalism in the early childhood education context. Professionalism is a notion of patriarchy that gives one group the right to control, make decisions and speak for others (p. 144). Statements and standards of professionalism that control the boundaries of who is professional and who is not are enforced upon ECE teachers and used to prevent deviation from regulated ideas of best and right (p.138). Professionalism works as a stratifying agent to keep women, who primarily do the work of education, under control and working as members of society who police what is right and best on behalf of those who are in power. Participation in professionalization movements by those in the field of ECE have been in hopes that pay and respect would increase for those doing the work but instead have had the unintended consequence of reinforcing the power of those in the dominant classes and sustaining the status quo (p. 137).

Critical whiteness scholars encourage us to look not just at patriarchy as the dominant structure of marginalization but specifically that whiteness further marginalizes people of color within groups. Identifying the way that whiteness works is critical to resisting racist norms (Applebaum, 2016). All professional fields have as an archetype the white male so attempts to professionalize the field of ECE, which is made up of almost exclusively women, is an effort that works to maintain white, male culture as the norm. Anyone who falls outside this strict definition is rejected from the definition of professional (Osgood, 2006). White teachers may not know or

understand their own white identity and when they do, they see it as a value or something they are lucky to have (Miller, 2017). White teachers protect the dominance of whiteness by avoiding addressing race in school environments (Picower, 2009). Many scholars encourage people of color to take up teaching work in schools (Cherng & Halpin, 2016) but when they arrive, whiteness acts as a system to make their work more difficult by marginalizing their identities and belittling their contributions (Cheruvu et al., 2015; McCormack, 2020). The California plan for Early Care and Education names the fact that requiring attendance at universities as a bar for entering the ECE teaching field privileges white, middle class teachers (Alcala et al., 2020) and that pathways other than college classes should exist for career development. However, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) which is the dominant voice in the professionalism movement for ECE workers in the United States and an agency that polices quality for privately run programs claims that only higher education should be considered adequate preparation for professionals (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

The unintended consequences created by increased regulation and attempts to create standards for professionals are problems of practice for ECE teachers. Teachers are at the center of regulation efforts as all new systems and ideas rely on teachers for implementation. Robotic purveyors of the latest rating scale will not meet the stated goals of market reform and certainly will not meet the needs of children and families. A problem for everyone touched by ECE (which this author argues is *everyone*) is that the teachers who do excel in meeting the goals of performative, rigid quality are those that are raised to be managers and mentors and who then espouse the values of neoliberal education reform and this cycle reinforces white supremacy.

This cycle must be broken to meet the need for locally contextualized values and standards constructed with, for and by professionals who live and work in the communities they serve and to challenge white supremacy in ECE.

Background and Need

The problems listed above represent a crisis of identity for the ECE field. As pressure on ECE increases to meet the demands of narrowly defined quality, teachers and leaders must work to adapt to new regulations and create professional identities that resist the negative impacts research has found (Reinke et al., 2019). In order for ECE to take its place at the center of a democratic society, a different way of valuing the profession must be front and center (Urban et al., 2012). Placing child care centers and family child care homes in competitive marketplaces is designed to improve quality by increasing competition but instead can decrease participation and cause deprofessionalization (MacCrimmon & Lakind, 2017). To return agency to teachers, marketplace reforms must be resisted, and understanding how ECE teachers and leaders think about and define quality and professionalism is critical. Professionals in ECE are required to do much more than simply teach in classrooms in order to fully serve families. Skattebol et al. (2016) found that we must look to these professionals to fully understand what it takes to be successful and that each program is unique in its needs. The masculine gaze of professionalism has been used to devalue the work of ECE teachers and leaders. Instead, the caring values of nurturing and emotional connection must be uplifted and centered in conversations of what is required of an ECE professional (Osgood, 2006). Research in schools on how leaders and teachers create their own professional codes of conduct that are meaningful to them must be conducted. The need to address the problems facing the field of ECE as the neoliberal gaze has

been turned to it is urgent and must be addressed in order to reduce and repair harm done but the ways that leaders and teachers create meaning is not well understood. A need for research that seeks to understand the ways that leaders and teachers respond to the challenges laid out is imperative for the field.

Quality improvement efforts will not ever be successful without the entire system surrounding ECE becoming competent; this involves making change at all levels in the ECE system and not relying on and blaming teachers alone for the performance of children (Urban et al., 2012). Scholars have outlined the ways that narrowly defined quality improvements have negatively affected teachers including that ECE teachers should have a say in the ways that they document their work and children's learning (Kilderry, 2014) and that to return agency to teachers, critical thinking must be valued over the performance of certain skills in the presence of an assessor (Reinke et al., 2019). However, the ways that ECE professionals have created meaning in their education spaces despite the problems has not been well researched.

Teacher preparation programs and leaders of ECE programs must face whiteness as a system head on in order to combat the negative effects on teachers of color and all students. Research done in teacher preparation programs, as laid out in the previous section, points to the fact that whiteness is unchallenged and in some cases protected by white teachers who are in teacher preparation programs (Miller, 2017; Picower, 2009) but there is a lack of research on the ways white identity shows up in ECE workplaces. McCormack (2020) writes of one example, in which programs that teach culturally relevant curriculum by including these in professional development budgets and creating time for teachers to meet together can disrupt whiteness. Further research which seeks to understand ways that whiteness works in ECE is needed.

Cheruvu et al. (2015) looked at the ways that pre-service teachers experienced marginalization. Continuing research on the ways that leaders and teachers privilege whiteness intentionally and unintentionally are key to further understanding opportunities and challenges to disrupting marginalization and white privilege.

Purpose of the Study

Due to the limited nature of this study, the author will focus on how universal definitions of professionalism, as one aspect of neoliberal education reform, are reproducing dominant discourse of white supremacy. Universal standards as well as the experiences of ECE professionals will be examined. This study uses a critical lens to examine universal definitions of best practice and professionalism. This study was conducted among mid-career center directors and teachers and used grounded theory to develop a useful understanding of how leaders and teachers cope with the neoliberal demands that research shows have negatively affected their work environments.

Research Questions

How do ECE leaders and teachers understand teacher professionalism?

What is the role of whiteness and gender in teacher professionalism?

What's the relationship between the ideas of professionalism and the local context in ECE?

Theoretical Framework/Rationale

This study is framed by the theory of critical whiteness studies which claims that racial injustice exists due to the perpetuation of white privilege through systems of white supremacy. White privilege can be theorized as the unearned advantages white people receive by nature of

the way they look (Applebaum, 2016). Though in modern day United States some might argue

for a color blind approach to race relations or the equal treatment of all, critical whiteness theory

would encourage us to look at the way systems and not individuals perpetuate race inequality

and how focusing on individual approaches to addressing racism may be helpful for individuals

but doesn't do the needed work of changing systems. By examining dominant discourse on what

is "right," "good," or "best," we can see the ways that white supremacy shapes these definitions.

This section includes a brief history of the critical whiteness theory which includes Baldwin's

(1963) iconic piece describing the ways in which white people construct Black people as inferior,

McIntosh's (1989) oft-cited piece on white privilege in which the experience of white people is

described as wearing an invisible backpack which grants unearned privileges and maintains

dominance, the work of Leonardo (2004) that argues that the systems that maintain white racial

dominance are what create conditions of white privilege and must be examined in the forefront,

and Jackson's work (2011) which examines the nuances of white interest.

In the iconic piece "The Fire Next Time," Baldwin (1963) discusses race relations in the

United States and the central part that white people play in the perpetuation of unequal

conditions for Black Americans. James Baldwin writes of white people:

> They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and
> until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe
> for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white
> men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it
> very difficult to act on what they know. (p. 4)

This description of white people illustrates two important pieces of Baldwin's theory.

First, the invisible nature of whiteness for white people allows for white supremacy to continue

unchecked. The history of whiteness and the construction of whiteness goes back many millennia

but yet is invisible to white people. Baldwin argues that the reason it goes on unchecked is the ahistorical nature of whiteness and the intentional forgetting of extreme violence and systematic killing that is the core of America's history of slavery. Baldwin argues that whiteness would have Black people believe that they are inferior but this must be resisted. Another important part of Baldwin's theory is what much of critical whiteness studies is drawn on. Baldwin repeatedly calls out the work that white people must do to "accept and love themselves and each other" (p. 8). This points to a key tenet of critical whiteness studies that separates it from other theories on race. Namely, that white people have the responsibility to work together to name whiteness and understand how this history has impacted their lives in order for every American to move forward. Until this happens, Baldwin argues, race inequality will never go away. McIntosh (1989) further develops the idea of whiteness being invisible.

McIntosh's (1989) seminal writing on white privilege is perhaps one of the most frequently cited and critiqued pieces of the academic field. McIntosh builds on Baldwin's ideas by naming her experience as a white woman and the ways that white supremacy (the system of resources moving toward whites and away from all other people) was hidden from her understanding. She calls the ways individuals are given unearned privileges the "invisible knapsack" (p. 1). A paraphrased list of these privileges includes: seeing people of the same race in the media and in curriculum materials, finding your skin color bandages in the store as well as that people in charge will likely look like you including store managers, police officers and tax collectors. McIntosh states that dominance is assigned to white people through these invisible privileges and, importantly, systematically taken away from all others. White people must seek to make visible these privileges, both positive and negative, in order to understand how the system

of white supremacy works seamlessly. Unless the invisible underpinnings of these systems are made to be seen, the perpetuation of white supremacy will continue. Leonardo (2004) offers a critique to the focus McIntosh places on the understanding of white privilege and brings scholastic attention to the systems that allow for the continuance of white supremacy.

Leonardo (2004) applies critical whiteness studies into the field of education. Leonardo argues that while understanding white privilege may be an important step for white educators, this practice must be partnered with a solid understanding of the system of securing dominance that allows white supremacy to continue. Leonardo points out that while white privilege may be "invisible" to white people, it is certainly not invisible to people of color. The opposite is true; for every white person enjoying relative ease working with police officers is the black or brown person police are trained to treat as inhuman. Leonardo argues that whites in power intentionally obfuscate the acts that have allowed whites to gain wealth and advantage while people of color have less and less. One of the ways this happens is a purposeful re-writing of history that leaves out acts of racial violence. In direct response to the list of possible privileges McIntosh provides from her experience as a white person, Leonardo gives us a list of historical racial violences that people of color have experienced in American history. By pointing out the actual and very much visible violence in juxtaposition to the non-threatening metaphor of an invisible knapsack, Leonardo is asking for white people to acknowledge not just their privilege as a problem but also, and more importantly for Leonardo, the violence enacted in order to retain privilege. The list includes laws that target people of color in education systems, housing discrimination, job discrimination, mass genocide and enslavement of African people, military occupation of indigenous lands, the eugenics movement, and much more. Leonardo makes a plea for educators

to move forward from a discourse on white privilege to a critical discourse on supremacy that makes visible the ways privileges are obtained. Jackson (2011) adds to the ways educators, and all white people may move forward in a discussion on interest conversion.

Building on a foundation of critical race theory and critical white studies, Jackson (2011) brings nuance to the idea of interest convergence to the discussion on whiteness. The theory of interest conversion is the idea that racial equality will only be achieved if it converges on white interests (Bell, 1980). Put another way, white people won't work toward racial progress if they lose materially from movements towards equity. Jackson expands "interest" into four categories: (1) material interest (having) (2) emotional interest (feeling) (3) psychological interest (thinking) and (4) moral interest (doing) (p. 439). Jackson uses the example of No Child Left Behind to illustrate the ways in which white material and emotional interests have been served by this policy. White wealth has increased and white jobs (economic interest) are secured for white children and this is all done under the curtain of a "merit" based system (emotional interest). However, when it comes to psychological and moral interests, Jackson argues that white interests are not best served by white supremacy. Calling it "collective trauma," Jackson cites the extreme disturbance facing white supremacy (as Baldwin, McIntosh and Leonardo have called for) causes in white people. Jackson concludes with the affirmation that white interests are best served by working in solidarity towards anti-racism that even outweighs the economic and emotional interest the project of white supremacy affords.

In summary, the theory of critical whiteness studies claims that systems of white supremacy perpetuate white privilege and work to make it invisible. By naming the racial dominance of whites, not just in the individual experience but in the history of systems, law, and

politics of the United States, critical whiteness theory attempts to disrupt this dominance. Critical

whiteness studies implores us to look for how whiteness is reproduced in systemic ways that are

by nature difficult to identify. Understanding how whiteness works in ECE means we need to

look at the economic setting of ECE which is changing. Over the past 10 years, arguments

against neoliberal policies in ECE have evolved.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations including: (a) the sampling procedure and sample size;

(b) age/quality/quantity of the data collected/used in the study; and (c) researcher positionality.

The small size of the sample may be a limitation because every person working in ECE will have

different values that impact their understanding of professionalism. The sample is also limited to

a geographic area and the political and social environment of the schools may or may not limit

the usefulness of the data and the data collected will not be generalizable to the entire population

of the ECE field. However, this limitation is balanced by a need to understand how

professionalism is locally constructed and only data that is specific can address this need. The

methods and data collection procedures for this study also include limitations. Data will be

collected through interviews which are subjective in nature, subjective observations delivered

from the participants on the topic of race may be influenced by the participants' desire to appear

unbiased and/or to not upset the researcher who is white. Finally, the researcher is an insider to

the field of ECE and holds a positive bias for leaders and teachers who use critical reflection to

analyze their working conditions. This may unduly influence the interpretation of participant

interviews which are not critical in nature. However, the insider perspective the researcher holds

will bring positive aspects as well. The researcher has access to many administrators and

teachers through her professional network which will help recruitment of subjects. The researcher also shares knowledge of the field, including ability to understand ECE jargon, which will help ease understanding so that much time is not focused on understanding what participants are referring to when they describe their work.

Significance of the Study

This thesis may be of significant interest to ECE leaders and teachers as well as professional organizations in ECE and policy makers. Leaders and teachers will benefit from understanding the ways in which neoliberal policies are impacting their working conditions and that these policies may be resisted. Leaders in ECE will be able to use this research to challenge their own assumptions about what professional means. Professional organizations can use this research to gain an understanding of how teachers experience professionalism outside the bounds of universal definitions. White teachers and leaders will benefit from identifying ways that whiteness is privileged in subtle ways in their work environments in order to be able to resist this privilege and divest from whiteness. Policy makers will benefit from understanding how locally constructed values can be privileged over universal values in order to improve the experience of ECE teachers and leaders and thus positively impact quality in schools.

CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature on the impacts of increased accountability, standardization and rigid definitions of professionalism in Early Childhood Education (ECE) seen through the lens of critical whiteness studies makes it clear that professionalism in ECE is a site in which market forces act upon teachers to negatively impact their working conditions and to privilege whiteness. The scholarship in this review that justifies this claim includes three bodies of evidence. The first demonstrates that quality improvement efforts including attempts at increasing accountability have had unintended negative outcomes on teachers in ECE. The second demonstrates that efforts to develop a universal definition of professionalism miss the mark by ignoring the experiences of ECE teachers. The final body of literature focuses on the ways whiteness permeates the dominant discourse of whom an ECE teacher should be. Much of the data in this section comes from other countries. Looking at literature from these contexts is important for American scholars because there have been concerted policy efforts to regulate ECE in other parts of the world that may influence what happens in the United States.

Quality "Improvement" Efforts

Research demonstrates that quality improvement efforts, including attempts at increasing accountability, have had unintended negative outcomes on teachers in ECE. The following section will review multiple articles written over the past decade that have looked at the consequences to the field of ECE policy reforms. This scholarship includes studies that argue quality improvement must be understood as a systemic problem not one of individual practice (Urban et al., 2012), illustrate an increase in requirements of performance for ECEC (this acronym is Early Childhood Education and Care and is used in the European Union as well as

the United Kingdom) teachers since 2004 (Kilderry, 2015), investigates how neoliberalism has decreased attention to the importance of belonging in ECEC (Press et al., 2018), examine the effects of the international use of children's assessments and teacher evaluations to compare performance of different governments (Delaune, 2019) and discuss the impact of rating systems and mandatory assessments on the professional lives of ECE teachers (Reinke et al., 2019). Taken together, this literature investigates the consequences of global quality improvement efforts on early educator's professional lives.

In 2012, Urban et al. took a comprehensive look at quality improvement policies attempting to regulate ECEC. This study was created to assess quality improvement efforts in fifteen countries of the European Union. The authors assert that we are living in a moment when ECEC is at the forefront for political figures hoping to compete on the global market and that some approaches to improving ECEC are ill-advised and ill-fated. They found that quality improvement was positioned by policy as a matter of change needed in individual practitioners. In other words, the dominant discourse on quality is that failure or improvement can only come from the teachers and should seek to create a highly knowledgeable, technically skilled and professionalized teaching force to implement mandated programs. The challenge to the field for quality to be pinned on individual teachers is that teachers have very little agency to change the conditions in which they work so pushing policy changes on teachers and expecting positive results without changing overall systems is an ill-fated expectation. The study found that in places where efforts to professionalize and create competency profiles were holistic and left much space for the lived realities of their specific contexts, positive change was possible.

However, in places where narrow visions and rote professional development were status quo, ECEC did not see improvement.

The findings of this research conclude that any true quality improvement, one that will positively impact children and families accessing early education, must move away from focusing on individual teachers and instead to a systemic approach that includes individual teachers as well as organizations, inter-institutional partnerships, and government support. The authors name this system-wide approach creating a "competent system". In order for ECE to embody democratic ideals and work as a competent system we must move away from positioning quality as an individual problem and certain conditions must be met in the system. These conditions are (a) position ECE as a matter of social good rather than a thing to be bought and sold, (b) create curriculum and competency profiles that are locally contextualized, (c) improve employment and working conditions, (d) integrated systems of professional development that are focused on overarching goals rather than hyper focused on one area, (e) provide systems of ongoing support for pedagogy improvement (f) address the institutional patriarchy resulting in ECE being classified as work for women. Taken together, these suggestions for a competent system indicate a counter narrative to the dominant discourse of teachers being at fault when it comes to the quality of ECE programs. Kilderry (2015) studied how neoliberal reform measures have increased performativity in ECEC services since the year 2000.

Kilderry (2015) conducted both a comprehensive literature review as well as a case study to illustrate the effects of increased performativity in early education. Performativity, as Kilderry defines it, is a tool used by reformers to have teachers prove their work, or perform, to certain

standards. Examples are turning in documentation to the state, submitting to outside assessments and using prescriptive training tools. Performativity is not about increasing quality on it's own but instead is about being accountable to showing your work. Kilderry argues that an increase in neoliberal reforms has increased the performance output required of teachers steadily from 2000-2014 and that teachers are asked to do more and more documenting and teaching to standardized measures. Over time, the discourse around increased performativity in the field has shifted from emerging to normalized so that teachers expect performative measures as part of their teaching practice in 2014 but weren't used to this in 2000. Interestingly, some literature showed evidence of teachers being pleased with increased quality measures, expressing that the measures gave them a more professional reputation. In addition to this review, Kilderry conducted a case study with one ECE teacher, examining the effects of requiring performative output from teachers. The key results are that teachers respond in three different ways to the demands of performance: (1) anxiety (2) confidence, and (3) disregard. These three responses are complicated, unpredictable and may happen concurrently for the same teacher. Press et al. (2018) also looked at effects of neoliberal policies on ECEC teachers and found another negative aspect to these reforms: a decrease in belonging.

Press et al. (2018) studied the effect neoliberal policies have had on belonging for ECEC teachers in Australia and New Zealand. The authors looked at policies of ECEC for the effects of neoliberalism. They found that the widespread creation of a market based system has caused a rise in the discourse of ECEC as something to be bought and sold and a decrease in the discourse of ECEC as a good for society. The authors have found that this change is creating a decrease in belonging both as a stated value of policy and as a feeling in ECEC programs. Belonging, as

defined by the authors, is the idea of being seen and known and can perhaps be best understood by noting the opposite of belonging is exclusion. The authors compare their findings to the stated values of the national curriculum in Australia and New Zealand and find that the loss of belonging goes against the stated objectives of the national curriculum. The authors end by arguing that the reduction of belonging forewarns a rip in the social fabric in these countries and argue that the neoliberal ideology that problems in ECEC can be fixed by privatizing the market must not be accepted as inevitable but instead resisted against. Building onto the scholarship regarding effects of neoliberal policies, Delaune (2019) conducted a policy analysis which found that neoliberal policies are limiting early education by insisting on a globalized definition of what education should look like.

Delaune (2019) analyzes a global study conducted across multiple nations called the International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study (IELS) by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) for the ways that this assessment attempts to gather data to understand and increase a competitive edge in global markets. This study has been implemented many times and began in 2001. Delaune found that over time understanding and appreciation of diverse understandings of education changed in the ideology of OECD, moving towards a more globalized shared understanding of quality. In the most recent iteration of the study, locally constructed knowledge and diversity has been decontextualized in order to reduce teaching to easily comparable technical aspects of teaching and to create a universal toolbox for anyone in the world to use in order to increase the effectiveness of early childhood education and increase performance of children on the global market, presuming that higher scores of children today leads to more competitive adults tomorrow. Delaune argues that this decontextualized

definition of best practice strips children and teachers of agency and opens the door for justifications of increased governmental control. The loss of locally constructed meaning for teachers reduces the practice of teaching to it's technical components and results in a loss of agency and meaning for teachers. An example of this effect on teachers comes from an article by Reinke et al. (2019) that contributes a teacher perspective to the expansion of decontextualized quality rating systems.

Reinke et al. (2019) write a compelling critique of two tools used to give universal ratings to ECE programs in the United States, the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) and the Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA). This critique was compiled by using their own lived experiences as three early childhood educators. The authors found that these two tools promote the idea of good teaching practice as being able to technically reproduce universal standards like clearly articulating which concrete skills children are learning. The authors argue that a focus on simple execution denies teachers of opportunities to create education environments that foster critical thinking and critique of dominant discourse that disrupts systems of power. In conclusion, Reinke et al. call for the need to foster new definitions of professionalism that values critical thinking and agency for teachers.

In summary, research demonstrates that the increased attention of neoliberal policies on ECE has deleteriously changed the profession. The above studies work together to show two main points. First, over the past 15 years, there have been significant changes in the level of interest in ECE as a place for economic gain. To put it simply, the world's markets have turned their attention to ECE as a potential for future human capital to be developed and as a site for competition in a global marketplace. Second, and most importantly for the purposes of this

literature review, the increased development and deployment of "universal" tools and assessments has created changes and stresses on teachers as education professionals. Under these restrictive definition teachers are (a) positioned as individually responsible for the success or failure of students (Urban et al., 2012) (b) teachers have had to adapt to higher requirements of performance and "showing their work" (Kilderry, 2015) (c) teachers, students and families have experienced decreased belonging in ECE spaces and alienation from their stated purposes (Press et al., 2018), and (d) teachers have experienced loss of locally constructed meaning for their work (Delaune, 2019). The article by Reinke et al. (2019) summarizes the importance of this body of literature. "Good" teaching is narrowly defined in a way that excludes any teacher who thinks or acts outside of the status quo. The active policing of this goodness through assessments, ratings, testing, etc. works to reinforce the dominant ideology of well-behaved, organized, compliant, non-challenging professionals as desirable. The next section reviews a body of literature that further shows how professionalism has been narrowly defined in the field of ECE.

Professionalism

Research demonstrates that a focus on developing a universal definition of an ECE professional has negative consequences and does not reflect the lived realities of teachers. This research includes studies that critically analyze the ways in which state defined professionalism for ECE teachers oppresses teachers and further decreases their power in society (Osgood, 2006), articulate that different ways of being professional can be found at the periphery of ECE (Skattebol et al., 2016), and illustrate that additional regulation caused deprofessionalization by looking at one example in Wisconsin (MacCrimmon & Lakind, 2017).

Osgood uses a post-structuralist lens to highlight how economic attention and interest by the state on ECE teachers increases oppression of this already marginalized group. By examining two regulatory policy documents in the UK which call for accountability to universal standards of teaching and professionalism, Osgood found that rigidly defining professional as the ability to perform to and meet the universal standards in ECE creates oppression in two ways. The first being that the dominant construction of ECE as a nurturing field that values emotional connection will never meet the masculine ideology of the emotionless practitioner professional and will always make ECE educators come up short. Second, giving in to state driven definitions of professional robs the teachers themselves of instilling their values into their work. While Osgood (2006) provides a helpful overarching view of the "crisis" in Early Childhood Education, the work of Skattebol et al. (2016) provides an example of another way that strict definitions of professional leave out particular groups of educators who operate in further marginalized spaces.

Skattebol et al. (2016) addressed that when "professional" is limited to performing to state standards, professionals working on the periphery of mainstream services are left out. This study took place in Western Australia and included 20 service providers for ECE services from six early education sites. The findings of this study demonstrate that being a professional on the periphery requires specific traits and is framed by a critical outlook which understands the political and social climate of families. By interviewing participants about the nuance required in their jobs to work with vulnerable families the authors identified multiple professional traits including political awareness, ability to build trust with historically excluded populations, navigation of frequently changing monetary restrictions and flexibility about adapting to guidelines set out from multiple, sometimes conflicting, funding and regulating bodies. These

behaviors, though not included in the standard definitions of professionalism which focus on abilities of professionals to remain rational and to reproduce accountability measures, were deemed absolutely necessary in order for children and families to be successful in their ECE programs. The authors argue that in order to create high quality environments for children in margainzalied spaces, professionals must first be able to navigate complicated emotional and political landscapes. These findings illustrate how professionalism must be defined according to local contexts. Another example of problems with standard definitions of professionalism comes from MacCrimmon and Lakind's (2017) study of how market based strategies deprofessionalized rather than improved the working conditions for one family child care provider.

In 2017, MacCrimmon and Lakind addressed a QRIS (Quality Rating Improvement System) implemented in Wisconsin called YoungStar which was intended by the state to provide a marketplace of choice to families in the area. The YoungStar system gave ratings to providers and posted these ratings in a publicly accessible on-line system which positioned itself as the regulatory agency for the providers and a marketplace for parents. MacCrimmon and Lakind studied how the construction of professionalism was experienced by one family child care provider when faced with neoliberal practices like placing all providers in one "marketplace." The family childcare provider experienced the agency intervening in her self-owned family child care center when a family called to complain about the provider's professional conduct. The family chose to report the complaint to the YoungStar system which was then reported to the provider. Prior to the adoption of the YoungStart system, the family child care provider was used to families making complaints directly to her, as the professional in charge of the site. The family child care provider expressed feelings of hurt that the family would go to another agency instead

of coming to her. The provider responded by saying that in the future she would continue the practices that she believed in but would just keep them hidden from the parents. The positioning of the family child care provider as being regulated by the YoungStar system stripped this provider of her feelings of professionalism and caused subversive behavior. The findings of this study demonstrate that an increase of regulation deteriorates trust between providers and parents and that the providers feel less like professionals when this happens. In addition, the authors found an increase in subversive behavior in response to a loss of trust which is important because in some cases increased regulation can result in even less compliance than existed before the regulation.

In summary, research demonstrates that increased regulation narrows the definition of what it means to be an ECE professional and limits the possibilities and agency of these educators. This includes Osgood's (2006) claims that increased regulation oppresses ECE educators and restricts their agency, Skattebol et al. (2016) articulating the traits required of professionals working at the periphery of ECE should expand how we define professional and, MacCrimmon and Lakind (2017) illustrating deprofessionalization and subversive behavior for one family child care provider. Taken together, this body of research contributes to understanding how ECE is a site in which market forces act upon teachers in ways that narrow the definition of professionalism to leave many in the field of ECE excluded.

Privileging Whiteness

Research that looks at how whiteness works in ECE is developing. Many of these studies focus on teacher education programs in university settings and not on practitioners in the field but the results can be useful in understanding how whiteness works to permeate the dominant

discourse of who an ECE teacher should be. This section includes a study that illustrates how white preschool teachers come to understand their white identity through multiple paths (Miller, 2017), a study that articulates how white teachers avoid addressing race to protect the ideology of whiteness as normative (Picower, 2009), a study that looks at the ways in which "whiteness as rightness" affects the teaching of one Black identifying ECE teacher (McCormack, 2020), and a study that articulates the ways in which pre-service teachers of color are marginalized in early childhood teacher education programs (Cheruvu et al., 2015). These studies represent the breadth and diversity of thought in the scholarship on whiteness and ECE teacher education. Understanding the ways in which white identity is formed and operationalized in the field of ECE illuminates the importance of teacher education and leadership disrupting white supremacy for white teachers and leaders in order to encourage teachers and leaders to work with BIPOC children and educators in humanizing ways.

In 2017, Miller addressed the issue of white identity for white pre-service preschool teachers. Miller did this by studying how white teachers come into white identity. Conducted in the south-east United States, this study included 73 white identifying teachers enrolled in Diversity in Urban Education in a university teacher prep program for early childhood educators (preschool provision). The results of this study demonstrate that white preschool teachers come into their white identity either steadily over time or precariously as they are faced with intersectional challenges. Either way, white identity is constructed as *not* being a person of color. The author concludes that understanding how white preschool teachers come to white identity is a crucial question for teacher education programs. The findings of this study leads to the critical de-professionalization question: if white teachers recognize their race as something to be grateful

for, how will they respond when presented with classrooms full of students of color and peers who are people of color? The author concludes that white teachers must come to understand and disengage with white supremacy before they enter classroom spaces. This is related to the work of Picower (2009) who articulates how white teachers avoid addressing race to protect the ideology of whiteness as normative.

Similar to the findings of Miller (2017), Picower addressed how white teachers bring hegemonic understandings of race and Whiteness into their classrooms. Picower studied the ways white teachers protect dominant discourse of white identity in New York City. Though not specific to ECE settings, Picower's work can be helpful to understand how white educators may understand their race. This study included eight white female preservice teachers who were taking a class on multicultural education. The results of this study on white teachers outlined a set of ideas the author calls 'tools of whiteness' which are used to protect the hegemonic understandings of how whiteness works. The tools outlined by the authors are emotional, ideological and performative. Emotional tools of whiteness that white teachers employed were to deny personally taking part in past historical wrongs and to identify any antiracist sentiments as making them feel guilty. Ideological tools include claiming that society is in a post racial state, individuale racist acts as only about certain bad white people and not about systems and claiming powerlessness to make changes as an individual. Finally, performative tools of whiteness include staying silent when presented with racist acts, taking on white savior roles and entering into relationships with BIPOC with the intention of showing off the relationship. Picower concludes that teacher education programs must thoughtfully and thoroughly disrupt the ideology of Whiteness by offering multiple classes that allow white teachers to unlearn these tools.

While the findings of Miller (2017) and Picower (2009) address whiteness from the perspective of white educators, McCormack (2020) addressed the dominance of whiteness in US education from the perspective of a Black woman. McCormack studied how a professional support group helped her to shed the weights of white supremacy in Louisville, Kentucky. This study included the author, a Black identified Kindergarten and arts teacher. The author uses the metaphor of carrying a heavy backpack full of boulders to represent the ways that "stories of degradation, marginalization, disrespect and omission written by whiteness about Blackness" have weighed her down. Understanding how McCormack picked up these boulders is important to understanding how whiteness works in education to minimize the efforts of people of color. McCormack identifies two ways that she picked up boulders. The first through being made invisible in school as a child, both by being ignored as well as her history being erased from the white-washed curriculum. The second by being made invisible in universities as an adult university student who was tokenized as a Black teacher as well as treated as a data source and not as a partner in work with university professors. As a part of the study, McCormack participated in Professional Dyads of Culturally Relevant Teaching, a teaching support group that met periodically to offer support in implementing tenets of a curriculum style which focuses on using culturally relevant teaching practices to help marginalized students. McCormack concludes that these groups may be helpful to disengage from white supremacy for Black educators. The findings of this study demonstrate that it is necessary to break free of dominant views and practices in order to learn from and with children and to thrive as a teacher. Similar to these findings, Cheruvu et al. (2015) studied the ways in which teachers of color are marginalized by their pre-service experiences.

Cheruvu et al. (2015) addressed how teachers of color are marginalized by white centrality in teacher education programs. Cheruvu et al. investigated the experiences of pre-service teachers of color in predominantly white teacher education programs in the northeastern United States. This study included four women of color who are recent graduates of a private accredited ECE university program. The results of this study demonstrate that pre-service teachers of color are marginalized by their education programs in specific ways (a) feeling disconnected from other teachers in their programs (b) holding the burden of understanding and traversing multiple intersecting identities (c) being treated differently than peers by supervisor in student teaching placements, especially being seen through a deficit lens, and (d) being subjected to teaching practices and curriculum that value dominant, white culture and language. Cheruvu et al. conclude that teacher education programs and student teaching sites must do better to provide teachers of color with equitable experiences by critically naming whiteness and seeking to decenter whiteness ideology.

In summary, research demonstrates how whiteness permeates the dominant discourse of what and who ECE teachers should be. This includes (a) a study that illustrates how white teachers come to understand their white identity through multiple paths (Miller, 2017) (b) a study that articulates how white teachers avoid addressing race to protect the ideology of whiteness as normative (Picower, 2009) (c) a study that looks at the ways in which 'whiteness as rightness' affects the teaching of one Black identifying teacher (McCormack, 2020) (d) a study that articulates the ways in which pre-service teachers of color are marginalized in teacher education programs (Cheruvu et al., 2015). Taken together, this body of research justifies the claim of this

literature review that ECE professionalism is a site in which whiteness is a force that acts to

reproduce and justify white supremacy.

CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

The field of Early Childhood Education is under neoliberal pressure to improve and prove quality of teaching. Part of this effort includes professionalizing the field of ECE. The pressure has caused negative effects on the working conditions for teachers of young children. Research has identified negative consequences such as deprofessionalization and loss of belonging. In addition, the values of whiteness are privileged in ECE professionalism. Research on ways that teachers and leaders experience and make sense of their professional identities is needed in order to understand ways resistance can be built and agency can be developed among ECE professionals.

Methodology Summary and Rationale

The methodology employed by this study is grounded theory. Grounded theory is the best method for research on this topic in education because of the recommendations by Cresswell (2007) for using grounded theory when other theories aren't available about a group of people and when asking questions of power. According to Charmaz (2006), grounded theory uses a data analysis format which codes and re-codes according to emergent themes. In grounded theory, data collected by the researcher comes from interviews as well as documents and artifacts that are relevant to the research questions. The researcher sifts through data looking for themes, writes memos on these themes and then discovers a theory based on the data by categorizing and re-categorizing the data according to emerging themes. The process of review is iterative with the possibility of the researcher returning to the field when necessary in order to collect more data or pursue emergent themes (Charmaz, 2006). The end product of a grounded theory study is

a theory that can be used to understand a particular process within a group of people (Cresswell, 20017). The theory may or may not be generalizable to larger groups of people.

Research Setting and Participants

Setting

This study took place in the Bay Area of California, a large urban area surrounding San Francisco, and recruited center directors and teachers from a variety of ECE settings. This urban area is racially and socioeconomically diverse. Seven participants agreed to take part in the study and six participants met the parameters of the study. All of the participants work in formal, licensed child care settings and have worked in multiple ECE settings including private, public and family child care settings over their careers.

Participants: Sampling/Recruitment Plan

This study attempts to discover theory about locally created understandings. For this reason, this study will use theoretical sampling which uses theoretical constructs to choose participants (Cresswell, 20017). The researcher recruited participants by advertising through their Linkedin professional online network as well as looking for participants in their work organization. This organization has been rapidly growing and was new to the researcher at the time of the study. The organization consists of teachers with center based ECE backgrounds that are working as new family child care providers so it is a perfect place to find teachers with rich experience in ECE.

The first person recruited to the study was a previous colleague of the researcher and was emailed directly given the researcher's knowledge of her background and history in ECE. Linkedin was used to create a simple advertisement and request of the researcher's professional

network, three of the study participants reached out and offered to be a part of the study from that advertisement. Two of these participants had been colleagues of the researcher many years prior and one was unknown to the researcher. In addition to Linkedin, the researcher sent a message to a group of seven new teachers to their organization with an advertisement for the study. Four participants replied and agreed to participate. One of these participants stopped replying to messages from the researcher so did not participate. One participant was interviewed but was excluded from the interview data due to them having only worked in ECE for less than one year. Over a few messages and emails, the remaining two participants agreed to participate, returned consent forms and scheduled interviews.

Participant Description

The demographics of the participants are three white and three are of varying races: Hispanic and Asian, Hispanic, and Mexican. All of the participants self identified and labeled themselves with these categories freely after the researcher asked for them to define their race in an interview. In total, the participants represent 80 impressive years of experience in Early Childhood Education with individuals varying from 5 years to 25 years of experience. The median years worked of these participants is 10 years. See Table 1 for demographic and employment information of the participants. All of the participants of this study are women. The study was not structured to exclude male participants but none showed interest in participating.

At the time of the study, four participants were supervisors in center based child care centers with the job titles Director, Executive Director and Site Supervisor. The other three participants work in family child care centers where they are licensees with the job title Head Teacher. Both of these Head Teachers revealed in their interviews that they had previously held

the role of director in afterschool and ECE programs in addition to teaching. It is noteworthy that in addition to their current job in ECE, all the participants worked for multiple organizations and settings over the course of their careers and all but one participant had been a teacher at some point prior to their current role.

Table 1

Demographic and Employment Information of Participants

Participant pseudonym	Job title at interview	Setting at interview	Race	Gender	Time in field
Ruth	Director	Center- private	White	Female	10 years
Laina	Director	Center- private	White	Female	19 years
Mila	Executive Director	Center- non profit	Hispanic/ Asian	Female	5 years
Lyla	Site Supervisor	Center- public	Mexican	Female	25 years
Violet	Head Teacher	Family childcare	Hispanic	Female	10 years
Lauren	Head teacher	Family childcare	White	Female	11 years

Data Collection

The data collection methods employed for this grounded theory investigation of professionalism and whiteness in ECE included interviews and document analysis. Interviews were used to collect data that is specific to the local context in ECE environments. Document analysis was used to compare the participant's understanding of professionalism to an external understanding of professionalism as well as to unpack the ways that whiteness is privileged or not when standards are universalized. According to Charmaz (2006), intensive interviewing is an excellent method for grounded theory projects because rich data can be collected that is very specific to a certain topic.

For this project, the researcher devised a small number of focused but open-ended interview questions and followed the lead of the participants to get a deep understanding of their lived experience in ECE related to the topic of research. The interview protocol can be found in full in Appendix A of this report. Questions were created based on the research questions and were coded by category in order to gain information about each facet of the research project. Interviews were conducted over zoom at the convenience of the participants. Zoom meetings were necessary to the study given the concern for the spread of COVID-19. The benefit of the zoom meetings was flexibility to meet on the participant's schedule with a minimum amount of disruption to their lives as well as the ability to produce clear recordings that were valuable in data analysis. Six initial interviews were conducted with participants. Each of the interviews was approximately 60 minutes with five of the six lasting over an hour and one of about 45 minutes. At the 55 minute mark, the researcher checked in with the participants about their available time and wrapped up the final sections of the interview within 10-20 minutes. A second interview was done with one participant who had discussed an upcoming event during the interview that, after initial review of themes, was relevant to the grounded theory process. This interview was conducted over the phone and lasted approximately 10 minutes. During all interviews, participants tended to answer questions without being asked, allowing the researcher to follow their lead and ask follow up questions as necessary and to follow the interview protocol in a semi-structured way.

At the outset of this work the project was designed to unpack professionalism and explicitly looked to understand the intersections between whiteness and professionalism. In conducting the interviews it was obvious that race and whiteness specifically are topics people

are aware of but that issues around gender and pay equality were at top of mind for the participants as well. After reviewing initial data, the researcher added a feminsit lens to the framing of the paper to acknowledge intersectionality in the field of ECE.

Data Analysis

The plan for data analysis in this research followed the suggestion of Charmaz (2006). Interview recordings were saved as audio files and marked with pseudonyms. The audio files were fed into an on-line transcription program (Otter.ai, 2021) which analyzed the audio using artificial intelligence and provided editable transcripts. Next, the researcher listened to the recordings in their entirety and cleaned up the transcripts for any errors which were then fixed. During the fixing of audio transcripts, the researcher began to note initial themes and connections across interviews and created an analytic memo of initial thoughts. To achieve this, the researcher used a document to mark themes and to note the wording of certain questions and how participants responded. Interviews were conducted in batches so that initial interviews were reviewed by the researcher before the last interviews were complete. By engaging in data analysis while conducting interviews, the researcher was able to be on alert for participants discussing certain themes related to what other participants had shared.

After the transcripts were cleaned up, the text transcripts were placed into separate document files. The researcher then re-read the transcripts and used coding to make brief notes on the content of the interviews. The constant comparative method was employed, this entailed looking again at initial data based on the emerging theoretical categories (Cresswell, 2007). After each interview was coded and reviewed, a second analytic memo was created with data pulled into loose categories of recurring themes. The data was reviewed again, this time searching for

the themes identified for further data that may have been missed. In one case, a participant

offered a hypothesis about how pay was related to professionalism according to her experience.

At the time of initial interviews, another was just planning on giving large raises to teachers in

her program. The researcher returned to the field to gather further data on the hypothesis. As

categories emerged and crystallized, the researcher began organizing the categories into findings.

Plan for the Protection of Human Subjects

This project was approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human

Subjects under protocol 1438. The plan for the protection of human subjects in this research

included an informed consent process in which participants learned their rights as research

subjects. A copy of the informed consent letter can be found in Appendix B of this report.

Research subjects were informed of the goals of the research and the study procedures in

advance. Confidentiality of participants was managed by keeping research information in a

separate, secure file away and stored separately from raw data and using pseudonyms for

participants. The researcher discussed confidentiality with participants and shared steps taken to

protect confidentiality. There is an inherent risk of emotional trauma in social sciences research

because participants are sharing memories that may or may not be painful to relive. The

researcher covered these risks with participants and made clear to participants that they may stop

sharing at any time. Finally, the researcher disclosed the benefits of participating, namely to

contribute to further understanding about the topic which may benefit the field of ECE. There are

no financial benefits to this research.

Background of the Researcher

I have been working in the field of ECE in various roles for the past 17 years and have held a variety of roles including teaching, coaching and supervision roles. My background is relevant to this research because I chose the topic based on my dissatisfaction with the status quo. I am a white woman and the seed of the idea for this project comes from my questioning the privilege I have been granted due to my identity. I easily climbed the ranks of promotion and as I held more leadership positions I became uneasy with my place of relative power in the field of ECE which touts commitment to children in their most vulnerable years and yet also pays its teachers below a living wage.

Though I came to this project seeking to be critical of whiteness and make an attempt to grasp and name the slippery system of white supremacy, my position as a white woman affected the way that participants interacted with me in interviews when discussing race. I attempted to reduce this by naming my own positionality and criticality in the interview protocol with question 10:

> I am a white woman and I think that has made my career easier in ECE. Do you
> agree that might be a true statement based on your experiences?
>   a. If agree - what have you experienced that makes you agree?
>   b. If disagree - what have you experienced that causes you to disagree?

It was my hope that by naming my perspective on whiteness that participants would be willing to share their opinions and experiences. As a researcher, I had hoped for the non-white participants to share their feelings about race. However, most of the race data was collected from white participants. As a researcher, I adjusted my focus to account for this by noting what was

and wasn't said in regards to race and let go of my expectations when it came to the data I was collecting.

The nature of my position on ECE is one of relative power. To reduce the amount of impact this caused on the study results, questions about organizations were phrased to include any organization the participant has worked with before and to allow for participants to avoid being critical in a way that would feel dangerous to their employment. Though I attempted to guard against the feelings that participating in a research study would affect their employment, the limitation of time spent together doesn't allow for the deep relationship building necessary to feel safe in sharing stories that may paint their organizations in a bad light. However, my role as an insider with shared history allowed for participants to share openly about many challenges regarding professionalism and the field generally and they told stories of challenges in the field openly that they may not have told an outsider.

CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

The results of this study on professionalism were a number of findings that illustrate the

challenges of professional identity in the field of ECE. Six experienced teachers and leaders who

have each held multiple roles in the field were interviewed. They shared their experiences and

opinions of the topic through semi-structured interviews. The researcher followed each

participant's lead in order to gather their thoughts most organically. In addition, the NAEYC

Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators (National Association

for the Education of Young Children, 2020) was reviewed as an artifact of dominant discourse

about the research topic. The findings of this study are divided into 4 areas: the first finding

covers external notions of professionalism by reviewing the NAEYC Professional Standards

(National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). The second finding covers

insider notions of professional values. The third finding looks at responses to concepts of

professionalism and unprofessionalism. Finally, the fourth finding explores race in ECE.

Finding 1: External Notions of ECE Professionalism

As an example of a universal call for ECE teachers and leaders to ascribe to one notion of

professionalism, the NAEYC Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood

Educators was reviewed (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

NAEYC is nationally recognized as a leader in ECE teacher professional development and is a

dominant voice in the field. The document details six professional standards for educators to

adopt as well as proposes a leveling system with three tiers to be implemented nationally.

Standard 6 of the competencies is entitled "Professionalism as an Early Childhood Educator".

This standard details the way that early educators should behave in order to be professionals in

the field. This includes a) acting as spokespeople and advocates for the field as well as for children and families b) agreeing to standardized codes of ethics and professional standards and working within regulation and law where applicable c) have professional communication skills including ability to communicate in English with few mistakes d) participate in professional development and collaborate with peers and finally e) reflect on their teaching practice and respond to feedback.

In addition to the guidelines, the document advocates for a leveling system to be implemented which would rate and organize early childhood educators by level of formal education in ECE and would influence pay rankings as well as ability to supervise others. In this leveling system ECE I is the lowest ranking and ECE III is the highest ranking. ECE I, the lowest level, requires at the minimum, a professional certificate or 120 hours of preparation work and allows for the holders of this level to participate as members of teaching teams. The ECE II level requires an Associate's degree and allows for responsibility to develop ECE environments under the guidance of ECE IIIs. The highest level, ECE III, requires a Bachelor's or Master's degree and gives holders of the level the ability to be fully responsible for ECE environments as well as provide supervision support to ECE Is and IIs. The leveling system gives no guidance as to what educators with less than the prescribed amount of formal training should be doing.

In "Appendix B: Critical Issues and Research" of the Professional Standards, a number of research articles are cited and summarized which note the overall lack of formal education in the field of ECE as well as point to research which has found correlation to formal education and children's outcomes. Notable to this study of professionalism, the Appendix directly states that systemic racism and the socio-political devaluing of ECE have decreased the compensation in

the field which has contributed to the fact that many in the field of ECE do not have access to higher education. The conclusion of this appendix is a call to arms for ECE educators to unify under one definition of ECE professional and advocate for themselves to have access to formal education as one path forward towards the goal of professionalizing the field.

Finding 2: Professional Values of Insiders

Participants were asked to describe good teaching and later to describe professionalism during the course of interviews. "Good teaching" as a concept was used by the researcher to unveil the values insiders have on what the ideal behaviors would be of high quality educators. The participants each came from different backgrounds and were working in a variety of contexts at the time of the interviews but there were many commonalities in interviews that highlight the values of insiders. Themes are noted here and discussed in detail below: a personal commitment to ECE that is held onto despite obstacles, fostering relationships with parents, valuing experience over education in qualifications and promotion, recognizing the context of ECE when it comes to dress codes, considering all aspects of ECE professional and resisting English only workplaces.

Personal Commitment Despite Adversity

A value in ECE that may be specific to the field is a level of personal dedication and passion for working with children 0-5 that goes above and beyond being technically skilled as a teacher. All participants described this as a desirable and necessary characteristic for doing high quality work. One teacher participant, Lauren, described herself as "so passionate" and that the work was "so important" multiple times throughout the interview. Violet, a teacher in a family child care setting, described working in ECE as her "purpose". Lyla, a site supervisor leading a

publicly funded Head Start center illustrates the idea of a good teacher as someone who is
dedicated to the field:

> Somebody who is engaged and really loves what they do. Because I think that is
> really notable, you can have teachers that know what they're doing, but if they
> don't really love what they're doing, you can see the difference.

Violet described her job of teaching as fun and that she is lucky to be able to play all day
in her work as a professional. When the researcher questioned this notion and asked about the
job also being something people might call stressful she responded that she acknowledges that
and just returns to her knowledge of the importance of the work. Violet holds this notion despite
the fact that she also described burning out and needing to take months off of work due to the
stress of her previous positions on two separate occasions in her career. In Violet's words:

> And I know there's like teacher burnout. And I know that and I experienced that.
> But I also remember why I do this, what's my Why? What's my purpose? And I
> just go back to my life and I was like, I'm here because I'm making a difference in
> their lives.

One form of adversity for those in the field of ECE is negative social pressure from
friends and family members about the type of work and the earning potential ECE affords. Some
participants described being told by friends and family members that ECE was not a good choice
of field both because it isn't an important career and because it doesn't offer earning potential.
Lauren, described her career journey as being first dissuaded from ECE then after trying other
majors and working with older children how she came back to ECE even though she was
required to take a pay cut because the work was "so important". Lauren's experience was similar
to Violet's experience. Violet was encouraged to go into the medical field and discouraged from
her work in ECE and eventually, after trying different medical classes and disliking them,
decided to embrace ECE even if it meant she would make less money.

Earning potential is one aspect of being in ECE that participants mentioned as an adverse aspect of their chosen careers. In Lyla's role as a director she is frequently faced with teachers bringing up concerns to her about their pay being inadequate and in some cases needing to get off early in order to work other jobs. Lyla has experienced people saying, "Do it for the outcomes not the incomes" and "We do it because we love it". Lyla notes the social construction of ECE educators as being lucky to do such important work. She rejects this idea and counsels teachers to not accept the situation of low wages. In her words she responds:

> And it's like a really false sense of people being able to kind of put it that way to almost make you feel bad, you know, to try to get what you feel like you're worth, right, you know, so it's, um, you know and I tell them, you know, I may not be able to change it, but I don't ever want you to feel like you don't deserve it.

Building Relationships with Parents

Building strong relationships with the parents of children was a value shared by every participant in this study. Laina, a center director, described one reason for this as being able to manage difficult situations when they arise: if a strong relationship already exists then it will be easier for teachers and directors to work with parents through those situations. Ruth, a center director, explicitly defines good teachers as those that are able to keep parents happy and those who are able to get parents to "buy into their teaching philosophy". Violet put it this way: "I feel like once you understand and communicate with the families and build a relationship and build trust, then everything else comes along". Violet also shared that one of the most rewarding moments in her work as a teacher is to be able to tell parents about how well their children did in school during pick up times.

Keeping parents happy is an important part of the job, perhaps because of the difficulty in managing parents when they are unhappy. Lauren mentioned that most of the feedback she

receives is from parents and while she values it and tries to make any changes they request, she also feels parents complain just to complain since they have the power to do so and if they knew how hard the teachers work, they wouldn't complain so much. Lyla shared that one of the hardest aspects of her job is staying calm when parents are expressing displeasure and that she has experienced being yelled at on multiple occasions by unhappy parents.

The changes to ECE environments required by COVID, notably the exclusion of all visitors including parents, was evident in participant interviews. Three of the four directors in this study described that parents didn't enter the schools anymore which made communication more challenging but made the teachers jobs better because they weren't being watched all the time. Parents not having access to the classrooms plays out in different ways in different contexts. Lyla noted that in past years she would receive complaints from parents about teachers allowing boys to play in the Playhouse in a violation of gender norms. In a COVID context, the children and teacher had the same behavior but it isn't a problem since parents weren't there to watch teachers. On the other hand, Ruth shared that she previously had relied on parents reporting complaints to her which helped her know what was happening in the classrooms and she couldn't rely on this channel of information any longer which decreased her understanding of the teacher's work.

Experience over Education

The category of experience over education is nuanced. Some participants shared stories of valuing experience in the field, including attendance at informal training, over formal education in the field in the form of college credits. However, there was a tension with some participants that they valued experience and homegrown learning over formal education while

also desiring to see more current ECE educators have access to formal education. Context of the regulatory landscape in California regarding work in child care centers is important to note for this section. The state of California sets out minimum guidelines for how many and which college classes must be taken in order for teachers to work without being supervised by other teachers (California Department of Social Services, 2021). The regulations require a minimum of 12 college semester units (4 classes) for teachers to have when working in licensed child care centers. In licensed family child care centers, regulations do not require any college units.

Mila, an executive director at a nonprofit center, described feeling frustrated that she was required by California Licensing regulations to hire teachers who had earned college credits in child development even if they had less experience than people who did not have the credits. She described feeling like she would trust someone with many years of experience far more than someone without. Lauren described the value of seeing classrooms and working as an intern before being hired as a teacher and that people who haven't experienced ECE classrooms would have "no clue" what was going on. For Laina, the desire to grow and learn in the field does not mean obtaining higher level formal degrees. She shared that for her, opportunities to learn from peers and insider experts through training and professional learning communities (PLCs) are the ways that she has grown and considers herself a professional. On the other hand, Laina also shared the desire for ECE teachers to have access to formal education and cited wages as a barrier for access.

> ...So there's just this whole piece that feels really frustrating as someone who is a leader in this space, and you want this change to happen, and you want people to go back to school to be learners and to value this and see themselves as professionals, but we're not going to honor them with the respect of other fields or the salary of other fields…

Dress Codes

Understanding the nature of work in ECE as inherently messy and physically active was more important to participants than looking "professional" on the job. Participants valued being able to wear comfortable clothing that they can move easily in. Lyla described how one large for-profit early education company that she worked for had enforced dress codes on teachers including banning wearing jeans. Lyla felt this was not an appropriate action and that it made it seem that they couldn't be professional if they were wearing jeans. In her words:

> Just because you want them to be professional doesn't change what they do for a profession so asking for a certain look or certain clothes when you're going to be working with young children is not really a great professional expectation.

As Lyla clearly articulates above, dominant ideas of professional dress may not be appropriate in the setting of ECE. Lyla also stated that if she would wear a suit to have meetings with families who were low income then she would appear disconnected which would not be an advantage to her in her career. Violet relayed a story about how different environments have different dress codes and cited the example of how she was required to wear slacks and blouses at all times in a previous job as an ECE teacher. She described this as being hard for teachers and that in her current work environment, which does not have a dress code, she is able to be professional and knows how to talk to parents at the end of the day regardless of what she is wearing.

Working with children can be messy, participants described getting paint on clothes, getting vomited on and needing to move quickly during the day. Instead of focusing on the clothes, participants described the communication held with parents and co-workers to be the most important aspect of professionalism and that clearly articulating learning that had happened

was much more important than the way that teachers looked. One participant, Ruth, struggled

with this a little bit and had recently come to new terms about her own dress in the workplace.

As a director, she had always attempted to wear "slacks" but after having had a baby and

returning to work, she was unable to fit into her old clothes so was wearing jeans at work. She

shared that people didn't treat her any differently and it was the way she acted with families and

teachers in her role as director that turned out to be more important than the clothes she was

wearing.

The Many Jobs of Early Educators

Aside from teaching children, ECE teachers are required to engage in many other

activities that are not generally considered professional behaviors. This included cleaning,

cooking and changing diapers. These tasks were described as necessary and important parts of

the job. In Laina's center, other than teaching and working with children, teachers are required to

communicate with families and build relationships, complete daily cleaning tasks, and manage

health precautions for COVID 19. Executing all of these tasks well, in addition to teaching

children, made for successful teachers in her center.

Lauren, one of the teacher participants, was asked to describe any aspects of her job that

feel like a waste of her time as a teacher. Her response illustrates that she considers all aspects,

even the small tasks, to be meaningful in her identity as an early educator. Lauren also makes a

statement about the label 'teacher' versus the label 'early educator' which is distinct to her.

> I don't know necessarily, like, if I was just saying like, Oh, I'm just a teacher and I
> am just here to teach then maybe some of the things that I do like food prep and
> things like that aren't necessarily super helpful for me as a teacher, but as an early
> educator and someone who wants to, like grow in the field, I try and find value in
> everything that I do, if that makes sense. And even like grocery shopping or like
> curriculum planning and or looking at Pinterest for activities, those are things that
> I genuinely enjoy.

In Mila's work as an executive director, her center has been having problems with low staff availability and needing to book frequent temporary workers. In this context, Mila places value on flexible teachers who are able to care for children, despite the difficult work conditions. In the following quote, she describes this value as, " ... make sure that kids are still having fun and like, go home changed." Going home changed in this sentence refers to children's diapers being clean when they are picked up from school. Other roles teachers have in her center are to sweep, sanitize tables and to serve food for snack time.

Resisting English-only Workplaces

Participants in this study described a value of embracing colleagues that speak in languages other than English and valuing them for the contributions they bring regardless of their ability to speak English. Notably, all the participants of this study speak English fluently and two are fluent in Spanish as well. The participants of this study shared their experiences working with teachers who spoke languages other than English as their primary languages and how these co-workers were treated differently based on their ability to speak in English, regardless of their skill or level of experience. The participants argued for a more inclusive approach to these teachers and in some cases were able to advocate for these co-workers.

In Lyla's workplace, many families attend the center that do not communicate easily in English. For this reason, she highly values teachers who speak in other languages and she notes that when the multilingual teachers are absent from work everyone notices since they can't share things and answer questions of the parents who arrive. Lauren described an incident she experienced in a previous job: an infant co-teacher was feeling disrespected because she couldn't communicate clearly with the parents and was being paid less than other teachers for this reason.

The rest of the staff noticed how she was being treated unfairly based on her language ability. Lauren and other teachers went to the director and advocated for this teacher to be promoted given her experience and knowledge. The director agreed and Lauren shared her pride in being able to have a more inclusive view of leadership that included people with different language abilities.

Mila described two incidents from her early teaching career that involved the restriction of language for ECE teachers. At one staff meeting, the director of her center was presented with concerns from English speaking teachers that Spanish speaking teachers were speaking in Spanish in front of other teachers and they couldn't understand what was being said. The director's response was to ask all teachers to speak exclusively English when in their classrooms. Mila was upset by this comment as a Spanish speaking teacher and on behalf of her co-teachers who did not speak English fluently as she did, she organized a letter of complaint to be written by the staff and shared with the director and the regional manager who oversaw the site. In response, Mila was given a formal letter of misconduct to be placed in her employee file and told that it was unprofessional to go above the head of the director and complain to the regional manager. The write up did not include a response on the content of the complaint.

Finding 3: Professionalism and Unprofessionalism

"Professional" was a contested term by the participants in this study. While the above section shows that insiders in the field have share professional values and clearly articulated thoughts about desirable characteristics for those in the ECE field, the term professional being introduced by the researcher brought out many strong opinions and storytelling regarding the use of this term in the field of ECE and whether it is an appropriate label at all. Participants

described how they feel acutely that the rest of society doesn't see them as professionals by nature of the work they do. A critique was presented by participants that professional expectations don't match their work and that external pressures and demands are placed on the field in order to be considered more professional.

An example of this is Violet's response to the researcher asking what people mean when they say ECE teachers are or are not professional. The researcher was looking for examples of professional behavior but was met with a response about the term professional being applied to ECE teachers. Violet associates the term professional with experiences she has had with people telling her she is not professional based on their ideas of the low level work that she completes in ECE, she notes they call her a "babysitter":

> ...when I tell people that I work in early childhood education, and I work with infants, or toddlers or preschoolers, like, oh, you're a babysitter. And as soon as I hear that, I'm like, No, I just don't sit and watch children.

For the director participants, one aspect of professionalism that impacted their roles was the ability to work with and respond to teachers as employees and manage workplace behaviors in a professional way. Teachers not attending work or calling in sick frequently was mentioned by three of the four directors as a major stressor that impacted their work. Ruth also described how in her role, being professional was being able to keep trying and working with teachers even when they didn't want her help or respond positively to feedback. Lyla described needing to teach new teachers how to be professional in the workplace, she describes how she attempts to define unprofessionalism to new teachers as, "The way you say things, what you're saying, how you look, is your face saying something different than your mouth?"

Lauren described professionalism in terms of how passionate a teacher is about ECE and

relates unprofessional behaviors to the level of passion someone has. For Lauren, if a teacher is professional, they have passion for the field and passion for improving the field whereas teachers who aren't professional don't have passion and, due to a lack of passion, exhibit unprofessional behaviors such as being late, not showing up for work and not trying their best at their work.

When describing what professionalism and unprofessionalism specifically means, the definitions were at times quite opaque and poorly defined. Ruth uses this opaque language to describe professionalism and unprofessionalism and essentially defines the two in the exact same way, leaving her as the judge of which ways of carrying and ways of looking and ways of acting are professional and which are not:

> I feel it is a whole, it's a whole perception of how they carry their self, from the way they look, to the way they interact. And I think that when they say that someone is unprofessional, it is also the same thing is what… the way they carry themselves and the way they look and the way they act.

Unprofessionalism was described in opposite terms for Mila. In her role as an executive director she experienced working with one teacher who responded to the social construction of ECE as babysitting by behaving in ways that the teacher deemed as more professional. Mila described the teacher choosing adult oriented language as well as intentionally not showing emotion or sharing warm physical interactions with children such as hugging.

> For one teacher, I can tell you, they refuse to associate anything we do or say as like babysitting, so they're like we're not a daycare, we're not a co-op so that's why children need to come right at this time. Can't call it potty training, it's toilet training, it's like it's for them, they really identify with the profession and being professional in this field. They don't form things like loving, nurturing attachments with kids. Like, they're not huggy because they want to, like they want to have the composure of being like not a professor, but you know, like, a teacher and we have our distance.

For Mila, professionalism is, "is more just like I think interactions with people, you

know, are you kind? Can you hold a conversation?... Can you work with people? Can you collaborate? Can you show up? Can you be freaking on time?" While Mila describes the teacher above, who is responding to external depictions of the ECE field as unprofessional, she rejects the teacher's behavior as unprofessional according to the nurturing, collaborative values of the field that she ascribes to. These examples together show how unprofessionalism and professionalism together are terms with multiple, sometimes contradictory and overlapping meanings.

Unprofessionalism and Low Wages

For some participants, unprofessionalism in the field of ECE is correlated to low wages. Ruth and Mila, both center directors in private contexts, described in detail examples of teachers acting in unprofessional ways like missing work frequently, refusing to take feedback and being inflexible was related to the fact that they didn't make very much money. Ruth shared a story of one teacher she had in the center who received a raise of $1.50/hour. When the teacher received the raise, Ruth noticed that they carried themselves in a different way in the school. She describes that the raise changed the teacher's attitude about her own work which made her act more professionally. In Ruth's words, "the money piece makes you feel a little bit more worthy".

At the time of her initial interview with the researcher, Mila was at the precipice of giving 10% raises to her entire staff. She had worked hard to secure these raises and was looking forward to giving each of the teachers a higher wage. The researcher contacted Ruth a few weeks after the raises had been given to ask her how it went. Ruth stated that some teachers were relieved to have more money to spend around the holidays but that it didn't change any of the unprofessional behaviors she had noted previously and that she still struggled with teachers

missing work as a frequent challenge. In her words, "I didn't say like, 'Hey, these raises are for you to not call out anymore, or as much as you do', but honestly, the call outs are still through the roof".

Finding 4: Race in ECE

Race is a factor that impacts the experiences of the participants in this study. Two themes related to race are covered in this section. The first: race is a factor when it comes to promotion opportunities and advancement within the field. The second: white identifying participants have experienced increased awareness of their race in relation to recent social movements.

Race and Promotion

When asked about how issues around race have come up in their work, participants shared stories of how the promotion track may be related not to the skills of educators but rather to their race. Laina noted that all of the people who were promoted into higher level administrative jobs in her center had come from the pre-kindergarten classroom which they taught the oldest children (4-5 year olds). She described these teachers as having more education related responsibilities, such as developmental assessments, than teachers of younger children and that they were qualified for these additional responsibilities due to higher levels of formal education. She noted that all of these administrators were white, as she is, and that being a teacher in the oldest classrooms is a path to promotion whereas teaching in the classrooms that served younger children is not. Laina noted that in her experience, teachers who worked in the infant and toddler classrooms were more likely to be older, be non-native English speakers and women of color with less education than the teachers of pre-kindergarten. In her opinion, the stereotype of Asian and Latina women as caregivers influences what jobs they have access to in

ECE. (Note that the reference to demographic information is uncited by the participant).

> I think that there's an expectation of the people who are in the field as caregivers and that expectation is shown probably by demographical research, if you do it, especially in the Bay Area, you know, a lot of Asian or Latina women are often seen as caregivers are especially in infant classrooms, which tend to be more of a caregiver style than teacher style.

Lyla, a Mexican identifying site supervisor, gives another example of participants citing race as a concern regarding career advancement. She explained that in her workplace she had seen that only white women were at higher levels within the county doing administration of ECE programs. She noted that in her experience one white woman would recruit and refer her friend, another white woman, who would then take her place leaving no room for advancement for people of color to take on higher level roles. In the following quote, Lyla shares that there have been some changes to decrease this phenomena and that she hopes it ends up being a sign of change to come. In the quote, the word "they" first refers to white supervisors and the second "they" refers to decision makers within her county department of education that have control over hiring.

> They were all white women, about the same age, who came up together. And, and they finally, you know, said, "We need to change" because a lot of people were seeing that as a reflection on how far they can rise in the county, no matter how long they've been here. And no matter how much education you gathered.

White Participant Reflections on Race

A further finding related to race is that white identifying participants in this study are reflecting on their race in relation to advantages they have been given. Three of the six participants in this study are white. Each of the three white teachers and leaders noted that they were aware of their whiteness since the Black Lives Matters movement and that they had reflected on their own whiteness in response to the racial justice movement. Each of these

participants noted that they felt sad and some level of guilt for having got to where they were based on the color of their skin.

The researcher asked each of the participants the following question, "I am a white woman. And I think that that has really made my career easier in early childhood education. Do you agree that that might be a true statement based on your experience?" Each of the white participants, Lauren, Ruth and Laina agreed fully with this statement and thought that their racial identity had played a role in their ability to be promoted and to get jobs when they interviewed for them. Lauren had previously held the role of director in her last center. She felt that she had been promoted based on her race and that she wondered at the time if she had only gotten the job based on the way that she looked. She said she felt guilty over this and hoped that nobody else had these feelings when they saw her in her job. Here Lauren is describing her thoughts after being promoted:

> I did find myself kind of questioning like why me? like why was I kind of picked to take on this role when there's like so many other amazing teachers here? and people that have experience? And that was definitely like a time of reflection of like, okay, is it because I have a strong background? And like I'm super passionate? Um, or is it because I am a white female and I am someone who like stands out to my boss because I'm a white female? or is it both?

Ruth shared a story about her first job interview. She had gone to a center in order to apply to be a teacher and she had run into a regional manager of the organization who was also white. This woman, despite not being the hiring manager for the position she had come to apply for, took one look at her, requested her resume and asked her instead to apply for an assistant director job at another site in her region. Lauren was given the job as an assistant director, from which she worked a few months and then took over the directorship. She feels that this was related to the way related to her being white and that she might have been deemed trustworthy

based off of her whiteness. Ruth reflected, "I think that had I been a different race, it wouldn't

have happened that same way". Laina shared that her race makes opportunities easier for her and

the fact that she hasn't experienced adversity in her career is related to her identity as a white

woman.

> And so yeah, for sure, I think that a lot of things in my life are easier because I'm
> a white woman, including like the way my personality is developed and the way I
> think of my potential. Yeah, I would be foolish to say no.

CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

Early Childhood Education is a field that has garnered much attention on the world stage in the past several decades and is in the news in 2021 as the United States elected representatives take on solving the childcare crisis. This study was conducted in order to more deeply understand the lived experiences of the professionals at the center of this attention. Six experienced ECE educators were interviewed. The findings of this study on ECE professionalism illustrate some of the problems of practice in the field. ECE professionals have strong professional values including passion for their chosen careers and the many aspects of that career. Professionalism as a concept was contested by the participants who noted that the honor they feel to be teaching the youngest members of society is not reciprocated by that society. Finally, the participants indicated that race shows up in importants ways in their work and racism in action is tangible to them.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate there is a dissonance between the ways that insiders see their roles in society i.e.,"This work is so important", and the ways they have experienced society responding to them i.e., "You are a babysitter". I argue that there are two ways of responding to this dissonance that may be useful in having a deeper knowledge of the lived experience of ECE teachers and leaders. I call the first *constructive reimagining* of professionalism which extends the boundaries of professionalism to include ECE as a legitimate profession and includes the values of early educators as tenets of professionalism. The second I've identified as *destructive reimagining* which tightens the field of ECE to fit within the

professional boundaries set out by the rest of society and restricts access to the title of "professional" to only certain members of the group. Each of the participants of this study advocated for constructive reimagining and described different ideas they have to reimagine professionalism.

Constructive Reimagining

Finding three of chapter four shows that mentioning the idea of professionalism to the participants in the study garnered strong reactions and this hit on deep seated problems of practice in the field. Participants all recognize the field as deserving of respect and have passion for the importance of ECE as a social good. Urban et al. (2012) outlines their idea for moving forward in ECE as a competent system. A competent system acknowledges ECE as a social good, creates locally contextualized understandings, improves working conditions for ECE professionals, integrates support and professional development and addresses institutional inequities in ECE. Developing the idea of Urban et al. with the data from this study, constructive reimagining is conceptualization put forward by the author to understand the ways that participants were describing their knowledge of their own professional standing and their rejection of the status quo. Constructive reimagining can be thought of as one of the forward moves necessary toward a competent system. The stories and ideas shared by participants offer a new way to think about professionalism, one that includes diaper changes and wearing jeans and resists popular constructions of ECE teachers as low-skilled, low-wage workers who play all day. This reimagining expands the borders of professionalism to include the field of ECE, effectively saying "Yes! We deserve a seat at the table- just make it bigger!"

While research has pointed to losses in belonging and identity related to neoliberal pressure on the field of ECE (Delaune, 2019; Kilderry, 2015; Press et al., 2018), the findings of this study complicate previous findings and point to the idea that the participants have a strong sense of belonging and passion for their identities as ECE educators despite the adversity they have faced. It is notable that the participants of this study were largely a group of professionals with 10 or more years of experience in the field and many were leaders at the time of the study and all had been leaders at one point in their careers. The participants point to a strong sense of devotion that is necessary to be in the field and perhaps it is this devotion that led these participants to stay and advocate for the constructive reimagining of their chosen profession rather than give in to pressure to shape it to fit the ideas of outsiders. The findings of this study indicate that while the global and political context of ECE is pressured by neoliberal policies, the professionals on the ground are not neutral actors that sway to all pressures. They are robust members of a community with a strong set of homegrown values and ideas for what can and should be considered professional behavior.

The findings of MacCrimmon & Lakind (2017) indicate that ECE professionals have strong insider values and want to be judged by those values. The findings of this study confirm these findings and offer examples of how insider values can be prioritized. Participants in this study indicated that all aspects of working as ECE teachers, including sweeping, changing diapers and talking to parents are valuable and necessary aspects of professionalism. This idea is constructive reimagining at work: rather than rejecting the perhaps mundane and laborious parts of their jobs, participants celebrated the importance of these tasks and urged professionalism to include all of their work. Another example of constructive reimagining is the way participants

consider dress codes. Participants argued that fitting the field to the standards of office jobs does not help their image and can in some cases hurt it by causing them to seem out of touch. Instead, they argued for the desire to be treated respectfully as the professionals they are and that casual clothing that they can move in is a better standard than typical norms of professional dress such as suits and slacks.

The work of Reinke et al. (2019) suggests that standardizing is bad for children and argues for a harmonious ECE field that works together for children and lets there be many right ways to work in the field. While the findings of that study made these claims in regard to building curriculum, this study suggests support of this claim as it applies to other aspects of working as well. One example is the way participants argued against English-only workplaces and sought to look past English-only teaching to value the competencies of ECE teachers who speak other languages. Participants showed a commitment to acknowledging that there are many ways to do the job of teaching young children correctly. This is evidenced by stories that were shared about seeing leadership ability in teachers regardless of their ability to speak English. While the findings of Reinke et al. (2019) suggest while advocating for open and unrestricted curriculum models may be important, the dissonance teachers and directors feel between their belief in the importance of their work and the knowledge they are not well respected for this work needs to be addressed in order for the field to move on to the harmonious future the authors have designs upon.

Destructive Reimagining

Neoliberalism attempts to solve problems by creating markets in which services can be bought and sold. In this market based approach, quality is believed to be improved because

consumers select the highest quality service at the best price and where poor quality services will fade away since they aren't selected. Neoliberal market forces have attempted to position ECE services as a good to be bought and sold and that in this market based approach labor is devalued (Press et al., 2018). Critiques of neoliberal policies put forth by researchers encourage us to look closely at who retains power and who is stripped of power in market based approaches (Osgood, 2006). To critique the way neoliberalism is impacting understandings of professionalism, the author is putting forward a new conceptualization named *destructive reimagining.* Destructive reimagining is the call for assimilation to one set of values and the marginalization of some members of a community to that end. As discussed in the previous section, participants of this study responded to the dissonance in discussions of professionalism by imagining a new professionalism that would include them as they are. Destructive reimagining can be thought of as the opposite response: to narrow the definition of professionalism to only include certain professionals.

The Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020) is an example of dominant discourse that offers its version of professionalism as a fix for the problems of practice in ECE. This document is an example of the urge to professionalize in order to resist notions of ECE as a field of unskilled babysitters doing "women's work" that unfortunately acts as a double edged sword to further marginalize the educators it purports to serve (Cannella, 1997). The universal standard set forth by NAEYC restricts the path forward for educators by ability to access and complete formal education programs. In addition, the Standards and Practices ask for adherence to one set of beliefs across many different contexts instead of allowing for multiple paths into ECE

leadership. The findings of this study, that NAEYC is offering one standard as a solution, confirms what Osgood (2006) and Press et al. (2018) have indicated: neoliberal pressure encourages regulation and standardization.

Urban et al. (2012) found that neoliberal policies place the ownership on improving quality onto individual teachers instead of on comprehensive systems. The findings of this study confirm these findings and indicate that ECE teachers are being asked to take up the charge of improving the field by demanding access to formal education. NAEYC is asking individual teachers to take change into their own hands instead of calling for systemic change that values the educators that are in the field for what they already have. It is important to note that the NAEYC document is counter to what participants in this study have shared as their values. Whereas participants pointed to examples in their lives and workplaces where they see opportunities to reclaim professionalism as their own and include the passionate values they hold, the Professional Standards represent an opposite response to redesign ECE to fit into the professional mold.

Low wages. This research study was not centered around pay in ECE, however, each of the participants of this study brought up the issue of low wages and referred to this as an issue of professionalism. Participants discussed low wages as a problem in the ECE world and professionalization movements have used increasing wages as a reason for professionalizing the field. Laina's statement clearly illustrates this viewpoint that wages and pay are connected:

> I would say a lot of the time people that are not in the field, don't consider it a profession for teachers, for administrators, for directors, sure. And I would say part of that is tied into salary. And the money that people can make in this field doesn't feel like a professional wage.

Press et al. (2018) found that labor is devalued in neoliberal market based solutions. This work helps to explain why wages and pay may have been top of mind for participants when discussing professionalism in the field. By advocating that all teachers in ECE must have qualifications they do not have and tying pay and leadership opportunity to those qualifications, there is a justification for the low wages ECE professionals receive.

Parents as Customers. The findings of MacCrimmon & Lakind (2017) indicate that market based approaches to ECE could cause some child care providers to engage in subversive behavior when parents make complaints because they feel a loss of agency when placed in a competitive market. The findings of this study indicated teachers and directors in this study experience the need to perform and please parents and that relationships with parents are of the utmost importance. Participants discussed this in their conceptions of high ranked value to "keep parents happy". Interestingly, this was the case for the participants who work in the private sector as well as the participants working in the public sector. Much research on neoliberal policies points to the way global competition has influenced state policies and that the regulations imposed by the state have caused an impact on the lives of teachers (Delaune, 2019; Urban et al., 2012) and the findings of this study point to the fact that changing ideas of child care as a commodity might be changing the ways those working in ECE are interacting with parents as customers. The implications of these findings together with those of MacCrimmon and Lakind (2017) indicate that the high focus on keeping parents "happy" is an issue of concern and that it may be destructive to notions of professionalism that exist within the field if parents continue to gain more power over the lives of early educators.

Race in ECE

One of the goals of this research study was to learn more about how race works in ECE by looking at race through the lens of critical whiteness studies. The tenets of critical whiteness studies encourage us to move cautiously ahead when presented with anything that names itself "best" and "good" without criticality and search for examples of white supremacy in action (Applebaum, 2016). Whiteness only works if it is invisible. One of the tenets of white supremacy is to create boundaries that include whiteness and exclude others. In order to make visible these invisible boundaries, this section explicitly names whiteness as a force that is impacting the professional lives of teachers and leaders in ECE as evidenced by findings in this study.

External Definitions of Professionalism. Whiteness seeks to create invisible systems that privilege whites and justifies this privilege by calling it objective. The Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020) markets itself as the best path forward. This document was examined with a critical eye seeking to find ways that whiteness has permeated this agenda and it is posited that this document is not just an example of neoliberal attempts to standardize professionalism as previously stated but that it is a document perpetuating white supremacy. The leveling system the document calls for would create a hierarchy within professionalism by education level and give those with higher levels of formal education the ability to supervise those with less. This system is marketed as an objective way to increase levels of education by incentivizing engagement with higher education. Calling for a leveling system that is based solely on formal education creates a boundary within professionals that allows those with access to formal education to be professionals but restricts access to those who do not have access. The

document itself acknowledges that pathways to higher education are known to be racialized. Ignoring this acknowledgement and calling for the leveling system anyway is an example of white supremacy in action. By highlighting these examples, we can see how this document is working to align the idea of professionalism to the idea of being white and thus bolstering white supremacy.

It's the Way you Hold Yourself. Picower (2009) states that white educators must be educated about racial privilege so that they may work with BIPOC children in humanizing ways. The findings of this study take this a step further and indicate that understanding racial privilege may also be important with understanding how whiteness is valued in the ideology of professionalism. By using opaque definitions of professionalism, Ruth highlights how she knows the boundaries but that others may not. Given that Ruth is a white woman in a position of power over teachers, her comments are important in this discussion of race. For easy reference, here is her comment again, she is defining what professionalism is and isn't:

> I feel it is a whole, it's a whole perception of how they carry their self, from the way they look, to the way they interact. And I think that when they say that someone is unprofessional. It is also the same thing is what the way they carry themselves and the way they look and the way they act.

According to Applebaum (2016), when systems are ill-defined they can be employed to create racialized boundaries that can be used to promote white supremacy. In Ruth's position, she has the ability to hire, fire and promote folks according to her understanding of their professional abilities so her lack of clarity in definition is problematic and could have consequences for some employees. Based on this subjective description of professionalism, people with different identities than Ruth, who is a white woman and can only see the world through her own eyes, may be judged as unprofessional without having a clear sense of how they are or are not

professional. By unpacking this quote through the lens of whiteness we can see how white supremacy is served by having a lack of clarity around professionalism.

Race and Promotion. McIntosh (1989) theorizes white privilege as the system of invisible advantages that white people are awarded based on their skin color. The findings of this study suggest that participants are aware of higher rates of white people in leadership roles. The availability of role models who are white privileges younger generations of white people within promotion. Examples of systematic dis-privileging of people of color was present in the participants' responses as well. Participants told stories of teachers of color being relegated to work with infants and toddlers where the work is deemed less skilled and white teachers working in older classrooms. Cheruvu et al. (2015) found that pre-service preschool teachers of color are marginalized in their higher education programs. The findings of this study add on to the findings of Cheruvu et al. by indicating that teachers of color are also marginalized in their workplaces, perhaps even more when they haven't attended formal education pathways with student-teacher experiences. It is important to note that labor is already devalued in the context of neoliberal ECE (Press et al., 2018) and that these findings highlight that ECE professionals of color are further marginalized among a field of already marginalized workers.

Another boundary set out by NAEYC in the Standards and Practices (2020) is the way professionalism can be measured by ability to communicate with few errors in English. This explicitly restricts the identity of a professional to users of English and excludes all educators with different language abilities from the definition. Since there are many users of other languages that are also white, this boundary doesn't call itself out as explicitly racialized, however the findings of this study indicate that participants are aware that ECE teachers who do

not communicate in English are more likely to be people of color. Promotion practices are privileging whiteness while also masquerading as objective. Things like education level, working in certain classrooms and age groups of children served are acting as a tool to sort white people into leadership roles.

      White Participants Reflections on Race. While the findings of Picower (2009) and Miller (2017) would indicate that white participants in this study might be resistant to discussing race or acknowledging how racial privilege had positively impacted their careers, the findings of this study contradict that prediction and found that white participants acknowledged white privilege and spoke critically to the power whiteness has had on their careers and also spoke to taking opportunities to give intentional advantages to teachers of color when presented with the opportunity. The implication of these findings in relation to the theory of Critical Whiteness Studies is important. Baldwin (1963) theorizes that white supremacy exists because of the way it works invisibly for white people. The findings of this study may indicate that the boundaries of white supremacy are no longer invisible to the participants as they are able to name their racial privilege.

      As the findings of this study are surprising and different from what other research has indicated, the findings of Jackson (2011) can be helpful in unpacking what is happening for white participants in this study. Jackson adapts the theory of interest convergence to explain why some white people engage in antiracist thinking and action despite the fact that it seems to work against white interest. The participants of this study cited the social movement Black Lives Matters when discussing their understandings of privilege. The nod to a popular social movement indicates that the white participants have perhaps identified gains in the practice of

identifying themselves with the popular movement. In this way, antiracist thinking and action converge on these participants' interests psychologically and morally. The overarching goal of critical whiteness studies is to make visible the boundaries of white supremacy in order to end practices and policies that systematically give less to people of color in order to give more to white people. This study speaks to the first step for white people that Baldwin (1963), McIntosh (1989) and Leonardo (2004) and many others have argued for which is acknowledging white supremacy as a system. The fact that this study took place in 2021, 58 years after James Baldwin makes the call, and participants assigned credit to recent social movements as catalysts to helping them see the ways they are privileged as white people should be an indication of how powerful white supremacy is and how important making it visible really is.

Recommendations

For Research

Future studies should be done to expand the knowledge of everyday professionals in the field of ECE. Currently, much research is focused on either students in teacher education programs or practitioners with ties to the university but most ECE teachers and leaders aren't visible to the university. This study was able to gain an enormous amount of rich data from only six tenured participants from a few types of organizations. Imagine the things that we could learn from interviewing hundreds or thousands of participants from multiple types of organizations and in different stages of their careers.

Research that focuses on the role parents play in ECE, especially in regards to neoliberal policy, is not robust. Further research should be done that looks at the ways that the parent role may be changing when parents are primarily customers would be useful. In addition, research

should be done to further understand other aspects of neoliberal pressure. This study was limited in scope to professionalism but touched on the ways that neoliberalism impacts the ways teachers interact with parents, the ways teachers interact with each other and the ways that agency is developed in the field in response to neoliberal pressure. Additional research on these topics is suggested.

The structure of this thesis was set out to investigate how race may be showing up in ECE and takes for granted that ECE is already a highly gendered space but does not interrogate the role of patriarchy. Whiteness was used as a lens to understand race in this context but it is clear that gender norms and roles are critical to a full understanding of professionalism in the field of ECE. Further research should be completed that seeks to understand how race *and* gender together impact the professional lives of ECE educators. Perhaps work on multiply marginalized communities could be used to further understand the forces that impact this topic.

For Practice

The findings of this study can be useful to ECE professionals who want more from their chosen careers. The problems of practice that many ECE professionals face such as difficult parents, poor wages and racist promotion pathways are impacted and caused by systems and policies that are acting on the field. This study can help ECE professionals realize that the dissonance they feel is not just related to what is right in front of them but by the ways global pressures such as neoliberalism and white supremacy are shaping their world. This study can be useful to inspire ECE professionals to get involved in policy creation and raise their voices so local political leaders can make just policy decisions that celebrate and build upon the wealth of knowledge already existing in the field rather than seek to re-shape it to fit external standards. As

much of ECE exists in private spaces, this study can also be useful for leaders in organizations who make decisions about professional standards for ECE teachers and leaders within their organizations.

ECE professionals deserve a living wage because everyone deserves a living wage. External pressure exists to insist that ECE can assimilate to systems that create pathways to a living wage. This pressure must be acknowledged and rejected for what it is, a system that creates division in the field and prevents the field from acting together to claim what is right. The voices of the participants in this study should inspire all those in the field to know that the work is not so important that it is worth doing despite the adversity it causes but in fact so worth doing it shouldn't cause adversity.

Fights for respect and increased wages in the field of ECE are incredibly important and the author is not arguing against these fights. However, the author is vehemently arguing against buying into ideas of professionalism that destructively reimagine the field and leave out any teachers or leaders. White teachers and leaders in ECE must realize that whiteness is being used in the field of ECE to sort white people into leadership roles and higher pay by creating "objective" sorting tools and that this is bad for everyone. Only by first realizing how white supremacy is working and then rejecting these systems will we all be able to gain respect and increased wages together.

Conclusion

As an ECE professional myself, this study is deeply personal and allowed me to look through the lens of theory and research at some of the problems in the field I have come to take for granted. I, like the participants in this study, have a strong belief that working in this field is

worth many sacrifices including low wages and living with the daily knowledge that the hard

work I have done day in and day out for nearly 20 years is undervalued by society. However, this

research allowed me to step back and uncover some of the reasons why this might be happening

and to develop a conceptualization of the field that moves beyond staking claim to

professionalism but instead reimagines a new professionalism that holds me and my peers up and

celebrates us for who we are without trying to change us.

Baldwin's (1963) call to white people to take up and fight white supremacy speaks to me

as I complete this investigation. I came to this research project hoping to investigate how

whiteness works in professionalism movements and to understand how whiteness has worked in

my own life. I was surprised to hear the responses of these participants and excited that others in

my field were articulating recognition of their whiteness and critiquing the way whiteness has

been used to privilege them. These findings invigorate and humble me. There is so much work to

be done but I am proud that white professionals in my field are naming and moving against white

supremacy and I am excited to take the findings and conclusions from these pages back to the

field in my daily practice.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Intro: Thank you for meeting with me today. As I shared with you, I am working on the final project for a Masters degree and I am learning about folks that work in Early Childhood Education. I am especially interested in the way that ECE teachers and leaders think of professionalism. I am also interested in how race and gender has or has not been important to people in their work. I got interested in this project from my experience in ECE as a teacher, director and teacher trainer. I want to hear a lot of different perspectives and I am looking forward to hearing from you.

If I have your permission, I would like to record this interview so I can return to your words later. You may stop the interview or the recording at any time, just let me know. Do you have any questions for me? Alright then, let's get started!

1. Tell me a little bit about your current job and your experience in ECE.

2. In your opinion, what makes a really great teacher?

    a. For you, where did these ideas about good teaching come from?

    b. What is your organization's idea of good teaching?

    c. What do you think accounts for the discrepancies or similarities in your ideas and your organization's ideas?

3. Describe for me the tasks you (teachers) must complete for your work besides teaching children in your center?

      a. How do you decide how to use your time in the classroom?

4. How do you receive feedback on your teaching? (if leader) How do you learn about the

    quality of a teacher's work?

      a. Do you think that the way your organization gives you feedback reflects your

        work as a teacher?

      b. If you could choose, how would you want to get/give feedback?

5. In your role, are there any standard assessments that are done in your classroom/center?

    (can give examples- ECERS, ITERS, CLASS)

      a. Can you tell me about a standard from the assessment that you think is a useful

        measure of teaching? Why is it useful?

      b. Can you tell me about a standard from the assessment that you disagree with or

        that you don't think is an accurate measure of good teaching? What do you

        disagree with?

      c. What is a standard that you struggle to perform well on?

6. Are there any requirements of your job that you must do that do not feel useful to you as

    a teacher?

      a. What would the teachers say to this question?

      b. How would you have it be instead?

    *I'm going to switch gears a little bit and ask you about culture and gender. I'd like to
know if...*

7. Issues of race, culture or gender come up in your workplace?

    a.   If so, can you tell me about a time when something like that came up and you felt good about it?

    b. How about a specific situation where you disagreed or were unhappy with the way it was dealt with?

8. What are issues of race, culture or gender in your work that your organization doesn't discuss but should?

9. Have you ever experienced a time where you thought you were being treated differently based on your race or gender in your work as a teacher?

    a. If no- why do you think that is?

10. I am a white woman and I think that has made my career easier in ECE. Do you agree that might be a true statement based on your experiences?

    a. If agree - what have you experienced that makes you agree?

    b. If disagree - what have you experienced that causes you to disagree?

11. What do you think people mean when they say someone is or isn't professional?

12. Do you consider yourself professional? Why or why not?

13. If you were hiring all the teachers, which qualities would you look for?

14. What else have I not asked you that you think is important for me to understand about working as an ECE teacher/leader?

15. Final Question: I am looking for a little demographic information, how do you identify yourself?

Appendix B: IRB Consent form

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

Consent Form for Adults

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study entitled Professionalism in Early Childhood Education conducted by Kimberly Thai, a Masters student in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco. This faculty supervisor for this study is Professor Seenae Chong, a professor in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:
The purpose of this research study is to understand how professionalism is defined and understood by ECE professionals. The study will focus on how professional identity is connected to personal identity features such as race and gender.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:
During this study, the following will happen: You will be interviewed about your experience as an ECE professional.

With your permission, we will audiotape and take notes during the interview. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide, and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be audiotaped, we will take notes instead. If you agree to being audiotaped but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, we can turn off the recorder at your request. Or if you don't wish to continue, you can stop the interview at any time.

Your participation in this study will involve a 45- 60 minute long interview and may involve a short follow up session. The study will take place over zoom or in a public location if you prefer.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

The risks and benefits associated with this study are a loss of your time and the risks associated with regular activities. The benefit of the study is that it may add to the research on the field of early education professionals. This information, once collected, might be read by policymakers, educational experts, educators and scholars and could affect the educational practice. If you do not want to participate in the study, you will not be mentioned in any documents of the study, and your decision to not participate will not be told to anyone. You may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the

study without penalty. If you are upset by any of the questions asked, the researcher will refer you to counseling services available publicly or at the university if you are a member of the academic community (student, staff or professor).

BENEFITS:

You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study; however, the possible benefits to others from this study may benefit other people now or in the future to have a deeper understanding of the meaning of professionalism to ECE professionals which may cause the ECE field to be positively impacted.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report published, no information will be included that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. To minimize the risks to confidentiality, real names will be replaced by pseudonyms on all interview and observation transcripts, and all audio files, observation notes, or other documents that contain personal identifiers will be stored in a password-protected computer or hard-drive that we will keep in a locked file cabinet until the research has been completed. Original audio-files will be destroyed at the completion of the study.. Specifically, all information will be stored on a password-protected computer and any printouts in a locked file cabinet. Consent forms and any other identifiable data will be destroyed in 3 years from the date of data collection.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:

There is no payment or other form of compensation for your

participation in this study. **VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:**

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Kimberly Thai at 415-994-9898 or krthai@dons.usfca.edu or the faculty supervisor, Seenae Chong at (408) 421-2085 or srchong@usfca.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE   *DATE*

_____   _____

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