

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PREFERRED PRACTICES

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Abstract

This thesis paper aims to investigate and compare the preferred practices in early childhood education and care (ECEC) across four categories: public/universal, private, outdoor, and daycare or family/in-home care. The study utilized online surveys and interviews with parents/guardians of 3-6 year old children and program directors serving children within the same age range. The primary objective was initially to identify best practices in early childhood care. However, as the study progressed, it became evident that the different approaches to early childhood education and care offered unique and valuable contributions. The research shifted from there to an exploration of the substance and effectiveness of various methods rather than seeking a singular “best” practice. The comparative analysis encompasses a range of factors including program structure, parent involvement, social-emotional development of children, access to services, and influences of the COVID-19 pandemic and social media. Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of early childhood care by highlighting the multifaceted nature of preference. The findings underscore the significance of context-specific considerations and the need for tailored approaches to meet the unique needs of children and families in different settings. This research encourages further dialogue on effective practices in early childhood care to ensure the provision of high-quality education and support for young children.

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Introduction

Early childhood is the span between birth and about age 8 for a child. Early childhood education is the learning period between birth and the child's entrance to formal education, usually at age five with kindergarten. However, some definitions end the range with the first set of standardized tests, which comes in third grade in the United States, around age 8. The study of early childhood education examines a child's holistic development through the lenses of social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth and well-being. There has not always been an interest in how children acclimate to the world and in society, but in the last few centuries, there has been an uptrend in modalities and focuses as they surround children. Numerous studies investigating early childhood education programs have demonstrated short-term enhancements in cognitive abilities and early academic performance, aligned with long-term benefits such as increased income, educational attainment, and a decreased likelihood of engaging in criminal activities (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013).

History of Early Childhood Education and Care

The idea of special consideration for a child's development can be traced back to the 1500s with Martin Luther (1483 - 1546), a German theologian, religious reformer, and advocate for education reform. Luther recognized the importance of compulsory education for all regardless of social status and believed that teaching children to read would provide earlier, independent access to the Bible (McKinney, 2017). Luther believed that human salvation was only attainable through a personal relationship with God; this relationship could only be nurtured and enforced by an individual's understanding of the Bible. He also supported the idea of classical education, a liberal arts education rooted in ancient history and language, to further the

understanding one could have of the Bible (i.e. in other languages, avoiding translation, etc.). That being said, Luther was a major advocate for the establishment of schools that would serve both boys and girls which, although not the goal of his actions, aided in “greater equality and the acquisition of basic knowledge by as many members of the community as possible” leading to more opportunities and potential for higher incomes (Lutz and Klingholz, 2017, p. 15).

Expanding upon Luther’s advocacy, John Comenius (1592-1670), a Moravian bishop, is credited as the father of the modernized education system. Comenius formulated three strategies critical to the foundation of the current education system: 1) school systems, 2) educational theories, and 3) educational methods. He believed that all children should not only learn but also learn together. As is followed by the United States, Comenius’ breakdown of the school system looks like kindergarten, primary school, secondary school, college, and university. Additionally, Comenius felt that children should learn in their primary language and at their natural pace, starting with simple concepts and gradually progressing to more complex themes. His educational methods, detailed in nineteen principles, aimed to provide comprehensive education to all from various perspectives, a philosophy called pansophism (Schwarz & Martin, 2012).

The foundation laid by Luther and Comenius sparked the question of how best to educate children, leading to the emergence of child development theorists and innovative educational approaches (Bonnay, 2022). Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) understood the relationship between children and play, eventually founding the kindergarten education program that is popular today. This foundation created a wave of research and philosophies in the childcare industry. Maria Montessori (1870-1952) noted the advantages of self-directed learning in children while Jean Piaget (1896-1980) believed that children learned best through active and direct interactions. Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) championed socialization as a medium for cognitive, social, and linguistic

development. John Dewey (1859-1952) believed that learning should originate from the interests of the children and supported the “democratically-run classroom”, one of the major influences for the Bank Street School for Children. Waldorf School founder, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) prioritized the development of free and morally responsible youth. Erik Erikson (1902-1994) underscored the importance of socio-emotional learning in early childhood education. Reggio Emilia founder, Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), aimed to document the learning and interest of the children and use that information to inform programming, and David Weikart (1931-2003), the founder of HighScope, focused on the child’s intellectual maturity. By no means is this information on the study of early childhood exhaustive, but it does show how quickly the industry has taken off, particularly in the last two centuries. These influential figures reflect the diverse perspectives in early childhood education.

Although there are a variety of early childhood education and care settings, this research will focus on the following four sub-genres: private, public, outdoor, and daycare or family/in-home care. These four divisions, though not exclusive, seem to best represent the major categories of early childcare and will work as the basis of this paper’s program comparisons.

Day Care or Family/In-home Education and Care

Daycare refers to a program that provides age-appropriate care, developmental assistance, and support to children, typically under the age of five. Unlike more scholastic forms of care, daycares generally focus more on creating nurturing environments and can either be center- or home-based. Elizabeth Rose (1998), in her book “A Mother’s Job: The History of Day Care, 1890-1960,” explains the origins of daycare as a response to the plight of children whose mothers needed to work and were unable to stay home with them, “Day care emerged out of

pity...—pity for children who played on city streets while their mothers went to work to support them. The female philanthropists who established the first day nurseries wanted to bring these poor children in from the streets and create surrogate homes to shelter, nourish, and train them...They saw mothers' wage work as an unfortunate necessity, a heroic response to the tragedy of poverty” (p. 13). The role of daycare expanded as a result of World War II when women entered the workforce in record numbers, inevitably requiring care for their children.

Although the idea of day care encompasses all of the terms listed below, for this paper it will mean center-based child care programs that are not registered as a school, home-based programs (including nannies), and care by family/relatives. Due to daycares coming in many different forms, the benefits vary. In a center-based program or where multiple children of different ages and backgrounds can interact, there may be more social development (Bowne, 2017). In a more private care structure, such as a nanny or family/relative, there can be a greater amount of individualized attention, which can aid in emotional development. Daycare and family/in-home care can also allow for greater flexibility than scholastic-based programs as well as access to familiar environments, depending on the location of the program. Known negatives include limited professional oversight as not all daycares are held to the same standards with regard to staff education and training. For in-home and/or family-based care, isolation is a risk as there are fewer opportunities for children to interact with peers compared to center-based programs and school settings (Bennett & Hogarth, 2018).

Privately Funded Early Childhood Education and Care

The simplest definition of private education and/or care is a program or school that is privately or independently owned and funded without the assistance of local, state, or federal governments. These programs typically rely on direct payments from parents, donations, or other

forms of sponsorship. Consequently, private programs tend to have higher associated costs and may hire teachers with, or offer to pay for specialized training to fit the needs of their program. An example of this is Montessori education where it is often required that a teacher have a Montessori certification. In requiring additional levels or areas of education, programs are able to ensure that the staff is representing and delivering based on the qualities and philosophies of said program. It is important to note that no two programs, even within the same category, are identical. The use of a specific ideology in a program's name does not guarantee adherence to all its original principles and values due to varying interpretations. Furthermore, not all private programs closely align with a specific philosophy, but they typically have distinct policies and procedures that make them unique. According to Niche, a ranking and review site commonly used for education, private preschool programs such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, and Bank Street are among the main and most popular preschool approaches. These ideologies emphasize individual aspiration and learning, often using outdoor time to enhance the curriculum.

As with all of the program types mentioned in this paper, private preschool education tends to boast certain advantages. In these types of programs, it is more common to see smaller class sizes, which allow instructors to develop a deeper understanding of their students and provide more personalized instruction (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013). Private preschools often foster stronger family engagement, creating a sense of community within the school that enhances a child's comfort in learning and exploration. Private education has a reputation for providing safer, more disciplined, and more respectful environments, further promoting feelings of trust and community. According to Ho and Funk (2018), children who are socially and emotionally healthy tend to navigate relationships and social situations better, showing greater

motivation and engagement. Relationships, both with peers and staff, play crucial roles in young children's learning. Demonstrations of warmth, affection, and respect help children establish secure relationships, feel confident in their explorations, ask questions, and express their thoughts and feelings. Additionally, private preschool and care options offer more freedom in curriculum selection, allowing for materials that support the goals and mission of the school. Private programs also have greater autonomy over admission and can be more selective in their process as compared to their public counterparts. Areas of concern regarding private schools primarily involve cost and access to student support, particularly for those with special needs. Additionally, there are greater instances of disparity through a lack of economic, racial, and religious diversity (Downs, 2021).

Publicly Funded Early Childhood Education and Care

Publicly funded early childhood education programs, such as Head Start and Universal 3-/Pre-Kindergarten, offer a cost-effective option for families as there is usually no direct cost associated with attendance. Depending on the area, public education can have a negative wrap. In bigger cities, the lack of charge can lead to long wait lists or there may be a need for more programs to meet the demand of children in need of care. As the name suggests, publicly funded programs are supported mainly through government funding which means that there is also a higher necessity to meet specific predetermined measures of success to attain and maintain the already limited funding (Cannon et al., 2017). Although not the sole focus, one primary goal of public programs is kindergarten readiness meaning a child's academic preparedness for entrance into the public primary education system (Fitzpatrick, 2008). In this way, students and teachers are tasked with meeting certain educational goals, standards, and practices that are not required

of other program types. In public programs, instructors are more often required to retain a teaching certificate/degree and act within more stringent confines.

The first publicly funded preschool program in the United States was Head Start, created in 1965 under the Johnson administration (Office of Head Start, 2023). The program's original purpose was to address the educational and developmental needs of economically disadvantaged children, specifically 3- and 4-year olds. The original Head Start planning committee was comprised mainly of physicians and psychologists, offering little academic representation. Children enrolled in the program were handled in a holistic manner receiving comprehensive early childhood education along with health screenings, nutrition education, and parent involvement services. Families can also access employment, housing, and education services (Zigler & Styco, 2010). According to the National Head Start Association, there are noticeable effects within the first year that carry through the child's entire primary and secondary education as well as adulthood. By the end of their time in a Head Start program, children show an increased readiness for Kindergarten, score better than a control group on cognitive and social-emotional development, show increased impulse control, and are more likely to be immunized and up-to-date on dental and health screenings. During their scholastic journeys, children who attended Head Start programs exhibited fewer negative behaviors and attention problems, saw a 30-50% decrease in mortality rates for five- to nine-year-olds, and had fewer child welfare encounters. As adults, Head Start recipients had an increased likelihood of graduating from high school, attending college, and receiving some sort of post-secondary degree, license, or certificate. Through access to high-quality education, Head Start reports that the return on its investment can reach as much as 13% annually (National Head Start Association, 2022).

The influence and need of the national Head Start program prompted states to begin funding their early childhood education programs like Universal 3- and Pre-Kindergarten. It should be noted that public funding could refer to government-funded programs as well as vouchers, which can be used towards private center-based and daycare programs. The main goal of government subsidiaries was to support working families rather than educate children (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013).

Outdoor Early Childhood Education and Care

Outdoor education and care is an emerging trend in the United States, although it has been well established and successful in other countries for decades. This model recognizes the inherent relationship between children and nature, fostering an environment that promotes learning and self-growth. Though exact times may vary, children in an outdoor program spend an increased amount of time outdoors no matter the weather, unless there is a safety risk to the children (Coe, 2017). Their indoor time may be limited to restrooms, naps, and meals though many have found their way around these confines by using tents for more extreme weather conditions. Outdoor education focuses mostly on emotional regulation, socialization, and motor development through a child's relationship with the natural world as a path to learning. For example, children in outdoor programs engage in discovery-based learning activities like climbing trees (motor skills and risk analysis), building forts (communication, collaboration, and experimenting with materials), and more (Aldo Leopold Nature Center, n.d). As it is a newer model for early childhood education and care, there is still a lot to be determined and regulated when it comes to the educational experience, risk management, and training of the staff and instructors.

There are various models of outdoor education including, but not limited to, Forest Kindergarten and Nature-Based Preschools. Eva Änggård's 2010 article entitled "Making Use of 'Nature' in an Outdoor Preschool: Classroom, Home, and Fairyland", advocates for the use of nature as an active classroom which utilizes the outdoor environment to help shape a child's sense of self. As the title suggests, a preschool environment surrounded by nature can provide diverse educational experiences, facilitate the same comfort as home, and allow children to explore the depths of their imaginations unhindered. She concludes, "an important advantage of outdoor education...is that the outdoor space, as opposed to the classroom, is an authentic environment. The outdoor environment provides experience-based learning. The experiences inspire the children to ask questions, questions that are not forced upon them from above and that create good conditions for learning...there is an opposition between 'natural' and 'artificial', where nature is seen as a genuine and authentic context, while the classroom is seen as artificial and unnatural" (Änggård, 2010, p. 20-21). Änggård acknowledges the contrast between the wild, chaotic nature and the safe, organized home but also notes that with mastery of certain skills, safety, and routine can be achieved in nature enacting a similar trust in that environment as with home. "Nature is understood as cosmos, a place for contemplation—but it is also comprehended as chaos, which has to be mastered" (Änggård, 2020, p. 21). The same chaos that nature brings can also breed an organic space for imagination due to the many ties between fairytales and nature as well as the chance to watch varying forms, identities, and species. Extended access to natural environments can help children to develop self-discipline, relieve stress, facilitate creativity, and increase attention (Kuo, 2019).

Current Research

This paper aims to understand the decisions related to early childhood education and care from the perspectives of parents/guardians and program directors. For parents, what factors (personally, environmentally, financially, etc.) influence their choice of an early childhood education and care program for their child(ren)? Through the directors, I would like to understand the goal or focus of their program and how they differ from other education or care options. These research questions will be investigated through online surveys and interviews that examine aspects of emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support as demonstrated by Pelatti et al.'s 2016 study entitled "Examining Quality in Two Preschool Settings: Publicly Funded Early Childhood Education and Inclusive Early Childhood Education Classrooms".

Emotional support is defined as "a teacher's regard for children's emotional development and well-being, including nurturing teacher and peer relationships" (Pelatti et al., 2016, p. 832). Classroom organization refers to non-instructional learning opportunities and settings; i.e., the composition of the areas that the children use, their daily schedules, and the ways in which instructors can anticipate children's emotions and behaviors. Instructional support is the type and frequency of subject learning (math, literacy, etc.). "Most ECE [Early Childhood Education] classrooms have moderate to high levels of emotional support and classroom organization, yet the area of instructional support is substantially lower than the other two domains" (Pelatti et al., 2016, p. 832). One of the goals of this thesis paper is to understand the primary objectives of the different program types by using, in part, the categories presented by Pelatti and colleagues. I hope to use these parameters as a standard of measurement to compare the varying early childhood education and care modalities to see where they align with the previous statement. As

mentioned above, the early childhood stage of life refers to the time between birth and age eight but this paper targets children between the ages of three and six where engagement in early childhood education and care is more common (Bowne et al., 2017).

The shared benefits of all preschool programs are accessibility to early learning, social interaction with peers as well as instructors, wide-ranging activities, structure, and regulation, and that it is, in essence, a trial run to formal education (Cannon et al., 2017). Through early childhood education, children can learn academic, cognitive, socio-emotional, language, and literacy skills. On the other hand, the same website mentioned a few detractions to preschools such as a lack of one-on-one time, introducing learning concepts too early, separation anxiety, and too much rigidity. Previous to some more recent educational reforms, childhood learning was a more relaxed process including multiple opportunities to play as well as less academic pressure and competition. The majority of countries worldwide now have some type of compulsory education period for children; some backed by laws and others common practice (Paglayan, 2021). In the United States, depending on the state, children are required to attend schools starting between the ages of five and eight and can end their formal education between the ages of sixteen and nineteen unless, of course, choosing to continue past secondary education.

As educational opportunities for children become more plentiful for younger ages (i.e. Universal 3-/Pre-Kindergarten), it is critical to figure out not only what the short- and long-term effects are but also if they are positive or negative. Looking into the different types of early childhood education and care offerings allows this process to begin. By combining research and interviews, this project aims to provide insight into these early childhood education and care avenues. The finding will enhance understanding of the childcare landscape and can assist

stakeholders in making informed decisions to support the optimal development and well-being of young children and their families.

Methods

Overview

Participants for this study were recruited through social media flyers and direct outreach. Both methods provided a brief overview of the project and its details before requesting participation. Two separate recruitment processes occurred concurrently: one for parents/guardians of children aged three to six years old, and another for program directors or heads of schools serving children in the same age group. The flyers circulating brought potential participants to a landing page (Appendix G) which featured more detail on the project, information about the researcher, links to both the informed consent documents as well as the online survey, and for participants asked and willing, a manner in which to schedule their virtual interview. Following their recruitment, each participant virtually signed an informed consent form (sample in the appendix). The interview questions for this project were influenced by Pelatti et al's 2016 study, which provided a framework for analyzing the results. All of the questions asked relate in some way to the emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support of the programs as perceived by the parents and the program itself. My initial goal was to recruit five program directors and ten parents/guardians to complete an online demographics survey and then move on to an hour-long video conference interview, which went into detail on the decisions and factors that go into their role for choosing between care options for their child(ren) and those of others. Participants were able to indicate through the last

question on the online survey whether they were interested in participating in the interview and only those individuals were considered.

Parent/Guardian Participants

To obtain a diverse sample of responses, parents/guardians were recruited primarily through flyers on social media, with a special interest in parent and school groups. The informed consent (Appendix A) and survey (Appendix C) were delivered online, and built through Survey Monkey. The former asked the participants to create a Participant Identification Number, which was used to separate identifiable information from the response.

Although the Informed Consent Form was located on the landing page, before submitting the online survey, participants are presented with the form and asked to type their signature and date the submission to imply comprehension and understanding of their participation. Seventeen parents or guardians of children between the ages of 3 and 6 completed the survey and six participated in the videoconference interviews. Of those willing to participate, interviewees were selected in order to 1) ensure representation from each available program type and 2) offer diversity across areas like location, household income, and family size. The interview questions are listed in the appendix and although the goal is for all to be answered in as detailed a capacity as possible, no participant was forced to respond to any question and could end the interview at any time.

The online survey responses were collected over a three-month period between March and May 2023, using the Survey Monkey website. Twenty individuals filled out the online Informed Consent. Of those, seventeen completed the online demographic and base information survey. Three (18%) were based in Ontario, Canada, while the remaining fourteen (82%) were from the United States. Four (24%) indicated that their households included the presence of

adults over the age of 50, three (18%) families had older minor children (between 7 and 17 years old), and six (35%) had younger minor children (under the age of 3). In terms of gender composition, sixteen (94%) had at least one adult male (18+) in the household and the same was true for adult females (18+). Thirteen families (76%) indicated the presence of at least one male child aged 17 or younger, and twelve families (71%) had at least one female child.

Program Directors Participants

Similar to the process for parents/guardians, program directors were recruited through social media or word of mouth, then asked to participate in an online survey (Appendix D) followed by an hour-long interview (Appendix E) if willing and chosen. As with the parents/guardians, the final question in the online survey asked if the individual was interested in participating in the video conference interview. To establish confidentiality, the names of the childcare facilities were never requested, solely the category of childcare and the location, as general as the participant wanted to be. During the interview, as opposed to the parents/guardians, program directors were asked about the structure, support, and parental involvement within their programs. Some of the questions did mirror what was asked of the parents to identify any overlap in ideologies, focuses, and concerns. Twenty-six individuals signed the online Informed Consent for the study and, of those, twenty-two completed the Program Director survey. Of the 22, eleven (50%) identified their role/title as Director, six (27%) identified as Principals, and three (14%) as Superintendents. One person (5%) identified themselves as a founder and another (5%) as a manager within their organization. This research was conducted between March and May 2023. Nineteen (87%) of the participants were related to programs located within New York State. The other three individuals (14%) represented the state of New Hampshire, the province of Ontario, Canada, and the capital city of Tokyo, Japan.

In consideration of their time, participants of the videoconference interview were compensated with a \$20 gift card. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded, both video and audio, and transcribed. The copies of these interviews are kept in a secure, password-protected folder accessible solely to the researcher to maintain confidentiality. The methods of study used in this project were approved as exempt by an Institutional Review Board; only following this approval was research initiated.

Measures

The online survey was created and conducted via Survey Monkey. There were thirteen questions in both the parent/guardian (Appendix C) and program director (Appendix D) survey. The questions asked here pertained to demographic information like household size, composition, and income for the parents and school type, number of staff, and children for the directors. After signing the Informed Consent, also done through Survey Monkey, the parents and program directors were led directly to their respective surveys, minimizing the chance of a participant not completing both online components of the project. Following the surveys, if the participant indicated their willingness, they may be invited to participate in an interview. Although an hour of time was set aside for each interview, the meetings averaged about 30-35 minutes. During these interviews, participants were asked about the factors that led them to their childcare decisions, the goals and focus they had/have for the programs they are connected to, and advice they would give to others in their positions using the information they have now.

Results

Online Parent Survey Results

Educational Information: Of the seventeen families who participated in the online survey, nine indicated that their child(ren) currently attends a Public or Universal Preschool program, nine families have children in a Private program, and four families indicated using Day Care or Family/In-home Care. As for the parents/guardians themselves, eight attended Public/Universal care, nine went to a private program, and seven were in a daycare or family/in-home care. Unfortunately, none of the participating families were involved with outdoor care. This question was presented in a “check all that apply” manner, individuals were able to choose more than one option for which their children in the 3-6 year old age range currently attend and for what they attended as a child in that same age range. Mostly, the numbers reflect each other except for in the daycare or family/in-home care category. This could be a small insight into the evolution of childcare from a time when stay-at-home parenting or utilizing relational care was the more prevalent form of early childcare as opposed to participating in more academic and curricula-based programs, which is more common for modern families. All participants indicated that their children attended their program 4-5 days per week, and fifteen families (88%) had more than one early childhood education and care option. Please note that participating families were able to indicate more than one ECEC program type meaning that they may participate or have participated in multiple forms of ECEC simultaneously.

Financial Information: One (6%) participant indicated a household income between \$75,000 and \$99,999, three (18%) participants had household incomes between \$100,000 and \$149,999, and the remaining thirteen (76%) selected a household income of over \$150,000.

When asked about their monthly ECEC expenses: five families indicated free care, two families paid \$100 or less, two families paid between \$500 and \$999, seven families paid between \$1000 and \$1999, and one family paid between \$2000 and \$2999.

Goals for Early Childhood Education and Care: Fifteen participants answered the survey question on their goals for their early childhood education and care choice. These responses were put into six categories: Instructional Support (11), Socialization (12), Emotional Support (4), Kindergarten Readiness (3), Classroom Organization (4), and Allowing the Parents to Work (2). One survey specifically mentioned their ECEC choice as a way to “get [their] child out of the house” and another specified learning another language as being key to their choice. Categorization was based on keywords used in the participant responses and one response can be grouped into multiple categories. For example, one parent responded, “One goal for sending my child into an Early Childhood Education and Care Program was to assist with my child’s development intellectually, socially, emotionally, and physically. Also to prepare my child with the reading and math skills to enter Kindergarten”. This response was categorized as relating to emotional support, instructional support, socialization, and Kindergarten readiness.

Parent Interview Results

Of the seventeen individuals who completed the online survey, eleven indicated an interest in participating in the hour-long video conference interview. Six of these parents/guardians were selected. During the interview process, each parent was asked about twenty questions, the most influential and common questions and responses are mentioned below. For fundamental understanding, portions of the participant-provided demographic information is listed below.

Participant Identification Number	Location	Family Composition	Program Type Child is Enrolled	Program Type Parent was Enrolled	Monthly Fee (USD)	Household Income
P-1029	New York, USA	2 adults, 2 children - (1 aged 3-6)	Public	Public and Day Care or Family/In-home Care	\$1600	Over \$150,000
P-1122	Massachusetts USA	2 adults, 2 children - (1 aged 3-6)	Public	Family/In-home Care	\$0	Over \$150,000
P-1983	Ontario, Canada	3 adults, 2 children - (2 aged 3-6)	Public and Day Care or Family/In-home Care	Public and Day Care or Family/In-home Care	\$2000	Over \$150,000
P-3963	Ontario, Canada	2 adults, 3 children - (3 aged 3-6)	Public and Day Care or Family/In-home Care	Public and Day Care or Family/In-home Care	\$921	Over \$150,000
P-5150	New York, USA	2 adults, 1 child - (1 aged 3-6)	Private	Private	\$1000	Over \$150,000
P-8562	New York, USA	2 adults, 2 children - (1 aged 3-6)	Public	Private	\$0	Over \$150,000

- *What is your definition of early childhood? How important is this period to overall child development?*

The first question asked to both groups of participants was their understanding of the age span that early childhood covered. Overall the assumption of the parents was that early childhood ended when a child reached kindergarten, age 5 or 6. It is worth noting that there was one outlier who believed early childhood extends until age 10. The significance of early childhood care in children's development was highlighted by all respondents. One interviewee, P-5150, emphasized the crucial role of early childhood care as the foundation for children's lives. According to them, during this stage, children acquire essential skills such as manners, interpersonal skills, conflict resolution, and a range of lifelong abilities. This respondent stressed

that the lessons learned during early childhood care would significantly impact children's lives in the long run. Another parent, P-8562, emphasized the importance of socialization during this time. They strongly believed in the need for children to interact with their peers, indicating that a lack of exposure to others their age might lead to missed opportunities. P-3963 mentioned the evolution of options between their childhood and now saying, "I think it's becoming known for the last 10-15 years or so that it's very important. When I was a kid the JK [Junior Kindergarten] did not exist". As shown above, this participant is based in Canada where Junior Kindergarten is the equivalent of Pre-Kindergarten in America, a program for 4-year-old children.

- *Do you believe that early childhood education and care (ECEC) is popular in your community?*

The responses to this question were consistent among the group. P-8562 mentioned that early childhood care is highly sought after, as evidenced by constant inquiry and demand from working parents, particularly mothers, a point emphasized by P-1983. Another participant, P-8562, expressed gratitude for the ability to find a program for their child at age 3 as most options they explored were unaffordable. This parent specifically said, "[you] basically have to work to put your child in care so that you can work" demonstrating the financial burden families face. P-5150 attributed the popularity of early childhood education and care to the educated/education-minded community in which they reside. In this community, people "see the importance of education as early as possible". In addition to the affordability issue, P-1983 and P-1122 acknowledged that there is limited availability, in option and admission, to high quality early childhood care programs across the varying program types. P-3963's response emphasized the societal expectations when it came to early childhood care, "I don't know anybody that has not sent their kids to daycare and Kindergarten". P-1029 felt that early childhood education and

care is popular in their community but raised concerns about potential misconceptions. The participant highlighted that sometimes parents rely on educators primarily for babysitting purposes rather than recognizing their crucial role in the development of their children. This understanding suggests that popularity may not always align with a comprehensive understanding of the purpose and value of early childhood care. The interviews, specifically these responses, show how sought-after early childhood care is given the need for parents to work and the educational value they possess.

- *What were your goals for enrolling your child(ren) into an early childhood education and care program?*

During the interviews, several themes emerged as considerations for parents when choosing programs including socialization for the children as well as goal and value alignment between the parents/guardians and childcare providers. P-1122 and P-8562 both highlighted socialization. The former aimed to provide opportunities for their reserved child to interact with other children, encouraging them to step out of their comfort zones in a supportive environment. While the latter believed that there was more active learning when surrounded by like-minded others of a similar age. P-5150 and P-1029 discussed the importance of collaboration between home and school and emphasized finding a program that aligned with their values, beliefs, and objectives. P-5150 specifically mentioned the development of resilience and independence without excessive coddling and P-1029 specified shared learning, social, and behavior goals like collaborative play, personal boundaries, and a foundational introduction to educational concepts.

- *How did you find out about the program your child is currently enrolled in?*

Regarding how the parents found out about the program their child is currently enrolled in, the responses highlighted various methods such as city and municipal lotteries, personal

connections, social media, and referrals. P-1029 utilized an online platform called WonderSchool to find a suitable early childhood program for their child within their geographic location. After the initial program they selected closed, they relied on recommendations from the previous provider to ensure similar curricula, routines, and standards. P-1983 and P-8562 mentioned finding their programs through childcare lotteries. In the former's case, the lottery is for the free universal age 3-5 programs while the latter's lottery is for all fee-based programs registered through the province for all care before grade school. The Canadian parents, P-1983 and P-3963, mentioned that registration for these programs could begin before the child is even born. Depending on the community, families can be on the waitlist for anywhere between 1 and 18 months. P-1983 specifically mentioned that some parents, including highly educated and accomplished professionals, have to decide to care for their children themselves due to the high demand and low number of spots available. Two parents, P-5150 and P-1122, also mentioned finding their programs through personal connections. The former interviewee knew the Head of School and their family from living in the same neighborhood for many years and the latter attended high school with the director of their child's program. Through having a personal connection there is an additional level of comfort and confidence in the values and standards of the program.

- *Did the early childhood education and care you received influence your choices for your child(ren)?*

The participants shared their memories and reflections on their own early care experiences. While most recalled fond memories, many could not speak to the educational components. P-1029 described their experience with a babysitter noting that there was play and social interaction but a lack of structure and method in the activities. They contrasted this with the

programs they selected for their own children, which prioritize structured play and educational standards, which match parent expectations. Another parent, P-1122, did not receive any early care, outside of their mother, until Kindergarten. P-1983 discussed having an in-home nanny which provided their mother with flexibility but also occasional babysitters who, as also described by P-1029, lack formal early childhood education and oversight. One participant, P-8562, recalled being in school from the age of 3 making the educational setting feel safe for them which influenced their decision to start their children in school as soon as possible.

- *Were there any limitations that impacted your choice for your child?*

The participants shared their considerations when choosing programs for their children. Aside from availability, other concerns include financial constraints, hours of operation, student and staff diversity, location, and language preferences. The only parent participant to mention language, P-3963 spoke of their bilingual family and wanting their children to have access to both languages, which played a major role in their decision-making process. Three of the six emphasized a diverse student and/or staff population with one saying, “If this is the time period in her life where we can choose that and have her see an educator, early, that looks like her — we wanted to do that and were pretty intentional about that” (P-1029).

- *How does your child’s program emotionally and academically support them? What does communication look like?*

Emotional and academic support look different to all individuals based on their expectations of and experiences with the programs. Often communication plays a large part in both the parent and program’s understanding of each other and the needs of the child. P-8562 express that their child’s program focuses on emotional support through various tools, such as a feelings board and a therapeutic room. However, they mentioned a desire for more academic support, particularly in

reading and speech. According to a study by Denham and Brown (2010), promoting emotional intelligence in early childhood education positively affects children's social and emotional well-being. This aligns with P-8562's observation of the emphasis of the program on support in this way. This parent was dissatisfied with the lack of in-person communication. Effective communication between parents and teachers is crucial for understanding children's progress and addressing concerns. A 2001 article highlighted the significance of home-school partnerships in academic and overall success (Epstein, 2001). P-5150 noted that their child's program offers emotional support through teachers who engage with children warmly and gently, effectively de-escalating emotional issues. This aligns with research on the importance of teacher-child interactions and the positive impact they can have on a child's emotional and self-regulation (Denham et al., 2012). Almost all of the respondents use some sort of app to communicate with their children's programs. Where technology has previously been thought of as a distraction, it is now a bridge between the classroom and home. Communication between parents and teachers has been recognized as a valuable tool for increasing parental involvement and engagement (Graham-Clay, 2005).

- *From your understanding, what does a typical day look like for your child? Is your understanding based more on information from your child or from the program?*

Communication impacted the understanding that parents have of their children's day-to-day activities within the program. When asked about what a typical day for their children looks like, most parents were able to provide fairly detailed breakdowns of what went on in their child's program due to technological applications like ClassDojo and HiMama, which allow for communication between parents and school administration. Generally, the days include some form of circle time or group meeting, rotating instructional/play stations or learning blocks,

outdoor play, and hands-on activity. Though the itineraries for the activities consisted of the same general ideas, each participant spoke differently about the order of the events and the emphasis put on different areas. This could either be indicative of the focus of their program type or show the values that the parents place on certain aspects of the program. The use of technology was also spoken of as a way to connect parents with their children as they had insight into their day, which could lead to more informative conversations, giving room for bonding moments between caregiver and child.

- *Did you notice any changes to/in your program due to the COVID-19 pandemic? What are your thoughts on early childhood education and care in social media?*

COVID-19's impact on education, in general, is still not completely understood so when asked about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their early childhood care experiences, the parents/guardians described various adjustments, including mask-wearing, limited parental access to facilities, reduced activities and events, and, in some cases, the need for parents to volunteer due to staff shortages. The use of masks had both positive and negative impacts, with some children finding comfort and the social distance that it provided, while others faced challenges in communication, particularly speech due to their presence. These changes, which in some ways, are still in effect, whether through policy or habit, highlight the need for further research on the long-term effects of the pandemic on early childhood development.

Regarding the influence of social media on perceptions of early childhood education and care, the interviewees expressed mixed opinions. Some found social media to be a valuable source of ideas, inspiration, and connection with other parents. They appreciated the exchange of information and the ability to access diverse perspectives. These parents noted their own increased reference to social media during the pandemic as children were home in efforts to

provide developmentally enriching experiences while not attending their early childhood program. However, concerns were raised about the unrealistic portrayal of parenting experiences and the potential negative impacts on parenting choices and expectations.

Online Director Survey Results

Program Information: The twenty-two online survey participants were given four different early childhood education and care program options to categorize themselves into: Universal 3-/Pre-Kindergarten or Public Pre-Kindergarten/Kindergarten or Elementary School (13 - 59%), Private Preschool, Pre-Kindergarten/Kindergarten, or Elementary School (4 - 18%), Outdoor Preschool, Pre-Kindergarten/Kindergarten, or Elementary School (2 - 9%), and Day Care or Family/In-home Care (3 - 14%). Thirteen of the individuals reported free programs; three programs listed their monthly costs between \$500 and \$999, and five reported costs between \$1000 and \$1999. In terms of children served, the responses ranged from 17 to 450 children.

Staff Information: Each participant was asked about the number of staff members their programs employed and the answers ranged from 2 to over 60. The individuals completing the survey were asked about their highest level of education, four (18%) indicated a Bachelor's Degree, thirteen (59%) reported a Master's Degree, and five (23%) indicated a Doctoral Degree. When asked about the required education levels for their staff five (23%) listed a High School Diploma/GED, three (14%) said an Associate's Degree, four (18%) indicated a Bachelor's Degree, and ten (46%) reported a Master's Degree.

Goals for Early Childhood Education and Care: 21 of the 22 participants answered the write-in response on goals for the children and families who attend their program. Of those

responses, the following themes were repeated: Socialization (10), Instructional Support (11), Kindergarten Readiness (8), Family/Community (5), Confidence (4), and Emotional Support (3).

Director Interview Results

Of the twenty-two individuals who completed the online survey, fourteen indicated interest in participating in the hour-long video conference interview. Six of them were selected. One individual who participated in the video conference interview without completing the online survey making a total of seven program Director interviewees. During the interview process, each parent was asked about twenty questions, the most influential and common questions and responses are mentioned below. For fundamental understanding, portions of the participant-provided demographic information is listed below.

Participant Identification Number	Role and Location	Program Type	Cost	Students: Staff Employed	Director Education	Staff Required Education
D-1003	Director, New York	Day Care or Family/In-home Care	\$1,000 - \$2,000	325:83	Master's Degree	High School Diploma/ GED
D-1319	Assistant Superintendent New York	Public	\$0	130:25	Master's Degree	Master's Degree
D-2116	Principal, New York	Private	Did Not Answer	100:20	Master's Degree	Master's Degree
D-2121	Director, New York	Private	\$5,800 - \$12,300	75:12	Master's Degree	Master's Degree
D-5544	Director, Canada	Day Care or Family/In-home Care	\$30/day	331:60	Bachelor's Degree	High School Diploma/ GED
D-7067	Principal, New York	Public	\$0	180:50	Master's Degree	High School Diploma/ GED

- *What is your definition of early childhood? How important is this period to overall child development?*

When asked about their definitions of early childhood, participants provided a range of perspectives, offering their reasons behind why this time is so critical in youth development. D-0423 defined early childhood as the age range from 0 to 6 or 7 years old. They emphasized the importance of supporting children, families, and teachers. Their program incorporated elements from Montessori and Reggio approaches, with a strong emphasis on play-based education and creating safe spaces for children to follow their own lead. D-1003 defined early childhood as the period from birth until age 5 when the child enters the public school system. They highlighted the importance of providing proper care and nutrition during this period and regarded their philosophy as “transformative leadership” or understanding and responding to the specific needs of the child and the situation. D-2116 defined early childhood as ranging from prenatal to second grade, emphasizing the formation of neural pathways, brain development, and the acquisition of social skills. They relied on developmentally appropriate and integrated current best practices and pedagogies to support the changing needs of children. They also expressed their perspective on standardized tests, recognizing their potential for evaluating educational outcomes but acknowledging the controversies surrounding their implementation.

- *What is the process of promotion, recruitment, admission, and enrollment? Are there any common limitations that families face attempting to enroll?*

The process of promotion, recruitment, admission, and enrollment in early childhood education programs involved various strategies and considerations. Word of mouth, online platforms, screening processes, inclusivity, and recommendations are significant factors in attracting families to these programs. However, limitations such as financial constraints, capacity issues,

program availability, and long waitlists can pose challenges for enrollment. D-0423 mentioned their program experienced exponential growth through word of mouth. D-1003 highlighted the use of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram for promotion and recruitment. They can provide information about the program's offerings, philosophy, and testimonials from current parents, attracting families who align with the program's values. D-1319 mentioned the implementation of a screening process to determine suitability for each child. This practice can enhance the effectiveness of early childhood interventions and improve long-term outcomes. D-2116 emphasized their program's inclusive approach, welcoming all children regardless of their needs and socioeconomic status. Offering scholarships addresses the financial limitations and promotes access to quality education for all children. D-7067 discussed the public program's open enrollment policy, providing access to education for all children in the area. The provision of transportation and free or reduced lunch services further supports families' needs, reducing barriers to enrollment. D-2121 acknowledged the changing landscape of early childhood education and the need to actively promote their program. They mentioned the importance of financial assistance and diversity as needs they meet or aim to for their families and the local community.

Several limitations in the enrollment process were highlighted by the interview participants. These limitations can impact families' ability to enroll their children in early childhood education programs. Participant D-0423 mentioned the financial commitment associated with full-year outdoor education, including the cost of specific clothing and safety gear. D-1319 discussed how capacity constraints could result in turning away children and maintaining long waitlists. D-2116 mentioned the challenges of families seeking full-day programs, which theirs is not. Limited program timing or lack of availability for specific age

groups may restrict a family's choice and hinder enrollment. D-5544 highlighted the issue of long waitlists due to program popularity and the prioritization of siblings. This limitation can delay enrollment for families who desire a particular program.

- *What relationship does the program encourage between the children, the staff, and the families?*

In terms of the relationships that are encouraged, the interview responses indicate the prioritization of trust, safety, communication, and collaboration to foster positive relationships among children, staff, and families. The use of various communication apps and platforms, including Bright Wheel, Parent Square, Seesaw, HiMama, and Remind, facilitate ongoing dialogue and engagement between the program and families. D-1003 emphasized the significance of safety and trust in the relationship between the program and families. They stressed the importance of parents feeling at ease when leaving their children at the program and communicating regularly through their app. Continuous communication helps parents stay connected with their child's daily experiences and reduces any stress or worry. D-0423 highlights the programs' focus on meeting children's emotional, social, and cultural needs. They emphasized using solutions-based language and creating a safe environment where children can make mistakes and learn from them. The program encourages open communication with families through their app, allowing shared messages and newsletters that spark conversation about their child's experiences. D-1319 discussed the use of their app to facilitate communication after recognizing the preference of the families for text-based interactions. The program prioritizes a relationship between the families and the school through invitations to field trips and sponsored events. D-2116 shared their values of respect, active listening, and inclusivity in the relationships they promote. They highlighted the need for collaboration and involvement of parents in various

capacities. The use of their app helps to focus on positive interactions, sharing student work, and fostering open dialogue between teachers and parents. D-7067 discussed the initiatives aimed to address barriers, support parents, and promote a sense of partnership. D-2121 highlighted the focus on establishing genuine relationships with the families through modeling care and concern for the children.

- *What does a typical day in your program look like?*

Each participant described their program's unique approach in terms of daily schedules, which incorporated elements of play-based learning, collaboration with families, social-emotional development, and a balance between teacher-led and child-led activities. D-0423 described a flexible and open-ended approach where children engaged exclusively with the outdoors. Beginning at 9:00 am, the program mainly runs until 12:00 pm, with an extended day option that ends at 3:00 pm. The children and teacher begin the day by walking to their home base located in the park. On the way, they may take part in hikes and explorations depending on the interest and energy of the group. The program aimed to support children's holistic development and emphasized the importance of viewing children through a strengths-based perspective, supporting children as they are. D-1319 discussed a collaboration with Capital District Beginnings and highlighted the play-based learning approach. The program focused on social-emotional development through the Know and Grow program and provides ample opportunity for social interactions in preparation for school. D-2116 outlined the progression of the daily routine from Pre-K 3 to Kindergarten. Pre-K 3 focuses on choice, outdoor time, and student-led learning, gradually introducing more teacher-led components in Pre-K 4. Kindergarten incorporates a mix of seated, instructional activities and movement or hands-on activities, keeping the students engaged and active throughout the day. D-5544 described a busy

program with age-appropriate activities, including literacy, numeracy, art, music, language classes, physical education, and outdoor play. The program emphasizes a slow, calculated approach to skill building and offers various events and performances throughout the year where the children are expected to perform. D-2121 described a classroom environment where teachers set up various materials and activities, allowing children to make choices on what they would like to engage with. This director emphasized consistency and collaboration between the teachers and the students in all elements of the day and in the curriculum itself.

- *How is the curriculum developed, approved, and implemented?*

Curriculum development, approval, and implementation processes vary across different early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. The following interview responses shed light on how these processes are approached in various contexts. D-1003 described the use of a research-based curriculum that provides specific milestones for different age groups. Their curriculum is internally developed and chosen based on the preferences of the directors. In utilizing such a specific curriculum, they are allowed age-appropriate, hands-on learning experiences. In the case of D-1319, the curriculum is developed in alignment with the New York City early learning standards. The program modifies based on the needs of the children and revises collaboratively amongst the staff. Regular team meetings and collaboration ensure effective implementation and integration of the material across different areas of instruction. D-2116 mentioned the presence of a curriculum committee for evaluating the work they are currently using and considering new approaches. The committee carefully examines potential resources and materials, seeking evidence-based strategies that align with effective educational practices. D-7067 emphasizes the importance of adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of the children while still following approved standards. The aim is to provide a play-based and

developmentally appropriate curriculum that recognizes and praises the unique strengths, interests, and learning styles of the children. In D-2121's setting, teachers have complete autonomy in developing and implementing the curriculum. The approach allows experienced and capable educators to tailor the curriculum to the interests of their students.

- *Did you notice any change to/in your program due to the COVID-19 pandemic? What are your thoughts on early childhood education in social media?*

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on early childhood education and care programs, as reported by the interviewees. The only participant to have benefitted was the sole outdoor education program represented in this research. D-0423 mentioned that their program experienced a surge of interest and involvement during the pandemic, resulting in an expansion of their classes. Outdoor programs provide opportunities for safe and engaging learning experiences while adhering to physical distancing guidelines. The director also discussed the role of social media in early childhood education highlighting its potential to provide accessible information and guidance to parents. However, they also expressed concerns about exploitative practices and the tendency to focus on negativity. For D-1003, the impact of the pandemic was observed in the social skills of the younger children entering the program as well as the level of parental involvement in the program. They also mentioned an increased reliance on electronics as a challenge that they are facing. This director also expressed concerns about the influence of social media on parenting and the pressure that it can create. Another issue mentioned was the difficulty that programs have in finding qualified support staff like speech therapists. The increased demand for services, coupled with resource constraints and provider shortages, has created barriers to accessing necessary interventions. D-2116 spoke of the behavioral challenges faced by students who lacked developmentally appropriate learning environments during the

pandemic. Social media was also mentioned as having an isolating effect on parents through constant comparison. D-2121 mentioned a decrease in the number of applicants to their program.

Discussion

Interpretation of the Results

The interviewee responses highlight unanimous agreement among the parents and program director participants regarding the critical role of early childhood care in shaping children's lives and preparing them for future success. These findings reinforce the importance of quality early childhood education and care programs that prioritize holistic development and provide ample opportunities for socialization, skill building, and other foundational elements.

However, it is important to acknowledge certain benefits and limitations associated with the various program types. When it comes to private education and care programs, some associated limitations include the fees, lack of transparency, and inconsistency due to the absence of a centralized governing body to ensure consistent practices and standards. On the other hand, public and universal care options rely on policy and funding support, yet many program directors feel as though they are being led by people who do not see or care to see the importance and benefits of early childhood education and care. Additionally, while outdoor programs are beneficial in reconnecting children with nature, concerns about outdoor safety exist. Daycare and family/in-home care could benefit from enhanced educational development, improved access, and more opportunities for interaction with other children their age.

The benefits of structured schedules in early childhood care settings are supported by research. Howes, Matheson, and Hamilton (1994) found that children in structured classrooms showed higher levels of engagement, more positive peer interactions, and greater involvement in

learning activities compared to children in unstructured classrooms. The structure provided by a predictable routine helps children develop a sense of security and stability, contributing to their emotional well-being and overall development. Consistent routines have also been linked to positive outcomes such as improved self-regulatory skills and reduced behavioral problems (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007). However, it is crucial to establish a balance between structure and flexibility in early childhood schedules. Excessive rigidity may limit children's opportunities for free play, exploration, and self-directed learning, which are essential for creativity, problem-solving, and developing autonomy (Bodrova & Leong, 2012). Flexibility within a structured environment allows for responsiveness to individual children's needs and interests, promoting intrinsic motivation (Pyle & Bigelow, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published guidelines for childcare programs, emphasizing the importance of implementing preventative measures such as mask-wearing, social distancing, and limited parental access (2021). The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) also provided recommendations for childcare programs, which acknowledged the need for preventative measures but also the potential challenges that would come with these implementations, including reduced social interaction (2020). Aside from the health threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, there was the disruption of in-person activity, the transition to remote learning for those already in an academic program, impacts on socialization and emotional well-being for both children and families, parenting challenges, access disparities, and financial strain. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on early childhood education and care globally necessitating several changes and adaptations. One of the most notable shifts was the suspension of in-person programs and activities. For those already in a program, this meant the shift from in-person to virtual

classrooms, activities, and more. The absence of in-person interactions and structured classroom environments had adverse effects on cognitive, social, and emotional development. The lack of face-to-face interactions with out-of-home caregivers and peers hindered children's ability to engage in collaborative activities, socialize, and develop crucial social skills. Furthermore, the digital divide exacerbated existing inequalities in access to early childhood education and care for vulnerable children. Not all families had equal access to technology and reliable internet connections, which limited children's participation in remote learning activities and access to learning materials, especially for children who require additional support (Timmons et al., 2021).

Research supports the view that early childhood is a crucial period for development. According to a study by Barnett et al. (2018), early childhood experiences have a lasting impact on a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Play-based education has been shown to promote children's creativity, problem-solving skills, and social interactions (Dalli et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2015; Bodrova & Leong, 2015). The Reggio Emilia approach, which emphasizes child-led learning and the importance of the environment, has been associated with positive outcomes in early childhood education (Villa et al., 2013). A comprehensive study by Walker et al. (2011) found that early nutrition intervention could have long-term positive effects on cognitive development and educational outcomes. Additionally, individualized support fosters a positive and engaging learning environment for both children and educators.

Early intervention has been widely acknowledged as a vital component of early childhood care. Research indicated that early intervention can lead to positive outcomes in children's cognitive, language, and social-emotional development (Campbell et al., 2014; Ho and Funk, 2018; Reynolds et al., 2019). Parental involvement and a nurturing home environment have also been associated with better academics and socio-emotional outcomes for children

(Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; Jeynes, 2015). The significance of early childhood brain development and the acquisition of social skills is well documented in research. Early experiences play a crucial role in shaping the architecture of the developing brain (Shonkoff et al., 2012). Developmentally appropriate practice, which aligns instructional strategies with children's developmental stages and individual needs, has been associated with positive outcomes in early childhood education (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009). Regarding standardized tests, research highlights the need for careful implementation and consideration of age appropriateness in early childhood assessment (Meisels et al., 2003; Kaufman et al., 2014).

Play and outdoor experiences have been shown to contribute greatly to children's development and learning. Research suggests that play supports cognitive, social, and emotional development (Bergen, 2015). Outdoor play provides opportunities for physical activity, exploration, and problem solving, fostering children's creativity and resilience (Lester et al., 2010) Following state standards ensures a comprehensive approach to early education that addresses key developmental domains.

Strong and supportive relationships with caregivers promote children's socio-emotional development and well-being (Bowlby, 1988; Sheonkoff et al., 2012). Exposure to diverse philosophies and approaches in early childhood education can enrich children's learning experiences and contribute to their holistic development (Tremblay et al., 2017). Developmental interaction theory emphasizes the significance of interactions and relationships in promoting children's development and learning (Egeland and Sroufe, 1981). Concerns regarding standardization and the push-down model in early childhood education align with discussions in the literature about the need for developmentally appropriate practices and avoiding undue academic pressure on young children (NAEYC, 2009; Pianta et al., 2009). Effective

communication channels can strengthen the relationship between staff and families, leading to increased parental involvement and cooperation (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Building strong relationships with families can enhance parent-teacher collaboration, which positively influences children's academic and social outcomes. The integration of movement and active learning in early childhood education can enhance cognitive and academic performance (Donnelly et al., 2016). Balancing teacher-led activities with student-led choices can promote motivation and engagement (Blair, 2016).

Examining the influence of media on children and adolescents, Chassiakos et al. (2017) highlighted the need for parents to critically evaluate and interpret the media messages presented to their children and youth in general. With the widespread accessibility of various forms of media to children, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a growing need for research on the effects of continuous online usage concerning educational, social, and emotional development. The impact of social media on parenting is also becoming an increasingly popular area of study. As echoed by the responses from parents and program directors, social media can have both positive and negative effects on parents' attitudes, behaviors, and practices. As the field continues to delve into parenting research, it would be interesting to learn more about the effects of sharing parenting advice, skills, phenomena, etc. from diverse cultures on apps like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.

Research suggests that positive recommendations and personal testimonies from satisfied parents can significantly influence other families; decisions to enroll their children in a particular program. Online platforms have become increasingly popular for advertising and reaching out to prospective families (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Screening helps to ensure that children are placed in the appropriate program based on their needs and development level (Coppie &

Bradekamp, 2009). Inclusive programs promote diversity, foster empathy and understanding among children, and create a supportive environment for all (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2015).

Public/Universal care and private care are distinguished by factors such as funding, accessibility, and curriculum standardization while outdoor care and daycare or family/in-home care prioritize experiential learning and personalized attention. Safety, affordability, and availability are common considerations across all types of early childhood education and care. These are some ways in which each program type can improve. There is a plethora of research to support the long-term effects and benefits of early childhood education including, but not limited to, higher test scores, fewer instances of grade retention and special education placement, higher graduation rates, and a decrease in crime and delinquency. The current problem with preschool programs, particularly in the United States, is the inconsistency in standards across the board. Private education is too costly, public options are generally underfunded, outdoor education is not always accessible if even known about, and family or in-home care may lack educational focus. According to a study by Barnett (2011), research-based curricula can significantly improve children's school readiness and later academic achievement. Curriculum design is especially important in promoting positive educational experiences and outcomes.

Today's parents are forced to make impossible choices that research tells us will have an impact as children move forward in life. The insights given from the conversations have implications for policymakers, education professionals, and practitioners to ensure the accessibility, affordability, and quality of early childhood care to meet the demands of parents and support children's development.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

It is important to acknowledge that the responses gathered in this study represent the perspectives of the interviewed parents/guardians and program directors, providing valuable insights into their beliefs and attitudes towards early childhood education and care. However, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the similarities and differences among various program options and types, further research is needed with a larger and more diverse sample.

The research design can be enhanced in several ways. The primary challenge I faced was the recruitment of individuals, particularly those representing a diverse range of characteristics, such as program type, household income, and geographic location for parents/guardians, and program type and facility size/ratio for programs. In this study, a total of forty-six participants completed their informed consent, with thirty-nine individuals submitting the online survey and thirteen participating in videoconference interviews. It is important to note that the data conclusions presented do not reflect a global view on the topic of early childhood education and care, as certain factors were not fully considered, such as racial, cultural, and religious influences, as well as commonalities among participants in terms of location, socio-economic status, and education levels. Additionally, it is crucial to acknowledge that numerous other factors contribute to decision-making regarding the upbringing of a child.

Several suggestions can be made for future research. Inquiring more about the upbringing of the parents/guardians may provide insights into the decisions made for their children. Exploring racial and cultural nuances in child-rearing practices could be particularly informative, as there may be specific traditions and approaches within different communities. Another interesting avenue for investigation would be to examine the evolution of childcare preferences over time. I primarily focused on current child placement, but there may be a compelling

narrative in the journey that parents took before arriving at their current choices. It could also be beneficial to ask each participant about their perceptions of other varieties of early childhood education and care. While this was partially addressed with the program directors, who were asked about what sets their program apart from others serving the same age range, gathering parents' perspectives on different options would provide a more well rounded understanding.

It would also be beneficial to take a closer look at the relationship between income and education, including the service level provided in high-income versus low-income areas. The purpose of public school is to create equity but that equity does not translate across districts. Establishing a reputation for high quality education, care, and service can attract families seeking excellence in early childhood programs.

Furthermore, views and perspectives change over time and conducting a longitudinal study that explores diverse family arrangements and parenting styles could provide valuable information on how parent and family decisions evolve, as well as how programs themselves evolve over time. Taking a deeper analysis of the differences in parenting approaches between different children within the same family could also offer an intriguing perspective. Although this research did inquire about family composition, the focus was specifically on those currently between the ages of 3 and 6. However, it would be interesting to investigate whether these choices were influenced by previous experiences with older children or the addition of younger siblings. Additionally, I did not focus enough on the overall composition of the programs run by the directors. While some were solely early childhood focused, there were others that involved older and younger children which can change the dynamic and focus of the organization.

Conclusion

The majority of research on early childhood programs shows an improvement in school readiness in terms of social and cognitive development. There, of course, is more work to be done and many questions yet to be answered. We need more information to make concrete connections between program components and their specific outcomes as well as the longevity of outcomes to have a complete picture of the value of early childhood education and care. Having this understanding can be most beneficial in informing the evolution of early childcare in terms of funding, curriculum, staff requirements, and more (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013).

Yavorsky and Ruppner (2022) listed four benefits that adopting universal preschool and childcare would have in the United States. 1) “*Universal ECEC would create the infrastructure to reduce shortages and childcare deserts*”. Today’s childcare framework cannot accommodate millions of families in need of access to affordable, high-quality care. Universal early childcare would also create fewer labor shortages and turnover, specifically among women. 2) “*Universal ECEC would reduce the financial strain of childcare on families*”. At the time of the article’s publication, center-based care for young children (0-4 years old) ranged from an average of \$5,000 to \$24,000 annually among the states. 3) “*Universal ECEC would support mother’s employment, earnings, and careers*”. Mothers are less likely to work in states with higher childcare costs thereby perpetuating the fact that women-led households have the highest poverty rates. 4) “*High-Quality Universal ECEC Infrastructure will help close class-based educational gaps*”. Participation in early childhood care programs helps to equalize the learning experience of economically advantaged and disadvantaged children.

According to Ho and Funk’s 2018 article on young children’s social and emotional health, children who are socially and emotionally healthy tend to navigate relationships and

social situations better and show greater motivation and engagement. Youth children learn through relationships, both with peers and staff. Displays of warmth, affection, and respect help children to experience secure relationships, feel confident and competent in their explorations with the world, ask questions, and express their unique thoughts and feelings.

In the United States, 37% of infants and toddlers are exclusively cared for by a parent or guardian. 58% of working parents with children five years old and under rely on childcare programs, center-based or otherwise. The majority of working parents have reduced their work hours or pay in some way (late arrival, early departure, complete absence, or distraction, etc.) because of their children. More than half of American families have spent more than \$10,000 on childcare in 2020. Before the pandemic, at least two-thirds of families in the United States relied on some form of childcare. About 44% of Black families, 50% of White families, and 57% of Hispanic families live in a childcare desert, a geographic area without enough “licensed/registered child day care slots to adequately serve the number of children”(New York State Office of Children and Family Services). In higher-income areas, 43% of families struggle to find childcare while 54% of families struggle in low-income areas (Kolmar, 2023).

Investing in children’s learning before the age of 5 or their entry into Kindergarten is supported by several factors. Firstly, family income-based gaps in cognitive skill development have been identified, with studies indicating that children from low-income families often exhibit lower cognitive skills and school readiness compared to their higher-income peers (Duncan et al., 2013). Secondly, young children are particularly sensitive to environmental enrichment during the critical period of development between 0 and 3 years old. This period offers an opportunity to establish a foundation of cognitive skills, prosocial behaviors, self-regulation, and executive function. Moreover, increased funding for early childhood education can enable more primary

caregivers, usually women, to participate in the workforce, creating long-lasting positive effects for low-income families. Lastly, there is a growing emphasis on preschool education over home-based childcare, with 70% of families supporting legislation to make preschool options available to all young children (Yoshikawa et al., 2016).

In early childhood education, the incorporation of play is a significant concern. Jackie Mader said it best in her 2022 article entitled, *Want Resilient and Well-Adjusted Kids? Let Them Play*, “At the school level, it can be challenging to get the buy-in for more play time from stressed-out administrators and educators who are dealing with state testing pressures. Adults working in classrooms with younger children find that it takes planning and careful thought to design play environments and experiences that allow children to reap the benefits of play. And parents must be convinced that free time to play can be as important as organized activities and lessons.” Although the example is drastic, it is symbolic to note that when comparing the childhoods of inmates with the outside population, inmates were able to provide fewer examples of free play in childhood. Research has shown that play greatly impacts competency, resiliency, emotional health, and brain size, which can all play a part in decision-making and impulse control, which may be directly correlated to lawlessness.

The greatest disservice to children is having their education and care decisions made from places of want and need. It is widely known that more affluent families and areas can offer higher quality programs to their constituents while areas and families with lesser resources are not afforded the same opportunities. In Scandinavia, namely Finland and Sweden, all programs are created equal, offering not only homogenous access to quality programs but also intermingling between different socioeconomic groups allowing for the genuine development of social and emotional competencies which have been shown to carry into adulthood. If countries

like the United States were able to adopt similar models, it could lead to improvements in health, wealth, and societal support.

In conclusion, this research and other studies surmise that all program types have pros and cons. Financially, the increased affordability and increasing accessibility for families, especially in economically disparaging situations, and the emphasis on school readiness are significant pros. However, with limited availability, larger class sizes, and standardized curricula, there is less individualized attention and ability to meet the diverse needs of the students. Private care offers more options, flexibility, individualized attention, and opportunities for specialized programs that align with the goals and preferences of the program. Unfortunately, there are higher costs associated and varying levels of quality and regulation. Outdoor education and care options offer enhanced opportunities for nature-based learning, exploration, and physical activity, which often leads to increased environmental awareness and sustainability, but these programs are limited to certain geographic areas and there are concerns as to whether they can provide a comprehensive curriculum. Daycare and family/in-home care offer the most flexibility in hours and, depending on the circumstances, can promote stronger caregiver-child relationships. Situationally, there may be opportunities for socialization with peers or more one-on-one interactions. On the other hand, the variability of providers can be concerning as daycares may not require the same instructor and instructional education as the other categories. Daycare and family/in-home care can also run the risk of losing childcare if the provider becomes unavailable.

The parents who participated in the research collectively expressed simple wants. They wanted safe, affordable, accessible, educational, responsive, and empathetic care from childcare providers who partnered with the parents to care for their children. Although the conception of

these words may vary by parent/guardian, the meanings are the same. Each parent did their best to ensure quality care for their child based on what was available to them.

The same went for the childcare providers who all wanted to create safe spaces for children to develop in ways that most benefited them. Depending on the facility type, there may have been rules or boundaries that need to be followed which could interfere with the programmatic wants of even the most senior team members but, based on the interviews, each director tried their best for their students and families.

“It is family that is primarily responsible for education and successful socialization of a pupil; school and teachers are then responsible for his formal education and significantly contribute to his/her secondary education. The common task of schools, families, and the community is then to prepare children for life as successful active person/citizen. Thus, to develop and cultivate flexibility and resilience of the child to be able to respond adequately to diverse life situations and social changes brought by the development of technology and science, and relates to the differentiation of society” (Juvova & Bakker, 2015).

Going about a project where included in the name is a derivative of the word *compare*, can make the research feel like a contest. Which is better? What should or should not be done? And more questions come to mind. I even naively believed that in delving into the varying styles one would come out ahead of the others but that could not have been further from the truth as every program type made sense, offering practical and research-confirmed benefits. As with anything else, each program has its positive and negative qualities but that list is completely subjective to the eyes of the beholder, in this case, the directors and the parents. As seen above some parents are interested in jumpstarting their child(ren)’s educational journey, others are more interested in the social aspects, while others just need to know nothing more than if their child is

safe and happy as they work. The actions and choices of the directors similarly model the wants and needs of families within the flexibility of their scope with the same goal of safe and happy children.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Informed Consent (Parent/Guardian)

Informed Consent Form (Parents)

Title of Study: Early Childhood Care: A Comparative Analysis of Preferred Practices

Researcher Name and Affiliation: Shaija A. Mills (smills1@gm.slc.edu)

Sarah Lawrence College (1 Mead Way, Bronxville, NY 10708)

I am asking you to take part in a research study at Sarah Lawrence College. Please read through the following questions and responses and *ask any other questions* that will help you to decide whether or not to participate.

What is the purpose of this study?

This thesis project is meant to provide a comparative analysis of three to four early childhood programs obtaining information through a literature review, interviews with directors of schools/programs, and surveys with early childhood aged (3-6 years old) parents/guardians. After gathering information from these sources, the goal of the project is to have a comprehensive understanding of the various philosophies and benefits as they relate to overall (social, emotional, and cognitive) child development. The research for this study occurs in two parts: 1) understanding the administrative and educational side through conversations with childcare directors, and 2) considering the thought processes of parents when making early childhood care decisions for their children.

Why am I being asked to participate?

The purpose of this study is to understand the parameters that are involved in choosing and running early childhood care programs from those making the decisions. All persons invited to participate in this study must have a child in the early childhood age range of 3-6 years old or be a program director/head of an early childhood care program.

What will I be asked to do?

For this study, parents/guardians will complete a general demographic questionnaire to allow the researcher to understand more about yourself, your family, and your general location. Following that you will participate in an audio or video conference interview in which questions will be asked in more detail regarding the process of choosing early childhood care for your child(ren). The questions mainly fall into the categories of emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support as it relates to your understanding of what is offered and engaged with by the early childhood care program your child attends.

Is my participation voluntary?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary meaning that you may choose to opt-out at any point and doing so will not affect your relationship with Sarah Lawrence College. Additionally, you may choose not to answer any questions for any reason without needing to provide justification.

Are there any benefits or risks associated with my participation in this study?

The most direct benefit of participation in the study is adding more knowledge to the field of early childhood care especially as philosophies grow and change in the field.

Will I be compensated for my participation?

Participants will be compensated with a \$20 gift card following agreement and participation in a one-hour video conference interview.

Will the information I provide be kept confidential?

The participants will not be identified in any written or oral report of the research study. The researchers are the only people who will have access to their data and it will be stored securely. As there is an online component (survey and video conference interview), every reasonable effort will be made to keep data secure and confidential; however, the degree to which this is possible is determined by the technology being used.

If I have any questions or concerns after the study, can I contact you?

Yes, please reach out to me via email at SMills1@gm.sl.c.edu. Additionally, you are welcome to reach out to my faculty advisor, Patricia Hanley at PHanley@sarahlawrence.edu.

Who can I contact if I have questions about my rights as a research participant?

The IRB co-chairs Professors Elizabeth Johnston (203-722-3287) and Claire Davis (914-395-2605) at irb@sarahlawrence.edu.

Please indicate with your signature in the space below that you understand your rights and voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

Signature of Participant
Date

Print Participant Name

Please indicate with your signature in the space below that you understand your rights and voluntarily agree to have your participation in this study audio- and/or video-recorded.

Signature of Participant
Date

Print Participant Name

Appendix B: Informed Consent (Program Director)

Informed Consent Form (Directors)

Title of Study: Early Childhood Care: A Comparative Analysis of Preferred Practices

Researcher Name and Affiliation: Shaija A. Mills (smills1@gm.slc.edu)

Sarah Lawrence College (1 Mead Way, Bronxville, NY 10708)

I am asking you to participate in a research study at Sarah Lawrence College. Please read through the following questions and responses and *ask any other questions* that will help you to decide whether or not to participate.

What is the purpose of this study?

This thesis project is meant to provide a comparative analysis of three to four early childhood programs obtaining information through a literature review, interviews with directors of schools/programs, and surveys with early childhood aged (3-6 years old) parents/guardians. After gathering information from these sources, the project's goal is to comprehensively understand the various philosophies and benefits as they relate to overall (social, emotional, and cognitive) child development. The research for this study occurs in two parts: 1) understanding the administrative and educational side through conversations with childcare directors, and 2) considering the thought processes of parents when making early childhood care decisions for their children.

Why am I being asked to participate?

The purpose of this study is to understand the parameters that are involved in choosing and running early childhood care programs from those making the decisions. All persons invited to participate in this study must have a child in the early childhood age range of 3-6 years old or be a program director/head of an early childhood care program.

What will I be asked to do?

Early Childhood Care Directors will also be asked for some general demographic information regarding the education levels of themselves and their staff as it pertains to their program. They will also be asked for information based primarily on the categories of emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support as it relates to the overall management of an early childcare program. All communication would be online via an online survey, email, and interview via Zoom or a preferred video conferencing platform.

Is my participation voluntary?

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary meaning that you may choose to opt-out at any point and doing so will not affect your relationship with Sarah Lawrence

College. Additionally, you may choose not to answer any questions for any reason without needing to provide justification.

Are there any benefits or risks associated with my participation in this study?

The most direct benefit of participation in the study is adding more knowledge to early childhood care especially as philosophies grow and change in the area.

Will I be compensated for my participation?

Participants will be compensated with a \$20 gift card following an agreement to and participation in a one-hour video conference interview.

Will the information I provide be kept confidential?

The participants will not be identified in any written or oral report of the research study. The researchers are the only people who will have access to their data and it will be stored securely. As there is an online component (survey and video conference interview), every reasonable effort will be made to keep data secure and confidential; however, the degree to which this is possible is determined by the technology being used.

If I have any questions or concerns after the study, can I contact you?

Yes, please reach out to me via email at SMills1@gm.sl.c.edu. Additionally, you are welcome to reach out to my faculty advisor, Patricia Hanley at PHanley@sarahlawrence.edu.

Who can I contact if I have questions about my rights as a research participant?

The IRB co-chairs Professors Elizabeth Johnston (203-722-3287) and Claire Davis (914-395-2605) at irb@sarahlawrence.edu.

Please indicate with your signature on the space below that you understand your rights and voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

Signature of Participant *Print Participant Name* *Date*

Please indicate with your signature on the space below that you understand your rights and voluntarily agree to have your participation in this study audio- and/or video-recorded.

Signature of Participant *Print Participant Name* *Date*

Appendix C: Online Questionnaire (Parent/Guardian)

1. I have completed and electronically signed the Informed Consent survey and created a Participant Identification Number.
 - Multiple Choice Options: Yes and No.
2. Please enter your previously created 4-digit Participant Identification Number.
 - Answer Box
3. Location (City/Town, State/Province, Country)
 - Answer Box
4. Family Composition: Age (Please enter the number of individuals within your household who fall under each category)
 - Checkbox Options: Children (0-2), Children (3-6), Children (7-17), Adults (18-49), and Adults (50+)
5. Family Composition: Sex (Please enter the number of individuals within your household who fall under each category)
 - Checkbox Options: Adult Males (18+), Adult Females (18+), Youth Males (0-17), and Youth Females (0-17)
6. What type of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) does your child(ren) aged 3-6 currently receive?
 - Check Box Options: Universal 3-/Pre-K or Free Public Pre-Kindergarten/Kindergarten, or Elementary School; Private Preschool, Pre-Kindergarten/Kindergarten, or Elementary School; Outdoor Preschool, Pre-Kindergarten, or Elementary School; Daycare or Family/In-home Care; and Other (please specify).
7. What type of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) did you receive between the ages of 3 and 6?
 - Check Box Options: Universal 3-/Pre-K or Free Public Pre-Kindergarten/Kindergarten, or Elementary School; Private Preschool, Pre-Kindergarten/Kindergarten, or Elementary School; Outdoor Preschool, Pre-Kindergarten, or Elementary School; Daycare or Family/In-home Care; and Other (please specify).
8. How many days per week does your child attend an ECEC program?
 - Multiple Choice Options: 0-1, 2-3, 4-5, and 5-7.
9. Did you have more than one option for ECEC for your child(ren)?
 - Multiple Choice Options: Yes or No
10. What are your goals for sending your child to an Early Childhood Education and Care program?
 - Answer Box
11. Approximately how much do you spend per month on ECEC costs?
 - Answer Box
12. Household Income

- Multiple Choice Options: Under \$29,999, Between \$30,000 and \$49,999, Between \$50,000 and \$74,999, Between \$75,000 and \$99,999, Between \$100,000 and \$149,999, and Over \$150,000.
13. Are you willing to participate in a one-hour-long video conference call to go into detail about the process behind choosing early childhood care? If selected, following the completion of the interview, participants will receive a \$20 gift card.
- Multiple Choice Options: Yes or No

Appendix D: Online Survey (Program Director)

1. I have read and electronically signed the Informed Consent and created a Participant Identification Number.
 - Multiple Choice Options: Yes and No
2. Please enter your previously created Participant Identification Number.
 - Answer Box
3. Do you currently work in a program serving 3- to 6-year olds?
 - Multiple Choice Options: Yes and No
4. What is your role/title?
 - Answer Box
5. Where is your program located?
 - Answer Box
6. What category of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) does your program fall into?
 - Check Box Options: Universal 3-/Pre-K or Free Public Pre-Kindergarten/Kindergarten, or Elementary School; Private Preschool, Pre-Kindergarten/Kindergarten, or Elementary School; Outdoor Preschool, Pre-Kindergarten, or Elementary School; Daycare or Family/In-home Care
7. How much does it cost to attend your program?
 - Answer Box
8. How many children does your program serve?
 - Answer Box
9. How many staff members does your program employ?
 - Answer Box
10. What are your program's goals for the children and families who attend?
 - Answer Box
11. What is your highest level of education?
 - Multiple Choice Options: High School Diploma/GED, Associate's Degree, Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, or Doctorate Degree.
12. What education levels are required of your staff?
 - Multiple Choice Options: High School Diploma/GED, Associate's Degree, Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, or Doctorate Degree.
13. Are you willing to participate in a one-hour-long video conference call to speak more in-depth about your answers? If selected, following the completion of the interview, participants will receive a \$20 gift card.
 - Multiple Choice Options: Yes or No

Appendix E: Interview Questions (Parent/Guardian)

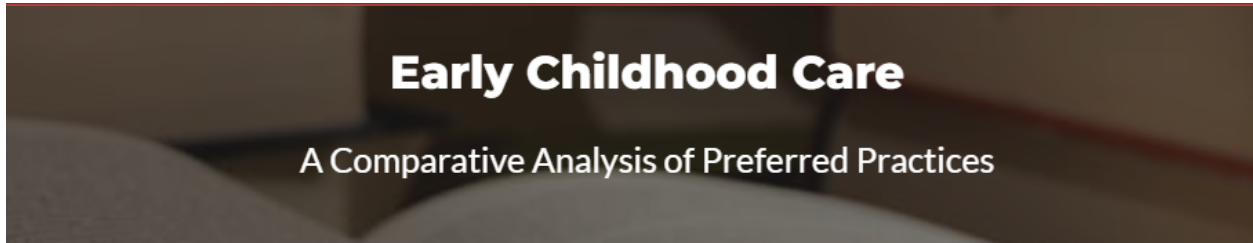
1. What is your definition of early childhood?
2. How important do you believe early childhood care to be in overall child development?
3. Are there any common or popular child-rearing or education practices that you agree or disagree with?
4. Are early childhood education and care (ECEC) popular in your community? Why or why not?
5. What are your goals for enrolling your child in an early childhood education and care (ECEC) program?
6. How did you find out about the program your child is in?
7. What drew you to the program that your child is in now?
8. Did the early childhood education and care (ECEC) you received influence your choice for your child?
9. Were there any limitations that impacted your choice for your child?
10. How does your child's program emotionally support them?
11. What does communication look like between you and the program staff?
12. From your understanding, what does a typical day look like for your child?
 - a. Is your understanding based more on information from your child or from the school?
13. What would you describe to be the focus of your child's ECEC program?
14. What is your understanding of the tools and methods used for behavior management?
 - a. Are they similar to the tools and methods used in your house?
15. How does the program support your child academically?
16. How do you define your role in your child(ren)'s development?
 - a. Outside of ECEC, what measures do you take to stimulate your child's overall development?
 - b. What opportunities are there for you to be involved in/with your child's ECEC program?
17. Did you notice any changes in your early ECEC decision due to the COVID-19 pandemic?
18. What are your thoughts on early childhood education and care in social media?
 - a. Did social media influence your decision?
19. Following ECEC, what type of school or program do you anticipate enrolling your child in?
20. Is there any additional information you feel I should know?

Appendix F: Interview Questions (Program Director)

1. What is your definition of early childhood?
2. How important do you believe early childhood care to be in overall child development?
3. Are there any child development or early childhood philosophies or theories that influence how you lead/manage your program?
 - a. If yes, what was your introduction to this discipline?
 - b. If yes, is there anything that you need to do to retain 'membership' in this discipline?
 - c. If no, how are the principles or goals decided for your program?
4. Are there any common or popular practices that you agree or disagree with?
5. What is the process of promotion, recruitment, admission, and enrollment in your program?
6. Are there any common limitations that families face attempting to enter your program?
7. Tell me about your program!
8. How does your program emotionally support the children?
 - a. Would you consider emotional support a primary goal?
9. What relationships does your program encourage between the children, the staff, and the families?
 - a. What does communication look like?
 - b. Are there opportunities for families to interact or get involved in the program?
10. Tell me about a typical day!
 - a. What is the general schedule?
 - b. How would you describe the ratio between instructional, free/play, and outside time?
 - c. What does the typical classroom look like? (age, room set-up, ratio)
11. How is the curriculum developed, approved, and implemented?
 - a. Would you consider instructional support a primary goal?
12. What tools are used for behavior management?
 - a. What behaviors require intervention?
 - b. How are expected behaviors communicated with families?
 - c. Would you consider behavior management a primary goal?
13. What services are offered by your program?
14. What type of instructional materials and activities are available to the children?
 - a. Are there any materials provided by families?
15. How involved are staff with student learning?
16. Does your program regularly evaluate the children?
17. Please rank the following from most important to least important: emotional support, instructional support, and classroom organization.
18. Did you notice any changes to/in your program due to the COVID-19 pandemic?
19. What are your thoughts on early childhood education and care in social media?

20. Is there any additional information you feel I should know?

Appendix G: Thesis Landing Page



Informed Consent and Online Survey Links



[Parent/Guardian Informed Consent](#)



[Parent/Guardian Online Survey](#)



[Program Director Informed Consent](#)



[Program Director Online Survey](#)

About the Researcher



Hello, my name is [Shajja A. Mills](#) and I am currently a 3rd-year graduate student at Sarah Lawrence College located in Bronxville, NY. As stated above, my thesis is entitled Early Childhood Care: A Comparative Analysis of Preferred Practices. The light is currently shining brightly on early childhood education and care making it the perfect time to investigate the specific values, nuances, and structures of different program types. Though the early childhood range is typically defined as ranging between 0 and 8, this thesis project is looking specifically into the 3-6 year-olds. I would like to understand the processes involved with choosing an early childhood program from the perspective of parents/guardians and understand the administrative side of running and managing an early childhood care center from program directors.

Following the completion of my degree, I will be working towards opening and managing my own child development center which makes this research very personal to me. If you have any questions about me or my project, please email SMills1@sm.slac.edu.