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Challenges in Improving Private Early Childhood Program Quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the Perspectives of Program Administrators

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Elizabeth King Oliver

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Challenges in Improving Private Early Childhood Program Quality in Trinidad and
Tobago from the Perspectives of Program Administrators

by

Elizabeth King Oliver

MEd, University of the West Indies, 2013

BEd, University of the West Indies, 2010

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

May 2023

Abstract

In 2003, the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education recommended that the early childhood care and education sector be regulated to improve the quality of programs. The problem is that the sector remains unregulated, and improving program quality in the private sector remains a challenge. This basic qualitative study examined private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on challenges to improve program quality in Trinidad and Tobago. The research questions investigated the challenges private early childhood program administrators encountered in improving program quality and support needed for improvement. Ten purposively sampled private early childhood program administrators shared their perspectives. The conceptual framework that guided this study was Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory. Semistructured interviews were used to collect data and analysis was conducted using coding and thematic analysis. Three themes emerged from the data: (a) limited collaboration, (b) lack of finances presents challenges in improving program quality, and (c) training opportunities are needed to improve program quality. The research findings have implications for positive social change, as the results can be used to develop strategies or change policies based on identified challenges and needed support to improve program quality benefiting preschool children in Trinidad and Tobago.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Placida King and to the loving memory of my father, Patrick John King. Thank you for always believing in me. I am truly grateful for your love and support. This dissertation is also dedicated to my three sons Shawn, Kristof, and Kriston. I love you all unconditionally. Remember to always do your best!

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Firstly, I give praise and honor to God, who is the head of my life. I express my gratitude for having the support of my family and loved ones. Especially my children, who supported and cheered me on with positive words. They always believed I could do it! To my committee, Dr. Griffiths, Dr. Salisbury, and Dr. Hoffman, thank you for your guidance and support throughout my journey. I also want to express my heartfelt thanks to Ms. Shannon Farren, thank you for all the support throughout this process.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) notes that access to quality early childcare programs helps reduce significant inequalities, cycles of poverty, and human rights problems faced by many children in the world from birth to age 5 (UNICEF, 2020). According to UNICEF, 3.6 million preschool children in Latin American and Caribbean countries exhibit inadequate cognitive, emotional, and physical development for their age. UNICEF also reports that, in most cases, the quality of the programs that preschool children attend impacts their development. Typically, better learning opportunities and experiences for children were connected with high-quality programs and poorer learning outcomes for children were found in low-quality programs (UNICEF, 2020; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021). Because early childhood program quality significantly impacts children's learning outcomes, more importance is placed on ensuring program quality (Agosti et al., 2021; Bamezor et al., 2021). In the Caribbean, particularly in Trinidad and Tobago, advocacy for improved early childhood care and education (ECCE) continues to gain momentum. As a result, the government has increased its commitment to addressing issues impacting the quality of early childhood programs (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago [GoRTT] Draft Education Policy Paper 2017-2022, n.d.).

As evidenced by the studies of Aubrey (2019), Movahedazarhouligh et al. (2022), and Alchin et al. (2019), early childhood program administrators play a critical role in determining program quality, and their actions, beliefs, and decisions have a significant impact on program quality. While studies illustrate the important role of early childhood

program administrators in determining program quality, challenges sometimes arise that negatively impact program quality (Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018). This basic qualitative study examined the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators. Private early childhood program administrators in Trinidad and Tobago own, manage, and oversee the daily operations of their centers to facilitate the learning and care of preschool children. Through semistructured interviews, 10 purposively selected private early childhood program administrators, sometimes called principals, shared their views about the challenges in improving program quality. Participants talked about the challenges of improving program quality, how it can be improved, and the support needed to address the changes required to improve program quality.

Most literature on early childhood program quality and its complexity comes from the United States of America (USA) or other developed countries (von Suchodoletz et al., 2022). Therefore, this study was worthwhile because of its uniqueness and the lack of research focused on the challenges in improving the quality of private early childhood programs from the perspectives of program administrators. In developing countries such as Trinidad and Tobago (UNESCO, 2021), this is particularly important because a better understanding of the challenges in improving the quality of private early childhood programs may lead to finding effective ways to improve program quality. This would promote social change by providing the children of Trinidad and Tobago with better learning opportunities in high-quality programs, ultimately impacting their future outcomes (GoRTT Draft Education Policy Paper 2017-2022, n.d.).

Chapter 1 provides the background of the study, including literature related to the study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, research questions, conceptual framework, nature of the study, definitions of key terms, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance to social change. Chapter 1 concludes with a summary of key points and progresses into Chapter 2.

Background

According to Hidayat et al. (2020), the quality of education provided to children in the early childhood environment affects their future outcomes. Consistent with this belief, Movahedazarhouli and Banerjee (2020) advocate for the relevant authorities to develop educational policies and implement frameworks to promote equitable learning for all children in quality early childhood programs. However, Klevering and McNae (2018) noted that adequate resources are needed to promote children's optimal development in a caring, safe environment to achieve this desirable outcome. Unfortunately, Diale and Sewagegn (2021) explained that providing quality early childhood programs is often fraught with challenges, particularly in the private sector. The magnification of challenges in the private early childhood sector is due in large part to the tasks program administrators must perform, such as hiring teachers, paying salaries, providing materials, selecting the curriculum, and providing a stimulating, safe learning environment for children (Bakken et al., 2017; Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018; Bamezor et al., 2021).

Both globally and regionally, early childhood education is becoming increasingly important and is supported by initiatives such as the Education for All (EFA) Framework

for Action. This Framework for Action aims to provide access to high-quality programs for all children (Laxton et al., 2021). At the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, improving and expanding the early childhood sector was one of the major goals discussed, with 164 governments committing to advocate for access to quality preschool programs for all children to achieve the EFA goals. Because of this initiative, preschool enrollment rates increased globally from 33% in 1999 to 54% by 2012, with significantly higher enrollment rates in Latin American and Caribbean countries (UNICEF, 2020). However, despite the noted overall success of increasing enrollment of preschool children in early childhood programs, the issue of program quality remains a concern, as many countries in the region, including Trinidad and Tobago, still lag far behind in providing quality programs (UNESCO, 2021).

Traditionally, in the Caribbean, families did not access preprimary schooling for their children (Logie, 1997). Typically, children were kept at home until they reached the compulsory primary school age of 5. In 1934, the first private nursery school in Trinidad emerged, and similar facilities continued to appear as the demand for workers increased in the immediate postwar period (Davies, 1997). Rapid industrialization in the postwar period created various employment opportunities for men and women (Charles & Williams, 2006). These employment opportunities led families to seek childcare services outside the home, which increased the demand for childcare services. As a result, early childhood programs mushroomed, leading to the emergence of numerous daycares, preschools, nursery schools, and kindergartens (Davies, 1997).

In these early times, early childhood programs focused heavily on formal teaching, and educators had limited awareness of young children's learning needs and no training in appropriate pedagogy, relying on intuition and tradition rather than best practices (Charles & Williams, 2006). Churches, nonprofit organizations, and individuals who operated from their homes, often under inadequate and unsafe conditions, offered programs for young children because the government was unwilling to provide programs that met families' childcare needs (Davies, 1997). Due to the government's lack of interest in early childhood care, Charles and Williams (2018) explained that childcare services continued to be dominated by the private sector and centers were not monitored by the government, which contributed to the poor quality of programs. Over the years, based on initiatives stemming from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), many Caribbean countries, including Trinidad and Tobago, have made significant progress in ECCE in terms of access to programs, but more is needed (Kinkead-Clark et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

In order to provide access to quality programs for all preschool children, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago presented an education policy paper in 1993 that established guidelines and regulations for early childhood programs. The policy paper focused on the management, governance, and staffing of centers (GoRTT Vision 2030, 2017). As the early childhood field continued to expand between 1995 and 2005, numerous private, government, and government assisted centers emerged to meet the rapidly increasing demand from parents for places in preschools for their children (GoRTT Vision 2030, 2017). As a result of this demand for places, in 2004, the

government made further efforts to ensure the quality of programs by introducing the Proposed National Standards for Regulating Early Childhood Services. The regulations and standards introduced were intended to ensure that all early childhood service providers, whether public or private, provide a safe and stimulating environment in which learning can take place according to children's individual needs and abilities (GoRTT Vision 2030, 2017).

In 2010, the Ministry of Education (MoE) recommended that all current and potential early childhood educators obtain at least a certificate in ECCE by 2020 (GoRTT Vision 2030, 2017). As a result, it is now mandatory that all early childhood administrators and teachers working in the public early childhood sector be suitably qualified. Unfortunately, this requirement is yet to be fulfilled by private providers. Between 2005 and 2007, the MoE increased its focus on creating a seamless education system to align preschool experiences with those regulated for primary schooling (GoRTT Vision 2030, 2017). As part of the initiative to improve program quality, a draft National Model for Education in Trinidad and Tobago (Early Childhood, Primary, and Secondary) was introduced in 2007. The introduction of this document provided a sound understanding of the principles and practices that promote child development at the various levels of schooling (GoRTT Proposed Standards for Regulating Early Childhood Services, 2005).

Consequently, the document was seen as a timely initiative, as many Anglo-Caribbean islands continue to struggle to implement measures to ensure the quality of programs considering children's fundamental rights (Kinkead-Clark et al., 2020).

Although Trinidad and Tobago have made significant progress in increasing the number of early childhood centers and the government continues to spend heavily on education, the country still has a long way to go (GoRTT Vision 2030, 2017). For the sector to progress, best practices must be followed in all early childhood settings (Abdul-Majied & Kinkead-Clark, 2022; Dash, 2018; World Bank, 2018). In Trinidad and Tobago ECCE includes children from birth to age 8. Services for children in this age range are divided into three categories administered by different agencies. From birth to 2 years of age, the provision of nursery or daycare services for children under the supervision of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (CATT) is available. Children ages 3 to 4 attend ECCE centers or preschools. The Trinidad Early Childhood Care and Education Division collaborates with the Division of Education, Youth Affairs and Sport responsible for ECCE centers in Tobago. The Trinidad Early Childhood Care and Education Division creates policies and supports leaders in promoting developmentally appropriate practices through management and leadership (GoRTT, Draft Education Policy Paper 2017-2022, n.d.).

While there is much research on early childhood and the complexities associated with establishing program quality, minimal literature focuses on the challenges faced in improving the quality of programs from the program administrators' perspectives, especially in the private sector (Alchin et al., 2019; Britto et al., 2021; Movahedazarhouligh & Banerjee, 2020). In this study, I examined the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators. Conducting this study was significant, as

Trinidad and Tobago need private early childhood centers because the public sector cannot meet the growing demand for places for all preschool children (GoRTT Draft Education Policy Paper 2017-2022, n.d.).

Given the growing demand for places at early childhood centers, it is acknowledged that some private early childhood program administrators face challenges in improving the quality of their programs (GoRTT Vision 2030, 2017). Despite this knowledge, there have been few opportunities for private early childhood program administrators to share their views on challenges in improving program quality (Dash, 2018). This study allowed participants to express their views and identify the support needed to improve program quality in Trinidad and Tobago. Ultimately, this may lead to more equitable access to quality programs for the nation's children, which will likely have a positive impact on their future wellbeing (Alanis et al., 2021). Therefore, this study was timely.

Problem Statement

This study examined the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators. According to Alchin et al. (2019), operating an early childhood center is a mammoth undertaking associated with various challenges that impact program quality. These challenges include a lack of resources, unrealistic parental demands, poor staffing, inadequate curriculum implementation, poor infrastructure, and financial woes that impact program quality (Aziz et al., 2021; Diale & Sewagegn, 2021). In 2003, the Trinidad and Tobago MoE recommended regulating the ECCE sector to improve the

quality of programs offered to preschool children. Unfortunately, despite the ministry's efforts, the sector remains unregulated, and limited progress has been made in improving program quality. In this context, some private early childhood program providers continue to face challenges in improving program quality (GoRTT Draft Education Policy Paper 2017-2022, n.d.).

Trinidad and Tobago's private early childhood sector includes more than 622 registered providers and an estimated 500 unregistered providers (Bhagwandin, 2019). As owners and operators of their centers, private program administrators are the leaders or managers of the center. This leadership position means the program administrator makes all major management decisions at the center. In this regard, they have several responsibilities. These include registering the center with the MoE, providing qualified teachers, ensuring appropriate teacher-child ratios, implementing appropriate curriculum, creating and maintaining a safe learning environment, and general maintenance of the center (GoRTT Proposed Standards for Regulating Early Childhood Services, 2005). All early childhood providers in Trinidad and Tobago must comply with these regulations. Nevertheless, some private early childhood providers have not yet met the requirements and continue to face challenges in improving the quality of their programs (GoRTT Draft Education Policy Paper 2017-2022, n.d.).

Data collected on the private early childhood centers in Trinidad indicate that some centers had overcrowded classrooms, inappropriate curricula, and a lack of trained staff, with inconsistent registration of centers. This inconsistency is evident in the estimated 500 unregistered providers who continue to quietly operate their centers (Dash,

2018). Despite these issues negatively impacting program quality, there is limited research examining the challenges of improving program quality from the perspectives of early childhood program administrators supporting the need for further research.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators. Because private early childhood program administrators play a critical role that significantly influences the quality of programs offered to preschool children (Diale & Sewagegn, 2021), it is critical to understand the challenges they face in improving program quality. Although researchers suggest that issues impacting the quality of early childhood programs are to be expected, more research is needed to understand early childhood program administrators' perspectives on the situations that lead to the challenges they experience (Bloese & Muteweri, 2021). This study addressed this research gap by examining private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on challenges in improving program quality. Therefore, as the Government of Trinidad and Tobago continues to regularize and improve the early childhood sector, research studies such as this one may be worthwhile to identify the challenges that hinder program quality improvement and to develop solutions that sufficiently address these issues.

Research Questions

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are the private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on the challenges in improving program quality in Trinidad and Tobago?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What are the private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on the support required to improve program quality in Trinidad and Tobago?

Conceptual Framework

The principles underscored by Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory provided the framework for this basic qualitative study. According to Hersey and Blanchard's theory, a leader's situation significantly determines and influences their decision making and leadership. Considering this background, Hersey and Blanchard's theory emphasizes that leadership requires an integration of both a directive and supportive approach that, when applied correctly in the appropriate situations, can be beneficial to improvement efforts (Ghazzawi et al., 2017).

The evidence suggests a need to improve the quality of early childhood programs in the private sector in Trinidad and Tobago. As Bhagwandin (2019) reports, the MoE desires to work closely with the managers and owners of private early childhood centers to improve the quality of programs currently offered to the nation's children. The ministry's goal is not to put private early childhood centers out of business. However, for the ministry's initiative to succeed, some managers and owners of private early childhood centers must be willing to change how they currently lead and manage their programs

(GoRTT Vision 2030, 2017). The private early childhood program administrator's role in providing quality programs differs slightly from their counterparts in the public sector.

The most notable difference is their leadership role. In the private early childhood sector, program administrators are responsible for staffing, paying wages, determining the teacher-child ratio, curriculum selection, hours of operation, registration of the center, delegating tasks to teachers, and the general maintenance and upkeep of the center. The administrator in the public sector does not traditionally perform these roles.

To improve the quality of programs in the private sector for young children, the MoE has provided guidelines for use. However, some programs do not yet meet the requirements (Dash, 2018). This understanding supports the findings of Movahedazarhouli et al. (2022), who stated that improving the quality of early childhood programs requires more than just providing guidelines to effect change. The authors added that more needs to be done to support administrators in their leadership roles, such as providing training and resources that result in ideal learning opportunities for all children (Blose & Muteweri, 2021; Bredekamp, 1997). Therefore, it is important to understand the situations that present challenges for private early childhood program administrators in providing quality programs (Bamezor et al., 2021).

Although the situation is unfortunate, Hersey and Blanchard's theory has shown that managers often find themselves in leadership roles without the necessary knowledge, training, and tools to assist them in making decisions. Unintentionally, this lack of knowledge, training, and tools often results in some leaders being unable to effectively manage their work situations (Colmer, 2017; Schachter et al., 2022). Applying Hersey

and Blanchard's theory helped to understand participants' perspectives on current challenges in improving the quality of early childhood programs. It also helped identify the support needed to improve the quality of private early childhood programs in Trinidad and Tobago. Further, the theory provided a conceptual basis for data collection and analysis. This study was timely, as private early childhood centers continue to mushroom due to the growing need for places for preschool children. Chapter 2 provides detailed information on Hersey and Blanchard's theory.

Nature of the Study

I used a basic qualitative research design to examine the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators. A qualitative approach was most appropriate for conducting this study because it facilitated data collection through narratives about participants' personal experiences (Burkholder et al., 2016). Through semistructured interviews, private early childhood program administrators shared about challenges in improving program quality and the support needed to overcome these challenges. The semistructured interviews consisted of open-ended questions that allowed me to obtain in-depth details about the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives.

Ravitch and Carl (2021) indicated that a qualitative approach helps the researcher to understand and interpret the data collected about the phenomenon in terms of the meaning participants attach to the issue. Participants in this study included 10 purposively selected private early childhood program administrators. Participants were selected from all educational districts in Trinidad. Only private early childhood program

administrators who experienced challenges in improving program quality participated. An interview protocol (see Appendix) guided the interview process. Each interview was conducted on Zoom and lasted approximately 35 minutes. All participant responses were recorded and transcribed before the coding process began. Coding the data allowed me to assign meaning to the data collected (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The coding process continued until no new themes emerged from the collected data. The data were manually coded and stored in secure folders.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are presented to assist the reader's understanding of the terms used throughout the study.

Early childhood: Is the first period in child development which begins at birth, including all children from birth through age 8 (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Early childhood center: Used to identify early childhood organizations or settings licensed to provide care for children ages three and four in public and private centers (UNICEF, 2020).

Early childhood program administrator: An individual who oversees the daily operations at the center and promotes the learning, development, and wellbeing of the children in the early childhood center (NAEYC, 2020).

Government center: These centers are entirely owned and operated by the Ministry of Education (GoRTT Proposed Standards for Regulating Early Childhood Services, 2005).

Government assisted center: Centers where the government provides a subvention for the operation (GoRTT Proposed Standards for Regulating Early Childhood Services, 2005).

Ministry of Education: The ministry of education is the government department responsible for education and related school affairs (GoRTT Proposed Standards for Regulating Early Childhood Services, 2005).

Private center: An early childhood center that is privately owned and operates for profit (GoRTT Proposed Standards for Regulating Early Childhood Services, 2005).

Quality education: This refers to an education that focuses on the development of the whole child, which includes their emotional, social, mental, physical, and cognitive development regardless of their race, gender, socioeconomic status, or geographic location (Nevenglosky et al., 2019).

Assumptions

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), examining assumptions that may influence the research is essential. Therefore, researchers must be aware of their assumptions that evolve about concepts and realities of the study, as these have implications for the conclusions drawn. In this study several assumptions were made. The first assumption was that participants answered all questions about the challenges of improving program quality and the support needed to improve program quality thoroughly and honestly. Another assumption was that participants had knowledge about program quality improvement challenges. I also assumed that participants were knowledgeable about the standards and mandatory requirements for operating an early childhood center in

Trinidad and Tobago. Finally, I assumed that the participants selected were representative of private early childhood program administrators in Trinidad and Tobago.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this research was the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators. The perspectives of private early childhood program administrators were examined by asking participants to share their views about the challenges and the necessary support needed to improve program quality. Participants included 10 private early childhood program administrators who experienced challenges improving program quality. Excluded from this study were private early childhood program administrators whose programs met all the requirements outlined in the standards document for regulating early childhood programs in Trinidad and Tobago. I used semistructured interviews to collect data from the participants.

I selected the private early childhood sector to conduct this study because of the high demand and rapid increase in private centers compared to public centers. Additionally, this group was selected because a large number of private early childhood program administrators do not yet meet the requirements for centers determining the quality of early childhood programs in Trinidad and Tobago (GoRTT Draft Education Policy Paper 2017-2022, n.d.). Therefore, this study did not include any participants from the government and government assisted early childhood centers. The findings of this study may be useful to other private early childhood program administrators who are challenged in improving program quality. Additionally, the findings may contribute to a

better understanding of the challenges of improving the quality of private early childhood programs and lead to effective ways and strategies to improve program quality.

Limitations

There were limitations in conducting this study. The first limitation was the number of private early childhood program administrators selected to participate in the study. The participants' involvement was strictly voluntary and limited to private early childhood program administrators who experienced challenges in improving program quality. In addition, participants were required to own and operate the center and have at least one teacher. These requirements for participation resulted in a small sample of private early childhood program administrators willing to share their perspectives and identify challenges in improving program quality. Because of these unavoidable limitations, transferring the findings to a different context may be difficult.

Another limitation of this study could have been researcher bias. Since I was the sole researcher, my experiences from previous projects at the MoE, such as hosting workshops that included some early childhood private program administrators, could have affected the study's results. To address these potential biases, I kept a reflective journal to observe personal thoughts about program quality and the early childhood program administrators' perspectives on the challenges in improving program quality. Additionally, only private early childhood program administrators with whom I had no personal contact were selected to participate in the study.

Significance

Researchers indicated that improving the quality of private early childhood programs is challenging, but little research addresses program administrators' perspectives on the challenges in improving program quality (Klevering & McNae, 2018; Movahedazarhouligh & Banerjee, 2020). Therefore, this study can help fill the gap in the literature by examining the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators, whereby ensuring that programs offered to preschool children provide developmentally appropriate opportunities to promote their holistic growth and development (see Visser et al., 2021).

According to Movahedazarhouligh and Banerjee (2020), many countries strive to ensure that programs offered to preschool children are of high quality. However, White and Fleer (2019) expressed that in doing so, there are interferences that hinder the progress of some early childhood program administrators in providing quality programs prompting the need for more research. This study can contribute to positive social change by providing information to better understand the challenges of improving the quality of private early childhood programs which can lead to finding effective ways and strategies to improve program quality. Researchers continue to support that the early childhood field needs current research to advance the sector while improving learning experiences for children (Neitzel, 2018; Tout et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Therefore, this study was a worthwhile undertaking.

Summary

Determining the quality of early childhood programs and the challenges associated with ensuring that programs offered to children are of high quality continue to be significant issues in education (Tout et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2020). Early childhood program administrators are essential in providing quality programs for preschool children (Burchinal, 2018), especially in the private sector. According to Movahedazarhouli et al. (2022), program administrators' increased responsibilities, decision making, and beliefs significantly impact the quality of programs offered to children. In providing quality early childhood programs, private program administrators inevitably encounter challenges that affect program quality (Movahedazarhouli, 2021; NAEYC, 2020). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of the program administrators and to identify the support needed to improve program quality.

Semistructured interviews were conducted with 10 private early childhood program administrators to collect data. The findings of this study may apply to other private early childhood program administrators that face challenges in improving program quality. Chapter 2 reviews the literature relevant to this study and its analysis. Additionally, Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory, which provided the framework for this study, is discussed in detail.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators. The problem is that the early childhood sector remains unregulated and improving program quality in the private sector remains a challenge. In this chapter, I first explain the search strategies used to find research relevant to this study. I then discuss the conceptual framework emphasized by Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory.

According to von Suchodoletz et al. (2022), the learning experiences provided to children in high-quality early childhood programs have a lasting positive impact on their social, cognitive, emotional, and overall wellbeing. In this context, the relevant authorities regularly seek to improve the quality of programs offered to children in private early childhood settings (Douglass et al., 2022). However, Weiland et al. (2018) noted that often these attempts are plagued with challenges that impede the improvement of program quality. There is a large body of research on the quality of early childhood programs based on curriculum implementation, resources, and teachers' perspectives. However, research on improving early childhood program quality is minimal from the program administrators' perspectives. This chapter discusses five significant challenges related to this study that emerged from the literature reviewed: program quality, the role of the administrator, early childhood curriculum, staffing-teacher selection, and center registration. The chapter concludes with a summary of the research findings that support the need for this study to address the current research gap.

Literature Search Strategy

I used various internet sources and search engines to find literature on challenges in improving the quality of private early childhood programs from the program administrators' perspectives. I also used Walden University Library and Google Scholar to find articles and peer reviewed journals published between 2018 and 2022. Articles were also retrieved from SAGEJournals, EBSCOHost, ProQuest, and ERIC. The following key terms helped identify relevant literature: *early childhood program quality*, *high-quality early childhood programs*, *administrators' role in program quality*, *challenges in early childhood*, *administrators' challenges in improving program quality*, *developmentally appropriate curriculum*, *early childhood quality indicators*, *staffing in early childhood*, and *center registration*. I also searched for seminal works of Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory for the conceptual framework. Because the authors of some research provided relevant information for this study, even though their research dated back before 2018 I included their work.

Conceptual Framework

For this study, I drew from the work of Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory, which assisted in examining the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators. Current research suggests that the theory underlying situational leadership can improve the quality of private early childhood programs by supporting professional development, curriculum development, pedagogical change, and organizational transformation (Hidayat et al., 2020; Raelin, 2020; Sims et al., 2018). Hidayat et al.

(2020) further explained that the leadership behaviors of early childhood program administrators are one of the most important determinants of program quality. In this regard, Aubrey (2019) found that the behavior of the early childhood program administrator determines the success or failure of the program.

The central principle of Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory, which was highly consistent with this study, is that successful leadership results from the leader's ability to adapt their methods to the maturity of the individuals they lead, to different situations, and the environment (Alchin et al., 2019). Because situations vary across private early childhood centers in Trinidad and Tobago, the program administrator must use the most appropriate leadership approach for their situation to improve program quality. Situations that vary from center to center include size, population, geographic location, number of staff or teachers, age of educators, and type of program offered, such as before and after care for children.

Ardichvili and Manderscheid (2008) expanded on Hersey and Blanchard's theory, adding that early childhood leaders must achieve outlined goals and successfully address challenges in improving the quality of programs by assessing the specifics of their various situations. This assessment helps determine the support needed to address challenges. Hidayat et al. (2020) also shared another notable underpinning of Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory is that the leadership role and decision making of leaders are important factors that influence the success or failure of an organization. Because the early childhood program administrator is responsible for directing and assigning tasks to teachers, program administrators must have the experience and

knowledge to provide appropriate guidance to ensure program quality (see Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018; Banuelos et al., 2019). According to Movahedazarhouligh and Banerjee (2020), private early childhood program administrators often find themselves in situations that require a change of perspective in addressing problems or challenges. As a result, difficulties may arise in applying an effective leadership style to achieve positive outcomes (see Sims et al., 2018; Wright, 2017). Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory emphasizes four main leadership styles and states that each approach or leadership style leaders use influences organizational outcomes.

One of Hersey and Blanchard's leadership styles involves telling or directing. According to Ardichvili and Manderscheid (2008), this leadership style involves the leader micromanaging the staff and telling individuals what to do and how to do it, with limited emphasis on establishing relationship behavior. Another style is selling or coaching. In this approach, the leader focuses on motivating their workers by selling them on goal setting and emphasizing the development of task and relationship behaviors. Praise and support from the leader encourage the staff to achieve the organization's goals. However, the leader must be willing and knowledgeable to coach the staff, especially if the staff is confident and willing (see Wright, 2017). Next, there is participating or supporting. In this leadership style, the leader must provide high levels of support for staff who can perform a task but are either unsure of their ability or unwilling to perform the task. According to Hidayat et al. (2020), the leader collaborates with the staff and shares the responsibility of decision making, focusing on relationship behaviors rather than task behaviors. The leader praises and provides feedback when the task is

completed. Finally, there is delegating, where the responsibility for completing the task and making decisions rests with the staff, and leaders monitor progress; this requires little task or relationship behavior. Some leaders require a progress report after the task is delegated. In contrast, Male and Palaiologou (2015) shared, with this style of leadership there is no ongoing contact with the staff regarding the task because the leader assumes the task will be completed.

It is important to note that Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory supports the ideology that there is no right or wrong leadership style. However, the leaders' attitude and willingness are critical to the outcome (Mukhtar et al., 2021). Therefore, all leadership styles can be effective (Banuelos et al., 2019; Blose & Muteweri, 2021; Campbell-Barr & Leeson, 2016), but failure to identify and apply the correct leadership style can lead to frustration and disappointment. In some cases, private early childhood program administrators in Trinidad and Tobago teach a group of children. However, ideally, they delegate the teaching duties to teachers and other tasks such as hosting meetings and setting up the learning environment.

Additionally, private early childhood program administrators must successfully lead their staff and effectively communicate with the Early Childhood Care and Education Division to understand and meet the outlined criteria that determine program quality (GoRTT Vision 2030, 2017). However, Banuelos et al. (2019) stated to improve the quality of private early childhood programs, program administrators need assistance in overcoming challenges. In this regard, Hersey and Blanchard's theory supports that each challenge a leader faces requires them to effectively assess the situation and adjust

their leadership style and decision making to achieve desired outcome (Cairns et al., 1998). This assessment and adaptation is critical when leading a team and managing a program or organization (Wright, 2017). Although authors have described private early childhood program administrators' critical role and significant influence in determining program quality, limited research focuses on the challenges of improving program quality from their perspectives (Mukhtar et al., 2021; Owojori & Gbenga-Akanmu, 2021; Portilla et al., 2020).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

This section reviews the literature on the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality from the perspectives of program administrators and the support recommended for improvement. Reviewing the literature, I found that common themes emerged across the various studies. I examined the five main themes that emerged. The first challenge focused on defining quality in early childhood and examining its importance through exploring the different concepts by authors. The second challenge relates to the role of the early childhood program administrator in providing quality programs. Third, the challenge of curriculum implementation and its impact on program quality was explored. The fourth challenge looked at appropriate staffing and the teacher's role in providing quality, including the characteristics teachers must possess to be effective in their jobs. The final challenge underscores the need for center registration to ensure quality programs for preschool children. The highlighted issues are discussed below.

Program Quality

According to UNICEF (2020), children's early childhood experiences significantly contribute to their future learning outcomes. In this context, Alanis et al. (2021) emphasize that early childhood programs designed to meet the learning needs of preschool children must be of high quality. According to Woodhead (1998), there are different views of what constitutes quality in early childhood. The different views are based on a framework of values and knowledge about child development and childhood, mainly about the functions and goals of programs (Elwick et al., 2017). As described by NAEYC a high-quality early childhood program provides a nurturing, safe environment that promotes children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical wellbeing and development and is responsive to families' needs (Ejuu et al., 2022; NAEYC, 2020; Venter, 2022).

Roessingh and Bence (2019) shared from the perspectives of some parents that a high-quality early childhood program emphasizes reading and writing, learning to count, and socializing with other children. However, Tout et al. (2021) explained that high-quality early childhood programs go beyond developing preschool children's school readiness and focus on children's healthy development. In contrast, others view a high-quality early childhood program as one that promotes equality and provides early intervention that protects and enhances children's lives (Cohen & Korintus, 2017). According to World Bank (2018), this finding is especially true for children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, Rajab and Wright (2020) took a slightly different view of what constitutes quality, emphasizing that low teacher-child ratios, a beautiful environment, and trained teachers do not automatically equate to high quality. The authors therefore argued that the best measure of quality is the interactions between the teacher and children in the learning environment. In high-quality early childhood programs, great emphasis is placed on the teachers' skills, love of teaching, and desire to interact with and engage children in their learning (Rao et al., 2021; Tefera, 2018; Torres & Mendive, 2022; UNICEF, 2020). According to Bailey et al. (2017), improving the quality of early childhood programs is high on the agenda of many countries, particularly in developing Caribbean countries such as Grenada, Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago, to advance the education sector. However, the results of efforts to improve the quality of early childhood programs have been mixed, and many fall short of intended quality targets (Movahedazarhouligh et al., 2022; Portilla et al., 2020). Additionally, Elwick et al. (2017) argue that improving the quality of early childhood programs can be challenging and that progress depends on collaboration and shared goals focused on change.

Diale and Sewagegn (2021) noted that no clearly established international standards or criteria for evaluating early childhood program quality are available. The authors explained that this is due to differences in countries' economies, cultures, diverse societal values, political aspirations, and policies (Rao et al., 2021; Sims et al., 2018; Soliday Hong et al., 2019). However, Diale and Sewagegn shared that some common standards exist. While Moss and Dahlberg (2008) noted that the quality of early

childhood programs is determined and assessed by criteria established by experts that focus on critical factors that benefit children, families, and the wider community. For others, quality is characterized by efficiency, effectiveness, coverage, and equity (Smillie et al., 2020). While behavior management, teachers' sensitivity, quality feedback, and productivity (Torres et al., 2022) are considered indicators of quality in early childhood.

According to Zhou and Fenech (2022), the main factors contributing to program quality are the creation of a supportive child centered, safe, and clean environment, well prepared teachers, a developmentally appropriate curriculum, and learning standards that meet the needs of all children. Subsequently, Blose and Muteweri (2021) concluded that these are some evaluation criteria used to set standards for accrediting and evaluating the quality of early childhood programs worldwide. Additionally, Baloyi and Makhubele (2018) recommended that goals targeted at improving the quality of early childhood programs should focus on increasing the number of trained educators, providing adequate funding for programs, and strengthening the existing program's infrastructure, resources, and materials. More importantly, according to Varmuza et al. (2021), monitoring and regulation of centers is necessary to achieve desired outcomes.

Bailey et al. (2017) and Bakken et al. (2017) explained that experiences provided to preschool children in quality programs promote their readiness for formal schooling. Despite this knowledge, Agosti et al. (2021) noted that early childhood programs vary widely, with noted disparities such as some centers having few resources and teachers with limited education, to settings with unlimited resources and highly trained, knowledgeable teachers, which affects program quality. Laxton et al. (2021) further

explained that improving the quality of early childhood programs is highly dependent on the strength of leaders and the various partnerships built within and across the organization. As such, Movahedazarhouligh et al. (2022) argued that alignment of standards, coordination of resources, effective networking with stakeholders, and the program administrators' willingness to adjust or change some approaches as key to meeting early childhood quality program standards. Achieving these goals is important because the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 specifies the right of all boys and girls to have access to quality early childhood programs that focus on their holistic development to ensure their readiness for primary school (Diale & Sewagegn, 2021; Rao et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2020).

A study conducted by Visser et al. (2021) in Western Cape, South Africa, found that improving the quality of early childhood programs led to a higher percentage of children 5 years of age school readiness. While a study conducted by Hu et al. (2016) in Zhejiang, China, showed that two specific indicators, structural quality (provision for learning) and process quality (teaching and interaction), contributed to 60% of the variance in determining the overall quality of early childhood programs. As a result, researchers consistently emphasize the unlimited benefits children derive from attending high-quality early childhood programs. However, Qi and Melhuish (2017) stated that ensuring quality can be hindered by numerous challenges that put children at risk of not reaching their full potential. Challenges to providing a high-quality program include a lack of resources, inadequate teacher-child ratios, unfavorable working conditions, inadequate supervision, lack of qualified teachers, inappropriate curriculum, poor

leadership, ineffective collaboration, and lack of legislation to regulate the sector (Banuelos et al., 2019; Douglass, 2018; Portilla et al., 2020).

The Learning Policy Institute (2021) stated that high-quality early childhood programs invest in teachers' professional development. In addition to aligning standards between early childhood and primary education, promoting coordination of early childhood governance, and implementing practical, ongoing program evaluation. In South Australia, an 'I Go to School' project that followed children as they transitioned to primary school found that children who attended high-quality programs had better cognitive development than children who attended low-quality programs (Lee-Hammond & Bjervas, 2021). In the study conducted, staff qualifications, the learning environment, and the level of engagement determined program quality. Zhou and Fenech (2022) explained that quality in early childhood is a multifaceted construct that plays an integral part in children's learning. As research on the quality of early childhood programs increases, researchers and practitioners continue their attempts at identifying common indicators or dimensions of quality. However, Portilla et al. (2020) stated that there needs to be more focus on the challenges of meeting quality indicators. Gibbs (2022) expressed it is worth addressing this issue as many providers continue to face various challenges in improving the quality of early childhood programs, highlighting the need for further research.

The Role of the Administrator

Early childhood program administrators are key contributors to program quality. Visser et al. (2021) explained early childhood program administrators' effective

leadership, combined with a passionate, nurturing, qualified team of teachers, and parents support, that desired learning outcomes for children are achieved. According to Gibbs (2022), early childhood program administrators strive to provide quality programs to ensure the best learning outcomes for children. However, Blose and Muteweri (2021) shared that the reality is many of them encounter challenges that affect their ability to provide quality programs (Escayg & Kinkead-Clark, 2018; Formosinho & Peeters, 2019; Lee-Hammond & Bjervas, 2021; Reetu et al., 2017). Furthermore, Mukhtar et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of effective leadership and organization in providing quality programs, adding that the role of early childhood program administrator goes beyond simply providing a stimulating learning environment for children. Mukhtar et al. (2021) also stated that early childhood program administrators must be able to effectively lead and guide their team to strengthen various skills that will help improve program quality.

Blose and Muteweri (2021) added that early childhood program administrators should be well equipped to supervise, delegate tasks, guide, monitor, and manage teachers to improve program quality. Conversely, Formosinho and Peeters (2019) and Dubovicki and Jukic (2017) argued that how well early childhood program administrators feel prepared to meet the increasing demands to effect change is critical to program outcomes. As explained by Haile and Mohammed (2017), if the realization of goals geared at improving program quality is to occur, proper measures for training early childhood program administrators will have to be established. Harrison et al. (2019) further endorsed the concept by noting that appropriate training helps foster the necessary skills and knowledge needed by the early childhood program administrator. While

Aubrey (2019) and Archambault et al. (2020) stated initiatives of this nature has the potential to create quality programs that promote a stimulating learning climate, which would improve children's learning opportunities. Although these solutions seem straightforward, researchers suggested that the challenges associated with improving early childhood program quality, how training will translate to ensure best practices, and how the practices can be maintained remain uncertain (Agosti et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2020).

The early childhood private program administrator typically works with one or more teachers. However, Gibbs (2022) shared there are a few instances where the early childhood program administrator is the only provider and performs the dual role of administrator and teacher. Undoubtedly, this can present a different set of challenges (Foong et al., 2018), as this combined role of manager/administrator/ director/teacher further adds to the role confusion that some private early childhood program administrator experience (Tout et al., 2021). In this regard, Sims et al. (2018) further expressed that although some general guidelines may assist program administrators in understanding their role, the lack of clear role descriptions often makes it difficult for early childhood program administrators to meet expectations and mandates. As a result, Male (2015) outlined that improving program quality in the early childhood setting may require more suitable approaches that consider the various challenges experienced by program administrators within their centers. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research focused on private early childhood program administrators' situations, which present

challenges in improving program quality (Charles & Williams, 2018; Raelin, 2020; Rao et al., 2021; Rao & Kaul, 2018).

Over the years, the role of the early childhood program administrator has shifted from simply supervising the center's daily operations to completing more extensive tasks based on increasing regulation and accountability standards focused on improving program quality (Diale & Sewagegn, 2021; Gibbs, 2022). Accordingly, Gibbs' mini-ethnographic case study, which examined how leadership practices were developed and emerged in three differently governed high-quality early childhood centers, found that the practice of leading was fundamental in achieving quality in the programs. However, despite this knowledge Aubrey (2019) argued that there is limited understanding of how effective leadership emerges and develops in the early childhood setting, and how the various situations that program administrators encounter affect their decision making. Consequently, this limited knowledge may compromise the development of early childhood program administrators' effective leadership, which can ultimately impact a child's right to a high-quality early childhood program (Colmer, 2017; Harrison et al., 2019; Raelin, 2020). Thus, Sims et al. (2018) suggestion that more research is needed to examine the early childhood program administrators' perspectives on challenges in improving program quality is timely.

Aligned with the current research, Visser et al. (2021) agree that every child has a right to an education focused on ending the intergenerational cycles of inequality and poverty faced by many children in marginalized communities. However, Douglass (2018) expressed that in achieving this goal, many emerging issues that place early childhood

program administrators in situations that present challenges to providing quality programs emerge. Early childhood program administrators often need clarification in making decisions that impact program quality, especially in the private sector (Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018; Bicaj & Buza, 2020). As such, ensuring the education and development of children is appropriately facilitated and supportive of families' needs while maintaining their profitability (Douglass et al., 2022; Schachter et al., 2022).

Robson and Martin (2019) outlined that a supportive, effective early childhood program administrator values the teachers, delegates tasks fairly, communicates effectively, successfully manages tasks, promotes a positive learning environment, and invests in resources and professional autonomy to provide quality programs. Although these are desirable outcomes, Rao and Kaul (2018) noted that achieving these outcomes to improve program quality can be challenging and requires time, planning, and resources that can be costly and require intensive work. Moreover, the challenges are often exacerbated by the preschool system's lack of cohesive infrastructure to support the implementation of practices and curricula to improve program quality (Agosti et al., 2021; Banuelos et al., 2019; Britto et al., 2021).

According to Astatke and Kassaw (2017), early childhood program administrators are responsible for leading their teachers in providing appropriate, stimulating, nurturing, and enriching preschool learning experiences for children. In some instances, a few perform teaching roles. Therefore, the program administrator's learned skills in early childhood are essential (Bamezor et al., 2021; Blose & Muteweri, 2021; Denee & Thornton, 2021; Gibbs, 2022). While Laxton et al. (2021) stated that early childhood

program administrators must have combined skills as they are required to perform additional roles such as accountant, mentor, nutritionist, social worker, and many other duties in establishing a dynamic quality program. However, based on the consistently changing dynamics within the early childhood sector and the extraordinary demands placed on private early childhood administrators, Alchin et al. (2019) found that many program administrators often feel helpless. This feeling of helplessness derives from the various challenges in meeting the changing requirements for improving program quality (Denee & Thornton, 2021; Movahedazarhouligh & Banerjee, 2020).

Although the evidence shows that children's learning intensifies in high-quality early childhood programs, recent research has highlighted the limitation of current policy approaches and governance to guide program administrators in strengthening practices that will aid in improving program quality (Bamezor et al., 2021; Blose & Muteweri, 2021; Chin et al., 2021). According to Douglass et al. (2022), based on their leadership role private early childhood program administrators may be best positioned to support governments' initiatives to improve program quality. However, Alchin et al. (2019) indicated that for this to occur, support from all levels of the early childhood system is required so that private administrators can feel more prepared, as the tasks they are required to perform increases.

Unfortunately, Torres et al. (2022) explained that there is limited evidence of early childhood program administrators' views on quality in government policies, and of contextual factors influencing their views, beliefs, and practices, despite the knowledge that their actions play such a key role in determining program quality. Thus, as the

private early childhood program administrators' roles intensify and they are required to perform more professionally complex functions, external pressures for greater accountability create more uneasiness and indecision (Boe & Hognestad, 2017; Denee & Thornton, 2021; Movahedazarhouligh & Banerjee, 2020).

Aziz et al. (2021) and Bamezor et al. (2021) reported that program administrators who lead adequate quality early childhood programs emphasize appropriate teacher-child ratios and do not overcrowd classrooms. They also develop a stimulating learning environment and ensure the availability of appropriate teaching and learning materials (Raelin, 2020; Robson & Martin, 2019; Tarekegne & Megersa, 2019). Further findings by Movahedazarhouligh and Banerjee (2020) revealed that the constant changes in the early childhood field pose significant challenges for center directors, managers, and administrators as the tasks they must perform constantly change.

In Australia, fulfilling the responsibilities associated with managing and leading both the pedagogical and organizational goals within the educational and legal framework of the system presents challenges for early childhood program administrators in improving program quality (Alchin et al., 2019; Millei & Gallagher, 2017). This finding supports the importance of understanding the depth and scope of the challenges early childhood program administrators experience, so that the necessary support to improve program quality is provided (Blöse & Muteweri, 2021). Because the reality of the situation is that implementing all the requirements is difficult for most private early childhood program providers to achieve (Kimosop, 2018; Movahedazarhouligh & Banerjee, 2020; Zhou & Fenech, 2022).

Smillie et al. (2020) explained that attaining sustainable improved changes in early childhood program quality will require program administrators to dedicate themselves to their roles unconditionally, to upkeep quality practices, and require investment of time, resources, and money in training leaders. In addition, Diale and Sewagegn (2021) emphasized that the constant reorganization, renaming, and restructuring of early childhood programs and services is confusing. Furthermore, the authors shared that undue pressure associated with policy implemented and limited flexibility results in some administrators not complying, leading to distrust of their ability to do their jobs effectively.

Camacho and Parham (2019) further stated that a lack of acknowledgment regarding the complexities involved in working with young children and their families while acceding to government and societal expectations creates a cascading effect on the early childhood sector. Often resulting in the sector being plagued by conflict, leading to displeasure and frustration (Agosti et al., 2021; Alanis et al., 2021; Alchin et al., 2019). Notwithstanding the various policies constantly being established for implementation in the hope of more sufficiently developing and improving the early childhood sector, the sector continues to be significantly hindered and plagued by inequalities that affect program administrators' ability to improve program quality (Aziz et al., 2021; Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018; Blose & Muteweri, 2021; Campbell-Barr & Leeson, 2016).

Early Childhood Curriculum

Gülçiçek et al. (2019) claimed that appropriate curriculum selection and implementation are imperative in improving early childhood program quality. Addisu and

Wudu (2019) and Roessingh and Bence (2019) echoed this claim and expressed that implementing a developmentally appropriate curriculum is a top priority of any early childhood program focused on achieving desirable learning outcomes for preschool children. The authors believed that early childhood programs aimed at improving program quality need to emphasize implementing a curriculum focused on the promotion of children's cognitive, physical, language, social, emotional, and motor skills development (Haslip & Gullo, 2018; Li & Chen, 2017; Portilla et al., 2020). In the early childhood setting, the curriculum differs across categories of centers based on varying philosophies, availability of materials and resources, pedagogy, teachers' instruction, classroom design, and group size (Ansari & Pianta, 2019; Yang & Li, 2019).

In Trinidad and Tobago, private early childhood centers typically select their curriculum. However, they are encouraged to use the Government of Trinidad and Tobago National Early Childhood Curriculum Guide, which the ministry approved over a decade ago (GoRTT Draft Education Policy 2017-2022, n.d.). However, this is not homogeneously used by private providers. Clifford and Crawford (2009) and Hannaway et al. (2019) expressed that although early childhood private program administrators often have the autonomy to select the curriculum, most feel constrained, as often their options are limited by state approved choices and accrediting bodies.

Curriculum implementation can be challenging; therefore, the successful delivery of the curriculum is highly dependent on the training and mentoring of teachers toward the faithful implementation of the selected curriculum (Jenkins et al., 2018; Schachter et al., 2022). This issue highlights that curriculum restrictions and guidance may be

significant and influential policy levers that can influence early childhood programs' quality and effectiveness (Boyd-Swan & Herbst, 2020; Clifford & Crawford, 2009). Inevitably, many elements must successfully come together for any early childhood curriculum to appropriately address the needs of all children (Baird & Clark, 2018; Henward et al., 2019). Elements include the program administrators', teachers', and parents' views of children as learners, developmentally appropriate practices, and sociocultural values (Khomais & Gahwaji, 2019; Looney, 2020; Nevenglosky et al., 2019).

A study by Addisu and Wudu (2019) to determine the challenges encountered in implementing the early childhood curriculum found that giving guidance to teachers that emerged from limited knowledge of child-centered pedagogy, pressure from parents to do formal work, and limited resources and materials presented challenges. Similarly, Li and Chen's (2017) study uncovered that teachers' education plays an essential role in curriculum implementation, that top-down models were ineffective, and changing ideas do not automatically equate to change in practices. Li and Chen's study also raised awareness of the concept that cultural context is essential to successful curriculum implementation. Therefore, ideologies of how children learn will not yield positive outcomes from a top-down approach. Moreover, Henward et al. (2019) shared that an appropriate early childhood curriculum promotes developmentally appropriate classroom experiences and activities, considering all the children's needs, ages, personalities, and learning styles.

Early childhood curriculum execution is vital in determining program quality and achieving a program's goals (Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018; Cohen & Korintus, 2017; Katz, 1993). Thus, if the teacher does not understand the curriculum's practical and theoretical framework, they would be unsuccessful in its implementation (Du Plessis, 2020; Gordon & Browne, 2017; Govender, 2018). Based on the principle that preschool children's learning is optimized when they are meaningfully engaged in age and developmentally appropriate activities, programs must strive to implement a curriculum that promotes quality experiences for young children (Bredenkamp, 1997; Halpern et al., 2021). Equally crucial to preschool children's success and improving the quality of early childhood programs is ensuring that teachers understand and are well prepared to deliver the curriculum (Infurna, 2020). While Agosti et al. (2021) outlined that free sharing of ideas, success stories, and suggestions among center staff and across centers can aid in overcoming challenges in curriculum implementation. Researchers further implied that opportunities to share successes and failures freely cultivates an environment that promotes psychological safety (Egert et al., 2020; Kimosop, 2018), which will aid in improving the quality of teachers' teaching.

A study undertaken by Tarekegne and Megersa (2019) in Southwest Shoa Zone to determine the challenges private early childhood program administrators encountered in improving program quality revealed that the curriculum presented a challenge. The researchers reported a major challenge was early childhood program administrators felt pressured to select a curriculum aligned with what parents wanted for their children, even if it was not developmentally appropriate. This choice resulted in the implementation of

an unsuccessful curriculum, which lacked relevance and failed to address all the children's learning and development needs to successfully prepare children for future learning and life (Chimbi & Jita, 2019). Additionally, other elements that assist in appropriate curriculum implementation were also not utilized (Nevenglosky et al., 2019), such as assessment, adequate materials, appropriate delivery methods, record keeping, and teachers' preparation (Camacho & Parham, 2019).

In support, Yang and Li (2019) found that curriculum selection and implementation presented challenges due to limited syllabus, policy documents, manuals, and the lack of uniformity in program implementation. At the same time, Weiland et al. (2018) stated that early childhood program administrators' approach to curriculum implementation and children's education in their setting arises from their beliefs about how children learn. If the early childhood program administrator believe children are active participants in their learning rather than passive participants while being exposed to specific concepts and skills, the center's curriculum will typically reflect the program administrator's belief of how children learn (Tarekegne & Megersa, 2019).

Conversely, Owojor and Gbenga-Akanmu (2021) stated that private early childhood program administrators depend on fees to operate their centers. Therefore, despite their beliefs about how children learn, they are often forced to select a curriculum based on parents' wishes, which is often inappropriate. Additionally, Baloyi and Makhubele (2018) found that limited materials, funding, and untrained or inexperienced teachers created stumbling blocks that negatively impacted curriculum implementation. Moreover, Rajab and Wright (2020) shared that inadequate space to facilitate children

appropriately, limited opportunities to explore the curriculum in an investigative manner, insufficient materials, complied with limited parental support, and teacher training were factors that hindered the appropriate implementation of the curriculum, ultimately impacting program quality.

Staffing-Teacher Selection

Diale and Sewagegn (2021) stated that appropriately trained, motivated, and skilled teachers are essential and necessary in ensuring quality in early childhood programs. Furthermore, Hoang et al. (2018) explained that quality in early childhood programs is virtually unattainable without appropriately trained teachers. Without qualified teachers, the tenets that underpin quality in early childhood will be challenging to attain (Hannaway et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2021). Both Ansari and Pianta (2019) and Bicaj and Buza (2020) expressed that even if facilities, resources, management, and finances are readily available and appropriate, if the teacher is untrained, there will be minimal benefits to children's learning. Therefore, two issues to be addressed by government policy would be teachers' education and training, as they are more significant predictors of quality in the early childhood setting (Khomais & Gahwaji, 2019).

Foong et al. (2018), reporting from the Malaysian context on their study, which included 3,087 early childhood teachers, revealed an urgent need for attention to teachers' training and professionalism in the private early childhood sector. The researchers found that there were many young, untrained, underqualified, inexperienced, and underpaid teachers in the private early childhood sector which impacted program

quality. Sylva et al. (2004) got similar results in their longitudinal study conducted in England, which found that qualified early childhood teachers were more versed in providing developmentally appropriate, engaging, and challenging activities for children than their unqualified counterparts in the private sector. However, Charles and Williams (2018) highlighted the importance of considering other factors which impact job satisfaction, such as the work environment, salary, and professional status, as all these elements ultimately contribute to the teacher's overall performance.

The early childhood teacher is responsible for promoting children's independence, self-esteem, and overall holistic development towards self-regulation and becoming contributing members of society (Du Plessis, 2020; Gülçiçek et al., 2019; Rouse & Joseph, 2019). Because early childhood teachers play such a critical role, recommendations are made that emphasis is placed on hiring early childhood teachers who are qualified, experienced, and aware of appropriate pedagogy associated with preschoolers learning and development (Dan et al., 2020; Weiland et al., 2018). Therefore, the recommendation is early childhood providers entrusted with hiring teachers must ensure teachers' preparation (Torres et al., 2022; Tout et al., 2021). Ensuring teachers' preparedness not just academically, but emotionally, physically, and psychologically to meet the needs of children; from varying backgrounds with different cultures, religious beliefs, abilities, socioeconomic status, and lived experiences is equally essential in ensuring quality (Albin-Clark et al., 2018; Teotia, 2021; Yılmaz et al., 2021).

Unfortunately, the reality in the private early childhood sector is its often difficult for program administrators to match the salaries offered to equally qualified teachers in the public sector (Camacho & Parham, 2019; Diale & Sewagegn, 2021; Foong et al., 2018). Also, many cannot guarantee job stability and often cannot provide teachers with benefits (Harrison, 2020). Regrettably, all these limitations result in qualified, experienced teachers being less interested in working in the private sector (Doromal et al., 2022). Despite these challenges, Movahedazarhouli et al. (2022) maintain that private early childhood program administrators must find workable solutions to overcome these challenges as much is at stake. As Gülçiçek et al. (2019) outlined teachers' lack of comprehension and inability to execute the curriculum negatively impacts children's learning.

Poor or untrained teachers often lack knowledge about appropriate practices, teaching strategies, and child development, which hinders their ability to deliver the curriculum appropriately, impacting program quality and further disadvantaging some children (Infurna, 2020; State of the States 2019, 2020). In Zimbabwe, private early childhood teachers' limited knowledge of basic skills in appropriate curriculum implementation cause teachers to resort to formal teaching instead of the advised child-centered approach to learning (Harrison, 2020; Owojori & Gbenga-Akanmu, 2021). Likewise, Hannaway et al. (2019) stated that untrained and less qualified teachers were sought after in the private sector because they accepted lower wages than qualified teachers.

According to Hannaway et al. (2019), early childhood teachers without professional qualifications and training cannot qualify to work in the public early childhood setting. Thus, the private sector usually attracts unqualified persons wanting to work with young children (Haslip & Gullo, 2018). In countries such as Sweden and France emphasis is placed on hiring early childhood teachers that are appropriately qualified, trained, and experienced, as these countries leaders understand the critical role of teachers in establishing program quality (Hoang et al., 2018; Infurna, 2020; Lee-Hammond & Bjervas, 2021). According to von Suchodoletz et al. (2022), almost all early childhood programs with a high level of success, including public preschools in Boston, New Jersey, Michigan, and Tulsa, require their head or lead teacher to have a bachelor's degree with a specialization in early childhood.

Additionally, Torres et al. (2022) indicated that having specialized teachers is essential in establishing high-quality programs, as having specialized teachers aids in appropriately ensuring children's learning and development. Adding to the discussion, Harrison (2020) explained that teachers with higher degrees of education and training are well prepared, knowledgeable, and skilled in providing developmentally appropriate activities in a child-centered, safe learning environment than teachers with lower levels of education. While Escayg and Kinkead-Clark (2018) stated a lack of trained, specialized early childhood teachers in the Eastern Caribbean has negatively impacted the quality of the education preschool children receive in many preprimary private centers in the Caribbean.

A visionary, organized, and trained early childhood program administrator who values teachers' preparation and appropriately delegate responsibilities to teachers assist with improving program quality (Vallberg, 2020). New Jersey preschool program expansion and improvement efforts provide a successful example of how creating various initiatives, such as multiple pathways to licensure, better teacher preparation programs, and scholarships for teachers to further their knowledge and skills, impacts program quality (Smillie et al., 2020). Although the recommendation is that trained teachers should teach young children, early research showed that appropriate mentoring and coaching of untrained teachers by program administrators could contribute to program quality improvement as unqualified teachers work towards becoming qualified (Govender, 2018; Portilla et al., 2020).

A study conducted in Washington State showed that failing or poor-quality early childhood programs that implemented coaching improved teachers' retention, teacher-child interactions, and teachers' burnout, which yielded better learning outcomes for children (Varmuza et al., 2021). Thus, leaders coaching teachers have demonstrated positive results in the absence of training or qualification of teachers; therefore, if the teacher is untrained, all is not lost (Govender, 2018). Because teachers, learning materials, resources, and teaching methods influence early childhood curriculum implementation (UNICEF, 2020), it is highly recommended that both the private and government authorities need to arrange ongoing training for teachers in curriculum implementation to maintain or improve program quality (UNESCO, 2021; von Suchodoletz et al., 2022; Zhou & Fenech, 2022).

Center Registration

The rekindled debate about the importance of quality in early childhood programs in Trinidad and Tobago has resulted from the relatively poor quality of some private early childhood programs (GoRTT Draft Education Policy Paper 2017-2022, n.d.). As a result, the MoE has intensified efforts to encourage private early childhood program administrators to register their centers (GoRTT Vision 2030, 2017). Harrison et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of the private early childhood program administrator's awareness of the policies or regulations that guide early childhood programs (Logan, 2017). Mainly because private program administrators must complete the mandatory center registration process (Campbell-Barr & Leeson, 2016; Millei & Gallagher, 2017; Moore et al., 2018).

In Trinidad and Tobago, the requirement for operating a private early childhood center is that the provider must register their center with the MoE. The private early childhood provider must be in operation for at least one month before applying for registration. In applying for registration, providers must include information regarding the hours of operation, the number of rooms, ownership of the center, and documentation of qualifications for at least one teaching staff. Additionally, the provider must produce the written approval of other authorities such as Fire Services, Electrical Inspectorate, Water and Sewage Authority, and the Ministry of Legal Affairs. The education division will inspect the center during the final registration process steps as a quality assurance measure. Upon completing the registration process, providers will have five years from the registration date to complete the licensing process, resulting in the center meeting the

quality requirements (GoRTT Proposed Standards for Regulating Early Childhood Services, 2005).

Haile and Mohammed (2017) highlighted that although early childhood is commonly referred to as the foundation years and is considered the most critical stage in determining children's future success, regrettably, education policies do not sufficiently prioritize this level of education (Elwick et al., 2017; Millei et al., 2017). According to NAEYC (2020), policymakers increasingly realize that having standards and regulations assists with establishing high-quality early childhood programs. Thus, more policymakers are implementing measures to improve program quality, such as the mandatory registration of early childhood centers (UNICEF, 2020). Over the years, many countries, especially countries with developing nation status such as Honduras, Chile, Colombia, Ghana, and throughout the Caribbean, have tried but failed to develop or successfully implement a consistent system of monitoring and measuring the quality of early childhood programs (UNICEF, 2020). Attaining an effective monitoring system has also been a challenge for Trinidad and Tobago, as reported by the National Child Policy 2020 – 2030 of Trinidad and Tobago, which outlined that one of the significant challenges of improving the quality of programs in the early childhood private sector is monitoring (GoRTT Proposed Standards for Regulating Early Childhood Services, 2005).

This challenge directly results from private program administrators' unwillingness or noncompliance in registering their centers with the MoE (GoRTT Proposed Standards for Regulating Early Childhood Services, 2005). Providers of early childhood programs need to register their centers with the relevant authority in their country, as registration of

the center ensures that the authorities responsible for early childhood programs are aware of the center's existence (Elwick, 2017; Singh, 2018). Being aware of the center's existence means that the assigned authority can visit, monitor the program, and provide support as necessary (Povera, 2020). Although commendable, arguably private program administrators are often reluctant to complete the process, as there is rarely forthcoming support and providers feel more criticized for not meeting outlined standards that denote quality (Raelin, 2020; Robson & Martin, 2019; Singh, 2018).

UNICEF reported that this issue needs to be appropriately addressed as approximately one third of the children attending preschool are enrolled in a private institution that operates outside the perimeters of the regulatory system (UNICEF, 2020). This issue is fundamental, as Singh (2018) articulated that improved monitoring of centers can assist in addressing some of the issues or challenges which impose a serious threat to quality, which can negatively impact children's learning outcomes (Henward et al., 2019; Smidt, 2018). Therefore, while private centers are needed to provide access, there needs to be a balance, with greater emphasis on quality (Haslip & Gullo, 2018).

Elwick et al. (2017) also stated that the various categories of private, government and government assisted centers create unequal and inequitable delivery of quality programs, as there is inconsistency with quality assurance mechanisms. This likely means that children from low-income families are more likely to attend poor-quality programs (Smidt, 2018). This revelation brings into complete focus the need for more emphasis on establishing equitable quality early childhood programs amid the prominence on universalizing access (Yilmaz et al., 2021). High-quality early childhood programs

emphasize child protection, violence prevention, building children's resilience, and ensuring that all children, teachers, and program administrators have the knowledge and skills to provide positive outcomes within a supportive learning environment, which policies and regulations promotes (Charles & Williams, 2018).

Thus, the attainment of quality in early childhood programs is a major driving force in governments' attempts to implement policies and regulations to guide the sector. One such medium is center registration (Povera, 2020; Tsegay et al., 2017). Appropriate registration of an early childhood center is essential for fostering quality in ECCE programs (Chin et al., 2021). The early childhood center registration process involves early childhood providers meeting the standards of various departments to be approved for the center's operation (Learning Policy Institute, 2021). However, meeting the multiple authorities' requirements presents challenges for many private early childhood program administrators. Private early childhood program administrators listed a lack of accurate and updated policy information regarding the registration process and the countless forms to be completed as significant hindrances in completing the registration process (Haslip & Gullo, 2018).

In Malaysia, early childhood private providers reported that the registration process is unclear, cumbersome, and time-consuming. Thus, an estimated 65,000 centers continue to operate without being registered (Singh, 2018). Additionally, many private early childhood program administrators who attempted to complete the registration process complained that they experienced challenges obtaining the correct forms and were unaware of updated policy information on registration, resulting from the

ineffective method of policy dissemination (Logan, 2017). Unfortunately, Aziz et al. (2021) reported these challenges make many private early childhood program administrators apprehensive about registering their centers.

The center registration process also includes meeting standards of quality in the infrastructure, which includes both the indoor and outdoor of the center (Tsegay et al., 2017). Unfortunately, according to Tan (2017), many centers in the private early childhood sector do not meet the regulated standards, and many lack suitable facilities such as appropriate washrooms, proper ventilation, running water, and equipment (Povera, 2020). Early childhood program administrators must meet these standards to ensure quality. However, more importantly, Ng (2010) and Kilderry et al. (2017) shared that early childhood program administrators need to meet these requirements to ensure the health and safety of the children in their program. As early childhood private centers continue to mushroom, major concerns emerge alongside the rapid emergence of these centers, such as overcrowded classrooms, limited washroom facilities, and a lack of appropriate teacher-child ratios that need addressing (Tan, 2017).

According to Tsegay et al. (2017), most of these inconsistencies in not abiding by regulation arise from providers wanting to satisfy the need of families while remaining profitable. Due to the impact of COVID 19, many private early childhood centers had no alternative but to close their doors permanently (UNICEF, 2020). However, as countries get back to levels of normalcy and many new private early childhood centers are emerging, it is suggested that this may be an opportune time for the government to work with the private sector. To collaborate, ensuring early childhood private program

administrators complete the center registration process, ultimately aiding in establishing program quality (Singh, 2018; Teotia, 2021; World Bank, 2018).

Summary and Conclusion

An extensive literature review was conducted on the challenges in improving early childhood program quality and the support needed for improvement. Although researchers have previously reported on the challenges in improving early childhood program quality (Visser et al., 2021; Yilmaz et al., 2021), few have examined the perspectives of private early childhood program administrators. This study will help address this research gap, as the findings provide insights that can be used to improve the quality of private early childhood programs and address challenges with needed support.

This chapter included an overview of the literature search strategy, the conceptual framework, and a review of the relevant literature related to this study. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the research design used to conduct this basic qualitative study. Chapter 3 also includes details on the role of the researcher, participant selection, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment and participation, data analysis plan, trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators. The study also elicited participants' views on the support needed to improve program quality. The data collected provided a deeper understanding of how private early childhood program administrators view the challenges of improving program quality. The information collected contributes to a better understanding of the roles performed by private early childhood program administrators and how quality requirements are interpreted and implemented by the centers' leaders. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology in detail, including participant selection, data collection, and analysis. In addition to ethical procedures, issues of trustworthiness are discussed, addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key elements of the research method.

Research Design and Rational

This study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on challenges in improving program quality in Trinidad and Tobago?

RQ2: What are the private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on the support required to improve program quality in Trinidad and Tobago?

I used a basic qualitative research design to examine the challenges and support needed in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of the program administrators. Ravitch and Carl (2021) stated that

qualitative research is ideal for exploring a phenomenon where the researcher identifies themes that emerge from the data analyzed. Therefore, the foundation underlying qualitative research was ideally suited for this study because I wanted to capture participants' views and lived experiences. I wanted to understand how participants experienced challenges in improving private early childhood program quality and the importance they placed on their experiences. I used a semistructured interview consisting of nine open-ended questions to capture the participants' perspectives. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), in-depth interviews allow the researcher to gather rich detailed information, which was necessary for this study.

Also, I chose a basic qualitative research design for this study because this approach was the most appropriate method to answer the research questions. Qualitative methods allow for the collection of data by capturing the first-hand knowledge and experiences of the participants. As the primary source of data, my goal was to gain an understanding of the challenges private early childhood program administrators face in improving program quality and the support needed to make improvements. Using a qualitative design gave me the opportunity to interact directly with participants and record their narratives and lived experiences.

A quantitative research method was rejected because it did not align with the research questions and what I was trying to understand. In addition, no hypothesis was tested, which is more appropriate for a quantitative approach (see Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that a basic qualitative research design is used to gain a clear understanding of the phenomenon through the perspectives of the

study's participants. Rubin and Rubin (2012) expressed the open-ended approach that underlies a qualitative design, allows participants to construct their meaning of the phenomenon in their own words from experiences in different situations. I also used a basic qualitative research design to ensure that the rich, thick, descriptive data from the semistructured interviews with participants were appropriately captured. Given the purpose of the study, a basic qualitative approach ensured that adequate insight was gained into the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago. This information could not have been adequately captured with a quantitative research design.

Other research designs, such as grounded theory, case studies, and phenomenology were considered and rejected for various reasons. According to Gaudet and Dominique (2018), grounded theory focuses on developing a theory from the data. The goal of this study was not to establish a theory, but to explore the lived experiences of the participants. Therefore, a grounded theory approach was not applicable. A case study design was also rejected because a case study explores a research question or problem with reference to a real-life situation, with the researcher deciding the how and why of the phenomenon (see Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this study, the focus was not on observing participants in real-life situations. Therefore, a case study was eliminated as an appropriate research design.

Phenomenology was also considered and ultimately rejected. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021) phenomenological research examines the everyday experiences of the participants and disregards the preconceived notions of the researcher. Also, in

phenomenology data is collected over a period of time. I was interested in collecting data at a specific point in time. After considering the various methods as a research design, a basic qualitative research design was the most appropriate and aligned with this study to answer the research questions. The chosen research design was also best suited to help the reader better understand the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality and the support needed to improve the quality of programs offered to preschool children.

Role of the Researcher

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), the researcher plays an essential role in the quality of the results in a qualitative study. As the sole researcher, I was responsible for all areas of the study, including recruiting appropriate participants, collecting the data, transcribing the data, analyzing the data, storing the data appropriately, and reporting the results. Another role of the researcher according to Corbin and Strauss (2015) is to create interview questions for the interview with the participants. My role as the researcher was to interview the participants and respectfully capture their views in a neutral, unbiased manner. Data were collected through semistructured interviews that lasted approximately 35 minutes with each participant.

I have worked in the educational field for over 20 years. As an educator, I have worked as a field officer, curriculum program facilitator, facilitator of professional development workshops, and adjunct facilitator at the tertiary level. As a curriculum program facilitator in the MoE, I am responsible for supporting the effective implementation and monitoring of the early childhood curriculum in the government

centers, conducting workshops, and training new staff. In the past, I have facilitated workshops that included some private early childhood program administrators.

However, as a curriculum program facilitator, I do not have personal contact with or supervise program administrators in the private early childhood setting. Therefore, I did not know the participants in this study because I do not perform my daily role in the private sector. The website publication of private early childhood centers in Trinidad was used to invite potential participants to voluntarily participate in this study. The identity of the participants was protected as I used a numerical identifier for each participant. I believe my role in the study was beneficial because I knew the expectations and standards for meeting program quality. My familiarity with the issue improved my understanding.

I was aware that a possible researcher bias would exist during the research process. Therefore, measures were taken to remain unbiased in all correspondence and interaction with participants and to ensure that my personal opinions, feelings, or thoughts did not influence the data collected. Therefore, participant responses were clarified as needed during the interview, and interviews were recorded for transcription with the participant's consent. These measures helped to ensure a valid study. To further ensure the validity of the study, I conducted peer reviews, transcription checks, and kept a reflective journal. In addition, member checks were conducted, and I met with each participant after the interview recordings were transcribed to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts, which increased the validity of the study. A peer reviewer was also used to prevent further bias. The peer reviewer reviewed the interview questions and checked the data analysis for accuracy. I kept a reflective journal to effectively document emerging

biases, assumptions, and beliefs, to monitor perceptions, influences, and background knowledge. Finally, I maintained a professional demeanor and ensured that my personal beliefs, knowledge, and opinions remained hidden during interviews.

Methodology

Participant Selection

In this basic qualitative research, purposive sampling was used to select 10 participants. This strategy facilitated the selection of participants with the information needed to answer the research questions. The selected participants were critical to this study because they were familiar with challenges in improving program quality in Trinidad and Tobago's private early childhood sector. Thus, detailed insights were gained on the study's topic based on participants' experiences and responses to the interview questions. Equally important in the selection of participants was ensuring all 10 participants willingly volunteered to participate in this study.

All participants were private early childhood program administrators operating in Trinidad, had at least one staff member other than themselves, and experienced challenges in improving program quality. Private early childhood program administrators whose programs met all the requirements of the standards for regulating early childhood centers were excluded from this study. In addition, private early childhood program administrators in Tobago were excluded from this study. This group was excluded due to limited access to participants. Also, this group was excluded to ensure that the study remained manageable, and a practical strategy was used to understand the challenges in improving the quality of private early childhood programs and the support needed to

improve from the perspectives of program administrators. Additionally, the sample was limited to Trinidad due to time, cost, and resource constraints. Participants in the study included private early childhood program administrators from all educational districts in Trinidad. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), sample size can vary in a qualitative study, as what is important is that data saturation is achieved. I ensured that data saturation was achieved during data analysis. The 10 participants selected were sufficient and provided the detailed data needed to answer the two research questions.

Also, in alignment with conducting this research, I sought approval from Walden University's Institutional Research Board (IRB) to conduct the study. Walden University's approval for this study was granted (approval # 01-04-23-0762387). After the IRB approval, the website list of private early childhood operators, which included the center's name, location, and contact information, was used to recruit potential participants. An invitation letter was sent via email to several potential participants.

Once a potential participant expressed interest in participating in the study through their email response, further telephone contact was made to obtain additional information, to ensure the participant explicitly met eligibility criteria. Interested participants also provided contact information for colleagues they believed might be interested in the study. I also contacted these individuals. This process continued until the required number of participants was reached. The consent form was emailed to the selected participants to help them understand the study and be aware that interviews would be audio recorded. Participants were required to respond to the email with 'I

consent' if they agreed to voluntarily participate in the study. Also, my contact information was shared with the selected participants to clarify any questions.

Instrumentation

Semistructured interviews were conducted for data collection. The interview protocol was prepared in collaboration with a field expert from Trinidad and contained the same questions for all participants (see Appendix). The interview protocol also included a welcome message, followed by details about the purpose of the study, before participants were asked the questions. All interview questions were open-ended, which facilitated the collection of in-depth data from participants' responses. The interview questionnaire also included probes that were asked as needed. The interview protocol also comprised a concluding statement informing participants about member checking. I conducted interviews with participants on Zoom. This method was the most feasible and effective for collecting the necessary data as the technology was readily available, convenient for participants, and allowed audio recording.

All questions used in the interviews were developed by me to answer the research questions, and the field expert commented on the appropriateness of the questions. An education expert with more than 20 years of experience helped review the interview questions and agreed that the questions were appropriately structured to elicit detailed, in-depth, and rich responses from participants. Interview questions were worded to be consistent with the literature, the conceptual framework, and answering the research questions. All questions allowed participants to respond in a natural conversational tone.

This strategy aimed to make participants feel comfortable and free to express their perspectives.

Care was also taken in the wording of the interview questions to ensure that questions were specific, relevant, and allowed participants to freely give their answers. Also, to validate the reliability and credibility of the interview protocol and questionnaire for collecting the required data, a pilot study was conducted. Through the pilot study and collaboration with the expert, the questions that were critical for collecting reliable and valid information for the study were identified. This was done to ensure that the questions were not too intrusive. In addition, questions that did not provide relevant information were excluded. No data from the pilot study were used in this study. Collaboration with an expert contributed to the academic rigor of the study, as recommendations made were applied to the interview protocol to improve the data collection instrument and ensure content validity. All these measures helped to establish the suitability of the data collection instrument for collecting sufficient data to answer the two research questions.

During the interview, participants were also asked to elaborate on their answers as needed to ensure accurate documentation of responses. The use of interviews was most appropriate for collecting data. Because the focus of the research was to obtain participants' perspectives, in real time, a semistructured interview was appropriate. It provided the opportunity to ask follow-up questions, probe appropriately for clarity, and gather the in-depth data needed to understand the challenges and support needed in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

In recruiting volunteers, I followed Walden University's IRB procedure for recruiting participants. After receiving the IRB's approval (# 01-04-23-0762387) to conduct this study, I used the website listing of private early childhood centers in Trinidad to obtain the email addresses and contact numbers of program administrators to recruit participants. I then sent emails to potential participants to recruit volunteers for the study. The invitation email to potential volunteers included details about the purpose of the study, criteria for participation, and my contact information. Interested participants also provided contact information for colleagues they thought might be interested in the study. I also contacted these individuals. Based on the private early childhood program administrators' willingness to voluntarily participate in the study, I selected 10 participants after verifying by phone that they met all participation criteria. Participants from all educational districts were included in the study. The consent form detailed the purpose of the study, method of data collection, ethical guidelines, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, data collection privacy, withdrawal procedure, and contact information. All selected participants were emailed the consent form.

I took steps to ensure that participants understood the study and its purpose. Each participant was allowed to keep a copy of the consent form. Potential participants were given 24 hours to learn about and review the requirements for participation in the study before giving consent. Potential participants who agreed to participate in the study were required to respond to the email with "I consent." To ensure confidentiality, I assigned each participant a numeric identifier. Also, participants selected a convenient date and

time from a predetermined schedule to conduct the interview. Before conducting the interviews, participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of the study, which outlined they were free to leave at any time with no consequences. Participants were also reminded that interviews would be audio recorded using Zoom recording features and my phone's recording device so that the information could be retrieved and transcribed later. All interviews ended with participants having an opportunity to ask questions related to the study. I thanked all participants for their willingness to participate in the study. The following week I communicated with each participant on WhatsApp to conduct the member checking exercise, which took approximately 15 minutes for completion with each participant.

Data Collection

Semistructured interviews were conducted to collect data. Participants were allowed to select the date and time of the interview from a predetermined schedule. All interviews were conducted on Zoom and lasted approximately 35 minutes. Participants used their work or home environment depending on convenience, comfort, and privacy. I conducted all interviews in my home office to maintain privacy. Participants were asked permission for me to audio record the interview, which was later transcribed. In addition to the audio recording devices, participants were informed that handwritten notes would be taken if needed. All recorded interviews and handwritten notes were securely stored for future reference. A debriefing session was held at the end of each interview to ensure that participants had the opportunity to ask questions, clarify concerns, and make comments or observations about any aspect of the interview.

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), allowing participants to ask questions and clarify concerns is essential to the data collection process. The week following the completion of the interviews, I followed up with each participant to complete the member checking exercise which lasted approximately 15 minutes. Participants were also informed that they could request a copy of the interview transcript. At the end of the interview, participants were thanked for their participation in the study. All responses were kept confidential. Data collection took place over 3 weeks.

Data Analysis Plan

The research questions provided the focus for data collection and the framework for developing the interview questions, ultimately helping to understand the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators and the support needed for improvement. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), analyzing the collected data is an essential step in qualitative research. To begin the data analysis, I first transcribed all interview recordings verbatim. I then read all transcripts and listened to the audio recordings several times to check for accuracy.

Once the collected data were transcribed, I began analyzing the data through open coding. According to Saldaña (2015), a code is a word or phrase that represents a meaning from the transcribed data and coding is the most comprehensive part of data analysis. The first coding was done by highlighting words and phrases from the transcripts that helped make sense of the data to answer the research questions. During

the second review of the data, I assigned codes. I categorized these codes, noting the relationships within the data.

Saldaña (2015) stated categories help to create a more precise group of related codes. Creating categories also allowed me to analyze the data to determine emerging themes by looking at the patterns and relationships that developed. The emerging themes were refined to determine relevance to the research questions. I completed the data analysis by labeling the emerging themes and presenting the established themes. A detailed report of the findings related to the research questions is subsequently presented. To avoid discrepant cases, I reviewed the coding process to ensure all participant's responses were accurately captured regarding their perspectives on the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators and the support needed for improvement. A review of the coding process was conducted to ensure that participants' perspectives were captured accurately and to avoid any discrepant cases.

Trustworthiness

Ravitch and Carl (2021) stated trustworthiness is critical in any research. Therefore, researchers must ensure that the data collected is analyzed and interpreted accurately and rigorously. Saldaña (2015) stated there are several techniques to maintain trustworthiness. These techniques include the researcher's focus on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021) credibility in research means that the researcher's findings are consistent with actual conditions, and the study measures what the research intends to measure.

I employed several strategies to ensure the credibility of this study. The semistructured interview questionnaire used to collect data provided the opportunity to collect in-depth data from participants based on the study's questions and to eliminate researcher bias and discrepancies. Rechecking the audio recorded interviews for agreement also helped to maintain credibility. Additionally, as part of the member checking, discussions ensued with participants to clarify, modify, and add omissions to validate the data collected. No adjustments were required. In addition, a qualified field expert reviewed the interview questions prior to the use of the protocol. The field expert also assisted in reviewing the data analysis to ensure the information was accurate and free of bias. During each interview, a reflective journal was kept documenting my thoughts and feelings, which avoided biases.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) stated transferability is another essential element of qualitative research. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) transferability refers to the ability to generalize and transfer findings so that a study replicated in a different setting can provide comparable data. To improve transferability, private early childhood program administrators who experienced challenges in improving program quality were selected from all educational districts in Trinidad. The selected participants varied in terms of years of experience, location, and the type of private early childhood center they operated, for example, before school care, after school care, or without. This additional information about the centers and participants was provided to allow the reader to assess the transferability of the study's findings. The detailed, thick descriptions that helped

understand the study's critical areas and determine whether the findings were transferable to other settings were collected in the semistructured interviews.

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), dependability in qualitative research is an additional element that the researcher must achieve. Dependability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the procedures and processes used for data analysis can be replicated. An audit trail was created that included a detailed description of the data collection and analysis methods, participant selection, and sampling procedures. Additionally, the data would be kept for approximately 5 years in the event a review of any document is required. I used a reflective journal to document reflections, biases, questions, perceptions, and decisions throughout the study, which ultimately helped develop my audit trail. Collectively these strategies helped to increase the dependability of this study.

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021) confirmability in qualitative research means accurately representing the experiences of the research participants without bias. I kept a reflective journal in which I recorded my questions, perceptions, biases, reflections, and decisions which helped ensure confirmability. Also, all protocols and ethical principles related to data collection and analysis were strictly followed. Member checking was conducted with each participant to verify the data collected. Detailed records of all stages, processes, and procedures used in conducting this study were maintained to ensure that data were collected accurately. Strategies used to increase the trustworthiness of the study included keeping a reflective journal and detailed records of

the data collection and analysis process. Also, an expert reviewer reviewed the interview questions and data analysis.

Ethical Procedures

Ravitch and Carl (2021) stated researchers must follow ethical guidelines.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), researchers should be aware of the potential harm to participants and respect their privacy during research. As the sole researcher in this study, I was responsible for following all ethical guidelines in conducting this research study to contribute to improving program quality in Trinidad and Tobago's private early childhood sector. The ethical practices used during the research process protected the participants while strengthening the validity of the study. Measures taken to protect the rights of participants during and after the completion of the study included ensuring that the necessary approvals were obtained to conduct the study and that at no time was the name of any participant, or their early childhood center mentioned.

Approval from the Walden University IRB is required before any data collection. The IRB granted approval, and I was assigned the number 01-04-23-0762387 to conduct this study. Obtaining the appropriate IRB approval ensured that the ethical principles underlying this research were followed to protect the participants.

After obtaining approval to conduct this study, potential participants were invited to participate voluntarily. The voluntary nature of the study was explained to participants, ensuring that participants understood that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without consequence. In addition, the purpose, and

procedures for protecting the privacy of participants and their centers were discussed with all participants. This included the use of numerical identification of participants.

Therefore, all identifying elements were omitted from this study to prevent participants from becoming known to the public. After selecting participants, they were required to provide informed consent to participate in the study. All participants were emailed the consent form, which outlined the purpose of the study, the selection criteria, the data analysis procedure, and information on how the data would be used. The consent form also informed the participants about the audio recording of the interviews for transcription. After participants carefully read the consent form and responded, 'I consent,' individual interviews were scheduled.

All protocols were followed during the interviews. Participants had the opportunity to clarify any ambiguities regarding the interview and questions. Any errors or misinterpretations were corrected. All data stored on the computer were assigned a password for access. To further ensure the confidentiality and protection of the data, I only used my personal computer to store the collected data. All hard copies of research materials from the study were stored securely in a locked drawer. In accordance with Walden University's policy, all data would be kept for approximately 5 years. At the end of this period, all materials stored in hard copy would be shredded, and all data stored on my computer would be erased using software designed to overwrite documents so that they are unreadable or unrecoverable.

Summary

A detailed description of the design and methodology of this study to examine challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators and the support needed for improvement was outlined in Chapter 3. A basic qualitative method was chosen to conduct the study. This method was chosen because it supported the collection of in-depth data on the research phenomenon to sufficiently answer the research questions. Chapter 3 elaborated on my role as the researcher and the steps I took in selecting the 10 study participants. Details about the use of semistructured interviews as the data collection method was also reported. How the collected data were transcribed, coded, analyzed, and stored was also discussed. The various measures taken to ensure compliance with the ethical guidelines of this study, such as the confidentiality of participants' data and the use of passwords to access stored data, were explained. The chapter concludes with a discussion about trustworthiness and ethical procedures. The following Chapter 4 details the research findings based on the data analysis.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on the challenges in improving program quality in Trinidad and Tobago?

RQ2: What are the private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on the support required to improve program quality in Trinidad and Tobago?

Chapter 4 includes the study setting, participant demographics, the data collection process, analysis procedures, results, and evidence of trustworthiness. Potential participants were invited via email to voluntarily participate in the study. The invitation email included the study's title, purpose, participation criteria, and my contact information. The study included 10 private early childhood program administrators who expressed interest in participating and met the participation criteria. The study included participants from all educational districts in Trinidad. The selected participants were emailed a consent form to which they responded, 'I consent' to participate in the study. Each participant was interviewed on Zoom at an agreed upon day and time. Notes were taken as needed, and all interviews were audio recorded. All responses to the interview questions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using open coding. Data were further analyzed to create categories and themes. External or personal circumstances did not influence participants' participation in the study.

Setting

All participants were interviewed from my home office. Interviews took place in the afternoons and lasted 3 weeks. Purposive sampling was used to select the 10 private early childhood program administrators who participated in the study. All participants owned and operated their early childhood centers ranging from 6 to 38 years. Data were collected from the 10 participants during individual interviews conducted on Zoom. At the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of the study. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, then coding and analysis began. No unplanned situations occurred during data collection.

Demographics

Ten private early childhood program administrators from all educational districts in Trinidad shared their perspectives on the challenges in improving program quality and the support needed to improve. The 10 research participants answered general demographic questions for summative purposes. Confidentiality was ensured by assigning participants a numeric identifier. All participants were managers and owners of their centers with experience ranging from 6 to 38 years. Participant demographics, such as their highest level of education, specialization, years in operation, and number of teachers, are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Highest Level of Education	Specialization	Years of Operation	Number of Teachers
PAdmin 1	Tertiary	ECCE	14	1
PAdmin 2	Tertiary	ECCE	6	3
PAdmin 3	Tertiary	ECCE	6	2
PAdmin 4	Tertiary	ECCE	35	3
PAdmin 5	Tertiary	ECCE	38	2
PAdmin 6	Tertiary	None	10	1
PAdmin 7	Tertiary	Administration	20	4
PAdmin 8	Tertiary	ECCE	8	2
PAdmin 9	Tertiary	ECCE	20	4
PAdmin 10	Tertiary	ECCE	12	2

Data Collection

Data collection began immediately after receiving approval from the Walden University IRB. The list of private centers published on the website was used to invite potential participants to voluntarily participate in the study. Interested participants were contacted by telephone to verify that they met the criteria. Participants also provided contact information for other colleagues who met the criteria for participation. The selected participants were emailed the consent form. The consent form informed participants of the study's background, purpose, procedures, sample questions, participant rights, benefits, privacy policy, and contact information. Data were collected

from the 10 participants through interviews conducted on Zoom. All interviews were audio recorded.

The data collection process took 3 weeks. Participants selected a day and time from a predetermined list that best suited their schedule. I contacted each participant the day before the interview to confirm the interview. Participants were interviewed individually, with each interview lasting approximately 35 minutes on Zoom. The length of each interview was based on the amount of information the participant shared. I used the interview protocol (see Appendix) so that each participant was asked the same questions to ensure that each interviewee provided similar general information. Each interview was recorded using the recording feature of my cell phone and the audio recording feature on Zoom. At the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of the study. I kept a reflective journal in which I recorded my thoughts and feelings to avoid intuitively conveying bias. The audio recording of each interview was transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word immediately after the interview was completed.

The data collection process described in Chapter 3 was strictly followed. No unusual circumstances occurred during data collection. As required by Walden University, all data collected would be kept securely for 5 years. All electronic data are password protected on my computer, and handwritten notes are kept in a locked drawer in my home office. Only I have access to the documents.

Data Analysis

In this basic qualitative study using semistructured interviews, I examined the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators. The 10 participants were each asked the same nine open-ended questions (see Appendix). I manually transcribed each recorded interview using Microsoft Word before beginning data analysis and compared the written interviews to the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. I became more familiar with the research data by reading and rereading the transcribed interviews line by line. After, the raw data were open coded to look for phrases, repeated words, patterns, and concepts to answer the research questions. The two research questions and the conceptual framework served as a guide for identifying the codes. Next, the open codes were categorized based on similarities using axial coding. The categories were then merged to determine the themes.

Interview Analysis

I used Saldaña's (2015) approach to qualitative data analysis in this study. The stages I followed included organizing and preparing the data, reviewing and familiarization of the data, coding and categorizing the data, generating themes, discussing the results, and validating the results. Although discrepant cases are common in qualitative research, no discrepant cases emerged from the collected data. I reviewed the collected data from the interviews for discrepancies and compared the results to the emergent themes. I went through the interview transcripts to ensure that nothing participants said was overlooked and that participants' exact words were reflected.

Member checking was also conducted, and I followed up with each participant on WhatsApp to review their transcripts. There were no unusual situations that affected the data analysis process.

Stage 1: Organizing and Preparing the Data

I prepared and organized the data by comparing the written transcripts to the audio recordings to ensure accuracy in recording participants' exact words. All interview transcripts were assigned to participants based on their numerical identification. Using the features of Microsoft Word, I coded the transcripts. All interviews were transcribed immediately after the interview was completed.

Stage 2: Reviewing and Familiarization of the Data

I listened to the recordings several times to ensure what was on the recording matched what was written in the transcript. I read the transcripts repeatedly to familiarize myself with the data. I allowed a few days to pass before I reread the transcripts, which gave me a new perspective on what was written, and I began making notes.

Stage 3: Coding and Categorizing the Data

The coding of the data was performed in two steps. These steps included open coding and axial coding. First, I read each transcript and made notes in the document. I read each transcript line by line and used highlighters to mark words, phrases, and concepts that were relevant to the conceptual framework and research questions. All highlighted words, phrases, and concepts were compiled into a list. These were then regrouped into codes based on common characteristics, patterns, and similarities. A total of 30 open codes emerged from the data. A sample of open codes, the numerical

identification of the participants, and excerpts corresponding to the codes are shown in

Table 2.

Table 2

Examples of Open Codes

Code	Participant	Excerpt
Inadequate information	PAdmin 1	“Because as a private provider I was not given any information, I just had to go on my own knowledge and the information I was receiving from other colleagues.”
	PAdmin 2	“I didn’t get information from anybody. I just went through and did what I had to do. I did not get much guidance when I started my school.”
Parental expectations	PAdmin 3	“They (parents) were always interested in whether their child could read and write when they get to the primary school.”
	PAdmin 9	“Parents want their children to learn to read and write, a little math and some science.”
Government Support	PAdmin 2	“The government gives us nothing, absolutely nothing because we are private.”
	PAdmin 10	“Ministry has limited interest in the private sector.” “Also, we need more visits. In all my years of operation a ministry official visited once.”
“Finance”	PAdmin 5	“Low salaries.”
	PAdmin 4	“You may want to implement certain things, but you do not have the type of finances to put it in your center, it kind of hinders.”
“Training”	PAdmin 7	“No matter how much resources, materials, money, or space you have, if the teachers are not trained to teacher the program will suffer and so will the children.”
“Resources”	PAdmin 3	“More resources, am would definitely be an asset.”
	PAdmin 1	“I somewhat follow part of the MoE curriculum. I add other things.”
View of MoE curriculum	PAdmin 8	“Ministry of Education has a curriculum guide they suggest or want us to use but it is outdated.”
	PAdmin 1	“Transitioning to primary school, sometimes most of the primary schools they want the children to already be able to read and write.”
Primary school expectations	PAdmin 6	“I tell her what to do.”
	PAdmin 10	“Teachers are given tasks by me.”
Allocation of center’s duties	PAdmin 6	“I tell her what to do.”
	PAdmin 10	“Teachers are given tasks by me.”

Saldaña (2015) stated axial coding is the second step that follows opening coding. Axial coding involves connecting codes developed during open coding to determine categories. I used axial coding to categorize the codes based on similarities in the second coding phase. Codes with the same meaning were condensed until all codes were grouped based on similarities. Each grouping of codes was used to determine the categories. After axial coding was completed, there were a total of 10 categories. Some examples of the categories, the open codes, the numerical identification of the participants, and excerpts from the interview transcripts are shown in Table 3.

Table 3*Examples of Categories and Open Codes*

Category	Code	Participant	Excerpt
Training opportunities	“Training”	PAdmin 1	“Training has help me a lot in the way I teach and way I do things at my center, and it has also helped me to be a more efficient leader at my center.”
	“Barrier”	PAdmin 7	“A barrier is little insights into how to use certain teaching tools...methods.”
	Teachers’ experience	PAdmin 9	“They love children, but they need lots of guidance and support as they have no teaching experience and no formal training in early childhood.”
Insufficient resources	“Resources”	PAdmin 3	“More resources, am would definitely be an asset.”
		PAdmin 6	“You may not have all the required resources for use in the center.”
Education of Parents	Parental expectations	PAdmin 4	“Parents expect you to get their child ready for primary school.”
	Challenges with parents	PAdmin 2	“I had people start in my school and then, for example, just Christmas there I had two children who come to school for a term and then from January said they could not afford it anymore and they will have to keep the children home.”
Limited funds	“Finance”	PAdmin 1	“We are not assisted financially by any institution or government strictly by our school fees and payment from parents.”
	Use of fees	PAdmin 5	“Low salaries.”
	Non-payment of fees	PAdmin 8	“When parents do not pay fees on time that creates challenges like not being able to pay teachers on time. As the fees are used for this also.”
PAdmin 10		“It is a struggle at times to get parents to pay fees.”	

Stage 4: Generating Themes

Once axial coding was completed, and the 10 categories were created, the categories were reviewed for emergent themes. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), themes are features of research participants’ accounts that characterize certain perceptions or experiences that the researcher deems relevant to answering the research

question. Once the themes were established, I assigned the themes to the appropriate research question they answered. I also ensured the themes were consistent with the conceptual framework and related literature. Three themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) limited collaboration, (b) lack of finances presents challenges in improving program quality, and (c) training opportunities are needed to improve program quality. The alignment between the themes, conceptual framework, literature, and research questions was maintained. The categories and themes for each research question are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Categories and Themes

Research Question	Category	Theme
RQ 1: What are the private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on the challenges in improving program quality in Trinidad and Tobago?	Limited sharing of information Lack of guidance Limited Partnership Insufficient visits	Theme 1: Limited collaboration presents challenges for improving program quality in the private early childhood sector.
	Limited funds Insufficient resources Fundraisers	Theme 2: Lack of finances presents challenges for improving program quality in the private early childhood sector.
RQ 2: What are the private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on the resources and support required to improve program quality in Trinidad and Tobago?	Training opportunities Networking Education of Parents	Theme 3: Training opportunities are needed to improve program quality.

Stage 5: Discussion of Results

Three themes related to the research questions emerged from the data collected. Two themes related to RQ1, and one theme related to RQ 2 (see Table 4). The results were compiled based on the information obtained from the data collected.

Stage 6: Validation of Results

An expert was consulted to validate the results of the study. The expert was a professor from a recognized university with over 20 years of experience in education. In addition, the themes that emerged were compared with the current literature to validate the findings.

Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators. I used a semistructured interview consisting of nine open-ended questions to capture participants' perspectives on the research questions. Participants provided in-depth responses to the interview questions. This section presents the findings from the participants' responses during the interviews. This chapter is also arranged into sections based on the themes that emerged from the data. In addition, the words of the participants are reproduced verbatim to illustrate the discussion of the themes in the context of the findings.

The following is a summary of the findings based on the research questions that guided this study. Interview questions three, four, and six related to RQ1: What are the private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on the challenges in improving program quality in Trinidad and Tobago? Two main themes emerged from the interviews related to the first research question. The two emerging themes were: (a) limited collaboration, and (b) lack of finances present challenges in improving private early childhood program quality. Both themes are discussed in this section.

Interview questions seven, eight, and nine addressed RQ2: What are the private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on the support required to improve program quality in Trinidad and Tobago? One main theme emerged from the interviews related to the second research question. The one theme was training opportunities are needed to improve program quality.

Theme 1: Limited Collaboration Presents Challenges in Improving Private Early Childhood Program Quality

This theme highlighted participants' perspectives on how limited collaboration hinders improving private early childhood program quality. From the data collected limited collaboration with the MoE in terms of sharing of information, guidance, partnership initiatives, support, and center visits, is a challenge. All participants expressed that limited collaboration with the MoE makes it difficult to understand and meet expectations for improving program quality. Participants expressed the limited sharing of information which emerged due to limited collaboration made it difficult to meet expectations. PAdmin 8 shared, "The Ministry of Education has documents, but we the private providers are not aware of everything we are expected to do to meet standards. Information is difficult to come by." PAdmin 1 said:

During the pandemic there were a lot of changes taking place and most of the time I will have to call to find out what's taking place, what's going on from colleagues in the other schools, as no information was forthcoming from the education ministry.

PAdmin 6 stated, “I have a parent who works at the Ministry of Education, and she finds out information for me from time to time.” PAdmin 7 added, “Information that is not readily available for private providers in meeting standards is critical. But getting information from the ministry is challenging.” While PAdmin 9 expressed:

To operate a private early childhood center, you must meet standards. I have been working towards meeting them, but they keep changing so that is a challenge. I do not mind it changing, because let’s face it everything changes, but the problem is when something changes, often, I do not know, as no message or information is given to us private people.

Participants also indicated that a lack of guidance from the MoE on operating procedures could be a challenge when starting a new center. Nine participants indicated that they received limited and unclear guidance when starting their centers and felt they had no one or nowhere to turn for assistance. PAdmin 1 explained, “As a private provider, I was not given any information when starting my school, so I just had to go on my own knowledge and the information I was receiving from other colleagues.” While PAdmin 10 contributed, “What I know about being a provider is a friend who has a school that told me about what I needed to do when I started up, and the website that I could go to.” PAdmin 2 shared a similar experience:

I did not get much guidance when I started my school, I just ran with it off passion. So, a little bit of guidance from the ministry would have been nice.

Somebody to say okay I think you shouldn’t do this; this way, let’s try it that way.

PAdmin 7 added, “Information in meeting standards is not readily available for private providers, so the challenge is I know there are some guidelines on the ministry’s webpage but that is unclear, and with no guidance, confusing.”

Participants also shared a lack of collaboration leaves them uncertain as to if they are doing the right thing regarding meeting the ministry’s standards which denote the quality of programs. PAdmin 10 stated:

I felt a bit lost completing the process when I started my school and up to today, I am not certain if I have everything. Things keep changing and no one reaches out to tell us, give us information. We need to work together to ensure that all programs are meeting standards. All, not just ministry centers, as we are providing a great service for children.

Several participants expressed limited collaboration with the MoE placed them in a challenging situation in fulfilling various aspects of their leadership role. Six providers shared that they believed their role as the leader in their center is a very serious one and they are aware that they have an obligation to parents, staff, and children to provide a quality program. PAdmin 10 explained, “I take my leadership of the center seriously. Teachers look to me for guidance.” Whereas PAdmin 5 acknowledged, “I am the person in charge at the school. The leader, so there are certain expectations of me to guide the school to success.” However, limited collaboration with the MoE often hinders the private early childhood program administrators’ ability to effectively perform their roles. PAdmin 3 shared, “Sometimes policy changes and we have no clue so we cannot update our staff and parents accordingly”. PAdmin 9 added:

I try my best to follow the policies of the Ministry of Education, but information is not forthcoming and sometimes parents know information you do not even have and when they ask you about it you are unsure. The time of COVID 19 was crazy as parents were scared to return their children to school and ministry schools had their guidelines for a safe return to face-to-face but we did not get any proper guidelines. They do not reach out or collaborate with us.

PAdmin 8 contributed, “As the administrator I should be working more closely with the ministry officials. They need our centers to fulfil their mandate, so they need to do more to work with us, hear our needs to move the sector forward. More collaboration with the ministry.”

Six participants also shared the increasing magnitude of the challenge as the early childhood sector keeps evolving. PAdmin 8 explained:

We need to work as partners. We need to know when policies are implemented.

We need to keep moving forward but the sector is too disconnected and segregated. Whether the early childhood center is government or private we have the same goal to educate the nation’s children.

PAdmin 9 shared, “I believe if the ministry works with us, we will improve as they are mainly focused on their centers we are left out and that is a challenge as we need to work together and get all centers at the same level.” PAdmin 1 voiced a similar opinion, “Challenges to me is that I think whether it is private, or government assisted or government school we should be at least somewhat on the same level. The lack of information sharing, and guidance is a challenge in keeping up.”

Participants also highlighted a lack of support which emerges from limited collaboration is not a new occurrence. Participants shared that getting support from the MoE over the years has been challenging. PAdmin 9 said:

I am willing to meet the ministry's expectations, but I have to know what it is to meet it. Private providers need their support. The government centers get training, teachers are paid by the ministry, they get support, we do not get those things, as a matter of fact we get nothing.

PAdmin 4 communicated, "We don't get support from the government. Lack of adequate support presents challenges. Every year I am asking ministry if they could at least give us a stipend or something." PAdmin 6 stated, "It is a real barrier to progress when it seems like you have no support."

In improving program quality regular center visits are deemed critical. Five participants attributed limited center visits to a lack of collaboration with the MoE. PAdmin 10 expressed, "We need more visits. In all my years of operation a ministry official visited once." PAdmin 8 expressed a similar experience, "We just do what we know but we cannot be sure if we are doing the right thing because they do not visit us, not in a very long time. Collaboration is lacking." Furthermore, participants believed that some of the amenities that the MoE provides for government and government assisted centers that are not extended to the private sector contribute to challenges in improving program quality. PAdmin 8 shared, "We do not get lunches like the government and government assisted schools. Those free box lunches will help." Also, PAdmin 1, PAdmin 4, PAdmin 6, and PAdmin 8 spoke about a Public Private Partnership (PPP)

program that existed approximately 10 years ago where the MoE paid for places for preschool children in private centers. PAdmin 1 said:

A few years aback we were in a program with the government, a private provider program and that program was working well for us, because they were paying for a space in our school for each child so that way it alleviated the responsibilities of parents to pay school fees.

PAdmin 4 shared, “The government assisted us for a couple of years. I think it was in 2013,14,15, and it worked wonderful. What they did is they paid for each child. Not extra curricula activities. They paid for each child’s fee. Other than that, we get no assistance.”

While PAdmin 8 stated:

We need to collaborate with the Ministry of Education and bring back programs such as the PPP, that provided spaces for children and paid us for that provision. I feel helpless at times, because you try reaching the ministry and there is often no response, this is a challenge.

These reported challenges, which have surfaced due to limited collaboration, must be addressed because improving the quality of early childhood programs is highly dependent on the strength of leaders and the various partnerships that are built within and across organizations (Laxton et al., 2021; Yaya-Bryson et al., 2020).

Theme 2: Lack of Finances Presents Challenges in Improving Private Early Childhood Program Quality

This theme focused on participants’ perspectives on a lack of finances related to improving program quality. The lack of finances was associated with two main factors;

no financial support from the government and some parents' inability or unwillingness to pay fees. All participants indicated that the availability of funds is very important for improving program quality, as almost all improvement efforts would require the investment of money. To ensure that the center has all the necessary amendments associated with quality programs need money. Therefore, although private early childhood program administrators strive to improve program quality, there are financial challenges. PAdmin 1 said, "We are not assisted financially by any institution or government strictly by our school fees and payment from parents." This was echoed by PAdmin 8 who shared:

The ministry wants us to meet certain standards, but it can be challenging due to the limited finances we have to do everything. Finances or lack of it presents its own sets of challenges. Not being able to upgrade the building, or do a paint job, these are some challenges that present themselves because of limited funds.

While PAdmin 7 said, "Currently my building needs some upgrading, and I am trying to work on getting it upgraded. To do this I plan to raise funds like a bazaar or something."

PAdmin 10 added, "Finances present challenges... that is lack of it. Parents struggle to pay fees, the ministry does not provide financial support, parents complain when we try to raise funds." While PAdmin 4 shared, "You may want to implement certain things, but you do not have the type of finances to put it in your center, it kind of hinders."

Participants PAdmin 1, PAdmin 3, PAdmin 7, and PAdmin 9 shared that they fully understood the MoE aspiration to have early childhood programs standardized or regulated, but this will require monetary investment in programs, not just the government

and government assisted programs but all programs. The participants further shared that the fees collected from parents is required to do so much, but does so little, when you must pay teachers' salaries, purchase materials, pay utilities, and maintain the school, it becomes overwhelming. According to PAdmin 2:

A challenge for me as well would be even the landlord, because they may feel things going good with me because they seeing children coming and going every day and ever so often, they may raise something, or do something and it's more money coming out of your pocket, ever so often very, very, often am because is a business you running, but fees have to come in to pay rent.

While PAdmin 1 shared, "I know personally parents left not paying school fees and then it difficult when they don't pay, it always comes back, I as a provider end up coming up short." PAdmin 10 expressed, "It is a struggle at times to get parents to pay fees."

Seven participants also highlighted that a lack of finances also affected their ability to hire qualified teachers as the more qualified the teacher is the more money they are expected to be paid. PAdmin 8 explained:

I often have to change staff as if they get a better paying job they will leave and that is only expected. So, every time you train the teacher, and the school is going smoothly, you have to change staff and start over. This is hard as the children must frequently learn new teachers.

PAdmin 10 voiced, "The school fees alone are insufficient to pay bills and staff."

PAdmin 5 added, "Low salary is a challenge in hiring qualified teachers", and PAdmin 9

expressed similar sentiments and shared, “I try to pay them well. I know one is looking to move on to secondary school, better pay and job stability, these things are expected.”

Various participants expressed that children need a variety of materials, as they quickly learn to manipulate and master puzzles and other manipulatives and get bored very quickly. Therefore, it is critical to have a range of materials, but this can be a costly undertaking. Participants indicated that this is a challenge as they do not have the financial resources to consistently acquire materials needed to support children’s learning. PAdmin 10 expressed, “We lack materials for children, our resources a few and we need help.” PAdmin 8 said, “You may not have all the required resources for use in the center.” While PAdmin 9 stated, “Not being able to buy resources and materials as is frequently required is challenging.”

Additionally, eight participants shared that they depend on fundraisers to acquire funds to implement necessary improvements. PAdmin 2 said:

In private preschool we do a lot of fundraisers, small fundraisers, nothing too big just to keep us afloat when it comes to little things. The ink for the copier, the stuff to sanitize, or we may want to buy something for the outdoor play area that kind of thing, so we come up with little things, so each class teacher comes up with a little sale probably every two weeks, small sales, nothing big.

Participants further indicated that these attempts to raise funds to purchase materials and resources are met with parents’ resistance. PAdmin 6 said, “You cannot ask the parents to help, as they believe they pay fees and that is it.” PAdmin 10 shared a similar experience, “I hosted a fundraiser for Christmas, a concert and decided to charge a small entrance fee

and parents complained about it and some outright refused to pay.” PAdmin 8 shared, “I used to keep fundraisers, but I hardly do anymore because parents complain or keep the child home on the day of the fundraiser, so they do not have to spend.” It is important to address these challenges and take steps to help overcome them to ensure that all preschool children are granted an opportunity to reach their optimum potential.

Theme 3: Training Opportunities are Needed to Improve Private Early Childhood Program Quality

This theme related participants’ perspectives regarding training opportunities needed to improve private early childhood program quality. Hoang et al. (2018) explained that quality in early childhood programs is virtually unattainable without appropriately trained teachers. Participants identified a need for training opportunities for private providers in improving program quality. Participants communicated their need for training opportunities not just focused on program administrators but more targeted towards teachers. PAdmin 9 shared:

Ministry used to hold workshops a long time ago. Ministry use to do training with us and their teachers and administrators. So, training will help! To continue to improve program quality we need to work together, and we need more training, at least that will be a start.

Participants shared that the opportunities previously provided for training through workshops hosted by the MoE was helpful in keeping private early childhood providers current and updated with new trends in education. PAdmin 1 shared, “They could bring back those training because those training has help me a lot in the way I teach and way I

do things at my center, and it has also helped me to be a more efficient leader at my center.” While PAdmin 3 stated, “I attend workshops when they have workshops available... you know just to learn new things.” The participants who have been in the field for over 10 years believed that they knew what was required to improve the quality of private early childhood programs. PAdmin 4 said, “Years I have been in the system; I know what will assist in developing the kids. Because of the number of years, I am in the system.” PAdmin 7 added:

Being in the field of early childhood for over 15 years has taught me the value of training, having trained staff to teach the children. No matter how much resources, materials, money, or space you have, if the teachers are not trained to teach the program will suffer and so will the children.

The participants who had the opportunity to participate in previous training initiatives held by the MoE spoke about how beneficial it was in improving program quality. PAdmin 10 shared, “Workshops, we use to have those regularly in the past, and it use to be good I learned a lot and I was able to come back and share with my teachers.” While PAdmin 3 shared, “What personally works for me is like doing additional courses then when we use to have the workshops for the holidays.” PAdmin 4 stated, “I capitalize on every workshop, seminars.” PAdmin 8 explained, “We need more workshops.”

Participants highlighted the need for their teachers to be trained as in many instances the teachers they can afford to hire are untrained. In this regard PAdmin 5 shared, “Another area we need will be training, or staff training I should say sometimes

people will come in and they just have their subjects if it is five or if it is seven but not a trained staff.” PAdmin 10 added:

We cannot afford to pay teachers that are highly qualified, so most times we hire teachers who have a love for teaching and may not necessarily be well trained. I have one staff member who has a certificate in early childhood. However, the other one just has CXC passes and loves working with children, so she has no training.

PAdmin 9 shared, “They love children, but they need lots of guidance and support as they have no teaching experience and no formal training in early childhood.” PAdmin 6 added, “I am grateful for my teachers every day, but I have two staff, teachers that I wished I could assist and send them to train.” PAdmin 7 contribution supported this idea, “Some teachers are trained and have masters and degrees, while some have CXC passes, and other have nothing but they are all hired to do the same job.” Most participants expressed their belief that all educators should be afforded opportunities for training as all teachers are hired to perform the same tasks which is educating the nation’s preschool children.

Seven of the 10 participants indicated that they currently used some form of the Trinidad and Tobago National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum Guide to inform the teaching at their center but were uncertain if it was being implemented correctly as they received no training. PAdmin 1 shared, “I somewhat follow part of the MoE curriculum. I add other things.” However, there were concerns about teachers not being trained in its implementation. PAdmin 10 said:

They give us a curriculum, but they have not trained us how to use it. We need support in training to use the curriculum. So having training for teachers will be helpful to us. We cannot afford to send them to train but they really need training, and that support will help improve program quality...for sure.

Additionally, PAdmin 8 said, "If the teachers are not well qualified and do not know how to teach that can be a challenge. More qualified teachers will mean better learning."

While PAdmin 7 shared, "I believe the situation of us not being trained equally or the same is difficult, because you want us to deliver a specific program, but we are all trained differently."

All participants stated that they delegate tasks to their teachers. Some of these tasks include hosting parent-teacher meetings, parents' workshops and most importantly planning activities to facilitate children's learning. According to PAdmin 9, "I share responsibilities among my staff. The two trained teachers I have, I give them a little more duties than the ones who are not trained." PAdmin 10 shared similarly, "Teachers are given tasks by me. I share up the duties evenly, I also help, but I manage the center more." Because part of the teacher's role in addition to teaching the children is daily interaction with parents, some administrators expressed the need for teachers to be trained in this aspect as well. As parent education is an important element in improvement attempts, it will be useful for teachers to be trained in dealing with parents and managing expectations. PAdmin 2 highlighted, "A lot of parents do not pay attention to children when it comes to early childhood, preschool, pre-K, whatever because as I said they believe that it's just a building that they go to." PAdmin 1 shared, "They were

always interested in whether their child could read and write when they get to the primary school.” While PAdmin 3 indicated:

I do parents workshop at the beginning of every academic year and have them understand the important of it...letting them act as children and do activities, like the children will do. Although it will be fun, and they say they understand at that point in time you may have like after a term or two, they are still not as happy with the quality they are expecting in terms of that formality.

Having the support in ensuring that teachers and private early childhood program administrators are appropriately trained is important. PAdmin 6 expressed, “I believe they need to train private administrators like they train their administrators in technology use, working with parents, and curriculum training to improve program quality.” PAdmin 7 said, “I believe for us to have good quality programs everyone has to be exposed to the same information and methodologies that can only come from training everyone similarly.” Most participants indicated that they do what they can in terms of upgrading themselves professionally. However, this aspiration can be costly. Participants expressed their willingness to improve their teachers’ teaching strategies to move the sector forward and provide quality programs for all preschool children. This can be achieved through providing more adequate training opportunities.

Discrepant Cases

Throughout the data analysis phase of this study, I encountered no conflicting cases. No evidence was found to contradict the results. Therefore, no further analysis was

required. Had conflicting data been encountered, I would have reviewed the data and responded to any discrepancies between the results.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

According to Burkholder et al. (2016), trustworthiness is an important component of qualitative research. Therefore, researchers conducting a qualitative study must ensure that data are collected, interpreted, and analyzed ethically. To demonstrate trustworthiness, I used the strategies of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. I took several steps to ensure that the study reflected the participants' perspectives and was not influenced by personal biases. To ensure content validity, I sought the expertise of a professor in the field of education who reviewed the interview questions used in this study for clarity and appropriateness in answering the research questions. I conducted a pilot study to test the interview protocol with nonparticipants; the information obtained from that exercise was not reproduced in this study.

Credibility

Burkholder et al. (2016) stated that credibility in qualitative research ensures that the study measures exactly what the research purports to measure. To ensure credibility, I used several data collection strategies including interview recordings, transcriptions, reflective journals, and member checking. Upon completion of the semistructured interviews, participants were contacted after the interviews were transcribed to confirm the accuracy of the transcription. A reflection journal was kept to record my personal thoughts and feelings.

Transferability

According to Burkholder et al. (2016), transferability in the research process is used to measure the trustworthiness of the research and to ensure that the study is applicable to other contexts. I provided a detailed methodological description of the study, including the data collection method and participant selection process. The descriptions of the data collected, participant selection, and data analysis contributed to transferability (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I also selected participants from all educational districts in Trinidad, who had varying years of experience. This selection process ensured diversity in the participants selected. Additional information about the study's setting was included to allow the reader to determine if this study is transferable to another early childhood setting with challenges in improving program quality.

Dependability

I gained dependability by detailing the research design and the data collection process. Ravitch and Carl (2021) stated that the stability of results over time determines dependability. In qualitative research dependability entails the extent to which the process and procedures used to analyze the data can be traced (Burkholder et al., 2016). To ensure that the data were transcribed correctly, I listened to the audio recording of the interviews repeatedly and compared it to what had been transcribed. Before I began the interview, I reminded participants of the voluntary nature of the study. The interview protocol was used to conduct the interviews and each participant was asked the same nine open-ended questions, in the same order. I kept a reflective journal to record my thoughts which limited personal bias. No additional interviews were required and there were no

unusual circumstances. The themes that emerged were compared to current literature to validate the findings. All collected data will be kept for five years for review as needed.

Confirmability

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), confirmability refers to the accurate representation of participants' experiences without bias. Confirmability ensures that research findings are derived from the participants' data and actual words and experiences, not the researcher bias. Therefore, I took steps to ensure that my beliefs about the phenomenon did not influence the study. Thus, I kept a reflective journal in which I documented thoughts and views as they arose to keep my biases in check. Additionally, I strictly adhered to the interview protocol during data collection and consulted an expert with years of experience in education to review the interview protocol, the data analysis process, and the findings. These actions contributed to the confirmability of the research.

Summary

This basic qualitative study examined the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators. In Chapter 4, I discussed the data analysis and findings of the study, which was guided by the research questions. Ten private early childhood program administrators from all educational districts in Trinidad voluntarily participated in the research and shared their perspectives. Semistructured interviews that consisted of nine open-ended questions were used to collect data from participants. I used Saldaña (2015) approach to analyze the results. Three themes emerged from the data analysis (see Table

4) reflecting participants' perspectives. The data revealed the perspectives of private early childhood program administrators regarding the challenge in improving program quality and the support needed. Limited collaboration with the MoE regarding sharing of information, guidance, partnership initiatives, support, and center visits was a challenge. Lack of finances also emerged as a challenge that impedes program quality improvement, as lack of finances makes it difficult to purchase learning materials, upgrade facilities, pay staff, and provide for professional development. The data indicated that the support needed to improve program quality is training.

The subsequent Chapter 5 provides interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, and implications. Each topic is discussed in detail in the context of the literature. The limitations of the study are also discussed.

Recommendations for addressing the limitations and topics for further research are provided and implications for the research findings are examined. I also identified possible opportunities for social change. Finally, I present the conclusion and final thoughts on the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative research was to examine the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators. It was important to conduct this study due to the gap in the current research that does not sufficiently capture the challenges of improving early childhood program quality from the program administrator's perspective. Conducting this study provided insights that may lead to finding effective ways to improve the quality of private early childhood programs.

A total of 10 private early childhood program administrators from all educational districts in Trinidad voluntarily participated in the study. Participants shared their perspectives on the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality and the support needed to improve program quality. Based on the data analysis, three themes emerged: (a) limited collaboration, (b) lack of finances presents challenges in improving program quality, and (c) training opportunities are needed to improve program quality. Chapter 5 presents the results in conjunction with the current literature and conceptual framework. Also presented are implications, limitations, recommendations for future research, implications for positive social change, and the chapter's conclusion.

Interpretation of Findings

Before data collection, I obtained approval from the Walden University IRB. The two research questions used to gather the data for this study were:

RQ1: What are the private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on the challenges in improving program quality in Trinidad and Tobago?

RQ2: What are the private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on the support required to improve program quality in Trinidad and Tobago?

Based on the participants responses to the interview questions and the analysis of data, two themes emerged which aligned with private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on the challenges in improving program quality and one theme emerged based on support required by the private early childhood program administrators to improve program quality. The findings of this study revealed that limited collaboration and lack of finances presented challenges in improving early childhood program quality, and training opportunities are needed to improve program quality. The results of this study were interpreted using the current literature and the foundations of the study's conceptual framework, Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory. Hersey and Blanchard theorize that a leader's situation greatly impacts their decisions and that successful leadership results from the leader's ability to adapt their methods to the maturity of the individuals they lead, to different situations, and to the environment (Alchin et al., 2019).

Theme 1: Limited Collaboration

Theme 1 revealed that limited collaboration with the MoE presents challenges in improving private early childhood program quality. Participants expressed that limited collaboration with the MoE regarding sharing of information, guidance, partnership initiatives, support, and center visits was a challenge. Alanis et al. (2021) stated that early childhood programs designed to meet the learning needs of preschool children must be of high quality. According to Woodhead (1998), there are different views of what

constitutes quality in early childhood. The different views are based on a framework of values and knowledge about child development and childhood, mainly about the functions and goals of programs (Elwick et al., 2017).

Each participant had the opportunity to share their perspectives on what they believed was a quality early childhood program, and as previous researchers have found, participants had different views. Most believed that quality early childhood programs cater to the holistic development of children and have a stimulating learning environment and trained teachers. While others believed that quality early childhood programs ensure children's readiness for primary school, provide a safe environment that promotes children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical wellbeing, and good working relationships with parents are established. Diale and Sewagegn (2021) noted that no clearly established international standards or criteria for evaluating early childhood program quality are available. Based on this notion, Moss and Dahlberg (2008) stated that the quality of early childhood programs is determined and assessed by criteria established by experts that focus on critical factors that benefit children, families, and the wider community. In this regard establishing increased collaboration between the MoE as the authoritative figure on education in Trinidad and Tobago and private early childhood program administrators is critical in improving program quality.

Denee and Thornton (2021) stated that information sharing is important in finding better ways to support early childhood program administrators in improving program quality. according to Aziz et al. (2021) information sharing would help private early childhood program administrators become stronger and more confident, as having

information would help providers meet expectations and improve program quality. This was especially true for the participants in this study, as all participants indicated that limited information hinders improvement efforts. Participants clearly articulated their understanding that policy can change, because education is a field that is constantly evolving, however, the challenge expressed is that information is not always readily available or instantaneous when changes occur. Participants believed limited information sharing among government, government assisted, and private early childhood programs leads to deep fragmentation of the sector and lack of consistent quality assurance mechanisms, resulting in uneven and inequitable distribution of quality programs.

Elwick et al. (2017) explained that improving the quality of early childhood programs can be challenging and that progress depends on collaboration, shared goals, and appropriate guidelines focused on change. To improve the quality of programs in the private early childhood sector in Trinidad and Tobago the MoE has provided guidelines for use. According to Sims et al. (2018), while some general guidelines can help early childhood program administrators in understanding their role and what needs to be done, the lack of clear role descriptions and tangible guidance often makes it difficult for providers to meet expectations and mandates. Participants were aware of some ministry's expectations and regulations for operating an early childhood center. The issue was the knowledge and guidance that most participants had for operating an early childhood center did not come from the MoE. Most of the information and guidance that participants had on opening and operating an early childhood center came from other sources, such as colleagues, their own knowledge, and websites. Most participants

indicated they were challenged, uncertain, and sometimes confused in completing tasks associated with their role. Movahedazarhouligh et al. (2022) shared that more needs to be done to support administrators in their leadership roles, such as providing training and resources. More collaboration would help foster a clearer understanding of guidelines, which is crucial for quality improvement in early childhood.

Agosti (2021), Banuelos et al. (2019), and Britto (2021) expressed that the everchanging dynamics within the early childhood sector and the extraordinary demands placed on program administrators of private early childhood centers leave many feeling helpless. This sense of helplessness emerges from the various challenges in meeting the changing demands to improve program quality that requires support (Denee & Thornton, 2021; Movahedazarhouligh & Banerjee, 2020). Researchers' findings accurately depict participants voiced concerns, as most participants conveyed feelings of frustration and helplessness and expressed their desire to have a standardized program, where all early childhood providers work towards achieving a common goal. Participants believed despite the type of center all early childhood programs should operate at the same level and receive equal support such as assistance with free lunches for children, monetary subventions, training opportunity, and materials and teaching resources. But unfortunately, this would not be a reality until there is improved collaboration with the MoE. Additionally, participants highlighted the need for support in meeting the standard requirements for operating an early childhood program. Participants shared the need to be supported by the MoE in acquiring a better understanding of policies that govern the sector in ensuring quality programs.

According to UNESCO (2021) approximately one third of children who attend preschool are enrolled in a private institution, often functioning outside the regulatory system, without proper monitoring of programs. Therefore, while private early childhood programs continue to bolster rates of early childhood coverage, limited monitoring can pose a serious threat to program quality. Yan and He (2021) stated that regular visits improve teacher morale, resilience, and dedication to implement best practices. Participants spoke about the impact of visits from ministry officials on program quality. Four participants expressed previous visits conducted by ministry officials to their center provided an opportunity for open dialogue and feedback regarding how the center was managed and operated, which was useful in implementing changes. Although the participants expressed the usefulness of the visit, they were quick to add, because no follow-up visit was conducted, they were unsure if the changes made met standards. According to Zhou and Fenech (2022) without sufficient onsite professional guidance, it would be very difficult for teachers to determine if they are implementing best practices and developmentally appropriate activities. Three participants shared their desire to be visited by ministry officials in the hope that guidance and support would be provided in the form of feedback regarding their current practices and suggestions or recommendations for improving. Conducting center visits is a positive start to establishing an ongoing partnership in achieving desired results of having all preschool children afforded ideal learning opportunities.

According to Alchin et al. (2019), establishing partnership is essential to ensure that children's needs are identified, assessed, and met throughout their childhood.

Therefore, building good professional connections and relationships minimizes working in isolation in achieving desired goals. Six participants shared when the MoE collaborated with private providers and paid for places for children, programs were more successfully operated. This efficient operation was as a result of not having to depend on parents for fees, resulting in more readily available cash. Thus, staff were promptly paid, and the availability of funds also meant that material, resources, and the upkeep of the infrastructure was more manageable. Participants expressed that these are the types of collaboration they are desirous of establishing with the MoE in improving program quality.

Theme 2: Financial Challenges

This theme focused on participants' perspectives on a lack of finances in improving program quality. According to Alchin et al. (2019), operating an early childhood center is a mammoth undertaking that is faced with challenges that arise from issues such as lack of finances. Limited finance was a challenge experienced by all participants. Participants highlighted that no financial support from the government and some parents' inability or unwillingness to pay fees gave rise to financial hardships that hindered program quality improvement efforts. Participants indicated that the availability of funds is critical for improving program quality, because almost all improvement efforts require money. Finance affects various areas of program quality as often how much money is available determines, how much staff is employed and their qualification, the size of the center, resources and materials available, and how often infrastructural works can be undertaken.

Having adequate teaching resources and materials in the classroom for children to explore is critical in promoting children's development (UNESCO, 2021). Aziz et al. (2021) and Bamezor et al. (2021) reported that program administrators who lead adequate quality early childhood programs emphasize appropriate teacher-child ratios, employ qualified teachers, establish stimulating learning environment, and have various resources and materials. The participants expressed their desire to have their centers operate at this level, however due to financial constraints this is difficult to attain. Five participants shared varying strategies they embarked upon to solicit funds from corporate society to obtain resources and materials for their centers. However, two of the five participants went on to share those efforts made yielded little to no results. Two participants also shared the limited success they had when attempts were made to acquire financial assistance from the MoE in the form of stipends for teachers or learning materials for children. The MoE response was the ministry had no funds to render any assistance.

Because early childhood teachers play a critical role in children's learning, recommendations are made that emphasis is placed on hiring early childhood teachers who are qualified, experienced, and aware of appropriate pedagogy associated with preschool children's learning and development (Dan et al., 2020; Weiland et al., 2018). Unfortunately, the reality in the private early childhood sector is its often difficult for program administrators to match the salaries offered to equally qualified teachers in the public sector (Camacho & Parham, 2019; Diale & Sewagegn, 2021; Foong et al., 2018). Also, they cannot guarantee job stability and often cannot provide teachers with benefits (Harrison, 2020). Regrettably, all these limitations result in qualified, experienced

teachers being less interested in working in the private sector (Doromal et al., 2022).

Participants were able to identify with what the research findings highlighted, as nine of the 10 participants indicated that they were challenged in paying teachers' salaries. This inability to pay appropriate or better wages to teachers often results in hiring less qualified teachers and frequent teacher turnover.

In the private early childhood sector in Trinidad and Tobago program administrators are dependent on the support of parents. Parents are relied upon to pay school fees, to support fundraisers, and at times, to make contributions in the form of providing learning materials for their children. Most participants shared that because they are dependent on the payment of school fees to manage and essentially keep their centers operational many challenging situations arise. Situations such as, some providers felt obligated to meet parental demands which is often not in keeping with ministry standards. Also, hosting fundraisers to compliment fees, which is often met with resistance by some parents.

The central principle of Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory is that successful leadership results from the leader's ability to adapt their methods to different situations, and the environment (Alchin et al., 2019). Because situations vary across private early childhood centers in Trinidad and Tobago, the program administrator must use the most appropriate leadership approach for their situation to improve program quality. Thus, despite the challenges encountered, Movahedazarhouligh et al. (2022) maintained that private early childhood administrators as managers and leaders of their

centers must find workable solutions to overcome challenges if they desire to improve program quality.

Theme 3: Training

Current research suggests that the theory underlying situational leadership can improve the quality of private early childhood programs by supporting professional development, curriculum development, pedagogical change, and organizational transformation (Hidayat et al., 2020; Raelin, 2020; Sims et al., 2018). Furthermore, researchers maintain that without qualified teachers, the tenets that underpin quality in early childhood will be challenging to attain (Hannaway et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2021). All the participants indicated that the support required to improve program quality is training. Six of the 10 participants further emphasized the need for training specific to the teachers.

Both Ansari and Pianta (2019) and Bicaaj and Buza (2020) expressed that even if facilities, resources, management, and finances are readily available and appropriate, if the teacher is untrained, there will be minimal benefits to children's learning. Therefore, two issues to be addressed by government policy will be teachers' education and training, as they are more significant predictors of quality in the early childhood setting (Khomais & Gahwaji, 2019). Participants shared this view, as most expressed that even if they had money, adequate buildings, received regular visits, and had unlimited resources and materials, if teachers were not appropriately trained challenges would still prevail. According to the Learning Policy Institute (2021), high-quality early childhood programs invest in teachers' professional development. Three participants indicated their

willingness to pay for further training for their teachers, but unfortunately, they simply cannot afford it. Therefore, participants expressed the need for the MoE to reinstitute training initiatives focused on the early childhood private sector.

Over the years, the role of the early childhood program administrator has shifted from simply supervising the center's daily operations to completing more extensive tasks based on increasing regulation and accountability standards focused on improving program quality (Diale & Sewagegn, 2021; Gibbs, 2022). Therefore, in addition to ensuring that early childhood program administrators are aware of any changes made regarding the management and operation of programs, training should be provided. As an assurance mechanism that early childhood program administrators are appropriately exposed to the information required to implement changes and meet expectations (Agosti et al., 2021). Seven participants expressed the need for more training to improve program quality that fits with what researchers have found to be an effective measure in achieving desired results.

Blose and Muteweri (2021) expressed that early childhood program administrators should be well equipped to supervise, delegate tasks, guide, monitor, and manage teachers to improve program quality. Mukhtar et al. (2021) also stated that early childhood program administrators must be able to effectively lead and guide their team to strengthen various skills that will help improve program quality. One of Hersey and Blanchard leadership styles involves telling or directing. This leadership style involves the leader micromanaging the staff and telling individuals what to do and how to do it. To a certain extent all participants engaged in this type of leadership, emphasizing the

urgency to ensure that early childhood private program administrators are adequately trained which will filter to the teachers they manage.

Gülçiçek et al. (2019) outlined teachers' lack of comprehension and inability to execute the curriculum negatively impacts children's learning. As explained by Haile and Mohammed (2017), if the realization of goals geared at improving program quality is to occur, proper measures for training early childhood program administrators will have to be established. Harrison et al. (2019) further endorsed the concept, by noting that appropriate training helps foster the necessary skills and knowledge needed by the early childhood program administrator. This initiative can potentially create quality programs that promote a stimulating learning climate, which would improve children's learning opportunities (Aubrey, 2019; Archambault et al., 2020). All participants attended a tertiary institution and believed that their training at the institution had sufficiently equipped them to execute their duties related to the appropriate planning for preschool children's learning. Additionally, nine of the participants expressed that they guide their teachers in planning activities, however, although they guide them in the planning of the activities because some lack teaching experience the activities are not always appropriately implemented.

Participants also highlighted they needed assistance in training, in use of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago National Early Childhood Curriculum Guide if they are required to use it in their program as part of meeting the MoE standards. Gülçiçek et al. (2019) claimed that appropriate curriculum selection and implementation are imperative in improving early childhood program quality. Addisu and Wudu (2019) and

Roessingh and Bence (2019) echoed this claim as they expressed that implementing a developmentally appropriate curriculum is a top priority of any early childhood program focused on achieving desirable learning outcomes for preschool children. The authors believed that any early childhood program aimed at improving program quality needs to emphasize implementing a child-centered curriculum that focuses on the promotion of children's cognitive, physical, language, social, emotional, and motor skills development (Haslip & Gullo, 2018; Li & Chen, 2017; Portilla et al., 2020). In the early childhood setting, the curriculum differs across categories of centers based on varying philosophies, availability of materials and resources, pedagogy, teachers' instruction, classroom design, group size, and assessment (Ansari & Pianta, 2019; Yang & Li, 2019).

In Trinidad and Tobago, private early childhood centers typically select their curriculum. However, they are encouraged to use the Government of Trinidad and Tobago National Early Childhood Curriculum Guide, which the ministry approved over a decade ago (GoRTT Draft Education Policy 2017 -2022 n.d.). However, this is not homogeneously used by private providers. Participants had varying views regarding the current MoE curriculum. Some believed that it was adequate for promoting children's learning and development and utilized it at their center. While a few believed it had some value and modified it for implementation. Others did not use it at all because they felt it was outdated and too focused on elements of learning through play. The one aspect that all participants agreed upon was that for any curriculum to be effectively implemented teachers must be trained.

Although these solutions seem straightforward, researchers suggested that the challenges associated with improving early childhood program quality, how training would translate to ensure best practices, and how the practices can be maintained remained uncertain (Agosti et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2020).

Limitations of the Study

There are limitations to qualitative studies mainly because the data collected are based on participants' responses and the researcher being the lone collector of the data. The limitation of this study included the sample size, and researcher bias. The participants' involvement in the study was strictly voluntary and limited to private early childhood program administrators who experienced challenges in improving program quality. In addition, participants were required to own and operate the center and have at least one teacher. These requirements for participation in the study resulted in a small sample of private early childhood program administrators willing to share their perspectives and identify challenges in improving program quality. I used the website to recruit potential participants who in turn recommended colleagues who met the criteria for participation. I limited the number of participants to 10. The low number of participants might limit the transferability of findings to a larger population.

Another limitation of the study was researcher bias. As the lone researcher responsible for collection and analysis of the data, researcher bias can emerge. I have strong beliefs as it pertains to the quality of early childhood programs. I took steps to avoid potential bias by asking questions that did not lead participants to provide answers that they thought they should provide. I followed the interview protocol and ensured that

I followed up with each participant to check the transcripts to confirm that their words were accurately recorded. Participants were given the opportunity to make corrections, however, none was required. I kept a reflective journal in which I recorded my reflections and biases. I also engaged in member checking and had an expert reviewer review the study's findings. Additionally, the expert reviewer reviewed the interview questionnaire, and the data analysis and confirmed its accuracy.

Recommendations

This study examined the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago from the perspectives of program administrators. The emerging themes from this study were: (a) limited collaboration, (b) lack of finances presents challenges in improving program quality, and (c) training opportunities are needed to improve program quality. According to Zhou and Fenech (2022), the main factors contributing to program quality are the creation of a supportive child centered, safe, and clean environment, well prepared teachers, a developmentally appropriate curriculum, and learning standards that meet the needs of all children. Subsequently, Blose and Muteweri (2021) concluded that these are some evaluation criteria used to set standards for accrediting and evaluating the quality of early childhood programs worldwide. The Trinidad and Tobago MoE aspiration is to regularize the ECCE sector. The following are recommendations for future research that may assist in the attainment of the ministry's goal while contributing to filling the research gap.

The first recommendation is to replicate this study and include a wider population inclusive of private early childhood program administrators in Tobago. This study was

limited to the perspectives of private early childhood program administrators from all educational districts in Trinidad. Therefore, the perspectives of a wider cross section inclusive of Tobago may provide additional insights on the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality.

The second recommendation is for this study to be replicated with the government assisted early childhood program administrators who receive support from the MoE. Agosti et al. (2021) noted that early childhood programs vary widely, with noted disparities such as some centers having few resources and teachers with limited education, to settings with unlimited resources and highly trained, knowledgeable teachers, which affects program quality. A study that looks at programs that are partially supported by the MoE may demonstrate if the challenges experienced by program administrators in government assisted early childhood programs are similar to those experienced by program administrators in the private sector.

I finally recommend that a study be conducted to examine the perspectives of early childhood directors and policymakers on the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality in Trinidad and Tobago. Because early childhood directors and policymakers play a critical role in establishing policies, standards, and guidelines to govern the sector, it would be worthwhile to document their experiences which would provide additional and different information.

Implications

It was important to conduct this study due to the gap in the current research that does not sufficiently capture the challenges of improving early childhood program quality

and the support needed from the program administrator's perspective. The study's participants expressed limited collaboration, and lack of finances present challenges in improving program quality and training is needed to improve program quality.

Improving the quality of private early childhood programs requires the effective implementation of Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory. Hersey and Blanchard's theory is focused on improvement efforts which highlights principles and practices that are central to a leader's practice of influencing the quality of an organization. Exploring the challenges in improving private early childhood program quality and the support needed for improvement could lead to a better understanding of the challenges program administrators encounter and ways to address them. The research findings have implications for positive social change, as the results can be used to develop strategies, or modify policy based on the identified challenges and support needed to improve program quality, benefiting the preschool children of Trinidad and Tobago.

Conclusion

The purpose of this basic qualitative research was to examine private early childhood program administrators' perspectives on challenges to improve program quality in Trinidad and Tobago. The research questions investigated the challenges private early childhood program administrators encountered in improving program quality and support needed for improvement. Ten private early childhood program administrators were interviewed from all educational districts in Trinidad. According to Alchin et al. (2019), early childhood program administrators play a critical role in

determining program quality, and their actions, beliefs, and decisions have a significant impact on program quality. While studies illustrate the important role of early childhood program administrators in determining program quality, challenges sometimes arise that negatively impact program quality (Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018). This study focused on filling the existing research gap.

The study's findings revealed that private early childhood program administrators encounter varying challenges in improving program quality. Challenges included limited collaboration which impacted sharing of information, provision of guidelines, partnership initiatives, support, and center visits. The lack of finances was also highlighted as a challenge in improving program quality, with the main contributors being no financial support from the government and some parents' inability or unwillingness to pay fees. While training opportunities were highlighted as the required support needed to improve program quality. The findings from this study may inform teachers, policymakers, and other stakeholders of the challenges private early childhood program administrators encounter in improving program quality and the ways in which they can be supported to improve. This study's findings could also support policy changes on how private early childhood program administrators are prepared through training to effectively carry out their leadership role. Finally, the research findings have implications for positive social change, as the results can be used to develop strategies based on the identified challenges and support needed to improve program quality, benefiting the preschool children of Trinidad and Tobago.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol and Questionnaire

Date:

Time:

Location of Interview:

Interviewee:

Interview Protocol:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study and speaking with me today. In order to facilitate notetaking, I would like to audio tape our conversation. Do note that only my supervisors (as necessary) and I will be privy to information on the tapes which will ultimately be destroyed after all the information is transcribed. The interview is scheduled to last for approximately 30 to 45 minutes. During this time there are several questions that I would like to cover. If at any time you feel the need to pause or feel uncomfortable with any question, please do not hesitate to indicate.

You have been selected to speak with me today because I am interested in hearing your perspectives on the challenges in improving the quality of private early childhood program in Trinidad and Tobago. My study does not seek to evaluate your techniques in the delivery of your program. Rather, I am interested in understanding more about the challenges in improving program quality based on your experiences and situations that may give rise to challenges as you perform your roles/duties, and the support that may be required to improve program quality.

Interview Questionnaire for Private Early Childhood Program Administrator

Demographics Data

What is your highest level of education?

Are you specialized in any area?

How long have you owned and managed your early childhood center?

How many staff members do you have at your early childhood center?

1. Tell me what you believe is a quality early childhood program?
2. Describe your understanding of the requirements for operating a private early childhood center in Trinidad and Tobago?
3. What presents challenges in improving early childhood program quality? Can you share an example?
4. What situations do you think give rise to challenges in improving early childhood program quality?
5. Do you delegate responsibilities to your staff? Can you provide an example?
6. What has been your experience in trying to improve early childhood program quality? What is working? What is not working?
7. Do you currently receive any assistance or support in improving program quality? Can you give an example?
8. What type of support do you believe is required to improve early childhood program quality?
9. How will getting support assist in improving early childhood program quality? Can you give an example?

10. Is there anything else you would like to share as it relates to improving the quality of private early childhood programs?

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and for freely expressing and sharing your in-depth responses. I will meet with you once more in the next two weeks to communicate my interpretations and share feedback, this is called member checking and it takes 15-20 minutes.