

AN EXPLORATION OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES AMONG CENTER-
BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION DIRECTORS

By

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ABSTRACT

Managing early childhood education (ECE) programs is intricate, with directors facing challenges in organizational leadership, business management, and meeting pedagogical standards. Early childhood education directors are vital as they play a crucial role in ensuring quality education and care. Despite the importance, research on leadership and management, especially through a gender lens, is limited. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to explore the leadership and management challenges Los Angeles County based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors experience in their leadership and management roles. Six participants who self-identified as ECE directors completed semi-structured interviews over Zoom. These interviews were then restoried into narratives and coded into themes using a coding software. Two major themes were developed: leadership and management challenges and strategies. The findings suggest that ECE directors need leadership and management academic and professional preparation before beginning a director's position. All directors emphasized the need for mentorship for support and guidance. While this study adds to the existing knowledge, further extensive research is required to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges ECE directors experience and the support they need to lead and manage their programs successfully and effectively.

Keywords: early childhood education, early childhood education director, ECE, ethics of care, the whole leadership framework.

DEDICATION

To God for his grace and mercy in allowing me to achieve this academic milestone and become a scholar-practitioner. Obtaining my doctorate was a life goal.

To my husband and my children for their support and patience. May this achievement serve as an example to my daughter and son that no matter your life circumstances, you can achieve your goals if you do your best.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Research has indicated that program quality, leadership, and management practices are heavily incorporated in the role of the early childhood education (ECE) director (Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013). Early childhood education directors are to be both leaders and managers (Leekeenana & Ponte, 2018). However, ECE leadership and management research is limited, and little has been written about the current challenges ECE directors experience in their leadership and management roles (Lee et al., 2022). Additionally, there is even less research available addressing the leadership and administrative management strategies and resources needed to support ECE directors to lead and operate high-quality and financially sustainable ECE programs (Alchin et al., 2019).

The ECE director oversees all operations within the early childhood program (Masterson, 2019). Operational functions include tasks traditionally associated with education, including designing, and implementing curriculum, creating, and maintaining the learning environment, and ensuring the health and safety of children enrolled in the program (Masterson, 2019; see also Morgan, 2000). The ECE program directors are also tasked with other responsibilities, including human resources, financial management, and effectively leading their organizations (Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013; Leekeenana & Ponte, 2018). However, a “dissonance exists between the administrative or operational demands of running accountable, socially-responsible and economically-sustainable ECE provision, and that of the professional challenge of pedagogy, specifically the principles, practice of teaching and how these affect learning” (Rodd, 2019, p. 293). While the ECE field has made significant progress in defining, measuring, and supporting quality instruction in classrooms and other learning environments, considerably less attention has

been devoted to a critical prerequisite of quality assurance—leadership and management of ECE programs (Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013).

It is more accurate and valuable for ECE stakeholders to view business stability not just as a precondition to quality but as an ingredient of a quality program that is as essential as well-prepared teachers and low teacher-child ratios (Lee et al., 2022). Research has shown that ECE programs with lower educational quality are usually associated with financial struggles, whereas high quality programs are characterized as financially stable (Rohacek et al., 2010). There are several factors that may affect the financial stability of ECE programs. These factors include the demand for enrollment, the size of the program, and access to various types of funding (Rohacek et al., 2010). It is evident that effective leadership and management of ECE programs are crucial components of early childhood education (Gibbs et al., 2019). As such, “...considerable research still is needed in the development and implementation of impactful strategies for and approaches to ECE leadership preparation and training...” (Rodd, 2019, p. 293). Thus, the present study explored the leadership and management challenges ECE directors faced in their jobs, their educational and professional training, and the strategies that helped alleviate such challenges.

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are provided to give the reader context in reviewing this study.

Director qualifications: The educational and experience background required to become an ECE director. These qualifications will vary by state ranging from twelve units in child development or in ECE to a bachelor’s degree (Leekeenana & Ponte, 2018).

Early childhood education (ECE): Any part- or full-day group program in a center, school, or home that serves children from birth through age eight, including children with exceptional

development and learning needs (Leekeenana & Ponte, 2018; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

Early childhood education director: The person responsible for all aspects of the daily activities, planning, and budget of a preschool's program, including the supervision and leadership of the caring and teaching of children (Leekeenana & Ponte, 2018).

Effective leadership in ECE: Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) wrote that effective leadership in ECE:

...involves inspiring others with a vision of a better future. It relies on a level of dedication and passion about early childhood care and education, and also upon a capacity to reflect upon and engage with changing contexts (i.e., the children, families, and community); and a willingness to embrace evidence-based practice. The provision of direction is promoted by the leader's capacity to identify and articulate an ambitious collective vision; to ensure consistency amongst the staff (shared understanding of setting practices and processes); being a reflective practitioner and encouraging reflective practice in others. (p. 16)

Ethics: "A system of moral values that helps one define the 'good,' the 'virtuous,' or the 'right' things to do" (Zhang, 2020, p. 299).

Ethics of care: A perspective related to ethics that values interpersonal ethics, relationality, and contextual decision-making (Sander-Staudt, 2018). Additionally, ethics of care emphasizes a commitment to humanity "which is informed by modest goals and dedication to care, compassion, and relationship-building" (Zhang, 2020, p. 299). It was first theorized by Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984) to challenge the male-centered psychological frameworks.

Leader: A person who participates in leadership by contributing to decision-making and influencing change and quality improvement; leadership can include directors and teachers (Kirby et al., 2021).

Management: Management functions relate to orchestrating tasks and developing systems to carry out the organizational mission (Bloom, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

The problem explored in this study derived from research on the leadership and management challenges early childhood education directors face in their programs (Alchin et al., 2019). Specific challenges included decentralized professional programs across the nation, which has created a need for unified standards of quality and requirements in directors' professional preparation to promote higher levels of education and reduce inequity and inconsistency across the nation (Lee et al., 2022). Moreover, there is a direct connection between effective leadership and business management of ECE directors and the level of quality of the ECE programs (Lee et al., 2022). Therefore, this study is based on the premise that ECE leadership and management knowledge and preparation have a direct effect on quality of care and education. Quality care and education is the ultimate goal of the field of early childhood education.

Considering that leadership and management research within the ECE field is limited and not adequately theorized (Lee et al., 2022; Stamopoulos, 2012) nor conceptualized, more research focusing on effective leadership and management knowledge is needed (Rodd, 2019). Thus, this study took a closer examination of the challenges ECE directors faced in their jobs. This study specifically addressed ECE directors' 1) academic and professional preparation for their leadership role, 2) leadership knowledge and preparation, and 3) management responsibilities, experiences, and needs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to explore the leadership and management challenges Los Angeles County based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors experienced in their leadership and management roles. For the purpose of this study, there was a specific focus on the directors' experiences with 1) academic and professional preparation for their leadership roles, 2) organizational leadership, and 3) business operational tasks. Leadership and management in the ECE environment were generally referred to as: ECE workforce (current ECE system, professional, and academic preparation), management duties (human resources, fiscal management, and facilities management [adequate equipment, environment, and space]), and leadership styles (effective, distributed, joint, transformational, and servant). This researcher interviewed directors to obtain information to explore the leadership and management challenges, and the resources and strategies needed to support their leadership and management roles.

Research Questions and Design

The research questions that guided this study were:

Research Question 1: How did Los Angeles County-based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors perceive program setting-related challenges as influencing their ability to effectively lead their organization?

Research Question 2: How did Los Angeles County-based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors describe the operational management tasks in the early childhood education setting?

Research Question 3: How did Los Angeles County-based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors describe their preparation for their leadership and management roles within their early childhood education organization?

This qualitative narrative inquiry study used semi-structured interviews to obtain information in order to understand the leadership and management challenges and what resources and strategies early childhood education directors need to support their leadership and management roles. The participants were directors from programs located in Los Angeles County in the State of California. The participants were directors from private-for-profit, single-center based programs. Participants possessed the minimum qualifications for academic and professional experience as required by the State of California (California Department of Public Social Services, 2023).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The purpose of adopting a conceptual and theoretical framework is to establish the foundations, boundaries, and linkage of a study to broader research literature (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). Furthermore, a theoretical framework can be used as a guide for a research study where themes from the literature are conceptually drawn and used to set boundaries for the research (van der Waladt, 2020). The conceptual framing of this study suggests that building foundational competence is necessary to avoid inadequacy in managing the daily leadership and management responsibilities of ECE directors. In 2017, the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at the National Louis University developed the whole leadership framework (Abel, 2017). The whole leadership framework (Abel, 2017) served as this study's conceptual framework. This framework encompasses a broad view of program leadership evidenced in

many areas and collapsed into three domains: leadership essentials, administrative, and pedagogical leadership (Abel et al., 2017; Masterson et al., 2019).

Leadership essentials include foundational skills in reflective practice, communication, and relationship building, each of which is critical for all facets of leadership and is often expressed in leadership styles and dispositions (Abel et al., 2017; Masterson et al., 2019).

Administrative leadership involves maximizing team capacity to develop and sustain an early childhood organization with operational and strategic leadership functions (Abel et al., 2017; Masterson et al., 2019). Program leaders also assume leadership roles beyond their organizations through advocacy and connections with their communities (Masterson, 2019). Pedagogical leadership addresses the complexity of teaching and learning in settings that serve young children from birth through third grade (Masterson et al., 2019).

The theoretical framing of this study suggests that feminist ethics of care or simply ethics of care perspective is relevant in that early care and education is mostly seen as a field of work for women with inferior status to the work that men typically do (Langford & Richardson, 2020). The majority of early childhood education educators are minority women who earn low wages and who work in poor working conditions, both of which create inequalities in the workforce (Bath, 2013). From an ethics of care point of view, the work of ECE is both challenging and valuable in a complex environment (Langford & Richardson, 2020) where ECE leadership is multidimensional, with discrepant standards and policies within various programs and settings (Gibbs et al., 2019). The increasing demands for high-quality ECE services and personnel call for new pathways to view and understand the needs of the field, its purpose, and leadership models that fit the unique needs of the field (Alchin et al., 2019). Therefore, the ethics of care

theoretical framework was chosen over other theories as it was determined to be ideally suited to the work of ECE educators and leaders.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

Qualitative research requires rigor for it to produce quality findings (Daniel, 2019). Consequently, it is essential and ethical that assumptions, limitations, and the scope of the study are identified, particularly when the findings might influence practice or might contribute to theory (Daniel, 2019). Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) described assumptions in qualitative research as the assertions considered true during the study and upon which conclusions are based. Thus, the following assumptions, limitations, and scope of the present study are reported below.

Assumptions are the beliefs the researcher has relative to their study that may influence the research process or the study itself (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Such statements are what the researcher takes for granted going into a study which are believed to be true without the data to substantiate such claims (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). To maintain the quality and rigor of this qualitative narrative inquiry study, the following assumptions were identified. First, this study assumed that early childhood education directors are not well prepared to be leaders and managers of ECE programs as most of their academic and professional preparation has been solely focused on teaching and managing the classroom (Alchin et al., 2019). Second, this study assumed that the responses to the interview questions received from ECE directors accurately reflect their professional opinions and lived experiences. Third, the specific population from which the sample was drawn for this study was a limitation. Fourth, because semi-structured interviews are time and labor consuming, it was difficult to interview a large enough sample to produce accuracy of the “plus or minus n percent variety” (Adams, 2015, p. 493). Early

childhood education directors are busy professionals, so finding directors who were willing to spend 45 minutes for the interview was a challenge.

The scope of this study was limited to early childhood education directors from programs located in Los Angeles County in the State of California. The participants were directors from private-for-profit, single-center based programs and possessed the minimum qualifications for academic and professional experience as required by the State of California (California Department of Public Social Services, 2023). Each director was interviewed to explore leadership and management factors and challenges experienced at their organization. Additionally, the resources and strategies needed to help support early childhood education directors in their roles as leaders and business managers were also explored.

Rationale and Significance

Research has acknowledged that program quality, leadership, and business management are essential components of ECE effective leadership practice; however, these studies are limited (Talan et al., 2014). Considering that it is the director who will implement and help sustain the quality of their ECE program through best leadership and business management practices (Talan et al., 2014), studying the leadership and management challenges ECE directors experience is necessary to ensure a solid foundation so that the directors are well-positioned to improve the quality of their programs and serve children and their families, including those in vulnerable (low-income, minority, infants, and toddlers) populations located in underserved areas so that these children have equal access to quality care and education.

It was the goal of this study to contribute to the understanding of effective leadership and management of ECE. Other areas of significance of this study included the identification of ECE directors' knowledge, academic preparation, and skills needed for effective ECE leadership and

management. These areas of research may be used in the design and implementation of leadership development programs at colleges, universities, and community agencies.

Additionally, because ECE directors are the key persons who will ultimately help sustain quality enhancement through effective leadership and management at the program level, the results of this study also contributed to the limited literature (Talan, 2014) on this topic, which can inform policy and best practices.

Summary

Leading and managing an ECE program is a complex job, and as such, it presents challenges for the ECE director (Gibbs et al., 2019). For example, a significant challenge is meeting the responsibilities of effectively leading an organization, managing a business, meeting pedagogical standards, and the needs of children, families, and the staff (Gibbs et al., 2019). To this end, it is important to learn about the context in which the directors experience their leadership and management challenges to understand the leadership and business strategies appropriate for their organization's needs and goals. Supporting the directors for a complex and changing role in ECE is critical because they are considered the "the key to quality" (Morgan, 2000, p. 53) in ECE settings. When ECE programs have a solid operational foundation, they are better positioned to support and provide equal high-quality care and education for all children in their communities (Alchin et al., 2019).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Research in the field of leadership in early childhood settings continues to be limited (Talan et al., 2014). However, there is a growing national and global interest in research and policy to promote leadership among the early childhood education (ECE) workforce and consequently improve the quality of early care and education services (Kirby et al., 2021). Economists have begun to recognize the importance and the benefits of high-quality early care and education have not only on children's development, but also on businesses, the economy, and society (Morgan & Helburn, 2019). Furthermore, economists around the world have recognized that every society benefits from investing in ECE education (Morgan & Helburn, 2019).

Much of the ECE leadership and management research dates to the 1990s (Waniganayake, 2014; see also Heikka et al., 2012). However, such studies were focused on management rather than leadership (Waniganayake, 2014). Bloom and Sheerer (1992) are prominent researchers in the field. Their seminal work on the effect of leadership training on child care program quality (Bloom & Sheerer, 1992) found that ECE directors had a limited view of their role as leaders. The participants reported that the most enjoyable aspect of their job was interacting with the children and their families, whereas the least enjoyable part was the management of the program. Bloom and Sheerer (1992) reported that ECE directors were not confident in their roles as leaders and managers and focused more on their roles as educators as they lacked training and education in leadership and management. More recent studies investigating ECE leadership and management have reported similar findings, which means not much changed in more than two decades (Bloom & Abel, 2015).

In recent years, research on ECE leadership has focused mainly on quality (Douglass, 2019). Directors have been called “the gatekeepers of quality” (Bloom & Sheerer, 1992, p. 138; see also Talan & Bloom, 2014) and the “key to quality” (Morgan, 2000, p. 40). Program quality has been linked to effective pedagogical and administrative leadership (Whitebook, 2018; see also Lee et al., 2022). Research has shown that there is more emphasis on leadership and its effect on program quality instead of a focus on the practice of leading and its impact on the whole program (Ronnerman et al., 2017). Rodd (2006) was one of the first researchers to call attention to the importance of ECE research and how it looks at leadership as experienced by directors to “advance the professionalization of the early childhood field and achieve still much needed advances in community credibility and status” (p. 10). This view perpetuates the idea that research on leadership in the ECE field is more focused on practice rather than theory (Rodd, 2006, 2019). Other studies echoed this suggestion by reporting that professionalizing the field of ECE with effective leadership development programs can help build a more sustainable, high quality, ECE system (Douglass, 2016, 2017; see also Farnham et al., 2020), while helping to theorize ECE leadership and not focusing on quality of care and education alone (Rodd, 2019).

Research has shown that leadership might directly or indirectly affect or impact program quality (Douglass, 2019). While it is critical to investigate and recognize the relationship between leadership and program quality, more attention needs to be paid to the investigation of ECE directors as leaders as they are considered to play a vital role in the success or failure of an ECE program (Stamopoulos, 2012). Equally important is the investigation of ECE directors as business managers of their programs (Maloney & Pettersen, 2017). Early childhood education directors’ roles are essential as they are responsible for critical factors in the leadership and management of ECE programs (Mastersen et al., 2019; see also Moloney & Pettersen, 2017).

Thus, this qualitative narrative inquiry study aimed to explore the leadership and management challenges early childhood education directors faced in their professional roles. A focus on ECE workforce, including the ECE system at the time this study was conducted, professional development in ECE, and academic preparation in ECE, business management duties in ECE, including human resources, fiscal management, and facilities management, and leadership styles, including organizational, effective, distributed, joint, transformational, and servant leadership, were reviewed. The literature review includes a brief history of the field of ECE. The literature review also examines the research that has been conducted on the variables of interest in this study, including leadership as it relates to the complexities and unique needs of ECE, business management, including the role and responsibilities of the ECE director regarding operational management tasks, and directors' academic and professional preparation. Themes related to leadership and management in the ECE arena were explored. This chapter also discusses the conceptual and theoretical frameworks used in this study that placed the topics of leadership and management of ECE programs in context.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This literature review presents a conceptual and theoretical lens which provides insights into understanding the unique leadership and management responsibilities of ECE directors. The conceptual framework lens is the whole leadership framework developed by Abel et al. (2017). The whole leadership framework was developed for the exclusive leadership undertakings of ECE directors (Abel, 2017). The whole leadership framework encompasses three leadership domains, which include pedagogical leadership, administrative leadership, and leadership essentials (Abet et al., 2017). Each domain is further developed in this literature review. The theoretical framework for this study is feminist ethics of care or simply ethics of care (EoC).

This theoretical lens provides insights into understanding the ethics of care whereby ECE leaders can transform the lives of those they serve as well as their own leadership roles (Langford & Richardson, 2020). Understanding the frameworks that lead to challenges and needs of ECE directors forms the foundation for this literature review, which covers the leadership styles and management tasks of ECE leaders. Furthermore, both frameworks formed the basis for the methodology of this study.

Personal Interest

The author of this study has been a center and home-based ECE director for over 17 years and has coached other ECE directors in the area of management. Working with various ECE directors with diverse educational and experience backgrounds, this researcher has found that many ECE directors have one thing in common: they do not possess the necessary educational and training in leadership and management. Although most directors have been trained to become educators, they have not been trained to be leaders and managers of ECE organizations (Leekeenan & Ponte, 2018). Many ECE directors lack business acumen (Freeman et al., 2013). Since this researcher has lived this experience as an ECE director for many years, she knows the need for leadership and management support in the field exists. The researcher's experience and those she has served prompted the topic for this research study.

Topical Research: Women's Leadership

Leadership has many definitions, and its meaning varies depending on the organization and the field of study (Douglass, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to define leadership as it correlates to this study. Numerous leadership models have been developed that work in non-educational contexts such as corporations, and some models have primarily been developed for educational settings (Hazegh, 2019). However, because ECE environments are different from

kindergarten through 12th grade school settings, a leadership theory that fits the needs of the field is crucial to developing an understanding of the leadership roles ECE directors play in their organizations (Brownlee et al., 2010; see also Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013; Wise & Wright, 2012).

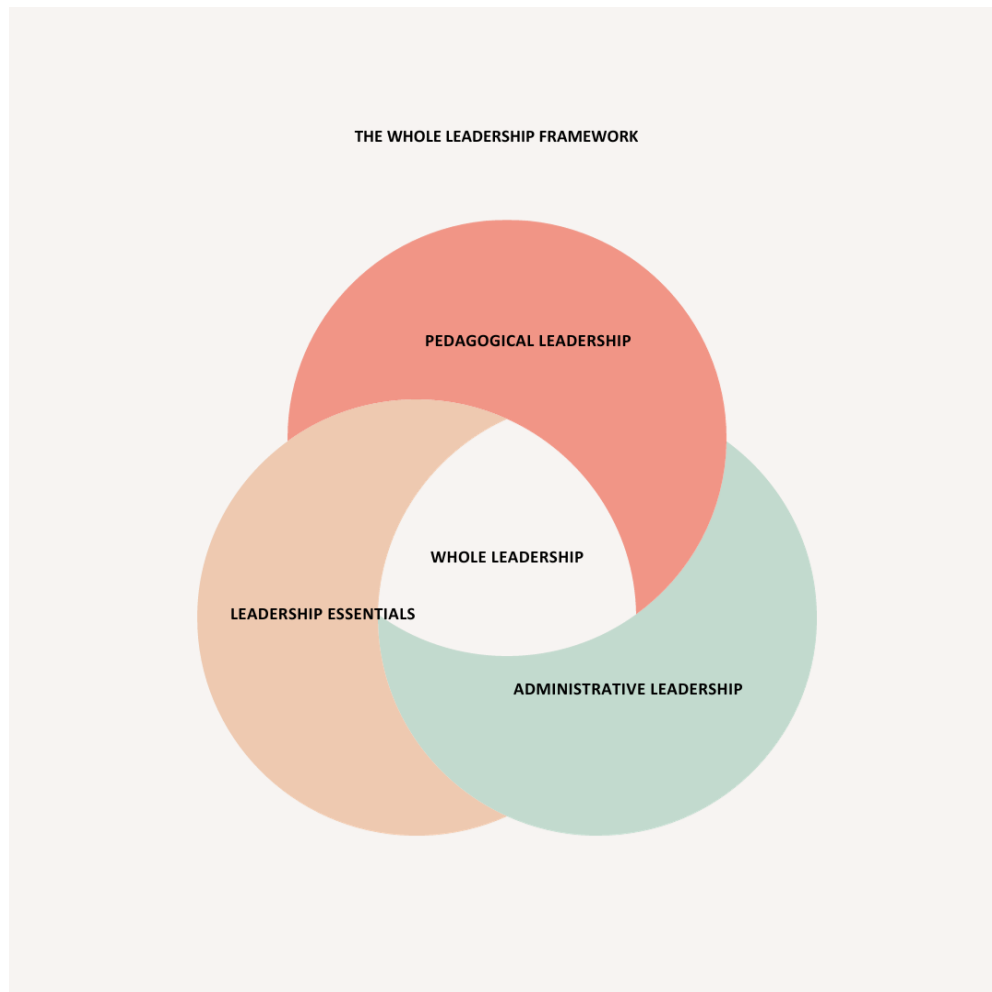
Early childhood education is one of the few educational fields where the leaders and followers are predominantly women (Langford & Richardson, 2020; Rodd, 2006, 2013). Researchers have cited the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions as one of the reasons for the underrepresentation in the leadership literature (Pullen & Vachhani, 2020). Pullen and Vachhani (2020) argued that women leaders have "experienced systematic discriminations in theory and practice" (p. 23). Furthermore, women's leadership has been scrutinized on leadership topics such as their suitability and capabilities to successfully carry out their leadership roles (Pullen & Vachhani, 2020). Moreover, women have been subjected to leadership roles according to men's definition of leadership (Pullen & Vachhani, 2020). Women have also experienced unequal visibility due to their gender because women's leadership has been understood in relation to male leadership rather than the leadership experienced by women (Pullen & Vachhani, 2020). Leadership from a woman's perspective can provide a more in-depth understanding of leadership in the ECE environment as most directors in the field are women (Langford & Richardson, 2020).

The Whole Leadership Conceptual Framework

In 2017, the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at the National Louis University proposed the whole leadership framework based on ECE directors' unique and complex needs and responsibilities as leaders (Abel et al., 2017). Because leadership in ECE is multidimensional, with discrepant standards and policies within various programs and settings (Hazegh, 2019), the increasing demands for high-quality ECE services and personnel called for

new pathways to view and understand the needs of the field, its purpose, and leadership models that rightly fit the unique needs of the field (Abel et al., 2017). Therefore, the whole leadership framework was created to answer the call (Abel et al., 2017).

The whole leadership framework is a conceptual framework drawn initially from Kagan and Bowman's (1997) seminal work on leadership in early care and education that consisted of three leadership domains: pedagogical and administrative leadership and leadership essentials (Abel et al., 2017). The three leadership domains represent an iterative process of learning and change. The whole leadership framework is illustrated to demonstrate the overlap of functions and responsibilities assumed by ECE directors in Figure 1. Because the leadership tasks of ECE directors include administrative and pedagogical leadership tasks in their daily work, a framework was needed for these tasks to be clearly defined (Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013).

Figure 1*The Whole Leadership Framework*

Note. The intersection of the circles shows how leadership concepts are inextricably linked and what leadership may look like in ECE contexts and settings. Adapted from Abel et al. (2017).

Hujula and Eskelinen (2013) stated that leadership in ECE is a “holistic process” that involves many moving parts and people (p. 214). For example, such a holistic process may consist of the director, board of directors, owner, lead teachers, and indirectly parents, who also may influence the execution of ECE services and practices (Hujula & Eskelinen, 2013).

Therefore, depending on the organizational structure of the ECE program, the leadership role

could be undertaken by only the director or multiple people (Hujula & Eskelinen, 2013). In the following section, the three domains that make up the whole leadership framework are discussed. This section begins by discussing leadership essentials, which are the personal and leadership characteristics of the ECE leader. Such characteristics are the basis for the other two domains. The pedagogical leadership domain is about improving the science of teaching and optimizing children's learning and outcomes. The third area is the administrative leadership domain which includes operational and strategic tasks. Below is an explanation of each of the three leadership concepts.

Leadership Essentials

Leadership essentials include ECE directors' attributes and leadership skills, which serve as the foundation for administrative and pedagogical leadership. Essential leadership qualities are inherent in successful leadership and act as crucial pillars for a leader's success (Abel et al., 2017). These leadership essentials anchor administrative and pedagogical leadership success (Abel et al., 2017). Furthermore, leadership essentials are the fertile grounds upon which a collaborative and successful environment is built to create "collaboration, efficacy, creativity, and ethical commitment" for everyone in the ECE program, which results in shared leadership responsibility (Abel et al., 2017, p. 3).

Leadership essentials include adaptability, authenticity, creativity, empathy, humility, learning, persistence, self-efficacy, and transparency (Abel et al., 2017). Leadership essentials also include reflective practice, foundational skills, and communication building, which are expressed in personal leadership styles and dispositions (Abel et al., 2017). These competencies provide ECE directors with the knowledge and abilities to maximize their leadership impact within their program and expand that influence in their communities and the larger field of ECE

(Abel et al., 2017). According to the whole leadership framework (Abel et al., 2017), these tools, personal skills, and attributes set a strong foundation and make way for pedagogical and administrative leadership.

Pedagogical Leadership

Pedagogical leadership is about the art and science of teaching to optimize child development and learning for children from birth to age eight through the support of classroom teachers (Dennis & O'Connor, 2015). Pedagogical leadership consists of educators providing high-quality opportunities and interactions with the students they serve (Abel et al., 2017; see also Dennis & O'Connor, 2015). Furthermore, this leadership domain includes instructional leadership supporting classroom teachers in implementing the curriculum, children's assessment in their development and learning, using data for evaluation, finding ways to optimize everyday learning, and family engagement values (Abel et al., 2017; see also Masterson et al., 2019). The tools for pedagogical leadership include coaching and mentoring skills; ability to apply child development theory and research; family focus; knowledge of evidence-based pedagogy; knowledge of assessment methodology; technical credibility; and knowledge of adult learning (Abel et al., 2017; see also Masterson et al., 2019).

Administrative Leadership

Administrative leadership refers to the operational management of an ECE program's values (Abel et al., 2017; see also Masterson et al., 2019). According to Abel et al. (2017), administrative leadership consists of four sub-domains. The first is operational leadership which includes securing adequate equipment and space, fiscal management, a positive organizational climate, and human resources. The second is strategic leadership, which provides goal setting and planning for the program's future. The third is advocacy leadership, which is about acting as

an advocate on behalf of the program, children, staff, and families. The fourth domain is community leadership. This domain includes collaborating with community organizations on behalf of the children, teachers, families, and programs.

The tools required to exercise administrative leadership are the ability to plan strategically; expertise in developing and implementing systems; financial and legal knowledge and skills; entrepreneurial knowledge; awareness of organizational climate; public engagement and relations and marketing expertise; ability to interpret data; and public engagement skills (Masterson et al., 2019). In addition to the abilities a leader must have listed above, the administrative leader also maintains and works toward a shared vision, mission, and core values (Talan et al., 2014). Research has found that the leadership traits, knowledge, and expertise are necessary for ECE directors to effectively manage and lead their programs, which is the foundation of any high-quality ECE program (Talan et al., 2014). Abel et al. (2017) posed that all ECE directors should be competent in all three dimensions of leadership because such multi-faceted competence will create a balanced leadership framework for the director.

Ethics of Care Theoretical Framework

Ethics of care emerged from Gilligan's (1982) seminal work challenging rationalist and objective approaches to morality (Pullen & Vachhani, 2020). Gilligan (1993) suggested four tenets of the theory of EoC include non-violent conflict resolution, contextual and narrative understanding, the activity of care, and networks of relationships and responsibilities. Care has been fused into an ethical theory with the influence to change how society studies and evaluates personal relationships, professional conduct, public policy, politics, and global issues (Held, 2006; see also Tronto, 2015). Gilligan (1993) suggested that “the ideal of care is thus an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web

of connection so that no one is left alone” (p. 62). Ethics of care, or feminist ethical leadership, is a valuable theory because it remains central to the purpose of the field of ECE; that is, to provide care within interdependent relationships (Langford & Richardson, 2020). Ethics of care fits well within the field of ECE because it provides a framework for understanding the work ECE educators do every day, which is caring and educating children while maintaining the crucial relationships with families, the community, and the larger society (Taggart, 2016).

Ethics of care is a feminist approach to ethical leadership arising from women's moral experiences in caring for others (Langford & Richardson, 2020). Ethics of care examines the care work assigned to women and racialized groups while critically analyzing the discourses, power, and politics where such work is allocated (Tronto, 2013). Ethics of care theory “is not conventional; it does not conserve the status quo...on the contrary, care ethicists are well aware that care often takes place under oppressive conditions” (Patterson, 2011, p. 55). Ethics of care challenges traditional moral theories that tend to be male-centric by omitting values and virtues associated with women and their roles such as those in ECE (Langford & Richardson, 2020). Ethics of care shifts the idea that care is “natural to women, which demoralizes the socioeconomic importance of care and places it as insusceptible to much needed social change” (Langford & Richardson, 2020, p. 33). The undermining of care in society directly affects ECE, as care is central to the field (Langford & Richardson, 2020). Care has been situated less relative to education, which removes the attention from the complexities and importance of caring for children (Langford & Richardson, 2020). Moss (2017) noted that “we should not encourage a view that care is of exclusive or even particular relevance to young children by including it in the term we use to describe the field” (p. 13). Therefore, the term “early childhood education” is preferred (Moss, 2017, p. 13).

This branch of ethics encourages individuals to evaluate their actions based on the extent to which they promote the interests of others and preserve the foundation of relationships (Held, 2006). Care ethics begin with the claim that "relations of interdependence and dependence are a fundamental feature of our existence" (Robinson, 2011, p. 4). Additionally, Held (2006) stated that:

The ethics of care recognizes that human beings are dependent for many years of their lives, that the moral claims of those dependent on us for the care they need is pressing, and that there are highly important moral aspects in developing the relations of caring that enable human beings to progress. (p. 125)

In the ECE field, children are dependent on educators to care for them and to meet their developmental needs, including the development of compassion for others, which results in healthy attachment (Taggart, 2016). Compassionate educators “produce compassionate, securely attached children” (Taggart, 2016, p. 177). Ethics of care is based on relationships and service to others, “which promotes human flourishing” (Taggart, 2016, p. 178). In this sense, ECE educators and leaders “water the seed of human flourishing” and promote compassion in the next generations (Taggart, 2016, p. 178). In this light, ECE educators should be seen as compassionate professionals and not “low-skilled customer care” workers in their communities (Taggart, 2016, p. 178). Additionally, the idea of community is at the heart of feminist ethics because values are not learned or practiced in isolation (Feeney & Freeman, 2019). Similarly, at the center of ECE are shared values, goals, and vision (Feeney & Freeman, 2019). Early childhood education cannot exist in isolation (Feeney & Freeman, 2019). It is part of the community and greater society (Feeney & Freeman, 2019). Ethics of care also emphasizes the effort in constantly determining the type of people leaders should be and forming and attending

to character development within their communities and as individuals (Feeney & Freeman, 2019).

In EoC, it is crucial to distinguish between care as a virtue and care as an action by both the giver and receiver (Hammington, 2015). Care as an action in ECE means that children are active participants in the caring relationship in ECE settings and are not just care recipients (Langford & Richardson, 2020). Therefore, in ECE, ethics of care leadership demands a more "complex understanding of children's needs and more complex educator responses to them, and the presence and absence of children's responses to the care given" (Langford & Richardson, 2020, p. 34). However, it is not only about the power relationships between children and ECE educators but also between "those responsible for constructing the class-based system of care" (Langford & Richardson, 2020, p. 35). The ability of ECE leaders to engage in genuine ethical caring for children and staff is challenged every day by the complexities of the existing ECE system (Langford & Richardson, 2020). Ethics of care encourages people to have a moral responsibility to each other (Tronto, 1993), where people must begin to understand the purpose of care through a lens of equality and value to address the existing social challenges and barriers (Langford & Richardson, 2020).

Scholars such as Tronto (1993, 2013, 2015), Barnes (2012), and Barnes et al. (2015) believed that care is immersed in power and politics. According to Tronto (2015), EoC is a feminist philosophy and a political theory that emerges out of the relationship between moral aspects of care practices such as attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and solidarity and political issues such as funding, marginalization of certain social groups. Ethical leadership in ECE usually faces ethical challenges where a balance needs to be maintained between meeting the needs of those under the leaders' responsibility such as teachers and

families and outside forces such as licensing and funding agencies (Male, 2012). Ethics of care is about following professional guidelines and also includes accountability as a person involved in the care of others (Feeney & Freeman, 2019). Keeping children, families, and teachers at the heart of ECE is an ethical consideration underpinned by care ethics (Feeney & Freeman, 2019).

History of Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education has been documented since the 1600s, but it is still relatively new in the United States (Morrison, 2012). However, ECE has been documented internationally, starting with John Amos Comenius, a 1600's Czech philosopher, pedagogue, and theologian considered the father of Education (Lee & Hong, 2021). He believed that education in early childhood was essential and advocated for sensory learning and different grade levels determined by chronological and developmental age (Comenius, 1650/1986). Later, in the 1700s, following the same line of thinking about ECE, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a French writer, philosopher, and social theorist, believed that children learned differently than adults and approached their education naturally (Rousseau, 1762/2019). Rousseau thought hands-on learning was best, which is central to modern ECE practice (Rousseau, 1762/2019). By the mid-1800s, Friedrich Froebel created the Garden of Children, also known as kindergarten (Froebel, 1896/1911). Froebel (1896/1911) based his beliefs about education on the fact that children are special and have unique needs which are different than adults. Froebel (1896/1911) believed that learning happens through play. Then, in the mid-1900s, Dr. Maria Montessori (1949) advocated for a child-centered curriculum and an environment that encouraged independence. Like Montessori (1949), John Dewey (1938) was an educator and proponent of ECE in the first half of the 20th century. Dewey (1938) encouraged progressive education, founded on the belief in children's individuality, respect toward children, child-centered instruction, and learning through

experience. To this day, Dewey's work continues to significantly influence ECE programs in the United States (Prochner & Woitte, 2013).

Understanding the history of ECE is essential as ECE's history sets the foundation for the state of ECE programs in the United States (Pianta, 2012). The field of ECE has evolved from providing only physical care to meeting all the developmental needs of children (Talan & Bloom, 2015). Children learn, grow, and thrive in ECE settings when high-quality interactions and nurturing relationships characterize those settings (Kulic et al., 2019). There is growing recognition in the United States that quality in ECE settings influences children's learning, development, and well-being (Kulic et al., 2019). Early childhood education research has focused on pedagogy and classroom quality as critical determinants of children's experiences in ECE settings (Garcia et al., 2016).

A child's learning journey begins from the day they are born, and a solid base for learning and development is needed to thrive in childhood and beyond (Kulic et al., 2019). Research has shown that a child's brain development is affected by their environments (Chan et al., 2017). Furthermore, a safe, reliable, stress-free, and high-quality environment, as well as opportunities for play, exploration, curiosity, and creativity, are needed for children to grow, learn, and develop to their fullest potential (Nilsson et al., 2018). Early childhood education programs have the potential to drastically influence the future of children's lives (Farewell et al., 2022). The ECE workforce plays a critical role in fostering optimal early childhood development (Farewell et al., 2022). However, the inherent demands and challenges of the ECE profession are many and affect the current state of the workforce (Farewell et al., 2022).

Early Childhood Education Workforce

The ECE workforce includes and is not limited to aides, assistant teachers, lead teachers, and directors (Adams et al., 2021). These professionals work in various settings, including home and center-based ECE programs, Early Head Start, Head Start, and private and public ECE programs (Adams et al., 2021). These educators nurture and educate millions of children daily, so their parents can attend school or work and strengthen the nation's economy. Furthermore, ECE educators ensure that children are well-prepared in all aspects of their lives (Kulic, 2020).

The ECE workforce has been facing many challenges for years within the American educational system (McLean et al., 2021). Such challenges include underfunding, low pay, and poor working conditions such as long hours, no benefits such as health insurance, and low job control with the classroom teachers having the least work control (Farewell et al., 2021). Furthermore, other challenging work conditions include high risk for injuries, such as lifting and moving children, as well as negative effects on educators' psychological, emotional, and physical health, such as exposure to toxic cleaning solutions and art supplies (Cumming, 2017). According to Farewell et al. (2021), ECE staff, and especially ECE directors, experience significantly high job demands and have less access to personal and external resources resulting in poor job satisfaction, high turnover and burnout rates, along with health disparities.

Efforts to support the ECE workforce have existed for some years now (Abel, 2019). However, the COVID-19 pandemic created more challenges for the field of ECE because the pandemic created new stressors, highlighting fundamental structural issues in the ECE system that include inequalities faced by minority women educators (Kwon et al., 2022). The pandemic brought restrictions and other stress factors that may have affected ECE directors, teachers, and parents' physical, mental, and emotional health (Adams et al., 2021a, 2021b). During the COVID-19 pandemic, constant changes ranged from teacher-child ratio size to when a program

had to close due to infections among children or staff (Lessard et al., 2020). At the time of this study, the field of ECE was recovering at a slow pace (Hao, 2022). The pre-pandemic challenges and inequalities that existed such as poor working conditions, disparities in wages, benefits, resources, high-turnover rates, as well as understaffing continued while this study was underway (Kim et al., 2022).

Early Childhood Education Educators and the Current State of the Field

Early childhood educators in the United States care and educate more than two million children each day (McLean et al., 2021). The United States is experiencing an ECE workforce shortage (Austin et al., 2021). Moreover, the ECE workforce's infrastructure faces chronic teacher recruitment and retention challenges (Austin et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated such challenges because the ECE field had pre-existing issues such as being underfunded, under-resourced, and undervalued (Kim et al., 2022). Although ECE educators were essential workers during the pandemic, public policies in response to the pandemic have fallen short in aiding ECE educators to successfully balance their health, jobs, and family (Austin et al., 2021).

Early childhood education is a labor-intensive field of work with low wages and high levels of stress (Farewell et al., 2021). Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened working conditions such as lack of benefits, job security, and stability for educators (Farewell et al., 2021). Early childhood education educators must now comply with more stringent cleaning, health, and safety regulations, which mean more human and financial resources are needed (Austin et al., 2021). Early childhood education programs face increased operating costs such as a greater amount of cleaning supplies (Workman & Jessen-Howard, 2020). Additionally, smaller teacher-child ratios are required, which means that more teachers are needed to meet the health

requirements, which translates into higher personnel costs (Austin et al., 2021). These conditions translate as challenges to ECE directors because there is already a shortage of qualified ECE teachers and lower student enrollment, which means less income for programs (Workman & Jessen-Howard, 2020).

The ECE workforce in the United States is composed mainly of females and they are disproportionately women of color in many states such as in California (Lessard et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2022). Early childhood education educators face profound financial uncertainty (Kim et al., 2020). These decade-long challenges include low pay, inadequate benefits, high turnover rates, and challenging work (Kim et al., 2020). Early childhood education educators tend to earn low wages (\$11.17/h versus \$18.50/h for all occupations), and more than half of all ECE providers are enrolled in at least one public support program, such as Medicaid or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Lessard et al., 2020). The cost of living continues to rise while ECE educators' wages have not (McLean et al., 2021; Ullrich & Schochet, 2018). Another factor affecting the ECE field is the aging and shrinking of the workforce (Ullrich & Schochet, 2018). The ECE employment sector is declining, with the percentage of teachers reaching retirement age increasing while the middle-age ECE professional age group is declining due to the poor working conditions and low wages (Lessard et al., 2020; see also McLean et al., 2021).

Early childhood education workforce funding must reflect the actual costs of compensating educated, experienced, and knowledgeable professionals and thus requires a robust public investment that is not subsidized by parents through poverty-level wages (McLean et al., 2021). Policy changes need to be urgently addressed to alleviate the current ECE workforce shortage and financial difficulties the field of ECE is experiencing (Kim et al., 2022). Local,

state, and federal governments need to support the well-being of ECE educators and inform systematic change for the incoming and future educators in the ECE sector (Kim et al., 2022). To fully understand the ECE workforce, it is imperative that their academic and professional preparation is also discussed.

Professional Qualifications and Academic Preparation for the ECE Workforce

National educational leaders are taking a closer look at the ECE profession and qualifications for the workforce (Abel, 2019). The National Association for the Education of Young Children ([NAEYC], 2017, 2019) created a national collaboration to bring professional recognition to the field of ECE called *Power to the Profession*, which included a rigorous structure to unify and redefine the professional roles of ECE educators. The framework also set the significant goal of all ECE educators to earn at least a bachelor's degree in ECE (NAEYC, 2017, 2019). Although these efforts offered clarity and a vision to the field regarding educational qualifications for teachers and pedagogical leaders, these efforts did not address similar academic and professional preparation challenges for ECE directors (Abel, 2019).

A significant challenge for ECE directors has been the lack of academic preparation and professional training qualifications to take on a leadership or managerial role, such as program director or administrator. (Maloney & Pettersen, 2017). ECE directors move into leadership positions “more by ‘accident’ than intention and lack the necessary practice and preparation for the role” (Gibbs et al., 2019, p. 176). It is evident in the literature that ECE directors lack adequate academic and professional preparation for, and practice in, leading organizations and followers (Sims et al., 2015). Although there is some research on leadership professional development for ECE leaders, there is a lack of conclusive evidence that such leadership preparation programs result in effective leadership service practice (Layen, 2015). This results in

an unsustainable model for leadership development among ECE leaders for both the individual and the organization (Waniganayake et al., 2016).

There are inconsistent policies for qualifications and competencies for ECE directors resulting in a “leadership gap” (Abel, 2019, p. 51). In some states, conditions are not consistent (Bloom et al., 2013; Whitebook et al., 2018), which may also account for the diversity of ECE directors’ educational levels across the nation (Hazegh, 2019). Research has suggested that the field of ECE needs to become professionalized by strengthening competency-based qualifications for all ECE educators with the minimum educational requirement of a bachelor's degree (Douglass, 2016, 2017). However, Whitebook et al. (2018) reported that a bachelor's degree in ECE has the lowest lifetime earnings projection compared to all other college majors.

The literature provides evidence that ECE directors directly impact program development and sustainability; therefore, directors must be considered when restructuring the workforce (Waniganayake et al., 2016). Required academic qualifications and professional experience should reflect the balance between pedagogical and administrative leadership as described in the whole leadership framework (Abel et al., 2017). Much of the literature has shown that ECE directors require diverse leadership skills and knowledge (Alchin et al., 2019). One of these skills is being able to effectively lead ECE organizations and being able to adapt to the complexities and constant changes of the field (Alchin et al., 2019). Thus, the following section discusses organizational leadership within the ECE context.

Organizational Leadership in Early Childhood Education

Organizational leadership is a management approach that deals with the challenges and goals brought by both the employees and the organization’s leaders (Fullan, 2020). An organization's climate, culture, and change management are essential in leading a successful

organization (Fullan, 2020; see also Kotter, 2012). The field of ECE is constantly changing due to various factors, but the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these changes by creating social exposure to problematic historical issues in the field (Austin et al., 2021). According to Douglass (2018), the field of ECE has been seen as the object of change instead of the co-creator of change. Furthermore, Douglass (2018) stated that ECE directors are not seen as leaders who can influence and inspire change from within the field. Therefore, it is imperative that organizational leadership, and specifically climate, culture, and change, is reviewed in the context of ECE because ECE's needs are different when compared to those of other organizations (Whitebook, 2018).

Organizational Climate

Organizational climate has been defined in various ways and is generally considered to be the overall environment in an organization (Hewett & La Paro, 2020) which may affect workers' behaviors, attitudes, and well-being (Veziroglu-Celik & Yildiz, 2018). From this study's theoretical framework perspective, Carmeli et al. (2017) found that organizations that displayed care for their team members promoted higher levels of employee satisfaction and involvement in the organization's activities. Organizational climate may help explain why some work settings are more productive, effective, innovative, and successful than others (Veziroglu-Celik & Yildiz, 2018). Early childhood education work settings represent distinctive organizational structures and functions due to the nature of the work performed (Hewett & La Paro, 2020). In an ECE setting, Bloom et al. (2012) described organizational climate as being a collective set of working conditions such as vision building, shared goals, good communication, and a professional learning culture. Organizational climate is characterized by a sense of belonging, warm and caring relationships, and a shared sense of purpose (Bloom et al., 2012). It

is these organizational climate characteristics that encourage commitment among directors, teachers, and support staff (Bloom et al., 2012).

Bloom (2010) created 10 dimensions of ECE organizational climate. These dimensions included collegiality, professional growth, supervisor support, clarity, reward system, decision making, goal consensus, task orientation, physical setting, and innovativeness. These dimensions embodied the multifaceted constructs of organizational climate in ECE work settings. These dimensions “are not meant to be mutually exclusive” meaning that they are interrelated (Bloom, 2012, p. 4). Effective leadership is critical to supporting and sustaining quality in ECE settings and creating a stimulating environment for staff and children (Douglass, 2018). Effective leadership establishes such organizational conditions that positively influence process quality, working conditions, and staff engagement in continuous professional learning and growth (Ehrlich et al., 2019).

The priority of any organization is creating a shared vision and mission (Fullan, 2020). A vision is the foundation of any organization (Fullan, 2020). The organization members need to know where they are headed and why (Kotter, 2012). Therefore, effective organizational leaders clearly communicate an organizational mission and vision. They build employee’s morale, ensure efficient business operations, help employees grow professionally, and contribute positively towards the organization mission and goals (Kotter, 2012). In the same manner, ECE directors' leadership skills influence change, relationships, and actions to achieve their programs' shared vision (Douglass, 2018). Some research studies have concluded that strong and effective organizational structures are the key to successful ECE programs and highlight exceptional directors and collaborative teachers as the two most important components of those structures (Hewett & La Paro, 2020). Creating a high-quality workforce requires more than academic

preparation and competencies as “high quality work environments are needed to support educators to thrive” (Cumming et al., 2020, p. 63). Early childhood education programs with a positive organizational climate will influence the program's culture regarding classroom quality, educational outcomes for children, and job satisfaction and retention (Hewett & La Paro, 2020).

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture may look different in ECE settings due to variables such as program structure and female leadership (Park & Lee, 2015). Organizational culture involves the transmission of shared values and beliefs, expectations, and understandings and is reflected in the behaviors and values of individuals inside the organization (Park & Lee, 2015). Creating a culture that encourages everyone’s input including teachers, support staff, parents, and children, lets them know that their voices matter and that the quality of the ECE program is based on the collaborative effort of all those involved (Schweikert, 2014). Early childhood education has a culture of high expectations and accountability for educators, quality improvement, and ethical practices to support children’s education and development (Bloom, 2013).

Some research has suggested that organizational culture may be influenced by job satisfaction and teachers’ efficacy (Kim & Kwon, 2012). Moreover, some studies have established a strong relationship between organizational culture and burnout, as well as turnover intention (Lee et al., 2022; see also Park & Lee, 2015). Connors (2016) posited that a professional culture of both collaboration and continuous professional development for teachers and leaders is important to adult learning and the professionalism of the field of ECE. Furthermore, a culture of professional collaboration in ECE work programs that are characterized by mutual respect, teamwork, warmth, continuous self-reflection, support and partnership among teachers and mentors such as directors or coaches is a critical part in

supporting educators' learning and professional improvement (Connors, 2016). Therefore, ECE leaders and stakeholders should recognize the importance of an organizational culture that includes effective policies that support ECE work environments that encourage strong relationships, cooperation, professional support, and a "family-like atmosphere" to help alleviate job burnout and turnover intention among teachers and support staff (Connors, 2016, p. 35).

Organizational Change

The field of ECE has been shown to be in constant change due to the positive and negative national and global trends affecting the profession (Haslip & Gullo, 2018). The field of ECE is a "complex landscape comprising complicated legislation, a volatile workforce, comprehensive standards of practice and a diversity of children and families" (Gibbs et al., 2019, p, 174). Early childhood education programs must develop, change, and adapt according to the needs of the children and families they serve, government requirements, quality improvement, curriculum requirements, and new trends in early education (i.e., nature, Montessori, or Reggio inspired ECE programs) (Haslip & Gullo, 2018), or global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Adams et al., 2021a, 2021b) . Organizational change has become embedded and is at the forefront of the director's role (Strehmel et al., 2019). These changes represent new challenges for the ECE directors and their staff.

Change leaders need to be able to manage change effectively to prevent organizational crises from arising (Alas & Gao, 2012). Crisis can be the first step in a change process for an organization (Alas & Gao, 2012). Crisis management can have physical, human, and ethical consequences, so how the situation is handled by the organizational leader is critical (Branicki, 2020). Because ECE is grounded in care and relationships, directors can benefit from managing crisis from EoC theory instead of business theories (Branicki, 2020). Gilligan (1993) wrote that

such events should not be managed as “a math problem with humans but a narrative of relationships that extend over time...” (p. 28, as cited in Branicki, 2020). Branicki (2020) suggested that managing crisis from an ethics of care point of view involves “a heightened appreciation of reciprocal care and relational needs” resulting in positive social change that is based on care for everyone involved leading to a sustainable future (p. 873).

Wheatley (2006) described organizations as complex and chaotic systems with regular changes in their working environments due to external influences such as the ones mentioned earlier. The ECE environment is complex and in constant change, which affects all aspects of an ECE program such as pedagogy, practice, policy, compliance, human resources, physical spaces, and relationships (Alchin et al., 2019). These changes come from external forces such as public policy, funding, and the needs of children and families (Haslip & Gullo, 2018). Other national and global changes in the ECE landscape include demographic shifts, cultural changes, and linguistic diversity, each of which requires teacher and leaders’ preparation and curriculum changes (Haslip & Gullo, 2018). The field and ECE programs must adapt to these changes and external influences to remain sustainable and survive (Alchin et al., 2019). Because organizational change is constant in ECE programs, ECE leaders need to be able to lead effectively during these transitional times (Haslip & Gullo, 2017). Organizational change may impact organizational climate depending on how that change is managed (Marian & Gonzalez, 2014). Therefore, ECE leaders need knowledge and competencies to manage such changes for their ECE programs to become learning environments for everyone (Vlasov et al., 2016).

Organizational changes, either big or small, may not come easily (Marian & Gonzalez, 2014). Organizational change can become a source of stress and burnout for directors (Elomaa et al., 2020). Nonetheless, change is an instrumental part of ECE leadership (Rodd, 2013). Change

must be understood to manage it effectively (Rodd, 2013). While challenging, change can be manageable and achievable when effective leadership is involved (Lee et al., 2022). As an effective change leader, the ECE director must know when and how much to change (Rodd, 2013). The change leader must engage in sensemaking with the followers (Marion & Gonzalez, 2014). Sensemaking means that the change needs to make sense to the followers to help enact the change (Marion & Gonzalez, 2014). To do this, a change agent must clearly communicate the purpose of the change in a manner that is easily understood by everyone involved (Fullan, 2020). Therefore, the role of the leader is to act as a catalyst in the change process (Fullan, 2020). The change leader must provide a structured approach to help people transition from their present state to the newly proposed and enacted change (Hoe, 2017). New changes and their processes are not easy, they can take a long time, and barriers to recent changes should be anticipated (Fullan, 2020). Organizational change requires support, structure, and a plan to move from vision to action so long-term change can be sustained (Kotter, 2012).

The ability to create positive change is a vital leadership skill. However, to become an effective organizational leader, management skills such as the directing and controlling resources, structures, and systems are necessary (Kotter, 2012). Management is a process “by which a set of objectives are achieved through the efficient use of resources” (Northouse, 2007, as cited in Alghtani, 2014, p. 4). Subsequently, management can be used to achieve organizational goals (Alghtani, 2014). As explained in the conceptual framework of this study, management tasks are part of being an administrative leader (Alchin, 2019). Therefore, the following section details management as part of administrative leadership as it pertains to ECE directors.

Management in Early Childhood Education Programs

Leadership is about influencing people to achieve goals, aligning followers with a shared vision, and inspiring followers despite challenges (Douglass, 2019). Management, on the other hand, can be defined as a formal role that promotes stability, planning, organization, direction, and control (Kotter, 2012). Additionally, Kotter (2012) stated that “the most important aspect of management includes planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, controlling, and problem solving” (p. 28). In the ECE field, management is defined as establishing systems that protect and sustain essential operational functions (Moloney & Pettersen, 2017). Within ECE management, operational tasks include hiring and supporting staff, overseeing budgets, and maintaining a positive work environment (Moloney & Pettersen, 2017).

As the job of the ECE director has become increasingly more complex in recent years, directors who are functioning primarily as managers of programs are not able to provide the quality of care and education children need (Alchin et al., 2019). Early childhood education directors are working with a dysfunctional system impacted by low wages, unqualified staff, and lack of funds, among other issues (McDonald et al., 2018). Furthermore, research has shown that the ECE director's role has shifted from being a classroom teacher to being a business manager dealing with many business complexities (Waniganayake, 2014). It has been estimated that nine out of 10 directors were previously classroom teachers before taking on leadership and management roles (McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, 2011; see also Leekeenan & Ponte, 2018). In a study of ECE in Australia, Alchin et al. (2019) found that more than half of the 600 participants in their study were teachers without leadership and management experience before taking a director's role. Business planning, financial management, and organizational change have become embedded in the role and are at the forefront of the director's position and directors are spending as much as 68% of their time on management tasks (Alchin

et al., 2019). Moreover, according to research, academic qualifications do not prepare ECE directors well for leadership and management roles because ECE directors are academically prepared to become educators and not leaders and managers (Alchin et al., 2019).

Despite ECE directors' potential lack of academic preparation for their workplace duties, being a successful manager is necessary for becoming a leader, so directors must learn to be both managers and leaders (Talan, 2016). Being a manager and a leader is part of good program management (Fosen et al., 2013). Furthermore, Talan (2016) explained that leading effective, thriving, and high-quality ECE programs is a leadership responsibility. In ECE, such functions are denoted as management tasks or functions and are less valued than leadership functions (Talan, 2016). Since they are seen as administrative tasks and not leadership, they are seen as less critical, so ECE educators and leaders must begin to “claim it [administrative functions] for what they are - administrative leadership” (Talan, 2016, p. 1). In ECE, management cannot be separated from leadership because orchestrating the work required of an ECE director to lead and operate a thriving program requires the ability and skills of an effective leader (Talan, 2016). This literature contradicts other researchers, such as Male (2012), who stated that a difference exists between management and leadership in ECE. Management, Male (2012) argued, refers to the delivery of services as determined by others, whereas leadership means having the responsibility to lead others to a shared vision. The following sections discuss human resources management, fiscal management, and facilities management as part of the business management responsibilities of ECE directors as presented in the whole leadership framework (Abel et al., 2017).

Human Resources

Human resources management is the process of utilizing human resources to achieve common goals effectively and efficiently for both the organization and the employees (Sukawati et al., 2020). In ECE programs, human resource management involves managing and leading teachers and staff while meeting the programs and teachers' goals (Hujala et al., 2013). This means recruiting, training, retaining, and supervising teachers (Hujala et al., 2013). According to Strehmel (2016), the goals of human resource management in ECE are two-sided. On one side, the purpose is to improve and strengthen the instructional quality and provide high-quality learning opportunities for children. On the other side, human resource management's goal is to improve the professional development of teachers and staff, working conditions, work motivation, and overall job satisfaction. According to Sukawati et al. (2020), it is easier for an educational organization to achieve its goals if their human resources possess high levels of competence and professionalism in performing their work. Therefore, ECE directors have the strategic role in running an effective workforce to achieve the organization's goals as well as those of all stakeholders (Sukawati et al., 2020). However, this is a challenging task for directors because the ECE field is known for low wages, disparities in academic qualifications of staff, and lack of sufficient funds, which makes it difficult for the field to attract highly educated and experienced ECE professionals (Moloney & Pettersen, 2017).

Ryan et al. (2011) found that human resources were one of the most important areas of ECE directors' jobs. In contrast, another study reported human resources as one of the main causes of directors' stress and burnout, and that the area that most specifically was challenging for directors was recruiting new teachers and finding substitutes (Elomaa et al., 2020; see also Rohacek et al., 2010). Similarly, Alchin et al. (2019) reported that human resources management was one of the most stressful parts of directors' jobs as they felt "ill-prepared" for this part of

their job (p. 294). In another study, directors reported challenges with staff development, benefits, strategic planning, and staffing plans (Arend, 2010). More recent research reported that time spent on human resources was the largest portion of time and emphasis for the directors (Shields & Hattingh, 2022).

Another challenge experienced by directors is conflict within the organization. Conflict has been associated with many women working together, and the field of ECE is “hyper-feminine” (Maloney & Pettersen, 2017, p. 129). The complexity of the field of ECE makes it a perfect setting for conflict to occur due to the competing interests, needs, and perspectives of all stakeholders including parents and staff (Allen-Agbro, 2013). In Maloney and Pettersen’s study (2017), one director reported that “...there is always a degree of conflict that goes on, especially when you have large staff, when you have a lot of women working together” (p. 129). Conflict in ECE programs can arise from issues such as differences in perspectives, stress from a demanding and stressful job, incompatible teaching styles, or outside influences; such interpersonal challenges are inevitable in ECE settings (Leekeenan & Ponte, 2018; Rodd, 2019).

Maloney and Pettersen (2017) reported that directors face conflict with and among teachers and if such conflict is not handled appropriately, professionally, and in a productive way it can become challenging. Shields and Hattingh (2022) posited that managing dilemmas is an essential part of ECE leadership roles. From the perspective of the theoretical framework of this study, Pettersen (2011) stated that “...the ethics of care originated in women’s care work, including maternal work, arenas that are rifled with conflicts and the need of being immediately handled” (p. 59). The ethics of care theory has demonstrated how to approach conflict by applying strategies such as appealing to empathy, rationality, dialogues, and “re-conceptualizations” of events (Pettersen, 2011, p. 59). Ethics of care calls for stakeholders to

replace conflict with communication and shared action (Adhariani et al., 2017). Additionally, conflict can be used to strengthen relationships, but this is dependent on the view one has on conflict and the approach one takes to resolving conflict (Campbell & Clarke, 2018).

According to the conceptual framework of the present study, human resources is a critical part of being administrative leader (Abel et al., 2017). Moreover, it is a crucial aspect of running a high-quality ECE program (Bloom & Abel, 2015). Yet, human resources management in the field of ECE is an under-researched and under-developed area (Zaenab, 2017). More research is needed in this area to support ECE directors (Arend, 2010).

Fiscal Management

Early childhood education organizations “are business[es] and must be managed accordingly to maintain a viable operation” regardless of the organizations for profit or non-profit status (Moloney & Pettersen, 2017, p. 100), yet this is a “somewhat controversial topic to discuss among many stakeholders in the field of early childhood education” (Maloney & Pettersen, 2017, p. 3). According to Rohacek et al. (2010), ECE programs’ financial stability is associated with the directors’ budgeting responsibilities and financial decisions. For example, ECE directors can influence certain factors that increase or decrease center resources such as collecting tuition fees on time (Rohacek et al., 2010). Depending on the program structure, ECE directors can have the principal responsibility to make financial decisions such as setting tuition rates, staff salaries, or allocating money to other areas of the program (Rohacek et al., 2010). There are ECE programs where directors have very little authority to make financial decisions (Rohacek et al., 2010). Early childhood education organizations are like other businesses in that they cannot survive if the leader or manager does not make intelligent use of financial resources (Freeman et al., 2013). One of the critical roles of ECE directors is to become financially

responsible administrative leaders by managing their program's finances effectively, as the program's success depends mainly on how the business side of the ECE program is executed (Alchin et al., 2019). Additionally, ECE directors are called and expected to be ethical financial leaders and be able to "manage resources responsibly and accurately account for their use" (NAEYC, 2011, p. 6; see also Feeney & Freeman, 2018). Ethical financial management is crucial because integrity is critical in the use of financial resources (van Staveren, 2016). "Caring finance" is financial management as seen through the lens of ethics of care (van Staveren, 2016, p. 249). Caring finance takes into consideration responsibility, relationships, and connections between stakeholders (van Staveren, 2016). Ethics of care can be seen as part of business ethics that can be applied in various financial situations, especially in settings where women oversee the financial responsibilities a business has (Adhiriani et al., 2017).

Early childhood education directors are tasked with financial management (Whitebook et al., 2012). They are responsible for covering all the expenses required to run an effective program as well as to ensure the doors of the program stay open for the community they serve (Whitebook et al., 2012). Kotloff and Burd (2012) reported that even though sound financial management may not be part of the organization's mission, financial management is necessary to achieve the organization's mission in a sustainable way. Healthy finances in an ECE program are strongly linked and central to quality care and education settings (Moloney & Pettersen, 2017).

Although fiscal management knowledge is essential to running high-quality ECE programs, research has indicated that financial management is often an area in which ECE directors lack training, experience, and confidence to properly execute those tasks (Alchin et al., 2019; Allgood, 2016) as ECE directors have been trained to be educators and not financial managers (Leekeenan & Ponte, 2018). Bruno (2012) posited that the lack of academic and

professional development of directors makes them “feel less confident about managing finances than they do about managing relationships or day-to-day program operations” (p. 147).

According to Morgan (2000), budget policy and program policy are interrelated and a clear understanding of this relationship by the director is critical for the quality of the program. In recent years, research has shown similar evidence in that “as leaders in our programs, we are charged with implementing policy and monitoring budgets. It turns out that your budget really is policy- there is no doubt about it” (Harris, 2019, p. 41). Early childhood education directors tend not to have clear and practical financial policies and procedures in place for financial management and decision-making (Maloney & Pettersen, 2017). In a study by Alchin et al. (2019), 63% of 600 novice and seasoned ECE directors stated they were not confident and felt unprepared regarding the business planning and financial management of their programs with responses such as “degrees need more business management” (p. 291). In another study, financial planning was reported as a challenge (Shields & Hattingh, 2022) and a source of stress for directors (Elomaa et al., 2020).

In one of the first scholarly works about management of ECE programs, Morgan (2000) reported that the financial management knowledge and skills of ECE directors should include budgeting skills, knowledge of break-even analysis, an understanding of cost analysis, the ability to develop cash-flow projections, and an understanding of budget projection . More recent research has also shown similar business knowledge and skills needed by ECE directors. These healthy financial management knowledge and practice skills include five crucial financial elements. These elements are “1) operational planning, 2) creating a budget, 3) monitoring income and expenses, 4) making necessary fiscal adjustments, and 5) strong governance” (Maloney & Pettersen, 2017, p. 103). Early childhood education directors are required to have

business acumen and acquire the knowledge and skills of financial management to make informed decisions to ensure the health of the program's finances (Freeman et al., 2013). Yet, they are not well-prepared either academically or professionally for such responsibilities (Alchin et al., 2019; Maloney & Pettersen, 2017). According to Allgood (2016), limited research has been conducted to study strategies and techniques to help ECE directors acquire the necessary financial knowledge and skills to operate as financially viable businesses leaders. Additionally, research on physical spaces and facilities and stakeholders' understanding of the importance of physical spaces is often underestimated (Amissah-Essel et al., 2020). Physical spaces in ECE programs represent a challenge to ECE directors for reasons such as limited space for children and staff (Oztabak & Polatlar, 2020). The challenges ECE directors experience regarding physical facilities are discussed below.

Facilities Management

The management and quality of the physical environment of ECE settings, also referred to here as facilities management, has been associated with positive learning development outcomes (Mathews & Lippman, 2016, 2019). The physical facilities of an ECE program include indoor and outdoor spaces and design elements such as room size, layout, furniture, gardens, equipment, and materials (Chepkonga, 2017). The physical facilities also include temperature, air quality, noise, and lighting (Mathews & Lippman, 2016). The quality of the physical facilities has been found to be a strong determinant of the ECE program learning environment (Chepkonga, 2017).

Early education and child development theorists and practitioners such as Piaget (1971), Malaguzzi (1993), and Montessori (1949) acknowledged that the physical environments in ECE settings play a crucial role in the development and learning of young children (Mathews &

Lippman, 2016, 2019). This includes Piaget's (1971) belief that the environment influences a child's learning experience, Montessori's (1949) concept of the prepared environment, and Malaguzzi's (1993) concept of the environment as the third teacher within the Reggio Emilia curriculum approach. These concepts are based on a strong belief and respect for children as capable, competent, and independent beings who act on their environment positively (Malaguzzi, 1993; Montessori, 1949; Piaget, 1971). It is important to note that the physical environment, including materials, needs to be adapted to meet the developmental needs of all children, including those with different abilities (Matshediso, 2021; see also Rohacek et al., 2010).

Facilities management is part of the director's administrative leadership tasks as well as an aspect of the director's operational responsibilities (Masterson, 2019). It is the responsibility of the directors to ensure that the physical facilities are safe for children and comply with local, state, and federal laws (Tadjic et al., 2015). Moreover, it is the responsibility of the ECE director to create, implement, and maintain a high-quality learning environment (Hujala et al., 2016). The director is also responsible for providing nurturing spaces that support the emotional-social development of children, including promoting respectful, meaningful, and responsive relationships among children, between children and teachers, parents, and staff, as well as among all staff members (Mathews & Lippman, 2016, 2019). Developing warm, respectful, and caring relationships are in line with ethics of care as they are considered necessary for human existence and central to the ECE field (Langford & Richardson, 2020).

In a study done in South Africa, it was reported that many of the directors interviewed were not cognizant of the leadership influence they had on the quality of the learning environment nor were they knowledgeable about how the program's curriculum is associated with the physical environment to provide optimal educational experiences to the children under

their care (Matshediso, 2021). Along with staff and program quality, the physical environment of ECE programs contributes significantly to children's development and learning outcomes (Mathews & Lippman, 2016). The physical environment, materials, equipment, and space are vital components in children's cognitive, social, and physical development, including classroom positive behavior (Chepkonga, 2017). Conversely, poor layout of ECE facilities can negatively affect children's learning and development (Mathews & Lippman, 2016).

Only one study was found in the literature reviewed that linked physical environments and educators' perspectives on administration (Oztabak et al., 2020). This study was carried out in the Turkish ECE context. The study found that the physical structures of ECE programs represented organizational challenges for the educators of those programs. According to Oztabak et al. (2020), the most significant challenges were small classrooms that felt crowded when all children and teachers were present. Other physical facilities issues dealt with the infrastructure of the ECE program, such as heating and plumbing. The lack of work space, meeting space, and storage for the teachers and administrators also presented challenges for staff. Early childhood education programs are primarily designed for children and not the adults that care and educate them, thus, special consideration should be given to ensure ECE settings are places in which directors, teachers, and staff can also thrive (Corr et al., 2017). Another study conducted in the Kenyan ECE context found a strong relationship between physical facilities and the delivery of high-quality early education (Chepkonga, 2017). Moreover, the study found that the lack of adequate learning facilities including equipment such as desks, tables, chairs, kitchen equipment, storage, and the availability of water, had a negative impact on the provision of high-quality early care and education programs (Chepkonga, 2017).

Research has demonstrated that ECE program facilities should be designed according to the highest quality physical standards in the field with a disciplinary team approach (Oztabak et al., 2020). This disciplinary team approach to designing ECE spaces should include input from architects, teachers, directors, parents, and the children themselves (Oztabak et al., 2020). It is important to note that the architectural design of any ECE setting needs to fit the mission, vision, philosophy, and goals of the program (i.e., Montessori) (Gules, 2013 as cited in Oztabak et al., 2020). Equally important is taking into consideration the technical, architectural, and economic challenges that may arise during architectural planning of ECE programs. It is crucial to resolve these challenges in advance to help mitigate administrative challenges for ECE leaders (Gules, 2013 as cited in Oztabak et al., 2020).

Research studies have linked the physical space of ECE programs, and the effect physical space has on children's development and growth, including the establishment of meaningful relationships and its influence on the overall quality of the program (Chepkonga, 2017). In the review of the literature, it has been revealed that ECE directors are the key to quality (Morgan, 2000). However, despite research findings acknowledging the importance and crucial role that the interior and exterior of physical environment, materials, equipment, and space play in ECE programs, little is known about the experiences, challenges, and views of educators and directors (Oztabak & Polatlar, 2020).

In summary, management within the ECE context has been discussed as it pertains to the administrative leadership of directors. The operational responsibilities of ECE directors as administrative leaders, which include human resources management, financial management, and facilities management were discussed. The literature reviewed also revealed that organizational leadership and management are core components of ECE programs and are part of the

responsibilities of directors (Moloney & Pettersen, 2017). Thus, this chapter now turns its attention to the discussion of leadership styles in ECE settings to better understand the breadth and scope of this study.

Leadership in Early Childhood Education

Leadership in general has been studied for the last 50 years leading to 65 classifications and 350 definitions with the focus on understanding the positive characteristics of the leaders (Cote, 2017). In spite of the “glamorization of leadership today” (Cote, 2017, p. 1), research on early childhood education leadership is limited and includes only a few empirical studies (Berger, 2015). No single definition of ECE leadership exists (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013). However, it is imperative that the meaning of leadership in the ECE context is articulated to bring importance and attention to the field’s need for leadership (Douglass, 2019). What is known about ECE leadership is that it encompasses both pedagogical and administrative leadership (Douglass, 2019). The few researchers who have studied leadership styles of ECE directors have reported the importance and the complexities of leadership in the field of ECE and have agreed that leadership in ECE is an under-researched area (Klevering & McNae, 2018).

Effective Leadership in Early Childhood Education

Leadership is motivating and influencing a group of people to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2016). Leadership focuses on relationships, growth, and vision (Marion & Gonzalez, 2014). Leadership requires a broad view, fostered by intention and reflection, which guides organizational leaders on how to lead (Fullan, 2020). An emerging body of research studies have suggested that effective leadership in ECE can lead to positive outcomes through high-quality learning experiences for children, supporting and retaining teachers, as well as supporting parents (Kirby et al., 2021). Researchers have agreed that defining and studying the concept of

leadership in the context of ECE is crucial for ECE leadership to become visible and bring attention, funding, and transform the field into a more structured educational field (Lee et al., 2022). However, because ECE is an educational field with many complexities such as program settings, lack of sufficient funding, diverse qualification requirements, leadership structure within each program, and a high proportion of women leaders, leadership must be seen through a lens that reflects and represents the leaders in the field (Abel, 2019).

Most leadership theories do not fit the field of ECE due to the previously mentioned complexities mainly because the needs of women leaders are different from those of their counterparts (Klevering & McNae, 2018). These gendered leadership stereotypes have created challenges for ECE practitioners, who are primarily women, because women relate to leadership differently than men (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013). For example, some research has reported that female leaders display more altruistic behaviors, emotional healing, hold value in service to others, and organizational stewardship (Beck, 2014). Given that ECE is an educational field dominated by women leaders and followers, a more inclusive approach to leadership should be taken into consideration to bring context and represent the needs and challenges of leadership for ECE directors (Langford & Richardson, 2020).

The ECE field provides a unique context in which to research woman-dominated leadership and culture (Wise, 2011). An approach to leadership through a gender-lens can help develop and support leadership within the field (Hinitz, 2013). Additionally, due to the nature of ECE settings, leadership is not hierarchical but shared (Fonset et al., 2013). Therefore, the following leadership styles will be discussed as they pertain to the leadership structures in ECE environments and are informed by the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the present study: distributed, joint, transformational, and servant leadership.

Distributed and Joint Leadership

Research has defined ECE leadership as encompassing two broad functions: administrative and pedagogical leadership (Douglass, 2017). Douglass (2017) stated that these two leadership functions may be exercised by one director alone or be shared among a leadership team. Although one director may act alone, leadership is most successful when shared with others (Fonset et al., 2013). According to Kouzes and Posner (2007), leadership success will continue to result from how well people work together. Early childhood education directors' leadership challenges are too complicated for a single leader to cope with when providing high-quality services to children (Douglass, 2017). Decision-making needs to be flexible and take advantage of everyone's knowledge and expertise in the organization (Fonset et al., 2013).

Distributed leadership recognizes that there are multiple leaders, and that leadership is widely shared within and between organizations (Rodd, 2013). Because leadership is shared among and with teachers, and sometimes parents depending on the program setting, distributed leadership is one of ECE's most recognized leadership styles (Douglass, 2017). Distributed leadership research also provides a robust theoretical underpinning of leadership practice in early education (Clarkin-Phillips & Morrison, 2018). The concept of the ECE leader sharing power, giving up control, and trusting others to make decisions and take responsibility is appealing to the field of ECE because directors do not have to be solely responsible for the organizations they serve (Clarkin-Phillips & Morrison, 2018). Early childhood education leaders must lead the intricate structures of ECE, which are different from educational settings such as kindergarten through 12th grade because ECE settings have different needs and limited access to resources (Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2021). Although the responsibilities and roles of kindergarten through 12th grade principals and ECE directors are similar, such as leading teachers, budgeting,

organizational goals, and parent involvement, the funding and access to resources and support differ greatly (Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2021). The ECE educational environment involves various roles, and the needs of each community being served vary as well (Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2021).

Because of this complexity in ECE leadership roles, the reviewed research cautioned against using only one leadership method (Rodd, 2013). Using only one approach may not be appropriate for each setting (Fonsen et al., 2015). Therefore, a diversion from distributed leadership to joint leadership has been proposed by some researchers (Fonsen et al., 2015). The main pillars of joint trust, a leadership are vision, goals, and communication, with trust being the most critical of the pillars (Ansio et al., 2013, as cited in Fonsen et al., 2015). According to Fonsen et al. (2015), joint leadership has a deeper and more diverse understanding of ECE and its management as leadership is spread throughout the organization through interactions and joint efforts (Hard & Jonsdottir, 2013). Similarly, transformational leadership emphasizes such factors while creating positive change in people and the organization (Bass, 2010).

Transformational Leadership

Since the late 1970s, transformational leadership has been used to understand leadership and organizational change (Yasir & Mohammad, 2016). Transformational leadership is considered an “ethical leadership style that involves a leader’s capability to promote intellectual stimulation through inspiration” (Choudhary et al., 2013, p. 434). Bass (1985, 2010) defined transformational leaders as having charisma, inspiring followers, using intellectual stimulation, and being considerate of each employee as an individual, giving personal attention in coaching, and advising. Transformational leadership has become a more complete, complex, and motivational approach than other leadership styles (Hackman & Johnson, 2013).

Transformational leadership appeals to employees' higher-level needs of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization as identified by Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). Moreover, transformational leadership influences perceptions and values and positively impacts follower motivation and expectations (Bass, 2010).

Transformational leaders inspire effort from their followers, who will make extra effort for their leaders (Bass, 2010). Transformational leaders set high goals for their followers (Bass, 2010). The leader's followers strive to reach these goals because of the individual consideration that the transformational leader provides for them (Bass, 2010). Transformational leaders do more with less and can positively impact the outcomes of their organizations (Bass, 2010). Such leadership behavior is exerted by ECE directors as the field suffers from underfunding, yet directors are required to meet all the needs of their program with the limited resources they have (Morrison, 2018).

Transformational leadership applies to directors as leaders because its characteristics mirror those of the field of ECE. In any organization, including ECE settings, transformational leadership produces better follower outcomes or, in the context of ECE environments, better teacher outcomes (Morrison, 2018). Personal outcomes include higher motivation and competency, higher self-efficacy, self-fulfillment, and more self-respect (Morrison, 2018). Organizational outcomes in the ECE context include higher staff motivation, increased child outcomes, higher staff productivity, better work environments, higher collaboration, and increased quality production (Morrison, 2018).

Transformational leaders are resilient and reflective, taking precious time to contemplate new and more in-depth perspectives during difficult times (Marion & Gonzalez, 2014). Furthermore, transformational leadership helps create positive change in followers, with the end

goal of developing followers into leaders (Bass, 2010). Transformational leaders partner with followers to identify needed changes, empower teams, and inspire a shared vision (Bass, 2010; Marion & Gonzalez, 2014; Morrison, 2018). Just like transformational leadership is people-oriented, servant leadership focuses on valuing people, mentoring, empowering followers, and appreciating others (Choudhary et al., 2013). Additionally, both transformational leadership and servant leadership view leadership from an ethical perspective (Yasir & Mohamad, 2016). The following section will discuss servant leadership as it relates to ECE leadership.

Servant Leadership

The concept of servant leadership has existed since biblical times as exemplified by religious and world leaders such as Jesus Christ, Mahatma Ghandi, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Baldonado, 2017). The term servant leadership was formulated by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970 in his essay *The Servant Leader* (Canavesi & Minelli, 2021). Servant leadership is an ethical leadership and management style where moral integrity is at the center of leadership (Yasir & Mohamad, 2016). Furthermore, servant leadership is fitting for the field of ECE because it allows “women leaders to enact the social roles of gender and leader in authentic ways, leading to enhanced follower perceptions and ethical decision making consistent with a feminine ethic of care” (Lehrke & Sowden, 2017, p. 1). Greenleaf (1977) asserted that “service to followers is the primary responsibility of leaders and the essence of ethical leadership” (p. 20). Greenleaf (1977) viewed leaders as having the desire to serve and meet the needs of others by emphasizing that the leader is a servant first and then a leader. Although it may seem paradoxical to consider a leader a servant, it is the service to others that drives servant leaders forward (Maglioni & Neville, 2021). Servant leadership highlights the idea that a servant leader places the needs, well-being, welfare, and “collective human development” of the followers first (Yasir

& Mohammad, 2016, p. 312) by balancing leadership and service (Choudhary et al., 2013).

Similarly, ECE leaders place the health, safety, well-being, and all the aspects of development of children and the educators they lead first while balancing their leadership responsibilities with the services their programs offer to families (Douglass, 2019).

Since Greenleaf's (1970) conception of servant leadership, many other scholars have refined servant leadership through various theoretical models (see Parolini, 2004; Patterson, 2003; Russell & Stone, 2002; Spears, 2010; Winston, 2013; Wong & Page, 2003). For the purpose of the current study's literature review, Patterson's (2003) working theory of servant leadership will be discussed because its theoretical constructs closely align with ECE leadership. Patterson (2003) distilled Greenleaf's (1970) work into seven virtuous constructs. Patterson (2003) asserted that the leadership process of servant leadership is based on virtue. These virtuous constructs include vision, humility, agapao love, altruism, service, empowerment, and trust (Patterson, 2003).

Vision refers to the idea that the leader has for each member of the organization and how the leader assists that member to reach their goal (Patterson, 2003). In the ECE setting, the director has a vision for each child and teacher to reach their fullest potential according to their abilities and interests. The second construct is humility. Humility allows leaders to respect the worth and contributions of all their followers, practicing self-acceptance, accepting advice, as well as criticism (Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005). For ECE directors, this translates into practicing self-acceptance without being self-centered and appreciating the contributions of others such as teachers and parents. The third construct is agapao love. Agapao love refers to the foundation of the servant leader-follower relationship (Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005). According to Patterson (2003), "this love is shown by leaders who consider each person as a total person - one with

needs, wants and desires” (p. 8). Similarly, ECE directors accept children as individuals with unique needs, talents, and contributions to the program. The fourth construct is altruism. Altruism seeks the best for others without any personal gain (Eva et al., 2019; Patterson, 2003). In the field of ECE educators and directors perform many altruistic acts such as purchasing educational materials with personal money or making dinner for a family in need. The fifth construct is service. Service is at the center of servant leadership because it is the primary function of a leader (Patterson, 2003). Early childhood education exists to service children through care and education and sets the foundation for later academics and life (Douglass, 2019). Empowerment is the sixth construct and one of the most important characteristics of servant leadership (Patterson, 2003). Empowerment refers to sharing power, effective listening, making people feel valued, teamwork, as well as equality (Patterson, 2003). Leadership styles where power is shared with others such as teachers and parents are ideal for ECE directors (Fosen et al., 2017). Lastly, trust is the seventh construct in which “trust is the building block to work from for servant leaders, a trust in the unseen potential of the followers, believing they can accomplish goals, a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Patterson, 2003, p. 5).

In conclusion, servant leadership is a concept that encourages leaders to be servants first, then leaders (Maglioni & Neville, 2021). Servant leadership also reminds leaders to balance leadership and service to promote positive organizational environments and change (Patterson, 2003). Patterson’s (2003) seven virtuous constructs provided a framework for comparing servant leaders with ECE leaders as outlined in the literature presented in this section. Early education directors, just as servant leaders, possess a set of behaviors that make them leaders rather than authority figures in their organizations (Crippen & Willows, 2019).

Summarizing Leadership and Management in Early Childhood Education

Leadership and management roles in ECE environments are complex (Alchin et al., 2019). In ECE settings, it appears that there is no clear definition between both roles (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013). The terms leadership and management are often used interchangeably within the ECE context because the directors are responsible for the execution of both roles, which may be contributing to the confusion (Miller et al., 2012). In other words, the separation of management and leadership tasks in ECE programs is difficult to achieve because the tasks are interwoven (Davis et al., 2014).

Research has indicated that ECE directors face multiple challenges that may prevent them from developing leadership skills (National Research Council, 2015). One of these challenges is the lack of appropriate training, qualifications, and academic background of directors, which vary across the ECE field (Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2021). Early childhood education directors are skilled at working and teaching young children but may have no or limited experience or academic background in leading organizations and followers (Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2021). Moreover, research has determined that the roles and responsibilities of ECE directors include managing their programs as both a business and educational setting (Alchin et al., 2019; Moloney & Pettersen, 2017). Therefore, administrative leadership and pedagogical leadership are at the forefront of ECE directors' responsibilities as they must have the knowledge and skills needed to effectively lead others, thereby creating a shared vision and a positive work environment while providing high-quality care and education to children (Bloom & Abel, 2015). Lastly, other management tasks such as fiscal management, human resources, and providing appropriate physical spaces have been found to be essential elements of ECE leadership and management success (Alchin et al., 2019).

Summary

The literature review in this study examined research on ECE directors' leadership and management skills, knowledge, and needs. The whole leadership conceptual framework (Abel et al., 2017) and the feminist ethics of care theoretical framework (Gilligan, 1982) were introduced and informed the literature review. According to the few scholarly works available that have studied ECE leadership, an approach to leadership through a gender-lens can help develop and support leadership within the context of ECE as the field is composed predominantly of female leaders (Langford & Richardson, 2020). The ECE literature reviewed in this study recognizes the difficulties ECE directors find in building leadership skills in a society where "leadership is still often viewed from a historically male paradigm" (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013, p. 323). Furthermore, the scholarly work reviewed also revealed that ECE leadership and management is an under-researched area with many organizational complexities such as being under-resourced, undervalued, and understaffed all while lacking sufficient funding (Alchin et al., 2019). It has been established that ECE directors are crucial in the success or failure of an ECE program (Talan & Abel, 2015). Therefore, it is imperative that ECE directors are supported in their complex leadership and management roles, so that the organizations they lead have a solid operational foundation for high-quality, financially feasible, and sustainable ECE programs in their communities. Chapter 3 includes a description of the participants, the location of the study, research design, data collection, and data analysis.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research on early childhood education (ECE) leadership and management has been neglected for decades (Douglass, 2017, 2019). However, there has been interest in leadership research and policy at the state, national, and global levels as economists and researchers have reported the social and economic benefits that quality ECE has on society (Lee et al., 2022). Although it has been established that there is a direct link between the quality of ECE programs and ECE directors' effective leadership, little is known about the leadership and management challenges ECE directors experience in their daily role as leaders of their organizations and the strategies and resources needed to alleviate such challenges (Lee et al., 2022). Therefore, the purpose of the present narrative inquiry study was to explore the lived experiences of center-based directors' challenges related to the leadership and management of ECE programs with a particular focus on 1) organizational leadership, 2) business management and operations, and 3) academic and professional preparation for their leadership roles. This research study explored the challenges six ECE directors experienced and the strategies and resources they needed to support their leadership and management roles, and the findings to serve as guideposts that will benefit directors and inform future research across the field of early childhood education. The research questions that guided this study were:

Research Question 1: How did Los Angeles County-based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors perceive program setting-related challenges as influencing their ability to effectively lead their organization?

Research Question 2: How did Los Angeles County-based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors describe the operational management tasks in the early childhood education setting?

Research Question 3: How did Los Angeles County-based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors describe their preparation for their leadership and management roles within their early childhood education organization?

The research design for this study was qualitative narrative inquiry. This approach was chosen partly because "policy and practice decisions, including those in education, increasingly are informed by findings in qualitative as well as quantitative research. Qualitative research is useful to policymakers because it often describes the settings in which policies will be implemented" (Anderson, 2010, p. 1). The present study's theoretical framework of ethics of care (EoC) guided the methodology of the research process by taking a care-centered approach to the leadership and management challenges experienced by center-based ECE directors. Ethics of care is associated with feminist theories and is grounded in caring for others, relationships, and avoiding hurting and alienating others (Gilligan, 1982) while considering the political, power, privilege, and moral aspects of caring (Tronto, 2013). Thus, this study takes a feminist perspective research methodology, which has been selected under the narrative inquiry paradigm (Adhariani et al., 2017).

Care is a recurrent issue in public discourse (Jesenkova, 2020). Care is talked about, emphasized, highlighted, and analyzed (Jesenkova, 2020). Nonetheless, care remains an unresolved issue because of the "allocation of responsibilities" (Tronto, 2013, p. 56). The allocation of responsibilities means that different forms and practices of care are divided into two categories where on one side, certain care such as health care is essential, and the other types or practices of care are expendable, such as early care and education (Jesenkova, 2020). Because EoC has been associated with feminine and feminist ethics, there is an assumption that EoC is only about women's natural moral ability to care for others (Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2021).

However, under Held's (2006) account, care is suitable for all human beings without exclusion. In Held's (2006) work, EoC is a normative theory with a relational emphasis on the universal capability of caring.

Care in ECE has been marginalized in many Western countries, including the United States, by separating care, education delivery, and policy (Langford & Richardson, 2020). The popular belief that “care work” performed in ECE settings comes “naturally to women legitimizes its subordination and glosses over the inherent complex, messy, contextual, and emotional nature of working with young children” (Langford & Richardson, 2020, p. 33). Consequently, “the overarching goal of feminist research is to identify the ways in which multiple forms of oppression impact women’s lives and empower women to tell their stories by providing a respectful and egalitarian research environment” (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 788). Such a goal is in line with the theoretical framework of this study, which is to empower ECE directors to use their experiences to express their leadership and management challenges from their perspectives and use their “voices as source of knowledge” (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 788).

As stated earlier, this study used a narrative inquiry research approach to study the lived experiences of ECE directors. To guide the author of this study to respond ethically to complex research phenomena such as the professional responsibilities of ECE directors, the theoretical framework of EoC guided this research study (Adhariani et al., 2017). Narrative inquiry research aims to thoroughly investigate the meanings that people assign to their experiences with emphasis on rich stories (Gavidia & Adu, 2022). Such methodology encouraged the participants in this research to use their voices to inform this researcher about their experiences with the phenomenon being studied. Moreover, qualitative research methodology considers the

positionality of the researcher and the participants "as core aspects of inquiry to understand how knowledge and experience are situated, co-constructed, historically and socially located" (Reich, 2021, p. 575). Similarly, EoC views care as a relational process in which care relies on the participation of the person caring about and the person being cared for, sharing a mutual interest in well-being (Tronto, 2013).

Ethics of care views humans as "relational and interdependent, morally and epistemologically, rather than autonomous beings" (Held, 2006, p. 13). Qualitative research analyzes the participants' lives as they experience a specific phenomenon through a subjective view of reality and examines them as complex and socially meaningful (Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2018; Reich, 2021). Similarly, EoC values women's lives and experiences in their complexity and importance (Langford & Richardson, 2020). Qualitative methodology with the ethics of care theoretical underpinning allowed this researcher to get closer to the phenomenon and to the lived experiences of the participants being studied while meaningfully and ethically analyzing ECE directors' lived experiences and perspectives (Reich, 2021).

Site Information and Demographics

There is a dire need in early childhood education to understand ECE directors' leadership and management experiences when leading their organizations (Douglass, 2019). This information is necessary to create strategies and resources to support them in their roles as leaders and managers (Douglass, 2019). The leadership and management gap among ECE directors is a national issue, but each state has unique challenges specific to the needs of its population (Abel, 2019). Consequently, this researcher concentrated on ECE directors in the State of California, specifically, the county of Los Angeles. Focusing on a specific region enhanced the knowledge of leadership and management roles, financial needs, challenges,

strategies, resources, and policies necessary to create leadership support systems for ECE directors to become effective leaders that are appropriate for the ECE setting and the community they serve.

California is home to over 3,000,000 children ages birth to five, which is more than any other state in the United States (Melnick et al., 2017). California's ECE system includes a mixture of programs with various designs and purposes (Melnick et al., 2017). These programs include government school readiness programs such as Head Start, private and public centers such as non-profits and school districts, as well as in-home child care programs making the ECE system in California complex (Melnick et al., 2017). In the Los Angeles County area, there are 2,468 licensed public and private center-based ECE programs serving children birth to eight (KidsData, 2021). Because the ECE landscape in the State of California is intricate, the present study focused on private, independent, single-center, and for-profit, ECE programs in the county of Los Angeles.

California faces an early care and education crisis ranging from financial strain to a shrinking labor workforce (Montoya et al., 2022). According to Powell et al. (2022), the vast majority of ECE educators (98%) are women and many of them are women of color. Many of California's ECE educators were born outside of the United States with Spanish speakers making up the largest group (Powell et al., 2022). There is a total of 44,900 ECE educators in California. At least 9,500 out of the 44,900 ECE directors and administrators (Powell et al., 2022). Over half of the 9,500 directors and administrators are over 50 years of age and three out of four directors are married or living with a partner (Powell et al., 2022). In 2019, the median child care worker hourly wage was \$13.43, preschool teachers earned \$16.83, whereas kindergarten teachers earned \$41.86 an hour (Powell et al., 2022). Additionally, many ECE educators lack access to

benefits such as health care or retirement savings (Whitebook & Ryan, 2018). Due to the low investment in the ECE industry, which results in low wages and lack of access to benefits, there is a high level of turnover among ECE educators (Gould et al., 2019). Consequently, ECE directors face many challenges managing and leading ECE programs in California. Thus, this study focused on the challenges, needs, and resources of such directors.

Early childhood education directors were selected from the child care database publicly available from the California Department of Social Services (2023) and from a private Facebook (2023) group that supports ECE directors. Participants that were selected from the California Department of Social Services (2023) database were emailed the invitation to participate and the invitation to participate post was posted on the private Facebook (2023) post. The selection of a research sample in qualitative research is purposeful (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The first six participants that answered the Facebook post were recruited as participants. Participants were selected according to preselected criteria which aligned with the research questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Participants and Sampling Method

To explore and understand the leadership and management challenges of ECE directors, the participants for the present study were ECE directors from licensed single, independent, for-profit, center-based programs in the State of California, specifically Los Angeles County. As stated in the previous section, the selection of a research sample in qualitative research is purposeful (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The point of purposeful sampling rests in choosing "information-rich cases" to obtain insight and understanding of the problem being studied (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 266). There are various types of purposeful sampling, including typical, maximum variation, homogenous, and snowball (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

The research's objectives determine the sample size, and the characteristic of the study determines the type and the number of people selected (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

The present study recruited six participants who self-identified as meeting the following criteria:

- 1) Age 18 or older
- 2) Identify as female
- 3) Completion of a high school diploma or GED and 15 child development units of ECE college courses with three of those units being in administration or staff relations.
- 4) At least four years of teaching experience in a licensed ECE program.
- 5) Have less than 10 years of experience as ECE directors in full-day programs.
- 6) Must be from licensed single, independent, for-profit, center-based programs in the State of California, specifically Los Angeles County.

The goal of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to collect stories and perceptions through rich descriptions of the leadership and management challenges of ECE directors in Los Angeles County. This study included ECE directors whose lived experiences were explored through semi-structured interviews. For the purpose of this study, the specific focus of the ECE directors' narrative stories were: 1) academic and professional preparation, 2) organizational leadership, and 3) business operational tasks. Since qualitative research does not strive for generalization (Ellis, 2016), a small sample of six participants was appropriate for this study.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

The present qualitative narrative inquiry study used semi-structured interviews (Appendix E) to understand the lived experiences of center-based early childhood education directors in their roles as leaders and managers of their ECE programs. Semi-structured

interviews were chosen for this study because they allowed the participants to elaborate on specific information that was important to them (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019). The semi-structured interview aids researchers in understanding participants' thoughts, beliefs, and experiences related to the research topic of interest (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Accordingly, the study's researcher collected rich, in-depth accounts by engaging with participants in "conversational interviewing" (Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2018, p. 28).

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were a mix of closed- and open-ended questions which were often complemented by why or how follow-up questions (Adams, 2015). The questions for the interviews were based on predetermined topics and allowed this researcher to rephrase questions to allow space for discussion and encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences (Okkonen et al., 2021). Moreover, the sequence of questions was modified by the researcher to best fit the participant and the interview context (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The conversation between the interviewer and the participant involved the topics of the study rather than adhering strictly to the questions such as in quantitative surveys (Adams, 2015).

This researcher conducted the interviews (Appendix E) virtually through Zoom. Interviews began with an introduction. As the interviews progressed, prompts were used by this researcher to encourage participants to go deeper into the questions encouraging a "relationship of trust, where safety and openness are critical" (Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2018, p. 28). A master list of the interviews' transcripts was kept, and each participant was assigned a unique pseudonym. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, stored in a password-protected folder, and housed in an external flash drive only accessible to this researcher.

The external flash drive was kept at this researcher's home as she was the only individual responsible for monitoring the data. The transcribed interviews were stripped of personally

identifiable information and the participants were referred to by their uniquely assigned pseudonym. The master list was destroyed after all restoried narratives were confirmed as being accurate. Lastly, if this study is published in journals or at higher education settings in the future, the participants in this study will not be named or identified.

The participant information sheet (Appendix C) was sent with the invitation to participate email (Appendix B) to possible participants during the recruitment phase. The participant information sheet was reviewed during the interview. Interviews were transcribed verbatim to “protect against bias and provide a permanent record of what was and was not said” (Gill et al., 2008, p. 293). Field notes were also taken. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that field notes are an important way of documenting a researcher’s experience during the interview.

Furthermore, field notes provide contextual information that contributes to the development of the participants’ stories (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). A member check was conducted by sending the restoried narratives back to the participants for review to ensure the accuracy of the narratives. Consequently, the participants reviewed the narratives for accuracy (Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2018). Member checking is essential for narrative inquiry methodology and feminist research, including EoC, because members checking aims for the researcher to stay close to the participants' experiences (Candela, 2019). Time was dedicated before the interview to answer any questions regarding the interview process and any other concern the participants had.

Data Analysis

Narrative inquiry research is about collecting and telling stories in detail (Kim, 2016). source). Narrative inquiry researchers investigate, interpret, and write narratives about the participants' lived experiences in their study and then discuss the meaning of the experience with them (Kim, 2016). As researchers work through the data analysis process, researchers give a

thorough account of what they learned from the analysis, organize the data for readers by identifying emerging themes, and interpret the results considering the relevant literature and the theoretical framework (Kim, 2016). For the present study, a narrative inquiry approach allowed this researcher to explore and present the voices of female early childhood education directors as they share the leadership and management challenges they face in their daily work. Exploring and presenting women's voices as they experience the complexities of their role as leaders and managers follows the theoretical framework of ethics of care, which underpins this study.

An essential step in data analysis is meaning-making from narratives such as transcribed interviews and field notes (Jha, 2018). There are various approaches to analyzing narrative inquiry research (Jha, 2018; Kim, 2016). For example, Connelly and Clandinin (2006) suggested three approaches that narrative inquiry data analysis can take: broadening (generalizing), burrowing (deeply exploring one event), and restorying (creating a new story, adding meaning, and exploring the significance in the larger story). The present study took a restorying approach to meaning-making. In restorying, the raw data is examined, and essential components are identified (Kim, 2016). These components are organized and sequenced, and finally, a narrative that recounts the participants' experiences is told (Kim, 2016). Retelling a story in a logical order aids research consumers in their understanding the data (Kim, 2016).

To construct meaning from the narratives in the present study, the researcher restoried the narratives and took field notes to identify groups focusing on categories that helped in providing an understanding of the context of the study. After each interview, transcripts were obtained using the Zoom's auto-transcription feature. All interviews were downloaded, restoried into narratives, and went through two coding cycles. According to Saldaña (2013), coding is necessary to reflect the perspectives and actions of participants. The first coding cycle was done

manually by classifying and categorizing data, writing notes in the margin (memoing), and lastly, categorizing raw data into groupings (chunking) and then into clusters. For the second cycle, this researcher used NVivo (Lumivero, 2023), a coding software program. Coding aided this researcher in attaining an in-depth understanding of the research participants' direct stories, ideas, and meanings (Okkonen et al., 2021). Interviews were analyzed thematically to reveal patterns; themes were identified based on recurrent words, phrases, and issues discussed during the interviews (Okkonen et al., 2021). According to Doucet and Mauthner (2012), it is in the "data analysis process where the power and privilege of the researcher are particularly pronounced and where the ethics of our research practice are particularly acute because of the largely invisible nature of the interpretive process" (p. 7). Participants had seven calendar days after receiving the restoried narratives to review, retract, or withdraw information. After seven calendar days, if the participant suggested no revisions, the restoried narratives were considered accurate.

Reflexivity is also a critical step in the interview process from the phenomenological and EoC perspective (Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2018) because the researcher is confronted with various ways of interpreting the participants' stories and may be quick in reaching an understanding of the researched phenomenon (Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2018). Reflexivity refers to the researchers' awareness of their role in the study and how this role affects both the research methods and results (Haynes, 2012). Thus, researchers need to be reflexive, accountable, honest, and transparent during the research process, particularly during data analysis (Doucet & Mauthner, 2012).

Limitations, Delimitations, and Ethical Issues

In any given study, potential limitations, delimitations, and ethical issues exist due to various reasons such sample size or researcher-participant relationship (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Such limitations, delimitations, and ethical issues should be reported to improve the quality of the study's findings and interpretations of the evidence reported (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Qualitative research, especially narrative inquiries, has limitations in that it offers a framework for understanding and meaning rather than leading to definite conclusions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Thus, the following section presents the possible limitations, delimitations, and ethical issues that may affect the findings of the present study.

Limitations

All research studies have limitations (Ross & Zaidi, 2019). Limitations represent potential weaknesses within the study that may influence the research findings and conclusions and should therefore be acknowledged (Ross & Zaidi, 2019). Some limitations, such as funding and time, may be out of the researcher's control (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Data analysis in qualitative methodologies that cannot be truly replicated can be a potential limitation (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Researchers must disclose any limitations to research consumers and reveal areas for future research inquiry (Ross & Zaidi, 2019). Moreover, disclosing limitations is also an ethical element of the scholarly process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). A limitation of this study is that a qualitative methodology was used for data analysis, which cannot be truly replicated (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Another limitation was the lack of previous research studies on ECE leadership and management topics.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the boundaries the author of the study sets so that the study's objectives can be achieved (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). In other words, delimitations are the researchers' limitations for their studies (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Delimitations are concerned with the study's theoretical background, research questions, aims, and variables (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Delimitations are not considered positive nor negative; instead, they are a clear account of the reasoning of how the scope of the study's interests was narrowed down as they relate to the research design and the underpinning of the theoretical framework (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Informing research consumers of the delimitations is another ethical element of the research process (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The delimitations for the present study included that participants were only females with less than 10 years of experience as ECE directors. Additionally, the participants were from single, private-for-profit centers located in Los Angeles County, CA. Furthermore, the study excluded ECE directors from public and private non-profit, faith-based, and school district programs, as well as home-based directors and assistant directors.

Ethical Issues

Ethical challenges can be found throughout the research process including the study's conclusions (Sanjari et al., 2014). Thus, researchers are required and responsible for protecting the rights and safety of the participants to minimize the potential harm that may result from participating in a study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Such ethical responsibilities are highlighted under EoC, the theoretical framework of this study (Adhariani, 2018). Ethics of care emphasizes responsibility, concern, care, integrity, and the avoidance of hurting others in the research process (Adhariani, 2018). Therefore, ethical guidelines such as the *Belmont Report* have been formulated to protect research participants as the participants' well-being must be the priority for

the researcher (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The primary purpose of the *Belmont Report* is to protect the rights of research participants (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The *Belmont Report* consists of three ethical principles research studies should adhere to, including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Respect for persons refers to the understanding that participants are autonomous beings and have the right to decide whether they want to participate in research (Miracle, 2016). The second principle of the *Belmont Report* is beneficence, which incorporates the principle of doing good (Miracle, 2016). In other words, the principle consists of a researcher doing no harm and increasing potential benefits while decreasing adverse effects. Justice requires equal treatment and fairness for all people without creating differences in treatment among ethnic, religious, sexual, or age-defined classes (Miracle, 2016).

An informed consent was provided to the participants to provide information about the study to the participants. Informed consent is a major characteristic of feminist research (McCormick, 2012). Specifically, EoC emphasizes that it is imperative that participants not only understand what is written on the informed consent about the process of the study, but that they comprehend the “implications of granting the request” (McCormick, 2012, p. 24). Therefore, this researcher verbally discussed the informed consent with the participants before data collection took place. There was also room for questions if participants needed further clarification about the study. Researchers also have the ethical responsibility to ensure the confidentiality of the participants as well as their privacy and anonymity (Sanjari et al., 2014). Additionally, data interpretation may represent an ethical concern (Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2018).

Trustworthiness

It is essential to note that a crucial aspect of qualitative methodology and this study's theoretical framework is the researcher's relationship with the participants (Okkonen et al., 2021). Because power relations exist in research, Okkonen et al. (2021) suggested that the researcher and the participants form a relationship as "collaborative partners who share an understanding and try to minimize disparities of power" (p. 381). Building honest and respectful relationships, as well as the acknowledgment and ethical management of relationships in research, is of primary importance and at the heart of feminist research and EoC (Adhariani et al., 2017). The relationship between researchers and those being researched is thus "simultaneously epistemological and ethical...the quality of qualitative research is based on the quality of relations developed" (Gunzenhauser, 2006, p. 622). Therefore, the shift that happens from the researcher as the "knower" and the participants as the "known" is a continuous effort to balance one's own needs as the researcher with the needs of the participants (Okkonen et al., 2021, p. 382). The trustworthiness of a study's result is the anchor of high-quality qualitative research (Birt et al., 2016). Trustworthiness assesses the rigor of qualitative studies to become a "notable piece of evidence" (Forero et al., 2018, p. 9). The following section describes the qualitative methods of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability created by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to establish the trustworthiness of research.

Credibility

Credibility refers to establishing readers' confidence that a study's results are necessary, trustworthy, credible, and believable (Forero et al., 2018). Credibility can be established using various approaches, such as a member check in which respondents check for accuracy and resonance of the data analysis (Birt, 2016). Other credibility strategies include prolonged field

engagement, such as spending more time engaging with participants, journaling, and reflexivity (Forero et al., 2018). For the present study this researcher conducted a member check and kept a journal during data collection and analysis.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of the study can be extended to the broader population or transferred to other contexts or settings while maintaining the “content-specific richness” of the results (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 205). Transferability relies on the research consumer who wishes to apply the study findings to their context or setting (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Transferability to other contexts can be complex and requires careful consideration of the primary and target context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Therefore, a study's author can improve a study's likelihood of transferability by thoroughly describing the context of the study and assumptions that were critical to the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Some strategies include purposeful sampling techniques and data saturation (Forero et al., 2018).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the ability of the data and findings of a qualitative research study to stay consistent and reliable over time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In other words, the researcher needs to ensure that the findings of the qualitative research are repeatable by adequately tracking the specific methods used for data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Forero et al., 2018). Additionally, the researcher should provide the contextual factors of each so that the study could be replicated by others and generate similar results (Forero et al., 2018). For the present study, a detailed report and analysis has been written to support the methodology the study used.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which other researchers could confirm or corroborate the study results (Forero et al., 2018). With confirmability, the researcher aims to prove that the qualitative research is neutral and not influenced by the subjectivity and biases of the author (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). To remain transparent to the research consumers, the researcher needs to identify and disclose the decisions made throughout the research process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Some strategies to address the biases and prejudices that may affect data interpretation are reflexivity and triangulation (Forero et al., 2018).

Summary

The present qualitative narrative inquiry study used conducted using semi-structured interviews to explore the leadership and management challenges ECE directors faced as the leaders and managers of their programs. The research design and instrumentation were carefully analyzed to provide trustworthiness to the research consumers while considering ethical responsibilities to minimize harm to the participants. The size of the sample consisted of six participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom, recorded, transcribed, stored in a password-protected folder, and housed in an external flash drive. Once the semi-structured interviews were completed, the restoried narratives were sent back to the participants for review. Once the data was analyzed, this researcher interpreted the data. The author's analysis methods and presentation of results and findings are presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This qualitative narrative inquiry study aimed to explore and describe the lived experiences of early childhood education (ECE) directors regarding the leadership and management challenges they experience in their roles as leaders and managers of their ECE programs. The present study's emphasis lies in three primary areas: 1) academic and professional preparation for their leadership roles, 2) organizational leadership, and 3) business management and operations. The present study documented the narratives of six ECE directors in the Los Angeles County area of the State of California through semi-structured interviews and field notes. The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: How did Los Angeles County-based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors perceive program setting-related challenges as influencing their ability to effectively lead their organization?

Research Question 2: How did Los Angeles County-based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors describe the operational management tasks in the early childhood education setting?

Research Question 3: How did Los Angeles County-based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors describe their preparation for their leadership and management roles within their early childhood education organization?

Narrative inquiry was defined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) as a method of exploring and inquiring about lived experiences through the "collaboration between researcher and participants over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (p. 20). Narrative research is a unique form of qualitative research in which participants express their personal experiences by narrating their own stories in their distinct style to the researcher

during an interview (Scheffelaar et al., 2021). The researcher subsequently interprets the meaning of the interview through narrative analysis, thus creating a new interpretation of the story (Scheffelaar et al., 2021). Consequently, the research findings are a collaborative creation between the participant who shares their lived experiences and the researcher who analyzes and interprets them (Scheffelaar et al., 2021).

Narratives can be analyzed through various methods primarily within two main dimensions: 1) thematic versus holistic approaches and 2) content versus form (Lieblich et al., 1998). Polkinghorne (1995) described the first dimension as distinguishing "the analysis of narratives" and "narrative analysis." The analysis of narratives aims to derive overarching themes from a collection of narratives moving from individual stories to common elements (Lieblich et al., 1998). The second method of analysis involves holistic narrative analysis (Scheffelaar et al., 2021). Accounts of events and experiences are gathered and blended into a storyline where the participant's stories are collected as data to analyze the common themes that connect and give meaning to the data (Scheffelaar et al., 2021). In other words, while categorical content analysis divides the narratives into themes, the holistic method of analysis integrates the data into a comprehensive story (Etherington, 2002).

In holistic content analysis, the researcher analyzes the collected data and retells or restories the participants' narratives (Scheffelaar et al., 2021). Restorying is the process of compiling stories, analyzing them for central themes, and then constructing and revising each story chronologically (Scheffelaar et al., 2021). As stated in Chapter 3, the present study took a restorying approach to meaning-making involving creating a new story, adding meaning, and exploring the significance in the larger story (Kim, 2016). These components are organized and sequenced, and finally, a narrative that recounts the participants' experiences is told (Connelly &

Clandinin, 2006). According to Hargreaves (1996), every human voice deserves to be heard, particularly the voices of educators who can offer pragmatic perspectives that can shape policy direction. Positioning the unique voices of female ECE directors at the heart of this study proved to be an empowering experience for the participants by amplifying their voices and narrating stories that might have remained unheard otherwise. Thus, narrative analysis aligns with the ethics of care (EoC) theoretical framework that underpins this study, which emphasizes women using their voices (Langford & Richardson, 2020).

Analysis Methods

Participants were recruited through email (Appendix B) approved by the University of New England's Office of Research Integrity (Appendix A) and posted in a private Facebook group (2023) for ECE directors. This email included the participant information sheet (Appendix C). The email and the post asked the potential participants to self-identify by asking the following questions to determine if the participants fit the criteria of the study:

- 1) Age 18 or older
- 2) Identify as female
- 3) Completion of a high school diploma or GED and 15 child development units of ECE college courses, three of which are in administration or staff relations.
- 4) At least four years of teaching experience in a licensed ECE program.
- 5) Have less than 10 years of experience as an ECE director in full-day programs.
- 6) Must be from licensed single, independent, for-profit, center-based programs in California, specifically Los Angeles County.

There were no responses to the emails sent. All responses came from the Facebook post in the private group, which was reposted three times. The first six initial respondents who met

the criteria mentioned above were recruited. Response emails were sent out to schedule semi-structured interviews conducted over Zoom with each participant.

Interviews were conducted with each participant and ranged from 45 to 65 minutes in length. The participants were asked to share their stories about their leadership and management challenges as ECE directors. The interviews were scheduled within a week of each participant responding. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using the Zoom transcription feature. Once the interviews were transcribed, the interviews were restoried and organized based on the following three categories: educational and professional experience, leadership, and management. After the data was organized into these categories, it was then restoried into narratives adopting Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three dimensions of narrative writing which include time, place, and social interaction. The participants' information was written as a narrative that included direct quotes and paraphrasing of their stories.

To enhance the credibility of the data collected for the present study, the restoried narratives were sent via email to the participants so that they could review the narratives for accuracy and clarity. Each participant was given seven calendar days to member check their restoried narrative; none of the participants requested changes to their restoried narratives. As written in the Participant Information Sheet, the six restoried narratives were considered accurate if seven days passed without a response for changes. The data from the restoried narratives were then analyzed to identify themes and commonalities. There were two cycles of coding. The first coding cycle was done manually, and for the second cycle NVivo (Lumivvero, 2023), a coding software program, was used. Two main themes (leadership and management) were identified. All identifying information was deidentified when creating the narratives, and participants' identities were protected using pseudonyms.

Presentation of Results and Findings

A component of narrative investigation involves a researcher's recognition of patterns of themes that arise from the narratives the researcher has gathered. Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) stated, "In this process, researchers narrate the story and often identify themes or categories that emerge from the story. Thus, the qualitative data analysis may be both descriptions of the story and themes that emerge from it" (p. 332). From the narratives collected and analyzed, two main themes emerged: leadership and management. These main themes were divided into challenges and strategies. These themes are presented in the section below.

Table 1 below shows the participants' demographic profiles. The participants' stories are presented as follows. Each story is presented in three sections: academic and professional preparedness, leadership, and management. All participants in the present study were Latinas.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Profiles

Pseudonym	Age Range	Highest Educational Level	Years of Experience as Director	Program Size (licensed capacity)	Leadership and Administrative Support
Ava	32	MA Child Development	1 year	63	Assistant Director
Gina	39	MA Child Development	10 years	60	Assistant Director
Julie	48	PhD Education	10 years	67	Assistant Director
Jessica	45	MA Child Development	10 years	55	Assistant Director

Table 1 (continued)*Participants' Demographic Profiles*

Pseudonym	Age Range	Highest Educational Level	Years of Experience as Director	Program Size (licensed capacity)	Leadership and Administrative Support
Paula	26	BA Communication + 30 Child	2 years	172	Co-Director + Administrator
Marie	28	Development Units AA Child Development	6 years	175	Assistant Director

Ava

Ava was in her early 30s and held a master's degree in child development. She had been a director for one year. Ava was a preschool teacher for two years before being promoted to director. In addition to being the program's director, she taught child development courses at the college level. Ava shared her professional journey including the challenges and joys of the profession.

Leadership Challenges and Strategies

Ava shared her educational and professional journey as an ECE director. She began her ECE career as a teacher. She taught for two years in toddler and preschool classrooms. Ava's decision to become a director was driven by her observation of a need in the field. She stated, "I saw the need, to be honest with you...I saw the need for more passionate early childhood educators in the field." According to Ava, becoming an ECE educator requires much work, which is not acknowledged by others. Ava said:

So many people think [ECE] it's an easy field, and it's not...once you step into the classroom, and you face all the challenges you encounter. And with the students with behavior problems and dealing with parents, you know, there's [*sic*] just so many things that go on.

Ava wanted to become a director to gain experience in the field. Ava identified her future career goal as becoming a full-time community college instructor.

Ava also shared her educational preparation for her current position. She decided to attend graduate school in preparation for working with older students. Ava originally did not plan to become an ECE educator and noted that "I was looking more to work with like high school students, and above, and more like college students." Ava thought she was prepared for the director role but realized that her educational and professional preparation lacked the leadership and management skills needed for such a role. Ava said, "I wish I could have been a little bit more prepared. I feel like there's just so many things that I wish I could have known, first of all, just a little background." Ava added that she needed to gain leadership or business knowledge before becoming the director of her ECE program. The training required by the State of California did not prepare Ava for the duties of her position. To this point, Ava stated:

So, it was like, more like a basic, like overview, very basic, overview. Yeah. Like how to plan, do teachers' scheduling, and all that. They did talk a little bit more about budgeting, but not in depth. Nothing that has to do with business management.

Ava wished she would have been better prepared academically and that she should have received more support as a child development student. Ava said, "I should have taken more courses in early childhood. You know, just the lack of resources and information you get as a student, so I

wish I could have been a little bit more prepared." Overall, Ava felt academically unprepared for the director's role.

Ava started the director's position a year ago. The previous director, Ava's mentor, promoted her to this position. Ava shared, "The previous director, who was also like my mentor. She kind of guided me with this opportunity...." However, her love for the field of ECE made her accept the director's position. Ava said, "I love the field. So, I decided, you know what, I got this opportunity. I'm going to do it and learn from it." Ava shared that becoming a director has had its ups and downs. In her first year, many challenges presented themselves, ranging from children's concerns to a lack of support from the owner of the ECE program. Eva explained that it had not been an easy journey. Eva said:

I think our first year of experience is always the most challenging one. Once you step into the classroom, and you face all the challenges that you encounter... with the students' different behavior problems and dealing with the parents, you know, there's just so many things that go on. The school [graduate school] doesn't really prep you...when it comes to school allegations or between parents.

Ava mentioned the emotional roller coaster that comes with the director's position, especially in the first year. This sentiment is encapsulated in her quote that "The school doesn't really prep you about the emotional roller coaster that can go on your first year." Additionally, Ava highlighted how graduate school does not prepare one for managing complex interactions between parents, students, and teachers. Ava noted "The preparation when it comes to school allegations or between parents is lacking."

Ava identified her strategies of resilience and self-discovery to combat the lack of preparation for her leadership role. Despite the challenges, Ava adapted and learned as she went

along, demonstrating a resilient spirit. She stated, "You just, you just get accustomed to it as time goes by." Her narrative portrayed her evolving understanding of leadership, with learning from experience becoming a central theme. Ava said that to mitigate the emotional challenges associated with her position, she took self-care seriously. Ava mentioned, "But your mindset and your health is what is important, you know." She mentioned how she had to remind herself not to be overwhelmed and stress herself out in her initial days and emphasized the importance of maintaining good mental health in her leadership role.

Ava also highlighted the need for more mentoring and emotional support for directors, citing her first year in the role as being a particularly challenging period. Ava added that ECE directors need more support and mentoring, especially when one is new in a leadership role. Ava mentioned in the interview that "...mentoring programs, and right mentors are not accessible to everyone." Ava identified the lack of mentorship as a significant challenge, citing the inaccessibility of appropriate mentors for directors. She emphasized, "I think directors really need mentoring programs." Guidance from mentors and other directors with much more experience is necessary for the success of novice directors (Doan, 2016). Ava's sentiments underscored the gap in the system where directors, who are expected to mentor others such as teachers, also need mentorship and support. Furthermore, Ava's sentiments also spoke to the complexities and emotional tolls of leadership in the ECE field that may often be underestimated. To mitigate the lack of available mentorship, Ava relied on her network of friends who had been directors before, signifying the importance of emotional support from peers in similar positions.

Ava also discussed organizational leadership challenges. She stated that overall, the organizational leadership challenges were associated with private preschool settings. The

narrative brings forth the unique difficulties associated with private ECE settings. With limited resources, Ava pointed out that there is often inadequate support and resources, especially when compared to public settings. Ava said, "The resources for the center are very limited compared to like probably Head Start or public education." This reality illustrates an ongoing challenge private ECE programs face and the need for a more equitable allocation of resources. Ava did what she had to do to keep a positive organizational climate and culture. For example, Ava strongly emphasized supporting and mentoring her teachers. Ava hosted monthly meetings dedicated to helping teachers complete their state permits in ECE. She said, "I encourage my teachers to grow professionally." Her leadership emphasized continual learning and professional growth, which, according to Ava, can positively impact job satisfaction and performance among staff. Overall, Ava felt a positive organizational climate and culture starts with her. She talked about being consistent, communicating with her staff, acknowledging their efforts, and even treating them to little gestures such as snacks or an extra ten-minute break to keep the morale high.

Ava also touched on organizational change as it relates to the ECE program she led. She highlighted the structural shifts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring the difficulties encountered and the need for adaptability during that period. Such challenges included wearing masks, sanitizing, a reduced teacher-child ratio, and social distance. Ava stated, "How do you try to explain to children to maintain social distance, right? Like it is impossible...and sometimes they want to hug you, give a high five, you know." Ava relied on a clear communication and consistency strategy among her teachers and parents.

Management Challenges and Strategies

As an ECE director, Ava was responsible for the management of the operations of the program. Despite her lack of a formal business education, Ava was responsible for the financial aspects and the general management of the ECE program. She noted, "I'm in full control; it's my responsibility that everything's running smoothly." She described being involved in budgeting, ensuring the tuition is collected, and ensuring that teachers are paid on time, among other responsibilities. She noted, "You have to make sure every penny is accounted for." Ava expressed that one of the most significant management challenges in her role was handling finances and budgeting, precisely because she lacked formal business education, which was a significant challenge for her. She felt inadequately equipped in some areas, particularly her lack of proficiency in Excel. She commented, "If I knew a little bit more about Excel and those shortcuts...my life would be easier." Her lack of business education and training also manifested as a struggle with the financial aspects of her job. Ava explained, "If you're going so much into child development because it's so general, right? We don't focus so much on detail until when it comes to finances, budgeting, etc."

Another challenge is balancing her administrative duties and her love for being in the classroom. Ava acknowledged that she missed being in the classroom. She admitted that "it was kind of hard for me to be always in the office" and that she had to train herself to pull away from classroom activities to focus on her managerial role. To cope with her tasks, Ava employed various tools and strategies to manage her time and tasks efficiently, such as using a daily schedule, setting daily goals, and relying on her phone's calendar and reminders. She explained, "I have my top three priorities of what to do and what I need to get done for the day. If I do not get it done, it is okay. I might move those things for tomorrow." The management responsibilities of an ECE director are time-consuming, which represented a challenge for Ava.

Ava used tools such as Google Calendar, sticky notes, and her phone reminder system to organize her work. She highlighted the importance of setting daily goals, which she believed aids time management. Additionally, Ava explained how her position brought a degree of satisfaction when she completed tasks, especially those related to finance. Ava also found joy in helping teachers, expressing that once the financial tasks are completed, "I am more at ease, and I'm able to help teachers whenever they need a little bit more help."

Ava also addressed the challenge of human resources, explicitly hiring, training, and retaining teachers. In her role as a human resource manager, Ava acknowledged the difficulties she faced. In particular, she noted the lack of fair salaries for teachers as a significant challenge. Moreover, Ava admitted that she needed to prepare for the business management aspect of her role when she initially took on the director job. She embraced a learning attitude and was unafraid to ask questions and seek help. She noted that having a qualified team is essential but suggested that retaining teachers means more than just ensuring they have the appropriate qualifications. To Ava, it was vital to create a supportive environment by showing empathy towards her staff and understanding their situations. Ava maintained a positive work environment to retain her staff, which she considered one of her greatest satisfactions in her role. Ava emphasized open communication, respect, and empathy. She believed in humanizing herself to her team and encouraged an open-door policy that allowed her to be approachable. She noted, "Oh, I [pretending to be a teacher] can go to the director and talk to her if I'm feeling down, if I need a five-minute break, or if I am having trouble." Ava's openness was further highlighted in her response to the question about her preparation for being a human resource manager. She confessed to a lack of readiness but emphasized her willingness to learn, grow, and constantly

improve by saying, "I didn't feel ready. I absolutely didn't feel ready...and I feel like that's the same thing that's happening to me right now, like under your first year. It's, it's a trial and error."

Ava's narrative revealed that one of the significant challenges in her director's role is the need for more communication with the center's owner, particularly regarding budgeting and resource allocation. She underscored the necessity of clear expectations and finding solutions to challenging circumstances. Ava noted, "Because the owner is not present here with us at the school, communication with him has been the most challenging for me." She was able to find creative solutions, showcasing the importance of community involvement, resourcefulness, and initiative in leadership. She shared that she reaches out to the community for help.

As a business manager of the ECE program, Ava was also responsible for the physical facilities of the center. She acknowledged the challenges associated with maintaining the physical facilities of the center. These challenges were due to the center's age and high repair needs. She stated, "The school is very old, so I have to be fully aware of the maintenance needs of the center." Another challenge is the limited financial resources of the center in relation to what Ava described as "addressing repairs and renovations within the constraints of our budget." As a strategy for the limited financial resources, Ava reached out to the community for volunteers and donations. Ava stated, "Nonprofit organizations are willing to donate things to the school. I use my network and connections to obtain resources for the center." She used community resources to meet these challenges, displaying resourcefulness and resilience. To ensure the health and safety of the center, Ava performed a walk-through of the center and has trained her teachers to do the same in their classrooms and play yards. Ava's number one priority was the health and safety of children and staff.

Summarizing Ava's Narrative

In summary, Ava presented herself as a director motivated by what she perceived as being a need for passionate ECE educators. Her leadership style emphasized traits such as delegation, mentorship, and fostering a collaborative environment. However, she noted significant challenges in her role mainly stemming from her teachers' need for more mentoring and support for directors in the field. Despite these challenges, Ava remained committed to her teachers and had clear aspirations for her career. Additionally, as the business manager of her center, Ava carried out numerous responsibilities and faced challenges mostly around financial management and juggling her roles. She used personal organization tools and empathy-driven management to succeed in her role. Her narrative provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of individuals in similar roles.

Gina

Gina was in her mid-30s and held a master's degree in child development. She had been a director for 10 years. Gina was a preschool teacher for four years before being promoted to director. Gina planned to open her own center.

Leadership Challenges and Strategies

Gina shared her educational and professional journey as an ECE director. She began her ECE career as a teacher in a three-year-old classroom; she then moved to teach two- and four-year-olds. She mentioned in the interview that toddlers are her favorite age group to teach. The opportunity for Gina to become a director came from the center's owner. She stated, "the owner of the business, she just wanted to retire, and so I was a teacher there, and she offered the position." Gina knew it was time for her to advance professionally and become a director. She wanted a position that granted her more power to decide what happens in the center. To that point, she stated:

I knew that if I wanted to implement more of the ideas, I had to make the center better; I had to move up to being a director. That was one of the top reasons why I wanted to become a director, just so that I could implement all the ideas and values that I had at that time.

Gina added that she felt she had made the center better regarding ECE best practices such as fostering respectful relationships between adults and children, developmentally appropriate practices, engaging in ethical conduct, and relationships with parents and the community.

Gina also shared her educational preparation for her current position. Gina stated that she always wanted to be in the ECE field. She started taking child development classes while in high school. By the time she graduated from high school, she had the child development units required to become an ECE teacher in California. She then received her bachelor's in early childhood education and a master's degree in child development. She decided to attend graduate school to further her knowledge of child development and to support the children she serves most effectively.

Gina believed she was prepared to lead the center but needed to think about the leadership and management role she had to perform. Gina was focused more on the pedagogical leadership role that is part of being a director and did not place too much thought on the leadership and management responsibilities that came with the position. Gina stated, "I thought I was definitely qualified. You know I had sufficient experience in the classroom." When discussing leadership and management preparation and training, Gina said, "No, I didn't take any classes (leadership and business management) of that sort. It was mainly theory about the whole child." Gina thought she was prepared for the director role but realized that her educational and

professional preparation lacked the leadership and management training needed for such a role, especially regarding human resources and financial management.

Gina's narrative revealed several leadership challenges she encountered as the leader of her center. The first significant leadership challenge Gina experienced was a lack of resources and support, both of which become particularly critical during a time of need. Gina stated:

When an issue arises, I think that's where I definitely find barriers, or I feel, for lack of a better term, just stuck on something that I would like to do, such as professional development or meetings, but I can't because there is no funding compared to maybe public schools that might have greater funds to implement what you want.

This quote reflects the challenge of limited financial resources and its impact on decision-making. She explained that for her to send her staff members to professional development trainings, she must pay the teacher and the substitute. Gina also explained that substitute costs are expensive. Based on the data collected in this study, the financial limitations are more of a systematic rather than an individual challenge. Data indicated that the structures and nature of private ECE programs may not allow for the same level of flexibility and funding that public schools have when it comes to staff development and meetings.

Another leadership challenge Gina had faced related to leadership was organizational change leadership. For example, navigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was incredibly challenging for Gina. She noted that this situation significantly disrupted her center's operations by stating, "COVID-19, and dealing just again with everything that brought down, specifically our center. The safety precautions we had to adhere to really, really impacted everything we do." Gina added that the pandemic exacerbated the existing financial struggles by reducing the center's enrollment due to safety concerns and regulations.

Throughout the pandemic, Gina emphasized the importance of frequent communication with staff and parents. She stated:

Just communicating all those steps that we were taking to make sure that their kids were going to be as safe as possible. And I think just communication with enrolled families really helped. It just gave them a sense of like, okay, they are doing the best they can to keep everyone safe.

This quote reflects the strategy of clear, open communication and transparency to foster trust and a sense of security among parents and staff.

Another organizational leadership challenge mentioned by Gina had to do with maintaining a positive organizational climate. Gina mentioned the need for more time for continuous staff communication as being a significant obstacle to maintaining a positive environment. Gina explained that she had little time for staff feedback, which she considered vital for fostering a positive climate. Another challenge Gina described was related to time constraints. Gina also expressed that the time pressure in a busy working environment contributes to difficulties in actively fostering a positive climate by noting that "You [the center director] don't have time to clear misunderstandings." Gina emphasized that the need for more time for staff communication was affecting the center's organizational climate. A third leadership challenge for Gina was personnel management. Gina believed this to be more of a personal challenge in her role as a leader. She shared, "I think I've always struggled in terms of managing personnel...I really dislike just like confronting, you know, employees and staff about something that needs to get addressed." This speaks to the interpersonal dynamics of leadership that Gina found particularly difficult.

Despite these challenges, Gina also described several strategies to foster a positive organizational climate. Gina tried to foster a positive environment by engaging in small gestures of appreciation. She hoped these gestures would help staff members feel valued and comfortable. Gina said, "Yeah, as much as I can, I try to do little things right. I hope that makes them feel, you know, appreciated." One practical expression of these small gestures is the provision of snacks for staff during their break times. Gina said, "You know, I try to make sure that I get something for them like snacks, so that at least, you know, when they have their break in the break room, they have something to eat." Another strategy Gina used to create a positive climate is recognizing staff members' birthdays with a day off and a gift card. Gina said, "When there it's their birthday, they get the day off, but we also give them like a gift card." Gina strived to overcome the previously mentioned challenges by implementing small acts of appreciation and recognition to show her staff they are valued.

Regarding organizational culture, Gina appreciated the diversity within the center. Gina attributed the center's diversity to its location in Los Angeles. She had not encountered significant barriers to creating a positive organizational culture. The diverse community enabled Gina's center to enroll families from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, which aligned with the center's values.

Management Challenges and Strategies

Gina stated that her financial responsibilities at the center included budgeting, keeping track of tuition, and paying all the center's bills. Gina shared that she did not learn about business management in school, so working with the center's finances required a learning curve at the beginning of her career as the director. Over time, she came to understand the fiscal complexities of her position. This was marked by her acknowledgment of her limited business acumen. Gina

said, "I wasn't knowledgeable about [financial management of a business], you know, that's not something I feel like I excel at either." This realization led her to describe her initial steps in the role as "going into it blindfolded," indicating a sense of being unprepared and uncertain about business management. When asked about budgeting, Gina explained that while she had a role in managing the budget, she did not set it. Gina noted:

I have the owner give me like a template for that particular month, and more or less what we would like to spend on. This is our budget, and I go over it. But I don't like to set or do the budget.

She emphasized that collecting tuition was time-consuming. She stated, "Just like making sure that all tuition is paid...give reminders to certain parents. I think just that takes a lot of time at the beginning of the month." As a strategy to save time, Gina started using tuition collection software.

Gina also mentioned that the most significant challenge in managing her ECE program from a financial perspective was the need for more financial resources and funding because it affects the entire program, from the director to the teachers to the children. Gina stated, "It not only affects the teachers and director, but the children as well because they are not receiving the education or experiences that we would want to provide for them." Gina added that the economic situation in the United States at the time this study was being conducted made the center's financial situation more complex. Gina noted, "Now, you know, I feel like it's even worse because, you know, everything has gone up here in LA, with inflation. Everything is so expensive now, but the center's budget is still the same as before inflation." This financial situation was indicative of how the center's static budget was being stretched by a rising cost environment, which was in turn negatively impacting the center's financial capabilities.

Despite these challenges, Gina highlighted strategies she had adopted to keep the center financially viable. The most notable strategies Gina highlighted were community engagement and fundraising activities. She recalled, "We do community volunteer days, and so like, through our social media account, we invited the community to come out and volunteer to the center to work on our edible garden. Also, we got a lot of donations that way." These strategies showed Gina's resourcefulness and her efforts to leverage community support to manage the center's financial constraints. Another strategy shared by Gina was fundraising with the community and the parents. Gina noted, "The parents are really, really helpful with fundraising." Gina added that her center also got donations from community ECE agencies.

In terms of human resources management, Gina outlined several difficulties. First, the most challenging tasks she encounters relate to addressing issues with staff members, especially those about job performance. Hiring had become more complex over recent years as fewer individuals were interested in ECE teaching roles. Gina noted, "I feel like in the last few years, they have been even more difficult to even find people that want to teach, that want to work with children. It's been super difficult." Gina described how the lower salaries paid to employees in private ECE programs compared to the higher salaries paid to employees in public ECE programs exacerbated hiring challenges. Gina said, "Private preschool usually tend to pay less than, than in public." Gina said that retaining staff was also difficult due to her center's inability to offer competitive pay or benefits over time:

Not being able to pay staff what they should be earning as teachers has been difficult, which affects the retention of teachers...after a while, they might be happy, but if they are not getting a raise every year, and they don't have benefits, so they start thinking about leaving.

Lastly, Gina said that her program offered reactive rather than preventive training due to cost considerations.

Gina also identified her ongoing learning process in managing her team and communication. She conceded that understanding each team member's communication style had been challenging. She noted, "Learning how to communicate with each one of them [staff] because each one of them is different. So, I think for me, just learning, that took me a long time, and even now, I'm still learning from that." Gina reiterated that she preferred aspects of her job not associated with personnel management.

Gina had taken several steps in response to these challenges. For instance, she provided staff with educational resources like articles and presentations outside of formal training contexts to circumvent budgetary constraints. Additionally, she sought advice and mentoring from an external ECE coach offered by a non-profit community ECE organization. Gina's described how her coach helped her navigate challenges with a new perspective.

Regarding daily administrative tasks, Gina emphasized that financial management and supervision of teachers take a lot of her time. Gina's primary strategy for handling the vast array of tasks as a director involved structured organization and reminders. She utilized to-do lists to prioritize her tasks for the day and week. Furthermore, she used digital reminders on her computer and phone to keep track of these tasks. Gina emphasized the importance of learning to manage her time as a director.

As a director of her ECE program, Gina also managed the center's physical facilities. The primary challenge Gina described related to the older infrastructure of the building which constantly required repairs. As Gina mentioned, "It just seems like every month [there is] something we need to repair, or, you know, take care of." The lack of support from the property

owner and the center's owner complicated the situation. When discussing the impact of these challenges on their program, Gina shared an incident where her center faced flooding issues in its restrooms. The incident disrupted the center's routine and strained the staff as they figured out a solution without support from the property owner or the center's owner. Gina said, "It was a challenge for me because I had to, like, figure out how we were going to take care of this." Gina added that the center's heating and air conditioning were also old and required constant maintenance. Further complicating this challenge was the lack of support from both the center's owner and the landlord. Additionally, the state of the building directly impacted the daily operations of the center, causing disruptions in various areas of the center.

In response to these challenges, Gina attempted to open dialogues with the center's owner and property owner to secure funding for necessary repairs. However, she noted that this had largely been ineffective as it frequently resulted in a cyclical pattern of non-responsiveness and lack of action from the landlord. Gina detailed her efforts by stating:

I've had conversations with, with my boss, and you know him, he's very like receptive to like, okay, we're, you know. We're going to take care of this. I'm going to talk to, for example, the owners of the building, but it's always like a cycle because then the owners of the buildings come back with, like, no, we're not going to do anything. We're not going to pay for anything...

To mitigate the issues and maintain the center's operations, Gina had to personally handle the problem by finding and implementing solutions, often involving research on her own time and manual labor. She illustrated this with the example of the flooding problem, where she found herself seeking help from a hardware store and researching solutions online due to lack of support from the owners. She said:

You know I had to like to end up, you know, cleaning it...going to Home Depot and trying to find out like how I can like, you know. See where this flood was coming from because I wasn't getting any support. It's always like me trying to, you know, just go on the Internet, and see, like, okay, what is it that it's needed to solve this problem?

To ensure the health and safety of the physical facilities and classroom environments, Gina and her team developed a daily checklist system. Gina detailed how the center's opening staff go through a list of safety checks before opening the center, such as checking heaters and locks and ensuring no potential hazards are present. The closing staff also follow a similar process at the end of the day. Gina explained the procedure as:

We have a like checklist of things that we need to check before the center is open...we definitely have like a checklist of things that need to be checked for safety or any, you know, any has hazard potential. And so that's something we do daily, and that's something that our opening staff does. And then also our closing staff does at the end of the day.

This practice ensures staff keep the environment conducive to high-quality education, despite the ongoing maintenance issues.

Summarizing Gina's Narrative

In summary, Gina's narrative provided a vivid account of the realities of leading an ECE program. Gina's narrative outlined the challenges she encountered and the strategies she used to overcome them. Gina's leadership challenges stemmed primarily from financial limitations and communication gaps. Gina's narrative underscores the need for more support and resources in private ECE programs. Her strategies were focused on fostering a positive organizational climate through personal touches and employee rewards.

In this narrative, Gina shared her journey of personal and professional growth in managing the financial, human resources, and physical facilities responsibilities of her role as a director. Despite initially feeling unprepared for being in business management, Gina showed resilience and adaptability by actively seeking solutions to her challenges. Furthermore, this narrative vividly depicts the financial, human resources, and facilities management struggles and innovative strategies involved in leading and managing an ECE program.

Julie

Julie had been a director for 10 years. She held a Ph.D. in education with an emphasis in ECE and a master's degree in school administration. She had been an ECE teacher, supervisor, and had taught child development courses at the college level. Julie shared that she was going to be transitioning to a consultant position with a national ECE company. She felt ready to advance professionally.

Leadership Challenges and Strategies

Julie shared her journey as the leader of her ECE program. Julie's journey included many joys, accomplishments, and challenges. Julie was motivated to become a director due to her passion for working with children. Her desire was to positively impact children during their formative years. Julie stated, "Working with [children] in the child development field had always been a passion of mine."

In terms of leadership style, Julie characterized herself primarily as a mentor. She learned from her own mentors and strove to provide similar guidance to her staff. She stated, "My role, I think, it's...one of mentorship." She saw herself as someone who supported and guided her staff to feel confident and secure in their roles to develop professionally. Julie said, "I'm very

transparent with them. I'm pretty much guiding them." However, Julie acknowledged challenges in her position, including staff retention and funding.

Julie mentioned that staff retention was one of her main leadership challenges as a director. She linked this issue to funding problems, as she could not provide her staff with the level of monetary incentives, bonuses, or pay they deserved. She stated, "...funding is a huge issue, being able to provide our staff with what they deserve, as far as just an incentive or a bonus, or just giving them a little more pay." Because of this, she struggled to retain quality teachers, as they often found better opportunities elsewhere. To this point, Julie stated, "Pay has been the greatest challenge because as much as I would want to retain our great teachers, sometimes they find other places, or even other fields they want to go into." Julie emphasized that staff retention due to unfair salaries had been her greatest leadership challenge.

Another barrier in her leadership role as a director was ensuring effective training for the staff. According to Julie, "I would love to send them to conferences, or these training or workshops, but it's always...costly." Despite the importance of these experiences for staff growth, the expenses often prohibited Julie from sending her staff to such events. To combat this, Julie sought free or low-cost training opportunities for her team to help them continue to grow and learn. She adopted a "pusher" role, encouraging her staff to further their education and broaden their horizons. Julie shared:

I will go above and beyond for my staff to find resources for them just because I want them to be better and to learn more. But if we had, you know, if had programs that were actually free and, and or less expensive, that would be great!

Her goal was to ensure that her staff could continue to learn and improve despite financial limitations.

Julie also shared that she did not face any challenges regarding organizational climate and culture. Julie fostered a diverse, fun, and inclusive environment in her center. She placed importance on understanding and respecting cultural differences and fostering an environment of mutual learning. One strategy Julie introduced was called the “Star Coordinator.” This role encouraged one of the teachers to act as the center’s cheerleader, organizing fun activities and events for staff in and out of the center. These activities aimed to strengthen relationships and understanding among staff and acknowledged the importance of personality and cultural dynamics in the workplace. In terms of organizational culture, Julie stated that since she was the founding director of the center, she had been able to create a positive organizational culture since the center opened ten years ago.

Julie also discussed the difficulties she faced during recent times of organizational change. She emphasized how changes in the center owner’s management and funding model had adverse effects on the teaching staff. This is illustrated in the following statement:

Our janitorial services were taken away completely where our teachers now had to clean and throw away the trash and make sure that we still keep very nice and clean and sanitized school. And so that became a huge challenge.

She mentioned the decision’s negative impact on staff morale and the increased workload the budget cuts resulted in. To address the issue of janitorial services being taken away, Julie, her assistant, and their cook took it upon themselves to take care of the cleaning. By doing so, they aimed to alleviate the additional responsibilities placed on the teachers, showing a hands-on approach to problem-solving and demonstrating leadership.

Other organizational leadership strategies Julie shared involved personal investment. Julie often used her personal funds to provide extras for teachers to keep them motivated.

Although this strategy was specific to Julie's context and personal capacity, it demonstrated her commitment to the organization and staff feeling positive and encouraged. Julie believed in maintaining a supportive organizational climate. She often walked around the classroom to greet the teachers and let them know that she is there for support. This strategy of staying positive and supportive helped to keep morale high, even in challenging times. Similarly, Julie believed in communication and recognition. Julie emphasized the importance of clear communication and recognition for her staff. She described how she made it a point to let staff know they are valued and appreciated for their hard work. This strategy helped to build a cohesive and loyal team who felt seen and appreciated. Finally, Julie believed in proactive engagement. Julie believed in being proactive with her staff, addressing issues as soon as they arose, and being physically present and available. She found this hands-on approach strengthened the bond between the staff and the administration and fostered a collaborative work environment.

Management Challenges and Strategies

The following dialogue provides a look at the role, tasks, responsibilities, challenges faced by Julie as the business manager of her ECE program. Specifically, Julie shared her experience in the business areas of financial management, human resources management, and facilities management. She also presented the business management strategies she employed. Her narrative shed light on her functions, the complexities of her job, and the strategies she used to manage her work efficiently.

One of Julie's key responsibilities as a business manager involved maintaining her center's enrollment number. Julie highlighted marketing as being an important aspect in her role. To this point, she mentioned, "I have to maintain our enrollment, so marketing it's, it's one of the functions I have to kind of constantly be doing." As part of being the financial manager of

the program, Julie said, “It’s just maintaining those numbers, maintaining the flow of the financial part of it, and then, of course, the marketing part.” Additionally, Julie was responsible for the hiring, qualification, and verification of staff, as well as the management of numerous reports and paperwork required by her employer. She stated, “I also do a little bit of HR [human resources] in the sense that I have to make sure that I’m hiring my staff, and making sure that they have the appropriate educational background.”

Regarding the business management challenges, Julie expressed those issues with funding and the difficulty in finding quality teachers due to budget constraints resulted in challenges. Julie noted, “Finding quality teachers has been that other challenge just because what we pay our teachers is not what they are looking for...that’s been the challenge, the one or the most challenging things that I’ve been [experiencing].” Due to financial constraints, which directly impacts hiring and retention of staff, Julie stated retention becomes challenging. According to Julie, potential employees are transparent about their salary expectations, but often the center cannot meet them. This leads to many candidates rejecting job offers. Julie said, “When it comes to that, you know, I do let them know what the [salary] looks like, and where they would stand, and for the most part, they’ll say no. They are not interested.” Julie acknowledged that salary was a significant reason for staff departures, saying “It really all comes down to the to the salary.” Even when teachers are hired and trained, retention was a problem for Julie’s center due to staff either finding better paying opportunities or leaving to pursue their education. Julie shared, “But if they leave it’s really because either they found something where they are going to get more money, or again, it’s just because they’re going back to school.”

To mitigate these challenges, Julie said she attempted to create a positive working environment with various activities and occasional gifts. Additionally, she allowed former

employees who may have left for school or better opportunities to return to work during summers or holidays. Julie noted that “I always tell them if you ever want to come back after, or you know you feel that you want to make some hours like during the summer. You’re more than welcome to come back.” Furthermore, Julie tried to make her staff feel special by organizing Teacher Appreciation Week with the help from families of the children. She also offered benefits like letting staff go home early during holidays or organizing activities like scavenger hunts or Easter egg hunts with small rewards. Julie shared, “We’ll do like scavenger hunts. We’ll have like a ‘have a free day [from work]’, or I’ve done like for Easter. I’ll do Easter egg hunt with surprises inside like a free t-shirt, or you get a free meal.” According to Julie, these activities aim to improve staff morale and create a positive work environment.

Other challenges faced by Julie involved financial management of her program. Julie shared her experience stepping into a director role, specifically concerning financial management. She shared the challenges she faced at the beginning of her career and the strategies she employed to navigate these barriers. Julie noted that she felt unprepared for the financial aspects of her role as director when she first started. She said, “I don’t think I got any type of training to be honest when it came down to the financials or the operation of that part. I think it was more of learning, while, like, as I went.” This quote emphasizes that the training was not in place to help Julie understand how to manage the finances of the organization. Despite not receiving any formal training, Julie managed to learn the financial part of her job over time. She stated, “So now I’m able to kind of read the reports without even actually being trained on, because I’m a little more, I have more knowledge, and I, I’m more exposed to it.” She primarily learned on the job through experience, saying “It was more learning, while like as I went through the days or through the months, and through the years now.” She also had to rely on her initiative

to understand complex reports and fiscal requirement. Julie described how she had to ask “What do you mean by my report? And, and what is the overall budget that I’m looking for? I had to figure it on my own.” Over time, Julie’s self-reliance and continual learning helped her develop confidence in her financial management skills. She said she now feels comfortable with her role and the associated responsibilities. Julie said, “I feel now very comfortable just receiving any type of report that would be sent to me at this moment.” Her journey toward self-education shows her determination to succeed in her role.

Julie also talked about how the center’s budget does not seem to consider the difference in costs in the current economy, suggesting that the center’s owners might not understand how much more expensive some things are. Julie said, “I mean, sometimes just buying a bottle of paint, it’s like \$60.00, so how much can I really buy with \$200.00 [for the center’s art material for 65 children] a month for my staff?” Julie also shared the difficulties she faces when trying to provide merit increases for her staff given the limited budget she has to work with. This highlights the challenge she experiences in maintaining staff morale and motivation. As she explained, “so those are the challenges, because at this point, I’m, I’m trying to divide everybody equally. And I mean, 10 dollars with 16 teachers is not even a dollar per person.” This quote underlines the difficulty Julie has faced in providing meaningful raises within an extremely limited budget. Her narrative also brings out the emotional labor that comes with her management role. For example, Julie mentioned that she must communicate the disappointing news of minimal salary increases to her staff, a task she described as one of the “hard conversations.” This underlines the emotional demands of her job, which often go unacknowledged by others such as the owners of the center, parents, and other stakeholders.

Despite these challenges, Julie adopted various strategies to cope. She used her own money to supplement the budget and encourages her staff to pursue further education as a pathway to earning a higher salary. Julie said she tells staff, “Get an AA degree because they do get an increase when they get their AAs or the BAs, so I’ll push them to get that going, so that they are aware that they will get another increase when they do that.” Moreover, Julie shared her fundraising efforts such as selling candles to parents and holding parents’ night out. The profit from fundraising events goes directly to the teachers as financial incentives. Her approach to finding solutions indicates resourcefulness and a commitment to supporting her staff.

Additionally, the rigorous and exhaustive paperwork and reporting also poses a challenge, as both consume significant amounts of time. Julie stated, “Our, our company is huge in reports, and, and they are very, they do micromanage.” To mitigate such challenges, Julie employed several strategies for managing routine tasks, focusing on communication and consistency. She said, “Consistency...I mean honestly that’s what’s helped, the consistency of the, the routine.” She also described how she relied heavily on traditional tools like paper-based memos and desk calendars, saying “I actually have it on my desk, everything is written in paper form. I’m still old-fashioned in that way.” To manage her time and tasks, Julie used to-do lists, which she felt give her a sense of accomplishment when crossing out completed tasks. She shared, “To-do list is my thing, and it’s just because it helps me feel accomplished every time, I cross a task out from there.” Other strategies Julie used included a whiteboard for reminders and memos given to teachers daily. Julie said, “I do have a morning memo that I post every morning where teachers will know of any changes that might be happening for the week.”

Julie mentioned that her job satisfaction was directly related to the welfare of her staff and children. “My satisfaction is just getting the day through, seeing that my kids were safe for

the day...and then my staff leads with a smile every, every day when they're, when they are going home" she revealed. However, the narrative also shows the sacrifices Julie makes to ensure everything runs smoothly, including long hours, sometimes staying at work until nine or 10 at night and working weekends:

I think maybe just the long hours...I mean, sometimes I do stay there after closing hour for about two or three hours...that and the fact that it's even on the weekend. Sometimes, I have to, to work and get things done just so that everything else kind of falls into place.

Julie's commitment to child safety and staff satisfaction was clear and provides an insight into her motivation and values as a business manager. Julie also discussed the challenges and strategies related to the physical management of her center. Maintaining the physical facilities, which Julie noted includes the health and safety of the children and staff, are part of her responsibilities as the manager of her ECE program. A significant challenge Julie pointed out was the company's decision to cut back on certain services due to financial issues, including the janitorial services. Julie said, "Unfortunately, we've had those dead ends where they [owners] just say that right now they're going through a financial situation, and they need to cut back on certain things." Julie described the difficulty maintaining cleanliness in the facility, particularly in the classrooms where children eat. She emphasized the need for frequent cleaning to keep the center's environment safe and healthy. The absence of a professional cleaning company compounded the challenge by leaving the responsibility of maintaining cleanliness to Julie, her assistant, and the cook. Julie said, "It's been just these last five months. It's been a challenge of not having the cleaning crew... school just gets dirty...our children eat in most of the classrooms, and it needs to be maintained."

As part of her efforts to ensure a high-quality educational environment, Julie ensured the health and safety of the children and staff by implementing strict sanitation practices. This included hand washing and sanitizing stations and a three-process cleaning spray. Julie said, “We wanted to make sure all of our children, everybody that steps in the school that they’re always washing their hands...we do keep it very clean...we have a three-process cleaning spray.” Furthermore, Julie and her teaching team have implemented strict illness policies, requiring sick children to stay home until they meet certain criteria and provide doctor’s notes. Julie said, “Our children if they are sick, we have them stay home. We do have policies implemented where there’s [sic] certain criteria that they have to meet before they can come back to school.” Julie explained that the health and safety of the children, families, and staff were her priorities.

Summarizing Julie’s Narrative

Despite facing challenges, staff retention, and funding constraints, Julie effectively led her ECE program by leveraging strong communication, promoting a learning culture, and creating an inclusive environment. Furthermore, this narrative presented an insightful examination of the struggles and strategies of an ECE director in navigating organizational changes, managing staff well-being, and promoting a positive work culture amid challenges. Julie presented herself as a strong organizational leader who takes a hands-on approach to organizational challenges. Her narrative outlined her multifaceted role, management challenges, and the tools and strategies she employed to mitigate those challenges. Specifically, Julie shared the challenges she faced in hiring, training, and retaining staff in a financially constrained environment. Julie also shed light on how she leveraged creative strategies to foster a positive and engaging work environment to mitigate these barriers. Overall, Julie’s narrative painted a picture of a resilient leader and manager who continuously learned and found creative ways to

navigate fiscal management, motivate her team, and maintain the health and safety of the children and staff despite her initial unpreparedness and ongoing financial challenges.

Jessica

Jessica had been a director for 10 years. She held a master's degree in child development and a certificate in ECE leadership. She had been an ECE teacher and director at the center. She also had a social services background, specifically in-home supportive services. Jessica was the owner-director of her program, which she said she "loves" as she can make decisions, she would otherwise not be able to make if she was only an employee. She said she planned to hire a director so that she could have more time off for her family.

Leadership Challenges and Strategies

Jessica shared her journey as a director in the ECE field. Jessica stated that when she took on the role of director-owner, she felt inadequately prepared for the leadership and management responsibilities of her role. She acknowledged that her education should have focused explicitly on ECE or leadership. This realization prompted her to complete a certificate in ECE leadership, which Jessica found helped her succeed in her role. She stated, "I was educated to be in social services and education, but not necessarily in the early childhood education area." She admitted feeling unprepared for leadership and management responsibilities.

Jessica identified herself as a transformational and servant leader when describing her leadership style. She emphasized the importance of serving others. Jessica primarily focused on the health, safety, and education of the children and the staff. Jessica's fulfillment comes from witnessing the children's development and growth and seeing her teachers excel and become leaders. Julie valued "Just knowing that I create leaders in my teachers and the children through

play and our curriculum.” She focused on serving others, particularly the children and staff in her care.

Jessica faced several challenges in her role as a director. Initially, she needed to gain experience and education as a leader and manager, which made navigating her responsibilities difficult. She shared, “I didn’t have any experience. No education as a leader or manager, and a lack of academic and professional experience became barriers at that time.” The absence of mentorship and a network of colleagues added to the difficulties of her position, making her job feel isolating and overwhelming at times. She noted, “The barrier was just the lack of mentorship...when you’re a director in a single center, you don’t have other colleagues.” Jessica prioritized mentorship and valued the support she received from friends in the same field, which helped her overcome the challenges of leading a single center. Furthermore, Jessica employed various strategies to enhance her effectiveness as a director. She focused on continuous learning and gaining experience. Jessica said, “I continue to educate myself...reading books, workshops, and online classes.” She also emphasized the importance of gaining experience over time, which allowed her to grow and develop as a leader. Jessica said, “The years of experience also help.”

Regarding organizational climate, Jessica identified negative attitudes among parents and teachers as a significant challenge to maintaining a positive environment. Another challenge Jessica identified was gossiping and forming groups among staff. Jessica shared, “Working with a group of women all day, every day, becomes challenging at times.” Jessica stated that gossiping is usually during certain seasons when one person affects her team's peace and balance. She employed several strategies to foster a supportive and favorable climate. These strategies included modeling the behavior she expected from others, demonstrating support through training and listening to concerns, and personally reaching out to her staff during

difficult times. She shared, “I greet them with a smile. I also ask them how they are doing, or I send flowers if a family member is sick. It is important for parents and staff to feel that they are seen.” She acknowledged the importance of recognizing and caring for the well-being of both teachers and families to create a sense of belonging and value within the organization. Moreover, Jessica promoted trust and team building through activities that foster positive relations among staff members. She noted, “Going out for team-building activities has helped keep positive relations among all staff members.” She also provided supervisory support and honest interactions to establish trust between them.

Jessica also discussed organizational change and crisis management challenges. Jessica explained that one of the challenges to organizational change is “the resistance to change from both teachers and parents.” To address the resistance to change, Jessica emphasized the significance of effective communication and clearly explaining the need for change. She learned the importance of communication during her studies in ECE leadership, saying “I believe communication is key in this type of situation...the changes need to be made clear, and they need to make sense, right?” Moreover, Jessica highlighted the importance of communicating the benefits of changes to teachers, parents, and even children. She stated, “We have to explain to them why it is that we are making those changes.” During crisis management situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Jessica mentioned the importance of systems addressing immediate needs. Jessica said, “I go with what needs to be done at the specific moment. Having systems in place makes a difference, like during the [COVID-19] pandemic.” Jessica reiterated that communication, a plan, and systems are critical during organizational change and crisis management.

When asked about organizational culture, Jessica acknowledged that teachers in her center are satisfied with their work but also feel drained and stressed due to the amount of work. Jessica said, “I think teachers are satisfied in my center. But the amount of work is a lot. It’s draining and stressful. So, paying close attention to keeping a positive organizational culture is key to preventing burnout in some way.” To establish a positive organizational culture, Jessica employed various strategies, including building trust in her teachers’ abilities, providing necessary tools and resources, and allowing them decision-making freedom within given frameworks. Jessica said:

I trust my teachers that they will provide high-quality education to the children. I also ensure that I give them the tools and resources for them to do so...they have freedom of decision in many ways. I provide them with frameworks...supportive supervision and clear communication are extremely important.

Also, Jessica emphasized the importance of her teachers believing in the center’s purpose, mission, and vision. Jessica said, “They [the teachers] have to believe in the center’s purpose, mission, and vision. That’s really important.” Moreover, Jessica described how she supported her teachers by providing small gestures such as snacks, drinks, lunch, bonuses for perfect attendance, or a monetary gift on their birthday.

Management Challenges and Strategies

Jessica discussed her experience as the business manager of her program. Her narrative revealed several key themes. These themes included financial management challenges, the importance of continuous learning and adaptability, and the satisfaction of overcoming challenges in a managerial role. Jessica also discussed human resources and facilities

management, listing the strategies she used to manage her program from a business perspective successfully.

As the business manager, Jessica handled critical tasks like payroll budgeting and financial analysis. She described how she spent a significant amount of time on financial functions because of the importance of careful budgeting in a field characterized by many expenses and insufficient funding. As Jessica put it, “Every penny counts.” Jessica noted that her main challenge was finding new ways to raise funds to avoid laying off teachers. Jessica constantly brought up the issue of financial management in her role. She said, “I have to be really careful with the center’s finances because the field is comprised of many expenses and low income.” Furthermore, Jessica emphasized, “The highest expense in an ECE program is salaries followed by the rent.” Jessica went on to say that the major management challenge was balancing both providing quality education and managing the center’s limited finances. Jessica added, “stretching the money and finding new ways to bring in money” and “provide quality education and still have money left for quality, professional development for teachers, and fair salaries is difficult.” She also mentioned the limited financial situation her center faced due to varying levels of student enrollment in the last two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite these challenges, Jessica enjoyed the financial aspects of her work. She stated, “I am a rare director who likes management tasks. Since I am the center owner, I do payroll, budgeting, and with my CPA, at the end of the month, we go over profit and loss statements, balance sheet, etc.” Despite not being initially prepared for business management tasks, Jessica developed skills through self-education, online courses, and real-world experience. Jessica said, “At the beginning, I had never taken a business or financial management course or classes. I am now knowledgeable about finances and have the necessary skills.”

Jessica also shared some strategies she used to ensure all expenses are covered each month. She used techniques such as purchasing materials and equipment from thrift stores, recycling materials, and obtaining free books from local libraries to reduce expenses and allocate more funds to salaries. Jessica said that parents also donate materials to their child's classrooms when teachers create classroom wish lists during Christmas. Also, Jessica hosted fundraising events, such as selling caramel apples in October and collecting and selling recyclables throughout the year. The money collected over a certain period of time was used to purchase something the center needed, such as a water table or an art easel.

As part of being the business manager of her center, Jessica handled the human resources aspect of her program. She supervised 12 staff members and noted the challenge of keeping up with fair salaries given the field's high expenses. However, she adopted a resourceful approach by cutting costs in other areas and allocating savings to wages. She shared, "I can reduce other expenses and allocate that money to salaries." Furthermore, Jessica developed her skills and knowledge as a human resource manager through continuing education. She took online classes, read books, joined Facebook groups related to her field, and gained invaluable experience from her 10 years in the role as director. She stated, "After almost 10 years of experience, I have come to learn what works and what doesn't. So, I definitely have a better idea in this area." Jessica explained that the years of experience she acquired helped her manage the center in all areas.

Another area of human resources that represented a challenge to Jessica was not being able to provide full benefits to her staff such as medical and dental insurance, more vacation time, and a retirement account. She explained, "There is just not enough money to offer benefits like 401K or extra PTO [personal time off]. When you offer PTO, you have to get substitutes, which are very expensive. You pay the teacher and the substitute one and a half more than your

staff. It gets really expensive.” Jessica emphasized her frustration in this area as she wished she could offer her teachers more time off and benefits to increase retention.

Jessica was also responsible for managing the physical facilities of the ECE program. The physical facilities of the center posed another challenge for Jessica. Jessica’s center was located in an old, leased building in need of many repairs. The facility’s poor condition made managing the center much more complicated. Jessica shared:

There’s a lot of repairs to be done. For example, plumbing is an issue, and the owners [of the property] don’t want to do anything with the plumbing. So, we keep fixing what we can, but they [the pipes] can get clogged again. Electricity is also another issue. For example, in the summer, when we turned on all the ACs sometimes the electrical panels shut off because they can’t handle all the ACs and the lights being on.

The center’s facility presented challenges due to its age and poor maintenance by the property owners. This situation created stress for Jessica, who was responsible for the health and safety of the children and staff. Jessica said, “So when this happens in the summer. That is just extremely stressful.” Jessica emphasized that money had to be allocated for the maintenance of the facility every month because there was always something to be fixed. She explained, “So, I ensure that I maintain the building well as I can with our financial abilities. We are not the building owners, and there are so many things we can’t do based on the lease we have.” Jessica emphasized how frustrating this situation was for her and her team.

Jessica explained that as a director, her number one priority was the health and safety of the children she served and the staff she led. Therefore, she implemented many strategies to ensure her facility was safe. She shared:

I think I do what I can to ensure a safe environment for the children and teachers. The teachers and I do a daily walk through the classrooms and playground to ensure that there are no immediate hazards. Also, monthly, a more thorough walk of the center is done.

We look for broken equipment or materials.

Other efforts taken by Jessica and her teaching team include using filters in the classrooms, plant-based cleaning products, hand-washing, and ensure that all staff members follow the Center for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC], 2023) health strategies. Such health strategies include staying up to date on vaccinations, staying home when sick, ventilation, hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette; and cleaning (CDC, 2023).

It was clear that Jessica took the health and safety of her ECE program seriously and made every effort possible to ensure she was successful in this area. She added, “Also, we clean the entire center every day and pressure wash the restrooms and the playground once a month. Toys are cleaned accordingly.” Many challenges come with an aging facility, but such challenges also further illustrate Jessica’s resilience and determination to run the center safely and effectively. Jessica also demonstrated a problem-solving mindset as the leader and manager of her program.

As explained in her narrative, Jessica’s responsibilities were many and time-consuming. She was responsible for many tasks as the leader, business manager, and center owner. She highlighted the need to be intentional with her time. Jessica described how she used digital tools like Google Calendar, phone reminders, and to-do lists to help her manage her time. She also used project management and tuition payment collection software. Jessica also highlighted the importance of having business systems and standard operating procedures to help run her program smoothly and successfully.

Summarizing Jessica's Narrative

Jessica's story revealed the significant impact of her academic background, leadership style, and strategies on her effectiveness as a director. Despite facing initial challenges, she adapted and grew as a leader. Jessica emphasized continuing education and fostering supportive relationships as being critical to her success in the ECE field. Additionally, Jessica's story provided valuable information about her approach and strategies for organizational change and crisis management. Furthermore, Jessica's narrative provides valuable insights into the challenges faced and effective strategies used for a positive organizational climate and culture in her center.

Jessica's narrative analysis also illustrated her deep understanding of the nuanced role of a director as a business manager while simultaneously shedding light on the financial, human resources, and infrastructure management challenges she faced as a director. Jessica's narrative underscored the importance of adaptability, resourcefulness, continuous learning, time management, and job satisfaction. Her emphasis on communication, planning, and support for her teachers and their well-being demonstrated her commitment to maintaining a positive environment for staff, parents, and children.

Paula

Paula had been a director for almost two years. She held a bachelor's degree in communications and 30 units in child development. Before becoming a director and taking child development units, Paula was an administrative assistant to the previous director. While being the administrative assistant, she realized she enjoyed the role of being a director. When the opportunity to become her center's director arose, she took it, and her leadership and management journey began. The ECE program offered care and education to infants, toddlers,

and preschoolers. Because the center offered various ECE programs, Paula had a co-director and an administrator.

Leadership Challenges and Strategies

Paula shared her journey to becoming a program leader and the barriers she encountered along the way. She decided to become a director because of her desire to interact with children while maintaining a professional role. She stated, “I knew I feel like this is a great position for me. I get to talk to adults. I get to talk to children. So, it’s really kind of just fit both aspects of me.” Furthermore, Paula liked the balance between her professional duties and interaction with children she served. Paula noted that she did not want to be in the classroom full-time. She said, “I like the idea of being able to be still interacting with children, but also still have some moment where you can be professional.”

Paula's leadership journey had not been devoid of challenges. As a leader, Paula described her experience during the initial transition to the director role as being challenging. She mentioned the difficulties she faced in taking over from the previous director and co-owner of the center, which seemed to have caused initial resistance from staff members who were used to how the former director led and managed the program. Despite this leadership shift, staff were initially inclined to reach out to the former director, making it difficult for Paula to establish her own leadership position as the new director. She explained, “When you come in, and you are brought on, sometimes it’s a little hard when there’s older staff who are used to other things. I understand that change is not always something everyone gets along right away.” She recognized that transitioning into a new leadership role, especially in an established setting, may be difficult. She shared, “The changing of management was probably the biggest challenge at first. But now I

feel like we have worked through all of those, and I haven't really had any challenges as of right now."

Another organizational change challenge was the COVID-19 pandemic. Like others in the state, the ECE program underwent considerable changes, such as implementing safety measures like wearing masks and outdoor napping for children. These changes highlighted the necessity for effective crisis management and the ability to adapt to new circumstances. Paula noted, "That was a big change in trying to make sure everyone was staying healthy." The reorganization of the center's typical operations created uncertainty and sometimes tension. As she explained, "So COVID was hard like the parents knew this is how we ran the school, and then now we have to run it completely different. Some children had a difficult time wearing masks." Under Paula's leadership, the center reinvented its operational model and drastically shifted from the standard practices familiar to staff and parents.

Given the changes, constant and precise communication with parents and staff became critical. Paula and her co-director had to reassure parents, keeping them well-informed about their child's well-being and the strategies used to navigate these unusual circumstances. To support staff, frequent communication between Paula and her staff was also crucial. Daily, weekly, and monthly check-ins were implemented. Paula shared, "My main solution is just to talk to people and try to see what they think, what's their opinion, what they have done. I feel like that's the best way to really understand how to figure out solutions." Paula and her co-director proactively asked staff about their feelings, progress, and challenges and offered help whenever needed.

Another challenge Paula mentioned was building a positive organizational culture amidst crisis and change. The pandemic brought about increased stress levels and heightened sanitation

protocols. Paula noted challenges associated with “following the COVID guidelines and trying to manage the stress of families and teachers.” The combination of the fear of infection and the continuous cleaning regulations, much beyond the usual requirements, placed a heavy emotional burden on the staff, thereby impacting the organizational culture and climate of the center.

To counteract these barriers, Paula stated she established a servant leadership culture. She stepped in to help whenever a situation demanded it. This active involvement was more than just issuing directives for Paula. Paula felt it was also about showing empathy and getting involved at the ground level. Paula said, “We see a child crying. We’ll go in and step in...” Paula’s actions demonstrated a commitment to the staff’s well-being and the children’s welfare. Other strategies Paula implemented were recognition of the staff’s effort and providing them with small gestures of gratitude. Paula said, “We always try to acknowledge it here by getting them coffee or lunch. Whatever they are doing, we try to appreciate what they’re doing.” These gestures acknowledged the staff’s hard work.

When discussing organizational leadership, Paula highlighted the importance of hiring individuals with similar work ethics and mindsets to foster a positive organizational climate and culture. Paula noted, “Bringing those happy people who want to be here, who want to work as hard, who want to provide that great quality of care and making sure everything is perfect and organized. Bringing those people is pretty contagious.” During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an increased demand for teachers, but fewer candidates were willing to work. In their desperation to fill positions, Paula and her co-director hired individuals who did not meet their preferred standards. This led to conflict and inefficiency in the operations of the program. Paula learned from hiring such uncooperative staff. Paula emphasized the importance of hiring individuals with similar work ethics and mindset. She noted, “Having those employees who

weren't exactly on board with our expectations and philosophy...we had them leave." This difficult decision was strategic in ensuring that all remaining staff were committed to the organization's values and objectives, thereby facilitating a more positive organizational climate and culture. Paula mentioned that the work environment improved significantly when she began hiring staff who were more aligned with her center's goals and expectations.

Another strategy Paula shared regarding organizational leadership was adaptability. She emphasized the need to remain flexible and adaptable in her role, especially when things can change instantly, as was often the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another strategy Paula described was seeking support. Paula valued reaching out to experienced directors with more experience in ECE program leadership and management. Realizing the importance of having a support network, Paula and her co-director began to connect with other directors in the neighborhood to build relationships and create a resource for advice and guidance, especially during challenging times such as the pandemic. She shared how this network allowed colleagues to ask questions such as, "If I ever need any help, can I ask you a question, or can you give me advice?" Paula described how networking provides opportunities for knowledge sharing and mutual support.

Management Challenges and Strategies

As co-director of her program, Paula shared some of the business responsibilities of the center with her co-director and administrator. The following dialogue revolves around only Paula's management responsibilities, and focused on human resources, fiscal management, and physical facilities. Additionally, Paula shared time and task management strategies. Paula shed light on her role, the challenges she encountered, and the strategies she adopted to overcome these barriers.

Paula's responsibilities did not involve a significant number of financial tasks. Paula stated the owners of the center were responsible for most of its financial responsibilities. This lack of involvement in the financial aspects of the center could represent a limitation in Paula's understanding and management of the center's finances. Paula noted, "I don't really have that much responsibility with the finance. That's more of the co-owner's responsibility." She added, "I feel like the co-owners can possibly give us a little bit more insight into how much we make. Oh, I don't know what our revenue is. I don't know exactly how much our bills cost." With no direct control over the budget, Paula noted that she sometimes hesitates to propose initiatives due to uncertainty about their financial feasibility. She stated:

That's why I don't have a budget. I wish I had a budget, too, and like I sometimes I am afraid to propose certain stuff because I'm like, I don't know if this is totally out of bounds or if this is something that's gonna get approved.

Paula was candid about her struggles in understanding and managing the center's finances, which she felt limited her ability to make informed decisions or plan effectively. Paula desired greater financial transparency, acknowledging that clarity would help her perform better in her role as director.

Paula highlighted that a large part of her role as a business manager of her ECE program involved managing staff schedules and ensuring classrooms are adequately covered. The challenge Paula identified in relation to staff management often derived from unpredictable staff absences. Paula stated, "We will have an ideal schedule. What we would like, or the day will look like, and then we will have to change it last minute." To deal with staff shortages and last-minute changes, Paula described how the center uses support teachers who step in when regular teachers are absent. Paula said, "We kind of overstaff on purpose because of that knowing that

we will have someone possibly out...if we don't need them to go into a classroom the whole day, they will do some different administrative projects for us."

Additionally, to ensure a suitable fit, Paula and her team developed a hiring process, which Paula called a "working trial" and assessed for candidate's compatibility with the center's environment and philosophy. She shared, "We do a working trial where they come on campus for about four hours...if it's a good fit for all of us, we bring them on." Paula highlighted that finding the balance between passion, experience, and educational qualifications while hiring was not always easy. Paula said, "So, I feel like with the most challenging is that sometimes we will find a great candidate, but she doesn't have the educational units to count for [teacher/child] ratio." The units Paula was referring to are determined by the California Department of Social Services (n.d.). Paula explained the challenges of finding the right balance between passion and qualification in the hiring process. She elucidated, "So it's just trying to find that unicorn." Paula highlighted that it could be difficult to find a candidate who has a solid academic education, professional experience, and passion for the field of ECE. A strategy Paula and her team used to attract and retain qualified and talented teachers is the provision of good benefits to teachers and staff. Paula shared, "We do have a lot of good benefits that we provide our staff members."

Paula also shared her responsibilities as the facility manager of her center. Paula said, "I have to do some management responsibilities...if we have any damages on the wall, [I] have to make sure [to] contact the handyman." Paula noted that facility management, such as dealing with contractors for building issues, was not her favorite task. Because the center owners were not the property owners, Paula said that the owners of the center faced challenges regarding who covers maintenance costs. Paula said:

We do not own our building. Unfortunately, we rent it, so we do not have some challenges where it's like, what do we cover in cost versus what do the building owners cover in cost? And sometimes they don't want to cover anything.

Paula believed it was unfair that the property owners do not want to share the building maintenance responsibility with the center owners. This was evident when Paula noted, "They [property owners] say 'You guys are there; you guys figure it out.' We had to replace our roof...we've just spent \$10,000 to replace the roof, so like that's not fair for us." This situation added another layer of financial strain and operational complexity to the center's management.

Regardless of the challenges and barriers Paula faced with the management of the center's facilities, she and her co-director adopted strategies to maintain an environment conducive to learning. Paula described how she fully complies with the California Department of Public Social Services (2023) Community Licensing guidelines, regular cleaning, and life-saving medications such as EpiPens and inhalers are kept in the classrooms. She shared:

So, we're always following licensing guidelines. We're just ensuring the classrooms stay clean throughout the day. We have two sanitation people who clean throughout the school day. One mainly for the indoor environment, and one for the outdoor environment. We have first aid kits everywhere.

Paula's priority is the health and safety of the children and staff. With her program's responsibilities as a leader and business manager, Paula found herself busy with many tasks to complete each day. To help her organize her tasks and her time, Paula used tools such as Google Calendar and planner apps. She also planned her administrative work during quieter hours when she was less needed for immediate support, such as during children's nap time. Paula and her co-director also have systems in place to help them manage their time, such as encouraging teachers

to be independent. Paula said, “We do try to tell our teachers to try their best to support themselves before coming to us.” Paula described how she and her co-director take time to train their teachers to solve their problems as much as they can. Paula said doing so gives her and her co-director more time for leadership and business tasks.

Summarizing Paula’s Narrative

Paula’s narrative analysis presented here encompasses various aspects of leadership, crisis management, and organizational climate within her role as an ECE director. Overall, this narrative presents a portrait of a leader who is focused on problem-solving, values, communication, and is willing to learn and adapt to new situations. Paula provided valuable insights into the challenges of ECE leadership. Paula described the importance of maintaining a positive organizational climate and the role of collaboration and support networks during times of crisis and change management.

Paula’s narrative also provides valuable insights into the financial, infrastructural, human resources, and safety-related challenges of ECE center management. However, Paula countered these difficulties with strategic measures, such as delegating responsibilities, hiring candidates who will contribute to the goals and mission of the center, and adhering strictly to safety guidelines. Paula also shared using organizational tools to manage her leadership and management tasks and time. Furthermore, Paula’s dialogue shed light on the realities of leadership and management in the ECE context and revealed the potential obstacles and the strategies to overcome such obstacles.

Marie

Marie had been a director at her current program for six years. She was an assistant director before taking over the director’s role. Before becoming an assistant director, she was an

ECE educator for the same center. She held an associate of arts degree in child development. Marie's narrative provided insights into the daily experiences and challenges she faced as the director and leader of her program. Marie's program was owned by a corporation. She comprehensively accounted for the complexities she had experienced as a leader, especially during organizational change. Marie offered a unique perspective on her strategies to address the challenges and her understanding of her duties and responsibilities.

Leadership Challenges and Strategies

During the interview, Marie revealed a lack of preparation for her role as a director, saying she felt neither academically nor professionally ready for the leadership responsibilities the role entailed, even though she was an assistant director before becoming the director. She shared, in relation to the leadership role, that she was "...definitely not adequately prepared at all." Despite having performed many of the director's duties before her appointment as the center's director, Marie felt inadequately prepared due to a lack of mentoring and formal training. Marie's actual training involved learning from mistakes and misunderstandings, sometimes resulting in reprimands rather than being comprehensive and anticipatory. She noted, "It was very, very basic information, and it was more of you learn through reading the report; you learn from getting scolded."

Despite the described challenges and lack of preparation, Marie accepted the position for several reasons. First, it was a financial incentive for her, as the role offered a transition from an hourly wage to a salaried job. Marie said, "It was mostly the financial incentive of it." Second, Marie identified a personal trait of enjoying challenges. Marie's persistent and challenge-embracing nature played a significant role in her decision to step into the role of ECE director. Third, the position offered some level of flexibility in her schedule. She stated, "That flexibility

allows me to take my kids to school every morning, take them to therapy, and sports activities.” This demonstrated the role’s support for Marie’s personal life and her ability to balance work with her commitments as a parent.

A significant theme that emerged during the interview was organizational change. Marie discussed losing five members in a month due to conditions beyond her control. Marie said, “Beginning of April [2023], I lost about five staff members...it was the wages I couldn’t meet.” Marie highlighted the challenge of being unable to meet staff’s wage expectations due to constraints set by the corporation, leading to further resignations from others in the center. Another significant organizational change challenge was during and after the COVID-19 pandemic when she found it challenging to find candidates who wanted to work. Marie said, “it was the post-COVID season, where nobody wanted to work...” Yet another challenge Marie faced as an effective leader was managing people and understanding their different needs. Marie said, “Managing people has been one of the barriers because everyone is different.” Marie recognized the diversity of people’s personalities and perspectives within her staff as being a barrier to effective leadership. According to Marie, understanding and managing this diversity required skills and patience.

Marie discussed various strategies she employed to navigate the challenges of her leadership role. Marie described understanding, flexibility, and gratitude as being the pillars of her approach to effective leadership. Marie said, “...being understanding, being flexible...that’s my way of dealing with the challenges.” Marie emphasized being grateful as an essential aspect of being an effective leader. Marie described “...genuinely being grateful...I thank them [her staff] for being here.” Marie’s approach to leadership also focused on empowering others and promoting their development. She indicated, “The way I work in my role is to develop and

empower others to be greater. So, I am big on [professional and personal] development.” Data indicated that Marie demonstrated a democratic and transformational leadership style.

Marie also discussed her experience with the challenges and barriers regarding organizational climate and culture. Marie reflected on the importance of being open to other people’s opinions when speaking about organizational climate. She understood that not everyone will be pleased with her decisions and how this realization was part of her learning journey. She said, “People will say and have their own opinion. And it’s valid...you know, everyone has an opinion, and everybody has something to say. And you’re not going to please everybody.” Marie stated that this mindset shift took around two to three years to develop through experience rather than formal training. Marie shared how normal human characteristics, such as gossip and different opinions, were barriers to creating a positive organizational climate. A particularly impactful challenge Marie felt was dealing with unhappy staff members, which could lead to a hostile work climate if not addressed. Marie elaborated, “If you get an employee that’s not happy...everybody’s gonna either jump on it and create a negative climate.” Marie acknowledged that working in a predominantly female environment could have unique challenges, particularly concerning communication patterns. Marie said, “And it’s a much more difficult when you work with mostly women or all women, right?” Marie believed that gender dynamics play a significant role in organizational climate.

To maintain a positive environment and address the barriers, Marie promoted open communication by encouraging employees to directly bring their concerns to her and address any issues immediately. She tells her team members, “I need you to tell me [so] I can address it. I can take care of it.” By addressing problems promptly, Marie aimed to prevent minor issues from escalating into significant conflicts. She believed that early intervention often leads to better

outcomes, saying “I have an open-door policy in my office.” The open-door policy expressed by Marie provides a clear pathway for staff to voice concerns or issues. According to Marie, this approach promotes transparency and can lead to more immediate solutions.

Furthermore, Marie encourages staff to understand the complexities and pressures of managing a large team. She stated:

They [staff] doesn't understand what we're [leadership] going through or what we're being asked on our end for them. It's a lot of times tunnel vision, and it's 'me syndrome,' and it's me, me, like I need this, or I want this, and, and we, on the other hand, have to manage that, times 20 people or 25 times.

By helping staff members see things from the management perspective, Maria hoped to reduce complaints and promote a more cooperative and harmonious environment. Marie also highlighted the importance of clear communication, which is why she reinforced a conversation technique she called A and B conversations. Marie described that such conversations involve restricting the conversation to only those directly involved. Marie explained the following:

So, one of my biggest things is reinforcing A and B conversations. Even with the kids.

That means that you can talk about yourself, and you can talk about the other person, and you can talk about each other, but you can't add a C or third person.

Marie's narrative also sheds light on the difficulties in establishing a positive organizational culture. Marie shared that one challenge is finding out what motivates staff. She observed that while financial incentives are influential, meeting such needs is not always feasible. This results in a continuous search for alternatives that can effectively motivate staff. Marie said, “Finding what motivates them, of course, is financially. That's a huge one, but a lot of times, that's something we can't meet, right? So, what else? What else motivates our staff?”

Marie highlighted the struggles of providing rewards that appeal to all staff members, citing an example that was met with resistance:

I used to give people Bath and Body Works lotions...and then there was staff saying, well, I don't like this one...well, I don't like that one you know. I don't wear this. And it's like, okay, well, let me not do that anymore. Let me find something else.

Marie had to find what her staff liked and enjoyed. She mentioned using gift cards and creative activities like scavenger hunts to build teamwork. Marie said, "I like to also do like gift cards. Gift cards tend to be like a good hit. I like to do more like a scavenger hunt because I like to build teamwork in it." Marie also described specific gestures demonstrating her care and thoughtfulness such as providing lunch during a rough day. Marie said, "I think it was last month we had a rough day. I brought in something for lunch...it shows that I think about them. It shows that I'm trying to find ways." This shows consideration for staff welfare and creates an environment and culture where staff can feel appreciated.

Management Challenges and Strategies

Marie also shared her experience as the business manager of her ECE program. The conversation revealed Marie's journey from feeling inadequate initially to her development of a more robust understanding of fiscal responsibilities. When Marie first assumed her role as director, she admitted to a lack of knowledge in fiscal management. Marie said "I didn't necessarily understand or know the numbers business-wise. Now, I can tell you how much I am making now, how much the school makes a week...In the beginning, I didn't pay attention to it." This statement reflected Marie's lack of knowledge of the financial intricacies of her position. However, Marie developed a firmer grasp of financial metrics and business-related tasks over time. Her competence in this area became notable when she described her current financial and

business knowledge as “strong.” Maria added that she has transformed into a more knowledgeable business manager and has acquired the necessary skills to navigate her role successfully.

Nevertheless, challenges persist in her role. The most significant one, according to Marie, stems from unrealistic expectations of the company. Marie said, “I think it’s more of the company’s expectations. Their expectations are high and unrealistic. That’s my biggest part is that they are unrealistic.” It became evident during the interview that Marie’s business role has been influenced by the company’s structure. She explained that her position entails working within set budget limits. Marie said, “I’m given targets, given information, given budget limits, and from there, I manage ways to work with them.” Her greatest financial management challenge is labor, mainly in relation to budgeted labor. She stated, “I want to say that labor is the greatest challenge.” Marie noted that budget constraints affect labor management and staffing because she cannot give raises or pay more than she is instructed to do in the budget she receives from the company. Being constrained by externally set targets, budgets, and limits, with little agency in decision-making, was demonstrated in the data to be Marie’s most significant challenge. Marie also shared that the company’s sometimes unrealistic financial projections are stressful because they are high and sometimes unable to be met. Despite these challenges, Marie demonstrated effective strategies for financial management. She emphasized the importance of understanding and tracking financial metrics, saying “Knowing your number for me is [a] huge, huge thing and being able to explain, and in a sense refute the unrealistic expectations.” Marie shared that she knows how to read financial statements such as profit and loss, and balance sheets. This strategy allows for Marie’s improved fiscal management and has helped her navigate and challenge unrealistic expectations.

Another challenge Marie identified is the considerable administrative workload. The business tasks, such as scanning and emailing reference checks, handling background clearance, financial reports, and projecting schedules for the following year seemed to be additional tasks when compared to those tasks associated the management of the smaller centers in the present study. Marie said she relies on technology-based tools to manage various tasks and responsibilities, specifically an iPad and a planning app. She described how she maintains lists and prioritizes tasks based on needs. Marie said, "I am a list taker...and so I tend to have lists and lists. I have an iPad that I write everything in all of my notes and everything in...and I'm able to prioritize, based on need." These strategies have helped Maria manage her role effectively and efficiently.

As the center's business manager, Marie was also in charge of the management of the physical facilities of the program. Marie explained that there are positives and negatives when it came to maintaining the physical facilities of the center. She spoke about the limitations imposed by the corporate nature of facility management. While the company's system has some advantages, the drawbacks are evident when individual needs cannot be met. Marie highlighted this in her statement that "Because the corporate side of it, in that sense, I can't just hire a gardener to come to take care of something." On the one hand, Marie appreciated the prompt response for emergencies. Marie said, "It's really good because, you know, my toilet is clogged. I call someone or call the company, and the company [can] right away send somebody, which is great." Marie faced difficulty in getting maintenance to attend to areas that need improvement but are not necessary emergencies. Marie stated, "Like my yard outside, there are some areas that need help and need things. I'll call them, but if it's not an emergency, then it's difficult." For pressing concerns, Marie has leaned on her supervisor for support. Marie said, "So it it's

something excessive, then I'll follow up to my supervisor, and she's really good...she'll take care of getting me help and support and whatever I need."

Marie had also implemented a system to ensure that the physical facilities, especially the classrooms, are conducive to high-quality education:

I have a system where, if anything is broken, there is a list on my door that the teachers are responsible for putting it on...so before maintenance comes...I also give reminders like check your cabinets, check everything, for when they [repair company] come.

Marie also stressed the importance of holding her staff accountable. Teachers must note any issues in a centralized location to streamline repairs and maintenance. Marie's emphasis on accountability is reinforced in Marie's statement that "And I also hold the teachers accountable...it's very easy for them to say, but I told you...so, I always hold my teachers accountable. Make sure to put it on the door so they [the repair company] can see." Marie also mentioned personally inspecting the facilities, suggesting a proactive approach to facility management, saying "I walk through the building myself at least weekly." She emphasized that the teachers, being present daily, are also responsible for observing and reporting issues. Marie said, "Every day when they're working, they look for things that need repair." Marie demonstrated that she ensures that no problem goes unnoticed by instilling a sense of accountability.

Summarizing Marie's Narrative

In conclusion, Marie took on the director role despite needing more preparatory support and training. Marie's narrative analysis painted a picture of a thoughtful leader coping with the complexities of becoming a director and an organizational leader. While Marie discussed the challenges she faced, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, Marie also presented her

struggle to manage her team effectively, maintain organizational stability during high turnover, and the pressure of being the final decision-maker. However, Marie also exemplified resilience by strategizing through flexibility, gratitude, and a focus on development. Her narrative underscored the complex dynamics of leadership within an ECE organizational context.

Marie's narrative also provided an insightful story into the management challenges she faced in her role as director. These challenges included fiscal management, human resource management, and facilities management. Marie's narrative showcased her evolution as a business manager navigating the business realities of an ECE program director while meeting the expectations of her employer. However, through experience and self-education, Marie demonstrated a strategic approach to running a fiscally viable ECE program.

Themes and Subthemes

Thematic analysis revealed two main themes with corresponding subthemes. These categories provided insights into the lived experience of early childhood education directors. These themes are categorized as leadership challenges and strategies and management challenges and strategies. The first theme, leadership, covered the following subthemes: academic and professional preparedness organizational climate, organizational culture, organizational change, and mentorship. The second theme, management, covered the following subthemes: financial management, human resource management, facilities management, time, and task management. The following section provides the results of this research and the findings that emerged during narrative data analysis, which included restorying and coding. A facet of narrative inquiry is identifying themes that might surface from the gathered narratives (Ollerenshaw & Cresswell, 2002). The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2*Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes	Challenges	Strategies
Leadership Challenges and Strategies	Academic and Professional Preparedness	Lack of leadership and business preparation	Acquiring on the job experience, on-going training, and self-education.
	Organizational Climate	Unfair salaries, negative attitudes	Reward system, supervisory support, leading by example, resourcefulness.
	Organizational Culture	Interpersonal conflict	Understanding, clear communication, clear vision and mission
	Organizational Change	COVID-19 pandemic, low availability of teacher candidates	Clear and constant communication, consistency, flexibility, adaptability.
	Mentorship	Lack of social support or networks	Mentoring programs, networks, meaningful relationships with colleagues.
Management Challenges and Strategies	Financial Management	Insufficient funding	Fundraising and reducing expenses in other areas.

Table 2 (continued)*Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes	Challenges	Strategies
	Human Resources Management	Unfair salaries and interpersonal conflict	Fundraising, clear, and constant communication.
	Facilities Management	Aging facilities and lack of support from property owners.	Ensuring the health and safety of the children and staff through regular building maintenance, walkthroughs of the center and holding staff responsible.
	Time and Task Management	Too many tasks and interruptions.	Use of time management strategies, apps, and software.

Theme 1: Leadership Challenges and Strategies

All directors in the study experienced academic and professional preparedness and organizational leadership challenges. Despite the challenges faced as directors of their program, they all enjoyed being ECE directors. For example, Jessica noted, “I can’t imagine doing anything else other than being a director.” Gina shared, “My greatest joy is seeing children learn, grow, and be happy and knowing I’m part of their learning journey.” The positive impact the directors were making in the lives of children brought the directors joy and kept them going regardless of the challenges they experienced in their jobs. To continue making an impact in the lives of children, all directors developed effective organizational leadership strategies to counteract the challenges they faced. Below is a discussion of the leadership challenges the directors in the study experienced and the strategies they employed.

Academic and Professional Preparedness

Most of the participants in the present study were not academically or professionally prepared for the leadership and management responsibilities of being an ECE director. They were all passionate about the field of ECE, but their academic education was focused more on becoming an educator rather than a leader and manager of an ECE program. For example, Ava felt academically unprepared for the director's role and wished she had more leadership and business knowledge. With the exception of Julie, who was previously an ECE site supervisor before becoming an ECE director, the other participants felt academically and professionally unprepared for the role. Ava stated, "I wish I could have been a little bit more prepared. I feel like there's just so many things that I wish I could have known." Jessica noted, "I didn't have any experience, no education as a leader or manager, and a lack of academic and professional experience became barriers at that time." Lack of academic preparation was a significant challenge noted in the literature (Gibbs et al., 2019; Maloney & Pettersen, 2017; Sims et al., 2015). Additionally, the literature illustrated how many directors unintentionally move into leadership and management positions (Gibbs et al., 2019). Jessica shared, "I became the director after I purchased the preschool from the previous owner." Gibbs et al. (2019) wrote that ECE directors move into leadership positions "by 'accident' more than intention and lack the necessary practice and preparation for the role" (p. 176). Moving into the director's role unintentionally was also mentioned by all participants except for Julie.

Organizational Climate

Effective leadership is pivotal in maintaining a positive ECE work environment and fostering an enriching atmosphere for staff and children (Douglass, 2018). Research has shown that all components of organizational climate are important to educational quality in ECE

programs (Veziroglu-Celik & Yildiz, 2018). All participants in the study did their best to create a positive organizational climate in their centers. Nonetheless, all participants experienced challenges in this area of organizational leadership. A challenge that emerged in this area, which all participants shared in the present study, was the lack of sufficient funding for salaries and professional development, as well as the lack of resources for private ECE programs. For example, Ava stated, "The resources for the center are very limited compared to, like, probably, Head Start or public education." All participants shared their frustration due to limited financial resources, which was shown to impact professional development for their staff members. For Gina, the most significant leadership challenge was the lack of resources and support. Gina shared:

I feel, for lack of a better term, just stuck on something that I would like to do, such as professional development or meetings, but I can't because there is no funding compared to maybe public schools that might have greater funds to implement what you want.

Julie shared the same sentiment, saying "I would love to send them to conferences, or these trainings or workshops, but it's always...costly." In a study conducted by Veziroglu-Celik and Yildiz (2018), the professional development aspect of organizational climate in ECE settings received the most negative feedback from teachers in the study. Gina also shared that because she has so many responsibilities, she does not have enough time for continuous staff communication and feedback. Gina stated that having enough time to continuous staff communication and feedback was essential for fostering a positive organizational climate. Gina added, "You don't have time to clear misunderstandings." Lack of time for staff feedback and communication was shared by Jessica as being a challenge as well.

Another challenge that emerged due to the lack of sufficient funding was not being able to pay their teachers what they deserve. This inability to pay their teachers merit salary increases and bonuses directly affected staff morale and motivation. Julie explained, "...at this point, I am, I'm trying to divide [merit salary increases] everybody equally. And I mean, \$10.16 is not even a dollar per person." Marie shared, "...five staff members left. Five left. Nothing to do with us here; it was the wages I couldn't meet." The literature showed that a college degree in ECE is projected to have the least lifetime earnings compared to any other college major (Whitebrook et al., 2018). The other participants agreed that not being able to pay teachers what they deserve negatively affects everyone in the center, especially the children, as their teachers leave for better-paying jobs, many times outside of the field of ECE. To this point, Julie stated, "Pay has been the greatest challenge because as much as I would want to retain our great teachers, sometimes they find other places, or even other fields they want to go into." The lack of fair wages for teachers was a significant challenge for all participants in the study. All directors in this study emphasized their advocacy for higher wages but felt frustrated that they did not have the power to offer higher wages to staff. The theoretical framework of this study, ethics of care (EoC), emphasizes that ECE leaders should advocate for the people they serve and act to protect their rights (Feeney & Freeman, 2019). The participants in the present study demonstrated that they take their leadership responsibility seriously.

Each participant had strategies they used to ensure a positive organizational culture. For example, all participants shared that having clear and constant communication, respect, and empathy were crucial to maintaining a positive work environment. Paula noted, "My main solution is just to talk to people and try to see what they think, what's their opinion, what they have done. I feel like that's the best way to really understand how to figure out solutions." Each

ECE director ensured that their staff feels seen and appreciated. Jessica shared, "I greet them with a smile. I also ask them how they are doing, or I send flowers if a family member is sick." Each participant profoundly cared about their staff members and made up for the unfair salaries in other ways. For example, each participant had some reward system. These reward systems included sometimes providing teachers with snacks, meals, extra time for breaks or lunch, scavenger hunts, gift cards, birthday off from work, and communicating gratitude for the hard work teachers performed. Gina shared, "I try to do little things. I try to make sure that I get something for them like snacks or gift cards for their birthdays." Marie stated, "I do scavenger hunts. I give them gift cards." According to Bloom (2010), a reward system is one of the 10 dimensions of creating a positive organizational climate in an ECE work environment.

Research also has shown that any organization's priority should be to share its vision and mission with employees, as they are the foundation of an organization (Fullan, 2020). To this point, Jessica stated, "They [teachers] have to believe in the center's purpose, mission, and vision. That's really important." Research has also shown that supervisory support is important in maintaining a positive work environment in the ECE field (Hewett & La Paro, 2020). Bloom (2010) also included supervisory support as one of the 10 dimensions of a positive organizational climate in ECE settings. Jessica highlighted her efforts to support her teachers by saying "As director and supervisor, I provide a lot of support to my teachers so that they feel they are not alone." Research has concluded that director's support to their teachers is crucial to a positive work environment as it affects teachers' behaviors, attitudes, and program quality (Bloom, 2010; Hewett & La Paro, 2020; Veziroglu-Celik & Yildiz, 2018).

Organizational Culture

When discussing organizational culture, some challenges emerged from the interviews. One of the challenges was the amount of work teachers have, which can be stressful for them, especially when coupled with the low pay teachers receive. Jessica said, "I think teachers are satisfied in my center, but the amount of work is a lot. It's draining and stressful. So, paying close attention to keeping a positive organizational culture is key to preventing burnout in some way." Studies have shown a significant link between organizational culture and burnout, including teacher turnover (Lee et al., 2022; Park & Lee, 2015).

Jessica and Paula found negative attitudes from teachers challenging in establishing a positive organizational culture. Paula highlighted that the importance of hiring teachers with the same positive mindset and ethical behavior of existing center team members. She stated, "...bringing those happy people who want to be here, who want to work as hard, who want to provide that great quality of care...bringing those people is pretty contagious." Bloom (2013) posited that accountability and ethical practices, among other factors, help support children's education and development, which is why the early childhood education field exists.

Marie also expressed that negative attitudes among teachers are a challenge when maintaining a positive organizational culture. She elaborated, "If you get an employee that's not happy... everybody's gonna either jump on it and create a negative climate." As stated earlier, Marie acknowledged that working in a predominantly female environment could have unique challenges, particularly concerning communication patterns. Marie also stated, "And it's much more difficult when you work with mostly women or all women, right?" Jessica also shared that gossip among teachers and forming groups among the staff affected the culture of her center and that working with women is sometimes challenging. Jessica said, "Working with a group of women all day, every day becomes challenging at times." As a strategy for this issue, Marie

shared, "I make sure to set a good example for the team by not engaging in gossip and encouraging open communication." Differences in opinions happen and are expected in ECE settings (Maloney & Pettersen, 2019). Ethics of care state that care is central to ECE settings and associated with women's work (Langford & Richardson, 2020), "and consequently, the workforce is hyper-feminine," and interpersonal conflict arises (Maloney & Pettersen, 2019, p.129). In order to combat attitudes that can negatively affect the culture of their centers, Jessica and Marie stated that they both promote trust and team building through team-building activities such as hiking and social events like going out to brunch. They believe these activities help create a supportive climate and culture and reduce gossip within the team.

Organizational Change

Organizational change management is central to the discussion when exploring organizational leadership in ECE settings. Organizational change was at the top of participants' lists of organizational leadership challenges. All the directors agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic was the most significant organizational change and crisis management they had to deal with in their careers. Paula said, "That [the COVID-19 pandemic] was a big change. We were trying to keep everyone safe...it was stressful." The COVID-19 pandemic brought many changes to the field (Adams et al., 2021a, 2021b) and, consequently, to each center. The directors expressed those changes took place frequently due to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2023) guidelines, which included guidelines for teacher to child ratios, washing hands procedures, daily activities, and even closing the center when there was an infection among children. Paula noted, "Following the COVID guidelines and trying to manage the stress of families and teachers...was hard." These types of constant changes in ECE settings across the nation have been documented in literature (Adams et al., 2021a, 2021b; Lessard et al., 2020).

The directors expressed that beginning in 2023, they began to see the ECE field slowly recuperate in terms of enrollment and availability for teacher candidates to work. As stated in Chapter 2, at the time of this study, the ECE field was recovering slowly from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hao, 2022).

Ava shared her struggles with the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on children. She shared:

How do you try to explain to children to maintain social distance, right? Like it is impossible...and sometimes they want to hug you, give a high five, you know. There were children who had never seen their teacher's face because we had to wear [a] mask.

Jessica stated:

It was hard working with children, especially infants, when you had to wear masks, and you know how important it is for them [infants] to see facial expressions. Seeing facial expressions and teachers' faces are important for infant development and learning.

Gina added:

In my culture [Latino] and in my program, we hug to show our affection. It's just part of my program's culture, but with the pandemic changes, we couldn't do that, and I felt the children and the teachers, and I were missing out on expressing our emotions. Let me give you an example. Children sometimes need a hug when they are not feeling okay, or children with special needs sometimes need a tight hug to feel better when they are having a tough moment. We couldn't do that because we had to keep our distance. It brought tears to my eyes. The pandemic changed the dynamics of our program in so many ways, but we had to learn how to navigate the frequent changes. It was tough for us, and now imagine the children.

According to the conceptual framework of this study, the whole leadership framework, directors are also pedagogical leaders (Abel et al., 2017; Masterson et al., 2019). The directors in this study showed strong leadership in the art and science of teaching and were aware of the need for children's continuous learning and development. Part of being an effective pedagogical leader is supporting teachers and children to optimize their learning and development even when the environment or conditions are not optimal (Abel et al., 2017; Masterson et al. 2019). Paula, for example, shared that she held meal and nap time in the playground instead of indoors. Gina implemented more nature activities and spent more time outdoors. She mentioned creating flower and edible gardens and setting up shades so children could learn through nature and spend more time outdoors. Jessica and Ava emphasized the need to be flexible and creative in times of change and during crisis management. Jessica stated, "When there is change, you go with the flow, work with what you have and make the best of it and learn from the changes around you. We have to set the example for our teachers and families."

Another challenge that was mentioned was the need for teacher candidates. Marie stated, "It was the post-COVID season, where nobody wanted to work..." Jessica noted, "During and after the pandemic ended, it has been a challenge to find qualified teachers and staff. They either don't apply, don't show up to interviews, or won't even return calls. It has been tough." Early childhood education staff shortage was a phenomenon happening across the United States when this study was completed (Kim et al., 2022; Sanchez Castillo et al., 2023). Research studies have shown that this challenge linked to the pandemic compounds the issues of low wages and high stress in the ECE field, which are the leading causes of the overall shortage of teachers and staff (Sanchez Castillo et al., 2023). The pandemic severely impacted the already strained ECE sector in California (Adams, 2021a, 2021b). However, the stressors were not uniformly distributed

among all programs, which highlighted and intensified existing inequalities based on the type of program and its funding sources (Kim et al., 2022). Studies in California have shown that center-based ECE programs faced more significant challenges with staffing, operational shifts, and decreased enrollment (Kim et al., 2022). The number one reason for the difficulty finding qualified staff was due to the salaries ECE programs, regardless of the funding type (i.e., public non-profit or private non-profit, private for-profit), could offer (Kim et al., 2022). Research has also shown that turnover rates were much higher in the centers without government funding, such as independent centers like those in the present study, than in Head Start, a federally funded ECE program that serves low-income three- and four-year-old children, and Title 5, subsidized ECE programs under contract with the California Department of Education, Early Education and Support Division (Kim et al., 2022).

During times of organizational change, all participants devised strategies to counteract the constant changes. A common theme across all participants was clear, precise, and constant communication. For example, Gina said:

Just communicating all those steps that we were taking to ensure their kids were going to be as safe as possible. And I think just communication with enrolled families really helped. It just gave them a sense of like, okay, they are doing the best they can to keep everyone safe.

Paula shared, "My main solution is just to talk to people and try to see what they think, what's their opinion, what they have done. I feel like that's the best way to really understand how to figure out solutions." All participants in this study also had strategies to make up for the low salaries their staff members received. Marie shared:

I like to give gift cards. They are a hit...I think it was last month we had a rough day. I brought in something for lunch...it shows that I think about them. It shows that I'm trying to find ways.

Gina also bought personalized snacks for her teachers. Gina said, "I know which snacks and drinks they like, so I buy those and have them ready for them when they take their break." Julie shared that she encouraged her teachers to further their education so that they can get a salary increase. She also held fundraising events and allocated those funds to give bonuses to the teachers. Jessica shared the same strategies.

Mentorship

All participants in the study agreed that mentorship was essential for them to be effective leaders. Research has shown that mentoring holds a significance for those who are new to the ECE field (Doan, 2013). Mentoring novice ECE educators could lead to higher levels of workplace satisfaction for both mentors and mentees (Doan, 2013). Higher levels of workplace satisfaction could translate to reduced burnout, a deeper understanding of leadership within ECE, and improved care quality (Doan, 2013).

Mentorship was a subtheme without the researcher intentionally researching the subject. All directors emphasized the benefits of having a mentor they could count on during challenging times. For example, Ava stated that directors, especially new ones like her, need support and mentoring. She shared, "Lack of right mentoring programs and right mentors are not accessible to everyone...I think directors really need mentoring programs." Julie noted that she learned what she knows from her mentor in her previous position, who she believed prepared her well for the director position. Jessica noted, "The lack of mentorship...when you're a director in a single center, you don't have other colleagues." Jessica expressed her appreciation for the support

she had received from friends in the field of ECE who had helped her overcome the challenges of owning, leading, and managing a single-center program. Paula also highlighted the importance of having a supportive network. Paula shared that she and her co-director reached out to other ECE directors in their community to build relationships and create a resource for advice and guidance during challenging times or to feel supported on a difficult day. Lastly, Marie stated that her supervisor offers the support she needs to carry out her role as director. Marie noted, "... she's [her supervisor] really good... she'll take care of getting me help and support [in] whatever I need." The directors expressed how much mentorship means to them and how mentors have helped them become effective leaders.

Theme 2: Management Challenges and Strategies

All participants in the study also experienced management challenges in their role as ECE directors. In the following section, management challenges and strategies as the second main theme is discussed. Additionally, four subthemes are also identified. These four subthemes include financial management, human resources management, facilities management, and time and task management. All participants stated that they do their best every day to be competent business managers even though they were not prepared for such role when they took on the job of ECE directors.

Financial Management

Financial matters were a common concern that emerged during interviews. Finances seemed to cause many of the challenges experienced by all directors in the study. Ava noted, "You have to ensure every penny is accounted for." From an EoC perspective, ECE directors are expected to act as ethical financial leaders who can administer resources responsibly and provide precise accounts of how funds are utilized (NAEYC Code of Ethics, 2011; Feeney & Freeman,

2018). Additionally, literature has demonstrated that the financial health of ECE programs is linked to budgeting duties and financial choices made by the center's directors (Rohacek et al., 2010). Moreover, the literature has shown that most for-profit ECE programs operate on "razor-thin profit margins" (U.S Department of the Treasury, 2021, p. 15).

Managing finances was an issue for the directors who participated in this study, especially at the beginning of their careers, because none of the directors felt academically prepared or professionally trained to manage the center's finances. When asked if she felt prepared for the business management responsibilities of their program, Jessica stated that she was educated but not in the ECE administration area. Gina shared, "We are educated and trained to be educators and not business people. We didn't get an MBA [master of business administration]." This statement is congruent with the literature showing that ECE directors are academically trained to be educators, not financial administrators (Leekeenan & Ponte, 2018). Marie stated, "Because I didn't necessarily understand or know the numbers business-wise, I felt lost at first..." All directors felt inadequately prepared for the management responsibilities their positions entailed. They stated that experience and continuing education had helped them gain the financial knowledge they needed. Jessica noted, "At the beginning, I had never taken a business or financial management course. I am now knowledgeable about finances and have the necessary skills." Research has shown that ECE directors play a pivotal role in ensuring financial prudence, as the success of the program largely rests on the proficiency with which its business aspects are managed (Alchin et al., 2019).

Financial management responsibilities for the directors in the study varied but included being responsible for doing payroll, buying food and snacks, paying bills, and purchasing art supplies and materials. Jessica was the only director-owner in the study. Her financial

responsibilities included additional responsibilities that the other directors in the study were not responsible for in their programs. Jessica's responsibilities included paying rent, taxes, building maintenance expenses, and meeting with her certified public accountant to review the center's balance sheet, cash flow, and profit and loss statement. According to research studies, these are some of the necessary financial management skills and knowledge ECE directors should possess to manage their program successfully (Morgan, 2000; Maloney & Pettersen, 2017).

The directors in the study believed that there was not enough money to spend equally among all operating cost areas of their program as most of the income was spent on salaries and rent. This sentiment is congruent with the literature that states that personnel costs are a major portion of an ECE program's budget (Shields & Hattingh, 2022). Julie stated, "I mean, sometimes just buying a bottle of paint it's like \$60.00, so how much can I really buy with \$200.00 a month for my staff?" Gina noted, "Now, you know, I feel like it's even worse because, you know, everything has gone up here in L.A. [Los Angeles] with inflation. Everything is so expensive now, but the center's budget is still the same as before inflation." Research has reported that, on average, classroom materials account for eight to 13% of the overall operating expenses in ECE programs nationwide (Workman, 2021). All directors agreed that everything needed to run an ECE program in the Los Angeles area is much more expensive than other cities in the country. For example, Julie stated, "...the company thinks that we are in some town in Michigan. This is Los Angeles." Jessica stated, "Preschool tuition in Los Angeles is pretty much the same as college tuition nowadays." She added, "People may think there is a lot of money left over, but if you take the high rent rates in L.A. and the salaries plus benefits, you don't have much left for other things." There seems to be a disconnect between high tuition rates, high

operating expenses, and small profit margins in ECE programs. Therefore, directors must be creative to meet their program's needs.

The study's participants used various strategies to help balance their income and expenses. For example, Gina shared:

We do community volunteer days, and so like, through our social media accounts, we invited the community to come out and volunteer to the center to work on our edible garden. Also, we got a lot of donations that way.

In order to work within her limited budget, Jessica noted:

I buy materials and equipment from thrift stores. Some of the materials are even new in their original package, you know. I also get free books from The Free Little Library [a volunteer-led book exchange in local communities across the country] in various neighborhoods. I tend to go to the more affluent neighborhoods here in L.A. because the books are pretty much new, and there is also a variety of themes. You know, Yeni, you can even get books for adults. I have gotten leadership, business, gardening, arts and crafts, and self-help books from there.

Jessica added:

We also use recycled materials like boxes, paper towel tubes, and yogurt cups for paint. Parents are a great source for recycling materials. For example, they bring used market bags that we use for dirty diapers, so we don't have to buy them at the store.

Gina also shared:

I have parents that are architects and engineers, and they would bring big roles of art paper. I have another parent that works in cable installation, and he brought in a cable roll holder; that's what it is called, I think, which we turned into a table for our playground.

When there is a need for money, people become creative and resourceful, and to be a director, this is a must. Parents are really, really helpful with fundraising.

Other strategies participants in this study used included classroom wish lists each teacher creates, usually at the beginning of the school year or during Christmas. Parents purchase items from the wish lists and donate them to their child's classroom. Each director had creative strategies they used to help compensate for the inadequate funding of their programs.

Human Resources Management

The data in the study showed that the need for sufficient funding in ECE has a negative spillover effect regarding human resources management. Directors are responsible for human resource responsibilities such as recruiting, onboarding, training, and retaining teachers and other crucial staff members (Masterson, 2019). Additionally, they train and guide their teachers and provide needed supervision support (Masterson, 2019). Directors also experience challenges in this area. Over recent years, talent acquisition has become more complex, with fewer individuals interested in becoming ECE teachers (Kim et al., 2022; Sanchez Castillo et al., 2023). Gina shared, "I feel like in the last few years, they have been even more difficult to even find people that want to teach, that want to work with children. It's been super difficult." The opportunity to retain highly qualified teaching staff had also become challenging for participants. Gina added:

Private preschools usually tend to pay less than, than in public. Not being able to pay staff what they should be earning as teachers has been difficult, which affects the retention of teachers...after a while, they might be happy, but if they are not getting a raise every year and they don't have benefits, so they start thinking about leaving.

Marie noted, "I want to say that labor [concerning wages] is the greatest challenge." Julie shared a similar experience. Julie highlighted that retaining staff was one of her primary

leadership and management challenges as a director. She associated this challenge with funding constraints, which prevent her from offering wage increases and bonuses. Julie said:

Funding is a huge issue, being able to provide our staff with what they deserve, as far as just an incentive or a bonus, or just giving them a little more pay...pay has been the greatest challenge because as much as I would want to retain our great teachers, sometimes they find other places, or even other fields they want to go into.

The literature has shown that directors in other countries also face the same challenges. For example, Franze and Hjalmarsson, (2021) showed that directors in Sweden also faced limited financial resources to provide monetary rewards, so they used meals and gift cards as tokens of appreciation for their teachers.

All directors stated that they believed low salaries were their number one stressor related to financial management and human resources. Other challenges were also reported related to human resource management. One such challenge was not being able to provide full benefits such as retirement plans, medical and dental benefits, and personal time off. Jessica explained:

There is no money to offer benefits like 401K or extra PTO [personal time off]. When you offer PTO, you have to get substitutes, which are very expensive. You pay the teacher and the substitute at least one and a half times more than you pay your staff. It gets really expensive.

Paula's program offered benefits to her teachers. She added, "We do have a lot of good benefits that we provide our staff." Paula found providing work-related benefits helps to retain qualified and passionate teachers. She characterized such teachers as "unicorns."

In the United States, ECE teachers receive low salaries, face frequent job changes, and many report undergoing significant stress and financial instability (U.S. Department of the

Treasury, 2021). Most ECE educators lack collective bargaining rights, which in turn hinders their efforts to improve working conditions (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021). Therefore, the ECE field experiences a significant rate of teacher turnover every year (26-40% nationally) (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021). According to Schaacka et al. (2020), low salaries as well as physically and emotionally demanding ECE work conditions create high levels of stress and burnout for ECE educators. It is well-known that the ECE sector is labor-intensive and that salaries take the largest share of a center's operational costs (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021). For example, Workman (2021) reported teachers' salaries for an infant program accounted for 50-60% of the total operational expenses for an ECE program. Financial planning for a program where operational expenses are high and funding is low creates considerable stress among ECE directors (Elomaa et al., 2020).

Directors have come up with creative strategies to counteract these challenges. Some strategies the directors in this study used regarding low wages included raising funds to provide teachers with financial incentives such as bonuses. Some of the fundraising events held include the sale of food and candles, auctioning children's art, selling recyclables, and holding parents' night out for a fee, as well as reducing the expenses in other areas of the center's operation and allocating them to the teachers' bonuses. As Jessica stated, "I can reduce other expenses and allocate that money to salaries." All directors agreed that to be a successful director, it is necessary to be resourceful.

Another challenge is personnel conflict and a need for more effective communication among teachers and between teachers and directors. Gina said, "I think I've always struggled in terms of managing personnel...I really dislike just confronting, you know, employees and staff about something that needs to get addressed." Gina, like other directors in the study, spoke to the

challenging interpersonal dynamics of people management. Gina also noted that each teacher's communication style had been challenging by saying, "Learning to communicate with each one of them [teachers] because each one of them is different. So, I think for me, just learning, that took me a long time, and even now, I'm still learning from that." Marie shared, "People will say and have their own opinion. And it's valid...you know, everyone has an opinion, and everybody has something to say. And you're not going to please everybody." Studies have shown that human resources management primarily contributes to directors' stress and burnout, with many directors feeling unprepared for this role (Alchin et al., 2019; Elomaa et al., 2020).

According to the conceptual framework of the present study, human resource management is a critical part of being an administrative leader (Abel et al., 2017). In line with the theoretical framework of this research, Pettersen (2011) noted that EoC has its roots in women's caregiving roles, such as motherhood, which are often fraught with immediate conflicts and needs. The EoC theory showcased methods to challenge conflicts by invoking empathy, reason, dialogues, and revisiting perceptions of events in care settings (Pettersen, 2011). Ethics of care encourages stakeholders to replace discord with dialogue and collaborative actions (Adhariani et al., 2017). Moreover, while conflict has the potential to fortify bonds, conflict resolution effectiveness largely depends on one's perception of conflict and the chosen resolution strategy (Campbell & Clarke, 2018). As such, the directors in the present study have developed strategies to become effective human resource managers. All directors emphasized open communication, respect, and empathy as the foundation for their human resource manager role. From the participants' narratives, open and transparent communication is critical to maintaining positive relationships with teachers and staff. For example, in her interview, Marie shared that she established the use of A and B conversations with her staff and ensured that conflicts and

misunderstandings are resolved when they happen and only between the people that are involved in the conflict.

Another strategy directors in the study used to become effective human resource managers was to support their teachers in expanding their education and knowledge. All directors focused on professional development for themselves and their teachers even when professional development opportunities were challenging when it came to funding those opportunities. Jessica stated that she was constantly taking online classes, reading books, joined Facebook groups related to the field, and attended conferences. Gina provided her teachers with educational resources such as articles, workshops, and presentations conducted by herself. Julie also provides her own training to the teachers and encourages them to continue their education and obtain a higher degree. Julie shared, "I will go above and beyond for my staff to find resources for them just because I want them to be better and to learn more..." Julie aimed to enable her staff to keep growing and enhancing their skills, even with financial constraints.

Facilities Management

According to the conceptual framework of this study, facilities management is part of directors being administrative leaders (Abel et al., 2017; Masterson, 2019). Physical facilities management of their centers was a challenge for most of the participants in this study. The challenge seemed to lie in the maintenance of old buildings which require frequent maintenance. This maintenance results in a financial burden. To this point, Ava stated, "The school is very old, so I have to be fully aware of the maintenance needs of the center." Gina shared something similar, saying "It just seems like every month [there is] something we need to repair, or, you know, take care of." Gina added that the lack of support from the property owner complicated the situation. The old infrastructure of the center sometimes even disrupts the program's daily

routine, such as when the center had flooding from the restrooms or the kitchen, or the air conditioner and heaters do not work in the summer and winter, respectively. Research has shown that physical settings of an ECE program can affect the organizational climate as well as program quality (Chepkonga, 2017; Veziroglu-Celik & Yildiz, 2018).

Jessica's challenges mirrored Gina's. Jessica shared that her program was housed in an old, leased building that needs constant repairs, including repairs to plumbing and electricity. Jessica noted, "There's a lot of repairs to be done. For example, plumbing is an issue, and the owners don't want to do anything with the plumbing. So, we keep fixing what we can, but they [children's toilets] can get clogged again." Jessica mentioned that she was responsible for the expenses of maintaining the physical facilities and not the property owner, which added to the program's overall expenses. She mentioned that her program also has air conditioning and heating issues. Jessica's and Gina's experience with the physical maintenance of their centers is in line with the literature that found heating and air conditioning a challenge when it comes to the physical maintenance of ECE programs for directors (Oztabak et al., 2020). Jessica also reported the need for more meeting space and appropriate adult furniture as being a challenge. This challenge is also consistent with the literature which states that meeting space, adult furniture, and storage represent a challenge for staff (Oztabak et al., 2020). The physical environment, including safety issues, temperature, aesthetics, and the quality of materials and equipment, can influence how employees view the organization (Bloom, 2010; Rohacek et al., 2010). Additionally, insufficient or subpar physical setups can contribute to a feeling of a stressful workplace (Bloom, 2010; Rohacek et al., 2010).

Paula shared a similar experience with the physical facilities management of her center. She commented, "They [the landlord] say, 'You guys are there; you guys figure it out.' We had to

replace our roof... we've just spent \$10,000 to replace the roof, so that's not fair for us." Paula noted that this type of situation introduces further financial pressure and adds to the operational intricacy of managing the center. Paula also shared that in this situation, she is responsible for doing the due diligence of finding and vetting an appropriate contractor, presenting the project to the property owner, getting approval, and then managing the remodeling project. The extra responsibilities add to her already busy schedule.

Marie shared that her experience with the physical management of the facilities varied depending on the situation. For example, if maintenance such as clogged toilets is needed, Marie noted that the company quickly responds and sends a plumbing company. The same goes for electrical issues. However, when something is to be fixed, but it is not an emergency, it takes time for the company to fix it. Maria stated, "Like my yard outside, some areas need help and things. I'll call them, but if it's not an emergency, then it's difficult." Marie added that she does find support in her supervisor to ensure that things that are not emergencies are taken care of within a reasonable timeframe.

Julie's experience with the physical management of the facilities had to do more with the decision of the owners to dispose of the janitorial company of the center. She shared:

It's been just these last five months. It's been a challenge of not having the cleaning crew... school just gets dirty...our children eat in most of the classrooms, and it needs to be maintained. Unfortunately, we've had those dead ends where they just say that right now, they're going through a financial situation, and they need to cut back on certain things.

According to Julie, the company made the teachers responsible for cleaning the center. Julie believed it was unfair for teachers in her center to clean the center as they have many

responsibilities related to educating and caring for the children in their classrooms. Therefore, Julie decided that she, her assistant, as well as the center's cook would clean the center. Julie stated that they stay after the center closes to clean and disinfect the entire center, which adds to her already busy schedule. In a Swedish study, directors appeared to put significant pressure on themselves to handle numerous responsibilities on their own in order to ensure their center runs successfully (Franzen & Hjalmarsson, 2021). As Jessica stated during the interview, "As a director, even if you have a master's degree or doctorate, you still have to unclog the toilet or clean up when a child throws up, if necessary. This is not a glamorous job." The challenges presented by the directors in the present study are supported by a national report that stated that there are indications that many of the buildings where the country's children spend most of their time are in a state of disrepair (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021). Furthermore, a report by the Bipartisan Policy Center (2019) concluded that issues such as broken gates, water damage, or exposure to carbon dioxide faced by ECE center facilities in some states reflect a broader infrastructure concern in the United States.

The participants in the study developed strategies to help counteract the challenges of maintaining the physical facilities of the program. For example, Ava reached out to the community for volunteers and donations. Ava stated, "Nonprofit organizations are willing to donate things to the school. I use my network and connections to obtain resources for the center." She also performed a walkthrough of the center and has trained her teachers to do the same. Gina developed a daily safety checklist system for the classrooms and the yard. Gina and her teachers do a daily walkthrough before opening and after closing the center. She also performed a monthly, more detailed walkthrough of the center. Gina shared, "We have a like checklist, right, of things that we need to check before the center is open...we definitely have like a checklist of

things that need to be checked for safety or any, you know, any hazard potentials.” This approach ensures that Gina and her teachers maintain an environment favorable for high-quality education, even amidst persistent maintenance challenges.

Julie implemented a strict sanitation practice as part of her efforts to ensure the health and safety of the children under her care. Julie's center had washing stations and center staff use disinfecting sprays to sanitize common areas. She shared, "We wanted to make sure all of our children, everybody that steps in the school, that they're always washing their hands...we do keep it very clean...we have a three-process cleaning spray." Julie also implemented illness policies. Julie said, "Our children, if they are sick, we have them stay home. We do have policies implemented where there are certain criteria that they have to meet before they can come back to school." Jessica also shared that she and her team performed daily and monthly walkthroughs of the center. In addition to these efforts, Jessica stated:

We also have air filters in the classrooms. We use plant-based cleaning products and ensure we follow the CDC measures, such as washing hands and keeping sick children and staff at home. We also have those plants in the classroom that filter the air. I forget what they are called.

Additionally, Jessica had a cleaning company that cleaned and sanitized the classrooms, restrooms, and common areas. Jessica described how her center's toys are washed and sanitized daily by the cleaning personnel. The restrooms are cleaned every day. Additionally, the restrooms and playgrounds are power washed professionally once a month.

Paula shared that she fully complies with California Department of Social Services (2023) Community Care Licensing guidelines, performs regular cleaning, and ensures her center has life-saving medications such as EpiPens and inhalers. Paula noted:

So, we're always following licensing guidelines. We're just ensuring the classrooms stay clean throughout the day. We have two sanitation people who clean throughout the school day. One mainly for the indoor environment and one for the outdoor environment. We have first aid kits everywhere.

Marie also shared her strategies to ensure her staff's and children's health and safety. She has implemented a system she described as:

I have a system where, if anything is broken, there is a list on my door that the teachers are responsible for putting it on...so before maintenance comes...I also give reminders like check your cabinets, check everything, for when they [repair company] come.

She highlighted that the teachers must be held accountable for the health and safety of children.

Marie also described how she performs a weekly walkthrough of the center. All directors expressed that their priority, above everything else, is children's and staff's health and safety.

Research has shown that in an ECE program, the director is responsible for creating, implementing, and maintaining a safe environment that is conducive to learning (Hujala et al., 2016). Additionally, directors foster nurturing environments that bolster children's emotional and social growth, including genuine, sincere, and respectful relationships among and between children, teachers, and families (Mathews & Lippman, 2016, 2019). Building warm, considerate, and nurturing relationships aligns with EoC, as such caring relationships are essential for human well-being and pivotal in the ECE field (Langford & Richardson, 2020).

Time and Task Management

Early childhood education directors in this study dedicated a significant amount of time to address various leadership and administrative tasks, including meetings. These leadership and administrative tasks that took a lot of the directors' time is consistent with research studies

(Franzen & Hjalmarsson, 2021). Franzen and Hjalmarsson (2021) reported that ECE directors in their study placed significant demands on themselves to complete numerous management tasks so that their programs could run successfully. Some of these tasks can be resolved swiftly, while others demand more effort, time, and persistence. It is also important to note that directors in the present study reported that they were interrupted frequently when working at the office. The data in the present study demonstrated that handling administrative tasks that vary in complexity from simple to challenging requires a system and tools to ensure all needed tasks are completed. All participants commented that they want to perform their best at work and be competent leaders and managers.

The directors shared their time and task management strategies and systems to help complete their leadership and management tasks. For example, Ava used a range of methods and techniques to effectively organize her time and tasks, including maintaining a daily agenda, establishing daily objectives, and utilizing her phone's calendar and alert functions. Ava shared, "I have my top three priorities of what to do and what I need to get done for that day..." She used technology-based tools such as Google Calendar, sticky notes, and phone reminders to organize her work. Ava highlighted the importance of setting daily goals. Gina utilized to-do lists to prioritize her tasks for the day and week. She also used digital reminders on her phone and computer to keep track of tasks.

Julie relied on paper-based memos and desk calendars. She noted, "To-do list is my thing, and it's just because it helps me feel accomplished every time, I cross a task out from there." Other strategies shared by Julie include a whiteboard and memos given to teachers daily to inform them of any changes. Julie shared, "I do have a morning memo that I post every morning where teachers will know of any changes that might be happening for the week."

Jessica's time management strategies include the use of Google Calendar, phone reminders, and to do-lists to manage her time. Additionally, she used project management apps and tuition collection software as well as a communication channel for teachers and parents. She also highlighted the importance of having business systems and standard operating procedures to help her with managing her leadership and management tasks. Paula used similar strategies which include a planner app and using quieter hours of day such as nap time to complete administrative work. Marie relied on technology-based tools such as her iPad and software for enrollment, tuition collection, and communication with parents. The directors emphasized that learning how to manage their time effectively is a skill that they needed to learn early in their careers. The directors seemed to have similar time management strategies they implemented to help them accomplish the predictable and unpredictable tasks of their days.

Summary

This narrative inquiry study included six early childhood education directors. Two main themes were identified in the study. These main themes were leadership challenges and strategies and management challenges and strategies. Subthemes emerged within the leadership main theme. These subthemes were academic and professional preparedness, organizational climate, organizational culture, organizational change, and mentorship. Subthemes also arose from the management main theme. These subthemes included financial management, human resources management, facilities management, and time and task management. The next chapter will integrate the data from Chapter 4 and will conclude this study.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This qualitative narrative inquiry study stemmed from this researcher's personal and professional experience as an early childhood education (ECE) director. This researcher sought to better understand the challenges experienced by directors as leaders and managers of their ECE programs. The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the lived experiences of center-based directors' challenges related to the leadership and management of ECE programs with a particular focus on 1) academic and professional preparation for their leadership roles, 2) organizational leadership, and 3) business management and operations. This research study documented the challenges ECE directors experienced and the strategies they implemented in their leadership and management roles in order to lead successful ECE programs.

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted to answer this study's research questions. The research questions for this study were developed to give the participants an opportunity to share their experiences with the leadership and management challenges they encountered in their professional roles. The following research questions guided the semi-structured interviews, the restorying of the interviews, coding of data, and the data analysis process. The research questions that guided this study were:

Research Question 1: How did Los Angeles County-based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors perceive program setting-related challenges as influencing their ability to effectively lead their organization?

Research Question 2: How did Los Angeles County-based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors describe the operational management tasks in the early childhood education setting?

Research Question 3: How did Los Angeles County-based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors describe their preparation for their leadership and management roles within their early childhood education organization?

Six participants shared their personal stories during semi-structured interviews conducted over Zoom. The interviews were then restoried into a narrative format. The narratives were coded to reveal two main themes: leadership challenges and strategies and management challenges and strategies. The two main themes were then developed further into subthemes. The first theme, leadership challenges and strategies, covered the following subthemes: organizational climate, organizational culture, organizational change, and mentorship. The second theme, management challenges and strategies, covered the following subthemes: financial management, human resources management, facilities management, and time and task management. This chapter will discuss the findings of this study and provide recommendations for action and further study.

Interpretation and Importance of Findings

Narrative inquiry is a method used in qualitative research to examine the individual stories of people within a group to identify common themes or experiences (Creswell, 2013). A narrative inquiry research approach was used in this study to allow the participants to share their own individual experiences in terms of the leadership and management challenges they encountered in their professional roles as ECE directors. From the ethics of care (EoC) theoretical framework perspective of this study, narrative inquiry was chosen to give the six Latina female participants an opportunity to use their voices and share their stories. This section focuses on the three research questions that guided this study. The three questions were answered and interpreted from the restoried narratives of the six participants. A discussion of the

conceptual and theoretical framework of this study is discussed as it relates to the findings of this study. The interpretation and importance of the findings as each relates to the three research questions are discussed below.

The whole leadership framework is rooted in Kagan and Bowman's (1997) study on leadership in ECE (Abel et al., 2017; Kagan & Bowman, 1997). The whole leadership framework outlines three core leadership domains: pedagogical leadership, administrative leadership, and leadership essentials (Abel et al., 2017). As discussed in the literature review of this study, this framework captures the multifaceted roles and responsibilities of ECE directors and underscores the intertwined nature of their duties. Given the blend of administrative and pedagogical responsibilities that ECE directors manage, there is a pressing need to distinctly map out these functions. Leadership essentials encompass the foundational personal and leadership traits of an ECE leader. Pedagogical leadership is centered on enhancing teaching methods and elevating children's learning outcomes, while the administrative leadership domain focuses on operations and strategic endeavors (Abel et al., 2017; Mastersen et al., 2019). The present study focused on the administrative domain of the framework.

As demonstrated in the present study, the participants were learning or have learned many of the skills included in the administrative domain. The directors have acquired financial knowledge to read financial reports as required by their role and their employers. They were responsible for financial duties such creating or following the center's budget, managing the income and expenses, and reading and interpreting financial reports. They also implemented systems in various areas of their programs. They also marketed their programs to increase enrollment. The directors were responsible for the organizational climate, culture, and change

implementation of their programs. Overall, the directors in the study engaged in all administrative leadership duties as outlined in the whole leadership framework.

The present study's theoretical foundation was anchored in the EoC perspective, underscoring its relevance to ECE as being a sector predominantly perceived as a lower-status domain primarily occupied by women compared to professions typically filled by men (Langford & Richardson, 2020). A significant portion of ECE practitioners are minority women who are often subjected to lower wages and subpar working conditions, which in turn leads to workforce inequalities (Bath, 2013). The EoC perspective portrays ECE work as both intricate and invaluable, unfolding within a multifaced milieu (Langford & Richardson, 2020). Ethical leadership within the realm of ECE often faces the intricate tasks of maintaining a balance between meeting the needs of the children and staff and addressing external pressures such as funding demands (Male, 2012). The directors in this study were committed to advocating for the rights and welfare of those who work for them, which was demonstrated in the directors' advocacy for increased funding and fair wages. The EoC perspective goes beyond mere adherence to professional standards by emphasizing personal accountability in the caregiving role (Feeney & Freeman, 2019).

Ethics of care resonated closely with the roles and responsibilities of ECE directors demonstrated in this study. Additionally, all participants in the study were minority women for whom English was their second language. Ethics of care scrutinizes the caregiving roles given to women and marginalized racial groups, while critically evaluating the narratives, power dynamics, and politics where the work is allocated (Tronto, 2013). All directors advocated for their teachers and staff for better wages and other benefits. If directors found themselves to unsuccessful in advocating for better wages and other benefits and they were resourceful and

were able to provide staff with financial incentives. The directors in the study also made their best effort to provide a positive organizational climate and culture that fostered positive relationships which benefitted teachers and staff as well as children and families. Additionally, the participants reported being ethical financial leaders when administering their center's financial resources. Additionally, the directors offered opportunities for discourse when personal conflict arose and encouraged open and honest communication. Moreover, the participants ensured the health and safety of the children and staff by taking precautions and following state and government health mandates, which allowed children to continue to receive quality care and education. Lastly, the directors embodied ethical leadership by making ethical decisions and acting during times of crisis and organizational change.

Research Question One

Research question one asked how do Los Angeles County-based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors perceive program setting-related challenges as influencing their ability to effectively lead their organization? This question was developed to explore the challenges ECE directors experienced as they led their ECE programs successfully. All participants in this study faced challenges related to organizational leadership, but it seemed that having professional experience had a positive effect on how the challenges were handled and the strategies applied. Every director experienced and dealt with those challenges differently. Accordingly, each director devised strategies based on the needs of their programs. They all highlighted the need for mentorship and the benefits of having a mentor and a supportive network.

Organizational Climate

Effective leadership is crucial in ensuring a nurturing environment in ECE programs for staff and children (Douglass, 2018). The data demonstrated that while participants endeavored to foster a positive organizational climate in their programs, they all faced challenges, particularly around lack of sufficient funding. Limited financial resources hindered fair salaries and adequate professional development opportunities for staff, which in turn negatively impacted staff morale. For instance, Ava and Gina noted the discrepancy in financial resources allocated to salaries when comparing private and public ECE programs.

The shortage of funds affected teachers' salaries, which in turn impacted staff motivation. Many participants reported teachers leaving due to non-competitive wages. This was, for example, highlighted by Marie in her interview. The literature has confirmed that ECE graduates tend to have the lowest lifetime earnings when compared with college graduates who pursued different fields of study (Whitebrook et al., 2018). Data in this study indicated that the inability to offer competitive salaries has forced teachers to look for better opportunities outside of ECE. Research studies have shown that there is a relationship between a school's climate and job satisfaction (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016). Aldridge and Fraser (2016) also noted that various school climate aspects could be used by school leadership to enhance job satisfaction for teachers in various school settings. The data in this study demonstrated that low wages negatively affected the work environments at each director's center. Such information provides significant knowledge of directors' leadership challenges. Knowing what ECE teachers value in their work environments could help directors and other leaders in the field retain teachers. Providing fair salaries to teachers would hopefully lead to less leadership challenges for directors, less teacher turnover rates, and better-quality education for children.

Organizational Culture

Findings as presented in Chapter 4 indicated that the relationships and communication methods among teachers and director are crucial. Additionally, the leadership provided by the center director significantly influenced the formation of the organizational culture in the program. During the interviews, several organizational culture challenges were highlighted. A significant challenge was identified by participants as being the overwhelming workload teachers face, which they found to be even more difficult given the lack of adequate financial compensation. Jessica emphasized that managing this workload and stress is crucial to avoiding teacher burnout and underscored the importance of maintaining a positive organizational culture to combat it. Research studies have supported the connection between organizational culture and issues like burnout and teacher turnover (Lee et al., 2022; Park & Lee, 2015).

Both Jessica and Paula identified negative attitudes among teachers as being barriers to cultivating a positive organizational environment. Paula stressed the significance of hiring candidates with a compatible mindset and ethical values aligned with her center's principles. Paula believed in hiring staff who aligned with her center's mission and vision. Participants also reiterated the challenges posed by negative attitudes and expressed that in predominantly female workplaces unique communication challenges emerge. Jessica and Marie pointed out the significance of leading by example, discouraging undesirable behaviors, and promoting open communication. Such challenges are anticipated in ECE settings (Maloney & Pettersen, 2019), particularly given the theoretical framework of this study, EoC, which emphasizes care being integral to ECE and being deeply tied to women's' roles. To counteract the negative attitudes and promote a unified team of ECE educators, the directors employed team-building activities, clear communication, supervisor support, and reward systems. The participants believed these initiatives fostered mutual support and created a more harmonious workplace. McCrea (2015)

noted that emphasizing communication within organizations can be beneficial to the organization's culture. In a similar view, Duignan (2012) proposed that robust organizational relationships can bolster the creation of cohesive organizational cultures. Additionally, a study by Wong et al. (2012) underscored the significance of leadership and communication in teamwork among ECE professionals.

Organizational Change

Organizational leadership within ECE settings often revolves around change management (Haslip & Gullo, 2017). Among the most prominent challenges in organizational leadership cited by participants was managing change. Unanimously, directors identified the COVID-19 pandemic as the most challenging period of their careers as directors. Paula emphasized the stress of maintaining the health and safety of children and staff during this time. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced a slew of alterations to the daily operations of each center. These encompassed changes in teacher-child ratios, hand hygiene protocols, daily activities, and even center shutdowns due to infections. Paula described the complexities of adhering to these guidelines given the stress the guidelines placed on both educators and families. Following the conclusion of the COVID-19 pandemic, directors in the study highlighted hiring as another challenge. Marie, Gina, and Jessica noted a distinct reluctance among potential hires following the pandemic to join the ECE workforce and attributed this trend to the pandemic's aftermath and systemic issues such as low wages in the field. Research studies confirmed this phenomenon and its roots in low salaries and high stress (Kim et al., 2022; Sanchez Castillo et al., 2023). The pandemic exacerbated disparities among ECE programs in California (Adams, 2019a, 2019b).

To combat these challenges, participants resorted to various strategies. Clear communication emerged as a unifying theme. Gina emphasized proactive communication with

families, while Paula stressed open dialogue. Directors brainstormed creative ways to compensate for their staff's low salaries, from gift cards and lunch treats to personalized snacks and encouragement for further education for salary increases. Fundraising events and bonuses were also tools employed by directors like Jessica and Julie to support their teams during these turbulent times.

The present study emphasized the need for a strategic approach to managing change in ECE settings as change is characterized by so many uncertainties. For the directors in the study, leading change required resilience to navigate challenges until stability and targeted outcomes were realized. The implication of this study showed that if an ECE program's culture is resistant to change, directors, as change leaders, need to invest additional efforts and available resources to secure the support from their staff and their communities. The data further demonstrated that successful strategic change depends on communicating the change and having a common vision and mission of the center. In essence, clear, open, and effective communication was pivotal to all the ECE programs' organizational transformation during turbulent times.

Mentoring

All participants in the study agreed on the crucial role of mentorship in becoming effective ECE leaders. Research has shown that mentoring can enhance workplace satisfaction for both the mentor and mentee and lead to reduced burnout, better leadership understanding in ECE, and enhanced quality of care (Doan, 2013). Interestingly, mentorship emerged as a significant subtheme even though it was not the primary focus of this research study. All directors stressed the value of having a reliable mentor during difficult times. For example, Ava emphasized the need for proper mentoring programs, while Julie credited her prior mentor for preparing her for her position as the director. Jessica highlighted the challenges directors of

single site centers face due to the absence of a mentoring system and expressed gratitude for her friends in the ECE field for their guidance. Paula spoke about the importance of a supportive peer network and shared her efforts in building relationships with other ECE directors for advice and support. Marie expressed gratitude for the continuous support from her supervisor. Collectively, the directors highlighted the indispensable role of mentorship in shaping them into competent and effective leaders. This study also indicated a strong emphasis on the directors receiving support from their mentors or colleagues, practical advice, moral and emotional support, as well as the transmission of knowledge, and inviting the directors to contribute to their own interpretation and understandings of the difficult situations they were going through, especially during times of change.

Research Question Two

Research question two asked how do Los Angeles County-based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors describe the operational management tasks in the early childhood education setting? This question was developed to explore the challenges ECE directors face when managing their programs from a business role perspective. The management theme is further explored by discussing the four subthemes: financial management, human resources management, facilities management, and time and task management. The directors also shared the strategies they had implemented to counteract the challenges they faced.

Financial Management

Financial concerns were frequently highlighted in all interviews. All directors mentioned financial challenges and how these challenges affected all areas of leadership and management. Research has indicated that ECE programs' fiscal health depends on directors' budgeting and financial decisions (Rohacek et al., 2010). Additionally, because funding in the field of ECE is

limited, most ECE programs work with small profit margins (U.S Department of the Treasury, 2021).

The data showed that directors initially struggled with financial management due to their educational backgrounds where they were trained to be educators and not leaders and managers. The participants' experience with the lack of financial education and training aligns with the literature indicating ECE directors are often unprepared for financial tasks (Leekeenana & Ponte, 2018). Many of directors in the study felt overwhelmed by the number of financial tasks they dealt with as part of their operational tasks. Despite initial challenges, with experience and ongoing education, directors gained the financial knowledge needed to run their centers effectively. For example, Jessica remarked on her journey from being unskilled in financial management to gaining proficiency as she acquired experience. Research has emphasized the crucial role ECE directors play in the financial stability of their programs (Alchin et al., 2019).

Funding constraints was another challenge for the directors. Many directors felt that most of their revenue was consumed by salaries followed by rent. Julie highlighted the high costs of art and materials supplies, while Gina mentioned the rising costs associated with having a center based in Los Angeles. The consensus among the study's participants was that running ECE programs in Los Angeles was more expensive than in other cities in the United States.

Data demonstrated that, in order to counteract these financial pressures, the directors employed various innovative approaches such as hosting community volunteer days, classroom wish-lists, obtaining family support and donations, and fundraising. Other solutions included finding cost effective solutions like sourcing from thrift stores or even free books and equipment from non-profit organizations. Leveraging community resources was a common theme that

emerged from data analysis. The narratives underscored the directors' adaptability and resourcefulness in navigating financial challenges.

The findings in this study demonstrated that financial knowledge, training, and ongoing professional development in the area of finances are vital to the success of ECE programs. As Jessica stated in her interview, "I have come to understand that healthy finances are the backbone of your program." The data showed that having knowledge of business management is necessary to be a successful ECE director. The necessary knowledge included understanding the basics of budgeting, cash-flow projection, revenue and expense forecast, financial statement interpretation, and balance sheet interpretation. Furthermore, the data also demonstrated that actively pursuing revenue for the program, keeping abreast of the finances of the business, and involving the leadership team in the management of the business was vital to the success of the program. Overall, this study found that there is a need for professional development in financial management for ECE directors. Furthermore, this study suggested the need for increased academic preparation programs focused on the business side of ECE programs such as financial management.

Human Resources Management

This study's findings indicated an indirect effect of limited financial resources on directors' managing human resources. The directors were entrusted with vital human resource duties including recruitment, onboarding, staff development, and retention. The directors also oversaw teacher training and supervision. Navigating these responsibilities has become more difficult over the years, especially with fewer individuals showing interest in ECE teaching roles (Kim et al., 2022; Sanchez Castillo et al., 2023). Gina reflected on the heightened difficulty in finding qualified and passionate teachers in recent years, especially considering that private ECE

programs often have lower salaries compared to public ones, making staff retention challenging. Marie and Julie echoed similar sentiments, attributing wage concerns as a dominant challenge tied to funding shortages. Across the board, directors in the study cited inadequate salaries as their primary stressor in human resources management. Benefits like retirement plans and health insurance were also difficult to offer due to lack of sufficient funding. Other challenges such as personnel issues, including communication, remained a major issue.

To navigate these challenges, the directors employed innovative solutions. Examples included organizing fundraisers or reallocating funds to offer bonuses to teachers, as was shared by Jessica. The directors also offered non-monetary rewards like meals and snacks, gift cards, and other small gestures to show appreciation. Another emphasis was on continuous professional growth. All directors championed professional development for themselves and their staff despite financial challenges. All directors concurred that resourcefulness is key to effective human resources management.

The findings from this study demonstrated that the participants reported good practices in some of the areas related to human resources management, such as supervision and support. Participants however struggled in other areas such as compensation and staff development due to lack of sufficient funding. The data also showed that professional development and other human resources constructs, such as conflict resolution skills were necessary. Furthermore, this study also demonstrated the need for academic preparation program that focuses specifically on ECE human resources management.

Facilities Management

This study highlighted the challenges faced by directors of ECE centers regarding the physical management of their facilities. All participants reported difficulties maintaining older,

leased buildings, which often led to significant financial and time burdens. Common issues included frequent repairs, outdated infrastructure causing disruptions in daily routines, and a lack of support from property owners. Jessica's and Gina's experiences, for instance, aligned with the literature indicating that heating and cooling systems present notable maintenance challenges for ECE programs (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2019; Oztabak et al., 2020; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021). Julie faced added responsibilities due to a cutback on janitorial services, compelling her to handle cleaning tasks.

To combat these challenges and to maintain the health and safety of children and staff, participants employed various strategies. Ava sought help from the community through donations and volunteer work, while Gina utilized a daily safety checklist system for consistent health and safety assessment. Julie emphasized strict sanitation practices. Jessica, on the other hand, invested in air filters, plant-based cleaning products, and regular professional cleaning. Marie implemented a system for teachers to report broken items. The directors also saw the need for storage and meeting spaces for staff support to be available.

This study demonstrated what research had already shown, which is that many ECE centers are housed in buildings in disrepair, reflecting larger infrastructure concerns across the nation (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2019). Managing the physical facilities of ECE programs is part of being an effective business manager and leader according to the conceptual framework of this study (Abel et al., 2017). Additionally, effective management of physical facilities is directly related to the health and safety of children and staff (Masterson, 2019). Overall, the health and safety of children and staff was the number one priority of all the directors in the present study.

Time and Task Management

Directors in the study found themselves heavily engaged in numerous leadership and

administrative tasks, including frequent meetings, and supporting teachers in the classroom. A significant finding was the frequent interruptions directors experienced during office hours, suggesting the need for structured systems and tools to manage a range of tasks. In terms of task management, participants shared a combination of traditional and technological strategies. Ava, for instance, leaned heavily on digital tools like Google Calendar, phone reminders, and emphasizing the importance of daily goal-setting. Gina favored to-do lists and used digital reminders on various devices, while Julie felt most successful managing her time with paper-based methods like memos and desk calendars. Julie even used a morning memo system for her staff. Jessica integrated project and tuition management apps and advocated for established business systems and procedures. Paula preferred using a planner app and strategically capitalized on quieter moments during the day, such as nap time. Marie, on the other hand, incorporated technology tools such as an iPad and various software solutions for enrollment, tuition, and communication needs. A common theme among all directors was the recognition that mastering time and task management was essential, and many seemed to have developed similar strategies to handle both the expected and unexpected elements of their workday.

Research Question Three

Research question three asked how do Los Angeles County-based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education directors describe their preparation for their leadership and management roles within their early childhood education organization? This question was developed to learn about the participants' perceptions of their academic and professional preparation in the areas of leadership in management that helped them to effectively lead and manage their ECE programs. With the ECE workforce viewed as being central to the delivery of high quality ECE programs (Douglass, 2019), attracting and retaining qualified, professional,

and skilled educators and leaders is recognized as being a critical component of national workforce strategies (Abel, 2019). High ECE educator turnover rates have been shown to hinder optimal outcomes for not only children and families, but more broadly for the nation; therefore, it is essential to explore means to enhance the retention and skill development of ECE educators and leaders (McDonald et al., 2018).

Academic and Professional Preparedness

In the current study, most participants felt ill-prepared for the leadership and management roles associated with being ECE directors, both academically professionally. All of the participants had studied child development. They stated that the courses they took even at the graduate level dealt more with child development theory than leadership and management of ECE programs. The college education they received including the administrative courses required by the California Department of Social Services Community Care Licensing Division (n.d.) did not adequately prepare the participants in this study for their roles. Ava stated, “They did talk a little bit about budgeting, but not in depth.” All participants mentioned in the interviews that such mandated courses were more of overview of the California Department of Social Services Community Care Licensing (2023) regulations than in-depth study of leadership and management. All participants mentioned that they also took a mandated course on adult supervision, which was required by California Department of Social Services Community Care Licensing (n.d.) regulations, but all agreed the mandated course was more focused on topics such as teacher scheduling rather than human resources or organizational leadership topics.

The data in the study demonstrated that it was more the years of experience, mentoring, and professional development that helped the participants to effectively lead their programs more than their academic preparation. Jessica noted, “I didn’t have any experience. No education as a

leader or manager, and a lack of academic and professional experience became barriers at that time.” Access to formal and informal professional learning opportunities and availability of expertise, information, and resources to build the pedagogical and administrative leadership capabilities of teachers and directors was found to be vital in this study.

The findings in this study are congruent with the prevalent issue of the inadequate academic preparation for ECE director roles (Abel, 2019; Gibbs et al., 2019; Maloney & Pettersen, 2017; Masterson et al., 2019; Sims et al., 2015). It is noteworthy that many ECE directors, according to Gibbs et al. (2019), often find themselves in leadership roles unintentionally rather than by choice. Five out of the six participants in this study became a director unintentionally. Further studies have indicated that the ECE sector should become professionalized by reinforcing competency-based qualifications for all ECE educators (Douglass, 2016, 2017). There was ample data generated from this study to support the existing body of literature as it pertains to early childhood leadership development and the impact it has on the professionalization of the field.

Implications

Research highlights the importance of program quality, leadership, and business management in effective ECE leadership, yet there are limited studies in this area (Talan et al., 2014). Given that ECE directors play a crucial role in upholding and enhancing program quality, it is essential to study the challenges they experience. This study aimed to deepen the understanding of ECE leadership and management. It sought to identify the knowledge, academic readiness, and skills ECE directors need for effective leadership. By focusing on ECE directors, who are pivotal in maintaining program quality, this study’s findings contributed to the limited existing literature on leadership and management topics as related to ECE.

This study provided evidence that ECE directors experienced leadership and management challenges, especially at the beginning of their careers as directors. The present study demonstrated that five out of the six directors were neither academically nor professionally prepared to become the leader and business manager of their programs. This evidence falls in line with existing research that has demonstrated that ECE directors do not feel confident in their roles as leaders and managers as they lack training in these essential areas (Alchin et al., 2019; Bloom & Abel, 2015; Maloney & Pettersen, 2017). As evidenced by data in this study, the leadership and management challenges arose for the directors from their lack of academic and professional training. These challenges were amplified by the lack of sufficient funding in their programs, especially in relation to fair salaries for the teachers in their programs, professional development opportunities, and the barriers to maintaining a physical environment conducive to learning. This evidence is in line with existing research (McLean et al., 2021).

There are various implications derived from this study. First, there is an implication of the need for accessible professional development in the areas of effective leadership and business management programs that can be offered by local community colleges, non-profit organizations, or university extension studies. Second, practical implication is the need for mentoring and coaching programs for new and seasoned ECE directors. All directors in the study highlighted the importance and the positive impact having a mentor made in their careers. A fourth implication is for higher education institutions to offer leadership and business management, specifically financial management programs for those students interested in ECE, but who do not necessarily want to become teachers such as Paula and Jessica. Fifth, there should be more funding for ECE programs including private centers to invest in aspects of the program such as professional development and the improvement of the physical facilities.

Recommendations for Action

The findings of this qualitative narrative inquiry study demonstrated specific challenges ECE directors experienced in their role as leaders and business managers of their programs. Thus, the results of the current study led this researcher to offer the following recommendations for action in the field of ECE. These recommendations were drawn from this researcher's analysis of the lived experiences of the six participants in the study. The recommendations for action are as follows:

- Higher education must prepare students who are interested in ECE not only for teaching positions, but also for leadership and management positions while simultaneously strengthening competency-based qualifications.
- Early childhood education preparation programs should include organizational leadership and business management programs, specifically financial management as financial management knowledge has been found to be essential to running high-quality ECE programs (Maloney & Pettersen, 2017).
- Higher education institutions should not stop at offering leadership preparation programs for center leadership only. Higher education institutions should also support the wider field of ECE including policy and advocacy. Therefore, higher education institutions should consider offering terminal degrees specifically in early childhood educational leadership. Such institutions tend to focus on elementary, secondary, and higher education leadership programs but fail to recognize the leadership needs of those in the early childhood education field (Austin, 2014).
- Field experience opportunities should be offered to those ECE students desiring to become ECE leaders.

- More professional development opportunities should be made available for free or low-cost either at the local, state, or national level. Examples of such opportunities are those offered by the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership (2014).
- Leadership and management training for ECE should consider frameworks such as the whole leadership framework when structuring such programs (Abel, 2017).
- Local, state, and national funding for private ECE programs should be increased.
- The owners of private ECE programs should offer more support to their directors.
- More mentoring and coaching programs for ECE directors and aspiring leaders should be available.
- Investment funds should focus on retrofitting buildings and upgrading the facilities' electrical, heating, and cooling systems to newer, sustainable systems that can help save financial and environmental resources. Investing in the safety of playgrounds is part of investing in the ECE facilities and is equally important.

Recommendations for Further Study

There is a growing national and global interest in ECE leadership research (Kirby et al., 2021). However, this research continues to be limited and is mainly focus on the quality of education provided to children (Douglass, 2019). Therefore, based on the evidence provided in this study, it is recommended that more research be conducted in other areas of leadership and management as specified in the conceptual framework of this study, the whole leadership framework (Abel et al., 2017). Possible areas of research can focus on leadership essentials such as personal attributes and on other areas of administrative leadership, such as strategic, advocacy, and community leadership.

When recommending topics for future research, it is important and ethical to reference the limitations and delimitations of the current study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). A limitation of this study is that a qualitative methodology was used for data analysis, which cannot be truly replicated (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Another limitation was the lack of previous research studies on ECE leadership and management topics. The delimitations for the present study included females only with less than 10 years of experience as ECE directors. Additionally, the participants were from single, private-for-profit centers located in Los Angeles County, CA. Furthermore, the study excluded ECE directors from public and private non-profit, faith-based, military-based, and school district programs, as well as home-based directors and assistant directors. Therefore, future research should include male participants, females with more years of experience, participants from other ethnic groups, other counties, states, and territories, and the inclusion of other ECE programs operating under different financial structures.

Conclusion

Leading and managing ECE programs is a multifaceted responsibility, often posing challenges for ECE directors (Gibbs et al., 2019). Some of the challenges includes meeting the demands of effectively leading an ECE organization, successfully managing a business, upholding educational standards, and addressing the needs of children, families, and staff (Gibbs et al., 2019). Considering that leadership and management research within the ECE field is limited (Lee, 2022), this study took a closer examination of the challenges ECE directors face in their jobs, specifically to address academic and professional preparation for their leadership role, leadership knowledge and preparation, and management responsibilities, experiences, and needs.

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to explore the leadership and management challenges of six Los Angeles County based, private-for-profit, single-center early childhood education female directors experience in their leadership and management roles. For the purpose of this study, there was a specific focus on the directors' experiences with academic and professional preparation for their leadership roles, organizational leadership, and business operational tasks. The findings of the study showed that all participants encountered obstacles linked to organizational leadership such as organizational climate, organizational culture, and organizational change. The participants also faced challenges regarding managing the business operational tasks of their center such as financial management, human resources, physical facilities, and time and task management. Each director in this study responded and managed these challenges differently. These directors employed strategies tailored to the needs of their programs.

In conclusion, this qualitative narrative inquiry study has extended the knowledge about the lived experiences of ECE directors and the leadership and management challenge they experienced, as well as the strategies they employed. The findings suggest that ECE directors need better leadership and management academic and professional preparation before beginning a director's position. A common sentiment among all participants was the value of mentorship and the advantages of having a mentor and a supportive network. This study lays the groundwork for future research to include leadership and management topics and other types of ECE programs excluded from this study. The results of this study will partially address the existing gap in the literature on the subject. Further study is needed to better understand the full spectrum of the challenges ECE directors experience in their leadership and management roles.

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APPENDIX A
IRB APPROVAL LETTER



**Office of Research
Integrity Institutional Review Board**
Biddeford Campus

11 Hills Beach Road, Biddeford, ME 04005
(207) 602-2244 T (207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus
716 Stevens Ave., Portland, ME 04103
DATE OF LETTER: May 2, 2023

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Yeni Portillo-Lemus
FACULTY ADVISOR: Ian A. Menchini, Ed.D.

PROJECT NUMBER: 0523-01
RECORD NUMBER: 0523-01-01

PROJECT TITLE: An Exploration of Leadership and Management Challenges Among Early Childhood Education Directors

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
SUBMISSION DATE: April 29, 2023
ACTION: Determination of Exempt Status
DECISION DATE: May 2, 2023
REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption Category # 2ii

The Office of Research Integrity has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above-referenced project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

You are responsible for conducting this project in accordance with the approved study documents, and all applicable UNE policies and procedures.

If any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the research proposal summary, data collection instruments, interview/survey questions, recruitment materials, participant information sheet, and/or other approved study documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment for review to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.

If you have any questions, please send an e-mail to irb@une.edu and reference the project number as specified above within the correspondence.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Kennedy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Bob" and last name "Kennedy" clearly legible.

Bob Kennedy, MS
Director of Research Integrity

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL E-MAIL

Dear Early Childhood Education Director:

The purpose of this email is to ask for your participation in a research study on leadership in and management of early childhood education (ECE) directors. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of New England interested in the leadership and management challenges directors experience in their professional roles. This research will give directors an opportunity to share their experiences and perceptions of leadership and management challenges.

I am contacting you because you are a director in a licensed early childhood education program in Los Angeles, California, and your experiences, perceptions, and other comments relative to your experience will greatly contribute to this research project.

Participants need to be at least 18 years old. They also need to possess the minimum academic and professional experience required by the State of California per Title 22 of the California Administrative Code. As a participant in this study, you will be committing to approximately 45 minutes to one hour of time for a Zoom interview on your leadership and management experience as the director of your ECE program.

I will also contact you after the initial interview to ensure the accuracy of the interview transcripts. All information obtained in the interview will be recorded and maintained in accordance with the guidelines of institutional research for human subjects. The interview will be treated confidentially and maintained and used in such a way as to protect your identity. I have attached the informed consent form for your review.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please indicate your interest by responding to this e-mail within the next week. Your response can be sent to me at the following address: yportillolemus@une.edu. If you prefer, you may also contact me by phone at 213-344-8968.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Yeni Portillo-Lemus, MA
Doctoral Candidate
The College of Graduate and Professional Studies
University of New England

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET



INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board

Version Date:	4/28/2023
IRB Project #:	0523-01
Title of Project:	An Exploration of Leadership and Management Challenges Among Early Childhood Education Directors
Principal Investigator (PI):	Yeni Portillo-Lemus, MA
PI Contact Information:	yportillolemus@une.edu 213-344-8968

INTRODUCTION

- This is a project being conducted for research purposes. Your participation is completely voluntary.
- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with important details about this research project.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions about this research project, now, during or after the project is complete.
- The use of the word ‘we’ in the Information Sheet refers to the Principal Investigator and/or other research staff.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?

The general purpose of this project is to explore the lived experiences of center-based challenges related to the leadership and management of early childhood education (ECE) programs. This research study intends to explore the challenges of six ECE directors from licensed single, independent, for-profit, center-based programs in the State of California, specifically Los Angeles County as part of the principal investigator’s dissertation research.

WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?

You are being asked to participate in this research project because you self-identify as:

- 1) Age 18 or older
- 2) Identify as female



Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board

INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

- 3) Completion of a high school diploma or GED and 15 child development units of ECE college courses with three of those units being in administration or staff relations.
- 4) At least four years of teaching experience in a licensed ECE program.
- 5) Have less than 10 years of experience as ECE directors in full-day programs.
- 6) Must be from licensed single, independent, for-profit, center-based programs in the State of California, specifically Los Angeles County.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS STUDY?

- You will be asked to participate in one semi structured interview with the principal investigator that will last approximately 45 minutes to one hour over Zoom.
- You will be assigned a pseudonym to be used in place of your name for the study.
- You will be given the opportunity to leave your camera on or off during the interview, and your interview will be recorded using Zoom.
- You will be emailed a copy of your interview restored narrative to review for accuracy. You will have seven calendar days to respond, or the principal investigator will assume that you have no comments and the restored narrative will be assumed to be accurate.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS INVOLVED FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

The risks involved with participation in this research project are minimal and may include an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality. This risk will be minimized by using pseudonym for each of the participants names and by eliminating any identifying information from the study. Participants will have the opportunity to review their restored narratives for accuracy and will be given the choice to have their cameras off during the interview. Participants have the right to skip or not answer any questions, for any reason.

Please see the 'PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY' section below for steps we will take to minimize an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality from occurring.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

There are no likely benefits to you by being in this research project; however, the information we collect may help us understand the experiences of ECE directors.

WILL YOU BE COMPENSATED FOR BEING IN THIS PROJECT?



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You will not be compensated for being in this research project.

WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY?

We will do our best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research project could be reviewed by representatives of the University such as the Office of Research Integrity and/or the Institutional Review Board.

The results of this research project may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any papers or talks are given about this research, your name will not be used. We may use data from this research project that has been permanently stripped of personal identifiers in future research without obtaining your consent.

- Data will only be collected during one-on-one participant interviews using Zoom, no information will be taken without participant consent, and restoried narratives will be checked by participants for accuracy before it is added to the study.
- Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and any personally identifying information will be stripped from the interview transcript.
- All names and e-mails gathered during recruitment will be recorded and linked to a uniquely assigned pseudonym within a master list.
- The master list will be kept securely and separately from the study data and accessible only to the principal investigator.
- The interview will be conducted in a private setting to ensure others cannot hear your conversation.
- Participants are given the option to turn off their cameras during Zoom interview.
- Once participant checking of the restoried narratives is complete, the recorded Zoom interview will be destroyed. Once all restoried narratives have been verified by the participants, the master list of personal information will be destroyed.
- All other study data will be retained on record for three years after the completion of the project and then destroyed. The study data may be accessed upon request by representatives of the University (e.g., faculty advisors, Office of Research Integrity, etc.) when necessary.
- All data collected will be stored on a password protected personal laptop computer accessible only by the principal investigator.

WHAT IF YOU WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to choose not to participate, or to withdraw your participation at any time until the Master List is destroyed without penalty or loss of benefits. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in this project.

If you request to withdraw from this project, the data collected about you will be deleted when the master list is in existence, but the researcher may not be able to do so after the master list is destroyed.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints, or concerns, you should contact the Principal Investigator listed on the first page of this document.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Integrity at (207) 602-2244 or via e-mail at irb@une.edu.

APPENDIX D

CONFIRMATION E-MAIL

Dear Participant:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my dissertation research on leadership and management in early childhood education. This research study intends to explore the challenges ECE directors experience, the strategies and resources needed to support their leadership and management roles, and the findings to serve as guideposts that will benefit directors and inform future research. Your participation is valuable to my research and to the greater field of early childhood education.

This letter serves to confirm our interview appointment scheduled for _____. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes to one hour. I have attached a copy of the information sheet form for your review. Please review this document and we will review it on the day of the interview.

If you have any questions or concerns that you would like to discuss with me before the interview, please feel free to contact me at 213-344-8968 or yportillolemus@une.edu.

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study. Your participation will add to the body of knowledge about early childhood education directors' leadership and management. I look forward to meeting you soon.

Sincerely,

Yeni Portillo-Lemus, MA
Doctoral Candidate
The College of Graduate and Professional Studies
University of New England

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**AN EXPLORATION OF THE LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES
AMONG EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION DIRECTORS**

Yeni Portillo-Lemus

Demographic Information:

- 1) What is your age range?
- 2) What is your gender identity?
- 3) How many years of experience do you have as an early childhood education director?

Center Information:

- 1) What is the licensed capacity of your center?
 - a. What are the ages of children served?
 - b. How many classrooms do you have?
 - c. What are the hours of operation?
- 2) How long has your center been in operation?

Educational and Professional Experience:

- 1) What was your previous position before becoming a director?
- 2) Please tell me about your current position.
 - a. How long have you been in this position?
 - b. How did this professional opportunity come about?
- 3) What is the highest college degree you hold? If the degree is not in early childhood education (ECE) or child development, the following question will be asked:

- a. How many units have you completed in early childhood education or child development?
 - b. Please explain your academic preparation in leadership and business management (i.e., budgeting, human resources, strategic planning)?
- 4) When you took on the role of a ECE director, did you feel adequately prepared (academically and/or professionally) for the leadership and management roles you perform? Why or why not?

Leadership:

- 1) Why did you decide to become an ECE director?
- 2) How would you describe your role as leader in an ECE setting?
- 3) Can you describe the barriers you have experienced in becoming an effective leader?
- 4) What have been the greatest challenges you have experienced as the director (and leader) of an ECE program?
 - a. How have you dealt with those challenges?
 - b. What strategies have you used in order to become an effective leader?

Organizational Climate:

- 1) What are the challenges or barriers you find in maintaining a positive organizational climate?
- 2) What strategies do you implement to maintain a positive organizational climate?

Organizational Change:

- 1) What have been the greatest challenges you have experienced during a time of organizational change or crisis management?
 - a. How have you dealt with those challenges?

- 2) What strategies have you found effective in helping you make positive organizational changes in your center?

Organizational Culture:

- 1) What are the barriers/challenges to establishing a positive organizational culture?
- 2) What strategies have you found effective in helping you establish a positive organizational culture?

Management:

- 1) Please tell me about your role as a business manager of your program.
- 2) What are the administrative tasks that take up most of your time? Why?
- 3) What have been the greatest management challenges you have experienced as a director?
- 4) Tell me about the strategies you have used to manage the routine tasks of your typical day.
 - a. What tools do you use to manage your time?
 - b. What tasks give you the greatest satisfaction in your position as a director?
 - c. What are the least satisfactory tasks and aspects of your position as a director?

Human Resources:

- 1) How many teaching and other staff members do you supervise?
- 2) What do you find most challenging when it comes to hiring, training, and retaining?
 - a. How have you dealt with those challenges?
- 3) What strategies have you found effective in helping you as a human resource manager?

Fiscal Management:

- 1) When you took on the role of director, did you feel adequately prepared for the business management role of your job? Why or why not?

- 2) How would you describe your financial and business knowledge and skills?
- 3) What would you say are the challenges in managing your center from a financial perspective?
- 4) Tell me about the strategies you have used that have helped you run a financially viable center?

Facilities Management

- 1) What would you say are the challenges when it comes to the physical facilities of your center? Why are these challenges?
- 2) If there are challenges, what actions have you taken to mitigate those challenges? Have those actions being effective? Why or why not?
- 3) What strategies do you implement to ensure the health and safety of the physical facilities including the classroom environment that are conducive to high quality education?

Ending Questions:

- 1) Is there anything else you can think of that would help me understand your leadership and management challenges as an ECE director?
- 2) Is there anything else you would like to add or share that I have not asked?

Closing Remark:

Thank you very much for taking the time to share your experiences, the challenges, the strategies, and the joy of being an ECE leader and manager.