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Early Childhood Directors' Perspectives Regarding Barriers to Childcare Quality Improvement

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Early Childhood Directors' Perspectives Regarding Barriers to Childcare Quality Improvement

by

Charlotte Greenfield Richards

MS, Murray State University, 2001

BS, Murray State University, 1994

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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April 2022

Abstract

Early childhood childcare program directors face barriers that impede program quality, but there is a lack of research exploring these barriers. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors regarding barriers they encounter as they attempt to implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the state quality rating and improvement system (QRIS). This study was grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which notes the influence of environmental systems on the development of young children. The research question explored the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors' regarding barriers they encounter as they attempt to implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the state QRIS. Twelve early childhood childcare center directors employed by childcare programs rated at differing quality levels were interviewed. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed using open coding with the identification of categories and themes. The analysis resulted in the following themes: (a) a shortage of childcare educators exists, and turnover is a frequent problem; (b) in person professional development opportunities are needed, but time to attend training is limited; (c) the cost of providing quality childcare is high with parent tuition as the primary funding source; and (d) the QRIS assessment process is subjective and stressful, with results providing an incomplete appraisal of the overall childcare program. This study may promote positive social change by providing early childhood stakeholders with the perspectives of childcare center directors, which may help as they improve policies and initiatives at the federal and state level providing supports and resources necessary for quality early childhood programming.

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Dedication

Completing this doctoral journey is the accomplishment of one of my greatest life goals. I dedicate this dissertation to my family. To my beautiful children, without you I would not be the person I am today. May you always strive to achieve your goals and dreams. To my husband, thank you for the sacrifices you made so I could succeed. And finally, to my parents, who have loved me and taught me that I can achieve great things.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and express my gratitude to Dr. Curtis and Dr. Brackin. Your guidance, encouragement, and patience has been truly remarkable throughout this arduous journey. I am blessed to have gone through this process with you both.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Early childhood childcare programs offer education and care to the nation's youngest children, creating a foundation for future learning. The quality of these programs is important due to the impact of early childhood experiences on the development of the brain (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2021; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). High-quality early childhood programs foster healthy relationships among children and educators, support and assess children's development and learning, and develop partnerships with families (Iruka & Forry, 2018; National Association for the Education of Young Children, n.d.). Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) have been developed by 49 states to assess, rate, and improve the quality of early childhood programs throughout the country (Herbst, 2018; QRIS National Learning Network, 2017). A QRIS assigns a rating level to a program based on identified quality indicators, which allow stakeholders and families to identify and compare the quality of early childhood programs (Herbst, 2018; Tout et al., 2017). In the southeastern state where this study took place, 1,704 center-based childcare programs participated in the state QRIS in 2018, with 570 of these programs scoring below the highest level of quality (Child Care Aware of America, 2019b). These 570 programs provided medium to low-quality care for 46,675 children across the state (Child Care Aware of America, 2019b). This study utilized qualitative interviews to explore the perspectives of directors of early childhood childcare programs as they attempted to improve program quality to achieve the highest, 3-star rating in the state QRIS. The potential impact of this study on the field of early childhood education and care includes an increased understanding of the

difficulties faced by early childhood childcare program directors when implementing quality improvements. The findings from this research may lead to improved training, technical assistance, coaching, and support for early childhood childcare center educators and directors based on the revealed challenges. Early childhood childcare center directors and policymakers may benefit from the findings, which can affect improvements to policies and initiatives at the federal and state level providing supports and resources necessary for quality early childhood programming. The following sections of Chapter 1 detail the background literature that supports the need for the study, the problem and purpose of the study, the conceptual framework that underlies the study, and the research question. I conclude Chapter 1 by describing the significance of the study and the implications for social change.

Background

Nurturing interactions with caregivers and stimulating environments during the first years of life influence the development of neural connections in the brain that impact cognitive and socioemotional abilities (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2021; Lally & Mangione, 2017). For the 12.5 million children attending early childhood childcare programs, these early experiences are influenced by the quality of the program, including teacher-child interactions and support of children's development and learning (Araujo et al., 2019; Burchinal, 2018; Child Care Aware of America, 2019a; Donoghue & AAP Council on Early Childhood, 2017; Duval et al., 2020; Early et al., 2017; Iruka & Forry, 2018). The significance of teacher-child interactions was noted by Araujo et al. (2019) as they found developmental gains in the children who received care

from a teacher demonstrating higher-quality interactions. Bakken et al. (2017) reported that participating in a high-quality early childhood program had positive impacts on children's academic achievement. Effects of early childhood programming on children's development were also highlighted by McCoy et al. (2017), who described significant reductions in academic problems and increased high school graduation rates for early childhood education program attendees.

Significant differences in quality exist in center-based early childhood childcare programs in the southeastern state where this study took place. Quality differences are revealed by the variations in program rating scores in the state QRIS. The structural and process quality factors that influence the quality of early childhood programs has been widely studied (Bonetti & Brown, 2018; Bowne et al., 2017; Burchinal, 2018; Donoghue & AAP Council on Early Childhood, 2017; Francis & Barnett, 2019; Manning et al., 2019). Researchers have shared that there is a gap in literature on practice in the early childhood field regarding the perspectives of directors in early childhood quality improvement initiatives (Perlman et al., 2020). The focus of this study was to address this gap by exploring early childhood childcare center directors' perspectives regarding the barriers that affect program quality. The current study may provide insight into the identification of obstacles that hinder early childhood childcare program improvement. Results of this study may help stakeholders and policymakers lead initiatives to address the identified barriers.

Problem Statement

Early childhood childcare programs impact the overall development and well-being of children, as the highest quality programs provide experiences that support all later learning (Ansari & Pianta, 2018; Araujo et al., 2019; Bakken et al., 2017; Bowne et al., 2017; Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2021). The problem is that approximately 30% of early childhood childcare centers participating in the QRIS in the southeastern study state are not performing at the highest rated level of quality (Child Care Aware of America, 2019b). In the United States, 12.5 million children under 5 years of age attend nonparental childcare every week and, as a result, are affected by the experiences and care they receive in these settings (Child Care Aware of America, 2019a). In the state this study took place, 295,000 children require weekly childcare (Child Care Aware of America, 2019b). Positive effects of high-quality childcare on the outcomes of children are noted in recent research by Bakken et al. (2017), who found that children who attended high-quality early childhood programs had higher reading and math scores, and fewer discipline referrals. Pinto et al. (2019) also found that infants who participated in high-quality childcare consisting of quality teacher-child interactions showed increased adaptive skills.

To encourage improvements in the quality of early childhood childcare centers across the United States, QRIS policies have been developed in 49 states and the District of Columbia (Jenkins et al., 2021; QRIS National Learning Network, 2017). The QRIS model in the study state addresses both process and structural quality of childcare centers and monitors a higher standard of quality than state childcare licensing rules and

regulations (Tennessee Department of Human Services, n.d.). Researchers have identified issues impacting quality early childhood childcare centers, including the knowledge of educators, educator-child relationships, and the organizational climate of the program (Anderson et al., 2018; McNally & Slutsky, 2018; Pacchiano et al., 2019). Childcare program quality is also affected by low staff compensation, high staff turnover, and the work-related stress involved with caring (Blochliger & Bauer, 2018; Faulkner et al., 2016; McMullen et al., 2020; Whitebook et al., 2018). Issues affecting the quality of childcare have been identified through research and exploring the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors regarding barriers that affect childcare improvements can provide important additional information. Therefore, this study was needed to understand early childhood childcare center directors' perspectives regarding the barriers they encounter when attempting to implement quality improvements to earn a 3-star rating in the QRIS.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors regarding barriers they encounter as they attempt to implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the QRIS in a southeastern state. Increasing the understanding of perspectives regarding barriers early childhood childcare center directors encounter as they implement quality improvements to reach the highest score in the state QRIS warrants exploration because 30% of early childhood childcare centers participating in the QRIS are not performing at the 3-star, highest level of quality rated in the QRIS, in the southeastern state where this

study took place (Child Care Aware of America, 2019b). Research has revealed that high-quality early childhood experiences impact a child's overall development (Soliday Hong et al., 2019); however, little is known about the barriers that are faced by childcare program directors as they try to improve the quality of early childhood childcare programs and thus improve the quality of the experiences of the young children participating in their program. Recent research has emphasized the role of the early childhood childcare center director as directly and indirectly affecting the quality of a childcare program, resulting in the need for directors to expand their leadership capacity to affect quality (Pacchiano et al., 2019). Increased understanding of perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors regarding barriers they face as they strive to implement quality improvements will provide insight into issues related to early childhood quality improvements. In this basic qualitative study, I examined the gap in the literature on practice to gain a broader understanding of the problem by exploring perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors in a southeastern state regarding barriers they encounter as they attempt to implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the state QRIS.

Research Question

The following research question guided this study:

Research question (RQ): What are the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors' regarding barriers they encounter as they attempt to implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the QRIS in a southeastern state?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory (EST). Bronfenbrenner's theory postulates environmental systems that influence people and within which people interact. EST defines five nested, interconnected environmental systems or layers, including the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chrono-systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's first layer, the microsystem, includes the immediate environments surrounding a person, such as family, a childcare center, and peers. The second layer, or mesosystem, involves the relationships between members of the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This layer could include communication between the parent and a childcare educator, which could have a positive influence on the child. The third layer, or exosystem, involves connections among environments over which the person has no control (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, this layer could include the indirect influence of a parent's workplace on a child if the child were required to leave his childcare program due to a parent's loss of employment. The fourth layer is the macrosystem, which consists of a person's culture, social class, governmental resources, or policies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The state QRIS policy that influences a childcare center the child attends would be included in the macrosystem. The chronosystem is the fifth layer, which involves the influence of time on growth and development throughout a lifespan (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Each ecological layer of the model is interconnected with the others and each influences growth and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST provides a model for conceptualizing the influences of the environment on individuals. Connections between a childcare center and the surrounding environmental elements can influence a center's quality, which in turn impacts the care and development of the child enrolled in the childcare center. Bronfenbrenner's theory framed my study of early childhood childcare center directors' perspectives of barriers to quality improvements, which could lie within the micro-, meso-, and/or exo-systems. The EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was used to develop the RQ for this study as it outlines how aspects of and interactions between environmental layers affect early childhood childcare centers, which, in turn, affect an individual child's growth and development. The RQ findings identified the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors regarding barriers they encounter as they attempt to make quality improvements in childcare centers. These barriers are nested in the environmental layers surrounding the childcare center and influence program quality. Bronfenbrenner's theory was beneficial for the study of environmental elements and interactions in and among the meso-, exo-, macro-, and chrono-systems, which can affect the development of the quality of the childcare program. Exploring the director's perspectives regarding the factors that affect the implementation of quality practices allowed the investigation of elements presented in each environmental layer and how they interconnect to affect quality in early childhood childcare centers. As I used semistructured, audio recorded interviews to gather perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors' regarding barriers they encounter as they implement quality improvements, I connected these perspectives to the EST, considering the inclusion of barriers in different systems in the

framework and how these systems interconnect, affecting program quality, and ultimately affecting each child enrolled in the program. In Chapter 2, I continue and expand my discussion about the conceptual framework.

Nature of the Study

I used a basic qualitative design to explore the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors regarding the barriers they encounter as they attempt to implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the QRIS. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a qualitative interview is an effort to construct an understanding of the perspectives and experiences of an interviewee from their point of view. The purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors; therefore, I conducted semistructured, one-on-one interviews to appropriately gather data. Creating a comfortable environment with open-ended interview questions stimulated a conversation with the interviewee to gain robust responses to answer the RQ. After gathering the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors, the interview data were transcribed, using the Hyper Transcribe software, and then coded. Saldaña (2021) identified the similarities of qualitative coding to developing a title for a book. A code represents the primary substance of qualitative data, like a title that identifies the primary content of a book (Saldaña, 2021). The transcription of the interview data was entered into the QDA Miner Lite software for organization, coding, and analysis. I used thematic coding to summarize chunks of the interview data using codes and then identified the themes that emerged as the codes were analyzed (see Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Definitions

The following terms are used throughout this study:

Childcare educator: A person providing for the basic needs and education of children in a childcare program (Beltman et al., 2020).

Early childhood childcare program: A program providing for the care and education of children prior to enrollment in a primary school setting (Wotipka et al., 2017).

Early childhood education: The care and education of children from birth to age 8 (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

High-quality childcare: The care and education of young children in a childcare setting that leads to positive outcomes for children (National Association for the Education of Young Children, n.d.).

Quality rating and improvement system: A system of assessing the quality of early childhood programs designed to improve program quality and share program quality ratings with parents and stakeholders (Herbst, 2018).

Young children: Children from birth to age 8 (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

Assumptions

Qualitative inquiry involves assumptions, or aspects of a study that the researcher considers to be true (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The first assumption for this study was that the childcare program directors would provide factual information and honestly express their ideas and opinions. For the directors to feel comfortable expressing their

ideas openly and honestly, I designed open-ended interview questions to encourage the participants to speak freely. This design provided freedom for the participants to answer in detail, share their personal perspectives, and share additional data that otherwise might not have been shared. The second assumption was that the perspectives shared by the 12 childcare center directors in this study are representative of the wider population of center-based early childhood childcare center directors. The selection criteria of research participants provided evidence for this assumption. Selected participants were limited to directors of center-based childcare programs licensed by the Department of Human Services (DHS), serving children from birth to 5 years of age, and rated 0, 1, or 2 stars on the state QRIS. Also, the director must have been employed in their current position as director for at least 1 year.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study encompassed exploring the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors regarding barriers they encounter as they attempt to implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the state QRIS. Directors from programs currently rated at 0, 1, or 2 stars on the state QRIS were selected from three counties in the study state. In addition to these selection criteria, each director was employed in their current position for at least 1 year as the director of a DHS licensed childcare program serving children from birth to 5 years of age. This focus was chosen because 30% of early childhood childcare centers participating in the QRIS in the study state are not reaching the 3-star, highest level of quality rated (Child Care Aware of America, 2019b). Understanding the barriers faced by childcare program directors as they

attempt to increase the quality of early childhood childcare programs may fill a gap in literature on practice and potentially lead to improved training, technical assistance, resources, and supports that are necessary for quality early childhood programming.

Directors from early childhood childcare programs scoring at the 3-star, highest level of quality on the QRIS were excluded from this study. Research exists on the aspects and benefits of high-quality early childhood education and care (Araujo et al., 2019; Bakken et al., 2017; Bowne et al., Pinto et al., 2019), but there was a gap in literature on practice regarding the barriers encountered by program directors as they attempt to implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the QRIS. To begin to address this gap, early childhood childcare center directors were selected for this study whose programs currently score at the 0, 1, or 2-star rating on the QRIS.

In this basic qualitative study, I viewed the exploration of barriers to the quality of early childhood programs through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST. Bronfenbrenner's EST was chosen due to the identification of interconnected environmental systems or layers and their impact on development. The EST frames how aspects of and interactions between the environmental layers can affect the quality of early childhood childcare centers, which, in turn, affect a child's development. A quantitative methodology was rejected due to the nature of quantitative research, which involves the analysis of numerical data (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). The use of a qualitative methodology was more appropriate for this study due to the exploration of an individual's perspectives, which requires rich engagement with the research participants

(see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews in qualitative research construct an understanding of the perspectives and experiences of the research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, interviews were used to explore and understand the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors regarding childcare quality improvements.

Transferability is the extent to which qualitative research findings can be transferred to other settings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The purpose of this research study was to explore perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors regarding barriers they encounter as they attempt to implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the QRIS. The appropriateness of generalizing the findings of this study to the larger population should be examined. To increase the transferability of the study findings, I provided rich, detailed descriptions of the context and data. Studying the detailed descriptions may enable other educators and stakeholders to determine whether the findings apply to their setting.

Limitations

Three limitations were identified in this study. The first study limitation was the small size of the sample. To thoroughly explore the perspectives, thoughts, and ideas of each childcare center director through in-depth interviews and analysis, the sample size was limited to 12 participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) maintained that an appropriate sample size allows the collection of extensive detail from each participant. The small sample size selected for this study may limit the transferability of the findings; however, it allowed for a robust investigation of the problem while containing the data to a

manageable size. A second limitation of this study was my limited experience as a researcher. In qualitative studies, the researcher is the primary instrument throughout the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To address this limitation, I continued to study and increase my knowledge of qualitative research methods. I also sought assistance from my doctoral committee members, thus relying on their knowledge to ensure rigor in my study.

The third study limitation was the current COVID-19 pandemic. The recruitment of participants and data collection methods were altered due to the health and safety restrictions imposed by the pandemic. All in-person contact with study recruits and participants was suspended, and all contact took place via email and telephone. This limitation potentially affected the data collected because the sharing of information during an interview is influenced by the setting and the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using the telephone to conduct the interviews potentially affected the comfort level of the interviewee and the collection of rich data. To create a comfortable environment for the participants, I greeted each participant, described the study, and answered any questions before beginning each interview. Prior to data collection, I conducted three pilot tests of the interviews with subject matter experts to practice conducting phone interviews using the interview protocol (see Appendix A) and audio recording devices. Noticing facial and body language cues can assist in forming a relationship with the interviewee and determine the need to change my tone or questioning to help create a comfortable atmosphere to collect rich data.

Assessing and monitoring my role as the researcher to address any potential bias is an essential component of qualitative research (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout this study, I reflected on personal bias by writing in a reflective journal. Acknowledging and reflecting on potential bias enhanced the confirmability of my study. I also used an expert reviewer to ensure that the data collection and coding process were free of bias. Member checking by providing a summary of the draft findings to each participant to ensure the findings reflect their perspectives was also used to address possible researcher bias.

Significance

The quality of early childhood childcare centers is related to the short- and long-term outcomes of children (Soliday Hong et al., 2019); yet, the quality of center-based early childhood childcare programs varies greatly, impacting these outcomes (Pacchiano et al., 2019). This study may contribute to addressing the problems involved in improving the quality of childcare by providing insight into the perspectives of directors as they strive to improve the quality within their early childhood childcare centers. Findings of this study filled a gap in the literature on practice, providing insights for agencies that support childcare programs in improving quality and increasing knowledge about barriers that affect childcare quality in the study state. This study makes an original contribution to the early childhood field and may lead to positive social change by providing policymakers with the perspectives of childcare center directors, which may affect improvements to policies and initiatives at the federal and state level, providing resources and supports needed for quality early childhood programming. The findings from this

research may lead to improved training, technical assistance, coaching, and support for early childhood childcare center educators and directors based on the revealed challenges.

Summary

Young children are affected by the care, experiences, and education they receive in early childhood settings (Araujo et al., 2019). The quality of early childhood programs influences the potential outcomes of children (Bakken et al., 2017). The problem addressed in Chapter 1 is that approximately 30% of early childhood childcare centers participating in the QRIS are not performing at the highest level of quality. The purpose of the study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood childcare program directors regarding the barriers they encounter when attempting to implement quality improvements. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST provided the conceptual framework for the study. Assumptions and limitations were detailed as well as the potential significance of the study to the field of early childhood education.

Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature related to this study. The review synthesizes the literature regarding the benefits of high-quality early childhood education, issues and trends affecting quality, and improvement efforts. Additionally, Chapter 2 includes the literature search strategy, a detailed description of the conceptual framework and how it was used to frame the study, and a review of the key variables and concepts of early childhood program quality. Chapter 2 ends with a summary and conclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors regarding barriers they encounter as they attempt to implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the state QRIS. High-quality early childhood programs can positively impact children's school readiness skills and academic and behavioral outcomes (Brownell & Drummond, 2020). To improve and monitor the quality of early childhood programs, many states have implemented QRIS models that offer incentives for high quality (Kane et al., 2018; Kirby et al., 2017). Despite improvement efforts, considerable differences exist in program quality across the United States (Child Care Aware of America, 2019b). These variations emphasize the diversity in the quality of early childhood programs and the need to study issues related to quality improvements.

An extensive review of the literature was conducted to investigate the current landscape of quality in childcare programs and issues that affect quality. The review provides an overview of current research about the dissertation. The theoretical framework that governed the study, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST, is outlined, and its application to this study is provided. The following review includes a synthesis of the literature regarding the benefits of high-quality early childhood education, elements of high-quality programs, issues affecting the childcare workforce, program funding, teacher-child interactions and relationships, and quality improvement initiatives. The literature review concludes with a synopsis of the research on improvement efforts in the field of early childhood programming and the need for continued improvements.

Literature Search Strategy

To gather published research related to the topic, databases were explored for peer-reviewed articles and scholarly literature published between 2016 and 2021. Access to primary and secondary sources was obtained through the social science databases in the Walden University library consisting of EBSCOHOST, ERIC, SAGE, Education Source, Taylor and Francis, Wiley Online, and PsychInfo. Google Scholar, ChildTrends, Project Muse, National Institute for Early Education Research, and the Annie M. Casey Foundation were searched for additional related research. Search criteria were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles and books to ensure the validity and reliability of sources. Using keywords and phrases including *quality childcare, center-based childcare, daycare, childcare center directors, improving childcare, preschool child outcomes, investments in early childhood education, childcare teachers, childcare educators, high-quality early childhood education, issues in childcare, childcare wages, childcare workforce, childcare trends, childcare quality regulations, Bronfenbrenner, ecological systems theory*, and *quality rating and improvement systems* generated current literature pertinent to the topic.

Due to the prevalence of research information on care and education for preschool-age children, a search was also conducted including the terms *infant childcare quality* and *toddler childcare quality* to ensure research related to quality childcare for children ages birth to 3 was also included in the review. Selection criteria were applied to the set of articles; specifically, all research had to pertain to quality early childhood programs in the United States due to the diversity of policies and programs in other

countries. Additional resources cited in the articles were reviewed and included based on their relevance to the topic of childcare quality. Some articles published before 2016 were used as supporting material. The abstracts provided initial information about research contexts related to the background of my study or justified the need for the study. As articles were selected and reviewed, they were entered into a literature review matrix, which provided an organization system for the research articles, with annotations of each piece of literature. The matrix provided further means of organizing the literature by theme. The search strategies were employed, and articles were reviewed until saturation of the topic occurred.

Conceptual Framework

The EST by Bronfenbrenner (1979) posited that an individual's development is influenced by interactions within and between surrounding layers of environmental systems. The EST outlines human development as a person's perception of and interactions within their surroundings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Layers consisting of multiple environmental components are nested together to form an ecological system that shapes an individual's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). When interactions occur within any layer of the system, the effects of the interaction ripple throughout the other layers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The influences of surroundings, such as the childcare environment and the issues impacting its quality, are nested within the systemic layers affecting a child's development. Bronfenbrenner's EST theory is based on the concept that the person and the environments in which they are surrounded jointly interact, influencing development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Children develop while nestled within

environmental relationships, such as family, community, childcare programs, and society, which can work together to help a child reach their full potential (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2021). Bronfenbrenner's theory was chosen to provide an ecological systems lens for investigating the RQ. Examination of the interrelated layers influencing early childhood programs provides insight into how elements contained in various layers interact to create the quality of a program and thus impact children's development.

The EST consists of five overarching layers, beginning with the innermost layer, or *microsystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This central structure includes the child and the immediate settings in which they exist, including the home, family, or childcare program. The interactions between the child and the surroundings in which they live (family, childcare classroom, teacher, and peers) are part of the mesosystem. The third layer, or exosystem, is composed of indirect environmental influences of which the individual is not a direct part, such as the parent's place of employment. Influences from culture, society, or policies are incorporated in the macrosystem. The EST theory emphasizes the timing of events in a person's life as crucial to development, and these are included in the outermost layer, the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The effectiveness of Bronfenbrenner's theory as a framework for research is well established. Duerden and Witt (2010) used the EST to examine the development and effectiveness of youth programs. In their work, Duerden and Witt used the principles of the EST to conceptualize how a youth program (microsystem) influences and is influenced by various environmental layers impacting the effectiveness and quality of the

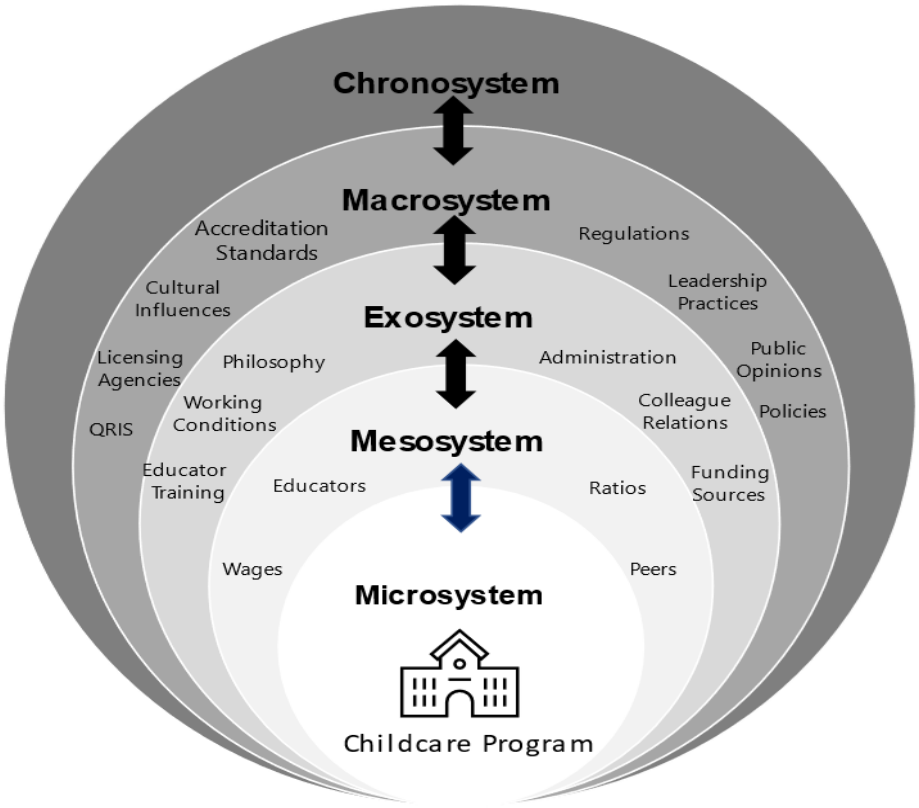
program, and likewise, the effects of programs on individual youth. Similarly, Rudasill et al. (2018) used the EST as a foundational theory for examining the school climate. The nested and interacting layers of the EST framed the dimensions of school climate, and the authors considered additional particulars they termed nanosystems, which are unique to school climate, through which they developed a unique theoretical framework (systems view of school climate) founded on the principles of EST (Rudasill et al., 2018). Ronka et al. (2019) used the EST to consider how changes affected one layer of the ecological system of family work life and the requirement to work nontraditional hours (evenings and weekends). The effects of the changes that occurred in the work-life system (extended hours) impacted the microsystem of the early childhood program. Adaptations were needed in the operational hours and services offered by the early childhood program to meet the needs of the family unit and the balance of the interconnected systems (Ronka et al., 2019).

The EST was also used as a framework by Liu (2018) when examining the occupational well-being of teachers. The elements in each environmental layer (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-system) were considered as well as their effects on educators (Liu, 2018). The paper addressed the direct impacts of interactions with students and parents on the occupational well-being of teachers. It extended the discussion to include indirect influences at the macrosystem level, including national policies and professional recognition of the well-being of educators (Liu, 2018). Similarly, Anderson and Mikesell (2019) used the EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to frame a review of the childcare quality in the rural United States. Their interpretations of the theory framed the investigation of the

impacts of childcare and its influence on the lives and development of children in rural areas (Anderson & Mikesell, 2019). The researchers considered the indirect impacts of rural areas, such as employment opportunities and health care, on childcare program type, availability, and quality. This study exemplifies the use of Bronfenbrenner's theory as a framework for research. Figure 1 shows an ecological system of a childcare program.

Figure 1

An Ecological System of a Childcare Program



Note. This figure displays an ecological system consisting of layers of environmental components nested together to bidirectionally influence the quality of a childcare program. Adapted from "Examining How Rural Ecological Contexts Influence Children's Early Learning Opportunities," by I. Iruka, M. DeKraai, J. Walther, S. Sheridan, and T. Abdel-Monem, 2020, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *52*, p.16 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2019.09.005). Copyright 2020 by Elsevier. Adapted with permission (see Appendix B).

For this study, the child is the center of the ecological system, with the childcare program serving as the environment at the microsystem level, as shown in Figure 1. The elements of the surrounding systems interact between and among each other to influence the quality of the childcare program, which in turn influences the development of the child. These interactions begin in the mesosystem with relationships between the child and their caregiver. The relations are bidirectional as children in a childcare program benefit from nurturing interactions with caregivers (Early et al., 2017), and the caregivers are also influenced by the relationships with the child (McNally & Slutsky, 2018). The exosystem layer of the system contains indirect influences on the child, with examples of elements including the professional development courses for educators, which could impact the child by improving the quality of classroom practices of the educator. The macrosystem is comprised of external standards and policies such as health and safety policies implemented within childcare programs to ensure the well-being of the children. The influence of an early childhood educator's nurturing interactions during a child's infancy that establishes secure attachments would be nested within the chronosystem because it involves a specific time of life in which the relationship took place. Using the EST lens to examine early childhood programs yields insight into the impact programs have on the development of young children and families.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables

Early life experiences impact the development of the brain and set the foundation for developmental trajectories (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2021). These early experiences include involvement in childcare programs for 12.5

million U.S. children who attend nonparental childcare (Child Care Aware of America, 2019a). Childcare arrangements for children of working families have evolved throughout history as maternal employment has increased. Childcare programs fill a societal need by balancing the parental demands of working and providing for the care, education, and safety of young children. The quality of these childcare programs is important to parents, educators, stakeholders, and society due to the impact early childhood care and education has on children's well-being and future outcomes (Burchinal, 2018; Chaudry & Sandstrom, 2020; Vandell et al., 2016). This importance is exemplified through federal, state, and local government investments of 7.4 billion dollars in programs serving 1.5 million 3 and 4-year-old children (Barnett et al., 2017).

Impact of High-Quality Early Childhood Education

Early childhood care and education has been reported to increase opportunities and life skills for young children (Bakken et al., 2017; Vandell et al., 2016). In a meta-analysis of research conducted on early childhood programs between 1960 and 2016, McCoy et al. (2017) found that on average, children who participated in an early childhood program had lower special education placement, less grade retention, and increased high school graduation rates. Brownell and Drummond (2020) found that childcare experiences from 6 to 54 months impacted children's prosocial behaviors in first grade. Long-term benefits of early childhood programs were reported by Vandell et al. (2016) as children who attended high-quality childcare between birth and kindergarten had higher grades at the end of high school. Bai et al. (2020) found academic gains in reading and math, decreased special education placement, and less grade retention

through middle school for children who attended high-quality early childhood programs. Children from disadvantaged households experienced the greatest gains from program participation (Bai et al., 2020). Similarly, Bakken et al. followed at-risk 4-year-old children who attended a high-quality early learning program through the fourth grade. Participating children demonstrated higher reading and math scores on standardized assessments in both third and fourth grades and better teacher-rated social skills than nonparticipating peers (Bakken et al., 2017).

Long-term academic gains from participation in high-quality early childhood programs are greater when quality experiences continue throughout a child's school years (Ansari & Pianta, 2018; Cash et al., 2019). Ansari and Pianta (2018) reported that children who attended high-quality childcare before school entry demonstrated higher literacy and math scores at the end of preschool. The benefits of the high-quality early childhood programming lasted until age 15 only when classroom environments throughout elementary school were high-quality (Ansari & Pianta, 2018). Carr et al. (2019) found that high-quality programming in both prekindergarten and kindergarten had cumulative effects on children's academic gains. Children's outcomes in language, literacy, and math skills were positively impacted by quality experiences extended throughout pre-k and kindergarten (Carr et al., 2019). Likewise, Cash et al. (2019) reported similar findings as children who received 2 years of high-quality instructional support exhibited improved language and literacy skills. Benefits of quality early childhood experiences are evident after 1 year and even greater after continuation for 2 years as supported by this research (Carr et al., 2019; Cash et al., 2019).

Hooper and Hallam (2017) contributed to the research on the impact of childcare quality on child outcomes by investigating the effects of quality on infants and toddlers. Hooper and Hallam (2017) noted that toddlers' engagement in classroom experiences significantly correlated with the classroom assessment scores. Classrooms with mid to high-quality overall assessment scores had significantly higher rates of toddler engagement than classes with low overall quality scores (Hooper & Hallam, 2017). The engagement of the caregiver was significantly correlated to the toddler's engagement, which establishes the importance of adult interactions on young children's classroom experiences (Hooper & Hallam, 2017). Araujo et al. (2019) also reported that the quality of childcare positively impacted the development of infants and toddlers. In their study, Araujo et al. (2019), studied children 6 to 24 months of age and found that the children who experienced higher quality caregiver interactions showed higher developmental outcomes in the areas of communication, problem-solving, and fine motor skills. Bratsch-Hines et al. (2020) further emphasized the importance of quality childcare in the early years. In their study, Bratsch-Hines et al. (2020) reported positive effects of quality teacher-child interactions on the language development of infants and toddlers. The impacts of these quality interactions during the infant and toddler years indirectly impacted the academic skills of children upon kindergarten entry (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020). Additionally, Bratsch-Hines et al. (2020) noted that infants and toddlers with more stable caregiver relations demonstrated higher social skills in kindergarten.

Components of High-Quality Early Childhood Care and Education

Early care and education (ECE) programs serving young children from birth to five years of age vary by type, including corporate and privately owned center-based programs, family childcare homes, state-funded preschool programs, Head Start programs, and various non-profit community programs (Merrill et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2017). Each of these programs plays a role in meeting the care, developmental, and educational needs of our nation's youngest children and are monitored by differing agencies (Gorry & Thomas, 2017). The quality of early childhood programs is essential due to the long-term developmental implications of early childhood experiences (Phillips et al., 2017; Vandell et al., 2016), and the vast number of children served in these settings (Child Care Aware of America, 2019b). The lack of federally mandated regulations of childcare programs in the U.S. allows for variations in regulations among state licensing agencies (Donoghue & AAP Council on Early Childhood, 2017). Professional organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Institute for Early Education Research, and the American Public Health Association have been leaders in providing quality recommendations that have influenced state regulations for quality in early childhood programs (Pianta et al., 2016). Efforts to improve quality have taken many forms, with federal and state agencies designed to provide and monitor high-quality early childhood programming receiving both substantial investments and scrutiny (Merrill et al., 2020; Navarro-Cruz & Luschei, 2018).

What constitutes high-quality childcare has been an issue of global discussion in the early childhood field (Pianta et al., 2020; Yoshikawa et al., 2018). A specific definition of quality has been difficult to establish (Pianta et al., 2020). The components of quality are commonly differentiated by structural and process elements (Pianta et al., 2020). Structural quality features include the foundational elements of a program, which are often easily regulated and assessed, such as class size, adult-child ratio, teacher qualifications, and wages (Bonetti & Brown, 2018). Process quality comprises the experiences that children have within a childcare setting, such as interactions with educators, peers, and learning activities (Bonetti & Brown, 2018; Vermeer & Groeneveid, 2017). Both structural and process quality features are essential to creating and maintaining a quality early childhood program (Bonetti & Brown, 2018).

Structural Quality Elements

Structural quality indicators are characteristics of the childcare program such as child-staff ratios, wages, classroom group sizes, and educator qualifications (Bonetti & Brown, 2018). Structural elements lay the foundations for process quality elements including positive teacher-child relationships, positive emotional climate, and nurturing, supportive interactions with children that are critical to healthy development (Bonetti & Brown, 2018; Francis & Barnett, 2019; Slot et al., 2018). Structural aspects of childcare program quality impact the safety and care children receive (Slot et al., 2018). Due to the ease of measuring structural dimensions of quality compared to process quality elements, most regulations and QRIS models use structural components to rate program quality (Gorry & Thomas, 2017). Research on structural quality indicators and their direct effects

on children's development yields mixed results. Perlman et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review of research investigating the association between child-staff ratios and child outcomes. Overall results yielded small or no associations between teacher-child ratios and child outcomes (Perlman et al., 2017). Research by Perlman et al. (2017) suggested that improvement efforts on quality indicators other than teacher-child ratios may prove more beneficial to improving quality (Perlman et al., 2017).

Francis and Barnett (2019) investigated the effects of class size on program quality. When class sizes decreased by five children, one on one interactions between educators and children and literacy skill gains at the end of the preschool year increased (Francis & Barnett, 2019). The results did not indicate that a decrease in class size resulted in higher quality interactions (Francis & Barnett, 2019). These results suggest that the structural components lay the foundation for quality; however, structural quality alone is not enough to create global program quality since high-quality interactions and other process quality pieces must also be in place (Francis & Barnett, 2019). Coaching and training in the areas of high-quality interactions are quality improvement recommendations gained from this study (Francis & Barnett, 2019). In a study of rural preschool classrooms, Hartman et al. (2016) researched the effects of different levels of structural regulations on program quality. Structural elements of teacher-child ratio, group size, teacher education, and classroom space were investigated (Hartman et al., 2016). The researchers found a correlation between programs with higher structural regulations and more teachers with higher education and higher-quality classroom environments (Hartman et al., 2016).

In early childhood settings, educators play a significant role in creating quality care and learning environments for young children (Hatfield et al., 2016). The United States has over two million adults in the childcare workforce, of which the vast majority are women (Whitebook et al., 2018). Maintaining a qualified workforce is essential to the quality of a childcare program (Cassidy et al., 2016). Despite the importance of educators in the quality of early childhood programs and their impact on child outcomes, workers are grossly underpaid with average hourly wages barely above the minimum wage (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). The lack of public investment in early childhood education creates difficulty in increasing educator wages comparable to that of educators of older children (Whitebook et al., 2018). Wage disparities exist with early care and education, with educators of the youngest children earning the lowest pay (Whitebook et al., 2018). Despite an increase in education levels of educators between 2002 and 2013, there was no significant increase in wages (Herbst, 2018). Low wages of childcare educators' impact job satisfaction, personal well-being, and the quality of care they provide (Cassidy et al., 2016; Cumming, 2017; Totenhagen et al., 2016).

Early childhood education is reflected through research as being an emotionally exhaustive field of work (Whitebook et al., 2018; Yuh & Choi, 2017). The combination of high job demands, and low wages can impede the health and well-being of early childhood childcare educators. Linnan et al. (2017) found that women employed as childcare educators earning low wages were more likely to have health risks. The likelihood of participating in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking also increased for low-wage workers (Linnan et al., 2017). Educator well-being is closely connected to the

ability to provide high-quality care for young children (Cumming, 2017; Park et al., 2020). Early childhood childcare educators face a variety of work stressors, which can influence their job satisfaction, including dealing with parents, caring for children, low societal perceptions of job worth, and low wages (Falenchuk et al., 2017). The emotional exhaustion created from work stressors can lead to educator turnover and lack of job satisfaction (Blochliger & Bauer, 2018; Carson et al., 2017). Despite the high demands of the profession, childcare educators who experience director and colleague support are more effective in balancing job fatigue and maintaining job satisfaction (Yuh & Choi, 2017). Likewise, educators who experience autonomy in their work environment experience lower rates of burnout (Blochliger & Bauer, 2018; Lovgren, 2016). Recognition for efforts and financial incentives can impact an educator's job performance (Lee et al., 2019). These rewards can buffer some of the stressors that affect the mental and physical well-being of educators and lead to high turnover in the profession (Faulkner et al., 2016). High turnover can have negative effects on the childcare environment by decreasing the continuous relationship between children and educators, which can also be detrimental to children's development (Totenhagen et al., 2016).

An early childhood program's ability to provide quality services is affected by high rates of educator turnover (Cumming, 2017; Grant et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2016). A high-quality, educated, and stable workforce is important to the quality of a childcare program, with retention of staff being a concern for many childcare programs due to low wages and high job demands (Grant et al., 2019). Children enrolled in the childcare program are affected by staff turnover as quality relationships with caregivers are

essential to children's healthy development (Lally & Mangione, 2017). This is especially significant for infants and toddlers whose development is significantly impacted by secure and consistent relationships with caregivers (Lally & Mangione, 2017). Bratsch-Hines et al. (2020) further emphasized the importance of caregiver consistency on development as they reported that infants and toddlers who experienced caregiver stability exhibited higher social skills in kindergarten.

High rates of staff turnover affect the remaining educators in a program as they experience increased stress and additional workload (Totenhagen et al., 2016). Costs of hiring and educating new employees financially and qualitatively impact early childhood programs (Grant et al., 2019). More experienced early childhood educators have been found to have better process quality (Jeon et al., 2016), which is associated with increased child outcomes (Broekhuizen et al., 2016). Educator wages were found to be a leading factor in the retention of early childhood childcare educators with higher wages resulting in higher job satisfaction and job commitment (Totenhagen et al., 2016). Early childhood childcare educator turnover leaves classrooms with inexperienced educators and has damaging effects on children and programs. Young children require stable, nurturing relationships with caregivers to thrive and achieve healthy development (Lally & Mangione, 2017). Though the demands for childcare educators are high, and wages are typically low, McDonald et al. (2018) found that early childhood childcare educators view their jobs as careers regardless of the low wages with intrinsic rewards. A study of early childhood educator turnover intentions found that teachers who perceived their working conditions as positive were less likely to report intentions to leave their position

(Grant et al., 2019). Childcare educators report emotional investment and intrinsic rewards are reasons for remaining in the low wage field (McDonald et al., 2018).

Early childhood childcare educators face many job stressors that can impact their well-being and their ability to provide quality care to children (Cumming, 2017; Faulkner et al., 2016; Park et al., 2020). Childcare workers are some of the lowest paid workers in the U.S. with working conditions, often including long hours, high job demands, and low wages affecting the health and well-being of childcare educators (Linnan et al., 2017). Employment as a childcare educator is associated with both physical and mental health concerns (Lee et al., 2019; Linnan et al., 2017). Depressive symptoms, stress, and emotional exhaustion were noted by Jeon et al. (2016) in early childhood educators who had negative perceptions of their jobs. The impacts of stress for childcare providers include obesity, sleep disturbances, and depressive symptoms (Faulkner et al., 2016; Linnan et al., 2017). Likewise, Ling (2018) found obesity and depression rates in childcare educators employed by Head Start programs were significantly higher than the national averages. Educators report that working in a childcare setting is creates emotional exhaustion which affects job satisfaction and intentions of quitting (Carson et al., 2017; Totenhagen et al., 2016). Grant et al. (2019) similarly found that emotional exhaustion was a key indicator of early childhood educators' intentions to leave their positions. Due to the connection between childcare educator well-being, job turnover, and the ability to provide quality care, researchers have investigated the stressors that impact their well-being (Carson et al., 2017). Faulkner et al. (2016) conducted focus groups of childcare providers and found that the primary source of job stress was not caused by the

act of caring for children, but rather the interactions with the parents of the children. Chaotic child care environments were also reported by child care educators as causing stress, depressive symptoms, and emotional exhaustion (Jeon et al., 2016). The lack of societal value for the work of childcare educators and the lack of being viewed as professionals also affect educator job satisfaction (Faulkner et al., 2016).

Despite the stressors involved in caring for children, some factors promote positive feelings about the work, influence educator well-being, and increase overall work engagement (Cassidy et al., 2016; Grant et al., 2019; Hur et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2019). Supportive relationships at work have been correlated with lower stress levels in educators (Hur et al., 2016), job satisfaction, and quality of life (Yuh & Choi, 2017). Teachers' participation in decision-making in their work environment was also found to decrease job stress (Hur et al., 2016). Reducing job stress by creating positive organizational environments that focus on teacher autonomy and supportive relationships has also been found to increase job satisfaction and lower turnover (Hur et al., 2016).

Early childhood caregiver education is often cited as a key indicator of quality in early childhood programs (Donoghue & AAP Council on Early Childhood, 2017). Manning et al. (2019) indicated that the education level of educators is significantly correlated with overall childcare quality. A research study conducted by Hartman et al. (2016) found a correlation between higher teacher education levels and higher preschool classroom assessment scores. Lin and Magnussen (2018) revealed that educators without post-secondary education and training in early childhood education were in classrooms of significantly lower quality compared with teachers who hold a college degree. Research

offers mixed results on the effects of teacher education on child outcomes. Falenchuk et al. (2017) reported no positive association between teacher education and child outcomes while Soliday Hong et al. (2019) found modest, but significant associations between teacher education and higher language, literacy, and math skills. Despite the mixed results regarding the impact of staff education on child outcomes, education level is still an important indicator of childcare quality. Totenhagen et al. (2016) revealed that hiring highly educated teachers in childcare is a complex issue since teachers with more education are prone to leaving the childcare program for higher-paying jobs. Childcare center directors face decisions of hiring less educated staff with higher job retention or hiring staff with higher education qualifications due to the potential of increased turnover of higher educated staff (Totenhagen et al., 2016).

With increasing numbers of children experiencing nonparental childcare, regulations have increased to enhance the safety and quality of care. Regulations that impact childcare group sizes, education requirements of educators, and child-staff ratios are all associated with the increases in the cost of care (Gorry & Thomas, 2017). Gorry and Thomas (2017) discovered that increasing the number of infants in a childcare classroom by one child lowered the average cost of infant care by $850-$1890 per year. This amount decreased when child-staff ratios were included in the analysis since an increase in children would also require hiring more staff to meet regulations (Gorry & Thomas, 2017). Due to the ease of measuring structural features of quality, these are often the focus of regulations (Gorry & Thomas, 2017). The recurring theme in the literature, which was reiterated by Gorry and Thomas, indicated weak associations

between structural features and children's developmental outcomes. Rather than showing significant impacts on outcomes, these structural features supply the foundation of healthy and safe environments that allow educators to provide high process quality, which is a predictor of healthy development (Bonetti & Brown, 2018). Findings by Gorry and Thomas (2017) reported that increased structural quality standards did not result in increased outcomes but significantly increased cost; however, Hartman et al. (2016) reported positive associations between increased regulations and overall program quality. Additional regulations for childcare programs include standards imposed by QRIS, and program accreditation organizations that further increase program quality (Gorry & Thomas, 2017). Early childhood professionals have called for a shift in the focus of compliance with licensing regulations to a focus on overall quality improvements (Maxwell & Starr, 2019). This call to action comes following increased requirements for childcare programs receiving childcare subsidy funds and licensing agencies to help strengthen program quality (Maxwell & Starr, 2019). Maxwell and Starr (2019) emphasized the vital role of licensing agencies in supporting the quality of childcare practices. Technical assistance efforts of licensing staff can impact quality improvement initiatives in addition to enforcing regulations (Maxwell & Starr, 2019).

Process Quality

Children are impacted and influenced by experiences and interactions they have with the people and environments in which they exist (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Caregiving environments, including families and childcare settings, considerably influence development (Iruka & Forry, 2018). Process quality features such as nurturing,

responsive relationships with caregivers impact the development of a child's brain (Lally & Mangione, 2017). Likewise, supportive instructional environments influence children's social and academic skills (Carr et al., 2019). Childcare programs with high process quality provide positive emotional climates with caregiver-child relationships that foster healthy development (Broekhuizen et al., 2016). A key element of these caregiver-child relationships that influence children's brain development are "serve- and- return" interactions (Phillips et al., 2017). These responsive, back and forth exchanges build brain circuitry allowing children to demonstrate cognitive skills that facilitate strong academic performance (Phillips et al., 2017).

The importance of process quality in the development of child outcomes is a central theme throughout the literature. In a study by Broekhuizen et al. (2016), at-risk children who attended emotionally supportive and well-organized preschool and kindergarten classrooms had better social and emotional skills than children in lower quality classrooms. Ansari and Pianta (2018) found modest academic benefits of attending high-quality childcare programs; when followed by quality teacher-child interactions in elementary school, these academic gains remained through 5th grade. Children with caregivers who practiced higher-quality interactions and relationships displayed better development outcomes (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020; Hatfield et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2016), with the youngest children experiencing the greatest benefits (La Paro & Gloeckler, 2016). Cash et al. (2019) studied the impact of continued high-quality interactions on a child's development. Children who received consistent, positive relationships and interactions with teachers during the preschool years had statistically

higher academic skills, and continuity of high quality over two years resulted in even higher academic gains for children (Cash et al., 2019). Broekhuizen et al. (2016) found that the quality of the care environment outweighed the effects of the amount of time spent in childcare. High amounts of childcare in positive environments positively impacted children's behavioral development (Broekhuizen et al., 2016).

Another study relating the effects of process quality indicators on children's development was conducted by McNally and Slutsky (2018). The researchers found that children who experienced strong relationships with adult caregivers in high-quality environments were more engaged in the classroom (McNally & Slutsky, 2018). Even though research supports the importance of quality relationships between children and caregivers, programs struggle to provide this level of quality. Hallam et al. (2016) reported that even in centers rated high-quality by QRIS, observational assessments reported minimal teacher-child interactions. Carr et al. (2019) found instructional support provided by pre-k and kindergarten educators to be a predictor of children's outcomes but was the lowest-rated domain in their study. Steering improvements around the supportive interactions of educators, which require more effort in monitoring and assessing, could benefit children's experiences, learning, and development (Duval et al., 2020; Hatfield et al., 2016).

Quality Improvement Initiatives

The well-documented benefits of high-quality childcare have led to an increase in the number and scope of government policy initiatives aimed at increasing quality in early childhood programs (Gordon et al., 2021; Kane et al., 2018; National Association

for the Education of Young Children, n.d.). Quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) are state or locally designed efforts aimed at improving the quality of early childhood programs and providing parents with information about program quality to assist in making child care choices (Herbst, 2018; Markowitz et al., 2020). The quality indicators measured in QRIS vary among states (Kirby et al., 2017) with many models employing assessment instruments such as the Environment Rating Scales (ERS; Harms et al., 2014). The 2011 Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grants designed to improve programs serving infants, toddlers, and preschoolers influenced the development and restructuring of QRIS programs among states (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.b). Despite the development of QRIS to improve the quality of early childhood programs, issues have arisen in the validity of quality measurement designs, concerns with the use of assessment instruments in high stakes settings that were not designed for this purpose, and effective ways to support directors and educators as they strive to improve quality within their programs (Setodji et al., 2018; Tout et al., 2017).

Coaching, technical assistance, professional development, and funding incentives are examples of supports that can help programs improve quality (Warner-Richter et al., 2016). Success by 6 (SB6) in Pennsylvania is a community-based effort that provided these supports for childcare programs participating in the state QRIS (Warner-Richter et al., 2016). Childcare programs that rated a level of 2 stars on the QRIS were provided technical assistance through a coaching program, funding for improvements, ERS assessments, professional development, and director roundtables which led to a small

increase in program improvement (Warner-Richter et al., 2016). Karoly et al. (2016) revealed that childcare programs participating in the Delaware QRIS scoring at the highest rating level did not provide quality at a level that impacted children's development. To ensure QRIS models are designed so that higher rating levels truly coincide with higher quality programming, Markowitz et al. (2020) report the need for improved validation measures to adequately assess process quality elements, which are more closely linked to child outcomes than structural indicators. Data from states reports weak associations between QRIS and child outcomes, also suggesting that changes in the QRIS design may be warranted (Markowitz et al., 2020).

Summary and Conclusions

The EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) has been used by many researchers to examine the bidirectional impacts of environments and environmental influences on the development of a child. Centering the childcare program as a microsystem in the child's developing ecological system containing layers of influencing elements provides a frame for this review of literature related to factors influencing childcare quality. As early childhood childcare programs strive to continuously improve quality and thus positively impact children's development, they are confronted by many issues and barriers. This extensive literature review was completed to explore the existing barriers affecting childcare quality improvements. Themes emerged within the literature reviewed regarding these barriers.

There is a large amount of research on early childhood quality and trending related issues (Bonetti & Brown, 2018; Lee et al., 2019; McNally & Slutsky, 2018). A

gap exists in the literature about practice on the perspectives of childcare center directors as they implement program improvements, and further research is needed. Research related to QRIS and other improvement efforts in the field of early childhood reveals that improvements have occurred. Growth is still needed as well as research to guide improvement efforts.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors regarding barriers they encounter as they attempt to implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the state QRIS. These quality improvement barriers were studied because 30% of childcare programs participating in the QRIS in the study state are not performing at the highest level of quality, which can impact the learning and development of the children enrolled in these programs (Child Care Aware of America, 2019b). This qualitative study may provide insight into the issues involved in early childhood program improvement by focusing on the directors' multiple perspectives and meanings. Chapter 3 includes information about the research design and rationale. My role as the researcher in this study is explained along with a description of measures to address researcher bias and ethical issues. Participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, and analysis processes are detailed. Chapter 3 concludes with a description of the strategies that were used to ensure trustworthiness and the ethical procedures involved in the study.

Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative research is designed to allow the investigation of experiences and social life through an individual's perspective (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative inquiry involves the belief that knowledge is not preexisting, rather as people engage in activities and experiences in their lives, they create understanding and construct knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A basic

qualitative research design was used to structure the collection and analysis of data to answer the following RQ that guided this study:

RQ: What are the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors' regarding barriers they encounter as they implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the QRIS in a southeastern state?

To provide a rigorous study of the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors, a basic qualitative design was appropriate for this study. The consideration of a quantitative design was rejected because the characteristic elements of quantitative design such as the determination of a relationship among variables or a hypothesis to confirm or deny were not present in this study. Quantitative inquiry involves data that are interpreted and expressed through numeric values (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In contrast, qualitative inquiry involves the investigation of a problem by collecting data through attentive and concentrated interviewing and observation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using qualitative inquiry to conduct interviews presented a holistic picture of the perspectives of childcare center directors and the meanings they interpret regarding barriers that are encountered as they attempt to implement quality improvements within their childcare programs.

A basic qualitative research design was appropriate to study this RQ as it involved the study of individual interpretations of experiences (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethnography and case study are research designs that were considered and rejected due to their lack of alignment with the study purpose. Ethnography involves the immersive study of cultural groups and beliefs, which was not characteristic of this study (Creswell

& Poth, 2018). Case studies involve a deep exploration of a specific, real-life case or multiple cases over time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study I have designed involved exploring perspectives of multiple people who have a shared experience, which aligned with a basic qualitative methodology (see Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher in this qualitative study, I became part of the research as I explored the perspectives of participants through one-on-one telephone interviews. Conducting interviews to focus on the participants' perspectives of the problem was essential to gain an understanding of their meaning of the issue. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that qualitative inquiry relies on the researcher as a vital instrument in data collection. To effectively perform the role of researcher, I had to be aware of any personal biases, assumptions, and experiences that could affect my interpretation of the data. The assessment and monitoring of personal bias and assumptions, known as reflexivity, is an essential component of reliable qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout the research study, I self-reflected on personal bias and my position in the study by writing in a reflective journal. Acknowledging and reflecting on my subjectivity enhanced the quality of the study by limiting the influence of bias on the interpretation of results. Member checking was used to further reduce any researcher bias and increase validity by providing a summary of the draft findings to each participant to allow a review for accuracy and to ensure the findings reflected their perspectives (see Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

My professional role during this research period was as an infant and toddler specialist with the Child Care Resource and Referral network providing training, coaching, and technical assistance to childcare directors and educators. To alleviate any conflict of interest between my role as a researcher and my position as an infant and toddler specialist, participants for the study were recruited from three counties outside of my service area, with whom I had no personal, professional, or supervisory relationship. If during the recruitment process a potential participant had emerged with whom I had a personal or professional relationship, this person would have been eliminated from the participant pool to alleviate any potential conflict of interest. My experience in providing reflective coaching with directors and educators and my knowledge of the work involved in the provision of services for young children and families may have created a level of trust with the participants. Establishing this trust with the childcare program directors increased their comfort level during the interview process, leading to a willingness to share open and honest perspectives. Creating a safe, respectful interview environment in which the participants were comfortable sharing their perspectives was needed to gather data that led to a rigorous study of the issue.

Methodology

In this study, I explored the perspectives of 12 directors of center-based childcare programs to identify barriers related to improving program quality. Exploring these barriers to improvement was important because approximately 30% of center-based childcare programs participating in the QRIS in the study state are not performing at the highest quality level (Child Care Aware of America, 2019b). I selected a basic qualitative

research design for this study because the goal of a researcher in a basic qualitative design is to gain an understanding of the meaning individuals construct of their personal experiences (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). In this section, I provide a detailed description of the participant selection, the use and selection of data sources, instruments used to collect data, and the data analysis plan. Measures taken to increase the trustworthiness of the study are identified as well as the use of ethical procedures to ensure rigorous and quality research.

Participant Selection

Unlike quantitative research, which emphasizes the ability to generalize research findings with numerical data, qualitative research attempts to uncover meaning or understand a person's experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sampling methods used in qualitative research must be designed to generate a sample from whom the most information can be acquired (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). To gain rich information from individuals with personalized experiences associated with this study's RQ, I used purposeful sampling to select the participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended purposeful sampling for participant selection in which specific experience and knowledge are needed to answer the RQ. Twelve directors from center-based childcare programs in a southeastern study state who met the following criteria were selected as participants: (a) The director must be employed by a DHS licensed center-based childcare program in the study state, serving children from birth to 5 years of age; (b) the director of the program must have been employed in their current position for at least 1 year; and (c) the childcare program at which the director was employed must be rated at 0, 1, or 2 stars on the QRIS.

Purposeful sampling with these specific selection criteria was necessary to thoroughly answer the study's RQ.

The DHS website for the study state contains a listing of all licensed childcare programs in the state, with detailed information regarding the provider type (center-based, family, or group care provider), the ages of children served, QRIS star rating, years of program operation, and program contact information. Childcare program information on the state DHS website was used to generate a list of DHS licensed center-based childcare programs serving children birth to 5 with a star rating of 0, 1, or 2 stars on the QRIS. Due to the scope of the study, programs open less than 1 year, not participating in the QRIS, not licensed by DHS, or serving primarily school-age children were eliminated. Additional contact information including email addresses and updated telephone numbers were collected from childcare program websites as needed. Using the online contact information for childcare programs in the study state, I emailed the recruitment flyer and the consent form to each childcare program director. These documents included my contact information, the purpose of the study, and additional information to assist the directors in determining their interest in participation. The directors were instructed to ask any questions and reply via email within 48 hours of receipt with the words "I consent."

The decision to select a sample size of 12 to 15 participants was determined based on the need to gather in-depth data while considering the amount of time involved with data collection and analysis. Selecting 12 to 15 participants allowed for the collection of rich data while allowing for the possibility of participant withdrawal from the study. In

the event 12 to 15 directors did not respond with consent after 48 hours expired, I sent a second email containing the recruitment flyer and the consent form again requesting a response within 48 hours. After the expiration of the 48 hours and consent was not obtained from 12 to 15 directors, I began making phone calls to the directors on the generated list of programs. During this phone call, I verbally shared the information on the recruitment flyer to generate interest in study participation. If the director expressed an interest in participation, I sent an email containing the informed consent requesting their response via email with the words "I consent." All email attempts, phone calls, and responses were documented using a spreadsheet.

Instrumentation

To provide the collection of rich perspectives that are central to my study, I conducted a semistructured, one-on-one interview with each research participant. A phone call was made to each director selected for participation to schedule a convenient time for the interview. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, interviews took place via telephone to protect the health of participants and myself. Each interview was designed as an in-depth conversation guided by flexible questions that evolved based on interviewee responses. The interviews were steered by an interview protocol (see Appendix A) I personally designed. Procedures were developed to set the participant at ease and willing to openly share their ideas, knowledge, and experiences. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was designed to steer the interview in the direction to answer the RQ rather than serve as a strict list to follow. New questions emerged based on the responses of the interviewee, and follow-up questions were used to gather more detail. A semistructured

format for the interviews was chosen to allow flexibility of interview questions and permit follow-up questions when needed to clarify participant responses (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). I followed the recommendations of Creswell and Poth (2018) for qualitative interviews, including the use of an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to guide questions, being respectful of participants' time and feelings, attentively listening to responses, and asking additional questions to gather rich information that each interviewee could provide. Asking open-ended questions allowed the participants to share their viewpoints and elaborate on their responses and allowed me to ask for clarifying information to understand their perspectives.

Each interview was audio recorded using two recording devices: my personal laptop and my personal iPhone. Having two recording devices provided a secondary recording of each interview in the event there was a recording problem with one device. The audio recordings of the interviews were the primary source of data for my study and, therefore, ensuring a quality recording was of the utmost importance. Following each interview, the iPhone recording of the interview was copied to my password-protected, personal laptop, and deleted from the iPhone. The iPhone was password protected to ensure the confidentiality of the data during the short time the interview recordings were stored on the iPhone.

Before conducting interviews, a subject matter expert (SME), a colleague with 18 years of experience in early childhood care and education reviewed the interview protocol (see Appendix A) to ensure the validity of the instrument and its alignment to the purpose and RQ guiding the study. Feedback from the SME was used to facilitate

improvements to the interview protocol (see Appendix A). A pilot test of the interview protocol (see Appendix A) and procedures was also conducted before data collection. This pilot test consisted of telephone or virtual interviews with three SMEs who are early childhood professionals. SMEs were recruited from a group of colleagues who had at least 10 years of experience working with early childhood educators and administrators. As a novice researcher, conducting a pilot test was beneficial to increase my comfort level by conducting interviews and to ensure that the interview questions generated rich, in-depth responses to adequately examine the RQ.

The use of interviews to gather an individual's personal experiences and perspectives requires quality interview procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I designed the interview questions to flow from questions that were easy for participants to answer and helped establish the comfort level for the interviewee and progressed to questions that involved sharing personal experiences and knowledge once trust was established between myself and the interviewee. To establish this level of trust in the limited relationship I had with each participant, I adhered to strict methods of confidentiality and respected each participant for their unique knowledge and perspective. Another method of establishing trust was to keep a check on my body language, tone of voice, and emotions during the interviews as these can cause the interviewee to be uncomfortable and unwilling to share openly. Despite the limited contact I had with the interviewees due to the COVID 19 pandemic, establishing trust with the participants was critical to collecting robust data.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

To explore the perspectives of childcare center directors regarding the barriers they face as they attempt to implement quality improvements, I purposefully selected 12 directors of center-based childcare programs to interview. After I received permission from Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I recruited directors from three counties in the study state based on the following selection criteria: (a) The director must have been employed by a DHS licensed center-based childcare program serving children from birth to 5 years of age, (b) the director of the program must have been employed in their current position for at least 1 year, and (c) the childcare program at which the director was employed must have been rated at 0, 1, or 2 stars on the state QRIS. The counties in which the recruitment took place bordered my professional service area with the Child Care Resource and Referral Network. To begin the recruitment process, I explored the state DHS website to identify center-based childcare programs in three counties within the study state. A list was printed from the website of all center-based childcare programs in these counties serving children birth to 5 with a score of 0, 1, or 2 stars on the state QRIS. Contact information for childcare programs was located on the study state DHS website. Additional contact information including email addresses and updated phone numbers were collected from childcare program websites. Programs open less than 1 year, not participating in the QRIS, not licensed by DHS, or serving primarily school-age children were eliminated from the list.

The recruitment flyer and request for informed consent were delivered through email to each director on the identified list meeting the selection criteria. The childcare

center directors who were interested in participating responded by email with the words "I Consent" as directed on the consent form. A period of 48 hours was given to allow participants to review the invitation, ask questions, and email consent for participation. When initial email communication was not possible, I contacted the director by telephone to share the recruitment flyer and the consent form and to obtain email contact information. The recruitment flyer and consent form were then delivered through email requesting the response of "I consent" within the same 48-hour time frame. Upon receiving each email response, a pseudonym was created for each possible participant. These pseudonyms were used throughout the entirety of the research study to ensure confidentiality.

Once informed consent was obtained, I made a phone call to each interested director to express my thanks for his or her interest and to schedule a convenient date and time for each interview. Each director selected a time and location to participate in the phone interview. The opportunity to choose a private interview location away from their work setting reduced the professional risks involved with being overheard by others when sharing information. When phone calls to a participant were necessary, no information was shared with others or left in messages that could connect the participant to the research study. Due to the COVID-19 national pandemic, interviews were completed by telephone rather than in-person to protect the health of participants and the researcher. During this initial phone call, I reviewed their rights as a participant and answered any questions to reduce anxiety and provide further information about the interview. In the event 12 to 15 participants were not identified by the initial recruitment, additional

counties would have been added to identify additional directors using the same recruitment method and selection criteria.

The length of the interview was anticipated to last 45 to 60 minutes. An interview protocol (see Appendix A) was used to conduct the interviews, which included gathering demographic information, open-ended questions, and additional questions and probes to gain further information as needed. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) ensured a similar questioning of all participants related to the RQ. Follow-up questions and probes emerged based on participant responses to initial questions. Each interview was audio recorded using two devices, the Voice Recorder software on my personal computer and the Voice Memos app on my personal iPhone. A reflective journal was used during the interview process as a data collection method, including observations, such as participants' tone of voice, and other notes taken during the interview process, which could not be recorded by audio. Journal entries written during the participant interviews increased the richness of the data collected (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). A debrief was conducted at the end of each interview, reviewing the purpose of the study, and allowing ample time for participant questions.

The interview process was anticipated to take approximately four weeks to complete. Conducting the interviews via telephone or Zoom allowed the potential for the completion of three to four interviews each week. Following each interview, I used Hyper Transcribe to create a complete transcription of each interview. I uploaded the transcripts to the QDA Miner Lite software for coding and analysis. Electronic files related to the study were stored on my personal computer which is password protected.

All hard copies of documents and a flash drive containing a copy of the electronic files related to the study were stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office. After five years, all documents and information related to the research study will be shredded or deleted.

Data Analysis Plan

As I utilized semistructured, audio-recorded interviews to gather perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors, I studied these perspectives through the lens of the EST. I considered how the shared issues are layered in different systems in the framework and how these systems interconnect, affecting program quality, and ultimately affecting each child enrolled in the program. Saldaña (2021) described the process of data analysis as making meaning of data to answer a RQ. This process began as I collected data and continued in an iterative manner leading to a comprehensive analysis of all data collected. Following the first and each subsequent interview, I reflected on the information gathered and transcribed each audio-recorded interview using the Hyper Transcribe software. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and transcriptions were checked against the audio recordings to ensure accuracy.

Accuracy in the transcription process was essential to the quality of the study since the words and ideas shared by the participants were used to make meaning of the directors' perspectives which were critical to the purpose of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As I transcribed and reflected on each bit of the collected data, I made notes and wrote memos to capture reflections and insights I obtained. Beginning the data analysis during data collection allowed me to identify thoughts and ideas that emerged that I

might want to ask more about in subsequent interviews (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). After transcription, the interview data was entered into the software program, QDA Miner Lite, for data management, coding, and further analysis. The QDA Miner Lite software provided an organized inventory of all the collected data. Using this software, I searched for recurring words, phrases, and ideas and applied codes or multiple codes to chunks of data that were arranged and organized by the software. The software allowed for the insertion of my memos and reflections, which further increased the credibility of the findings.

After the initial cycle of coding, I searched the data for emerging themes and categories. This iterative process of analysis allowed for the ongoing reflection, refinement, and revision of codes and themes by reviewing the transcriptions to ensure that emerging themes accurately reflected the data (Saldaña, 2021). I wrote memos and in journals to reflect on the coding process, to consider relationships among codes and themes, the appearance of additional themes, and the continued refinement of codes and themes. This process continued until no additional themes arose and identified themes were well established in the data (Saldaña, 2021). After the coding process, member checking took place. This member checking process occurred through email, enlisting the assistance of each study participant in reviewing a one-page draft summary of the findings to ensure the accuracy of my interpretations.

After the completion of the coding and member checking processes, I began the data synthesis. This synthesis involved examining the categories and themes that emerged from the data and determining the key information and findings of the study. The draft

findings were emailed to an expert reviewer to thoroughly scrutinize my coding process and data interpretation. Utilizing this colleague with an advanced degree in education as an expert reviewer increased the validity of the study and ensured that my findings were credible (Saldaña, 2021). The findings for my study built from the problem and research design and were summarized to address the RQ. To ensure the confidentiality of research participants, the expert reviewer was emailed a copy of the confidentiality agreement which they signed and returned via email. By signing the confidentiality agreement, the expert reviewer agreed to refrain from sharing or discussing any information related to the research study with anyone other than the researcher, to securely store all research information while in her possession, to return all research information to the researcher after the review, and to erase or delete all non-returnable research information.

Saldaña (2021) detailed the importance of a researcher critically challenging and questioning her interpretations of data. Preconceived ideas can cloud the ability to question or identify alternative themes in the data (Saldaña, 2021). To challenge my interpretations, I searched for discrepant data that did not align with my initial understandings. This discrepant data was used to reflect on the themes that were identified and determine if additional themes were unfolding or if this data was truly discrepant. Continuously rechecking my interpretations throughout analysis assisted in developing a complex understanding of the data. All salient data was included in the findings and all discrepant cases were reported. Electronic files related to the study are stored on my personal computer which is password protected. All hard copies of documents and a flash drive containing a copy of the electronic files related to the study

are stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office. After five years, all documents and information related to the research study will be shredded or deleted.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, ensuring that participants' experiences are accurately represented through complex and holistic research findings is essential to a valid and trustworthy study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Quantitative research involves the use of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity to ensure rigor (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The nature of qualitative research, focusing on an individual's perspectives and experiences, requires a different approach to establishing rigor within a study. To achieve a high level of trustworthiness, or validity in a qualitative study, Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend adherence to principles including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. The following paragraphs describe the strategies I utilized to strengthen each of these standards.

Credibility

Credibility in a qualitative research study is likened to the concept of internal validity in quantitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Establishing credibility involves the researcher’s focus on the complexity of the data to develop a robust, comprehensive research study. The concept of credibility involves ensuring the findings generated from the study reflect what is present in the data (Saldaña, 2021). One method of establishing credibility that I implemented was member checking. This strategy required sharing the collected data and interpretations with study participants to enlist their evaluation of my interpretations of their perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Reviewing the data allowed participants to offer clarification, provide additional information, and check for accuracy. To further increase the credibility of the study, I enlisted the assistance of a colleague with an advanced degree in education and experience in early childhood. The role of the expert reviewer was to scrutinize my coding process, data interpretation, and analysis for accuracy and to offer an additional perspective. As the sole researcher within this study, I became an instrument within the study as I collected and interpreted the data. The close association I had with the data and the inability to completely remove my personal ideas, experiences, and biases substantiated the need for member checking and the assistance of an expert reviewer. Allowing participants and the expert reviewer to examine the data and my interpretations increased the rigor and richness of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Dependability

Johnson et al. (2020) referred to dependability as the consistency of reflection of the study findings with the data that was collected. To strengthen dependability within my study, I developed a strong research design to collect data to adequately answer the RQ. The practice of using member checking that was used to strengthen credibility also strengthened the dependability of my study. Member checks consisted of sending each participant an emailed copy of the draft findings to determine if I accurately interpreted their perspectives. In addition to member checks to enhance dependability, I also provided a detailed description of how the data was collected, how the themes were determined, and how decisions in the analysis were determined to create an audit trail. The audit trail provided the reader with an explanation of how I arrived at findings thus

establishing the dependability of the study. The audit trail records included reflective journals, notes, and memos.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a principle of trustworthiness that suggests if another researcher were to analyze the same study data, the results will be confirmed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). As the primary instrument in my study, my personality, experiences, and bias can influence all stages of the research. Study results should be grounded in the data rather than my personal viewpoints. Careful consideration of personal subjectivity and open explanation of my research processes through an audit trail provided transparency and increased overall credibility. In addition to reflective practices, an expert reviewer was employed to scrutinize my data collection, coding process, and analysis. Enlisting the perspective of the expert reviewer increased the confirmability of my basic qualitative study.

Transferability

Transferability is the applicability of research findings to other settings (Johnson et al., 2020). Rigorous qualitative research provides the reader with rich details regarding the study process and participants to extend the ability to transfer research findings to other contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To enhance transferability in my study, I provided a detailed description of the childcare center directors, the childcare programs, and the findings of the study. Descriptions of interview settings, atmosphere, and observations of use during data analysis were included in my interview notes to further establish transferability. Providing this type of descriptive

information enables the reader to determine if the transferability of the study findings to other settings is appropriate (Johnson et al., 2020).

Ethical Procedures

The consideration of and planning for ethical issues that could surface during research is essential to designing a quality study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend examining ethical issues and how they apply to each stage of the research process. To address ethical procedures, I followed the suggestions of Creswell and Poth (2018) and developed a list of issues that could arise and sorted them into study stages including: before the study, when beginning the study, during data collection, during data analysis, and when reporting findings. This allowed me to thoroughly consider issues and develop plans to address each.

Approval from Walden University's IRB was obtained before beginning research. IRB guidelines were utilized throughout the research process to ensure the protection and privacy of all study participants. During participant recruitment, each interested director was asked to review the consent form which addressed ethical considerations. The consent form provided written information outlining the purpose of the study, procedures, risks, and benefits, assurance that participation was voluntary, and that withdrawal was allowable at any time with no ramifications. Additional ethical procedures included protecting participant identity. All information shared by participants was securely stored and not personally identifiable to them in the study report (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A pseudonym was assigned to each participant upon selection, to ensure anonymity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Study participants were notified in the consent form about the audio recording of each interview. Recordings were made using two recording devices, my personal laptop, and my personal cell phone, to ensure that a quality recording of each interview was captured. The audio recordings were used to accurately transcribe each interview word for word. To ensure the confidentiality of all participants and data, both my personal laptop and the personal cell phone are password protected. Following each interview, the audio recording on the cell phone was copied to the personal computer and deleted from the cell phone. The Hyper Transcribe software was used to transcribe each audio-recorded interview. The Hyper Transcribe software breaks the recordings into small chunks of data that can easily be replayed to allow for accuracy in the transcription process. After the interview data was transcribed, it was entered into the QDA Miner Lite program for organization, coding, and analysis. Pseudonyms were used to identify each study participant to ensure anonymity. Demographic information was only used in an aggregated format along with pseudonyms. Electronic files related to the study are stored on my personal computer which is password protected. All hard copies of documents and a flash drive containing a copy of the electronic files related to the study are stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office. After 5 years, all documents and information related to the research study will be shredded or deleted.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I described the methodology for this basic qualitative research study. Details of the participant selection, instrumentation, and the data analysis plan are provided. Ethical considerations have been addressed, as well as issues related to the

trustworthiness of the study. Chapter 4 includes a detailed description of the setting, data collection, data analysis, and study results.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors regarding barriers they encounter as they attempt to implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the QRIS in a southeastern state. One RQ guided the study:

RQ: What are the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors' regarding barriers they encounter as they attempt to implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the QRIS in a southeastern state?

To examine the RQ, I gathered data by interviewing participants using a semistructured interview protocol (see Appendix A) containing open ended questions. Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, participants were given the option of a phone or Zoom call for the interviews to keep everyone safe, and all participants chose to participate using a phone interview. In the previous chapters, I discussed the introduction to the study, which included the problem, purpose, and conceptual framework that guided the study. I also outlined the impact of early childhood experiences on children's development and learning with the current literature.

Chapter 4 includes a description of the setting of the study by providing demographic information of the participants and characteristics of the childcare programs they serve. A review of the data collection process, the data analysis methods used, and the study results are provided. Details about the search for discrepant data are also included. Chapter 4 concludes with a description of the evidence of trustworthiness.

Setting

Participants of this study were directors of center-based early childhood childcare programs in three counties in a southeastern state. Each participant in the study was a director of an early childhood childcare program with years of experience as a program director ranging from 2 to 27 years. The number of years working in the field of early childhood education ranged from 4 to 35 years. Educational background of the participants included two directors with a high school diploma, three with a Child Development Associate credential, five with a bachelor's degree in an unrelated field of study, one with a bachelor's degree in elementary education, and one with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. All participants were female. A total of 12 early childhood program directors participated in the study. The participants' demographic information is listed in Table 1.

There were variations in the characteristics of the early childhood programs from which each director was employed. The size of the childcare programs ranged from 15 to 224 children. On the QRIS in the study state, the highest score is 3 stars. All programs in the study scored below this 3-star rating. Nine of the programs had a quality rating score of 2, two programs had a score of 1, and one program had a score of 0, as rated by the state QRIS. The characteristics of the programs from which each director was employed are listed in Table 2.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Participant pseudonym	Level of education	Years as director	Years in early childhood education
D1	Bachelor's in Early Childhood Education	7	35
D2	Bachelor's in Health Care Administration	5	28
D3	High School diploma	15	15
D4	Bachelor's in Elementary Education	12	23
D5	Bachelor's in Criminal Justice	2	4
D6	Bachelor's in Music	27	27
D7	Child Development Associate Credential	6	24
D8	Child Development Associate Credential	12	17
D9	Child Development Associate Credential	3	11
D10	Bachelor's in Business	4	10
D11	High School Diploma	6	6
D12	Bachelor's in Urban Studies	4	10

Table 2

Characteristics of the Early Childhood Programs

Participant pseudonym	Number of children served	Number of years in operation	QRIS rating (0-3)
D1	68	7	1
D2	15	5	2
D3	23	15	2
D4	113	50	2
D5	55	4	2
D6	78	40	1
D7	21	5	2
D8	72	25	2
D9	55	40	2
D10	72	15	2
D11	224	12	0
D12	85	3	2

Data Collection

After receiving approval from Walden University's IRB (approval number 05-21-21-0736170), I used the state DHS website to access a list of all licensed childcare programs in the study state. To alleviate any conflicts of interest, I filtered the list to include only programs in three counties located outside of the area where I provided services through my employment with the state Child Care Resource and Referral network. Criteria were also set to limit the list to include only licensed, center-based childcare programs serving children from birth to 5 years of age, in operation for at least 1 year, and scoring a 0, 1, or 2 on the state QRIS. From the list of programs in the three identified counties, 41 programs met the identified criteria. One of the three counties initially selected for inclusion had zero programs that met the identified criteria. Because there were no programs in that county that met the criteria, it was replaced by a different county. This provided the three counties included in the study. The same methods described previously were used to identify the programs within the third county. A total of 59 programs from the three counties were found to meet the study criteria. The list from the DHS website listed the early childhood childcare program name, the director's name, and a contact phone number. From childcare program websites, I obtained email addresses for 34 childcare program directors to use for participant recruitment. An email invitation was sent to each of the 34 directors, including the participant recruitment flyer and the consent form. The recruitment flyer and consent form provided criteria for the study and requested an email response with the words "I consent." I received zero responses to these 34 email invitations indicating consent to participate.

A phone call was made to the remaining 25 for whom email addresses were not available. Each phone call was used to introduce myself, describe the research study, and obtain an email address for the program director. Twenty-five phone calls generated 13 directors who provided an email address to each of whom I sent the recruitment flyer and consent form. Four email responses were received indicating consent to participate from the 13 potential participants. An email reply of consent indicated that the director met the study criteria outlined in the consent form. These four directors were selected to participate in the research study. Following each email receipt of consent for participation, a phone call was made to each director to determine their choice of a phone or Zoom interview.

Due to the public safety concerns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, study participants were given the option to participate in a phone or Zoom interview. All directors chose a phone interview, and each selected a convenient time for the interview to occur. At the scheduled time, each director was contacted by phone. Each interview began with an overview of the study, a reminder that the interview would be recorded, and time for answering participant questions. I used the interview protocol (see Appendix A) during each interview to provide a consistent format for the interview questions with follow-up questions included as needed to gather additional information or clarification.

Following the data collection plan outlined in Chapter 3, I sent a second email to each director who did not respond to the initial email invitation for participation. I did not receive any email responses of interest in participation from this second email invitation. Following the data collection plan outlined in Chapter 3, I began making phone calls to

each of the directors who did not respond to the email contacts. Of the 34 phone calls made to directors, 20 directors requested that I email the information again for them to review and consider participating in the study. Eight directors responded to the email indicating their consent to participate in the study. These eight directors were selected for participation and were contacted to schedule their choice of a phone or Zoom interview. All eight directors chose a phone interview, and each selected a convenient time for the interview to occur. At the scheduled interview time, four participants were not available to participate in the interview, and all four were rescheduled for a more convenient time. These four directors participated in the phone interview during the second scheduled call.

The 12 interviews were on an average of 45 minutes. Each interview was conducted by phone due to the COVID-19 pandemic and participant choice. Interviews were audio-recorded using two recording devices as described in the consent form. An interview protocol (see Appendix A) was used to guide each interview. During each interview, I made notes about statements that needed clarification or further explanation. Follow-up questions were asked to provide clarification before proceeding to the next question in the interview. Each participant received a debriefing at the end of the interview where I reviewed the purpose of the research study, asked for any questions related to the study, and explained that they would receive via email, a draft summary of the findings to ensure the accuracy of my interpretations. After they reviewed the draft findings, participants were asked to respond to the email with details about needed corrections.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process began with the transcription of 12 interviews using the Hyper Transcribe software. To increase my familiarity with the data, I read each transcription and listened to the audio recordings multiple times. The transcriptions were imported into the QDA Miner Lite software to organize and code the data. Transcripts were reviewed line by line to identify codes to label and summarize chunks of the data. Examples of codes included staff shortages, low wages, need for in person training, educator anxiety. Table 3 includes an example of the codes identified from five data excerpts.

Table 3

Example of Open Codes.

Codes	Excerpts
Can't find workers	"You can't find people. We've been running ads for weeks; we have hired 10 different people and they have all kind of fallen apart or haven't shown up so now we run more ads. It's just been an absolute nightmare."
Director in classrooms	"Working rooms myself every day"
Ratio problems	"So many [directors] who just throw a body in there because they've got to meet their ratio and they've got to meet what the state requirements are."
No shows Can't pay enough	"I don't know how many interviews I have set up and people not show up, or they may show up and then what I offer them is not enough for them for an hourly wage compared to what background they have, or education they have"
Low wages	"Childcare is not the way it used to be, you can pay low, but you will not keep them."

After the initial cycle of coding, I reread each transcript to reflect, refine, and revise the identified codes. As patterns in the data surfaced, the codes were organized into categories. Through analysis, the coded data were reorganized into categories. Themes began to emerge within the data as I continued to search for commonalities and discrepancies. The iterative process of analysis allowed a repeated review of the transcriptions to ensure that the emerging themes accurately reflected the data. I wrote memos and in journals to reflect on the coding process and to consider relationships among categories and themes. Four themes emerged that provided answers to the RQ: (a) A shortage of childcare educators exists, and turnover is a frequent problem; (b) in person professional development opportunities are needed, but time to attend training is limited; (c) the cost of providing quality childcare is high with parent tuition as the primary funding source; and (d) the QRIS assessment process is subjective and stressful, with results providing an incomplete appraisal of the overall childcare program. Table 4 includes the four themes that emerged from the data pertaining to the RQ and the categories that supported each theme.

Table 4

Example of Categories and Theme Development

Theme	Categories
Educator shortage and turnover	Staff shortages Need to entice potential workers Low wages impact hiring Other jobs pay more creating turnover Limited staff affect operations Educated people take better paying jobs Constantly hiring and training staff

Results

Early childhood childcare program directors shared detailed accounts of their experiences to provide the data necessary to answer the RQ for this study. The RQ for this study was as follows:

> What are the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors' regarding barriers they encounter as they attempt to implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the QRIS in a southeastern state?

Reviewing, coding, and analyzing the participant data resulted in the identification of the following themes: (a) A shortage of childcare educators exists, and turnover is a frequent problem; (b) in person professional development opportunities are needed, but time to attend training is limited; (c) the cost of providing quality childcare is high with parent tuition as the primary funding source; and (d) the QRIS assessment process is subjective and stressful, with results providing an incomplete appraisal of the overall childcare program.

Theme 1: Childcare Educator Shortage and Turnover

During the data analysis process, childcare educator shortage and turnover emerged as the first of four themes within the data. Eleven of the 12 directors interviewed reported problems with hiring and retaining staff. Director 6 described the problem as follows:

> You can't find people. We've been running ads for weeks; we have hired 10 different people and they have all kind of fallen apart or haven't shown up so now we run more ads. It's just been an absolute nightmare.

Similar concerns were reported by Director 7:

> I don't know how many interviews I have set up and people not show up, or they may show up and then what I offer them is not enough for them for an hourly wage compared to what background they have, or education they have.

Director 10 shared her issues by stating, "It has been very difficult lately to hire new teachers and to get people to want to come work." Directors 5 and 7 shared that even when staff are hired, retaining the employees is difficult. In programs such as the one overseen by Director 6, the staffing problem is so severe that she is "working rooms [herself] every day." The educator shortage has resulted in "so many [directors] who just throw a body in there because they've got to meet their ratio and they've got to meet what the state requirements are" as shared by Director 6. The problem has caused Director 1 to turn parents away because they did not have enough teachers to care for their children.

Low staff compensation in the childcare industry was mentioned as further complicating the staff shortage and retention problem. This was evidenced by Director 12 who reported, "We are one of the best paying centers in our area and it's still not enough. We have tuition and everything, but we still don't draw enough money to pay more money." This problem was also shared by Director 3: "Childcare is not the way it used to be, you can pay low, but you will not keep them." Director 11 voiced that "I don't think we pay enough. I don't think anybody pays teachers enough. This is not a high-paying field."

One director in this study did not share the issue of staffing challenges that was reported by the other participants. Director 2 described her childcare program as small,

with 15 children enrolled and four staff employed. Unlike the other directors interviewed, Director 2 stated, “I have the same staff I have had for years.”

Theme 2: Professional Development of Staff

The directors in the study were asked to share about barriers they have faced in all areas of the QRIS. Professional development was one section of the QRIS specified as presenting barriers. Ten of the 12 directors interviewed identified problems with educator professional development including providing time away from the classroom to attend training. Director 12 shared the following example of the inability to relieve educators from their classroom duties to participate in training:

> Teachers don’t get enough time set aside to do those trainings and to be able to participate. … I will get emails on trainings, but they are usually during the day which is when we work … at 10:00 on a Thursday and we are all in a classroom.

Director 5 shared similar problems “just being able to have enough staff on hand where you could pull somebody out of a classroom to do it [participate in training].” Expecting childcare educators to participate in training on their personal time was a difficulty reported by Director 11, “the majority of my teachers are moms and it’s really hard to ask them to give up a Saturday to do a training or to take off work to do a training. It’s just not really practical.” Director 3 shared issues about the time required to participate in training:

> Some of my employees they have other jobs or are going to school, so timing can be a little bit of a snag when it comes to trying to get them to get their training in. …it is a time-consuming opportunity for them.

Director 4 mentioned how the training requirements for childcare educators can result in staff turnover, “a lot of centers have found … drops with employment because a lot of those teachers just aren't willing to give that time.”

Participants also verbalized the problems the COVID pandemic has placed on staff professional development. Director 6 described the problem as

> We used to close the center and have people come in and do trainings and stuff and now that is not as available anymore. Everything has moved…online… Sometimes that is nice, but there is just something about being in person for some stuff.

Directors 2, 9, and 10 reported the benefits of and the need for in-person training, however, due to COVID-19, only online training is available.

Theme 3: Cost and Funding of Quality Childcare

Another recurring theme within the study data was the challenge of generating enough program revenue to fund quality operations. Classroom materials and overall program operations are costly to a childcare program and funding is limited by the primary revenue source of the childcare tuition cost incurred by families. Director 1 shared “you look at all the things that are in a classroom and sometimes we may be a little short on that, but it may be due to funding because we don’t have anything other than what the parents bring [childcare tuition payments].” Director 2 shared similar views:

> I’m not a corporation or anything like that, I don’t have funding that I can put into areas when it comes to the pay and all the things you can offer. I think that comes

> in with the finance and some of the things they want to see in the classroom. You may not be able to purchase or have them available.

Director 12 stated, “The materials and the things that are required for each center…it falls back on financials. We can’t go and buy all this stuff just so we can get a good grade.” Director 2 noted that “the amount of materials that are required [to reach a 3-star rating] … that affects a program financially.”

The fixed amount of income received from childcare tuition payments limits quality initiatives such as increasing staff salaries and benefits. This limitation was shared by Director 8:

> We do not have very much compensation. We do offer half price child care, but we are in a very low-income community. We barely go up in prices, maybe $5 every 2 years, but as far as offering health benefits or anything like that unfortunately we do not offer that to our staff and that is just because we are in a low-income community.

According to Director 9, her staff wages can increase as the center increases in the number of children served: “My staff is aware that as the center grows, and we increase children we will give them raises as we can. So that is what we have done. We have steadily increased the pay rate of the employee. When I came in they were making $7 - $8 per hour. Now they come in at $10 and we bump them up to $13.”

Even though directors reported that more income is needed to finance a quality program, the cost of increasing the childcare tuition rate creates a financial hardship for families. Director 5 voiced,

> I've recently had to significantly up my tuition … it has almost doubled my tuition in the last couple of months. Just being able to find that balance where people can afford it [childcare] so they are not paying a crazy amount of money to send a child to childcare. To get everybody just to $15 was going to cost me another $135,000 a year. So, it's not just tweaking one little thing. That's massive, for a little daycare like mine, that's a massive amount of money... that's like another fifth of the amount of money it takes to run this daycare center.

Director 6 reported,

> The last couple of years it has been a nightmare because my payroll is over half a million dollars. Over 75% of tuition goes to payroll. So, now it's getting to the point where as a parent, how do you afford daycare? It's a car payment every week.

Adult-to-child ratios in classrooms were another financial barrier reported by directors. These ratios impact program income due to the number of children that can be in a classroom, and the number of staff required for the group. This impact was shared by Director 4:

> With a center of my size where I can have 113 children which is what I am licensed for, if I'm not using my space, that's going to give me the correct amount of what my licensing says I can have, but the quality rating score says you should only have one to five in that age group of toddlers … It's going to minimize my space a lot. I'm not going to be able to have the number of children in the space

> that's measured and says I can have. …in order to get a 3 [star rating], I have to keep a smaller number. Which does become a bigger problem.

Adult to child ratios also create a financial hardship for director 7: “The ratio for infants is one [adult] to four [infants]. It is not affordable.”

Theme 4: Program Regulation and Assessment Issues

Participants in the study shared concerns with the program assessment process of the QRIS. The limited classroom observation time of the program assessment was a concern shared by many participants. Director 8 reported that “they [program assessors] were judging us for this one day on 365 days of our education and our teaching and it didn't feel kind of fair.” A similar view was shared by Director 1, “It's a one-day thing, eight hours at the most… I don’t see [program assessors] getting a true assessment of my program because they are here one day.” Director 9 reported that “you [program assessors] can only assess so much during the amount of time you come in.” Director 10 “it’s so hard because it is just like a snippet or part of a day. Sometimes that can be difficult. It is supposed to be like a normal day, but it’s not a normal day.”

Classroom setup and ensuring the provision of proper materials was a second issue shared about program assessment. Director 2 shared that “… trying to make sure that everything is set up properly and that there is the proper equipment for the room. That is the only issue with that.” The perspective that the program assessment is more of a classroom inventory than an overall assessment was reported by Director 6, and Director 12 voiced that “a lot of it is finding the materials and the things that are required

for each center … making sure you have different races of baby dolls. … It's kind of a struggle."

Participants shared that the process of the program assessment is very stressful for childcare directors and educators. Director 4 expressed the effects of assessment on educators:

> Not everyone is comfortable with someone watching them and grading them. That can have a huge effect on how well a teacher does in that setting. There are a lot of teachers that I have seen cry for receiving a score that was not conducive to what they do every day … it's a lot of pressure on the teacher… I have seen teachers quit after assessment.

Director 5 shared a similar perspective "You are not going to perform at your optimum having somebody looking over your shoulder…I know that it can be super, super nerve-wracking for literally everybody in the center." Concern about the pressure being placed on childcare teachers was voiced by Director 4 "It's just a lot of pressure and for people making $10 per hour. We are expecting way too much from teachers sometimes."

Barriers to program quality related to childcare licensing and regulations was the final theme to emerge in the data. Program directors noted the need for assistance from a consultant or mentor knowledgeable about childcare licensing rules and regulations to fully understand and comply with regulations. Director 4 shared this view of the problem:

> It took a couple of times going through the actual assessment, getting the results back, reading through the scores and why and how I scored what I scored to go "oh, that's how that works." But it's like I said, because of my background, I

> could pick up on it. I can't imagine if somebody just has the desire and the love for children to just do it and then have to go through the process. I dare say, how hard it is for them to get it right. Especially without the experience of someone who comes in and helps them.

Directors 6 and 8 shared that the program assessment and licensing regulations are subjective. This concern was also voiced by Director 11:

> There have been a couple of situations where my program evaluator said, "you need to do this," but the licensing guidelines, say this, and she said, "you need to do it this way." … I don't know how to operate when I have guidelines I am supposed to follow but someone says "no, you are supposed to do it this way." There is no one for me to go to and ask for clarification.

The number of regulations and expectations was seen as unreasonable, and Director 3 shared the importance of flexibility "some things have changed, and you just have to go with it, with the flow on different new processes and procedures. It's just about adjusting to new things that come down the pike for us as directors."

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Accurately representing each participant's perspective through the research findings is essential to a valid and trustworthy study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Walden University's Institutional Review Board provided research guidelines that I utilized to support the quality of this study. The strategies described in Chapter 3 were implemented throughout the study to increase trustworthiness. The following sections describe how

credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were incorporated to enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

Credibility

Credibility involves ensuring the findings generated from the study reflect what is present in the data (Saldaña, 2021). To establish credibility, I utilized member checking to enlist each participant in evaluating my interpretations of their perspectives. After completing the draft analysis, I emailed each participant a one-page summary of the draft findings for their review of my interpretations to check for accuracy. Two of the study participants responded to my email request by responding that my interpretations were correct. No response was received from the 10 remaining participants. A second method of ensuring credibility was enlisting the assistance of an expert reviewer. After the member checking process was completed, the expert reviewer was emailed a draft of the research findings to scrutinize my data collection, coding process, and analysis. The expert reviewer was a colleague with an advanced graduate degree in Early Childhood Education and 25 years of experience in early childhood training and technical assistance. After the member checking process was completed, the draft findings were emailed to the expert reviewer. A question arose from the expert reviewer about the fourth theme that emerged in the data. I explained the process used to identify the theme and the data that supported the theme after which they reviewed the data again and concurred with my findings. The expert reviewer found no biases in the study.

Dependability

In qualitative research, dependability is described as the consistency of the study findings with the data that was collected (Johnson et al., 2020). The strong research design I used to collect data and answer the RQ as well as the member checking process supports the dependability of the study. An audit trail was also developed to increase study dependability by providing a detailed description of the data collection, the determination of the themes, and the process of arriving at research findings. Audit trail documentation consists of audio recordings of interviews, interview transcripts, reflective journals, notes, and memos. The description of the data collection and analysis process assists in the transferability of the study. The findings from this study apply to early childhood professionals working in childcare settings serving children from birth to five years of age. The themes are derived from the data in this study.

Confirmability

Confirmability is described by Denzin and Lincoln (2018) as the confirmation of study results through analysis by another researcher. Exploration and reflection of my personal biases and the possible implications these biases could have on my data collection and analysis were used to enhance confirmability in the study. Documentation of my thoughts and ideas was collected through journal entries, memos, and notes after each interview as well as during the analysis process. This process allowed me to reflect on my thoughts and ideas and thoroughly consider their implications on my study. In addition to my personal reflection of possible bias, the incorporation of the expert reviewer further increased the confirmability of the study. The review process by the

expert reviewer provided scrutiny of my data analysis and interpretation for accuracy. Utilizing these methods assisted with the confirmability of the study.

Transferability

Transferability is referred to as the ability to apply the findings from a research study to other contexts (Johnson et al., 2020). To provide the information needed to determine if findings from this research can be applied to other contexts, I provide a detailed description of the study process and participants. Participant selection was limited to early childhood childcare program directors from center-based childcare programs serving children from birth to five years in the southeastern study state. The 12 participants were from 12 different early childhood childcare centers located in three counties within the state. Participating program directors were employed by childcare programs scoring below the highest tier on the state QRIS with either a 0, 1, or 2-star rating. The years each director had served in their current capacity ranged from 2 to 27 years. Twelve responses to the request for participation were received and all 12 were selected for participation. A detailed description of the selection process was included earlier in Chapter 4. I conducted individual interviews via phone at the participant's convenience. Each study participant was actively engaged in the interview process and shared detailed perspectives of barriers faced when attempting to improve program quality.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I reported the results of the study through themes that serve to answer the single RQ. The participating childcare directors expressed that a barrier to

program quality exists in program staffing, specifically with hiring and retaining childcare educators. Professional development of the educators also presented a barrier through the lack of in-person training due to the COVID-19 pandemic and time for staff to participate in training. Barriers related to program finances surfaced with parents experiencing increased costs of childcare to allow for quality program operations. The program assessment process of the QRIS also created difficulty for directors due to the assessor's limited classroom observation time and in the stress the assessment places on educators. Evidence of the trustworthiness of the study was also provided. Chapter 5 includes my interpretations of the research findings, along with the limitations, recommendations, and implications of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood childcare center directors regarding barriers they encounter as they attempt to implement quality improvements to rate at the highest, 3-star level in the QRIS in a southeastern state. The problem is that approximately 30% of early childhood childcare centers participating in the QRIS in the southeastern study state are not performing at the highest rated level of quality (Child Care Aware of America, 2019b). This study could fill a gap in literature on practice regarding the issues childcare program directors face as they attempt to achieve a 3-star QRIS rating. To thoroughly explore the perspectives of the childcare program directors, I conducted individual interviews with each director. Data from each interview were coded and analyzed to identify themes that emerged.

An analysis of the study findings revealed that childcare providers recognize that barriers exist in their efforts to improve the quality of their childcare programs. Study participants indicated that a shortage of childcare educators exists, and turnover is a frequent problem. Additional barriers reported were the need for professional development opportunities, along with time for staff to attend, the high cost of providing quality childcare, and issues related to program regulation and assessment. The following sections of Chapter 5 provide an interpretation of the research findings, limitations, recommendations, and implications of the study.

Interpretation of the Findings

Research studies reviewed in Chapter 2 reflected the importance of and issues affecting early childhood programming (see Blochliger & Bauer, 2018; Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020; Duval et al., 2020; Francis & Barnett, 2019; Grant et al., 2019). Results of this study aligned with the information presented in the reviewed research. Study findings corroborate that despite the importance of quality early childhood programs on the development of young children, barriers exist that impede the quality of these programs. Views of childcare program directors indicated that they lack the resources and supports needed to overcome barriers to further improve program quality. Following are the interpretations of the study findings and how they connect to current literature.

Theme 1: Childcare Educator Shortage and Turnover

A theme identified in this study was the issue of childcare educator shortages and staff turnover as a barrier to program quality improvement. The findings indicated that childcare directors have difficulty recruiting, hiring, and retaining childcare educators. Staffing problems were reported as affecting many areas of the childcare program including the ability to provide care for additional children, maintaining mandated adult to child ratios, and allowing teachers to participate in professional development during work hours. Childcare teacher shortages were also reported to create program management issues as directors in this study stated they were forced to work in classrooms, leaving leadership tasks unfinished.

Cumming (2017), Grant et al. (2019), and Phillips et al. (2016) revealed that an early childhood program's ability to provide quality services is affected by high rates of

educator turnover. According to directors in the study, the ability to hire and retain educators is affected by the low wages they offer employees due to limited program funding and profits. This finding aligned with research by Totenhagen et al. (2016) in which educator wages were found to be a leading factor in the retention of childcare workers with higher wages resulting in higher job satisfaction and job commitment.

Theme 2: Professional Development of Staff

Childcare directors in this study reported that problems related to the professional development of educators was a barrier to program quality improvement. Employees are often required to attend professional development classes during their personal time outside of work hours. The childcare educator shortage limits the staff available to work in classrooms to allow educators to attend professional development courses during the workday. Research by Manning et al. (2019) indicated that the education of childcare providers is significantly correlated with overall childcare quality. Despite the influence of educated childcare workers on the quality of care provided, Totenhagen et al. (2016) revealed that childcare center directors are challenged with complex hiring decisions such as hiring and retaining less educated staff or attempting to hire staff with more education and facing employees leaving for higher paying jobs. This research aligned with the reported problems with recruitment and hiring faced by the study participants.

Theme 3: Cost and Funding of Quality Childcare

Directors interviewed in this study reported that the cost of operating a quality childcare program is high, and parent tuition often serves as the sole funding source. The inability of families to afford the high cost of childcare was a shared concern. Reviewed

literature by Whitebook et al. (2018) aligned with this finding as the lack of public investment in early childhood education created difficulty with the implementation of program quality initiatives. Directors in my study reported that making quality improvements such as increasing educator wages and purchasing needed classroom materials is challenging due to the increased cost of care incurred by parents to afford these improvements. Findings by Gorry and Thomas (2017) confirmed that regulations designed to improve childcare quality also increase the cost of care.

Theme 4: Program Regulation and Assessment Issues

The final theme reflected that program regulation and assessment create barriers to quality improvement. Findings indicated that directors found the program assessment to be problematic due to the observation process and the stress it creates for educators. Study participants reported concerns with the accuracy of the program assessment due to the limited time of the observation and assessment methods used. These findings aligned with literature by Setodji et al. (2018), who reported concerns with the use of assessment instruments in high stakes settings that were not designed for this purpose. The participants in my study voiced concerns that the program assessment seemed more of a classroom inventory than an overall reflection of program quality. Research by Tout et al. (2017) aligned with my study findings as they reported that QRIS systems may not capture domains of quality using current assessment measures.

Bronfenbrenner's EST (1979), which noted how interactions within and between layers of environmental systems impact an individual's development, was a valuable framework for this study. Ronka et al. (2019) also identified the EST as beneficial as they

shared how changes in the ecological system of family work life impacted the services of an early childhood program. The EST model reveals how the components of environmental layers of an early childhood system interconnect to impact the overall quality of the childcare program. Findings from the study were aligned with the EST as barriers to quality such as low staff compensation nested in the mesosystem are impacted by program funding sources in the exosystem, and in turn impact the staff retention in the mesosystem. Each nested layer of the ecological system interconnects to impact the overall quality of the childcare program, which in turn affects each child enrolled in the program.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of this basic, qualitative study included the small sample size, my limited experience as a researcher, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Early childhood childcare program directors from three counties within the study state were identified as possible participants. Additional selection criteria included the following: (a) The director must have been employed by a DHS licensed center-based childcare program in the study state, serving children from birth to 5 years of age; (b) the director of the program must have been employed in their current position for at least 1 year; and (c) the childcare program at which the director was employed must have been rated at 0, 1, or 2 stars on the QRIS. To alleviate any conflict of interest, the counties selected were outside of the area where I provided services for the Child Care Resource and Referral network.

Purposeful selection criteria limited the number of program directors who were eligible for participation but was necessary to thoroughly answer the study's RQ. Of the

59 childcare program directors who met the identified criteria, 12 provided consent and were selected to participate in the study. This small sample size could limit the transferability of the findings; however, it allowed for a robust investigation of the problem while containing the data to a manageable size. A decision to limit the sample size follows the guidance of Creswell and Poth (2018), who described an appropriate sample size as one that allows the collection of extensive detail from each participant.

Creswell and Poth (2018) referred to the qualitative researcher as the primary instrument throughout the research process. Before and during the research study, I worked to increase my knowledge of qualitative research methods and processes. However, a limitation of the study was my minimal experience as a researcher. Studying related literature, reading published research, and viewing online publications and webinars assisted in increasing my knowledge. Ongoing assistance from my doctoral committee members allowed me to utilize their knowledge to ensure rigor in my study.

The COVID-19 pandemic created the third identified limitation of my study. Processes of recruiting participants and collecting data were altered due to the health and safety restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Contact with all study recruits and participants took place via email and telephone. Participants were provided the option of participating in the interview by phone or through Zoom. All 12 participants chose a phone interview. I used the initial phone call to connect with each director and build rapport so each would feel comfortable sharing their perspectives during the interview. However, study data may have been impacted due to the lack of personal connection between me as the researcher and the participants.

Recommendations

The study participants were 12 childcare program directors from three counties within a southeastern state. To further understand the perspectives of early childhood childcare program directors, I recommend that the study be replicated in different geographic areas to determine if similar results are yielded. This study could also be replicated in childcare programs from both rural and urban areas. Broadening the geographic and population density area of study participants could provide additional data findings. To further explore issues faced by childcare program directors, I recommend that childcare programs in various states be studied to identify different barriers particularly related to program regulations and assessment. Studying the perspectives of childcare directors from a state operating a QRIS is referred to as a second generation QRIS, with a single assessment method such as the CLASS for the QRIS rating (Markowitz et al., 2020). Differing regulations and QRIS systems in differing states could result in different director perspectives of issues related to quality improvement and additional findings.

Implications

This study provided an avenue for the voices of early childhood childcare program directors to be heard, allowing them to share the issues they face as they try to improve the quality of their programs. High quality experiences during the early childhood years impact brain development (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2021; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). The quality of early childhood childcare programs is important due to the impact these programs have on the experiences of young

children. Findings of this study can provide insights for agencies that support childcare programs in improving quality and increase knowledge about barriers that affect childcare quality.

Positive social change that could occur from the findings of this research includes improvements in policies and initiatives at the federal and state level providing resources and supports needed for quality early childhood programming. Study participants shared the need for funding assistance to support an increase in educator wages and overall program operations. Low wages were reported to impact the ability to hire and retain childcare educators. Early childhood stakeholders may benefit from the findings when advocating for improvements to policies and initiatives at the federal and state level such as investments in public funding support for programs. Concerns were reported by childcare directors regarding the program assessment process and requirements. Study findings could be beneficial as early childhood leaders consider improvements in QRIS planning and implementation. Using this research could lead to improvements in support for childcare programs at the state and federal level, which could result in more young children benefitting from high-quality early childhood programs.

Conclusion

The results of this study filled a gap in literature on practice. High quality early childhood childcare programs support young children's development and learning (Iruka & Forry, 2018). For the 12.5 million children attending early childhood childcare programs, early experiences are influenced by the quality of programs (Araujo et al., 2019; Burchinal, 2018; Child Care Aware of America, 2019a; Donoghue & AAP Council

on Early Childhood, 2017; Duval et al., 2020; Early et al., 2017; Iruka & Forry, 2018). Effects of early childhood programming on children's development included significant reductions in academic problems and increased high school graduation rates for early childhood education program attendees (McCoy et al., 2017).

Findings of this study provide an increased understanding of the difficulties faced by early childhood childcare program directors when improving program quality. Results of this study outlined that childcare program directors have problems in hiring and retaining quality educators. Participants reported that the single program funding source of parent childcare tuition limited their ability to implement program quality improvements. Directors also voiced that the professional development of staff was problematic due to the lack of in-person training and the ability to employ enough educators to allow staff to attend training during work hours. Information gathered from this study may lead to improved training, technical assistance, coaching, and support for early childhood childcare center educators and directors based on the revealed challenges. Early childhood stakeholders can use the findings to advocate for improvements to policies and initiatives at the federal and state level providing supports and resources necessary for quality early childhood programming.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Part 1: Demographics

1. Please tell me your name.
2. How many years have you worked in the field of early childhood care and education?
3. What is your educational background?
4. How many years have you been employed as an early childhood childcare program director?
5. How many years have you been employed in your current position as a director?
6. How many years has the childcare program been in operation?
7. How many times (years) have you participated in a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), the Star Quality Child Care program review? How many of those years were as the director of the program being reviewed?
8. What is the program's current star rating on the Star-Quality Child Care program?
9. In the program you currently direct, how many children are enrolled?
10. In the program you currently direct, how many childcare educators are employed?
11. How many educators have attended the TECTA orientation?
12. How many educators in your program have a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential? An Early Childhood degree? A degree in another field?
13. Is the program you direct accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children?
14. Does your program have funding sources other than parent tuition? If so, what are the other sources?

Thank you for participating in this research study. This study will explore the perspectives of childcare center directors regarding the barriers they encounter as they implement program quality improvements. All data related to the study will be kept confidential. You will be assigned a pseudonym to protect your identity, and demographic information will only be used in an aggregated format along with pseudonyms. Data related to this study will be stored for five years and then shredded or deleted. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. This interview will take 45 to 60 minutes and will be audio recorded using two recording devices. The interview questions are based on an interview guide, and you may choose not to answer any of the questions. If you do not understand any of the questions, please ask me for further explanation.

Do you have any questions? If there are no further questions, we will begin with the interview.

Part 2: Interview Questions

1. What experience do you have implementing the state QRIS, the Star Quality Child Care program?
2. Tell me about any barriers you have faced when implementing the state QRIS which includes the following sections: Director qualifications, professional development, developmental learning, family engagement, ratio/group size, staff compensation, program assessment, and child health/well-being.
3. How did you overcome the challenges you faced in each section? Do you have some examples to share?
4. What section of the QRIS did you find most difficult to implement, and why?
5. What other barriers keep your program from scoring the highest rating in the state QRIS?
6. What practices or resources are needed to help programs improve to score at the highest rating on the QRIS?
7. How well does the QRIS measure childcare quality in the state?
8. How would you describe the level of quality within your program?
9. What other thoughts or information related to this topic would you like to share?

Thank you for your time and for participating in this interview.

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