

Childcare Organizations: A Qualitative Study on Childcare Leaders' Perceptions of the
Elements that Promote the Work They Do in the Childcare Industry

A Dissertation

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Abstract

Research has often highlighted the positive effects of high-quality early care and education on children's development and the economy. However, the challenge of ensuring access to quality care for all children and understanding the perspectives of leaders doing crucial work on the ground remains. Given the strong associations between high-quality early childhood education, brain development, and positive economic outcomes for those who access high-quality care, my paper introduces a theory of change. This theory outlines a pathway from understanding the determinants of quality in childcare centers, as seen through the eyes of industry leaders, to the implementation of policy changes. I focus on how leaders within the industry describe themselves, their centers, the world, and their values. The evidence presented in this paper showcases strategies that leaders employ to uphold their status as pioneers in early childhood education.

Key words: Professionalization, Leaders, Childcare Director, High Quality Childcare, Organization, Validate, Elevate

Preface

The Why of the Study

In 1974, my grandmother opened a licensed childcare center to care for a few children. Shortly thereafter, my mother began working alongside her to provide childcare services. Over the next two decades, the mother-daughter pair opened different locations around the Jefferson Parish metropolitan area and at one point, even opened a small operation in St. John Parish. My mother and grandmother served children seven days a week and, at one point, twenty-four hours a day. This dynamic duo led the way in the childcare industry by embedding the smallest, yet very meaningful events in their everyday practices, from Mardi Gras parades with parental involvement to large scale partnerships with East Jefferson Hospital allowing nurses and doctors access to childcare outside of traditional working hours. Growing up with two strong business savvy women in my life has truly set the stage for the work I do now.

As a young child, there were many experiences I vividly remember regarding my mother running a small business: late-night phone calls from the childcare center, 5:00 a.m. wake ups to open the center, the Sunday trips to the grocery store to purchase 30 gallons of milk and other items to stock the kitchen, which was always followed up by complete clean-ups of the play yard. When the opportunity to purchase the center from my mother presented itself in 1999, I was initially opposed to the idea. At that point, I was mapping out my plans to wrap up my MBA program at the University of New Orleans. I always yearned to do something with a larger scope and did not know if childcare was going to fill that desire. With a bit of uncertainty, I decided to move forward and purchased one of the largest childcare centers in the Greater New Orleans area. I was a single 25-year-old woman in charge of over 180 children and responsible for managing a staff of over 30 women. When I began to reflect on how to move my business forward, I knew the crux of my business model was going to be grounded in quality and result in the very best care for every child I served in an environment where all students and teachers thrived.

The past twenty-five years have taken me on an educational journey filled with many hills and valleys. In addition to running a high-quality center, my advocacy efforts around early care and education started about ten years ago. Through my hard work and dedication at my own childcare center, I was asked to advocate for all children in Louisiana. Now serving as Chair for the Louisiana Department of Education Early Childhood Advisory Board, Commission member

for the Early Childhood Care Birth to Three Commission and past Education Chair for the Jefferson Chamber of Commerce, my advocacy efforts are unparalleled and perhaps speak to the larger scope of work I initially set out to do in 1999. During the COVID pandemic, I was asked to serve as a representative of early care and education on the Governor's task force and for the past two years served on Teachstone's Advisory Board. Beyond the advocacy work, I also received extensive training through the national organization and developer of the CLASS tool, Teachstone. The breadth and depth of knowledge gained with Teachstone allowed me to better understand and identify high quality interactions in classrooms as well as some of the research that has moved the childcare industry to the place it is today.

Among the many lessons I have learned, three stand out. First, the childcare industry is an extremely complex industry with many moving parts. Second, providing a socially and emotionally safe environment for children is the cornerstone of early childhood education. Finally, each of these incredibly dynamic privately owned childcare organizations is influenced by the policies, practices, and relationships that prevail across the entire organization and the industry it lives in.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the introduction, I will present the statement of the problem, introduce key terms, provide the context of the study, state the research questions and the rationale behind them, describe the significance of the study, describe the scope and limitations of this study, and finally, provide an overview of the dissertation chapters.

Statement of the Problem

Childcare businesses bring individuals - teachers, directors, administrators, cooks, mental health consultants, and therapists, to name a few - together to work toward a common goal, the well-being of the children served. According to a 2020 report from the Bipartisan Policy Center, there is a need for data at the state level to understand the landscape of highly effective, high quality childcare centers. Not only are childcare centers responsible for providing the basic health and safety needs for the children they serve, but also for creating an environment in which all students, teachers, and other professionals thrive while offering the highest quality of care for children. Creating this type of ideal organization is challenging work under the best of circumstances. According to Louisiana Policy Institute for Children's 2020 report, State of Early Care and Education, childcare businesses, however, are typically working off razor thin margins and therefore, struggling to pay their teachers a living wage, most of whom are women. Given these conditions, *how do you create a fruitful and robust environment for teachers to provide high quality childcare for the children they serve?* This study seeks to address this precise inquiry by delving into the elements that contribute to this environment and by gaining insights into the perspectives of childcare center leaders regarding these factors.

Key Terms

Louisiana Type I Childcare center – A “type I license” is the type of license issued to an early learning center that is owned or operated by a church or religious organization that is qualified as a tax-exempt organization under §501(c) of the *Internal Revenue Code* and that receives no state or federal funds directly or indirectly from any source (Part CLXI. Bulletin 137-Louisiana Early Learning Center Licensing Regulations).

Louisiana Type II Childcare center – A “type II license” is the type of license issued to an early learning center that either receives no state or federal funds directly or indirectly from any source or whose only source of state or federal funds is from U.S. Department of Agriculture's

food and nutrition programs, hereinafter referred to in this bulletin as “federal food and nutrition programs (Part CLXI. Bulletin 137-Louisiana Early Learning Center Licensing Regulations).

Louisiana Type III Childcare center – A “type III license” is the type of license issued to an early learning center that directly or indirectly receives state or federal funds from any source other than the federal food and nutrition programs (Part CLXI. Bulletin 137-Louisiana Early Learning Center Licensing Regulations).

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) – A classroom observation-based system used to assess and rate classroom quality across multiple areas using a scale of one to seven (Pianta, Hamre, and Mintz, 2012; Part CLXVII. Bulletin 140—Louisiana Early Childhood Care and Education Network).

Context for the Study

The Louisiana Department of Education is the industry’s governing agency and puts forth rules laid out in Bulletin 137- Louisiana Early Learning Center Licensing Regulations. The thirty-nine-page document, which is reviewed every three years according to federal guidelines, is the law that governs every licensed childcare center in the state of Louisiana. Bulletin 137 outlines the threshold for providing basic health and safety for the children served, qualifications for the individuals employed within the field, and guidelines on what is required to open a center. Bulletin 139 - Louisiana Child Care and Development Fund Program establishes how programs are funded and the policies to be eligible to receive funding. Bulletin 140 establishes the duties and responsibilities of the Early Childhood Care and Education Network, local community networks and community network lead agencies, define kindergarten readiness, and create a uniform assessment and accountability system for publicly funded early childhood care and education sites and community networks that include a performance profile indicative of performance. Louisiana is unlike other states in that it offers three types of licenses for childcare centers, Type I, II and III. For purposes of my dissertation, as well as an attempt to provide information on what high quality childcare looks like, I will focus on Type III privately owned childcare centers.

Type III centers are those that may receive public funds. While Type II centers receive public funds, the public funds received are strictly related to the federal food and nutrition program. Because public funds are involved for Type III centers, the law requires that each classroom within these centers be observed twice per year, once in the fall and once in the spring. These classrooms

are observed with a tool called the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), a research-based tool that provides a robust set of domains and dimensions grounded in developmentally appropriate practices that provide strategies for teachers to engage in high quality interactions with the children they serve. While CLASS observations are not mandated by the Louisiana Department of Education for Type I or II centers, the results from observations can provide a set of data that can inform teachers in delivering a high level of quality interactions. Operating as a Type III center comes with additional expectations including increased accountability and above all, buy-in and participation from the individuals within the center. This study expands on earlier research, (Bassok and Latham, 2017) by conducting open ended interviews with a variety of childcare leaders within the state of Louisiana, operating Type III centers for at least five years, which has not been explored in earlier studies, (Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2021) of early care and education settings. Louisiana Department of Education mandates that each center have a director “who is responsible for planning, managing and controlling the center’s daily activities as well as responding to parental concerns and ensuring that minimum licensing requirements are met” (LDOE, 2023, p. 19). The director/director designee shall be at least 21 years of age and shall have documentation of at least one of the following upon date of hire as director or director designee:

1. An early childhood ancillary certificate and one year of experience in teaching or care in a licensed early learning center or comparable setting, subject to approval by the department.
2. A national administrator credential and one year experience in teaching or care in a licensed early learning center, or comparable setting, plus 6 credit hours or 90 clock hours of training in child care, child development, early childhood, or management/administration, subject to approval by the department; or
3. Three years of experience as a director or staff in a licensed early learning center, or comparable setting, subject to approval by the department plus 6 credit hours or 90 clock hours of training in child care, child development, early childhood, or management/administration approved by the department.
4. A director who was qualified on the director’s date of hire remains qualified as long as the director remains continuously employed at the licensed center or at another licensed center without a break in service of more than 90 days (LDOE, 2023). In

summary, this study adds to the body of focused on early care and education and the levers of success that exist within high quality centers.

Research Questions

Research has shown that strengthening the organizational climate and conditions surrounding classroom practices and family engagement leads to increased quality (Bassok and Latham, 2017, Douglass, OECD, 2019, Saltzman, 1997, Haugh & McKee, 2003, Mauno, Kiuru & Kinnunen, 2011). Given the limited research between organizational climate and sites that are high performing have organizational contexts that are far more supportive of teaching, learning, and family engagement than sites that were not high performing (Bassok & Latham, 2017). Given these findings, my objective is to study determinants of success in childcare centers. My overarching research questions are:

1. What factors contribute to the quality of Type III childcare centers in Louisiana?
2. How do leaders of Type III childcare centers articulate essential elements that promote the work they do in their childcare centers?

Rationale for Research Questions

My research question focuses on Type III centers because this group of centers have publicly available data on their quality as measured by the research-based CLASS tool. This dissertation is based primarily on 32 interviews I conducted with childcare leaders of Type III centers in Louisiana. I chose leaders of the organizations because my initial focus was on how childcare organizations were being run, what the organizational culture looked like and how leaders managed these complex environments. By leaders, I am referring to childcare owners, directors, or others who lead the day-to-day operations of these childcare organizations. I wanted to speak to those who are in the center managing the many and varied tasks across the day, such as the call out from teachers, behavioral challenge from child, the surprise visit from licensing, and the parent who is upset because her child lost his shoe. Of course, all these competing issues can happen simultaneously. I supplement the information from the interviews with CLASS scores associated with their centers, but the majority of this dissertation is built on the feedback from childcare center owners and directors. I formulated my research question to be addressed through in-depth, qualitative methods, while using published CLASS data to provide a lens for measurable quality in the childcare centers.

Significance of the Study

Childcare businesses primary function is to provide childcare; however one of the unintended consequences include bringing together a diverse array of individuals, ranging from teachers and directors to administrators, cooks, mental health consultants, and therapists. These professionals collaborate with a shared objective: the well-being of the children they serve. Ensuring the operation of a highly effective and high-quality childcare center demands a unique skill set that has yet to be precisely defined. These centers bear the dual responsibility of meeting the basic health and safety needs of the children while cultivating an environment where students, teachers, and other professionals not only survive but thrive, all while delivering the highest quality of care to the children. Crafting such an ideal organization is a formidable challenge even under the most favorable circumstances.

Childcare businesses, however, often find themselves navigating treacherous terrain, operating on razor-thin profit margins (Louisiana Policy Institute for Children, 2020). These financial constraints exacerbate the struggle to provide teachers, the majority of whom are women, with a living wage commensurate with the vital role they play in early childhood development. In the midst of these economic pressures, a pressing question emerges: How can we create a fertile and robust environment for teachers to deliver high-quality childcare to the children they serve?

This study is significant in addressing this critical conundrum. By delving into the factors that contribute to the quality of Type III childcare centers in Louisiana, where public funds are involved and stringent quality assessments like the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) are implemented, this research seeks to unravel the intricate web of challenges and opportunities within early childhood education. In doing so, it not only sheds light on what they understand to be the determinants of quality in childcare centers but also explores how leaders within the industry describe themselves, their center, the world, and their values.

The significance of this study extends beyond the confines of Louisiana, resonating with childcare providers, policymakers, educators, and researchers nationwide. As the well-being of our youngest people rests in the hands of childcare professionals, understanding the dynamics of high-quality childcare centers becomes paramount. This research equips us with valuable insights into the intricate interplay of factors that enable teachers and childcare leaders to provide the best possible care to our children, even in the face of economic constraints.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the broader discourse on gender equity and income disparity, particularly in fields predominantly occupied by women. As the childcare sector grapples with challenges related to compensation and sustainability, this research serves as a timely exploration of strategies to empower educators and provide them with the recognition and remuneration they deserve.

In conclusion, this study's significance lies in its potential to inform policies, practices, and strategies that not only enhance the quality of childcare but also create a more equitable and sustainable environment for the dedicated professionals who nurture and educate our youngest generation. By unraveling the complexities of childcare success, this research endeavors to pave the way for a brighter future for both our children and those who dedicate their careers to their well-being.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

There are limitations with any form of research. My study is limited to the state of Louisiana and exclusively focuses on Type III childcare providers. This study will not include Type I and II centers which primarily receive private funds, nor does this research include family home care providers. According to the 2022 Louisiana Department of Education Early Childhood Advisory Council report, listing of childcare centers within Louisiana revealed 1150 (75%) Type III centers, 172 (12%) Type II centers and 212 (13%) Type I centers. While some of the outcomes of this paper may be applicable in other states and other childcare organizations, the research will be conducted within the state of Louisiana and with Type III centers.

For purposes of my study, I will use data from the CLASS tool as an indicator of classroom quality for successful childcare centers. Louisiana uses CLASS scores to rate the childcare center's quality, publishing each Type III childcare center's performance profile. While CLASS scores are the primary indicators of classroom quality, the performance profile also details other factors that indicate quality including child to teacher ratios, curriculum, teacher qualifications, and child assessment (Teachstone). I will cross reference CLASS scores to organize and synthesize data; thus, nuances that are evident within the CLASS tool will be explained in Chapter 5.

Themes

In this work, I found five broad themes that were narrated consistently, these powerful themes were reiterated by leaders in high quality centers. The first is the advocacy and elevation

of the profession as a whole. The second is a commitment to high-quality care and education for all children with a focus on empowering their entire team. A third is the importance of establishing a supportive community and one of equity. A fourth is a conception of this work as a spiritual calling. Finally, a fifth is a provision of a culture of family and strong ties for their team of employees. It is through these traits that childcare leaders push this critical work forward. In sum, understanding the importance of high-quality early care and education and valuing the work of childcare organizations can lead to a robust environment for the industry to thrive, benefitting society as a whole.

Overview of the Dissertation Chapters

This dissertation is composed of nine chapters. In the preface, I began with the “why” of my research study. I then provided an overview and introduction to the research study. In the second chapter, I reviewed the extant literature followed by the third chapter, where I have described the study’s methodology and expounded upon the research design employed in this study, elucidating the sampling strategy and size, alongside detailing the data collection methods and the instruments utilized. I have also provided a comprehensive overview of the analysis techniques and software employed to gather, code, and transcribe the collected data. Ethical considerations and the inherent limitations of my research were discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 4 is entitled “Elevating Childcare and a Need to Advocate for Professionalization.” “All you do is babysit,” might be the harshest thing that could be said to a leader running a high-quality childcare center, but this is often the perception of this fragile industry. How do you begin to change the perception of the critical work being done in the birth to four-year-old age range? Leaders will describe the challenges that they face and the tireless work they currently do to legitimize the childcare industry. Using feedback from leaders I describe their unwavering efforts to advocate for an industry that has evolved over the past two decades and provides a critical service not only for the children in their care, but the workforce and economy as a whole.

Chapter 5 is entitled “Commitment to Excellence, Empowerment & Professional Development in Type III Childcare Centers.” What does commitment to excellence, empowerment and professional development look like for childcare organizations? Type III organizations that are privately owned and operated, in different parts of the state with different funding structures, can look quite different, but for the leaders I interviewed the themes that

emerged were consistent with wanting the best for their organizations, children and teachers. This chapter will detail how the CLASS tool, Tier 1 curriculum, and the plethora of professional development available to teachers allows each of them to strive for excellence.

Chapter 6 is entitled “Community-Centered Leadership & Commitment to Equitable Childhood Development.” Wanting what is in the best interest for your own privately owned business is innate, but wanting what is best for the community and all young children that live in it was a theme that was echoed by leaders within these organizations. This chapter lays out the narratives from leaders within the state about their desire to serve all children, not only the children and families that can afford the quality of care they provide but also for the families that, without federally-funded assistance, could not afford to access high-quality childcare centers. The end goal for these providers is to give all children in their community access to a high-quality environment which will then allow them to start school on the same level as their peers.

Chapter 7 is entitled “Mission-Driven Passion & Spiritual Calling in Childcare Leadership.” Passion and spiritual calling are typically words you might hear in a place of worship or Sunday church. This chapter will explain that despite the complex system that Type III childcare centers function in, they feel truly compelled to do this critical work and know that despite the myriad of challenges presented, they must stay the course because providing high quality care is their life’s mission.

Chapter 8 is entitled “Family- Like Culture & Supportive Relationships in Type III Childcare Centers.” When you think of family, what words might surface? For many, qualities including love, relationship, protection, trust, support, responsibility, growth, compassion, understanding and nurturing may arise. The way leaders discuss the inner workings of their operation were consistent with a family-like culture. This chapter explains how a family like-culture and supportive relationships allows childcare organizations to thrive.

In Chapter 9, the conclusion, I share the study’s results. I share how leaders within Type III centers make sense of the profession they have chosen to operate in and more importantly validate the work they do. As an expert in the field of childcare organizations, my research explains the strategies leaders use to deliver high quality care and elucidate the purpose of the critical work. While five themes emerged from my research, the central idea that resonated with

all leaders were the strategies they used to defend their status as early childhood leaders operating in Type III childcare centers.

I lay out the study sample, key findings, and results. I analyze the research hypotheses and end with a discussion of the implications and limitations of the findings. I focus on interpreting the findings in light of the research objectives initially identified. I then relate the findings to the literature review discussed in Chapter 2. I discuss the theoretical and practical implications of my research and end with suggestions for future research. I conclude my dissertation with a summary of the research problem and objectives. I highlight key findings and contributions of the study, implications for social science theory and practice, and conclude with recommendations for policy and practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In Chapter 2, I review the existing literature including an overview of the major theories that exist and research in the field of early care and education. First, I introduce my theoretical framework by reviewing and discussing how the work of Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, Urie Bronfenbrenner, Mario Small, and Jean Anyon frame the study. Next, I review the relevant research in early care and education, which I have organized into three bodies of literature: (1) childcare organizations as part of society, (2) childcare organizations within the United States, and (3) success and childcare organizations within Louisiana. I also provide a synthesis of key findings and gaps in the research and finally, I present the conceptual framework that guides my research.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework that draws upon the works of prominent sociologists Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, Urie Bronfenbrenner, and Mario Small, along with the educational theorist Jean Anyon. Each of these theories contributes a unique lens through which we can understand the complex dynamics within childcare centers, elucidating the factors that shape the well-being of children and the professionals who care for them. The theoretical framework for this study draws upon the insights of these prominent theorists to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics within childcare centers. By integrating these theories, this research seeks to unravel the multifaceted factors that contribute to the well-being of children and the professionals who play a vital role in their early care and education.

Durkheim

Emile Durkheim's groundbreaking work on social solidarity and the intricate relationship between individuals and society provides the foundational framework for this study (Durkheim, 1858). Durkheim's insights into how societies cohere, with a focus on the roles individuals play within these larger social groups, offer valuable perspectives that underpin our examination of childcare centers.

Durkheim contends that societies are bound together by common bonds and shared values (Durkheim, 1858). In the context of childcare centers, these shared values center around a profound love for children and an unwavering commitment to delivering top-notch care. In *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), his exploration of the regulation of professions becomes

particularly pertinent in understanding the childcare industry's role in societal harmony. While Durkheim does not specifically cite childcare centers in his work, these critical organizations can serve as a what he would consider a vital conduit for parents to participate in collective groups beyond their immediate families, enriching the broader societal fabric.

Durkheim's ideas also shed light on childcare centers as professional communities, fostering moral closeness and cooperation among teachers, administrators, and other dedicated professionals. This theory underscores the pivotal role of childcare centers in uniting individuals toward the common goal of nurturing children's well-being, thereby contributing to the betterment of society. Furthermore, Durkheim's notion of "moral closeness" resonates with the common thread that binds individuals within the childcare industry – a deep-seated love for children and a passionate commitment to providing high-quality care (Durkheim, 1858). Despite varying personalities, childcare professionals share this common purpose, forming a cohesive professional group dedicated to the critical task of nurturing and educating young children. This shared sense of purpose often leads to the development of strong bonds and rich friendships among individuals in childcare centers.

In *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), Durkheim's assertion that laws are crafted to harmonize individual pursuits with communal well-being finds relevance in the childcare sector's adherence to regulations outlined in the Louisiana Department of Education's Bulletin 137, 139, and 140. These regulations, akin to the rules governing professional groups, guide the work of childcare centers, with Type III centers additionally adhering to CLASS observations. The CLASS tool serves as a means to validate and legitimize the work of childcare teachers, dispelling the misconception that their role is akin to babysitting.

In summary, Durkheim's theories illuminate the profound societal significance of childcare centers as professional communities and hubs of moral closeness. These centers bring together individuals driven by a common love for children and a commitment to excellence in care, playing a pivotal role in promoting societal harmony and enhancing collective well-being. Thus, accessible, and effective childcare can be seen as the adhesive that binds society together as a whole, nurturing its most precious asset – its children.

Simmel

Georg Simmel's Theory of Social Relationships plays a pivotal role in shaping the context of this study, particularly in comprehending the intricate dynamics among individuals

within childcare organizations. Simmel's profound insights into social relationships resonate with the ever-evolving nature of teachers and administrators within childcare centers. In *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms* (2015), Simmel astutely observes that individuals are in a constant state of evolution, their personalities shaped by the environments they inhabit. This concept parallels the professional growth and personal development experienced by adults within childcare centers, both within their classrooms and as integral parts of the broader organizational ecosystem. The evolving nature of these relationships takes center stage, especially within the childcare industry. Furthermore, Simmel's notion of value and exchange sheds light on the early care and education industry's climate (Simmel and Levine, 2015). While Simmel posits that people create value by distancing themselves from certain objects and then endeavoring to bridge that gap, Heckman et al. (2008) emphasize the inherent value of high-quality care and education for children and society. In a 2020 article from *New America*, the perception of this work as mere babysitting persists, and it is imperative to challenge and change this mindset.

As a leader within the childcare sector, your role in creating a positive and collaborative community is paramount. Strategies such as providing high-quality professional development, facilitating access to continued education, and granting autonomy in decision-making contribute not only to the growth of teachers but also to the aim of fostering student growth. These initiatives align with Simmel's theory of evolution and the nurturing of an environment conducive to personal and collective development.

In essence, Simmel's theories underscore the significance of cultivating and nurturing relationships, both strong and weak, within and beyond childcare centers. These relationships are not only vital for organizational success but also instrumental in creating emotionally supportive environments for teachers and students. Simmel's concept of value and exchange further emphasizes the need to recognize and advocate for the true worth of early care and education in promoting societal well-being.

Bronfenbrenner

Similarly, Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory serves as a fundamental framework for comprehending child and human development in the context of childcare centers (Bronfenbrenner, 1978). This theory offers a holistic perspective, emphasizing the intricate web of influences stemming from various ecological systems. In *The Social Role of the Child in Ecological Perspective* (p.7), these systems range from the immediate family and educational

settings to broader cultural values and economic conditions, collectively shaping the experiences of children, families, teachers, and leaders within childcare centers. Within childcare centers, Bronfenbrenner's theory sheds light on the dynamic interplay among individuals at different ecological levels. It underscores how societal factors, cultural values, and economic circumstances have a profound impact on children's development and the functioning of childcare centers. Bronfenbrenner's model accentuates the interconnectedness of these systems, highlighting the significance of strong ties and relationships in fostering positive outcomes for both children and educators (Bronfenbrenner, 1978).

Bronfenbrenner's theory encompasses multiple levels, each contributing to the intricate tapestry of influences on child development (p.6). The macrosystem encompasses larger societal factors, including cultural values and prevailing economic conditions, which exert influence on children's lives. The exosystem extends beyond the child's immediate environment, encompassing elements such as how a child's home life may be influenced by a parent's experiences at work. The mesosystem delves into the interconnections between microsystems, illustrating how relationships between families and teachers, or between peers and families, can produce varying outcomes based on the strength of these ties. Finally, the microsystem encompasses the factors and events within the child's immediate surroundings, directly impacting the child's daily life (Bronfenbrenner, 1978).

In today's globally interconnected world, characterized by technological advancements and social media, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1978) remains relevant. It helps elucidate the complex dynamics of contemporary childhood development, emphasizing how political, cultural, and economic factors continue to shape the learning and growth of children. This ecological perspective underscores the need to consider the broader context in which childcare centers operate, recognizing that these multifaceted influences play a significant role in the lives of both children and educators (Parenta, 2018).

Small

Mario Small's Theory of Brokerage discusses the concept of routine organizations, such as childcare centers, serving as intermediaries that connect various actors to valuable resources. In the context of this study, childcare centers function as brokers by facilitating access to high-quality early care and education services for children and families. Small's theory underscores the crucial role played by childcare centers in bridging the gap between families and essential

educational resources, aligning with the broader objective of ensuring equitable access to quality early childhood education.

Within childcare centers, organizational practices and norms foster interactions among teachers, creating an environment characterized by joint tasks and mutual trust. These established guidelines, akin to Louisiana's Bulletin 137, 139, and 140, encourage specific behaviors and activities within the organization. According to Small (2020), the success of an organization in brokering connections hinges on factors such as the frequency of interactions, their duration, and the presence of shared norms that facilitate extended collaboration. Teachers within childcare centers benefit from frequent and extended interactions with one another, centered around the common focus of promoting the well-being and success of each child under their care. Effective brokerage of stakeholder relationships within childcare centers yields numerous advantages, including a heightened sense of belonging among employees. When teachers or childcare center staff feel supported within a network, their job retention rates improve, providing much-needed consistency for the children they serve. Consistency and structure are particularly beneficial for children, contributing to their success in kindergarten and beyond. Individuals, especially those with limited resources, often rely on their networks for support. Childcare centers that successfully serve as intermediaries between various stakeholders can build stronger ties and relationships among their teachers.

The sense of belonging to a larger community fosters unique connections (Small, 2020, p.93), which is especially pertinent given that most individuals working in childcare centers are women. These women, often facing resource constraints, may look to the organization as a safety net. Research by Allard and Small (2013) suggests that formal organizations play a significant role in the well-being of disadvantaged individuals, with fewer resources relying more on the organizations they engage with. Such organizations are defined as ““formally recognized sets of people and practices whose activities are oriented toward an overarching purpose; examples include schools, welfare agencies, employment centers, bodegas, supermarkets, half-way houses, churches, food pantries, and childcare centers (see Scott 1995, 2003)” (Allard & Small, 2013, p. 9).

Anyon

Jean Anyon's Educational Theory contributes to the theoretical framework by shedding light on the socioeconomic disparities deeply ingrained within educational systems (2014).

While not explicitly mentioned in the provided text, Anyon's work serves as a poignant reminder of the broader context in which childcare centers operate. According to Anyon (2014), *Radical Possibilities*, her theory underscores the pressing need to address socioeconomic disparities and inequities within early childhood education to foster a more just and equitable educational system.

Jean Anyon's political economic framework delves into the intricate relationships between the economy, race, social class, and educational policies. Given the profound impact of public policies on the early learning experiences of our youngest learners, it is crucial to grasp the significance of the intersection between the economy and education (Anyon, 2014). The disparities prevalent in early childhood discourse, particularly concerning race and social classes, are discernible across many states. The political economic lens provides a holistic framework ideally suited for comprehending early childhood educational policies.

Michael J. Dumas and Jean Anyon (2014) expound on the necessity of scrutinizing educational policy within the broader context of social policy and ideological discourse. Anyon (2014) aptly notes, "To this end, we must analyze the ideological, political as well as cultural contexts within which education policy is created and implemented" (pp. 149-150). Critical theory, as advocated by Anyon, scrutinizes how power dynamics shape the constructs and processes that influence our understanding of "what is, what should be, and what is possible" (Anyon, 2014, p. 151). Cultural political economy allows us to consider a multitude of factors, encompassing social, historical, economic, and cultural contexts in which actions are situated. Embracing this approach enables us to "establish connections between the global and local, between ideology and social practice, and between institutional structures and individual human agency that drive policy implementation" (Anyon, 2014, p. 152). It is important to recognize that the political economy significantly influences the policy-making process.

Childcare Organizations as Part of Society

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is an international organization that works to shape policies that foster prosperity, equality, opportunity, and well-being for all; specifically, it provides a unique forum and knowledge hub for data and analysis, exchange of experiences, best-practice sharing, and advice on public policies and international standard-setting (OECD). In one OECD report, 30 nations, including

the United States, focused on lifelong learning, and identified early care and education as foundational (OECD, 2012).

Three major trends emerged from this report. First, policy makers recognize the early stages in life are critical. If policies support high quality programs and parents recognize the importance of the programs, we can maximize children's motivation that results in a lifetime of learning. Second, equity manifests when services are established to foster social cohesion among marginalized families. Third, viewing the childcare system as a space that accommodates the needs of working parents creates economic independence and increased educational levels for citizens (Neuman & Bennett, 2001). Given that childcare is viewed as a priority around the globe, it is imperative that we understand it as an integral part of society. To achieve equitable access, a system must view early care and education as a "shared societal responsibility," not solely a responsibility of the private citizen. As Urban et al. (2002) note, "Early childhood education is a public good rather than a commodity. Competent systems require democratic governance built on consultation with key stakeholders, particularly at the local level" (p. 518).

The creation of a robust system of early care and education begins with a strong framework of governance that addresses policy responsibilities and links early childhood policies at all levels. Policies that support early care and education have been enacted in many areas in the world. For example, an ambitious socio-economic policy agenda came out of the Maastricht Treaty of 1993. The European Union (EU) frames early childhood education as a critical mechanism that can achieve many goals including social inclusion, poverty reduction, and socio-economic development. According to Urban (2012),

Caring for and educating young children lies at the core of any society. Childrearing practices and the institutions and professions we establish around them are the most fundamental manifestations of the relationships between the private and the public, which is not static, universal, or uncontested. (p. 494)

The EU's comprehensive policy includes free and universal access to early care and education, an intentional and funded approach to serve the most marginalized groups. Belgium, Denmark, Lithuania, Norway, and Slovenia provide equitable access by offering free access to childcare for children under the age of three (Gromada & Richardson, 2021). The OECD also published a working paper that highlights the research on the importance of leadership in childcare organizations (OECD, 2012).

We must prioritize our children birth to three years old and do what is necessary for them to be successful. Determinants of childcare center quality must be identified in order to provide the highest quality care for all children. Much of the scholarship on the early childhood sector has linked brain development to high quality care (Garcia et al., 2019). My work builds upon this body of literature that confirms birth to four years old is a critical time in a child's life. The current research shows that many children enter kindergarten with varying levels of skills (Bassok & Latham, 2017). Children that do not have access to high quality early care typically enter kindergarten with significantly less vocabulary and are unprepared to engage socially as well as academically. Research also indicates that placing quality as a mandate rather than an option for all childcare providers is a smart direction for educational policy (OECD, 2012).

Travis Wright's (2011) study on educational policy relates closely to the unfulfilled promises of early childhood to the social and geographic inequities that currently exist in the K-12 system. He notes, "The outcomes of these inequities are clearly manifested in the policies of universal preschool access and quality" (p.1). Further research states that the structure of the existing early childhood economy perpetuates many of the inequities faced by families of color, women, and other vulnerable communities. According to The Center on the Developing Child, 90% of brain development occurs between birth and four years old. Heckman (2008) found that early childhood is a critical time for building a strong foundation for all children to be successful in the future. High quality early care and education places all children at an advantage when entering kindergarten as well as later in life (Starting Strong IV Early Childhood Education and Care Data Country Note). A robust body of research (Shonkoff et al., 2000) shows that early childhood experiences have great influence on developing social, emotional, and cognitive development which are all critical to a strong economic productive adult. Early intervention enhances productivity in children that persists throughout their life by producing developmental gains, promoting self-control, and mitigating risk factors in a variety of ways including poverty, low parental education, and incarceration.

Anne Douglass's (2019) research on leadership in quality early childhood care and education underscores the significance of organizational culture within the workplace environment. Douglass emphasizes the complexity and nuanced nature of leadership roles within childcare organizations, highlighting their crucial role in enhancing quality. Effective leadership in childcare necessitates the cultivation of a culture that champions quality. As Douglass (2017)

points out, “A culture of learning and improvement is one in which staff feel empowered to express their ideas, seek clarification, and challenge existing norms; it provides them with regular opportunities to collaborate and strategize for enhancement alongside their colleagues” (p. 21). Fostering a positive organizational culture that empowers teachers is instrumental in creating an environment conducive to the success of children. The OECD, as an international organization, sheds light on global best practices and sets international standards, including essential guidelines for leaders in early care and education institutions. It is imperative to recognize that this industry must be an integral part of contemporary society, one in which both parents or guardians are active participants in the workforce.

Childcare Organizations within the United States

Scholars in the field of early childhood development have found that all children benefit from high quality early care and education, especially those from vulnerable populations (Heckman, 2008). By providing access to high quality early care and education for all children, we position our youngest learners to be successful as they enter school and even later in life. Children that do not have access to high quality early care typically enter kindergarten with significantly less vocabulary and are unprepared to engage socially as well as academically (Knudsen et al., 2006). The future success of the U.S. economy will depend, in part, on well-educated and highly resourceful workers who are capable of learning new skills so that they remain competitive in a continually changing global market. That success is in jeopardy because a growing fraction of the nation’s workforce will consist of adults who were raised in disadvantaged environments, a segment of the population that has historically been less likely to attain high levels of education and skill development than the general population (Knudsen et al., 2006). While some countries have prioritized early care and education and have reaped the benefits, others still consider this vulnerable population an afterthought.

According to Knudsen et al., (2006), a robust body of research shows that early childhood experiences greatly influence social, emotional, and cognitive development which are all critical to a strong economically productive adult. Early intervention enhances productivity in children that persists throughout their lifetimes. Additional research has shown that early childhood is a critical time for building a strong foundation for children to succeed in the future (Heckman, 2008). These benefits have a high rate of return and are estimated to have high benefit-cost ratios. Early intervention builds the skill base for the children it serves and even

enhances the productivity of children later in life. It is important to note that the ideal system is one that is developed, supported, and maintains competence at all layers of a system. This system must be flexible, recognizing that each state, government, and community is ever changing.

In addition to Heckman's work, The National Association of the Education for Young Children (NAEYC) is a group that has been advocating for high quality early care and education for many decades. Their mission statement reads, "NAEYC promotes high-quality early learning for all children, birth through age 8, by connecting practice, policy, and research. We advance a diverse, dynamic early childhood profession and support all who care for, educate, and work on behalf of young children." NAEYC states:

All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that help them achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society. Thus, all early childhood educators have a professional obligation to advance equity. They can do this best when they are effectively supported by the early learning settings in which they work and when they and their wider communities embrace diversity and full inclusion as strengths, uphold fundamental principles of fairness and justice, and work to eliminate structural inequities that limit equitable learning opportunities (The National Association of the Education for Young Children).

Most states within the United States operate with an opt-in Quality Rating System (QRIS). A QRIS is a systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early and school-age care and education programs. Like rating systems for restaurants and hotels, QRIS awards quality ratings to early and school-age care and education programs that meet a set of defined program standards. By participating in their state's QRIS, early and school-age care providers embark on a path of continuous quality improvement.

Bassok and Latham (2017) conducted extensive research around organizational climate and culture. According to the study, for childcare providers to deliver high quality education, they must foster a strong organizational climate. Research shows that many children enter kindergarten with many variations in skills (Bassok & Latham, 2017). It has also shown that programs with a supportive culture and climate are more likely to exhibit higher instructional qualities. The culture of an early childhood setting is what makes it unique. Culture includes shared values, assumptions, and collective beliefs about what is important, and the norms and expectations for what is appropriate and acceptable in everyday interactions. Culture also

includes the traditions, rituals, celebrations, and customs that distinguish one program or school from another (Dennis & O'Connor, 2013).

An early childhood setting's organizational climate is slightly different from its culture. Organizational climate refers to the staff's collective perceptions of what the organization is like in terms of policies, practices, procedures, and routines. Culture and climate are complementary concepts with overlapping, yet distinguishable, nuances of organizational life (Ostroff et al., 2013). Ehrlich et al. (2018) note that "Leaders cultivate a collaborative culture and strong professional learning community across all teachers, staff, and families that strengthens collective responsibility and action for change" (p. 34). The quality of an early childhood education program is not limited to what happens inside the classroom but also the broader professional environment of the early childhood program including strong leadership. High quality instruction is essential to produce developmental gains. Many of the existing policies focus on structural features, including group size and basic health and safety for children. To move the needle in the childcare industry, we need to enhance both the structures in place and focus on the process, including the organizational climate, increased classroom processes, and the leadership that exists within the organization (Connors & Morris, 2015).

The Childcare System in Louisiana

Louisiana has made great strides to transform the structure of the childcare system with the implementation of Act 3 in 2012. Act 3 enacted a set of sweeping reforms designed to unify state early childhood systems and declares that it "is the intent of the legislature that a comprehensive and integrated delivery system for early childhood care and education be created to ensure that every child enters kindergarten healthy and ready to learn." ("Louisiana Early Childhood Education Act." Acts 2012, No. 3, §1, eff. April 18, 2012)

Act 3 was a bold implementation policy to a long-standing system that has typically been an afterthought as it relates to early care and education policy. The results, while only evident for Type III centers, have been transformative and have truly changed the landscape of early care and education in Louisiana. The policy was a catalyst for additional changes that have begun to take place in Louisiana, all attempting to provide equitable access for our children from birth to three years old, specifically those from economically disadvantaged families. One of the largest tenets of Act III was the implementation of the CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) tool. The CLASS is a research-based tool grounded in interactions between teachers and

children; it provides the ability to measure and improve the interactions that matter most for student outcomes. Hamre, Pianta, and Downer (2016) “zero in on teacher-student interactions—characterized by teachers’ sensitivity to individual needs, support for positive behavior, and stimulation of language and cognitive development—as a key indicator of classroom quality that appears to benefit all children from prekindergarten through third grade” (p.1). Prior to this tool, Type III centers were not required to adhere to any form of observations, therefore had no way to identify the level of quality.

Louisiana’s 2021-2022 Performance Profiles release marks seven years of full implementation of the statewide early childhood network in which more than 11,600 CLASS observations took place in more than 65 classrooms at nearly 1650 sites. Approximately 800 local CLASS observers conducted observations in infant, toddler, and pre-k classrooms and provided valuable feedback to help teachers in publicly funded sites, as can be seen by the 2022 Star Ratings of Sites (see Table 1).

Table 1
2022 Star Ratings of Type III Childcare Centers in Louisiana

CLASS Score Range	Performance Rating	Star Rating	2022 Star Rating (# and % of Type III ELCs)
6.00-7.00	Excellent	5 Stars	61 (5.6%)
5.25 - 5.99	High Proficient	4 Stars	507 (46.7%)
4.50- 5.24	Proficient	3 Stars	420 (38.7%)
3.75- 4.49	Approaching Proficient	2 Stars	67 (6.18%)
3.00 - 3.74	Approaching Proficient	1 Stars	7 (.64%)
1.00 - 2.99	Unsatisfactory or Not Yet Rated	0 Stars	22 (2.3%)

Characteristics of Teachers in Childcare in Louisiana

In a 2017 article, *Equity Starts Early*, put out by The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), they note that the childcare industry consists of low wage jobs in which the workforce is primarily made up of women, especially women of color. Louisiana’s childcare workforce includes workers from diverse educational, socioeconomic, and racial/ethnic backgrounds.

According to a Louisiana Pathways in a 2023 report to the Louisiana Department of Education Early Childhood Advisory Board, the demographics of the early learning workforce are as follows: (16,577 active Pathways members): 16,512 (99.6%) are female, 16,523 (99.2%) speak English as their primary language. 9449 (60%) are African American 5968, (36%) are Caucasian American, 331 (1.9%) are Hispanic American, 166 (1%) are Acadian American and 663 (4%) are other ethnicities. Relative to education level, 9734 (58%) have a high school education or no verified degree, 295 (1.7%) have thirty college credits, 3025 (18%) have a CDA or Approved Career Diploma, 1489 (8.9%) have an associate degree and 2034 (12%) have a bachelor's degree or higher. These demographics provide insight into the educational and financial vulnerability that childcare workers face.

Leadership in Childcare in Louisiana

Local leaders in Louisiana performed research in 2021 and according to Caston & DiCarlo, leadership styles are an incredibly important determinant of success for childcare organizations. This study identified three distinct leadership styles: transformational, transactional, and passive. To assess these leadership styles among directors in Louisiana, the researchers employed The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), which asked directors to self-identify their leadership approach. The researchers distributed the survey using the Qualtrics Online Survey platform to Type III childcare directors in Louisiana. “The *MLQ 5X Short Form* measures self-perceptions, while allowing for analysis of leadership styles and outcomes while determining any correlations” (p.3). The researcher compiled a list of all email addresses using the states website and data from the 2018 Performance Profile which allowed for simple random sampling. The study employed voluntary leaders with a total of 90 people opening the survey and 66 completing the survey. The findings from this study reveal that directors who identify as managers, transactional, or passive/avoidant leaders may lack the necessary skills to effectively lead high-quality early care and education sites (Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2021). This research underscores the critical aspects of leadership within high-quality care and education settings.

Notably, the study highlights the unique career trajectories of many childcare directors. Unlike traditional administrative pathways, a significant number of directors transition into leadership roles from teaching positions. Consequently, these individuals may not inherently possess the full skill set required to effectively manage a high-quality childcare organization. As

the research suggests, effective leadership in this context entails not only leveraging one's existing qualities but also the ability to surround oneself with individuals possessing complementary skills and traits (Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2021, p. 3). This research contributes to our understanding of the intricate challenges involved in running a high-quality childcare center.

Identifying Gaps in the Literature

In order to bring about equitable policy changes that can truly transform the landscape for all children, Kuhn (2012) asserts that researchers must be willing to challenge the established "norms." Achieving a paradigm shift requires us to approach things differently. Early childhood education is still largely rooted in an older paradigm, one that provides only a limited perspective.

Given today's society in which both parents are typically in the workforce, our youngest learners are often being placed in early care and education settings. Because of this trend, it is of the utmost importance to identify a formula for delivering high quality early care and education. Licensed childcare organizations often have children in their care for up to possibly 10 hours per day. How are these children being cared for? Are their basic needs being met; are they being challenged to think on a deeper level; are they being exposed to language; will they be ready for kindergarten? The daily operations of a childcare center can only thrive when the organization is effectively managed. This study looks to pinpoint the factors that contribute to the success of Type III childcare centers in Louisiana and to shed light on the essential elements identified by leaders in Type III childcare centers, elements crucial for promoting the well-being of children.

In conclusion, we must no longer relegate early care and education to the margins of our priorities. Our federal, state and local officials must fund the very work that allows the economy to function. Early care and education historically has not been considered a priority. While states have structures to support elementary and secondary education, families with children ages 6 weeks to 3 years of age have limited options for care with very little funding to support their choice. High-quality childcare not only benefits society as a whole but also plays a crucial role in children's brain development and supports the vulnerable workforce within this industry. It paves the way for the development of capable and contributing adults. Therefore, it is imperative that we prioritize qualitative research, which allows for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the inner workings of early care and education systems. A substantial body of

literature has explored the relationships between individuals within organizations and the role of organizations within societies. Within this literature, the discussion of childcare in society underscores the necessity for robust policies, equitable access to childcare, and support for working families to bolster our economy. Achieving this requires strong leadership and a well-defined framework.

Despite the increasing recognition of the value of childcare in the United States, leaders must prioritize this critical work through both policy and funding. Until this occurs, especially for the most vulnerable children, there will be ongoing challenges. Notably, no research has delved into the childcare center leaders' perceptions of the determinants of successful childcare organizations. While leadership styles and organizational cultures have been identified as important factors, (Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2021; Bassok & Latham, 2017) a notable gap remains in the literature concerning the fundamental principles necessary to establish a nurturing and resilient environment for teachers to deliver high-quality childcare to the children they serve. This study seeks to bridge that gap by exploring leaders' perspectives on the essential elements that promote the well-being of children

Chapter 3: Methods

In Chapter 3, I expound upon the research design employed in this study, elucidating the sampling strategy and size, alongside detailing the data collection methods and the instruments utilized. I also provide a comprehensive overview of the analysis techniques and software employed to gather, code, and transcribe the collected data. I discuss ethical considerations and the inherent limitations of my research in this chapter. Lastly, I provide a structured outline of the subsequent chapters of the dissertation.

The study's research question and sub-questions are:

1. What factors contribute to the quality of Type III childcare centers in Louisiana?
2. How do leaders of Type III childcare centers articulate essential elements that promote the work they do in their childcare centers?

The goal of this study is to delve into the elements that contribute to quality childcare organizations in Louisiana by exploring the perspectives of childcare center leaders regarding these factors.

This study was conducted to ascertain the key factors contributing to the success of childcare organizations by drawing insights from leaders overseeing Type III childcare centers with the aim of bolstering the availability of this crucial service that has become a cornerstone of contemporary society.

For data collection, two instruments were selected. The first instrument consisted of a comprehensive open-ended interview guide, featuring a range of open-ended questions posed to the interviewees. These questions encompassed various aspects, such as motivations for entering the childcare industry, leadership competencies, licensure, support systems, staff relationships, daily operational practices, parent engagement, and the use of instructional support materials. To gain a holistic understanding of the childcare centers' operations, specific inquiries about child-to-staff ratios, compensation rates, and benefits were also integrated into the interview. These interviews followed a semi-structured format, informed by insights from previous interviews. In essence, the interviewer gains a better understanding of each interview based on the previous information gathered, this information helps further develop the next set of questions and overall enriches the data received (refer to Small, 2009, for a discussion on sequential interviewing).

The second instrument employed in this research was the CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) scores. I have defined "quality" based on the criteria established by

the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE). To measure success, I utilized the CLASS scores (LaParo et al., 2011), an assessment tool designed to evaluate teacher-child interactions in group settings. I selected this instrument due to its research-based foundation and its adoption by Louisiana as a benchmark for identifying academically successful childcare centers. Louisiana chose the CLASS tool because of its use of evidence-based approach. The evidence-based approach led to better knowledge of what students needed to learn and how teachers could be effective in supporting that learning through effective interactions. Scientist knew that interactions were a primary mechanism to support development (Teachstone). A benefit of using the CLASS is that it is content neutral, this means its constructs are meaningful across diverse learning approaches. According to Teachstone, publication of the CLASS was groundbreaking and enabled the education field to shift program requirements from easily quantifiable indicators such as student– teacher ratio, class size, and teacher credentials and degrees to observable interactions that are predictors of student achievement. For the first time, effective teaching practices were universally measurable with evidence that these metrics led to positive child outcomes.”

Today, CLASS is used both nationally and internationally in several ways. Some areas use the tool for accountability, while others use it for program planning, evaluation, and professional development.

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System® (CLASS) was developed to identify observable teacher-student¹ interactions, to determine which interactions are effective in driving better developmental and academic student outcomes, and to support teachers as they improve their teaching practices. The CLASS is a standardized approach that can be used to drive improved teaching in birth through secondary classrooms. There are six developmentally aligned versions, each based on theory and shown to be reliable and valid in large-scale empirical studies.

A publication by (Pianta et al., 2005), states that research consistently points to effective teacher-child interactions improving student academic achievement and development of social skills being a better measures of quality than previous measures.

Table 2*Research Justification for CLASS Tool*

Scale	Research Justification
Infant	<p>Research and statistical analyses support the use of one domain, Responsive Caregiving, and four dimensions, for the infant CLASS measure, as it is largely based on interactions in routine care activities in which the infant is fully dependent on an adult (LaParo, K.M., et al., 2011). Evidence indicates that the effectiveness of teacher-student interactions within this domain predicts levels of child learning and development. The infant measure focuses more on verbal and physical interactions between infants and teachers and less on classroom management than other age level versions because teachers’ degree of sensitivity and interactive skills are more influential to infant development. [from Infant Intro PPT_v.1.1]</p>
Toddler	<p>Research revealed that toddler classroom interactions fall into one of two broad domains, divided into eight dimensions (LaParo, K.M. et al., 2012).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Emotional and Behavioral Support domain refers to the social and emotional supports teachers provide to promote all areas of development and manage children’s behavior, time, and attention in the classroom. • The Engaged Support for Learning domain refers to how teachers promote cognitive and language development. [from Toddler Introduction PPT_v2.1] <p>The Toddler CLASS tool includes nearly all of the same dimensions as the Pre-K CLASS tool, but the Productivity, Instructional Learning Formats, and Concept Development dimensions from the pre-K tool are combined into a new dimension: Facilitation of Learning and Development.</p>
Pre-K	<p>Research revealed that pre-K classroom interactions fall into one of three domains: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. These are further divided into ten dimensions. (Pianta, R., et al, 2008).</p> <p>The Pre-K and K-3 versions have the same three domains and ten dimensions; these may be considered “partner” age levels. However, the interactions look different, as a preschooler is very different from a third grader.</p>

Interviews

Qualitative methods, particularly interviews, played a pivotal role in this study. These methods proved invaluable given the intricate nature of the research questions under examination. The study focused on leaders of Type III childcare centers, encompassing owners and/or directors managing childcare centers in Louisiana that have been in operation for a minimum of five years. By concentrating on childcare owners and directors, I aimed to capture the individuals responsible for guiding organizations through day-to-day operations and uncovering the determinants that contribute to a childcare center’s success.

The study encompassed various variations within its scope, including the size or licensed capacity of the center, geographical location (urban vs. rural), quality rating (ranging from unsatisfactory to excellent), and funding structure (private pay, public funds, or mixed). To

analyze the data comprehensively, I triangulated information obtained from all interviews with the existing CLASS scores to identify recurring themes and topics within the research.

The interview data collected from childcare centers encompassed various aspects of their day-to-day operations, including specific inquiries related to pay and benefits, child-to-staff ratios, work environment, flexibility, professional development, work schedules, staff turnover, relationships with coworkers, location, the communities they serve, the presence of other childcare centers in their vicinity, and external support received, such as professional development opportunities and funding. Additionally, I inquired about what initially drew owners and directors to the childcare industry and their experiences regarding daily challenges and successes. A particularly informative question revolved around the choice to operate as a Type III licensed childcare center. The research project was designed to yield insights within a manageable timeframe. The research question was intentionally focused to provide concise yet valuable insights into this often-undervalued sector.

One of the study's objectives was to gain an understanding of the leadership philosophy and beliefs of childcare center leaders concerning early care and education. This encompassed an exploration of the demographic composition of the student population, parental expectations, and the factors that set different centers apart from one another. In pursuit of this goal, the research design incorporated elements reminiscent of Mario Small's research approach. Small (2009) emphasizes the necessity for additional research that sheds light on minorities, urban poverty, and social inequalities. Qualitative methods emerge as potent tools for uncovering critical facets of these underrepresented populations, especially when other forms of research, such as quantitative studies, may fall short. Small underscores that while qualitative research diverges from quantitative approaches, it is equally significant and provides insights that conventional quantitative data may not deliver. He contends that there is a need for case studies on minority groups that generate theories and empirical conditions that can benefit a broader audience.

Rationale for Small-n Interview Study

Research questions framed within a qualitative approach may not necessarily yield statistically generalizable findings but are instrumental in providing in-depth insights. Qualitative methods, particularly in-depth open-ended interviews, excel in addressing complex issues surrounding social inequality and racial disparities. Small argues that "while such large studies are valuable, there is a place for a small interview study to make meaningful contributions to

knowledge, provided the language and assumptions through which it is interpreted differ” (p. 15). Qualitative research of this nature can also offer insights into society at large. Small encourages researchers to reframe their perspective on samples, suggesting that instead of viewing them as a “‘sample of n=35,’ they should consider them as a ‘set of 35 cases,’” emphasizing that each interview represents a unique case (p.15). This perspective encourages researchers to approach the work with an investigative lens.

Small (2009) expands on the extended case method, previously introduced by Burawoy and sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, a solution to the challenge of generalizability. This approach involves analyzing a specific social situation in the context of broader social forces that shape it. By identifying social processes, researchers can gain deeper insights into the groups they study, potentially unveiling data that can drive change for underrepresented populations. In-depth interview-based studies enable the formulation of better hypotheses and provide greater opportunities to make empirical statements. The logic of case studies offers an alternative framework for examining data compared to traditional sampling logic. In the case study approach, researchers proceed sequentially, with each case informing the next. As the interviews progressed, a deeper understanding was achieved, and saturation was reached when little or no new information was gleaned from subsequent interviews.

My research question does not offer statistical generalizability and requires a method that will provide in-depth information. I decided that qualitative methods, specifically in-depth open ended interviews, would be most effective in addressing the complexity of the question. Small explains, “What an in-depth interviewer with three dozen respondents’ faces is not a ‘bias’ problem but a set of cases with particular characteristics that, rather than being ‘controlled away’, should be understood, developed, and incorporated into her understanding of the cases at hand” (p. 14).

Sampling Strategy and Sample Size

To best understand the organizations within Louisiana, I created a list of lead agencies to reach out to from the Louisiana Department of Education’s website. I contacted all 64 Early Childhood Community Network Lead Agencies via email in the beginning of February 2023 inviting them to recruit participants from their network of childcare owners/directors to participate in this study. All Type III childcare center owners/directors who had been in operation for at least 5 years were invited to participate. Thirty-two interviews were secured;

those owners/directors who participated had been in business anywhere from 5 years to the longest running center in operation for 50 years. The sizes of childcare centers varied with the smallest licensing capacity of 32 children and the largest licensing capacity at 330. Childcare centers in both rural and urban locations participated. The Louisiana cities of Alexandria, Bastrop, Baton Rouge, Bogalusa, Covington, Gretna, Hammond, Lacombe, Lafayette, Lake Charles, Metairie, Monroe, New Orleans, New Roads, Pineville, St. Rose, Shreveport, and Slidell were represented. This study included those centers with approaching proficient, proficient, high proficient or excellent rating according to the Louisiana Department of Education. As of December 2022, there were 1150 Type III childcare centers in Louisiana. Of the 1150, 22 are not yet rated, 74 are approaching proficient, 420 are proficient, 507 are highly proficient and 61 are excellent. My study included 1 not yet rated, 2 approaching proficient, 6 proficient, 15 highly proficient and 8 excellent centers. The lowest CLASS score represented was 4.27 and the highest was 6.29. All centers receiving public funds had a mixed funding structure.

Beyond the emails I sent to all lead agencies in the state of Louisiana, three community networks invited me to share my project on their collaborative calls which were all held via Zoom at a mutually convenient time. From the initial list of 64 community network lead agencies, a total of 35 owners/directors were secured for Zoom interviews. The interviews took place from February 13, 2023, through May 4, 2023. Of the original 35 scheduled, 3 were ineligible because they did not fit the required criteria. One contact did not serve as the onsite owner/director and the other two had not been in business for at least five years. Each scheduled interviewee received a welcome email including the study consent form, a Zoom link as well as a reminder email prior to the interview. Disclosure of the purpose, duration, and procedures were included in the communication. Anonymity and confidentiality were explained to all participants. Participants were informed of their choice to discontinue or not answer any questions they were not comfortable with. No compensation was provided to the interviewees. Two center owners requested a copy of the Interview Guide prior to the interview. Two men and thirty women agreed to participate in the study. The shortest interview lasted 31 minutes 45 seconds and the longest ran 84 minutes and 8 seconds. All interviews and surveys were kept completely confidential, and records are accessible to participants upon request. All interviewees gave consent in order to participate.

Data Analysis Techniques and Software

Once interviews were secured, the file was uploaded to Zoom to be transcribed. I reviewed the transcribed interview for grammatical errors and participants were identified using initials to remove identifiable information. I imported the transcribed interview into the software program NVIVO for analysis. Once the transcribed interview was exported to NVIVO, I created a coding structure based on the questions presented to the owners/directors in the interview guide. The information was coded by questions until the themes began to emerge. After I familiarized myself with the data, I generalized initial codes. From that point, five themes began to emerge. I performed an in-depth analysis by theme and separated the themes based on attribute values. Additional analysis was completed to compare capacity with themes as well as location with themes. I utilized the computer software program NVIVO to help analyze and organize the findings within my qualitative research. Based on the significance of some themes over others, NVIVO helps combine the themes into groups which are then presented as a node. The nodes serve as the broad idea and then child nodes are created for themes within each group. My interviews required deep levels of analysis, and NVivo's features including color coding helped me stay organized with the wealth of information.

CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System)

The existing observation tool being used in Type III childcare centers in Louisiana is the CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System). According to Bulletin 140,

The purpose of this Bulletin is to establish the duties and responsibilities of the Early Childhood Care and Education Network, local community networks and community network lead agencies, define kindergarten readiness, and create a uniform assessment and accountability system for publicly-funded early childhood care and education sites and community networks that includes a performance profile indicative of performance.”

“*CLASS®—Classroom Assessment Scoring System.*” “*Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®)—a classroom observation-based system used to assess and rate classroom quality across multiple areas using a scale of one to seven. The Early Childhood Care and Education Accountability System (accountability system) is the uniform accountability system created pursuant to R.S. 17:407.23(B)(3) and used to evaluate the performance of publicly- funded early childhood care and education sites*

and community networks in preparing children for kindergarten and to assign a performance profile to each site and community network. (p. 1)

The research-based tool is grounded in interactions between teachers and children in the classroom. The CLASS tool allows for one assessment and professional development system that supports all age levels which ensures greater alignment and continuity. The tool also provides a common language, supports common standards of professionalism, and creates a shared vision of effective practice. The ratings are identified as: Unsatisfactory (1.00-2.99), Achieving Proficiency (3.00-4.49), Proficient (4.50-5.24), Highly Proficient (5.25-5.99), and Excellent (6.00-7.00). The data about those centers in Louisiana are available to the public. What the CLASS tool does not do is guarantee quality. The tool is not a magic wand, teachers must use it with fidelity, consistency, frequency, and intentionality for it to be effective in driving better developmental and academic student outcomes. Unlike other states who use the CLASS tool, Louisiana links financial incentives to higher CLASS scores. Details on financial incentives are detailed in Chapter 5.

Centers rated unsatisfactory are at risk of losing their academic approval and access to public funding. In order to support the unsatisfactory sites, the Louisiana Department of Education has implemented an improvement planning process. Any site with an overall CLASS score below 3.75 is required to participate in the Early Childhood Site Improvement Planning process which is led by the Department and supported by their local CCR&R (Child Care Resource and Referral Agency). The formal planning process involves completion of a needs assessment plan and development for overall site improvement. Regular monitoring and reporting of implementation is required to be part of the plan. According to the latest data, there are no unsatisfactory sites for the 2021-2022 school year.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The validity of this research was established using two measures, the existing CLASS scores and the inclusion of a variety of licensed childcare leader interviews within the state of Louisiana. The research includes existing published CLASS scores of Type III childcare centers in Louisiana. The sample included all childcare owners/directors, who have been running childcare centers for at least five years who are based in rural/urban, north/south/east/west areas within the state. The inclusion of a greater diversity of respondents will lead the research to reduce its bias towards only one type of outcome, creating a base for valid results. The other

technique I utilized was to restrict the amount of information shared with the respondents to make sure that the research is not biased with preconceived notions of the respondents. As a childcare leader in the field, I was mindful about sharing my thoughts or practices on the questions I asked. I did not want the participants to provide information based on what they thought my best practices or existing work in the field was. Given my work and expertise within the industry, I was cognizant to not lead the conversation or prompt in a predetermined way but was intent on listening to what was being communicated. These steps helped establish the validity of the results gained, proving the accurateness of the qualitative research. Further, the validity of the interview guide was reviewed with experts in the field of qualitative research.

As I detail out ethical consideration, it is important to note that I have served as a contract trainer directly for Teachstone for over ten years, delivered the keynote address at the 2017 national conference, and currently serve as an Advisory Board member for the Teachstone organization. My relationship with Teachstone spans several years and I have created deep ties with the organization.

Chapter 4: Elevating Childcare and a Need to Advocate for Professionalization

“All you do is babysit” is a phrase that childcare directors often hear, and it may be one of the most disheartening misconceptions that plagues this vital industry. When confronted with the question of what people often overlook about early care and education, Danielle, who runs a high proficient center with just under 100 children, astutely pointed out, “They don't know that we're true professionals; they think we're just daycare providers and that all we do is babysit. I don't think they realize the depth of education we provide.” How can we shift perceptions and truly recognize the critical work taking place in the realm of early childhood education?

Leaders in this field grapple with the challenges they face and the relentless effort they invest to validate the childcare industry. Drawing from the insights of these dedicated leaders, I shed light on their unwavering advocacy for an industry that has undergone significant evolution over the past two decades. It offers not only a vital service for the children in their care but also plays a pivotal role in supporting the workforce and bolstering the overall economy.

Brief History of the Child Care Profession in Louisiana

In the late 1990's when I was positioning myself to purchase the childcare center from my mother, I attended multiple childcare meetings held by the state licensing department and childcare owners/directors. I was a very young professional eager to learn everything necessary to make my center the very best it could be. I drove up to Baton Rouge, and one of the first meetings I attended consisted of disorganized banter, including yelling between several owners and the leadership at the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the entity that managed childcare centers before it shifted to the Department of Education in 2012. I was disheartened and deflated to say the least.

Prior to 2012, licensed childcare had been overseen by the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS). Licensed childcare centers approved through DCFS were registered as either a Class A or B license. Class A licensed childcare centers were eligible to receive public funds, (i.e.- child care assistance) as opposed to Class B licensed childcare centers which were ineligible to receive any type of public funding. In addition to the type of funding received, there were also looser regulations, specifically around teacher-child ratios. Class A centers had smaller ratios in place, while Class B centers were offered larger teacher to child ratios. Licensing specialists served as the “childcare police,” making surprise visits to ensure centers were

following the requirements articulated in Bulletin 137. Licensing specialists were also required to visit centers annually and sit for hours sifting over piles of documentation to ensure every teacher on the premises had a background check, hours of professional development and a host of other qualifications. This inefficient antiquated system needed an overhaul, and those changes began with the transition of child care licensing to the Louisiana Department of Education in 2012.

While the childcare profession in Louisiana didn't originate in the 1990s, it has certainly undergone significant changes since then. In the late 20th century, we began to see an influx of both parents in the workforce as Shonkoff and Phillips note (2000),

Between 1975 and 1999 the proportion of children under 6 years of age with mothers in the labor force increased from 38.8 percent to 61.1 percent- a 36 percent increase. The proportion of young children with mothers working full time and year round nearly tripled from 11 to 30 percent. The increase in maternal employment (including both full- and part-time workers) over this 24 year period was most rapid for infants rising from 24 to 54 percent, compared to older children.” (p. 269)

“While we began to see an influx of children in regularly scheduled child care we also began to see a rich and robust body of research around brain development taking place during the first three years of a child's life.” (p. 269)

Over the past four decades, we have seen an evolution or shift from less of a managed care or babysitting environment to caring for children in high quality early care and education settings. The first and largest shift was the licensing entity moving from the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) to the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE), meaning that all changes in policy would be overseen by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). While LDOE is the entity that oversees all licensed childcare centers, the childcare industry is controlled and operates under many jurisdictions including the Department of Health and the Office of the Fire Marshal. Mary, who runs a center in an urban part of Louisiana with seventy children, peaks to the variety of regulations by saying, “And, you know, they don't know that there's a lot of regulations and certifications and things like that that's required and that we're not just babysitters, we're not.” As we delve into the concept of professionalization, it becomes clear that it entails a series of stages through which professions evolve and grow.

Professionalization

Professionalization is viewed as a progression involving stages through which professions develop and evolve. This perspective on the development of professions started to shift in the 1960s, coincidentally aligning with the emergence of the childcare industry under licensing agencies during that same period.

Andrew Abbott (1988) defines professions as “exclusive occupational groups applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases” (p. 8). In *The System of Professions*, Abbott addresses the interrelations of professions and ways occupational groups control the knowledge and skill that exist within these organizations. Abbott goes on to say,

Any occupation can obtain licensure (e.g., beauticians) or develop an ethics code (e.g., real estate). But only a knowledge system governed by abstractions can redefine its problems and tasks, defend them from interlopers, and seize new problems—as medicine has recently seized alcoholism, mental illness, hyperactivity in children, obesity, and numerous other things. Abstraction enables survival in the competitive system of professions (p. 9).

The childcare industry began a formal transition to professionalization when the Louisiana Department of Education began to oversee the industry. The expectation for experts, or early care and education teachers, were beginning to change as well with requirements to deliver more intentional interactions in structured environments that encouraged children to think deeper. We began to see an increase in teacher requirements including Early childhood ancillary certificates (ECAC), with knowledge on the CLASS tool as well as an understanding in how to deliver a Tier one Curriculum with a focus on instruction. Louisiana Department of Education requires all Type III centers to utilize a curriculum that the Department has determined aligns with state content standards, received a Tier 1 status based on a set of criteria and been scored the best possible on all indicators of superior quality. Providers can choose any curriculum that fall within the Tier one list and best fits the needs of their students. A high-quality curriculum or a (HQIM) supports effective interactions between teachers and children by providing structure, materials, guidance, and activities which enable teachers to create opportunities for supportive interactions that promote children’s development and learning.

When I asked Jane how the selection of instructional support materials played into the success of her childcare center she said, “I think a Tier one curriculum is very important to give

my new teachers and my old teachers a guideline to follow and guide best practices.” Dawn narrated a similar story, by saying, “Frog Street lends a lot to what we're trying to accomplish here, which is to talk about feelings and talk about all those things. And so I think it's a good program that kind of fits into what we want to do. I think it will have a very profound effect.” The leaders describe the work as intentional work requiring work and effort and many of those leaders narrate how it affects the workforce and our local economy.

Historically, effective childcare leaders have been expected to manage many tasks. At any given time, a director or owner may be welcoming families at the front door, preparing breakfast for children, unclogging a toilet, or even managing payroll. One leader described a recent challenge:

Right now, I would say my struggle is accountability. I don't like all this one-on-one meetings and goal setting with the state, like I just don't like that stuff, it's just not in me. So the expectations are there, you know, you got to get your clock hours, you've got to have all the things they need to have to do for the job. In today's workforce, the struggle of consequences. Like putting consequences to not doing their job is kind of hard because you don't want to make anybody mad, cause you can't, you know, you can't hire anybody out there, you know, so it's like we tiptoe around getting on anybody or writing them up, and so I think and I hate that everybody struggle right now is staffing, but it is. Yeah, it's all the way around from. Wages to accountability, the consequences to write in somebody up and then you're shorthanded, you know. I'm trying to get everything digital, the policies and procedures. Just the everyday, I never really sit down, and if a kid gets a bee sting, what do you do? You know, just all those little bitty things, but I know that's never ending.

Another director described the plethora of responsibilities she felt were challenging on a day-to-day basis including, securing her own CLASS observations, staffing, ensuring that her teachers are following lesson plans and not on their cell phone, making sure accidents do not happen, and communicating with parents. Another leader described her challenges specifically around keeping qualified teachers:

You know, so I think that's the biggest challenge is keeping them, I mean, it is a challenge keeping them well-trained to do all the stuff that the State Department requires.

Not only is keeping qualified teachers a struggle, but many describe the struggle in hiring teachers that are a good fit. One Director described her experience:

So the number one thing I look for in a teacher is love. I look for them to have some type of educational background. Show me you have some commitments in the field, whether it's a CDA or an associate degree. We need something to show that you're already dedicated to the future. Then a little bit of experience. That's my second requirement. Have you ever had experience with children at that age because you can be trained all day long at a college, but it's different when you're like, there's a screaming baby here, there's a kid that's on fire. Like, there's so much stuff going on that was different from the teachers than, say, the teacher setting in the school that some people just aren't built for. So those are the two most important qualities. I look to make sure they genuinely have a love for children. Because we're trained right or educated. We have experience, but we have a negative attitude about children and especially little ones and what they do. You know, a lot of my questions are geared toward negative situations in the center of parents yelling at you or a child being rough and you having to deal with the child.

It can be difficult to step outside the day-to-day operations of your childcare center to advocate for high quality care, but leaders have emerged. Many directors and owners have gone to great lengths to speak out on behalf of this important work, some testifying in front of legislative bodies, others serving on important boards. While these tasks can feel daunting at times, these advocacy efforts have helped shape the professionalization of the childcare industry.

In a 2004 study by Hujala, leadership in childcare was examined as a micro phenomenon. The research aimed to understand the significance of leadership in the context of society using a contextual leadership model grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory which was presented in my literature review. Hujala's leadership study is examined from a leadership point of view and is seen as a visionary strategy inclusive of interactions between the process and context of leadership:

In this study, leadership on the macro level was largely derived from the mission of childcare in society. The mission was defined as producing early childhood services for families. Participants saw that implementation of the mission is comprehensively shared by society through its values, municipalities and its administrative organization and by the parents with their demands for services (p.61).

The 2004 Finland study performed to better understand the leadership phenomenon in a childcare context, *Dimensions of Leadership in the Childcare Context*, the important tasks of directors is to be image builders for childcare and defend this fragile industry as well as all those involved in it. “Center directors themselves see their task as to 'keep the flag flying, advertise and represent childcare and bring it to public attention” (p. 65). One of the leaders who effectively flies her flag in Louisiana is Erin, who says,

I don't really believe people realize how imperative it is for a child's future, how what they do every day matters. Early childhood is so imperative for their future and helps their social emotional. I mean, that's just if they don't feel safe and loved, they're going to have a really hard time in their future. And that's got to be the most important thing in any childcare center because all of the other stuff will come if you have that, you know.

These tireless advocates see their work as beneficial, and a critical part of development for future generations.

Figure 1

Paula Polito Speaks at the Louisiana State Capitol with Ready Louisiana



Chapter 5: Commitment to Excellence, Empowerment and Professional Development in Type III Childcare Centers

“I just tried to remain the best because if you’re the best, you’re going to do the best and you have to set your expectations high.” Ann, a leader who runs one of the largest licensed centers in Louisiana, provided her rationale for setting high expectations. This desire and commitment to excellence was clearly echoed through all of the participants. In Louisiana, childcare leaders choose to deliver services as a Type I, II or III. The Type III leaders interviewed in my study, despite the level of CLASS scores, none being Unsatisfactory, were all working to achieve higher scores. In addition to their dedication to delivering high-quality care and increasing their CLASS scores, these owners and directors were equally committed to empowering the teachers and staff they employed. This commitment was evident across various Type III organizations, which while varying in location and funding structures, were united by a common theme - their unwavering dedication to the well-being of their organizations, children, and teachers. This chapter will detail how the CLASS tool, Tier 1 curriculum, and the plethora of professional development supported teachers in nurturing their dedication and desire for excellence.

Most leaders described themselves as organized, go-getters, and over-achievers. The topics/questions including Type III licensure, working towards proficient, highly proficient, or excellent helped inform the theme presented in Chapter 5, commitment to excellence, empowerment and professional development. Faye, who ran a highly proficient site in an urban area within Louisiana, was incredibly proud of the growth she saw in her teachers as it relates to her CLASS Scores,

I get really excited when our teachers pick up on all this stuff that they have to pick up on for class observation and make good scores. That’s my success story right there. If I can get you to get a five or higher, we’re doing good, you know, so that is something I really work hard with them, with class observation and scores and TS Gold, because I want them to be successful when Picard gets here.

Gina, who ran a center that was also high proficient in a rural area within Louisiana said, “I couldn’t wait to tell my teacher when I got the scores back and it was awesome. She was happy. I was happy. Yeah, it was just a great feeling!”

The early care and education industry has been and continues to be a pillar of a strong economy. For years, children have entered these spaces and spent countless hours in others' care. It was not until about two decades ago that researchers began focusing on the levers of effective teacher-child interactions. In general, components of quality early care and education include: structural elements, features of the classroom environment, dimensions of teacher student interactions and quality improvement systems. As presented by a policy brief by CASTL (The University of Virginia, Curry School of Education), while all four components have proven to be important, there has been a growing consensus that teachers' daily interactions with students are among the most important ways to enhance child development that persists through third grade. As a professional in the industry, I yearned for research-based tools that were specific, intentional, and results- driven. While there was research on the benefit of teacher qualifications, low teacher-child ratios, appropriate classroom environments, high-quality curriculum, and smaller group size, there was no specific information regarding the benefits related to teacher-child interactions until 2012.

In 2012, Act 3 was enacted as part of the Louisiana legislation which required all Type III childcare centers to receive two CLASS observations during the school year, once in the fall and once in the spring. The bulletin states these observations must be conducted by the community network. The community network may include observers from the local network or reliable observers within individual centers. Reliable observers within centers may consist of Directors, teachers, coaches, or any other individual who works at the center. They must pass the reliability test and submit justifications for the scores they submit. While this notion of stakeholders observing their own classrooms sounds absurd, the community network is charged with overseeing the observations and the network is audited through a contract with the University of Louisiana at Lafayette Picard Center to conduct independent third-party observations which are then used to generate Performance Profiles.

Historically, Picard has served as Louisiana's third-party observer. The Picard Center's data team randomly selects 50% of the total number of classrooms, ensuring at least one infant, toddler, and pre-K classroom is selected at each site (when applicable). Picard functions as a mechanism for checks and balances in relation to local observations. Score replacement occurs if the scores are consistently different by more than one point of the third-party observation. If this practice occurs, the Department may replace all observation results with third party results.

The CLASS is a research-based tool grounded in interactions between teachers and children; it measures and improves the interactions that matter most for student outcomes. Hamre et al. (2016) noted that this tool:

zero[ed] in on teacher-student interactions— characterized by teachers’ sensitivity to individual needs, support for positive behavior, and stimulation of language and cognitive development—as a key indicator of classroom quality that appears to benefit all children from prekindergarten through third grade. (p. 119)

Because I found this tool to be incredibly impactful not only for the children in the classroom, but also for the teachers that were interacting with children on a daily basis, I participated in in-depth training on the tool in 2013. The training I have received with Teachstone has been extensive, including being trained as a CLASS reliable observer for Infant, Toddler and Pre-K, MMCI (Making the Most of Classroom Interactions), MTP (My Teaching Partner) as well as a Train the Trainer series which allows me to train others on the tool. To provide some context for the most extensive tool in early childhood education, I detail the three larger domains of the PK Class tool.

Domains of the PK CLASS Tool

The three main domains that make up the CLASS tool include emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. Emotional support in a classroom is evident when teachers develop positive relationships with children and are sensitive to their needs. Emotional support is also evident when teachers promote the development of self-regulatory and prosocial skills. Consistency of emotional support from teachers for children is important to promote early academic skills. Stress in children who access out of home settings are evident and can be mitigated in emotionally supportive environments, particularly those where teachers create a warm and supportive environment. The emotional support domain includes four dimensions: positive climate, negative climate, teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perspective. In this domain, effective teacher-child interactions manifest as teachers being in close proximity to children, smiling, laughing, verbal and physical affection, and a high level of respect. Emotionally supportive classrooms also include teachers who are aware and responsive to children’s academic and emotional needs. Students feel comfortable in these classrooms. Teachers that are flexible, allow ample levels of autonomy, encourage children to express their

ideas, and allow children to move are also strong indicators within the domain of emotional support.

The second domain within the CLASS tool is classroom organization. Since organizational and managerial aspects of a classroom are important in developing self-regulatory and executive functioning skills, classrooms that offer high levels of organization allow children to thrive. When teachers use proactive skills to manage behavior and provide clear expectations, children are able to spend less time off task. When children are actively engaged in learning, they have stronger early cognitive and academic development. The classroom organization domain includes three dimensions: behavior management, productivity, and instructional learning format. Evidence of classroom organization encompasses teachers who establish clear expectations, monitor their classroom, and focus on reinforcing positive behavior as it relates to children's behavior. Productive classrooms that operate like a well-oiled machine minimize idle time for children to wander, offer brief transitions, and have their materials prepared will allow children to be involved in their learning activities.

The third domain found in the Classroom Assessment Scoring System is the instructional support domain. Consistent and intentional implementation of the indicators within this range is crucial for children to experience significant gains in their learning. It is also important to note that in order to create instructionally supportive classrooms, teachers must first offer an emotionally supportive and organized classroom. Instructional supports include the ways teachers provide opportunities for higher order thinking, provide feedback and scaffold language development. When the instructional support dimensions are embedded throughout a child's day, it allows them to be more successful across all academic domains. The three dimensions within the instructional support domain include: concept development, quality of feedback and language modeling. Evidence of instructional support includes asking children "how" and "why" type questions, allowing them to brainstorm about topics, integrating concepts with previous knowledge and explicitly making real world connections to unfamiliar concepts. Additional evidence would include rich back and forth exchanges, scaffolding children's learning, asking students to explain their thinking, providing information to continue conversations, and encouraging them to persist in tasks that they may not be able to complete independently. Finally, teachers who create abundant opportunities for meaningful conversations, consistently

pose open-ended questions, align their actions with instructional goals, and cultivate classrooms rich in diverse vocabulary will establish an instructionally supportive learning environment.

Dr. Bridget Hamre, who currently serves as the CEO of Teachstone, sheds light on some initial goals in developing the CLASS tool and how it relates to children's success in school. She explains that the initial intent of the CLASS tool emerged from longitudinal research to identify the elements of children's experiences in classrooms that most impacted their learning and development. The research was conducted primarily by developmental psychologists. While they were interested in the traditional academic outcomes, they were also interested in gaining an understanding of children's social and self-regulatory development. The available tools were fairly limited in both their methodology as well as their focus on mostly academic inputs within given settings. The methodology was based primarily off of checklists, counting how many open-ended questions were asked, for example. Their goal was to understand the dynamic nature of the day-to-day interactions between teachers and children with a focus on child development and parent-child relationships.

Dr. Hamre spoke to the nuances relative to reliable CLASS observers. Hamre shared that from the very beginning, it was important to make sure that people using the tool were trained to use it well. She and the team at Teachstone developed a methodology for training and testing for reliability. A reliability criterion was established that every certified observer must pass on an annual basis. She made a point to note that being a reliable observer is not a "magic ticket" that ensures you will create reliable scores every time you conduct an observation. The reliability testing demonstrates that an individual can score reliably under a test situation, but ultimately, the observer walking into the classroom each day has a choice about the way they score. The Teachstone team has developed methods that can support, especially as a part of large-scale implementations, checks and balances that can help observers score consistently. A few options to ensure consistency include calibration which helps make sure people have ongoing opportunities to check the quality of their scores and get feedback. Dr. Hamre and team recognize the importance of feedback for observers, just as they know the importance of feedback for teachers. In fact, in my many years of working with Teachstone, the company often speaks to parallel processes.

Parallel processes - the domains and dimensions within the tool - should be viewed not only as a tool that can be used within the classroom, but also as strategies to use with teachers

and others when operating within systems. Another way to ensure consistency is a practice called double scoring in which a portion of the classes are double scored so reliability can be tracked at a larger level. Hamre notes that from a systems perspective, some of these strategies are used more in research than they are used in the field. She also briefly discussed variability and how it differs among entities. Louisiana has a bit more variability parish to parish when it comes to the rigor involved and the length of time the CLASS has been in place. Hamre notes that the Picard observers, which were initially put in place in Louisiana to be a check for local observers, are now viewed as a way to keep observers reliable. Hamre does not deny that there are observers who are not scoring accurately, noting that some data shows school ratings of 7's across entire schools, and they are aware that is not consistent. Most recently, Teachstone has tried to build an element that will check for accuracy into their new platform. Dr. Hamre mentioned that Teachstone had some initial bias toward perceiving local observers in Louisiana as less reliable due to their extensive knowledge about the settings. The opposite has actually shown to be true. If local observers maintain objectivity and consistency, the idea that they are more aware of their setting allows the observer to be more valid. The premise behind this is that the local observer knows something about the children in the classroom, their disability status, or even their language status. This comprehensive knowledge allows the observer to interpret things in ways that are likely more accurate than someone coming in from the outside.

Dr. Hamre highlights something she calls, "Each and every child, each and every teacher, each and every program." This statement refers to the idea that while the systematic intent is to best serve each and every child, teacher, and program, this isn't always possible. Inherently, there will be challenges and it is difficult to get it exactly right. While it would be ideal to motivate all programs in the state to invest in the interactions that we know are important whether that be through CLASS or other tools, Hamre says, "this is not to say that people are not well-intentioned, consistent and intentional high-quality interactions are just difficult to do." Hamre insists that our public dollars should fund early care and education sites that invest in quality.

Hamre also claims that accountability is important, and the ways policies are developed can also be problematic. The way Louisiana has tied the accountability measure to quality and funding creates some challenges. The specific example she used was related to thresholds and missing a certain level by a point, which could result in a difference in funding. Having

thresholds is important, but because the CLASS tool does not have that level of precision, an early care and education center may lose dollars because it falls below a certain threshold. Another state she described has a very rigid and problematic accountability policy in place which will shut down a center that falls below a certain level with no opportunity or support to implement an improvement plan. She notes that Louisiana has one of the premier accountability systems in policy allowing the lower performing programs to improve, because after all, the ultimate goal is to provide high quality interactions for all children being served in publicly funded programs.

The improvement plan implemented in Louisiana that Hamre refers to is called the Site Improvement Planning (SIP) Process. Early care and education sites that have CLASS scores below 3.75 are required to participate in the Site Improvement Planning (SIP) Process. The Louisiana Department of Education's field support consultants work with Child Care Resource and Referral agencies to ensure that the lower performing sites develop a set of achievable goals and receive resources, training, and coaching focused on improving the necessary interactions that we know are important for children to receive. Not only does Louisiana have support in place for these lower performing sites but when you look holistically at the way the accountability system is designed, Hamre points to a systematic improvement year upon year in Louisiana and because of the growth, other states are being influenced to design their accountability systems with improvements in mind. Some of the pillars of Louisiana's system include investment in local leaders which help create buy-in, two observations per year with feedback after observations, and professional development that local leaders can implement to continue to support improvement. Hamre says, "And so I think that's sort of what I would say at the end of the day is like the tension between that each and every accountability and improvement is intentional design of systems that help balance some of the negative sides of accountability with some of the opportunities that you get by having folks sort of be required to actually pay attention to the things that matter."

Hamre emphasizes the significance of policy leaders who prioritize their beliefs in interactions both from a policy perspective and in how they engage with the field. This approach is crucial as it facilitates the design of systems that are more human-centered. When I asked Dr. Hamre if she saw a relationship between leaders of organizations and their use of the CLASS tool in their centers, she said Teachstone has realized the importance of not only training teachers

but empowering directors to really know and understand how to use the CLASS tool in their programs in impactful ways and again cited Louisiana's system. In contrast to systems where CLASS assessments are merely conducted without follow-up, Teachstone aims to support states empowering leaders to exemplify effective interactions in the classroom and offer immediate meaningful feedback to teachers. This approach seeks to ensure that collected data is actively utilized to support teacher growth and improvement. Hamre notes that CLASS is most effective when it is embedded in teachers' day-to-day work rather than feeling like another task. In closing, Hamre says leaders who create a culture that is supportive of this work create spaces where educators and children thrive. Hamre (2018) states:

Teachers influence young children's development during the first five years of life and beyond. Yet classrooms are complex social environments, and we have much to learn about the nature of teacher-child interactions and the mechanisms that underlie their effects on children. New measures and methods will help us unpack this complexity in ways that can increase precision in our knowledge and, most important, inform intervention and improvement efforts. Federal and state agencies spend billions of dollars each year on early childhood programs. As our knowledge about teacher-child interactions expand and deepens, policy makers must use this knowledge to craft more effective policies and help programs allocate resources in ways that will improve children's classroom experiences. (pp. 9-10)

As alluded to in my interview with Dr. Hamre, the CLASS tool is used differently in Louisiana than it is in other states or even for other programs. Louisiana is unique in that it attached financial rewards and funding to higher scores; clearly, a system like this is ripe for corruption. Bulletin 139 details out the funding that is attached to childcare centers as it relates to their CLASS scores. Centers receive a financial incentive based on the average number of CCAP (Child Care Assistance Program) children enrolled at their site and the level of their CLASS scores. For instance, the higher the level and number of CCAP children the higher the reimbursement for the center. Clearly center owners want the highest CLASS score to receive the most financial incentive. The defense against gaming the system is put in place by the community network: "If observation results conducted by community networks are consistently different by more than one point from third party observations, the Department may replace all

of the community network’s observation results for a site or observer with third party results.” (LDOE, Performance Profiles Frequently Asked Questions)

In *Engines of Anxiety*, Espeland and Sauder discuss the nuances and complexities involved in not only rankings, reputation and accountability, but also what I find is a central struggle with the CLASS tool: quantifying social interactions. How does one put a number or create accountability with a quantitative assessment to complex social situations? Espeland and Sauder (2016) state:

We argue that the accountability produced by quantitative assessments like rankings is best characterized as “selective accountability,” meaning that these assessments hold people or organizations accountable on some dimensions while obscuring other aspects of the processes they measure. These biases are often overlooked not only because numbers are useful simplifications of complex social realities, but also because they are granted a great deal of cultural authority. We tend to see numerical measures as objective and legitimate because we associate them with technical efficiency as well as mathematical and scientific rigor. (p. 8)

Teachstone would agree that classrooms are complex environments and on any given day there may be several things taking place but would argue that the true indicator of success for children are the depth, duration, and intentionality of the interactions between the teacher and the children. Measuring the environment in a childcare center, while important, is not the key indicator to children’s success when entering school.

Espeland and Sauder also speak to outsiders ranking organizations and the power that they hold, which is evident in Louisiana with the third-party observers described earlier, Picard. It is important to understand that Picard comes in as a third party and if the local observation is scored within 1 point above or beyond the Picard observation, the local observation is maintained. While there are nuances involved in this process the intent was to allow the third party to serve as a check and balance to the local observation which could have incentive to skew the score higher in their favor.

Overall, these CLASS scores do offer insight to outsiders, as scores are placed on Performance Profiles and posted to the Department of Education’s website for anyone to view. Because the scores are widespread and the tool is communicated to the state as a measure of success, onlookers will view childcare centers as being good or bad, a place they want to send

their child or not based on these scores. The numbers on the Performance Profiles also make complex organizations like childcare centers easier to compare and understand.

Beyond the financial incentives placed on higher CLASS scores, there is also concern that the teachers will “act “or perform for the time they are being observed. The CLASS observations consist of 4, 20-minute cycles of observations. One might argue that anyone can put on a show for 20 minutes, when people are being measured, it is natural for them to want to perform their best. Given the training that a particular teacher might have, he/she could ensure that most all the interactions are being met during the observation cycle which is not the intent of the tool. As a reliable CLASS observer, I would argue that teachers who practice intentional interactions every day and not just when they are being observed, shine during observations by both how the children and the teacher interact during the cycles. If teachers attempt to put on a show for an observation, which consists of 4- 20-minute cycles, by the end of the second cycle, it is clear the teacher is lost, things begin to fall apart, and children are confused. It is evident during observations those teachers who consistently practice high quality interactions both because of the flow of the delivery as well as the children’s responses.

Another way the CLASS tool is used in Louisiana that benefits the childcare centers but more importantly, the children enrolled in the centers, is by using the feedback from the observer during the debriefing to improve their interactions in the classroom. Espeland and Sauder say that the rankings in a variety of fields encourage schools to engage in strategies to increase their numbers and transform their goals. The debriefing time spent between the observer and the teacher is the attempt at this. The observer will share the details of the observation, all the great interactions observed along with rooms for improvement. The teacher’s job is to go back into the classroom and focus on increasing the depth and duration of those missed opportunities described by the observer.

Espeland and Sauder state,

These measures are proliferating in numbers and in influence, and their legitimacy is increasingly taken for granted. Proponents are everywhere. Given that rankings are so useful in providing solutions to some practical problems, it is important to remember that useful is not the same as good. (p. 198)

While the CLASS tool has propelled our industry in many ways, I think it is important to remember Dr. Hamre’s comment that while a systematic attempt is in place and can certainly

help, it is not a magic wand that will ensure every teacher is doing everything right with each child every day, but it is a tool that can assist them to do what is best.

While the CLASS tool provides the NorthStar of quality and main focus is to drive quality in childcare centers, the other important aspect of this theme was the utilization of a Tier 1 curriculum and how a research-based curriculum allowed leaders to feel confident in the quality of instruction being delivered by their teachers. Dawn, who led a proficient center serving over 100 children a day, spoke about the Tier 1 curriculum in this respect,

Frog Street is very, I think it's, you know, it lends a lot to what we're trying to accomplish here, which is to talk about feelings and talk about all those things. And so I think it's a good program that kind of fits into what we want to do. So, you know, I think it will have a very profound effect.

When asked how the selection of instructional support materials played into the success of her childcare center, Jane, who was located in a rural part of the state said, "I think a Tier one curriculum is very important to give my new teachers and my old teachers a guideline to follow and guide best practices." Erin answered the same question in a similar fashion by responding:

So that is my job to set them up for success and to make sure those rooms have everything they need to be successful and intentional with the kids in whatever the object, the curriculum or lesson plan is perfect. That is part of my job to set my teachers up for success, right? So if I want you to have that incredible instructional support in the room, my job is to teach you how to create a school family, teach you how to love your kids and teach you how to make that like, you know, the routines and the expectations and all of that structure and organization.

Helen, who is located in an urban area of the state, and runs a high proficient site said, "It plays a huge part, having the tier one curriculum is already exemplary. You just increase the quality of the resources that you have to provide for children." Ann, who runs a high proficient center serving over 200 children described her experience with the instructional support and other supports like this:

I like it just because is very simple and but is also devout, developmentally appropriate, and the children are learning so that having a great curriculum, having a great network that can actually help teachers learn how to use the curriculum even better and actually add some of their ideas into the curriculum makes it even makes it great. And then what

other resources like some of the materials and stuff, like just buying certain kinds of toys like a lot of STEM stuff, really helps children, it kind of opens and broadens their ideas. Finally, the last pillar of this theme was consistent encouragement from leaders to teachers in supporting them to gain levels of higher education. Renee said:

You know, I'm Black, so my demographics, my culture can see a person like me, a person like me with a master's degree. The mom and dad never had a high school diploma, and I'm able to relate to that person, you know, because I was blessed to grow up in a two-parent home. But the people I serve, a lot of these young ladies are single moms with no degrees, no high school diploma. I wanted to help my culture. Yes, you can get a degree. Yes, you can get it. Just do it and faith to encourage them because the Black race has been so far behind Latinos. Well, you know, my challenges are different. And I want to be able to talk to my children about the challenges we bear. But people that look like me.

If a teacher walks in with a high school diploma, the director encourages the employee to gain her CDA (Child Development Associate). Those with CDAs were encouraged to get their Associate's or Bachelor's Degrees. As Carly noted:

We have really pushed that if our teachers wanted to go to further their education, whether they want to go from, you know, some have a CDA, some have associate's degree, some have a bachelor's degree. But if someone want to move on from, say, a bachelor's degree associate's degree from the community college, which is a very good program over there and wants to finish it at Northwestern, we work with them to make sure that there's no financial burden cost with them to continue that education to get it started. If they get their four-year degree, most likely they're going to go to the school system. But, you know, we all still work with them to help them pursue that career, that degree, that next level of education. And that sense of our success stories, this is the blessing that I get. They all work for me in high school and college. And now they are public school teachers. And so, you know, those are some of the success stories we get to see as we get to see this. You know this passing on the baton to the next leaders who are educating our children.

Ingrid described her excellent rated center serving over 160 children as a place that provides a lot of opportunity to learn and grow. We're not just throwing some money into a classroom, like to the walls to do what they want. And you know, for the first time ever, I think everyone has an opportunity to grow and to learn when you know somebody else who's learned more. And I think that helps them a lot because they feel like there's more. So I think probably the biggest thing would be like empowerment opportunities for growth, really. Feeling. Like, they're like intrinsically, they're growing, and it's not just here you are. We went to orientation and you're good. You see these with these opportunities and these connections, even with the network where they can go to the program and then go to MMCI or CBC. And then, you know, if they've reached all of that, we might find, you know, we have two teachers who wanted to get their autism certification. So we help them find that or become class observers or they just see opportunities to keep progressing.

Beth's center, also an excellent rated center and located in an urban area within the state said:

If you work for me, you have to want personal growth and you have to have that yearning for it. So we always try to go to like where my opportunity grows. Because if you work for me, it's not a choice. You have to go to school and further your education. But even when you get it, we're still going to do more like it doesn't end at just a CDA, right?

There's going to be other things like, I have to know your personal goals of like making those things happen.

She went on to say, "And then when they finish, every single one of my staff members will be degreed. And that's. I guess success with them because you have to want it, right? And so we're doing something right. If they're all going and finishing and like wanting to."

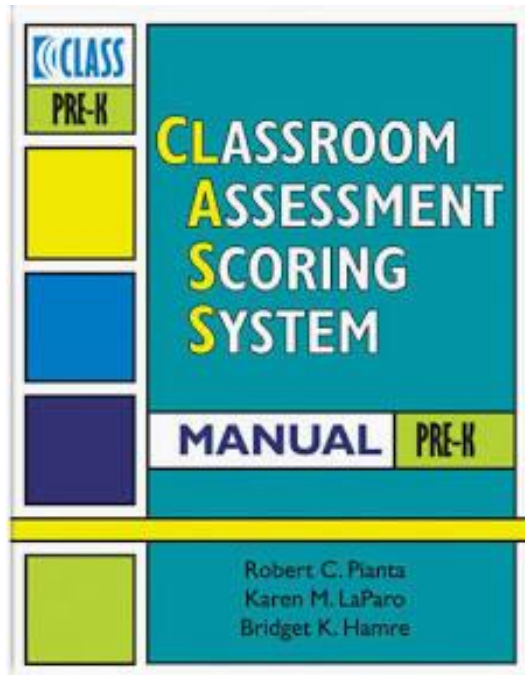
Helen offered a specific story about one of her teachers that came to her out of high school whose mother begged Helen to give her a chance. Helen said, "And I did, I gave her a chance?" This teacher did not have any formal credentials, but Helen said:

She has thrived so well that she's actually one of my teacher leads. If I could find another teacher to take her class, she will become assistant director. She does great, she is bilingual and has an exciting attitude. She's always positive. She articulates very well. She has great relationships with the teachers and parents and children. She's always willing to help. Always willing to go over and beyond and has just really shown great

leadership skills. Just recently, like last month, you know, I called her into my office and I'm just so proud of her. She got her CDA, she's just doing, she's doing a wonderful job. She does very well with class, she is awesome.

Ann summarized this topic and the direction of the industry as a whole nicely by saying, "Because I want to be the best that I can be. I just want to be the best. And that's just how I feel about it. I mean, this is a great school and I want it to be a great school."

Figure 2
The CLASS Pre-K Manual



Chapter 6: Community-Centered Leadership and Commitment to Equitable Childhood Development

“Oh, it takes a village to raise a child,” said Patricia. Faye echoed those same sentiments when asked about the kind of community her center is located in by saying, “We love what we do, we’ve been in the community a long time, we’ve been here since 1988. We teach, we teach children, we want children to be successful. It’s not just about the money here.”

The above quotes illustrate the consistent theme that prevailed throughout my research - the idea that the leaders of these childcare centers truly desire to better their community by serving all children. This encompasses children with special needs, those exhibiting challenging behaviors, children from low-income families and single-parent households, and children from diverse racial backgrounds. The goal is not only to provide service but also to pave the way for these children to achieve improved outcomes as they transition into adolescence and adulthood. The discussions surrounding community, attraction to the childcare industry, owners’ philosophies, and beliefs all align with the theme of community-centered leadership and a commitment to fostering equitable childhood development.

While the leaders interviewed may not have explicitly discussed their work in terms of organizational affiliations, in essence, their approach aligns with the principles detailed by Small in his book *Unanticipated Gains*. Small highlights, as I have previously emphasized in earlier chapters, the current challenges faced by working parents. He notes,

The childcare center has become an increasingly important organization because births to unmarried mothers have reached historic highs, at 36% in 2004 for all unmarried mothers. Among Latinas, the rate is 46%; among African-Americans, 69%. It has become especially important to low-income mothers since the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which eliminated the old welfare system and instituted a work requirement, forcing mothers to find childcare arrangements. Among organizations relevant to unmarried mothers, the childcare center is one of the most crucial. (p. 23)

Type III childcare centers, with their access to resources such as mental health consultation, Early Steps, health clinics, and more, serve as intermediaries for parents. Early Steps is a resource that provides services to families with infants and toddlers who have a medical condition likely to result in a developmental delay. The delays could include cognitive, motor, vision,

hearing, communication, social-emotional or adaptive development. The services are designed to improve the family's capacity to enhance their child's development. Facilitating access to services that parents may be unaware of or unable to access due to financial constraints or lack of awareness is a crucial aspect of this brokerage, as Small refers to it. These community center leaders possess a diverse set of tools that can connect families with necessary services. Given the varied backgrounds of the children they serve, it may be essential for families to leverage the resources that childcare center leaders have at their disposal. These "organizational ties" not only benefit the family as a whole but also have a positive impact on individual children.

When I asked Nancy, a female leader running a high proficient site serving over 60 children what recent challenges or successes she recently experienced, she said,

My staff know I have a big heart for children, obviously, and so I just can't give up on them. You know when I see that they need help and that we can help them. So that was a huge challenge for us. And then what was successful about it is we've got two months to accept Early Steps and now she's getting a screener and we've found a way to turn that negative situation and that stigma around because, you know, no one wants to believe that something could be wrong with their child, which we understand. And, you know, we are just the kind of people to let them know. It's not that anything's wrong, it's just like, let's try harder to get things where they need to be.

Nancy was able to connect this family to Early Steps, just one example of the services that provides services to families with infants and toddlers, birth to three years (36 months) who have a medical condition likely to result in a developmental delay, or who have developmental delays. Children with a variety of delays including social-emotional, adaptive development, cognitive, motor, vision, communication, or hearing may be eligible for these free services. The goal of Early Steps is to improve the family's capacity to enhance their child's development. This is only one example of many relative to how center leaders serve as a conduit to better the community in which they operate.

Within my research, leaders demonstrated a true desire to serve all children and do what was best for them and their families in countless ways. Their commitment extended beyond serving children; they also possessed the platform and resources to establish vital connections that offered specialized support for any developmental delays a child may have been experiencing. Take Nancy, whose professional ties are national. She said,

I'm a part of the Save the Children Action Network, and they have some documentation regarding behavioral challenges and we kind of use that paperwork to document these things for that parent. And so even though it was a bit of a challenge for my teacher and her support staff and obviously many people in a private business that you know, I have to deal with at the moment. You know when I see that they need help and that we can help them.

Participants repeatedly used descriptors such as "relationships" and "bettering the community" within their responses. Leaders strongly believed that all children should have high quality childcare opportunities. These owners and directors did not view their work as society erroneously often does - just a babysitting service. Ann said, "I think children should all get a fair shot at education, regardless of what socioeconomic base they're from, what color they are, where they live. They should all get the same benefits and have the same things offered to them." Faye shared a heartfelt narrative of how her mother, who started the business, felt compelled to provide for her community:

She wanted the kids in our community to be ready to go to kindergarten. What she does for the children, what she's done for the community, I think just being here, my mom still lives in this community. She could live anywhere she wants to, but she still lives here. She's not boisterous or, you know, flaunts her success. She's down to earth, she's a people person, I think we love what we do. We've been in the community a long time. We've been here since '88. We teach children, we want children to be successful, it's not just about the money here.

Ingrid, who moved to Southern Louisiana from New York, characterized the idea of a community-driven approach by saying,

I mean, I think that there's a lot of work to be done. These years are so important as we all know. I think for myself one big thing and it's because I was exposed to very strong education early and through high school was all public schools and it was some of the best schools in the nation. Coming down here and seeing that, it's not like that here, it was heartbreaking. Those supports and those pieces that I had have allowed me to be successful. And so for me, it's just really motivating to try to provide that to as many children as possible.

In essence, these childcare center leaders exemplify the idea that it takes a village to raise a child. Their dedication to bettering their communities and supporting the growth and development of every child they serve is not just about the money; it's about creating a brighter, more equitable future for the next generation.

Equity

“But, once again, I want to emphasize our commitment to serving marginalized communities, particularly low-income, Black, and Brown families,” emphasized Elizabeth, an African-American leader. In 2021, the Build Back Better Act was passed as a significant step toward achieving childcare access and equity. This legislation introduced five new programs, including Child Care Information Networks (CCINs), child care infrastructure grants, child care wage grants, tribal child care activities, and technical assistance. While the federal government has made efforts over the past few decades to promote access and equity, what truly makes an impact is the grassroots initiative led by passionate childcare leaders who are dedicated to fostering equity within their own centers.

Sarah, a leader with a small center in a rural part of Louisiana said,

Each child is like a different flower or plant. Every flower plant needs its own nutrients, needs different nutrients. Some need partial sun and some need full sun. Some need nitrogen, some don't. And if we give them what they need, then they will reach their full potential and they can all be beautiful. They might all look different, but they are all beautiful in their very own unique way. And our children are not very different. And it's really rewarding to see them not look at each other like, Oh, your mom gets food stamps. They're just their best friends and they love each other because of their personality and for who they are, not what they look like about where they come from.

Many leaders running centers offering high quality childcare for diverse ethnicities do it intentionally knowing they can make a difference for the children they serve. While it may only be a few children, knowing that they are making a small difference for their community gives them a sense of fulfillment. The wealth of data revealed over the past two decades shed light on the sheer volume of marginalized children and the barriers exist for these children.

A 2017 article from the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), highlights the disparities that exist for our youngest learners.

Young children who are ethnic or racial minorities experience higher poverty rates than their white counterparts. Historical and institutionalized racism, which manifests in systemic and structural barriers to equitable access to opportunity, lead to pronounced disparities in socio-economic experiences for a large share of America's children. In 2015, 4.2 million young children under age 5 (21 percent) lived in poverty. Nearly half of young children lived in low-income families below 200 percent of federal poverty.

Young children in low-income families are disproportionately children of color. (p. 2)

The leaders I interviewed represented a variety of racial backgrounds and their passion to advance racial equity was loud and clear.

For example, Tammy, a very successful African-American childcare owner in an urban part of the state said,

But most people, most children who don't get that opportunity will not feel like they could do more in life. And I never wanted another child to feel and go through the things that I went through. So I wanted to make sure they grow up and be in something that really impacts their lives.

Victoria, who runs a high proficient center in a rural area within Louisiana, stated,

I said, our community needs better. I think our children deserve better. I really felt strong that every child, no matter how much mom and daddy makes, desires really good childcare. So I really love the fact that I have a Walmart checkout mom who works at a Walmart checkout sitting right next to our local physician's child. And I just feel like it makes them. I mean, it makes the community better, makes children grow up better.

Another leader articulated her commitment to equity as follows,

I want the best for every child. So regardless if you can afford it or not, you know, I would like to see every child have at least an opportunity to reach their full potential. And on the way you can, you have to have the resources and you have to have, you know, you've got to have the resource, not just what resources, and you have to have the people who are dedicated to doing this because you can have all of the material and supplies and being there. But if you don't have people that understand high quality and want the best for other people's children, you've got nothing.

In this instance we hear leaders of color express their desire to not only serve children of color but to assure them that they can be successful and overcome odds that they may be faced with.

Addressing racial inequities in the early care and education industry will take a combination of sufficient funding and strong policy decisions, but at the heart of providing equitable access, we will need leaders who are committed to providing equity in the very environments they spend every waking moment in.

Figure 3

Teacher and Infant in a Classroom Setting



Chapter 7: Mission-Driven Passion and Spiritual Calling in Childcare Leadership

“To be honest, it is what God intended for my life, because he just gave me a supernatural kind of love for kids. It was truly just, I knew I was called to do it,” said Erin who runs an excellent site serving over 120 children. When I followed up with a question about her philosophy or beliefs around early care and education, she responded with, “I believe that we do the most important work in the world. And that I mean, I know people probably don't believe that, but I believe that because I believe that what I do matters for their future. I think our children deserve better.” Erin’s words reflect the definition of spiritual leadership according to Egri and Herman (2000) who explain that characteristics of a spiritual leader:

The focus of spiritual leadership is on collective social influence processes at workplace enabling employees to experience transcendence and find meaning and purpose in life (sense of calling), to enmesh in a network of social connections (sense of membership), and to align their personal spiritualities with organizational spiritualities (value alignment) (p.80).

Leaders consistently articulated that they believed their work was a calling and critical for the betterment of society for future generations. Jane affirmed this point by saying, “Even though Satan raised his head against me and gave me some challenges. I feel like, you know, I'm going to this is my work, this is my life's work. It is what I'm meant to do, even though there are some challenges.”

Spiritual leadership has proven to be a highly effective approach in motivating employees to embrace meaningful purpose in their work, especially in the context of preparing our youngest learners to become responsible and successful members of society (Afsar et al.,2015).

Participants expressed a range of emotions and concepts associated with this calling, such as profound passion, a deep connection to their souls, genuine love for children, willingness to make sacrifices, blessings, prayers, a sense of purpose, and a sincere affection for their roles. Jane, for example, spoke about the significance of her work while also highlighting some challenges, such as requiring permission to use the restroom due to strict child-staff ratios that must be adhered to. How many adults in the workforce still must ask another adult to use the restroom?

Another challenge that was reflected in my research was from leaders who explained that teachers often come into work not feeling well because of the bonds they formed with the children they care for; many teachers view the children in their classes as their own children. This rhetoric narrated by providers again speaks to the intrinsic motivation and compassion felt by leaders and teachers to deliver the highest quality of care to children at the center despite not feeling well. These comments underscore the dedication required to work in childcare. Afsar et al. (2015) argues that due to the significant amount of time people spend at their workplaces, it becomes challenging to distinguish spiritual identities from the organizations they work for. In a 2015 study to better understand the influence of workplace spirituality, intrinsic motivation, and environmental passion, Badir et al. (2015) stated:

According to Fairholm (1996), spiritual leaders lead people through intellectual discourse and dialogue, encourage self-directed free moral choice tasks for the betterment of society, and give meaning and purpose to them about their work roles. These behaviors are conceptually highly relevant to trigger pro-environmental behavior. For instance, spiritual leadership promotes employees' experience of transcendence through the work process to go beyond their own self-interests for the good of others and the society. (p. 80)

Several participants highlighted the significance of the work in the childcare industry and the intrinsic motivation by leaders and teachers for the pure benefits it has on society and the environment. Faye stated that she received a vision from God to open a daycare, indicating the spiritual aspect of this profession. Given the responses from the participants, many individuals go into this field because of the passion and love for the work they do.

Carly emphasized the necessity for respect and reverence within the industry, considering it a true profession akin to public schools in the past. This sentiment found consistent agreement among participants who recognize its genuine worth, even though others may still perceive this occupation as mere babysitting. Participants seemed to establish a relationship between workplace spirituality and intrinsic motivation. When asked about compensation in the childcare industry, Carly remarked, "The remuneration should reflect the value of the work, considering it's their passion; they are willing to accept lower pay to pursue their calling. It's a significant sacrifice." Chapter 2 also addressed the issue of inadequate compensation for women in the childcare field, highlighting how intrinsic motivation among leaders and educators serves as a

powerful driving force for success in this complex yet crucial sector. People choose this profession not for the monetary rewards but because of their genuine passion for the work. Patricia described childcare as a heart and soul business, emphasizing the emotional investment required. Participants described this work as no easy task, one that requires leaders to be flexible, understanding, and with the ability to multitask. At any given moment, a leader may be in the kitchen preparing a meal for seventy-five children and the next moment, on the floor with five one-year-olds playing peek-a-boo. Apart from the diverse array of responsibilities that leaders must handle daily, the industry may not be appealing to individuals seeking a high salary.

Again, the importance of workplace spirituality and intrinsic motivation were articulated when I asked Nancy what she thought made her center successful:

Our success starts as soon as you pull up, our center is beautiful. It's full with lush gardens. You pull up, you drive in a circle driveway. You're engulfed in beautiful palm trees, so it automatically feels calming right and welcoming. It feels clean. You're going someplace that doesn't have run down chain linked fence. Soon, as you get it, then you walk in and it smells great, looks clean. The staff is very, very friendly and caring. People often tell me they feel like they're walking by a family member's house and that is kind of weird at first, but it does put off what my mission is, and I make families feel like they're bringing their child to a relative. And not a school, you know, especially because no one likes to really envision like, no one respects the fact that we are schools, right? Because we have very young children, infants and toddlers. But once they see the results of the work that we do, they love it. And those are the results of what I love here.

Figure 4
Tranquil Gardens at Louisiana Childcare Center



(Figure 4 continued)



Note. Environment and ambience can enhance early childhood professionals' spiritual connection with their work environment.

Giselle spoke about how running a daycare has become a part of her identity, and that their love for the work is what drives them. Pamela expressed a passion for nurturing the hearts of children, while Jane described the job as a mission rather than just a job. Again, the idea of this work being mission-driven rather than simply a job was a theme that emerged time and time again by participants. Fry's (2003) words seem to echo this theme:

Spiritual leaders develop values of hope and faith, and altruistic love in a compelling transcendent vision of positively serving community, future generations, and nature, by increasing intrinsic motivation and a sense of membership and being understood and appreciated, among followers. (p. 87)

Some people can barely imagine tolerating working with children all day long, each and every day. However, the leaders I interviewed saw this work and time as invaluable given the formative time in children's lives. For example, Jill believes deeply in the mission of the childcare industry and it is that mission that helps her overcome challenges associated with this line of work.

Leaders also described the challenges they faced such as children with behavioral issues, shortage of staff, the volume of regulations that must be adhered to, and the like. However, their passion and love for the mission superseded those challenges. Elizabeth highlighted the

importance of instilling love and confidence in children so as to positively impact children's futures. She claims to be a nurturer at heart first.

The spiritual leadership study in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (Badir et al., 2015), yielded two significant findings. First, it underscored the importance of leadership in terms of organizational care, holistic support for teachers, and the value attributed to them. Second, it highlighted the pivotal role of leadership in promoting pro-environmental behaviors among employees in the childcare industry. These behaviors encompass communicating to teachers the significance of delivering high-quality interactions to children and the positive outcomes they generate (Afsar et al., 2015).

To conclude this chapter, I share a poignant statement from Gina, who manages a highly proficient center in a rural area of Louisiana. Gina passionately expressed, "Once I got involved and witnessed the impact, I just can't let it go now. God, I can't let it go now. This is what I love; I love doing it."

Chapter 8: Family-Like Culture and Supportive Relationships in Type III Childcare Centers

Jane, who has been in the industry for over 45 years, described an interaction she had with one of her employees. She said, “It’s an old suitcase that they owned, and I painted it out with all crazy colors. It’s in the staff lounge and I had a young employee who I hired and she said, ‘Can I take more than one thing?’ She took food home for her 14-year-old brother, and she took a bar of soap. We don’t know Paula. What our employees are suffering through on the other side.” The blessing box that she describes is a symbol of what leaders are willing to do and the lengths they’re willing to go for their teachers. This suitcase full of items as simple as a bar of soap sums up the narrative from many leaders in childcare organizations. “I think I need to know their love language,” Jane says. “I think I need to know how to best communicate with them. I feel like it doesn’t matter what I know until they know how much I care.” The leaders I interviewed consistently spoke about their teachers as if these individuals were members of their own family.

The first overarching theme of family culture and relationships was consistent among most interviewees. The leaders within each of the organizations frequently spoke of their childcare center operating as if it were a family, prioritizing their employees. Studies in the past have highlighted the need to change company culture that prioritizes the employees’ needs that exist outside of the workforce, therefore making them more productive in the workplace. In *Companies In A Family Way* (1997), Saltzman noted that this new mindset was “born out of necessity“ and went on to say, “work suggests that if businesses want to help people achieve balanced lives while helping firms profit, the answer is not to add more programs but to revamp fundamental notions about how people work (p. 2).” As mentioned earlier, our contemporary society is characterized by a workforce in which both parents or guardians are actively engaged in employment. In light of this reality, leaders must be prepared to implement necessary adjustments to ensure the effectiveness of their employees. This need is particularly salient in childcare organizations, where the majority of the workforce consists of women. As Saltzman aptly articulates, “employees have personal lives that sometimes become complex” (p. 2). In this context, leaders are tasked with the responsibility of providing support in unconventional ways to mitigate turnover and foster the development of positive work environments and cultures. One

leader running a childcare center in an urban area within Louisiana shared the way she supported one of her teachers:

But they also know like they can count on me as far as if something is needed in their personal life. They can count on me for that, and I'm going to make sure because listen, I'll tell you, the center that I worked at before. There was no time off. No, you're not allowed to go to your son's Christmas performance, you know. No, your son has a field trip, you can't go. We need you here. I'm not like that. I'm not. These are important times in people's lives that they want to go to and enjoy. And so if that means and listen, I've done it. If that means that I have to go stand in a classroom and change a diaper for somebody to go to a doctor's appointment that they couldn't get on the weekend. Or I have to go stay in a classroom for somebody to be able to go to their child's Christmas performance. I'm going to go on in that classroom because that's how much I value my people. And it's those lead teachers that are still there with me. They've been with me.

This leader describes providing flexibility and most importantly understanding and empathy for her teachers as important factors to keeping her team happy. Staff turnover tends to be incredibly high in the childcare industry, keeping teachers employed leads to consistency within classrooms, which benefits children.

Haugh & McKee (2003) noted the following,

The notion of an identifiable family culture in the smaller business is frequently noted in literature (Mulholland, 1997), it is sometimes referred to as familiar character (Payne, 1984), family atmosphere (Dick & Morgan, 1987), family paradigm (Davis, 1983) or family ideology (Ram, 1994b; Ram & Holliday, 1993). (p.144)

Kets de Vries (1993) characterizes the family spirit as one where 'the values family members express create a common purpose for employees and help to establish a sense of identification and commitment' (p. 62). In the previously described literature, this family culture is known by a variety of names, but the power of this family culture helps promote continuity and stability, which is a critical pillar in a complex environment such as a childcare center.

Similar to the work by Haugh & McKee, topics such as loyalty, trust, communication, commitment and relationships emerged from the study's data. The leaders I spoke to looked out for their employees, supporting them financially and emotionally, often even counseling them on personal matters. Just like children have expectations within families, so do employees within

these organizations. Leaders can confidently rely on their staff and delegate tasks, knowing that their intentions are aligned with the organization's well-being and are not aimed at causing harm to the organization, the children, or their fellow co-workers. In my research, the concept of belongingness emerged as another crucial component. These childcare leaders foster a sense of belonging and make individuals feel like integral members of their network, prioritizing their well-being. Owners and directors genuinely seek the best for their teachers, frequently extending their support beyond the bounds of traditional employer-employee relationships to ensure the welfare of their staff.

Participants cited many virtues to describe interactions among owners/directors and their teachers. Some included honest, kind, understanding, trustworthy, nurturing communication, compassion, leading by example, and fairness. One leader offered "Wellness Wednesdays" for her teachers in an effort to encourage everyone to practice healthy eating and exercise habits. One leader who runs a proficient center currently serving over 70 children/day went as far as helping an employee secure a house. Mary said,

When she came to me, she was homeless, living out of her car with her two grandkids that she had sole custody of. And I took her in my car and we went and found her a low income apartment, and we got her in that apartment for a year lease and we set her pay at something that she would be able to afford, but that she could still, you know, she her grandchildren, get Social Security benefits because they don't have, you know, deceased parents. And so we set her pay. It's something that she could afford that could help her. So. And within her lease was like six months into her lease. She's like, I don't want to be in this apartment anymore. I want my house. I said, OK, so the next day I went to her and said, Hey, I said, I want you to call this number and I want you to talk to these people. I want you to tell them this story, and I want you to see if they can build you a house. And she said, who? And I said, it's Habitat for Humanity. And she did, and she got her house.

The majority of the leaders emphasized the strength of the relationships they had with their teachers, with much of their work centered around building and nurturing these relationships.

Beth said,

People really treat people how they think they want to be treated without taking the time to really know who that person is and what resonates with them. So being real clear on who everyone is and what motivates them was extremely helpful, and it changed the way

that the team works together. And in a much more profound way than you can imagine really.

Faye, another participant, captured the theme of family-like cultures and supportive relationships up nicely saying:

They know that I'm always going to be here for them and they know that I'm always going to want to see the best for them and do what I can to be supportive of them in whatever way it might be. I'm always fair with everyone. I have people here that have their children here that I've been knowing all my life, honestly, their families. I've known them all my life, but I'm fair. And if I can't do it for everyone, then I can't do it for you, for yours. And they understand that and they know that. You know, if I can make it work, I will. But I'm not going to do anything more for one that I can't do for the other.

Everybody gets the same.

In a 2011 study between work-family culture and work attitudes, Mauno, Kiuru & Kinnunen stated, "The concept of work-family culture has received increasing attention among work-family researchers over the last few years. Work-family culture can be defined as 'the shared assumptions, beliefs, and values regarding the extent to which an organization supports and values the integration of employees' work and family life'" (p. 394). Supportive work-family cultures wield many advantages including higher job satisfaction and work engagement, conversely, this leads to decreased employee turnover. The more supported employees feel the work-family culture to be, the more positive their work attitudes become. Leaders within the childcare industry exemplify this as Dawn said, "everyone who comes in becomes a part of my family! They're like my family, I want them to stay here."

"Blessing boxes are just one notable example of cultivating this family-like environment. They symbolize values of family, belonging, support, honesty, kindness, understanding, trustworthy, nurturing communication, and compassion. The family-like culture and supportive relationships narrated by these childcare leaders are an important tenet of this critical work. As Jane says, "It doesn't matter what I know until they know how much I care."

Figure 5
Blessing Box



Note. A blessing box is one way early childhood leaders can support their teams and boost morale.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

In Chapter 9, the conclusion, I interpret the findings, discuss the study's theoretical and practical implications, and suggest topics for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

The initial inspiration for my research began with a conversation many years ago between me and a colleague on the steps of the Claiborne Building in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She asked me, very poignantly, what my secret sauce to delivering high quality childcare was. When I began this research, my goal was to identify the very ingredients that made up high quality early care and education centers.

My initial assumption was that organizational culture played a pivotal role in determining the success of high-quality childcare centers. As highlighted by Bassok and Latham (2017), fostering a robust organizational climate is imperative for childcare providers to deliver top-notch education. Research has consistently demonstrated that children entering kindergarten exhibit a wide range of skills (Bassok & Latham, 2017). Furthermore, programs that cultivate a supportive culture and climate tend to exhibit higher instructional quality.

The essence of an early childhood setting lies in its unique culture. This culture encompasses shared values, assumptions, and collective beliefs about what holds significance, as well as the norms and expectations governing everyday interactions. Moreover, culture extends to encompass the traditions, rituals, celebrations, and customs that set one program or school apart from another.

After interviewing childcare leaders with CLASS scores ranging from approaching proficient to excellent, I found no variation in how they articulated the very essence of their work within childcare centers. By interviewing leaders with different ratings on the CLASS tool, I made assumptions that those with higher scores (excellent) would articulate different information than those leaders with lower scores (approaching proficient). However, there were no stark differences between what leaders from approaching proficient centers said vs. what leaders running excellent centers. The lack of variation is compelling and allows us to understand an important party of the childcare system in Louisiana.

What my research has revealed is how leaders within Type III centers make sense of the profession they have chosen to operate in and more importantly validate the work they do. Sociologist Erving Goffman introduced the idea of framing (1974) to label, locate, perceive

and/or identify events. Leaders in my study constructed, organized, and differentiated the meanings of their experiences in the childcare industry they operate in. Leaders narrated how their work currently exists within Louisiana, the nation and society. While five themes emerged from my research, the central idea that resonated with all leaders were the strategies they used to defend their status as early childhood leaders operating in Type III childcare centers.

The findings of this study shed light on these strategies:

1. **Elevating Childcare:** Childcare leaders are encouraged to be advocates for Professionalization.
2. **Commitment to Excellence, Empowerment & Professional Development:** Childcare providers must not only strive for self-improvement but also invest in the growth and development of their teams and children.
3. **Community-Centered Leadership & Commitment:** Childcare providers must possess a deep-seated desire to serve all children, not just for the betterment of society but specifically for the value they add to their communities.
4. **Mission-Driven Passion & Spiritual Calling:** Childcare leaders and teachers must bring intense emotions, strong desire, and unwavering dedication to their work as these things are indispensable for providing high-quality care.
5. **Family-Like Culture & Supportive Relationships:** Childcare leaders should treat their staff as if they were family members, emphasizing relationships built on mutual trust and respect, thereby fostering a sense of belonging. Staff must be handled with compassion, kindness, honesty, and respect, creating a healthy work environment.

In summary, my contribution to the existing body of literature on leadership has added rich qualitative research on how childcare leaders validate and promote the work they do for children in Louisiana within their childcare organization. No past research has offered such depth and societal significance in an area that is so critical to society. Passion, a commitment to serving, the pursuit of excellence, and a family-centered approach are vital for both teachers and students to feel valued and supported. This holistic approach not only enhances the educational experience but also contributes to the overall well-being of the childcare community.

Suggestions for Future Research

To advance our comprehension of early childhood development, it is imperative that researchers explore a few other areas of this critical industry. Incorporating the perspectives of

low-income families is one perspective that could be taken to ensure their voices contribute to shaping equitable access to high-quality care for all children. Future research endeavors should focus on enhancing the capabilities of organizations to support early childhood education effectively. Ethnographic research within childcare facilities would serve as another opportunity to study the culture and practices within childcare centers, offering a different perspective about interactions of leaders, teachers, and families. Potential research areas encompass exploring the roles of early childhood advisory boards and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. Investigating these roles can provide deeper insights into how educational systems are constructed and how power and ideology influence the early care and education system. While I gained in depth information on Type III leaders' perspectives on leading high quality childcare centers, gaining perspective from Type I and Type II leaders may lend itself to offer variation that my research did not shed light on. Finally, another option for additional research would be with the teachers that interact with the children daily. Obtaining the teachers perspectives of both their work and their relationships with leaders would help layer the existing research I have presented in my manuscript.

While further research is undoubtedly essential, existing scholarship already offers valuable implications for policy and practice. A critical step forward involves contemplating policy changes that foster inclusivity and accountability within all licensed childcare centers. Such changes aim to establish a more equitable system. This represents just one of the many measures we can take to ensure that every child, regardless of their background or circumstances, receives the quality care and education they deserve.

Implications for Social Science Theory and Practice and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

To establish a more equitable system that empowers all children to thrive, it is imperative to scrutinize the provision of high-quality early care and education, recognizing its profound economic and political implications. While Louisiana introduced a quality rating system in 2007, it remains non-mandatory for all licensed centers. Understanding the transformative impact of high-quality early care and education is paramount. As Jean Anyon (2014) argues, advocating for more equitable public policies can effectively combat poverty and inequality (p. 88). Wright (2011) emphasizes the urgency of prioritizing our youngest learners and cultivating a culture that values creativity, inspiration, determination, and hope over factors such as race, class, family

structure, and zip code. By enacting policies that champion equity, we can construct a system that enables all children to realize their full potential.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, established in 1989 and reaffirmed at the World Education Forum in 2000, laid the foundation for expanding early childhood development globally. Nevertheless, the United States has grappled with providing equal educational opportunities, particularly for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. To enhance the early care and education system, policymakers should design a comprehensive system that caters to all children, with specific attention to low-income communities and immigrant children, and coordinate with health and human services departments. The responsibility for providing access to high-quality early care and education is a shared one among federal, state, and local governments, businesses, and communities. While the current U.S. administration has outlined a national plan with four pillars, securing adequate funding is crucial to transform it into a reality. My research underscores that, historically, the United States has not sufficiently prioritized, supported, or funded early care and education efforts. Louisiana has made progress, but further research is required to determine the necessary funding for sustaining high-quality early care and education.

In conclusion, this study has delved into the critical aspects of early childhood development, with a focus on the leaders' perspective's pivotal role in the work they do within their childcare centers. The research findings have illuminated the significance of elevating and advocating for the profession, commitment to excellence and professional development, community-centered leadership, emphasizing factors such as mission-driven passion, and the cultivation of a family-like culture with supportive relationships.

These findings not only contribute to our understanding of early childhood education but also have important implications for policy and practice. It is evident that prioritizing inclusivity and accountability within all licensed childcare centers is essential for creating a more equitable system, ensuring that all children receive the quality care and education they deserve, regardless of their background or circumstances.

In essence, this study underscores the urgency of recognizing the profound impact of high-quality early care and education on children's futures and society as a whole. By embracing inclusive policies and supporting equitable access to quality education, we can create a brighter and more equitable future for all children.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

1. Thank you again for your participation in my research project on determinants of successful childcare centers.
2. Explain my role: Paula Polito as a doctoral student doing research for a project on successful childcare centers. My background as a childcare owner in the industry.
3. Explain the interview process – how much time is allotted, names will be anonymous, Zoom recordings and the opportunity for the applicant to ask questions.(Share/refer to consent form)

Interview Questions

Personal and Rapport Building Questions

1. Describe what attracted you to the childcare industry?
 - a. What is your philosophy or beliefs around ECE?
2. Where is your center located?
 - a. Are there other centers located near yours?
3. What kind of community are you located in?
4. How long have you been in the field?
5. Have you worked at other centers?
6. How would you describe yourself as a leader?
7. Walk us through your day, can you think of a recent challenge you've experienced or a recent success you have had?
 - a. —Will follow up with asking them if that was typical or unique for that day?
8. Why did you choose to be a Type III Licensed Childcare Center?
9. What encouraged you to work towards Proficient/ Highly Proficient /Excellent?
10. Describe the students you serve. What type of families do they come from?
11. What type of supports do you receive (i.e.-Professional development, funding, etc)?

Specific Questions/ Teachers

1. Describe your relationships with your staff/teachers.
 - a. How do you hire new teachers?

- b. How do they find out about your center?
 - c. What do you look for in a potential teacher/employee?
 - d. Have you ever had to fire someone, and if so, why?
2. Walk me through a day, describe what a recent challenge with one of your staff look/feel like. Describe a successful interaction that you had recently with one of your team members.
3. When you think about the teachers that have been with you the longest, what do you think keeps them part of your team?
4. Why do you think your teachers have chosen to work/stay with you in your organization?
5. What makes your center different than other centers? What makes your center successful?
6. What type of parent engagement do you offer at your center? What role do your parents play?
7. What are some expectations that your parents have?
8. How does the selection of instructional support materials play into the success of your childcare center? Can you explain?

Specific Questions/ Compensation

1. Tell me more about:
 - a. What are the ratios in each of your classrooms?
 - b. If you are comfortable, can you share your average pay for assistant and lead teachers?
 - c. What type of schedules do your staff have? Flexible schedules, 8 hours/day, breaks?
 - d. How often do you offer professional development? What does it entail?
 - e. Do you offer paid vacation for your teachers?
 - f. Do you offer paid holidays for your teacher?
 - g. Do you offer free or discounted childcare for your teachers?
 - h. Do your teachers ask for advances/loans? Do you offer them?
 - i. How do you manage teachers time off for personal reasons?
 - j. Do your teachers cook on site, do group meals (i.e. gumbo, red beans and rice)?
 - k. Do you offer parties, paid lunches, holiday lunches/dinners for your team?
 - l. Do you vacation as a team?

- m. Do you offer free healthcare?
- n. Do you offer 401 K benefits?

- 2. What don't people know about Early Care and Education?
- 3. Do you know anybody else that I can talk to???
- 4. Is there anything I'm not asking that I should be asking about???

Thank participant for their time and let them know I can share outcomes if they are interested.
guide (Interview Bridget Hamre)

Interview Guide

- 1. Thank you again for your participation in my research project on determinants of successful childcare centers.
- 2. Explain my role: Paula Polito as a doctoral student doing research for a project on successful childcare centers. My background as a childcare owner in the industry.
- 3. Explain the interview process – how much time is allotted, names will be anonymous, Zoom recordings and the opportunity for the applicant to ask questions. (Share/refer to consent form)

Questions

- 1. Please explain your role with Teachstone.
- 2. What were your initial goals in developing the CLASS tool?
 - a. Children and success in school
- 3. Can you speak to the nuances within the tool as it relates to reliable CLASS Observers?
 - a. Testing
 - b. Validity
- 4. Can you share your thoughts on the way Louisiana utilizes the tool as opposed to other states?
- 5. In your work have you seen any link between successful childcare centers and CLASS Scores?

6. Do you see a relation between leaders of organizations and their use of the CLASS tool in their centers?
7. Is there anything I'm not asking that I should be asking?

Vita

The author was born in Metairie, Louisiana. She obtained her bachelor's degree in marketing from the University of New Orleans in 1996 and her Master of Business Administration from the University of New Orleans in 2001. She joined the University of New Orleans graduate program to pursue a doctorate in Urban Studies and plans to continue her advocacy efforts, not only on behalf of high-quality early care and education, but for her community as a whole.