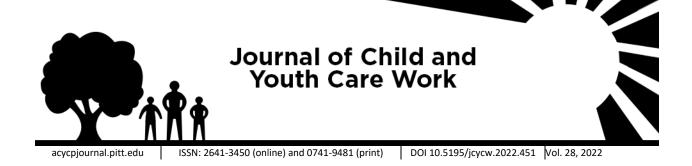# Journal of Child and Youth Care Work

Unlikely Additions:

One Institute of Higher Education plus Two Early Childhood Education and Care Centers equals Investment in Female Adult Learners

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Abstract

Early childcare professionals represent a cross-section of two underrepresented groups in higher education: childcare educators, and adult female learners. According to the United States Bureau of Labor and Statistics, the childcare workforce in 2020 was predominantly female and lacking post high-school education (https://www.bls.gov/ooh/personal-care-and-service/childcare-workers.htm). Early childcare professionals often receive minimal training and compensation (Harwood & Tukonic, 2016). Participants in a university credentialing program for non-traditional students participated in a focus group as part of a program evaluation. The data was collected and analyzed. Themes were identified, including anticipated themes such as concerns about cost of college credits, and successfully completing coursework while simultaneously managing personal and work challenges. However, themes of professionalism, and the significance of belonging to a community of learners were not anticipated. The focus group provided rich discussion, and the analysis offers thoughts on advocacy for and with the early childhood education and care workforce.

Keywords: early childhood education and care, professionalism, community of learners, advocacy

Introduction

Many early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers have read the whimsical picture book *1 + 1 = 5 and Other Unlikely Additions,* written by David LaRochelle and illustrated by Brenda Sexton. It is a playful take on math, with unique equations included such as one set of twins plus one set of triplets equals five babies. Aside from making addition creative and fun for young children, the book also illuminates the point that there can be more than one "correct" answer, and many ways to examine a problem. The purpose of this article is to discuss one higher education institution's partnership with two childcare centers that led to a variety of "correct" answers, and thoughts on some of the longstanding issues within the early childhood education and care field.

Although researchers, and the general population, recognize quality early childhood education and care as vital (Campbell-Barr, et al., 2015; Macewan, 2015; Press, et al., 2020), early childhood educators have historically faced numerous challenges, particularly teachers who work predominantly with infants and toddlers (birth to age three). ECEC professionals report higher levels of stress, depression and concern over workload, and lower levels of respect and job satisfaction when compared to national workforce averages (Farewell et al., 2021). Long workdays of caring for and teaching young children often lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout, which results in higher job absenteeism (Bekker et al., 2005) and turnover (Russell et. al, 2010).

Additionally, many outside the profession believe the only major work requirement is to have a caring and nurturing disposition, and that play comes naturally to children, therefore adults need only be present, mostly to ensure safety (Press, et al., 2020). More complex engagement with children is welcome, but unnecessary (Press, et al., 2020). In short, ECEC professionals are often regarded as glorified babysitters (Hylton & Vu, 2019), and the ECEC workforce has long been molded through lenses of genderism and maternalism (Lundkvist et al., 2017). These commonly held fallacies are some of the reasons for diminished professional respect, low compensation, and a predominantly female, about 96 percent, workforce (Press, et al., 2020; Van Dyke, 2015).

Early Childhood Education and Care

In the United States, early childhood programming is separated by age groups, with preschool programming relying on a variety of funding streams (Phillips et al., 2016) unlike K-3 program funding which consistently comes from the Department of Education. The funding resources, along with other inconsistencies, has led to a hierarchical structure in the early childhood education and care field in the United States, and in other countries who structure their ECEC programs similarly (Cumming, Logan, et. al., 2020). Childcare professionals who work with infants and toddlers are generally at the bottom of the ECEC hierarchy.

Historically, it is difficult to keep teachers with university degrees in ECEC working with infants and toddlers, when they can make more money, and earn more respect by teaching Kindergarten where children are only twelve to eighteen months older (Dalton, 2021). According to the United States Bureau of Labor and Statistics' May 2020 report, the mean wage for national childcare workers is $12.24/hour, putting ECEC professionals on par with dishwashers, at $12.31/hour, animal care workers at $13.97/hour, lobby attendants/ticket takers at $12.69/hour, and parking attendants at $13.42/hour (https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_nat.htm.

Paradoxically, the period of time during which children are in ECEC is a time of incredible brain development. The stretch between birth and two years of age is increasingly recognized as a remarkable window of time when children establish and solidify cognitive abilities, skills, and behaviors that last a lifespan (Gilmore, et al., 2018; Nelson, et al., 2007). The current understandings of brain development and ECEC have raised the profile of importance for the early years (Diamond & Whitington, 2015; Mustand, 2008; Shonkoff & Bales, 2011).

The University Credential Program

In an attempt to bolster wages, and educational levels of childcare workers, infant-toddler programming was one focus of the federal government's Race to the Top grant. The federal government awarded money to state governments, who in turn challenged higher education institutions to find creative and sustainable avenues for

ECEC professionals to earn college level credits through non-traditional pathways. Faculty grant awardees at one private, suburban university aligned existing undergraduate coursework with core knowledge competencies (CKCs) that guide best practices for infant/toddler curriculum and created an infant/toddler credential program.

The university had an existing partnership with an area non-profit urban childcare center. The director of the urban center invited one professor to attend a director's consortium meeting to "pitch" the program. After the meeting, a second center became a partner in the program. Ultimately, the two centers were a good balance for the partnership, as one was a non-profit organization with several sites, and the other was a large privately owned center in a suburban area.

A four-course, 12-credit sequence of undergraduate coursework was designed to be completed in a calendar year. The Infant/Toddler credential included three semi-traditional courses, worth nine credits, and a final three-credit capstone course. The capstone provided an opportunity for non-traditional students to put theory into practice. Infant/toddler capstone required students to complete 120 hours of direct work with infants and toddlers, participate in a bi-weekly seminar, and create a portfolio. The portfolio demonstrated mastery of core knowledge competencies.

The program was formatted with the majority of the classes held on-site at the two partner early childcare centers.   One class meeting per semester was held at the university. The credits in the credential program were to be earned from university undergraduate courses that already existed within the early childhood Bachelor of Science (BS) program. The difference between the courses offered to traditional students seeking a B.S. and the childcare educators seeking the twelve-credit credential was the course delivery model. Traditional fifteen-week undergraduate courses were reformatted to the 8-week graduate design. Course assignments were carefully restructured to fit the needs of the childcare educators. Course objectives and outcomes stayed the same. Additionally, part of the grant requirement was to enable the childcare educators to earn college credits that were "stackable," meaning the credits could be applied to a bachelor's degree in early childhood at the host university or other universities with early childhood or child development degree programs, or to a community college associate degree program.

The program was open and inclusive to any childcare educator with a high school diploma or General Education Degree (GED), and a recommendation from their center coordinator or director. The university held open registration on-site at several childcare centers. Perhaps the greatest benefit of this partnership program was the payment of tuition for the childcare educators through a state scholarship program. Childcare educators in turn made a professional commitment to work at their respective childcare centers for a certain amount of time after completing the program. This commitment was managed between the childcare educators and their centers.

The faculty who structured the program, decided to have one full-time faculty member with expertise in early childhood education and early intervention teach all four of the courses. Having one consistent faculty member involved throughout the program, particularly during the first semester, provided formative feedback through a clear channel between the childcare centers and the university. Overall, this strategy worked well and strengthened the program.

Methods

Data Collection

As the 12-month program was ending students were invited to participate in a focus group discussion. Institutional Review Board approval was not required as the discussion was voluntary and part of the program evaluation process. Data was collected throughout the year for program evaluation, including emails and text messages that students spontaneously shared. After the first course, the designated teaching professor began to notice a positive change in the students' levels of engagement and confidence in their assignments and materials. She and a colleague decided to capture informal qualitative data in the form of selected direct quotes and expressed attitudes of the students, to mark individual and group progress. As the program was ending, it seemed students had transformed in ways that had not been anticipated. The research took on an organic phenomenological approach when faculty decided to formally examine the experiences of the participants through a focus group, and selected interviews.

Holding a focus group was determined to be the most appropriate data collection method as students had been meeting weekly as a group for a year and were quite comfortable with each other. Additionally, all participants held at least one full-time job, many held a second job, and all had varied personal obligations and responsibilities. The focus group was held at a childcare center and was one hour in length. All students were advised that participation was optional, and not connected to the coursework or grades in any way. All students chose to participate. One teaching professor and one administrative professor were present. The teaching professor stayed only to introduce the second professor, whom students had never met. The teaching professor then removed herself from the room, and the administrator led the discussion.

Additionally, an opportunity arose for two students, one from each center, to co-present with faculty at a statewide early childhood conference. They were interviewed (separately and virtually) about presenting, and on being representatives of the program at the statewide conference. After all focus group and interview data were collected, recorded and transcribed in order to remain in alignment with Colaizzi's (1978) model for analysis (discussed in a subsequent section) individual follow-up was done as needed with the participants.

Participants

Participants included 11 infant/toddler childcare professionals who had completed the credential program. All were female and employed full-time at one of the two partner childcare centers (cc), ten were parents, three had a second job, and four were caregivers in multi-generational homes taking care of either grandchildren or parents. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Race	Age	Parental Status	Child with Disabilities	Employment	Multigenerational Caregiver
1	W	>40	Single Parent	No	Full-time cc + 2nd job	Yes
2	W	>40	Parenting w/ Partner	No	Full-time cc + 2nd job	Yes
3	B	>40	Parenting w/ Partner	No	Full-time cc	Yes
4	W	<40	No Children	No	Full-time cc	No
5	W	<40	Parenting w/ Partner	Yes	Full-time cc	No
6	W	<40	Parenting w/ Partner	No	Full-time cc	No
7	W	<40	Single Parent	Yes	Full-time cc	No
8	B	<40	Single Parent	Yes	Full-time cc + 2nd job	No
9	W	<40	Single Parent	Yes	Full-time cc	No
10	W	<40	Single Parent	No	Full-time cc	No
11	W	>40	Single Parent	No	Full-tine cc	Yes

Data Analysis

In alignment with Colaizzi's (1978) model, analysis followed a descriptive phenomenological approach. Phenomonology collects and analyzes lived experiences in order to understand a phenomenon. For this study, the lived experiences of early childhood education and care workers, who worked with infants and toddlers, were collected. The phenomenon under study was the participants' access to higher education, and potential growth and empowerment as female adult learners. The focus group discussion and two interviews were recorded, transcribed, read, and re-read with the authors extracting noteworthy ideas. The researchers individually formulated meanings and categorized their individualized meanings into themes. They met to share analyses and

develop a consensus on results. The researchers returned to the participants as needed with follow-up questions and incorporated all information into a final analysis.

It is important to make a distinction between descriptive and interpretative phenomenology. Descriptive phenomenology focuses entirely on the participants, with the researcher bracketing his or her biases by setting aside preconceived notions, theoretical understandings, and life experiences (Gregory, 2019; Le Vasseur, 2003). However, interpretative phenomenology includes the experiences of both the researcher and the participants to inform the study (Sorsa et al., 2015) and embraces subjectivity (Dorfler & Stierand, 2020).   Bracketing can be challenging when a researcher is immersed in a field of study, or wedded to a model or theoretical framework (Le Vasseur, 2003; Sorsa, et al., 2015). Bracketing will be discussed further in the limitations of the study**.**

Results

Three themes emerged program components, empowerment, and community of learners.

Theme 1: Program Components

Identified program components included three subthemes, access to guest experts, faculty fit, and not surprisingly, program cost.

Guest Experts. Courses had invited lecturers that included a children's librarian, the director of a childcare center housed in the county courthouse, and a pediatric physical therapist. The librarian shared resources, including preassembled kits, created specifically for infants and toddlers, available for checkout. About half the group did not have a library card and signed up during class. One commented, "I had no idea how the library had changed since I was last there." The director of a childcare drop-in center housed in family court shared information about the program's curriculum, and ways she and her staff deal with difficult situations including child abuse and protection from abuse court orders. After the director presented, one student remarked, "That was so helpful because she answered many questions about abuse and the child welfare system. I didn't know a program like that existed."

The final speaker, a pediatric physical therapist, who also has a Ph.D. in neuroscience, talked about gross and fine motor skill development for infants through preschoolers. Students were easily able to link theory to practice and had many questions about children in their care. After learning of the therapist's credentials, one student said, "All these really smart people came to work with us." Students valued the experts taking time to share their knowledge. They appreciated being able to ask direct questions. They seemed to gain a sense of validation being part of a professional conversation among peers, and experts in the field, and began to see themselves as contributing participants.

Faculty Fit. Students also reflected on how nervous they were to start the program. One said, "The understanding that Dr. X has for us is awesome. She explains everything, which helps you want to continue." Another commented, "…the first day Dr. X said something about the syllabus. I had no idea what that was, but she explained everything." Another reflected, "I don't think I would've stayed if Dr. X wasn't our teacher." Students valued the extra time devoted to questions, the connections to real world skills and issues, and the professor's availability outside of class via email or text messages.

Cost. One of the substantial benefits of the program were available state scholarships. One noted, "I would not have had any money set aside to ever send myself to school." Another chimed in "I'll be honest…I'm bettering myself, but the free tuition is motivating me." All 11 participants agreed that without scholarship support, none would have been financially able to participate in the credential program. It was not surprising that program cost arose as a main theme. Early childhood educators do not make a living wage. They are the most poorly compensated group in the educational workforce, often live below the government poverty line, rely on social service programs to survive (McDonald, et. al., 2018; Phillips, et. al., 2016), and have been documented as having food insecurity issues (Loh, et. al., 2021).

Theme 2: Empowerment

Empowerment also emerged as a theme as students discussed personal and educational growth that made them feel confident and self-assured. Some in childcare have shared they feel ashamed for not having a college degree, while simultaneously recognizing that a degree is not the sole arbitrator of a competent educator (Arndt, et. al., 2020). As the program progressed, students began to arrive to class prepared and with questions. They connected course material with work at their centers. The students had a growing self-realization that they understood children and child development, just not in formal theoretical ways. As they began to understand theory, they started to see themselves as both students and professional practitioners.

We are students. One student shared her thoughts via email regarding a final course grade, a B: "I just got off my second job and you made my week!!!!! That grade means so much to me… Thank you for believing in me Dr. X." Another said, "I've been out of college for a while, and wasn't sure how I was going to balance work, home, school. It was stressful, and hard, but I loved the new information. … it was exciting and kept me going another day." A third added, "It's been 42 years since I was in school. I remember hearing about PowerPoints, and I have never done any of that, but learning all we have. I've enjoyed it." One participant offered, "the classes… give you confidence that you know what you're doing." Lastly, "This [program] has gotten me into a pattern of reading more on child development."

At the end of the first 8-week course, the group was required to attend their first class on the campus. Students expressed trepidation about a range of things such as finding the campus, parking, and giving formal presentations in the university conference room in front of their peers. However, once on campus, the anxiety began to dissolve. By the third course, they were looking forward to learning on campus. One student remarked, "I feel like a real college student!" To which the professor replied, "You are a real college student!"

We are practitioners. One student who is also a mother commented, "I think the program helped me to be a better parent. I can go back to my house and instead of just letting my son get on my nerves, I think, 'Why is he doing this?'" Others remarked, "It makes you think about what kind of teacher you want to be and how important our jobs are" and "You think you know everything, because you've been in daycare for a while, but when you're in class and you're talking about different things you see it in a whole other light." Another chimed in, "Dr. X helped us understand why the kids are reacting the way they're reacting as opposed to us saying (using exasperated voice) 'Oh, my, gosh, why are they acting this way?!' And then you can be a little more sympathetic with them, and it helps." A final thought on being a practitioner, "I learned so much about kids' development. It has given me a better outlook on how babies and pre-toddlers think and act. Why they do what they do."

Theme 3: Support through a Community of Learners

Additionally, the third theme, belonging to a community of learners was deemed important to participants. Although this theme was somewhat unexpected, it aligned with national and international research (Manning, et al., 2019; Sumaryanta, et al., 2019; Khurshid, 2017) demonstrating a supportive community of learners is a powerful tool for underrepresented groups. One student remarked, "It was helpful to see the other center[s] and interact with other colleagues. They gave me ideas for our center." The participants said they felt valued to have experts share critical information that directly related to what they were doing in their center. "Being able to ask them [guest speakers], ask questions…the interaction with them was the best."

Near the program's conclusion, two students, from two different centers, co-presented with faculty at a statewide early childhood conference. They were interviewed about the professional and personal impact of the program. "Doing a presentation in front of the class was a four or five on the anxiety scale, but this was a ten. Even though you've been prepped, and you've practiced, it was still nerve wracking…but this was the highlight of everything for me. Being able to give a voice to my point of view…" The community of learners theme continued, "My anxiety level was way up there. I texted S. (her co-presenter) saying I don't know if I can do this, and she boosted me up. We've been helping and pushing each other along all year."

Both women felt program participation transformed them in ways that they felt would last a lifetime. One summed up like this, "I loved sitting down and getting to talk to other people in the same occupation as me, and hearing their stories. …We all have so much to deal with but …being able to bounce ideas and understand why kids react the way they do makes it seem better and easier to cope with at the end of the day. This program totally changed my perspectives in so many ways."

Discussion

This descriptive phenomenological research yielded important findings for the childcare profession and those in higher education who wish to advocate for the early childcare professional workforce, the majority of whom are female. Adult female learners are highly motivated but need reasonable accessible pathways to relevant college credit coursework. The women who pursue college credits will likely experience job satisfaction in their childcare setting or satisfaction in their current quality of life station (Knowles et al., 2015). However, costs are out of reach for infant-toddler educators. Unless scholarship opportunities continue to be available, individual infant-toddler childcare educators are unable to shoulder the financial burdens of continuing education.

Adult Female Learners

When compared to male counterparts, adult female learners face more multifaceted lifestyles. Females often hold multiple roles, and commonly encounter pressures of child-care, financial and school responsibilities (Bauer & Mott, 1990). Working mothers find making time for higher education challenging (Lin, 2016). Additionally, women often lack self-confidence in their academic capabilities, and are not satisfied with their academic performance (Lin, 2016). Despite barriers, adult female learners have been described as a fast-growing segment in higher education (Dzakiria 2013; Lin, 2016).

Self-Efficacy and Andragogy

Tenets of andragogy and self-efficacy likely have an effect on early childhood teacher retention, engagement and professional development. Andragogy, similar to pedagogy, is the art and science of teaching adults (Knowles, 1975), which highlights leading and educating *alongside* of adults (Mews, 2020). Andragogy values adult students' life experiences, the value adults place on the knowledge presented, and internal motivation (Knowles, 1975; Mews, 2020). The relevance of course material, and instructor qualities, also play a role in learning. How adults engage with their own learning and knowledge construction and remain motivated depends on a variety of factors including geographical proximity to higher education institutes, and work, family, and social commitments (Steyn & Van Tonder, 2017).

Self-efficacy influences individuals' effort and persistence. When an individual believes they can accomplish a task, they work harder to engage, and sustain effort even in the face of obstacles (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006). Four features of human agency make self-efficacy a factor linked to success. They include intentionality – creating a realistic action plan; forethought – setting goals and anticipating barriers and outcomes; self-regulation – monitoring and modifying actions; and self-examination – reflecting on personal efficacy and adjusting as needed (Bandura, 2006).

Teacher self-efficacy has been strongly related to success in teaching (Gavora, 2010). Although little is known about engagement and self-efficacy with early childhood educators specifically (Lipscomb, et al., 2021), self-efficacy has been identified as a key contributor to early childhood teacher retention (Kilgallon et. al., 2008). Additionally, teachers' self-efficacy has been linked to a number of factors including greater work engagement, and an interest in continuing professional development (Lipscomb et al., 2021). Perhaps reflecting on how we engage the ECEC workforce with professional development opportunities is an initial discussion point.

Reflective Supervision

Reflective supervision is commonplace within the zero to three population, and includes creating a safe, supportive environment that promotes learning, consistent feedback, formal reflection, and collaboration. The techniques used in creating and running the program, unexpectedly aligned with many tenets of reflective supervision. A further exploration of the use of reflective supervision with ECEC adult female learners may be a worthy contribution to the field. Infant-toddler professionals, and other early childhood educators, would likely be familiar with reflective supervision. If the principles formally align with the andragogy learning theory it might be worthwhile for faculty and administration in higher education to consider both frameworks when creating programming options, especially in the fields of early childhood education and care.

Retention

Specific program components seem to help with retention, especially within a predominantly female workforce. Components included a flexible registration process, geographical considerations, and careful selection of faculty, who will strategically provide authentic opportunities that validate early childhood educators' experiences with young children. It also important to bear in mind that professionalism is not always equal to credentialism (Arndt et. al., 2021), as adult students with experience bring much to the professional table.

Additionally, the quality and rigor of coursework should be maintained, and the value of creating a community of learners should not be overlooked. The foundational steps to building a community of learners, who support each other through the program and beyond, seems to be an important factor of adult female student personal and professional growth. Validating and celebrating the sense of empowerment that knowledge brings to infant/toddler educators is a significant piece of successful program creation.

This credential program provides early childhood educators a pathway to better understand the needs of children in their care, families, communities, and themselves. The childcare educators in this study demonstrated the four features of human agency in self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006). They were intentional in their plan to take courses and receive the infant/toddler credential. They had forethought in setting goals and anticipating barriers. They adopted self-regulating strategies and, finally, reflected on their personal efficacy and made adjustments throughout the twelve months.

It is interesting to note, that during the course of the infant-toddler credential program, the university was awarded a second larger grant. With the second grant, a special education credential was created and offered. Eighty percent of the original cohort continued taking courses for an additional semester to earn the special education credential. According to Hargreaves (2000), teachers differentiate between being professional (the quality of one's work) and being a professional (how one is seen by others, including status in the community and compensation levels). This credential program seemed to provide ECEC teachers pathways to both.

Future Directions

There have been criticisms of similar ECEC grant programs in other states (Van Dyke, 2015). In particular, the idea that ECEC professionals are akin to indentured servants, who owe time to childcare facilities, and that the programs serve the state over the individual (Van Dyke, 2015). Unique partnerships between childcare and higher education are certainly not the one "correct" answer for issues surrounding the infant/toddler workforce. However, they may be a step in the right direction for investing in adult female childcare professionals.

Being Professional and Being a Professional

Hargreaves (2000) differentiation between *being professional* and *being a professional* provides thoughts for future research directions. The grant programs seem to focus on the quality of one's work (being professional) which includes increased teacher knowledge about child development, early literacy, and families among other topics. Teachers' understandings and application of knowledge around these topics likely lead to more positive outcomes for young children. Existing literature points to high quality ECEC work being linked to how professionals demonstrate skills and competencies, often by earning a credential, or a two- or four-year degree (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015). It is perhaps not surprising then, that a focal point of the grant was to support development of a statewide progression to provide professionals who work with infants and toddlers a pipeline to earn an initial Infant/Toddler credential, an Associate degree, and eventually Bachelor's degree with ECED certification.

However, the grant enrollees seemed to focus equally on *being a professional*, including how others view the profession, status in the community, and compensation. There is little existing research that examines the complex nature of educators' work, including the well-being of the educators themselves (Cumming et al., 2020; Cumming et al., 2021; Hall-Kenyon et al. 2014). However, the field is beginning to understand that the mental and physical well-being of ECEC staff can either support or hinder the development of the children in their care (Farewell, et al. 2021). Existing programming that follows long-held rules are unlikely to produce appropriate substantial and sustainable change (Cumming et al, 2021).

In fact, continuing to tolerate few opportunities for professional development, the current pathways for advancement in the field, and an inequitable wage gap will likely "perpetuate a cycle of disparity" (Allen & Kelly, 2015, p.7). Therefore, it may be time to think about how to create alternate pathways to support early childhood education and care professionals. Minimal pay is clearly an issue in ECEC, but other reasons for high turnover rates include the perceived value (or lack of value) of the work, and little or no connection to the larger ECEC professional community (Hylton & Vu, 2019).

The university faculty for this infant/toddler credentialing program carefully considered contextual factors in the learners' lives that might potentially influence motivation (Morris, 2019) and attempted to provide support as students progressed through the program. Faculty attempted to move away from customary teacher-directed processes that are not always effective or appropriate for adult learners (Morris, 2019). Moreover, bringing in

expert guest speakers, and providing time for in class discussions among the students seemed to demonstrate links to the larger ECEC professional community. These connections proved to be large positives for students.

An examination of the importance of the infant/toddler workforce's desire to be professional and to be seen as a professional would make an interesting future study with a larger sample size. The faculty member teaching the courses was mindful of andragogy principles, and the participating women's personal and educational needs, which in turn helped the women to achieve a level of self-efficacy.

Advocacy

It seems trends in ECEC are moving in the right direction (spotlight on importance of brain development, some access to professional development for teachers), but working toward a standard living wage is still an issue. There is a need for ECEC professionals to begin to advocate for themselves, for more respect, and for fair compensation. According to Mevawalla and Hadley (2012), few studies have examined ECEC educators' perceptions of power in raising their own professional status. In the field of ECEC, advocacy is commonly understood to mean advocating for a child or a family (Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012). However, ECEC professionals' advocacy for themselves is a much less explored phenomenon (Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012).

ECEC teachers perceive advocacy as the responsibility of center directors, while center directors perceive advocacy responsibilities to lie with formal professional ECEC organizations and political leaders (Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012). Recommendations from an Australian early childhood workforce productivity report (2011) surmised that due to the often hectic and busy working conditions of ECEC teachers there is little time for professional development, unless it is offered after work hours, and at the cost of the teacher. In the United States, professional development opportunities for the ECEC workforce have been described as "scarce and inconsistent" (Phillips et al., 2016, p. 139). This structure presents problems in supporting the workforce to stay abreast of current trends and policies.

In-service training and professional development in ECEC is "paramount" for early childhood educators to develop advocacy skills (Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012, p. 78). During the recent global pandemic, national and state attention focused on the necessity of quality childcare, and the professionals who are employed as teachers of young children. The pandemic highlighted the importance of childcare, and its impact on the economy. Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren recently stated childcare is "infrastructure for families" (Kamenetz & Nadworny, 2020). President Biden shared his hope that workers in caregiving professions finally be given "the respect they deserve" (Linskey & Viser, 2020).

As far back as the late 1990s, economists have heralded childcare as critical to keeping almost all other industries going (Dalton, 2021), and childcare has been noted as a key pillar of the economy (Foley & Doliveira, 2021). Moving ECEC teachers toward an understanding of their place in a larger professional community, and publicly discussing with them, their value to the economy, and to children and families, may help to put ECEC professionals on a path of self-advocacy. The unlikely addition of one higher education institution, and two childcare centers equaled adult female learner educational growth and empowerment, a sum that was greater than its parts. Although credential programming and ECEC professional development are not a panacea, they may help to facilitate and hasten a predominantly adult female workforce's understanding of their collective worth.

Limitations

The limitations with this study include the small number of participants. Also, all participants were in the same university program, and employees of one of two childcare centers that were university partnership sites. The researchers were part of the planning and teaching in this program, which may also be considered a limitation. However, insights from this group both add to and align with current literature. Additionally, one researcher has spent her entire career teaching and researching in the field of early childhood education and care, including early childhood special education. Had the analysis been completed solely by the ECEC researcher the study likely would have been framed as an interpretative phenomenological study. However, the second researcher has spent decades in the elementary and special education fields. The shared data analysis process provided a natural bracketing procedure as one theoretical framework, nor one professional lens did not dominate the discourse and analysis.

Conflict of Interest
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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