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Exploring the Perspectives of Infant/Toddler-PK4 Teachers on Attaining an Associate Degree in Early Childhood Education

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

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Degree in Early Childhood Education

by

Isabel Lainez Furutan

MA, American Public University, 2014

BS, American Public University, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2023

Abstract

Researchers have found young children's academic skills and life outcomes are correlated to teachers' postsecondary education. Despite this, 60% of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers who work in center-based settings in the District of Columbia do not have postsecondary education beyond the high school level. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in center-based settings on the challenges of attaining an associate degree in early childhood education and the support needed throughout the process. Guided by Lewin's three-step model of change theory, the perspectives of 12 participants with a minimum of 3 years of experience as infant/toddler PK4 teachers and were pursuing postsecondary education were examined. The research questions addressed the challenges of attaining an associate degree in early childhood education from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by Office of the State Superintendent of Education and the type of support they needed through the process. Data were collected from semistructured interviews and were analyzed through open and axial coding, creating categories, and theme development. The key findings related to participants' challenges with technology, navigating the college system, language barriers, college readiness, and limited college support and guidance. These findings have implications for positive social change by providing the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, policymakers, and universities with a deeper understanding of teachers' challenges and the support they need to attain an early childhood degree to redesign policy and EC practices and to work together to implement a culture of professionalization that is inclusive of all its stakeholders.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my mother who overflowed the first 3 years of my life with unconditional love, care, and healthy experiences before departing this world to a heavenly place. Little did she know, those first 3 years were the most influential years of my life. To my late father who, amid sorrow, fulfilled his fatherhood role with courage, love, wisdom, and patience. My father ensured that my brothers and I felt like the most special children in the whole world. He was an EXCEPTIONAL father from the time I was born and thereafter. I dedicate this study to my three brothers for the wonderful experiences that made my early childhood so special and shaped me into a resilient woman. I also dedicate this study to my two beautiful daughters who took me on an incredible motherhood journey and gave a purpose and mission to my life. To the daughters who were the perfect young children, the joyful and unique teenagers, and now, are the most wonderful, kind, smart, and adventurous young ladies. I strongly believe that my passion for children is in part credited to you for being the most amazing children since the moment you were born. YOU have allowed me to mother you despite my imperfections. You have helped me to understand my own childhood while learning childhood developmental milestones so I can better support other children. I look forward to enjoying my doctoral life with you.

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Table of Contents

i

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Over the past 2 decades in the United States, the early childhood (EC) field has been at the center of educational reforms (Brass & Holloway, 2021; Garvis et al., 2018; Gibson et al., 2019). One of the components of educational reform in EC is professionalizing the workforce. Professionalizing the early childhood education (ECE) workforce has become an urgent international effort (McClean et al., 2021; Nutbrown, 2021; Vecchiotti, 2018), because it is linked to high-quality outcomes (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2022; Peleman et al., 2018). Educational attainment mandates for EC teachers have been put in place in many countries. In the United States, the need to professionalize the ECE workforce has ignited a movement of educational reforms and policy changes generating an ongoing effort for EC teachers to attain at least an associate degree to better support child learning and development outcomes in ECE classrooms (Boyd-Swan & Herbst, 2020; Coleman, 2020; Traunter, 2019). Many states have created new policy changes raising credentialing requirements for ECE teachers (Stechuk et al., 2019) requiring that the EC workforce attain a minimum of an associate degree with an emphasis on ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution (Stechuk et al., 2019; Pierson et al. 2021). A minimum of a 2-year postsecondary degree is not only suggested but also mandated by licensing agencies and employers for teachers working in center-based facilities with children from birth to 4 years old (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015; National Association of Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2018; Rucker, 2020; Whitebook et al., 2018). In 2016, the District of Columbia mandated that all infant/toddler-PK4 teachers attain an associate degree in

ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution (Office of the State Superintendent of Education [OSSE], 2016).

      The ECE system in the United States normally serves children from 0–8 years of age where 6–8 year olds traditionally attend public school settings and 0–5 year olds attend a variety of private and public settings, infants and toddler, prekindergarten (PK) 3-4 years old, and kindergarten (K) 5 years olds (Schachter et al., 2021). Unfortunately, teachers that teach children 0–5 years old often lack education (Bassok et al., 2021). According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2018), only 46% of preschool teachers who are older than 25 have a bachelor's degree, while 95% of teachers working in K–12 settings have a bachelor's degree. When compared with the K–12 system teachers, the ECE workforce has the lowest education attainment levels (Pierson et al., 2021) and often is limited to a high school diploma (Rucker et al., 2021; Whitebook et al. 2018). According to the Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education T.E.A.C.H. Grant Program (n.d.), the center-based EC workforce is comprised of more than 2.3 million individuals with complex personal and professional needs and most of them with minimal formal education beyond the high school level (ChildCare Aware, 2022). In the state of Oregon, less than a third of the ECE workforce working with young children have a bachelor's degree (Oregon Center for Career Development in Childhood Care and Education & Oregon Child Care Research Partnership, 2019).

      In the District of Columbia, 60% of the EC workforce working at the PK level do not have a postsecondary education or have they completed an appropriate educational program (OSSE, 2018). Additionally, in the District of Columbia, many teachers working

with infants and toddlers have only achieved a high school educational level (Keating et al. 2021). The District of Columbia has been working to address this problem; however, in 2016 it was mandated that all infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in center-based settings attain an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution by 2020, which was later amended to December 2023 (OSSE, 2016). The District of Columbia has also created and implemented systems of support and has allocated funding to assure their local ECE workforce receives all the support needed to achieve education attainment in a timely manner.

Although professionalizing the EC workforce is essential (Mooney Simmie & Murphy, 2021), the certification and licensure requirements that are imposed on today's EC teachers can make earning a 2- or 4-year degree from higher educational institutions a difficult task (Souto-Manning, 2019). It is not easy for the EC workforce to attain a higher education degree because they may encounter systematic barriers to "enrolling and investing in professional development that decrease participation" (Pierson et al., 2021, p. 2). The EC workforce is categorized as the atypical traditional student (Huss-Keeler, 2019; Landford, 2019) and is mostly comprised of women of color with an average age between 35–39 years old (Huss-Keller 2019; Katz et al., 2021). According to T.E.A.C.H. (2021), there are 867,200 individuals working with children younger than 5 years old in classroom settings. It is unclear what percentage of teachers working with children younger than the age of 5 have attained the required education (ChildCare Aware, 2022). Despite the regulations for the EC workforce to attain an ECE associate degree, the

challenges are felt by each state and territory (Ali et al., 2021; Nutbrown, 2021; OSSE, 2016).

While there is an urgency to have an EC workforce with at least a 2-year college degree (Nutbrown, 2021) and despite the availability of accredited postsecondary accredited institutions (Montoya et al., 2018) and systems of support implemented to aid the process, the number teachers seeking ECE training has declined (Bonetti & Blanden, 2020). Kaplan (2018) and Cheng et al. (2018) stated that there are many reasons as to what barriers ECE teachers face in the process to attain higher education, including they are employed full-time, have family and financial responsibilities, they lack basic skills to succeed in college, are non-English speaking, are nontraditional students, and they face substantial financial barriers. While many systems have been implemented to help overcome these barriers, there is still a lack of clarity about which specific barriers hinder the EC workforce to participate in the associate postsecondary degree-seeking process or to complete degree attainment (Bassok et al., 2021). Therefore, Bassok et al. (2021) recommended more studies be conducted to better understand what specific barriers affect ECE teachers' decisions in attaining a degree and how to overcome them. Further research on the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in center-based settings on the challenges of attaining postsecondary education may provide insights to policymakers, educational institutions, and licensing agencies on how to support the EC workforce to pursue and complete the mandated associate degree (Akhal, 2019; Bullough, 2016; Nutbrown, 2021). Kantrowitz (2021) stated it is time for colleges and

policymakers to do more to attract, retain, and help students to succeed in attaining the required education, especially the mandated associate degree.

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of the infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in a center-based setting on the challenges of attaining an EC associate degree from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the help needed throughout the process. The gap in practice and the literature reveals that, despite receiving support, infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in center-based settings are currently unable to complete the requirements for an ECE associate degree in a timely manner (Bonetti & Blanden, 2020; Kaplan, 2018). The research problem was that according to OSSE (2018) 60% of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in center-based settings have not attained an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE in a timely manner. This study has the potential to fill the gap in practice and literature regarding the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers about pursuing a postsecondary degree. At the local level, and especially in the District of Columbia, this study has the potential to help agencies and policymakers in understanding infant/toddler-PK4 teachers' perspectives on the mandate of attaining an associate degree in ECE by December 2023 and develop more support systems for the teachers to attain the required education.

The findings of this study could promote positive social change through helping teachers, policymakers, and stakeholders work together to implement a culture of professionalization that will benefit not only the teachers but the entire community,

including families and especially young children. In this introduction, I provided a clear description of the current state of the educational reforms affecting the EC workforce and the implications of policy changes on the educational qualifications of the individuals working in the ECE field. Following this introduction, I present the background, research problem, and research questions. Additionally, the chapter includes a discussion of the conceptual framework, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study.

Background

In the District of Columbia, the capital of the United States where this study took place, the EC workforce is comprised of nearly 6,000 professionals, and about 80% are people of color (Alliance for Early Success, 2022). There are 3,510 ECE teachers in center-based classroom settings (McLean et al., 2021). In 2016, the District of Columbia mandated that all infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in a center-based classroom must attain an associate degree in ECE by 2020 (OSSE, 2016). This mandate stemmed from the new federal regulations under the Child Care Development Block Grant Act 2014 (Sandstrom et al., 2022) and by NAEYC (2006) recommendations that stated that by the year 2020, an associate degree would be required for all teachers working in NAEYC-accredited centers and 75% of teachers would have a bachelor's degree with over 30 credits in ECE. In June 2018, the OSSE changed the deadline from December 2020 to December 2023. Noncompliance with the mandate means a loss of funding for the states who need the money to support their ECE programs and a loss of employment for

professionals working as infant/toddlers-PK4 teachers in center-based settings (Brown, 2019; OSSE, 2016).

In 2018, the OSSE conducted a study to examine the educational background of their EC workforce and found that 60% of the teachers did not have an ECE degree. The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment 2020 Report stated that many preschool teachers in the District of Columbia do not have postsecondary education (McClean et al., 2021). Similarly, *The State of Babies Yearbook: 2022*, a publication from Zero to Three, reported that many teachers working with children from birth to 3 years of age in the District of Columbia do not have education beyond a high school diploma (Keating et al., 2022). The State of Preschool 2020 and The State of Preschool 2021 reports published by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) indicated that the District of Columbia failed to meet all the teacher's education benchmarks, which according to Friedman-Krauss et al. (2022) were as follows: Benchmark 3, teacher degree, to meet this benchmark, lead teachers in every classroom are required to have at least a bachelor's degree; Benchmark 4, teacher-specialized training, the teachers must have specialized training in ECE and/or child development; Benchmark 5, assistant teacher degree, the requirement is that assistant teachers must hold a Child Development Associate CDA credentials or have equivalent preparation based on coursework; and Benchmark 6, staff professional development, the teachers and assistant teachers must have at least 15 hours of annual in-service training. The final score for the District of Columbia was 4 points out of 10 on The State of Preschool rating scale (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022). .

Previously, the District of Columbia created the ECE Workforce College Development Program with the purpose to encourage and support the ECE workforce to attain the required associate (or bachelor's) degree at a postsecondary educational institution by providing scholarships that will offset the cost of tuition at approved institutions of higher education (OSSE, 2021). For the fiscal years of 2022 and 2023, the District of Columbia had already allocated $4.4 million to offer additional scholarship support for 2,000 EC educators seeking a CDA, associate degree, or bachelor's degree (Alliance for Early Success, 2022). Pursuing an associate degree in ECE is free for the District of Columbia residents at two local universities. The requirement for Infant/Toddler-PK4 teachers to acquire, at a minimum an ECE associate degree, continues to be real pressure for the EC workforce.

While the District of Columbia was one of the first in the country to implement a higher education requirement for the ECE workforce, as of 2022, the gap in practice and literature was that there was no current data available on the progress of educational attainment by the ECE workforce in the District of Columbia or on the enrollment rates of infant/toddlers-PK4 teachers at local partner universities. It was unclear what the challenges of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in center-based settings in the District of Columbia are in attaining an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE in 2016 and what support they need throughout the process. There is also no current data on the percentages of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in center-based settings in the District of Columbia who have attained an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by

OSSE in 2016. Therefore, this study was much needed because it can address a gap in practice and the literature regarding the perspectives of the infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia on the challenges of attaining an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE.

Problem Statement

Researchers have found that many infant/toddlers-PK4 teachers in the United States do not have formal education beyond the high school level (Bonetti, 2020; Greenburg et al., 2018; Kwon et al., 2020; Nutbrown, 2021; Whitebook et all., 2018). Rucker et al. (2021) indicated that most of the workforce working with young children in the United States has less education than recommended by research. Hoffman and Mangino (2022) reported that EC teachers have not received the necessary education to provide effective instruction to young children. The problem for this study was 60% of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in center-based settings have not attained an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE in a timely manner.

Laterally to the mandate, the District of Columbia also implemented systems to support the teachers throughout the process of educational attainment. The Workforce College Development Program and a partnership with two local universities were formed, and the budget was adjusted to allocate $4.4 million in funding to support the infant/toddler-PK4 teachers to achieve the required educational mandate (OSSE, 2021). Still, it is unclear what challenges the teachers are having with attaining the associate degree and the additional support they need throughout the process. The gap in practice

and the literature is that there is no current data available on the progress of educational

attainment by the ECE workforce in the District of Columbia or on the enrollment rates

of infant/toddlers-PK4 teachers at local partner universities. It is unclear what the

challenges of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in center-based settings in the District

of Columbia are in attaining an associate degree in ECE from a post-secondary accredited

institution as mandated by OSSE in 2016 and what support they need throughout the

process. Current data shows the percentage of educational attainment by the EC

workforce from the District of Columbia is still substantially low (Friedman-Krauss et al.,

2022; Keating et al., 2022; McClean et al., 2021; NIEER, 2021; OSSE, 2018).

The lack of teachers' proper preparation may be associated with children's low

achievement and poor outcomes (Majoko, 2018). D'Amico et al. (2019) stated that the

optimal development of young children depends on well-equipped teachers with key

knowledge and skills. With the alarming levels of undereducated EC teachers, the

crusade to professionalize teachers has been rapidly increasing for decades (Schachter et

al., 2021; Wong & Rao, 2022).

Reforming childcare, especially educating the workforce, has an increasingly

important role in U.S. policy debates (Palmer, 2018). Education has not only been

necessary to attain a job but has always been essential in determining one's economic and

social status and the ability to perform a job well (Marken, 2021). Policymakers and

supporters have dedicated time and efforts to ensure that early educators are effective in

performing their job, and positive job performance requires improving the quality of their

skills, preparation, and knowledge acquisition that often comes through formal education

(Gupta, 2022; Libetty, 2018; Souto-Manning, 2019). The ECE workforce is being

mandated by licensing agencies, accreditation organizations, and employers to comply

with the educational requirements as part of the efforts to advance the quality of ECE in

the United States (Lin & Magnuson, 2018). The EC workforce is mandated to pursue

formal education to complete, at a minimum, a 2-year degree in ECE (NAEYC, 2018;

OSSE, 2016). Therefore, in this qualitative study, I sought to explore the perspectives of

the infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in a center-based

setting on the challenges of attaining an ECE associate degree from a postsecondary

accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the support needed throughout the

process.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of infant/toddlers-PK4

teachers from the District of Columbia on the challenges of attaining an associate degree

in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the

support needed throughout the process. The results of this study could provide data to

stakeholders, especially policymakers and university faculty, on the needs and

perspectives of childhood teachers on pursuing an associate degree. For many teachers,

this could be a big event in their lives because it means returning to school after a long

time or returning to school for the first time (Lin & Magnuson, 2018).

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District

of Columbia working in center-based settings on the challenges of attaining an

associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers in the District of Columbia working in center-based settings on the type of support they need to attain an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE?

Conceptual Framework

I used Lewin's (1947) theory of change as the conceptual framework for this study. Lewin believed that life is never without change, and when change occurs especially within a group, it is essential to exemplify it and illustrate in detail how and why the desired change is expected to happen in their context. Lewin suggested that when change takes place because of a need for a higher level of performance within the group, often two subgroups emerge among the group: the ones that embrace the change and those that resist change. These two constant forces depend on the conditions under which the group has been operating (Lewin, 1947). To minimize the impact of these two forces in the group, Lewin recommended approaching change through the three steps model: unfreeze, change, and refreeze. Lewin stated that change happens through a process of reeducation that evolves gradually from those three consecutive steps. The unfreeze step was defined by Lewin as when it is necessary "to break open the shell of complacency and self-righteousness, deliberately bring about an emotional stir up" (p. 76). The change step is the implementation of the actual change and is characterized by action and discomfort. During this step, Lewin described that an equilibrium must be

established as quickly as possible through active education and reassurance to the group.

Lewin's last step is the refreeze in which the process of change has been completed and

the new norm of behavior has been implemented. The sustainability of the change

depends on how well the group works together (Lewin, 1947). As the voice of the EC

workforce rarely is heard or considered on policy changes or decision making affecting

their practice (Shdaimah et al., 2018), Lewin's theory of change helped to inform the

research question development, emerging themes, data analysis, and the open-ended

interview question development in the current study. Moreover, I used Lewin's theory as

a lens through which to view the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the

District of Columbia working in center-based settings on attaining an associate degree in

ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the support

needed through the process.

Nature of the Study

In this study, I employed the basic qualitative method. According to Stutterheim

and Ratcliffe (2021), qualitative research is a participatory approach and gives voice to

those who have not been heard or are insufficiently heard; moreover, it allows people to

participate in opportunities that lead to meaningful community engagement. Mahat-

Shamir et al. (2019) described qualitative research as a formal and empirical method that

involves objectivity in the study of people and their actions and uses a formal process that

aims to describe phenomena in their natural locations and produce knowledge about

perspectives. Therefore, the qualitative approach was appropriate s to explore the

perspectives of the infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in

a center-based setting on the challenges of attaining an ECE associate degree from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the support they need throughout the process.

I collected data for this study through semistructured interviews. Interviews provide detailed and rich information that helps the researcher to understand the perspectives of the participants and their experiences in real time (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2019). I used a purposeful sampling strategy with set inclusion criteria. Data were collected from 12 participants who were working in center-based settings as infant/toddler-PK4 teachers in the District of Columbia. I planned to include all kinds of participants in the study, those that were pursuing an ECE associate degree from a postsecondary accredited institution, those who were not currently enrolled in any program, and those who were planning to return to school to pursue an ECE associate degree; however, in the end, all participants were pursuing their ECE associate degree.

I conducted semistructured, virtual interviews and asked open-ended, probing questions. The interviews were conducted via phone video call or Zoom. All the interviews were audio recorded. I used the open coding process to detect emerging patterns, groups, assertions, definitions, and the development of categories based on their dimensions and properties and to answer the research questions pertinent to this study (see Saldaña, 2021).

Definitions

Child development: An area of study dedicated to understanding the different stages of growth and development in childhood from birth to adolescence (Berk, 2015)

EC: The period of childhood from birth to 8 years old and is divided into several age phases: infancy, toddlers, preschool, kindergarten, and school-age (Berk, 2015; The Center for High Impact Philanthropy, University of Pennsylvania, n.d.)

ECE: The different learning systems designed for young children, especially from birth to 5 years old. ECE is offered through different types of programs and settings, both center based or home based, and can be public, private, and/or federally funded (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2012; Whitebook et al., 2018).

EC programs: Programs as mechanisms that can improve students' success in school and build on their readiness for academic achievement (Brown, 2010)

EC workforce: EC educators or educators who work to attain the best outcomes for young children. The EC workforce is comprised of professionals that promote and support the healthy development, growth, and learning of young children, especially those who work with children in the classroom as lead teachers. The EC workforce is considered complex, essential to children's development, and is too rarely considered when making decisions about EC systems (Cumming et al., 2015; Early Childhood Workforce Initiative, n.d.; Paschall et al., 2020)

EC teachers: A person who provides caretaking, emotional support, and guidance while facilitating learning. An educator who performs direct childcare functions and related duties and works under the supervision of an EC administrator or EC curriculum coordinator and is immediately responsible for the direct care, supervision, guidance, and education of children at a center. (Delaware Department of Children, Youth, and Their Families, n.d.; Saracho, 1988)

EC educators: Any professional working in an early learning and development program, which includes both center- and family-based facilities with children typically aged from birth to 5 years old (Cumming et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Nontraditional students: Students older than 24 years of age that have financial obligations to support themselves and often their families. They normally are students from diverse backgrounds returning to higher education or attending university for the first time in the United States (Jinkens, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Professionalization: The preparation and attainment of qualifications and skills of the workforce through professional development and specialized training (Nolan & Molla, 2019).

Professionalization of ECE educators: The effort to advance the educational status, training, and working conditions of educators who work in the ECE field directly with young children (Ingersoll et al.,1997).

Teacher professionalization: The process of changing the teaching occupation (i.e., the quality, autonomy, and status of the job) into a professional career (Sockett, 1993).

The OSSE: The District of Columbia education agency charged with raising the quality of education for all DC residents (https://osse.dc.gov)

Assumptions

This study was based on three assumptions that I believed to be true but could not demonstrate as true. I assumed that the teachers that I interviewed were honest in their answers and, therefore, that the collected data were quality data. The second assumption was that the participants were excited to participate in voicing their perspectives on attaining their ECE associate degree and that the data collected could be used to enhance the existing systems of support. I also assumed that the teachers were very confident about their child development knowledge due to their formal experience in working with children and pursuing their associate degree so it should have been an easy process to connect practice to theory. These assumptions were necessary to make sure the data aligned with the scope of the study.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in a center-based setting. My research study was delimited to infants/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in center-based settings that were in any of the following three scenarios: (a) pursuing an ECE associate degree from a postsecondary accredited institution, (b) not enrolled in any program, or (c) were planning to return to school to pursue an ECE associate degree. I chose only infant/toddlers-PK4 teachers because the educational requirement mandated by OSSE (2016) applies only to these teachers from the EC workforce. This study was also delimited by a geographic zone because I sought to explore the perspectives of the infant/toddler-PK4 teachers only from the District of Columbia working in child-based

settings on the challenges of attaining an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the support needed throughout the process.

I decided to conduct this study because of my personal interest in the fact that in recent years across the country, there have been strong policy mandates for EC teachers to attain an associate degree in ECE. Moreover, in the District of Columbia, infant/toddler-PK4 teachers are mandated to attain an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution by December 2023, but currently, there is no available data on the educational attainment of this population of teachers working in center-based settings in the District of Columbia. While the EC teachers are the ones doing the work in classrooms, normally those mandates come from a top-down process driven by researchers or policymakers (Schachter et al., 2021) and the views and perspectives of the EC workforce are seldom included in the decision-making process (Shdaimah et al., 2018).

According to the National Clearinghouse Research Center (2021), enrollment in postsecondary education had a drastic decline from 2020 to 2021. The overall spring 2021 enrollment of students pursuing an associate degree was 4.25 million across all postsecondary institutions, which is a 10.9% decrease from previous years (Bouchrika, 2021). The most popular associate degree specialties are nurse midwife and business administration. According to Data USA (2021), the highest number of undergraduate degrees in early childhood in 2020 were awarded in San Diego County, CA; Los Angeles County, CA; and King County, WA. The number of degrees awarded were as follows:

San Diego had a total of 1,585 with a 6.09% graduate growth; Los Angeles County had 1,052 with an 11.4% graduate growth, and King County, WA had 961 with a 11.7% growth. In the District of Columbia, 34 ECE undergraduate degrees were awarded, attaining a 3.03% graduate growth. According to OSSE, only 40% of the teachers in the District of Columbia will be able to meet the new educational requirement by December 2023 (Austermuhle, 2022). The locations in the United States with the highest concentrations of ECE and teaching degree recipients are San Diego, CA, Los Angeles, CA, and Indianapolis, IN (DATA USA, 2020). According to the data above, all fields of postsecondary education have experienced an enrollment decline; therefore, the results of this study have the potential to be transferable to other areas of the country because many states have created new policy changes raising credentialing requirements for ECE teachers, especially for infant/toddler-PK4 teachers (Stechuk et al., 2019).

Limitations

Identifying limitations and clarifying for the reader about how they could affect study results allows the researcher to recognize clear guidelines for future studies (Green, 2018). One limitation of the current study was the geographical area because this study involved only infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in a center-based setting in the District of Columbia. The results of this study cannot be generalized as a representation of all infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the rest of the country working in center-based settings. The District of Columbia is the capital of the United States and located in the northeast part of the country. Another limitation was the size of the sample. While there are 3,510 professionals in the infant/toddler-PK4 teaching workforce who are known as

childcare workers in the District of Columbia and work in public, private, and home-based settings (McLean, et al., 2021), the number of participants for this study was limited to a minimum of 12, which could have potentially limited the number of perspectives in the study and the transferability of the findings. To address these limitations, I presented a clear and detailed description of the location, the process of data collection, and other relevant information to the reader so they could determine transferability using their own consensus. Munthe-Kaas et al. (2020) stated that transferability is often evaluated by end users or stakeholders, who are anyone interested in the findings, relying on the information that was provided to them through a systematic review. Trochim (2020) defined transferability as how the results can be generalized or transferred to other contexts. Therefore, I wrote detailed descriptions of the participants, their interview responses, and the findings of the study to facilitate accuracy and transferability.

The last limitation was the participants' access to and use of technology. The participants' phone connections varied from excellent to poor and caused minor disruptions in audio, receptivity, and the interview flow. Lipman (2021) discussed that while there are many advantages to collecting data through digital devices, the disadvantages (i.e., digital literacy, phone connection, and lack of rapport) cannot be disregarded. The three possible disadvantages were. Lipman continued to state that some members of society, especially older people, do not have the necessary digital literacy to access audiovisual hardware, and as digital participants, they tend to no shows and have a lower response rate than in personal interviews (p. 461). Rapport is considered a

prerequisite for effective qualitative interviewing (Lipman, 2021). The virtual

environment is far from being warm and inviting when compared to a face-face

environment. My use of virtual interviewing could have hindered rapport building

because both me as the interviewer and the participant may have experienced the process

of interviewing as less natural; therefore, the interviews may not have yielded the desired

outcomes. To address the use and reliability of technology, I checked with the

participants via text, email, and a phone call about the status of their internet, phone

connection, and the proper functioning of the electronic devices at least 2 hours before

the scheduled interview time. Connectivity issues were reported by some participants,

and the interview was rescheduled for a later time that was convenient for each

participant. When the timeline of the participants affected the process of the study, I

considered replacing them with other qualified participants.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated that analyzing data through a qualitative

approach can be susceptible to a subjective nature process. This study was had the

potential risk of subjectivity. I was an infant/toddler-PK4 teacher, and I have attained all

levels of education and acquired extensive knowledge in the ECE field, so a potential

personal bias may have affected the research process. However, to avoid personal bias, I

explored my own views on the focus of the study and remained objective and reflexive

throughout the entire process of the study, including when interviewing the participants

and analyzing data. Reflexivity is a contextual practice that requires the researcher to be

deeply aware of their own bias and constantly check their own views and subjectivity and

is the gold standard for determining trustworthiness and responsibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Dodgson, 2019; Teh & Lek, 2018).

Significance

This study has the potential to fill the gap in practice and literature on infant/toddler-PK4 teachers' perspectives on pursuing a postsecondary degree. At the local level, this study has the potential to help agencies, policymakers, and EC organizations create and implement educational changes in a more effective way. Furthermore, the study has the potential to help these stakeholders better understand infant/toddler-PK4 teachers' perspectives on attaining an associate degree in ECE and the development of more support systems for teachers to attain the required education. Navigating postsecondary educational systems can be challenging for many, especially nontraditional students (Steinhauer & Lovell, 2021). The findings of this study could promote positive social change through promoting teachers, policymakers, and stakeholders to work together to redesign policy and EC practices and to implement a culture of professionalization that include all the stakeholders and could benefit not only the ECE teachers, but the entire community, including families and especially young children.

Summary

In the United States, many infant/toddler-PK4 teachers do not have formal education beyond the high school level and are considered underequipped with key knowledge to support child development and learning (Bassok et al., 2021; Bonetti, 2020; Greenburg et al., 2018; Kwon et al., 2020; Nutbrown, 2021; Whitebook et all., 2018).

The research problem was that 60% of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in the District of Columbia in center-based settings have not attained an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as required by OSSE, and it is still unclear what challenges the teachers are facing in attaining the required associate degree in ECE in a timely manner and what support they need throughout the process. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in a center-based setting regarding the challenges they face attaining an ECE associate degree from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the support they need throughout the process. The conceptual framework of this study was based on Lewin's (1947) theory of change. This study has the potential to contribute to a gap in the literature and positive social change by providing insights to EC organizations, policymakers, and stakeholders to better support the EC workforce in times of educational reforms, especially education attainment mandates.

Chapter 1 included a synopsis of the study. Key elements, such as the problem statement, the purpose of the study, research question, conceptual framework, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study, were clearly described in the chapter. In Chapter 2, I will present a comprehensive review of the literature that was used to support the current study. The literature reviewed was current (i.e., published within the last 5 years) and relevant to the problem under study. Chapter 2 will also include an in-depth description of literature

related to the conceptual framework and a review of relevant literature on the major

themes of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 consists of a review of the literature and a description of the search strategies for the literature, including the databases, search engines, and key terms and combinations of terms used to locate current articles that most related to and supported the topic of study. In this chapter, I also identify, define, and synthesize literature concerning the conceptual framework while explaining how the phenomenon applies to the study. Next, a selection of over 50 current studies that was drawn from peer-reviewed journals related to the study are discussed as well as their application to the study. This chapter ends with a summary and conclusion containing a summary of the themes and explanation of how the study fills a gap in the literature.

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of the infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in a center-based setting on the challenges of attaining an ECE associate degree from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the support they need throughout the process. The problem that I sought to address in this basic qualitative study why 60% of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in the District of Columbia in center-based settings have not attained an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as required by OSSE as well as why it is still unclear what challenges the teachers are facing when attaining the ECE associate degree from a postsecondary accredited institution and the support they need throughout the process. In 2018, OSSE conducted a study to check the educational background of the infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in center-based settings in the District of Columbia, and the findings indicated that 60% of the teachers

do not have an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution or have these teachers completed one as mandated by the OSSE (2016) to work with children from the ages of birth to 4 years old.

The need for qualifications for the EC workforce is based on increased brain and child development research findings. Additional recommendations for the ECE workforce to have formal education were made by the Institute of Medicine in 2015 who stated that the teachers working with very young children have a lower level of education than recommended by research (Rucker et al., 2021). Researchers have found that in the first 5 years of the life of a human being, development happens at a fast pace (Turesky et al., 2021). According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, the first 3 years are the building blocks for optimal development and are pivotal to setting the rest of the years the person will remain alive (https://developingchild.harvard.edu). Therefore, the quality of care, development support, and education a child receives are essential.

In the efforts to best support the well-being and development of young children, in recent decades the field of ECE has been under serious international scrutiny for quality, and in search of quality, unified frameworks have been designed (Al-Hassan, 2019). Among the many elements defining and comprising quality for ECE is the professionalization of the people who work with the children, especially the teachers or caregivers who are the ones who spend long hours with them in the daily basics (Dickerson & Trodd, 2020; Douglas, 2019). The ECE workforce must be degree-qualified to work with children (Campbell-Barr et al., 2020). Several studies support that

well-professionalized teachers will yield optimal outcomes for young children, which is

an ultimate quality goal (NAEYC, 2016; (Institute of Medicine & National Research

Council, 2015). The aim to professionalize the ECE workforce has been pipelined

through policy changes, mandates, and licensing requirements. All the 50 U.S. states and

territories have ECE learning and development standards and have implemented

initiatives pointing to the quality of ECE programs (Merrill et al., 2020). In the District of

Columbia, the mandate is that lead teachers working with children from birth to 4 years

old in center-based settings must have an associate degree from an accredited university

(OSSE, 2016). This mandate was made public in December 2016, and the first deadline

was set for December 2020. After an evaluation of the process in 2018, the deadline was

reset to December 2023.

Literature Search Strategy

I examined peer-reviewed articles, white papers, books, and information on topics

related to policy mandates on professionalizing the ECE workforce for this study. For

information that was current and relevant to the study, I searched the EBSCO, Education

Source, Sage Journals, ERIC, Elsevier, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, Google Scholar, and

Taylor & Francis Online databases and search engines. The Walden University Library

was not my best source of information, and I had difficulty finding recent articles that

could support this study through its holdings. The Taylor & Francis Online database

yielded most of the articles used in the study. Taylor & Francis Online has a "Citations"

tab, which allows tracking who has cited the article in their most recent studies. At first, I

accessed these sites through the Walden University Library and Google Scholar. Later in

the process, I searched for recent articles directly through Taylor & Francis Online's

website. I also used information from yearly reports from the (NIEER), NAEYC, Zero to

Three, Head Start, the Urban Institute, Learning Policy Institute, and T.E.A.C.H.

The keywords, phrases, and pairing words used to locate literature for this review

included *ECE teachers' postsecondary education, ECE workforce qualifications,*

educational reform for the ECE workforce, ECE workforce education mandates, ECE

teacher training, professionalizing the ECE workforce, early childhood policy reform,

policy mandates, and education for the ECE workforce, and *daycare teachers'*

qualifications. Other combined variations were also used, such as *teachers' perspectives*

on high education, daycare teachers pursuing an AA in early childhood, *non-traditional*

ECE students returning to school, *who is the ECE workforce?* and *ECE programs for*

working daycare teachers. I reviewed a variety of articles from other countries; however,

the majority were from the United States and were published between 2018 to 2022. I

used Google Scholar and Citefast.com APA7 to ensure articles were current and cited

correctly. The literature reviewed in this chapter closely relates to the purpose of the

study.

Conceptual Framework/Theoretical Foundation

Lewin's theory of change grounded this study. In this theory, Lewin (1947) aimed

to support social change within groups or organizations, stating that when supporting

changes at the societal level, it is most effective if presenting a detailed description of

how and why a needed change is expected to take place in a specific setting. Roger

(2014) added that this theory can also be used to support the implementation of an event, project, policy, program, or strategy.

Why Change?

Lewin (1946) believed that at some point in time, a group will need to implement change either at the operational level or at the level that represents the group standards. During the process, the group could experience division in a way that some will embrace the change and others will resist the change. Lewin stated that real change emerges from two forces, people's desires for change or their resistance to change, and the process occurs in one or two directions; however, change only takes place when both forces reach a balance. Lewin developed the three-step model to support the implementation of a successful change.

To better explain Lewin's model, I have included two visual representations. Figure 1 represents the stakeholder at the planning process level of the change that is about to occur. Figure 2 represents the actual plan of action when introducing the change to those whom the change is intended to impact. Lewin (1947) and Burnes (2021) argued that an ethical approach to change simply by communicating well leads to creating a better world where people are free of conflict and resentment and change will not fail.

Figure 1

Lewin's Three-Step Model of Change (as Applied to Stakeholders)
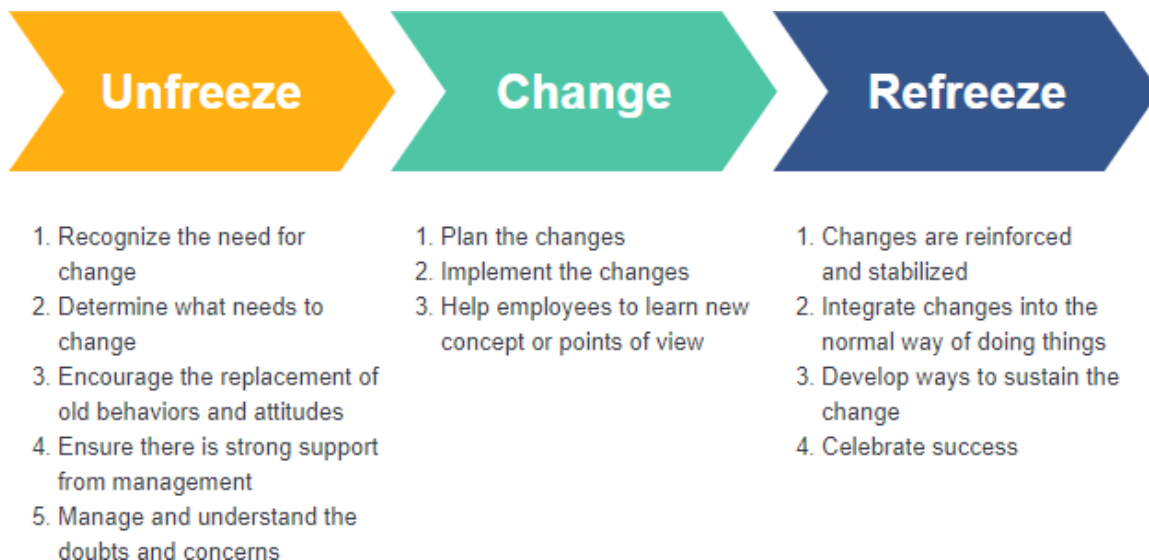
Note. Kurt Lewin's Change model (n.d.). (https://online.visual-

paradigm.com/knowledge/business-design/understand-lewins-change-management-

model/

Figure 2

Lewin's Three-Step Model of Change
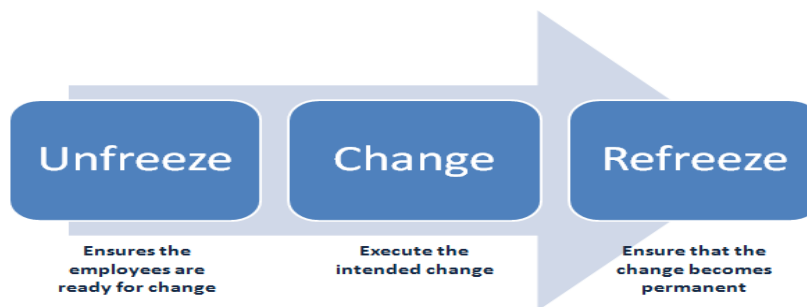
Note. Joy, M.M. (2016). Lewin's three-step model of organizational change

(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323695129_Organisational_Behaviour_-

_T1_MBA_-_KTU_Syllabus/figures?lo=1)

Lewin's Three-Step Model

Lewin's (1947) three-step model is a set of interventions consisting of planned

activities from three different stages: unfreeze, change, and freeze. The unfreeze stage is

where the problem has been identified and articulated, the necessary change has been

established, and the appropriate steps are taken in preparation for the change. The second

stage, change, is the process known as the transition; this stage is when actions take

place, and it is the one that will lead to the changes. The freeze stage is the process of

pursuing stability after the change has been established; the aim is to accept the change

and make it become the new norm or routine (Lewin, 1947). In a complex system, such

as the educational system, changes are constantly taking place at all levels, and many

times in a simultaneous manner (Abel, 2021). Nevertheless, even when people have

experienced a change in many segments of society, throughout the process, people have

also been either affected negatively or traumatized (Venketsamy et al., 2021). Therefore,

when changes are to be implemented, especially in educational settings, it is imperative

for employees to be fully informed of the reasons for change (Venketsamy et al., 2021).

Abazov (2021) stated that the theory of change can be adapted to specific educational

situations, including policy changes or policy reform, and while the process will

experience back-and-forth feedback, known as positive and negative, these two will

eventually reach an equilibrium and policy change will then take place (van der Heijden

& Kuhlmann, 2018). Both, the process and the implementation of policy change or policy

reform make change difficult because stakeholders become inflexible, and participants

resist change while protecting their old or existing models (Cerna 2013). Nevertheless,

despite the difficult and the long, gradual process, in the end, a transformative change can be experienced by all (van der Heijden & Kuhlmann, 2018). Because the ECE workforce continues to experience change (Abel, 2022), Lewin's theory of change was suited to use as the conceptual framework for the current study.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

In recent years throughout the United States, the EC workforce has been mandated to continue their formal education, and while every state has different requirements, several states and territories, including the District of Columbia, require an associate degree in ECE to work as an infant/toddler-PK4 teacher in center-based education centers (Deutsch & Riffin, 2013; NAEYC, 2018; OSSE, 2016). Traditionally, the EC workforce has not been required to have teaching preparation to work with children 0–5 years old (Cahan, 1989; Rucker, 2021; Whitebook, 2014) because working and caring for children younger than 5 years old has generally been associated with childcare or babysitting (Kagan et al., 2008; NAEYC, 2016). The public perceives ECE teachers as "glorified babysitters" (Quinones et al., 2021). Whitebook et al. (2014) stated that even now in present times, society debates the need for the EC workforce to attain higher education due to their role as caregivers versus educating and teaching young children. While the benefits of attaining education are undeniable, the process of change does impact the EC workforce in a tangible manner, especially because professionals working with young children are typically female, working full time, paid minimal wages, and are English language learners (Garavuso, 2016; McLean et al. 2021; Sakai et al., 2014; Schaack et al., 2021Smillie & McCann, 2020).

In understanding that at one point in life, groups will need to implement changes and their group standards or operational systems will be impacted by those changes (Lewin, 1946), the theory of change (Lewin, 1947) aligns well with this study. Lewin's three-step model proposed that is important to recognize the need for change, determine what needs to be changed, and encourage the replacement of old practices, behaviors, or attitudes. Additionally, it is important to determine how the changes will be implemented reinforced, and sustained, to establish strong support systems to minimize doubts and concerns, and how to integrate the changes as a new way of doing things or accomplishing tasks. Following Lewin's three-step model, this review comprised of current literature related to the study has been divided into key concepts that seek to understand the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in center-based settings on the mandates of education attainment.

Teacher Qualifications and Child Outcomes

In recent decades the field of ECE across and beyond the United States has been at the center of educational reforms (Boyd-Swan & Herbst, 2020; Lippard et al., 2019; Nolan & Molla, 2019) that seek to establish defined standards and competencies for EC programs that yield positive outcome for young children (Egert at al., 2018; Lippard et al., 2019; Zinsser et al., 2019;). Postsecondary degree for EC teachers has been highlighted as pivotal criteria linked to positive outcomes for young children and to high-quality programs and advocacy for it is at the core of conversations (Boyd-Swan & Herbst, 2020; Coleman, 2020; Davis & Dunn, 2018; Donegan-Ritter et al. 2022; Henk, 2020; Traunter, 2019). Several studies have reported that the EC teacher's education and

training are strong predictors of children's quality experiences and school readiness (Coleman, 2020; Han et al., 2019; Schacter et al., 2019).

In the United States, the government at all levels has invested in EC programs including teachers' education, training, and professionalization, and monitors closely for positive outcomes (Soliday Hong et al. 2019). Willenborg et al. (2022) and Burchinal (2018) stated that EC teachers are essential in shaping the cognitive and social domain of young children and teachers with bachelor's degrees had a deeper understanding of working with young children. Highly trained EC teachers create learning environments where young children have quality interactions that ultimately influence their learning and development (Bassok et al., 2022; Eghert et al. 2018). Children under the care of qualified and well-trained teachers displayed and scored higher levels of language, literacy, cognitive, and school readiness than those with teachers with less training (Egert et al., 2018). A strong connection was found between teachers with a bachelor's degree and the infants' language development who attended an infant-centered approach center (Han & Degotardi, 2020). Additional literature stated that a well-trained EC workforce also contributes to teachers' agency and capacity to work with families (Nolan & Molla, 2019).

When contrasting children's positive outcomes, there is a large and more consistent association between teachers with postsecondary qualifications to children's outcomes than with those who have no adequate training (Bonetti & Blandon, 2020). Therefore, it is important that well-qualified teachers work in early childhood education, and childcare programs (Han & Degotardi, 2020). While many studies have linked the

positives influences of EC teachers' postsecondary degrees on professional practices to positive outcomes for children, Vardy (2021) and Gardner-Neblett et al. (2020) argued that the outcomes still are inconclusive, and the evidence of the findings is not strong to make a sound connection. Johnson et al. (2021) and Blanden et al. (2021) claimed that the associations are very modest and while teachers' education is important, is not the only predictor for positive child outcomes. Brown and Weber (2019) noted that formal education for EC teachers remains strongly linked to student learning, however, positive outcomes for children also depend on the way teachers transfer their knowledge into the classroom and how they support the process of teaching and learning of young children. The teachers' leadership skills are equally important as pedagogical qualifications to impact children's positive outcomes (Heikka et al., 2018). Hinrichs (2021) acknowledged that education for EC teachers is important but also is important to question if academically prepared teachers remain better teachers. Lippard et al. (2019) noted that teachers with formal caregiving experience positively influence child's learning and behavior more than those who only have a degree qualification. The evidence is that a two-year postsecondary degree could yield positive outcomes for children, but according to Vardy (2021), teachers with a postgraduate degree could contribute to stronger child outcomes. While the ideal is for EC teachers to attain a postgraduate degree, for the teachers to attain an Associate of Arts (AA) in early childhood education would be considered a great milestone as 60% of the EC teachers do not have an education beyond the high school level in the District of Columbia.

The Need for Professionalizing the EC Workforce

Although the findings on the connection between teachers' education and child outcomes are still inconclusive, the high need for consistency of quality in children's learning outcomes is urgent (Brown, 2021; Gordon et al., 2021), and apparently, that need could be achieved when teachers have the proper formal education and training from a postsecondary institution (Fusaro et al., 2021; Lippard et al., 2019; Nolan & Molla, 2019; Trauter, 2019). The National Academy of Medicine recommends that the EC workforce should be characterized by a consistent framework of degree qualifications (Zinsser et al., 2019). However, there are too few educators with degree-level qualifications other than ECE, and they do not have the necessary education, skills, knowledge, and abilities to support the children's learning process (Brown, 2021; Goffin & Washington, 2019; Hoffman & Mangino, 2022).

Since ECE is offered through different formats, center and home-based, community centers, and public schools among others, the qualifications for the workforce vary from place to place (Zinsser et al., 2019). According to Greenburg et al. (2018), most of the teachers working with preschool-age children in private settings have only a high school diploma or less and, those working with infants and toddlers are less qualified. Young learners are most likely to have teachers with no qualifications caring for them (Slicker et al., 2020). In Illinois and Tennessee, for a person working as a lead teacher in an ECE center, the only required credentials are a high school diploma and a minimum of six college credit hours in ECE (Coleman, 2020; Zinsser et al., 2019). In the District of Columbia, the OSSE conducted a study and found that 60% of the teachers

caring for children in-home and center-based settings did not have education preparation to work as a lead teacher (OSSE, 2018). According to the   2021 State of Babies Yearly Report, a publication of Zero to Three stated that infants and toddlers attending center-based in the District of Columbia were cared for by individuals with no educational credentials beyond a high school diploma (Keating et al., 2022).

Ignited by the National Academy of Medicine recommendations published in 2015, the early childhood education field has been under intense examination calling for a change in the teachers' qualifications dilemma (Gibson et al., 2020; Han et al., 2020; Zinsser et al., 2019;). Following the National Academy of Medicine recommendations, many states, policymakers, and EC organizations embarked on a movement of setting goals, policy changes, and implementing educational requirements necessary for teachers to support the development of children (Katz et al., 2021). Recognizing the importance of degree-qualified teachers for the quality of the ECE field has become an international movement (Campbell-Barr et al., 2020; Huss-Keller, 2019; Schachter et al., 2019; Wong, 2021). Along with the recognition, the focus has also extended to policy interventions in the local and global contexts that highlight the need to explore ways to strengthen and professionalize the ECE workforce (Kay et al., 2019; Cramer et al., 2021). The need for professionalizing the ECE workforce is urgent but is suggested that teachers should receive all the support possible to engage in the process (Slicker et al., 2020) because traditionally and throughout history the ECE workforce has not entered the EC field with specialized degree training, qualifications, certifications, or licensure to work with children (Katz et al., 2021). This is key to this study as the District of Columbia's

mandate for infant/toddler-PK4 teachers to attain an EC associate degree from an

accredited university follows the recommendations as stated by the Institute of Medicine

and National Research Council.

Educational Reforms, Policy Change, and Mandates

For more than 2 decades the focus on policy reforms and interventions aiming to

raise the quality of ECE has expanded from local to global contexts (Akaba et al., 2019;

Brown et al, 2022; Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2022; Kay et al., 2019; Lux et al., 2022;

Myran & Masterson, 2020; Nuttall et al., 2022; Peleman et al., 2018). Federal, state, and

city policymakers have created regulatory systems to monitor compliances and to provide

technical support during the process including home and center-based settings providing

care for infants and toddlers (Bromer & Porter, 2019; Reid et al., 2021). Core to these

aims by the policymakers are the education, formal qualifications, and professionalization

of the workforce as a primary development strategy (Barnes et al., 2018; Bradbury 2019;

Brown et al., 2020; Done & Murphy, 2018; Jackson, 2021; Kay et at., 2019; Thorpe et

al., 2020). Postsecondary education equivalent to 2-year or 4-year degrees from

institutions of higher education has become the proxy for the professionalization and

qualifications of EC teachers (Arndt et al., 2018; Lippard et al., 2019; McLaughlin &

Wood, 2021).

At the local level, these educational reforms are often the result of political,

cultural, historical, and social changes (McLaughlin & Ruby, 2020). Silberfeld and

Mitchell (2018) stated that often policy regulations are the result of political narratives

and not of evidence closely related to the real need for change. Normally educational

leaders take the responsibility for achieving policy goals (Martin et al., 2020; Nuttall et al., 2022). However, EC policy implementation continues to shift from its rhetorical strategies (Hunkin, 2018) which creates imbalances in the workforce policy implementation process (Corral- Granados et al. 2021). The importance of EC is the focus of policy change for many government institutions (Kay et al., 2019) and clearly accounting for academic outcomes has become a major emphasis in government policy (Hedges & Cooper, 2018; Kwon et al., 2020).

In the United States, policy changes encompass demands and goals for teacher qualification which is considered an important variable linked to the quality and children's academic outcomes (Brown et al., 2022; Cramer & Capella 2019; Elicker et al., 2021, Han et al., 2020; Porterfield & Scott-Little, 2019). It has been stated that ECE can no longer survive merely on educators with no qualifications, but a radical reform is necessary for the entire field including stakeholders and the EC workforce (Andrews et al., 2019). The proponents of the ECE reform have created ambitious initiatives and policies to reinvent the qualifications of the ECE workforce (American Federation of State; Fowler, 2022;) because ECE and a specially qualified workforce are critical to positively impacting children's well-being and life trajectories (McDonald et al., 2018; Qi & Campbell, 2022). Since childcare services are regulated at each state level (Ali et al., 2021), state legislators and state EC leaders have taken a deeper look at the importance of formal education for the EC workforce (Palmer, 2018).

Many state licensing agencies have demanded 2-year and 4-year EC degrees from institutions of higher education for their ECE workforce (Lippard et al., 2019). According

to Kaufman et al. (2018), mandates to attain degree certificates as minimum qualifications for lead teachers have been created to implement laws and policy reforms. Abaka et al. (2019) noted that focusing on academic outcomes for children should not be the focus for pushing postsecondary education for the ECE workforce and such neoliberal policy should focus on more than one outcome. A policy that only focuses on upgrading qualifications is unfair (Nolan & Molla, 2019). It should be the teacher to realize their educational needs and they should on their own evaluate their professional goals (Aras, 2021; Nolan & Molla, 2019). In times of educational reform, teachers and children should be deemed and treated as the main stakeholders (McAnelly & Gaffney, 2019). Although regulations are necessary (Ali et al., 2021), every state has had challenges in meeting those requirements (Bassok et al. 2021) because there has not been a qualification framework for the EC workforce in every state (Coleman, 2020). After a close examination of policy regulations, there is an inconsistent result with some states asking their lead teachers for many qualifications and others asking for only one (Rucker et al. 2021).

In most US states the minimal educational requirements to work with young children have been a high school diploma or General Equivalent Diploma and able to pass a criminal background check (Coleman, 2020; Longley & Gilken, 2019). Following the education reform, the new policy regulation in many states is that an AA degree in ECE is the entry-level education required to work with children, especially for the preschool-age level (Longley & Gilken, 2019). With the new regulations, in states like Louisiana, a new policy implemented in 2019 requires that teachers attain Louisiana's

Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate within 24 months of their hiring date. However, the credentials are not enough, and it is expected that teachers must attain an ECE AA degree (Bassok, et al., 2021). In Montana, the ECE workforce has been receiving incentives to participate in professionalization efforts including tuition funding for ECE credits earned toward AA degrees each semester (Lux et al., 2022). Connecticut in 2019, enacted legislation (S.B. 932) and phased the qualification process for the EC workforce; by 2029 all lead teachers must have an associate or bachelor's degree (Smillie & McCann, 2020). In 2016, The District of Columbia launched a final ruling requiring that by the year 2020 all lead teachers working in a licensed child development center with children from birth to PK4 must attain an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution (Greenburg et al., 2021; Notice of Final Rulemaking, OSSE, 2016; Palmer, 2018; Willenborg et al., 2022).

Policymakers have recognized that children learning, and development can positively be impacted by good-quality programs (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2022) so ongoing educational reforms continue to increase (Garvis et al., 2018). According to Shdaimah et al. (2018) any changes implemented at the local, statewide, or national level the childcare providers are often the most affected. Any early education policy or conversations about changes in the EC field should involve the views and perspectives of the childcare providers, but ironically those voices are often absent (Ali et al. (202; Gibson et al., 2019; Heilala et al., 2021; Shdaimah et al., 2018; Willenborg et al., 2022). As the educational reform continues to push for professionalizing the EC workforce, Souto-Manning (2019) stated that this reform is based on conceptualizing quality by

reformers and transformers who normally are outsiders to the teaching profession

therefore, "current educational reform movements, lack respect for the intellectual work

of teaching" (p. 4). The District of Columbia's mandate aligns with NAEYC's

recommendations that the ECE workforce should attain postsecondary education to work

as infant/toddler-PK4 teachers especially when the science behind brain development is

well supported by research.

The Characteristics of the EC Workforce

The ECE in the United States is offered through publicly and nonpublicly funded

programs in a variety of settings such as home and center-based, fee-based subsidized,

and free programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start (Donegan-Ritter et al. 2022;

Reid et al., 2021; Slicker et al. 2020; Smillie & McCann, 2020). These settings are under

the supervision of multiple state agencies and employ a workforce that is increasingly

diverse in roles, qualifications, and backgrounds who care for children from infancy to

age 5 years of age (Jackson, 2021; Smillie & McCann, 2020). As more children

participate in ECE, the importance of the role of the teachers has become more complex

(Hunkin, 2019, Nocita et al., 2022; Pianta et al., 2020; Press et al., 2020; Sandstrom &

Schilder, 2021). The ECE workforce has received more attention than ever in recent

decades (Hunkin, 2019; Johnson et al., 2021; Zinsser et al. 2019); this attention

intensively concentrates on credentials, education level, and teaching experience

(Johnson et al., 2021; Lin & Magnuson, 2018).

While is expected that the ECE workforce is well-prepared with formal education

(Whitebook et al., 2018) the reality is that across the United States teachers working with

children from zero to age 5 are considered under professionalized, especially those

working in privately-owned centers (Kwon et al., 2020; Whitebook et al., 2018). Many

teachers have as little as 20 hours of child professional training a year which often is

considered a teacher who is under resourced (Nutbrown, 2021; Bonetti 2020). Teachers

working with 0-3years olds children have less formal education (Kwon, et al. 2020) and

this trend increases if the teacher is ethnically and linguistically diverse (Austin et al.,

2019; Sandstrom & Schilder, 2021). Often ECE workforce pursues professionalization

after entering the EC field (Katz et al., 2021). The ECE workforce is facing demands for

increased qualifications and accountability (Thorpe et al., 2020). Professional

qualifications are important (Nutbrown, 2021) however, other elements characterize the

diversity of the EC workforce that cannot be ignored. For instance, the early years

workforce is dominated primarily by females (McLean et al. 2021; Schaack et al., 2021;

Smillie & McCann, 2020) from different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds,

some having little or no experience working with children and others having many years

of experience working in the classroom (Hill et al., 2021; Movahedazarhouligh et al.,

2022; Wong, 2020). The average age of the EC workforce is 35-39 years old (Huss-

Keller 2019; Katz et al., 2022) but the workforce is comprised of individuals as young as

18 and older than 64 years of age.

  The ECE workforce in the United States is racially and ethnically diverse (Huss-

Keller 2019; Sandstrom & Schilder, 2021; Whitebook et al., 2018) yet most preschool

teachers are white and monolingual (Lash & Pech, 2020). In some areas, commonly the

ones who work with young children are commonly nontraditional immigrant women of

color (Mc Devitt, 2020). According to Child Care Aware (2019), 22% of childcare workers are foreign-born. In 2018 close to 40% of EC teachers were people of color (Sandstrom & Schilder, 2021) and spoke a native language other than English (McLean et al. 2021). Teachers working in the early childhood field are underpaid, their average yearly salary is $21,000, and experience economic distress (Farewell et al. 2021; Johnson et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2019; Purper et al., 2022). The EC work is stressful and demanding and teachers have to work long hours (Farewell et al. 2021; Nocita et al., 2020). There is a shortage of qualified EC workforce and recruiting and retaining them is challenging (Press et al., 2020) Retention of the ECE workforce is challenging and turnover is very high in early childhood education (Leifield, 2020; Purper et al., 2022; Rogers, 2021). Data from international reports stated that more than 40% of teachers exit the EC field (Grant et al. 2019; Thorpe et al. 2020).

Turnover of the EC workforce is detrimental to the profession and to the children (Kwon et al., 2020; Leifield, 2020; Mowrey, 2020) resulting in the loss of qualified teachers even some with EC degrees. The reasons for leaving the field are many including the expectations or pressure to improve qualifications or pursue an ECE career (Heilala et al., 2021; McDonald et al. 2018). Thorpe et al. (2020) noted that the ECE workforce exiting their job, or the EC field was related to the demands of undertaking formal education or university degrees. The challenge of recruiting and retaining qualified ECE teachers is one of the most prevalent problems affecting the ECE field in many countries (McCormich et al., 2021; Nutbrown, 2021; Oke et al., 2021). Thorpe et al., (2020) recommended improving career pathways, salary, and support systems for the

overall well-being of each EC teacher. When ECE professionals experience joy and fulfillment in their jobs the risk of turnover can minimize thus, understanding their well-being fully is imperative (Grant et al., 2019; Harding et al., 2019; McCormick et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2019; McMullen et al., 2020). The EC workforce in the United States is characterized by entering the ECE field without postsecondary education.

The Career Pathways and Challenges to an ECE College Degree

Professionalizing the EC workforce is in the public interest of policymakers at local, state, and national levels in the United States and many other countries (Fowler, 2022; Katz et al. 2021; Trodd & Dickerson, 2018). Professionalizing is attaining formal qualifications and might look different from state to state (Egert et al., 2018; Kaplan, 2018; Vecchiotti, 2018). Qualification is training early childhood teachers receive to work with young children (Rucker et al., 2021). Attaining an associate or bachelor's degree (Granados et al., 2021; Katz et al. 2021; Lux et al., 2022; Vecchiotti, 2018) or higher from an accredited university is the norm. As per policy mandates, the degree is considered an important benchmark to work in the ECE field to support quality instruction for children from birth to 5 (Dickerson and Trodd, 2020; Douglas, 2019; Fusaro et al. 2021; Gallanders et al., 2020; Gibson et al., 2019; Huss-Keller, 2019; Jackson, 2021Nocita et al. 2020;).

Professional learning is a complex process (Keay et al. 2019; Rogers, 2021) and EC could be challenged in the process of attaining a bachelor's degree (Huss-Keller, 2019). The process and the path to college could be complicated and difficult for EC teachers (Huss-Keller, 2019). Teachers with limited education and training could be

challenged with the process of seeking the degree (Katz et al., 2021; Kirk, 2018). Many

individuals working as EC teachers could be challenged in pursuing or attaining higher

education as required credentials due to a variety of reasons, such as language limitations,

immigrants first-generation seeking a degree, low levels of academic literacy,

transportation, inconvenient locations, time availability and, being considered

nontraditional students, (Al-Hasan, 2019; Barnes et al., 2018; Hackmack, 2019;

McDevitt, 2020). Students returning to school after the age of 24 are considered non-

traditional (Huss-Keller, 2020; Katz et al., 2021). Wong and Chiu (2018) stated that the

cost of tuition, commitment, nontraditional backgrounds, race/ethnicity, social status, and

challenges in becoming a university student could hinder the process of pursuing an

undergraduate degree.

Navigating the educational process from higher education institutions can be

challenging for many teachers from the ECE workforce, especially those who are

culturally and linguistically diverse individuals (Qi & Campbell, 2022). Although an

associate's or bachelor's is a policy requirement, many higher education institutions lack

a clear framework regarding the theoretical and/or practical content of the degree

(Campbell-Barr et al., 2020) neither they have established systems to accommodate the

diverse EC workforce pursuing the EC credentials (Al-Hassan, 2020; Barnes et al., 2018).

Universities offering ECE programs can be challenged in trying to accommodate the

diverse demographics and needs of EC practitioners (Huss-Keller, 2020). Traditional

students do not have formal classroom experience when compared to nontraditional

students (Silberfeld & Mitchell, 2018). To minimize barriers to postsecondary education

encountered by the EC workforce, a few potential solutions have been implemented by stakeholders and universities (Pierson et al., 2021). Online classes, professional learning networks (PLNs), professional learning communities, alliances between universities, community colleges, and community agencies, systems of support, shortcuts such as proven experience, and professional ladders are to minimize barriers to postsecondary education (Barnes et al., 2018; Carpenter et al., 2021; Coleman, 2020; Douglas, 2019; Fowler, 2022; Gillanders et al., 2020; Ribaeus et al. 2020; Thornton & Cherrington, 2018).

Universities are investing in student-centered education which is a relationship between university teachers and students to better support the EC teacher (Ribaeus & Löfdahl Hultman, 2022). The ECE workforce can attain their educational credentials by getting an ECE specialized degree or through an accumulation of multiple specialized training sessions (Rucker et al., 2021) however, policymakers should aim for a qualifications framework that is built on research-based recommendations and will support the EC workforce in their work with children and in their ability to get the mandated educational attainment (Rucker et al., 2021). Moreover, policymakers should include the voices of multiple stakeholders in the policy change process and decision-making especially, the ECE practitioners, families, children, and local communities (Peleman et al., 2018). The policy changes and educational reforms in the ECE workforce align with NAECY and seek to professionalize the EC workforce with proper training to support their practices. The process has challenges directly affecting the EC workforce.

Summary and Conclusions

Chapter 2 included a literature review that provides a context to frame the purpose of this study in which I sought to explore the perspectives of the infant/toddlers-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia on the challenges of attaining an associate degree in early childhood education from a post-secondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the support needed throughout the process. The review was a synthesis of current research related to the topics of professionalizing the EC workforce, policy change mandates, and educational reform, along with a brief description of the EC workforce landscape. The review included key concepts that addressed the rationale for educational reforms that coerce the EC workforce through policy changes and mandate to attain a minimum of an associate degree in ECE from post-secondary accredited institutions. The perspectives of infant/toddlers-PK4 teachers are seldom heard or included in the studies, and therefore a gap in the literature and in practice exists.

There have been numerous studies stating the importance of the early years of a child and how imperative is for those who care for them to be highly qualified with degree knowledge attained through ECE programs in postsecondary educational institutions. In parallel, there is plenty of studies and reports on the efforts of policy mandates and requirements to professionalize the EC workforce (Gupta, 2022). However, it is limited research exploring the perspectives of ECE teachers on returning to school to pursue educational attainment as mandated by policy changes in the EC workforce. Research on the voice and views of EC educators about mandates and policies that impact their practices, and their job is limited (Shdaimah et al., 2018). While is

undeniable the importance of education for those who work with children of any age, the

ECE has been characterized for comprising its workforce with people with minimal or no

education beyond the high school level. Historically, seldom do individuals enter the

ECE field with a bachelor's or master's in ECE per se, perhaps an associate of science or

child development credential commonly known as CDA could be more of a possibility

(Katz et al., 2021; Rucker et al., 2021).

There is so much that needs to be known about the EC workforce, especially

because is so diverse in so many ways, and changes drastically from region to region

even within a small county. Before trying to implement a change of the magnitude of

professionalizing a diverse ECE workforce all systems should be in place. For instance,

universities have found themselves unable to accommodate the needs of ECE students

who most of the time are increasingly diverse non-traditional students and will not meet

the structure design of regular high educational institutions (Al-Hassan, 2020; Barnes et

al., 2018;). The ECE workforce is faced with many barriers when accessing higher

education (Pierson et al., 2021) such as time, linguistics, and the cost of tuition. Lux et al.

(2022) suggested that to build the ECE workforce agency, access to professional

development and degree attainment across the world must be affordable and accessible to

those seeking education. In conclusion, in order to achieve policy goals to professionalize

the ECE workforce, all the involved systems and stakeholders have to coherent come

together; the voice of the ECE teachers needed to be included in any policy decision

making and the higher education institutions must become flexible with their programs,

simplify admission systems, establish ECE specific department and be creative in

recruiting and accommodating the non-traditional ECE student (Huss-Keller, 2019) who is already experienced in working with children but lack the "desired degree-knowledge" as recommended by research.

Chapter 3 included a detailed description of the basic qualitative research method and how the gap in practice was researched as well as the design and rationale, recruitment procedures, and data analysis plan which were consistent with that of qualitative studies which seek to interpret the experiences of the participants. Lastly, trustworthiness and ethical issues will also be explored and addressed.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of the infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in a center-based setting on the challenges of attaining an ECE associate degree from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the help needed throughout the process. In this chapter, I describe the research design and rationale for the study, the role of the researcher, methodology, procedures for recruitment, participation, data collection, and instrumentation. I also discuss the data analysis plan, the trustworthiness of the study, and the ethical procedures. The chapter ends with a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

In this research study, I explored the perspectives of the infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in a center-based setting on the challenges of attaining an ECE associate degree from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the help needed throughout the process. The research questions that guided this study were:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in center-based settings on the challenges of attaining an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers in the District of Columbia working in center-based settings on the type of support they need to

attain an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as

mandated by OSSE?

Basic qualitative research was the most appropriate approach for this study

because I wanted to explore the phenomenon of associate degree mandates for EC

teachers from the infant/toddler-PK4 teachers' perspectives. Creswell and Poth (2018)

stated that qualitative research is most used when a phenomenon or problem needs to be

further explored or new gaps of understanding need to be addressed. Qualitative research

also interprets people's perceptions of the different events as perceived in their natural

setting and allows the researcher to study the phenomenon in a naturally objective

manner (Gentles et al., 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Similarly, Popay et al. (1998) stated

that the aim of qualitative research is to give research participants a good opportunity to

understand their social reality while making sense of their experiences and voicing their

perspectives. Qualitative research is a participatory approach and gives voice to those

who have not been heard or are insufficiently heard; moreover, it allows people to

participate in opportunities that lead to meaningful community engagement (Merriam &

Greinier, 2019; Stutterheim & Ratcliffe, 2021). Mohajan (2018) declared that qualitative

research allows investigating local knowledge and the understanding of a given situation

along with the experiences, social processes, and other related factors that could

eventually marginalize a group of people. Quantitative research was ruled out for this

study because the aim of the quantitative researcher is to study the relationship between

variables while relying on a large sample size to describe and predict phenomena (see

Khalid et al., 2012). I did not plan to study the relationship between variables, and I used a small sample size of 12 participants.

There are several types of qualitative research designs, including phenomenological, ethnographic, grounded theory, historical, case study, and action research (Kemparaj & Chavan, 2013). After intensively reviewing each design, I was considering using the phenomenological design because when using this design, the participants are asked to describe their experiences and how they perceive them (see Ravitch & Carl, 2017). However, when learning that the process of data collection in phenomenological research can be time consuming and labor intensive (Creswell, 2014; Miles et al., 2014) and the individual conditions under which data are collected cannot be generalized (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2002), I determined that the basic qualitative study design best aligned with the purpose of the current study. I did not plan to use methods that take too much time to obtain results. A basic qualitative study design is used when a researcher seeks to interpret the experiences of others as well as the meaning of these experiences and the attribute they assign to them (Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). When selecting one specific qualitative method approach that aligns with the purpose of a study becomes difficult for the researcher, a basic qualitative design is an appropriate approach to select (Liu, 2016).

The qualitative research process involves the researcher asking questions to the participants and allowing them to describe their perspectives (Austin & Sutton, 2014). I conducted one-on-one interviews with open-ended questions, which allowed the participants to expand on their responses until their experiences were richly described

(see Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Seidman (2005) affirmed that interviewing supports the researcher in better understanding the experiences participants have had. I explored the perspectives of the participants by collecting data, analyzing it for emerging themes, and then interpreting the results. Through the analysis of the interview responses, I was able to identify the teachers' perspectives; patterns, themes, and trends; and ultimately the key information important to this study.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher for this study was to design and implement the study, from conducting open-ended interviews to collect data to analyzing the data to evaluating and presenting the findings. The interviews were audio recorded, and I transcribed each one after its completion. The entire research process was conducted in an ethical manner. I was reflexive by examining my own judgments, belief systems, and practices during the data collection process and keeping a reflexive research diary where I wrote my own thoughts rather than voicing them. Oliver et al. (2021) stated that the best modality for self-reflection is reflective journaling because it encourages the exploration of personal attitudes and beliefs. Exploring my own position as it related to the study and reviewing assumptions that could have jeopardized the objectivity of the study helped me to minimize bias. Additionally, I had an expert reviewer who has a Ph.D. in ECE and worked at a local university look at my findings to check for bias. Constantly checking one's own views and subjectivity is the gold standard for determining trustworthiness and responsibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Dodgson, 2019; Teh & Lek, 2018).

As a researcher, I had a key role in this study, therefore, it was important that I examined any personal and professional connections I could have with participants and identify any bias concerns I held. A potential concern for bias was my own experience pursuing an ECE postsecondary degree as a nontraditional student and under less than favorable circumstances. In 2009, I decided to return to school 20 years after obtaining my last degree. At the time, my personal and financial circumstances were unfavorable, yet I started with an AA in a local community college. After 13 months in the AA program, I transferred to a bachelor's program at an online university. I have since then earned a Master's in Public Administration and hope to have earned an Ed.D. by the summer of 2023. My biased position could be that pursuing postsecondary education is easy, and I do not understand why some teachers have not been able to attain a degree. To address potential biases, I took a neutral position when responding to the participants, took a position of openness to understand multiple perspectives on the given topic, and did not manipulate the data to align with my beliefs (see Patton, 2015). I did not interject my opinion when the participants were talking, and their responses were recorded word by word.

Another possible conflict was that I work for a higher education institution offering 2- and 4-year EC degrees in the District of Columbia where this study took place. Due to this role, I may have had a teacher-student relationship with some of the potential participants. To address this situation, I did not interview participants who were or have been my students in any of the classes I have taught at the higher education institution where I currently work as a professor. Understanding that these personal

situations were a potential for bias when interviewing and analyzing data, I kept a reflexive journal and made note of any reactions to the participants' responses to remain aware and mindful of any bias, prejudice, or subjectivity that may have arisen. I also conducted member checking to assure that my interpretations represented the perspectives of the participants with fidelity. I sent a two-to-three-page summary of the findings to the participants for review and gave them a week to respond with any concerns or corrections. According to Candela (2019), member checking is essential to create trustworthiness in quality research and consists of a process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of their statements. Involving the participants by having them review the results and conclusions to see if they are aligned with their thoughts and beliefs assured that the data collection and the findings were derived from the participants and not from my personal views (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Methodology

I used basic qualitative research design in this study and conducted interviews to gather the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers on the challenges of attaining an associate degree from a postsecondary accredited institution and the type of support needed through the process. The participants were teachers working with children between the ages of birth to 4 years old in center-based settings in the District of Columbia.

Participant Selection

The participant selection process for this study started after I received Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. The participants were selected using a purposeful sampling technique. According to Palinkas et al. (2015), purposeful sampling is extensively used in qualitative research because it helps to identify information-rich cases that relate to a phenomenon of interest. There are several strategies to conduct purposeful sampling: however, criterion sampling is the most used and is based on a sampling of cases on preconceived or preestablished criteria (Kemparaj & Chavan, 2013; Palinska et al, 2015; Sandelowski, 2000). The specific type of purposeful sampling was criterion; therefore, I selected the participants according to the following criteria: (a) participants had to be working with children in any classroom categorized as the infant classroom, the toddler classroom, the PK3, or PK4 classroom; (b) participants had to be pursuing an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution or be planning to return to school to pursue an associate degree in ECE; (c) the participants had to be teachers who had a minimum of 3 years of experience working with young children. These criteria were aligned with the purpose of the study. I also used snowball sampling when the minimum number of participants was not reached. Snowball sampling refers to asking the participants to share the invitation with colleagues that might be interested in participating in the study.

The participants were 12 infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in center-based settings in the District of Columbia, the capital of the United States. There are no specific guidelines when choosing a sample size for a basic qualitative study (Paton, 2015);

however, Guest et al. (2006) stated that in a qualitative study, saturation normally occurs with around seven to 12 participants from a homogenous group. Saturation is when the researcher reaches a point where adding more participants does not add more insights or new information (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Crouch and McKenzie (2006) noted that during a qualitative research study, fewer than 20 participants should give results with better data because this number allows the researcher to build a better rapport with the participants, which leads to a more natural conversation and better data. I determined that after interviewing 12 participants, I had reached saturation. Furthermore, this sample size gave reasonable coverage to the phenomenon that was core to the purpose of the study (see Patton, 2015).

The participants were identified, contacted, and recruited as follows: First, I used the local District of Columbia database of EC facilities to identify center-based facilities that offer services for children from birth to age 4 years old. This database is openly available to the public, especially for families who are looking for EC services. The database lists almost 500 licensed facilities; near to 400 are center-based facilities. Each center has a full profile including capacity, location, and contact information. Second, from the database, I emailed 60 random center-based directors explaining who I am, the purpose of the email, and the purpose of the study; I asked them to share the recruitment invitation and the informed consent with the teachers by forwarding it to the teacher's email and posting it in the teachers' lounge room. The invitation listed the criteria survey and my contact information for interested participants to contact me if they have any questions. Third, if in 2 weeks, I did not get a minimum of 12-15 responses, I was going

to email 60 more random center-based directors. I was going to repeat the process until a minimum of 12-15 interested participants was reached. Participants who meet the criteria were contacted via a phone call to schedule a phone or video call interview during a time of their convenience. The interviews were recorded and took place over a 3-week period. To establish confidentiality, the participants received alphanumeric codes (i.e., TP01–TP12). Member checking followed the completion of the data analysis. Member checking was the process of sending a summary of findings to the participants for them to check the findings for the accuracy of their data.

Instrumentation

Data for basic qualitative research is collected using interviews, document analysis, or observations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data collection instrumentation for this study was the interview protocol, specifically semistructured interviews with open-ended questions. Interviews provide detailed and rich information that helps the researcher to understand the perspectives of the participants and their experiences in real-time (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2019). According to Smith et al. (2009), interviews are ideal to collect data because they facilitate a discussion in which the respondents have an opportunity to tell their stories as it relates to their own experience. Therefore, they can be perceived as "the experiential expert on the subject and should therefore be allowed maximum opportunity to tell their own story" (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012, p. 58). The open-ended questions were developed by me and were aligned with the RQs to obtain the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in center-based settings on the challenges of attaining an associate degree from a postsecondary accredited institution

and the kind of support needed throughout the process. The participant's responses to the interview questions assisted me in answering my study's research question. The interview questions further addressed the perspectives on the type of support the teachers needed to attain the associate degree in ECE.

To support me in the process of developing the interview questions, I researched studies that have used interview questions. To establish content validity, and to assure the interview questions were clearly stated in a way that each participant could understand what is being asked, I had two EC experts reviewing the interview questions; one had a Ph.D. and works in a local university as a professor and as the head of the Child and Human Development department and the second had an Ed.D. and worked in a community college as the chair of ECE program. Clearly stated questions enabled and encouraged the participants to think and speak more about the topic with as little as possible intervention from the interviewer (Smith & Shinebourne 2012). In semistructured interviews, the investigator had a list of questions, but the interview was led rather than directed by the schedule (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012) Additionally, semi-structured interviews gave the researcher the flexibility to extract relevant data from the participant's rich responses (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The primary data for this study was the participants' recorded responses to the interview's open-ended questions as contained in Table 1. Recording the responses allowed me to check for the accuracy of the participants' responses as suggested by Brinkmann and Kvale, (2018). I implemented to fidelity any suggestions given by the reviewer.

In aligning the interview questions with Lewin (1947) three-step model of change the unfreeze step sought the perspectives of the participants on the recognition of the need for change, to determine what needs to be changed, how they felt about the change along with understanding the impact of change in the ECE workforce. The interview questions under the change step sought to understand the perspective of the participants in how they are planning and preparing to comply with the required change of attaining an ECE associate degree. The last step, refreeze, sought to understands the perspectives of the participants in how they are coping and sustaining the adopted change as they pursue the required education. Furthermore, sought to understand the system of support the participants have adopted and how were they feeling about their success in the process of degree attainment.

Table 1

Conceptual Framework, Research Questions, and Interview Alignment

Unfreeze	Change	Refreeze
Experiences of information (RQ1)	Experiences of day-to-day activities	Experiences of coping (CF)
1) How did you get the information about the required associate degree by OSSE and what was your initial reaction? Please explain.	1) What do you believe are the challenges of the OSSE mandate on Infant/Toddler-Pk4 teachers? (RQ1)	1)What are the challenges you have faced and how have you overcome these challenges when pursuing or completing the associate degree?
Experiences of challenges (RQ1)	2) What factors play a role in your decision to participate in attaining an associate degree as mandated by OSSE? (RQ1)	Experiences of support (RQ2)
1) How do you feel about the required associate degree mandated by OSSE and how do you perceive the policies that raise the educational requirements you have to reach in order to keep your job?	Experiences of challenges (RQ1)	1) What do you think support concerning pursuing or completing the associate degree should consist of?
2) In what ways has the implementation of these policies affected you directly? In what ways has it affected the early childhood workforce?	1) Tell me about any struggles or challenges you have with pursuing or completing the associate degree. Please give me an example and/or please explain X.	2) Who has helped you with the process of pursuing or completing the associate degree? Please explain the kind of help you have received. How did this support you?
3) What is your opinion about Infant/Toddler-Pk4 teachers attaining post-secondary education? Who else should attain post-secondary education? Any reasons for your answer?	2) In your opinion, how achievable do you think is it to attain an associate degree in early childhood education? Please explain.	3) What kind of suggestions for changes or improvements would you like to see for the OSSE mandate?
		4) What advice do you have for policymakers and leaders responsible for these changes and educational reforms?

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The participants were recruited during a 3-week period using a purposeful sampling technique through the District of Columbia database of early childhood facilities where this study took place. First, from the database, I identified and selected a list of center-based facilities that offered services for children from birth to age 4 years old. The centers' public or private status were not from early childhood centers in the District of Columbia considered as criteria for selection. Second, from the selected list, I emailed 60 random center-based directors explaining who I was, the purpose of the email, and the purpose of the study (see Appendix A); I asked them to share the attached recruitment invitation and the informed consent (see Appendix B) with the teachers by forwarding it to their email and posting it in their teachers' lounge room. The invitation (see Appendix B) listed the participation criteria and my contact information for interested participants to contact me if they have any questions. The interview questions (see Appendix C) asked participants about their current job position and the age of the children they work with, the status of their educational attainment process, and their years of experience working with young children. Interested participants completed and agreed to the informed consent before being considered to participate. Third, if in 2 weeks, I did not get a minimum of 12-15 responses, I was going to email 60 more random center-based directors. I repeated the process until a minimum of 12-15 interested participants were reached. The centers' public or private status was not considered as criteria for selection.

Participants who met the criteria were contacted using their preferred approved choice, a phone call, text, or email to schedule a 45–60-minute phone or video call interview on a date and time convenient for them. During this call, the interested participants were reminded of the purpose and rationale of the study. The interviews took place over a 3-week period to accommodate the participant's time availability. The interviews were conducted through telephone conferencing services. To ensure security and confidentiality, each participant was scheduled individually. Additionally, the participants were identified with an alphanumeric code TP01-TP12. Three days prior to the interview the participant received an email and text as a reminder of the interview date and time. Each interview was recorded. Member checking followed the completion of the data analysis which consisted of sending the participants a two-page summary of the findings to review and they had 1week to return it back to me.

On the day of the interview, I confirmed the participants' participation criteria then I followed the five stages of protocol suggested by Ryan and Dundon (2008) to build rapport with the participants which include (a) opening the interview, (b) searching for common ground, (c) establishing empathy, (d) embedding rapport, and (e) closing the interview (see Appendix D). During the opening stage, I (a) welcomed and thanked the participant {b) restated how long the interview will take, and (c) reminded the participants that the interview was being recorded, that participation was voluntary with no monetary compensation, and they have the right to opt-out at any time. Time for questions or concerns was offered before beginning the interview. For establishing rapport, I shared briefly about my past professional background as an infant /toddler-PK4

teacher and my current work as a professor, trainer, and consultant. I explained that their unique perspectives were fundamental to my study. All interview questions were open-ended and focused on capturing the perspectives of the infant/toddler-PK4 teachers on the challenges of attaining an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution and the type of support needed throughout the process. To establish credibility, I had two expert reviewers check the interview questions; both are early childhood professionals and are actively involved in the ECE field. Reviewer one has a Ph.D. and works in a local university as a professor and as the head of the Child and Human Development Department, and reviewer two, has an Ed.D. and works in a community college as the Chair of the ECE programs. The interviews were recorded yet I also took accurate notes for later reference. I manually transcribed the interviews word by word into a Microsoft Word MS document for data analysis and saved it in a secured cloud system. The documents were saved on my computer. I used a secured cloud-based storage solution DocuWare, to ensure secure digital destruction after keeping the confidential information stored for 5 years after the completion of the study.

Once the interviews were completed, I thanked the participants, debriefed them individually to allow opportunities for questions or concerns, and explain that if additional information was needed, I followed up with a phone call for clarification and verification. I also informed them that they were going to receive via email a two-page summary of the findings for review, and they had 1week to return it back to me. The participants also were informed that after the completion of the study, all the data were going to be kept confidential and secured at my home in a file cabinet for a 5-year period.

After this period, all data and related information to the study that has been transcribed on paper such as notes, and the responses from the participants will be electronically shredded and burned. Electronic files will be permanently deleted from the cloud-based storage where it has been previously stored.

Data Analysis Plan

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined data analysis as the process of examining collected data to find the answer to the research questions. Qualitative studies must use data analysis that is aligned with the research method to maintain integrity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The response to the interview questions were the main source of data. The interview consisted of 13 open-ended questions related to the research questions and the conceptual framework. The first step for the data analysis consisted of manually transcribing the answers to the question and organizing them into an MS summary table document soon after the interview ended. This summary table helped me to keep the information organized. I transcribed the interview verbatim which allowed me to become familiar with the data. Then the transcriptions were reviewed several times to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the data. The second step was coding the data using a content analyst and inductive coding procedures. The content analysis method is a flexible method and may be applied in a deductive or inductive manner (see Saldana, 2016). I did read the transcripts several times to identify codes that could emerge from similar phrases and words (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). No a priori codes or themes were established, instead, I did let the data guide me in terms of codes, categories, and themes as per Saldana (2021). Coding is most of the time a word or a short phrase assigned to a

portion of language categorized by an attribute (Saldana, 2008). To break larger domains into smaller categories, I relied on open coding. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) and Maxwell (2013) stated that open coding allows new codes to emerge from the data. Thereafter, the themes were generated, defined, and named.

To generate themes, I searched for categories in the open codes and raw data and formed new temporary themes. This process often includes an "inductive exploration of the data to identify recurring themes, patterns, or concepts and then describing and interpreting those categories" (Nassaji, 2015, p. 2). The temporary themes were organized into the main themes or subthemes. Miscellaneous were disregarded and discrepant data that contradicts the themes were fully described and discussed. Creswell (2014) noted that a study becomes more valid and realistic when contradictory evidence is presented and when the discrepancies are fully disclosed. Wolcott (1990) and Maxwell (2013) indicated that disclosing discrepancies does help the reader to make sense of the results, and to draw their own conclusions. The last step was writing the findings in an organized, factual, and objective manner. Therefore, I continued to review the codes and the themes and wrote a detailed synthesis to answer the research questions; I wrote the findings in a way that was meaningful, credible, and engaging to the readers supported with evidence of the process of how the research was done.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is essential to the integrity and credibility of the qualitative study and refers to the level of confidence used in the data analysis process to ensure the quality of the study (Cope, 2014; Pilot & Beck, 2014). Trustworthiness can be addressed in many

ways (Nickasch et al., 2016) however, Amankwaa (2016) stated that establishing a

protocol and procedures along with criteria are essential to establishing worthiness.

Therefore, qualitative research should be characterized by credibility, transferability,

dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I started with the credibility

of the participants that were randomly selected for this study. The participants were

infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in center-based settings in the District of Columbia,

the capital of the United States. The participants are currently pursuing the ECE associate

degree. To confirm the study's confirmability, I made sure none of the participants have

had any connection with me in the past. Therefore, I ensured that the findings reflect the

participants' opinions and experiences without adding my own personal biases. I kept a

reflective journal throughout the study process including the data collection and analysis.

I used member checking, and two EC professionals reviewed the results to establish the

authenticity of the participants. Key components such as credibility, transferability,

dependability, and confirmability are discussed in the following sections.

Credibility

Credibility is considered the most important criterion and refers to how truthful

the findings from the data analysis are (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck, 2012), and

the confidence the reader has in the truth of the findings (Amankwaa, 2016). Credibility

is also when the data has been accurately interpreted resulting from aligning the original

response of the participants with the results of the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To

establish credibility for this study I had two expert reviewers check the interview

questions and the findings; both are EC professionals and are actively involved in the

ECE field. Reviewer one has a Ph.D. and works in a local university as a professor and as the head of the Child and Human Development Department, and reviewer two, has an Ed.D. and works in a community college as the chair of the Early Childhood Education Programs. Additionally, I used member checking. Member checking is essential to create trustworthiness in quality research and consists of a process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of their statements and the findings of their data (Candela, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I conducted my own member checking by emailing the participants a two-page summary of the results of my study to allow them to review if their responses, experiences, and thoughts were accurately identified and stated in the findings. I kept a reflective journal where I recorded my own biases throughout the study.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings are useful to other people, groups, and settings (Polit & Beck, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Trochim, 2020). Also refers to the application of the findings in other contexts (Amankwaa, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2017) stated that to assure the transferability of a study, the researcher must provide rich descriptions of the findings. For transferability, I wrote rich and detailed descriptions of the participants, the procedures and protocols, and the contexts to facilitate other researchers to use my findings and do further research. I provided word-for-word direct quotes from the participants and use the reflexive journal to establish an audit trail. However, as stated by Korstjens and Moser (2018) it becomes the responsibility of the reader to read the rich

descriptions and use their own judgment to determine the transferability of the findings of

this study to settings. I presented clear and concise information from this study that could

be used in other contexts.

Dependability

Dependability is showing that the findings of the study are consistent and could

be repeated because of the stability of the data (Amankwaa, 2016; Pandey & Patnaik,

2014Polit & Beck, 2014). Dependability can be accomplished and established in several

ways. Cope (2014) indicated that the researcher can demonstrate the dependability of a

study by describing how conclusions and interpretations were established and confirming

that the findings resulted straight from the data. Demonstrating confirmability can be

exhibited by reporting rich descriptions from the participants that represent each

emerging theme (Cope, 2014). To confirm the dependability of this study I kept an audit

trail that documents a detailed description of all the steps I took throughout the research

process and included all the protocols and procedures including participation selection

and sampling procedure, data collection methods, and the data analysis process (Pandey

& Patnaik, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I made sure that interview questions were

consistently asked in the same manner for each participant to manage any possibility of

biases. In the reflexive journal, I kept detailed notes of the analysis process including

documenting the steps taken in the research from the beginning to the end. Keeping a

reflexive journal also helped me to manage my own biases. I also used member checking.

For member checking, I sent a two-page summary of the results of my study to the

participants to review if their responses, experiences, and thoughts were accurately

identified and stated in the findings. The participants were asked to return any corrections by email within 1 week of receiving them. Any correction was implemented to fidelity.

Confirmability

Confirmability according to Amankwaa, (2016) is a "degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest" (p. 1). Also, it ensures that the researcher can confirm the veracity of the data (Trochim, 2020). To establish confirmability, Lincoln and Guba, (1985) recommended conducting the following techniques: audit trail, and reflexivity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that an audit trail is a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of a research project to the development and reporting of findings. To assure confirmability, I kept a reflexive journal with detailed notes of the analysis process including documenting the steps taken in the research from the beginning to the end and checking and keeping records of my own bias. Being neutral and objective is essential to assure that the findings of the study were the result of the participant's responses. The data were continuously checked throughout the entire study and a detailed and organized audit trail to document the research process step by step. I had two expert reviewers check the findings for confirmability; both are EC professionals and are actively involved in the ECE field and I emailed a two-page summary of the findings of my study to the participants to allow them to determine if their responses, experiences, and thoughts were accurately identified and stated in the findings.

Ethical Procedures

To ensure ethical procedures for this study, the first step was to obtain approval

from the international review board (IRB) at Walden University through an application

process. I complied with any feedback received from the IRB process and I observed

Walden University's ethical requirements and completed any required training. If any

concerns regarding recruitment or data collection emerged, I would have contacted the

IRB using the Adverse Event Reporting Form. Upon receiving approval from Walden

University to conduct this study and before engaging in any data collection process, I

obtained informed consent from all the qualified participants. The informed consent had

information about the study, and how the personal data were to be kept confidential as

part of the confidentiality recommended guidelines. The names of the participants were

omitted, and I used the TP01 -TP12 alphanumeric codes instead to establish

confidentiality. At the time of the interviews, the participants were reminded that

participation was voluntary, and it was not financially compensated, and they had the

right to decline participation or withdraw from the interview at any time. If any teacher

opted out of the process, the interview was stop and another participant was selected. The

interviews were scheduled at times that were convenient for the participants. The

interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy and validity and labeled with the

teacher's TP01 -TP12 alphanumeric assigned code. The participants were informed of the

use of alphanumeric codes to minimize the risk of confidentiality and to protect their

privacy during the research process and in the written findings. All the data were

password secured on my computer. To ensure confidentiality always and especially when

reporting the results, all identifying factors of the participants were removed. The participants were informed that the data were going to be kept for five years in secured storage and at the end of that time, it will be shredded, and all the recordings will be permanently deleted.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of the infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in a center-based setting on the challenges of attaining an EC associate degree from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the help needed throughout the process. In Chapter 3 I presented in detail the design and rationale of the study including, the roles of the researchers, the procedures for recruitment, the participation selection, and the data collection process. The chapter also includes the instrumentation, data analysis plan, and trustworthiness; trustworthiness addresses how this study established credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Chapter 4 addressed the results of the data collected for this study and describe the setting and evidence of trustworthiness. Data collection and analysis will also be discussed.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of the infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in a center-based setting on the challenges of attaining an ECE associate degree from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the help needed throughout the process. The purposefully sampled participants were teachers working with children in the District of Columbia. The research questions were as follows:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in center-based settings on the challenges of attaining an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers in the District of Columbia working in center-based settings on the type of support they need to attain an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE?

In Chapter 4, I present the results as well as discuss the setting, data collection and analysis processes, and evidence of trustworthiness before concluding with a summary.

Setting

The setting for this qualitative research was the District of Columbia, which is the capital of the United States and located in the northeast part of the country. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 the estimated population of the District of Columbia is

about 672,000, and this population is approximately 41% Black, 38% White, 11% Hispanic, and about 5% Asian. There are over 44,000 children under the age of 5 years old, 61% of whom are under the age of 3. The EC system is comprised of home- and center-based facilities. Based on My Child Care DC 2023 (mychildcare.dc.gov) a local government agency, as 2022, there were about 400 licensed, center-based facilities. Centers operating under the public school system are not included in this number. There were 3,510 ECE teachers working in center-based facilities and 87% were people of color (Alliance for Early Success, 2022). As of 2016, the licensing agency in the District of Columbia mandated that infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in center-based settings must attain an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution (OSSE, 2022.

In this study, a total of 12 infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in center-based settings with children 0–4 years old from 12 different centers were interviewed. All participants met the following criteria: (a) were planning to return to school or were currently pursuing an AA degree in ECE; (b) had a minimum of 3 years of experience working with children; and (c) were working with children in any classroom categorized as the infant classroom, the toddler classroom, the PK3 classroom, or PK4 classroom. To establish confidentiality, I assigned the participants alphanumeric codes from TP01 through TP12 instead of names. Table 2 represents the participants' information.

Table 2

Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Years of experience	Job position	Classroom type	Children's age (months)	Pursuing an ECE AA
TP01	6	TA	PK-3	36–48	Yes
TP02	8	TA	Infants	1.5–9	Yes
TP03	15	LT	Inf/PK-3	1–36	Yes
TP04	4.5	LT	Toddlers	24–36	Yes
TP05	16	LT	Toddlers	24–30	Yes
TP06	8	LT	Toddlers	14–20	Yes
TP07	4	LT	PK-4	48–60	Yes
TP08	7	TA	Inf/Toddlers	1–36	Yes
TP09	17	LT	Inf/Toddlers	0–24	Yes
TP10	3	LT	Toddlers	18–24	Yes
TP11	6	LT	Infants	1.5–8	Yes
TP12	4	LT	Toddlers	13–20	Yes

Note. Inf = infants, LT = lead teacher, TA = teacher assistant.

The focus of the interviews was on the challenges infant/toddler-PK4 teachers faced regarding the mandate of attaining an AA degree in ECE by December 2023 to continue working with children in center-based EC centers. The 12 participants were all female teachers. During the interviews, they disclosed the following demographic information: They all were parents; some of them had young or grown-up children, some were single parents, and others were married. Of the 12 participants, 11 were native Spanish speaking, of which two spoke fluent English, two had advanced English skills, and seven were English language learners. Seven participants responded to the questions by mixing Spanish and English languages in their responses. One participant was native

English speaking. Of the 12 participants, seven identified themselves as immigrants, two

identified as second-generation immigrants born in the United States, and two identified

as immigrants who came to the country as young children. One self-identified herself as

native to the District of Columbia where the study took place. None of the participants

disclosed their racial backgrounds. Eleven participants stated that they had high school

diplomas and the child development associate credentials certificate, commonly known

as CDA. One said she only had a General Education Diploma. Three teachers stated that

they had a degree from their native countries; one has a certification in cosmetology,

another teacher had an AA in business and public accounting, and a third teacher said she

has an AA as an elementary school teacher but never worked as a teacher in her native

country. All the participants stated that this was the first time they attended a university to

pursue a degree, and all of them said they are the first ones in their family to attend

university. All the participants also identified themselves as nontraditional students. Eight

of the 12 teachers live and work in the District of Columbia where this study took place.

Data Collection

The data collection process started after I received approval from Walden

University IRB on November 8th, 2022. The IRB approval number was 11-08-22-

0547239. The data collection process started on November 16th, 2022, and was

completed on December 31st, 2022. I used purposeful sampling to recruit and interview a

minimum of 12 participants to collect data. From the My Child Care DC database, I

identified and selected a list of 60 random, center-based facilities that offered services for

children from birth to the age of 4 years old. After identifying a prospective center's

contact information, I sent an email explaining who I was, the purpose of the email, and the purpose of the study. I requested that the center share the attached recruitment invitation and the informed consent form (see Appendix B) with their teachers by forwarding it to the teachers' email addresses and posting it in their teachers' lounge room. The invitation (see Appendix B) listed the participation criteria and my contact information for interested participants to contact me if they had any questions. The informed consent form (see Appendix C) contained an explanation of the inclusion criteria and questions regarding their current job position, the age of the children they worked with, their educational attainment status, and their years of experience working with young children. Interested participants completed and agreed to the informed consent before they were considered for participation. I scheduled interviews with potential participants for a period of 3 weeks from the time their consent was received.

At the end of almost 3 weeks, 18 teachers had responded to the invitation. Fifteen of the 18 responders met all the criteria for participation in the research study prior to being interviewed. Because the teachers were busy finalizing their school semester during the second week of December, I scheduled the 15 interviews for mid-December.

On the dates of the interviews, all but two participants canceled their participation; a storm affected the region and left the rest of the participants with no internet and electricity. Thirteen interviews were postponed for a later time. On the day of the rescheduled interviews, only 10 teachers kept their scheduled interview appointments. Three teachers did not show and did not respond to my texts and calls to participate in the interview. One participant returned my call later stating she got sick and had lost her

voice but could be available later if I still needed it. I conducted the interviews individually, one teacher at a time. The same interview protocol was used for each of the participants.

I interviewed 10 teachers on the same day between 8:00 a.m. and 8:30 p.m. The interviews were conducted at different times throughout the day and at the convenience of each participant. The last interview was scheduled for 8:30 PM at the request of the participant who claimed that by that time, her child would be in bed, and she would be free to do the interview without interruptions. I closed each interview by thanking each participant and informing them that I may follow up with a brief phone call if additional information was needed. I also informed them that when I finished analyzing the data, they would receive a two-to-three-page summary of the findings for their review and that they would have 1 week to review the summary and get back to me with any changes or revisions. I did not encounter unusual circumstances during the data collection except for having to reschedule the interviews with the participants for a later time because of the regional storm.

I followed the interview protocol that I had developed during my proposal writing process (see Appendix D). All 12 participants were asked the same interview questions. The interview lengths ranged from 45 to 74 minutes. I audio recorded the interviews and transcribed them into a Microsoft Word document. This process helped me to gain a sense of the data gathered and identify possible patterns. I also took notes because I wanted to capture every detail of their answers to the questions. The audio recordings have been saved on my personal computer, and I made a copy to a flash drive.

Data Analysis

My data analysis process unfolded in the following order: transcribing the interviews, organizing the data, open coding the data, generating themes, reviewing the themes, naming the themes, and writing the findings. I transcribed the interviews by listening to the audio recording of each interview. Transcribing each interview verbatim allowed me to become familiar with the data. I then re-read the transcripts several times to ensure that all important information was identified. To organize and sort the data, I used a Microsoft Word table. I began coding in two stages, the first cycle and then the second cycle; each cycle allowed me to filter the actual words and phrases of the participants so I could get a good summary of the data. Using open coding, I searched through the data for repeated words, phrases, or keywords that followed a pattern and could be grouped into categories and then onto themes. This was done multiple times. Next, I axial coded by examining all the data carefully line by line to ensure emerging codes were not missed and to check for discrepant data. According to Esterberg (2002), qualitative data should be analyzed by being examined closely line by line multiple times if possible. I did not look for priori codes because they were not established for this study.

To confirm the dependability of this study, I kept an audit trail that provides a detailed description of all the steps taken throughout the research process and included all the protocols and procedures, such as the participation selection and sampling procedures, data collection methods, and the data analysis process (see Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016; Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). I also used reflexive journaling to limit my own

bias, note my feelings, and document all the steps of the research process.

   As I analyzed the data, the frequency and similarities of phrases and keywords

helped me to identify patterns and themes that addressed my research questions. I

highlighted codes and grouped them based on their similarities. As I continued with the

reviewing and analysis process, the categories and themes started to become evident. All

the codes were typed out and then formed into categories as I transferred them into a

table (see Table 3). During this process, I started to relate categories and themes (see

Saldana, 2022). The final step of coding was to identify the themes based on the patterns

of the categories. To identify the themes and later name them, I followed the same

process of open coding: typing all codes, forming categories, and then highlighting the

ones that presented similarities and repeated patterns.

Table 3

Open Codes and Categories

Open codes	Participants	Categories
"I don't have a computer." "We don't have internet at home."	PT01, PT03-PT08	Access to technology and computer abilities
"I am not good at using a computer." "Learning to type has been hard"	PT01-PT05	
'It was difficult to qualify for the program, I got a waiver for one of the requirements." "The registration process took a long time." "I have to request my high school transcripts from my country and took a long time." "Completing all the registration paperwork was difficult and took a long time"	PT01-PT10	College admission and registration process
"I don't speak English fluently completing the paperwork was very challenging."	PT01-PT07	Language barriers
""I am spending less time with my family because I am doing homework." "Learning APA has been hard and frustrating." "Reading and summarizing long articles is difficult? "Many times, I just don't understand the homework." "I take longer to understand and do homework." "I don't learn fast, I am old."	PT01-PT12	College readiness for nontraditional student
"I needed help understanding the requirements but there was no help available." "There was no bilingual helper. "There is no one to help us." There is no one person on charge that can help us." "They take a long time to answer emails."	PT01-PT12	Lack of institutional support

To develop the themes, I examined and reviewed the categories several times while looking for patterns among them. This process allowed me to create temporary themes. Some of the temporary themes were access to technology and computer abilities, college admission and registration process, language barriers, college readiness for non - traditional student, lack of institutional support. The naming of the themes was done by reviewing the patterns on the coding and the categories until the essence of each theme was defined as recommended by Braun and Clark (2006). When connecting the themes to the research questions and the conceptual framework the main key themes that emerged from the analysis were the following: challenges with technology, challenges navigating the college system, challenges with language barriers, challenges with college academic readiness, and challenges with limited college support and guidance. Each theme resulted from the codes in relationship to what I considered the pillars of my study, the research questions, the conceptual framework, and the literature review. Table 4 illustrates categories and themes. Throughout the process of data analysis, I did not encounter evidence of discrepant data. If discrepant data had been evident, I would have taken the responsibility to disclose, describe, and discuss the inconsistency of the findings.

Table 4

Categories and Themes

Categories	Themes
Access to technology and computer abilities	Challenges with technology
College admission and registration process	Challenges navigating the college system
Language barriers	Challenges with language barriers
College readiness for nontraditional students	Challenges with college academic readiness
Lack of institutional support	Challenges with limited college support and guidance

Results

In this basic qualitative study, I explored the perspectives of infant/toddler PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in a center-based setting on the challenges of attaining an EC associate degree as mandated by OSSE and, their perspectives on the kind of support teachers need throughout the process. For the data collection, I used semi-structured interviews which allowed me to collect rich and detailed data from 12 infant/toddler-Pk4 teachers from the District of Columbia working center-based facilities. In this section, I discussed the results of the interview. No unexpected themes emerged.

Theme 1: Challenges with Technology

Multiple challenges were mentioned by the participants throughout the interviews as one of the first challenges faced when deciding to attain an associate degree. The

bigger concerns for most of the participants were access to computer devices, access to

the internet, and their ability to use computers. Several participants confessed that they

did not own a computer device and did not have reliable internet services. Six

participants share that they have a type of services for low-income families called

Essentials which is sponsored by a well-known internet provider but is very slow and

often do not support more than two devices. The participants' level of computer literacy

was also mentioned as being a big challenge and varied from zero to intermediate level of

competency. The participants mentioned that they specially struggled navigating the

university blackboard system. The following paragraphs briefly describe the participants'

perspectives on these challenges.

Access to Computer Devices

Before COVID-19, local universities adopted optional digital formats to conduct

educational business. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, access to local

universities became 100 percent digital, and any required paperwork and application

forms were accessed and submitted electronically. Additionally, all classes became

virtual. Therefore, participants needed to have access to a reliable computer device.

Seven participants expressed that they did not own a computer. Several participants

indicated they had been using their child's tablet. The participants shared that their

child's tablet was a loaner from the school that was given to them during the Covid-19

pandemic time. PT04 said, "I normally waited for my daughter to finish her homework so

I could use her tablet." Many participants said the university had a laptop loaner

program, but they have not been able to get one yet. Participants waited for weeks to get

one of the loaner devices from the university. TP01 and PT12- disclosed "While I waited for a laptop, I used my phone to participate in class, but was not easy to do everything I needed to do for the class." TP05 discussed "I was able to attend class using the phone, but it was really hard to do all my homework on the phone." The participants shared the different issues of not having a computer device and how it was a challenge in the process of attaining the associate degree.

Five participants expressed that when entering the university system, they did not have internet services at home. PT04 expressed "The internet service was too expensive." PT06 discussed "There was only one internet provider in my area, and they only sell internet through bundled packages and is way too expensive." PT09 said that she had internet from a service called Essentials but the "connection at a time was very bad." Essentials is an internet program for low-income families sponsored by a commercial internet carrier. PT11 stated, "Many times my computer goes black, and I have to reboot it to make it work properly." Participants shared different issues with the internet services citing that it "was not always reliable", there are too many users at home, and accessing the internet many times can be very slow. Many participants shared that often they switch from the computer to their phone to get a better signal but working on the telephone comes with challenges and limitations.

Computer Abilities

This section addressed the participants' perspectives on their own ability to use computers and how has been a challenge in the process to attain the associate degree. Seven participants expressed they do not feel confident using technology even on a

personal basis. Four participants shared that they only have basic computer skills. PT01-PT07 discussed their typing skills are limited. PT05 said, "I use one finger from each hand only." PT05 said, "I never used a computer before; I don't have one at home." PT08 stated, "I have used the tablet at work to take pictures of my students, but my colleague does the other things." All participants mentioned that they have not had any technical training in how to use computers. Participants expressed that they don't have enough skills to use modern technology. Three participants mentioned that they have used their phones only to make phone calls and send texts but now they have been using it to attend virtual classes but is not the same when using either desktops or laptops. PT02 and PT10 shared, "The phone screen is really small, I cannot see well everything the teacher shows when sharing her screen."

Theme 2: Challenges Navigating the College System

This theme dealt with the participants' challenges in the admission and registration process of attaining the associate degree. The participants admitted that colleges normally have resources to support the application process but is up to the student to figure them out independently. All the participants expressed that the admission and registration process was difficult, and they felt overwhelmed with the process. All the participants mentioned that there was limited information or guidance on where to go or whom to contact to start the enrollment process. All participants mentioned that there were two parts to the process of enrollment, the admission, and the registration; the admission was merely to fill out some forms to check if the participants qualified for the program and then the registration process consisted of submitting a

different kind of paperwork. Participants stated that they had limited knowledge of where

to start and could not locate a point of contact to get help. Participants stated that their

workplace offered no help.

Admission Process

Most of the participants expressed that they had to meet a series of qualifications

before enrolling in the local university because they were receiving full scholarships.

Eight of the participants shared that the most challenging part was disclosing their

immigration status. PT07 said "no tenemos papeles buenos para trabajar." Five

participants mentioned that they only have a permit to work. Five participants expressed

they experienced stress and fear. Three teachers mentioned that they got a waiver for

their legal status requirement. They did not disclose who granted the waiver. PT03 stated,

"I did not pass the English test." Most of the participants said that completing the

admission process required taking time off from work which is always a challenge.

Several participants identified filling out forms as stressful because they were "afraid to

put information in the wrong place." Many participants said they asked for help from a

friend or their children who spoke English.

Registration Process

Eight participants shared that this process lasted for them more than 6

months due to the conflict between work and family schedules and lapses in waiting time

to receive their transcripts and other documents from their native country. PT06, PT01,

and PT07 described the challenges of balancing time between work, home

responsibilities, and the registration process. PT01 said, "The challenge for me was

finding the time to work on the process; I work a full-time job, and when I got home, I have to take care of my children, they needed me." PT06 expressed, "After working all day and then caring for my children, in the end, I was tired with no energy to work on the process." PT07 shared, "When at work I used my break time to work completing paperwork, but I only have 30 minutes break, so the process was slow for me." Additional services such as translating documents and education evaluation also added to the length of the process. PT02 said, "While the university provided a list of language translation agencies, it was up to me to call and find the information about their services." Seven participants said that they contacted people in their native countries to get their birth certificates, high school diplomas, and transcripts. PT03 expressed, "I called my brother and asked for help, but he was not able to get any of my paperwork until I sent him a notarized letter signed by me and the attorney." The participants expressed that this process was very expensive for them because they had to pay an attorney, and then send a Power of Attorney document to do the transactions on their behalf. PT05 said, "I did not use regular mail to send my request, it will never make it because people steal the mail. I used a private carrier, and their fees are very expensive." One participant said that after so many efforts with no results, she flew to her native country to get all the paperwork because it was very difficult to overcome the bureaucracy of attaining them through other people. It took 2 weeks to comply with the process because documents were not available right away. Seven of the participants have their documents translated from Spanish to English by an accredited and certified agency. This process was expensive and took time. PT04 said, "The translation agencies charged per word, not per document, so I spent a lot

of money getting all my documents translated." All the participants identified other barriers that slowed the registration process even more; applying for financial aid and scholarships, cohort and class placement, and availability of classes taught in Spanish. All the participants expressed they never met with a counselor to guide them on which classes to take or to develop an academic plan.

Theme 3: Challenges with Language Barriers

This theme dealt with the language barriers encountered by the participants through the process of attaining the associate degree. Ten participants worked for Spanish immersion centers and speaking English is not required to do their job. Seven participants expressed that they do not have enough English language skills to communicate with English speakers. PT04 and PT06 shared "I can say a few words in English, but I can never hold a conversation." Seven participants said they were challenged with filling up forms because they were in English. PT02 shared that she asked her children for help. All participants shared that they were challenged to respond to important emails in a timely manner due to the language barrier. Seven participants said they could not directly communicate with the university because there was nobody they could communicate with in Spanish. Seven participants identified a person who for confidentiality purposes, was identified as Melissa as the one helping them overcome the language barrier. PT07 said, "Melissa was fully bilingual, and helped me to complete my registration process."

Theme 4: Challenges with College Readiness

The participants identified themselves as full-time working adults and non-traditional students. Seven participants indicated that they graduated from high school in

their native countries "a long time ago." All participants expressed being motivated to attend college but identified themselves as lacking college-readiness abilities. Six participants considered that they were not well prepared academically to comply with the level of writing required in class. TP03, TP004, and TP06 expressed that learning American Psychology Association APA format style and summarizing 20-page-long articles has been very hard. Several participants said they have never written an essay before entering college. Many participants said putting extra effort to get schoolwork done because it takes longer for them to research and investigate topics and then to write an essay in a coherent way TP05, TP09, TP11, and TP12 recognized that is challenging to learn new complex topics such as learning theories. TP09 shared that she still struggles to remember Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories.

Participants shared taking longer time with technical reading assignments. Two participants said often they have to read material more than once because they are challenged to understand what they read. PT07 said "is a different kind of information and the level of the language is different. Some words I don't know what they mean." All participants shared they faced challenges doing activities that required summarizing, contrasting, comparing, and analyzing skills; three participants said they learned these skills in high school, but they have not had too much opportunity to practice them. PT10 said that "often my teachers required students to do online research for papers and projects, but I struggle getting them done properly." Several participants admitted having a lack of academic readiness, and that has hindered their academic success. PT03, PT04, and PT08 said their assignments are not the best and their grades have not been higher

than a C. Seven participants said not feeling confident in their own intellectual abilities and they have to work hard to succeed. Two participants said they ask for help or work with other colleagues to complete assignments. Participants explained that the professors expect them to have college skills and they seldom receive help from them.

Theme 5: Challenges with Limited College Support and Guidance

The participants stated that they have limited knowledge of where to start and could not locate a point of contact to get help. The participants acknowledged that the university had some support systems such as admission counseling, but they did not know how to access them effectively. All participants attended school virtual or in-person during the evening hours and they said that seldom there is someone to help them after 5:00 p.m. with school-related issues. Seven participants expressed facing challenges with limited college support and guidance that could speak Spanish. Eleven participants said they have waited several days for an email to be answered. Ten of the 12 participants identified one key person who helped them the most. In this study for confidentiality purposes, she was identified as Melissa. Melissa was temporarily hired by one of the local universities to support the recruitment of Spanish-speaking infant/toddler-PK4 teachers working in the District of Columbia. Melissa conducted community meetings and took time to visit as many centers as possible in the District of Columbia to inform teachers about the process of attaining the ECE associate degree and recruit them for the program. All 10 participants praised Melissa for all the work she did for each one of them. She helped them with the process of qualifying for the program, the registration process, answering emails, answering questions, calling with important information,

reminding them of tasks that needed to be done, helping with computers, translating

information and important documents, filling paperwork, calling the university in their

behalf, and at most helping with the transition to becoming university students. PT05

shared "Melissa came to my center a few times to help me complete the paperwork."

PT03 said, "I was about to give up because I was not getting my transcripts in a timely

manner, but Melissa encouraged me during this time to be patient." PT06 Shared "It was

difficult for me to gather all the paperwork to enroll in the university, but Melissa helped

me with the process. She was really a mentor. She really seemed to care for us."

Eleven participants stated that Melissa was the only person helping them with the

process, but once she transitioned to another job, they had nobody to help. Eleven

participants stated that a replacement for Melissa was hired but she did not speak English;

seven participants expressed not having a person who was bilingual made things more

difficult for them. Seven participants stated that they have never had access to an advisor.

Eight participants expressed that they often had questions or had a need to address

academic issues but there was no one to assist. Participants said that they emailed the

head of the department, but they never received an answer to their emails or calls. Six

participants said that on several occasions they went to the building but did not get help

either because there was no one to help. Most of the participants expressed that their

educational institution had provided limited support and guidance to the students. One

participant said, "There was no one there for us, was like they don't want us there." One

participant said, "I don't feel a sense of belonging in this university, this is sad because

we are the one who works in early childhood centers in this city, and we are the ones who

are mandated on attaining education." Three participants said that it seemed that the university was not ready for them. Several participants expressed that they were promised to be supported throughout the college process, but they got very little help from the educational institution especially after Melissa transitioned to another job. The participants recognized that Melissa's role made the process for them less challenging.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility refers to how accurately the findings have been interpreted from the data analysis and how they align with the participants' original responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Polit & Beck, 2012). To establish credibility for this study I first conducted one-on-one interviews with the participants. I presented a rich demographic description of the participants. I used member checking, to affirm the authenticity of the findings. A two-page summary of the findings was sent via email to the participants for review and asked them to return it within a week. None of the participants expressed concerns about the accuracy of the finding nor requested corrections. I had two ECE professional experts review the findings for biases; both are early childhood professionals and are actively involved in the ECE field. I also kept a reflective journal throughout the interview and data analysis process which helped me to examine my own biases including personal assumptions to the ideas and responses of the participants.

Transferability

To assure the transferability of a study, the researcher must provide rich and detailed descriptions of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2017). To ensure the transferability of this study I provided the reader with rich and detailed descriptions of the participant's responses, their demographics, sample, and methods along with the procedures and protocols, so researchers can use them at their own discretion in other contexts or do further research. Additionally, I provided direct quotes and coding examples from the data analysis process. Since transferability is determined by the reader and not by the researcher (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), I had two ECE professional experts review the findings for biases and to help establish credibility in the data analysis process.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the data collection being consistent with the findings of the study, and they could be repeated because of the stability of the data (Amankwaa, 2016; Pandey & Patnaik, 2014 (Polit & Beck, 2014;). To establish dependability I used three strategies, audit trail, reflexive journaling, and member checking. I kept an audit trail by documenting the process of data collection and a clear description of all the steps I took to analyze the data. I used reflexive journaling to limit my own bias, note my feelings, and document all the steps of the research process. Additionally, it helped me to make sure that the interview questions were consistent for each participant. To increase dependability, I recorded and transcribed the interviews. I wrote direct quotes that were

said by the participants to better convey their responses in the analysis. Member checking assured the consistency of the participants' responses.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the level of the researchers' neutrality represented in the results of a study; results should represent the participants' responses and not the bias, motivation, or interest of the researcher (Amankwaa, 2016). My research study was delimited to infants/toddlers-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in center-based settings that were under any of the following three scenarios: (a) pursuing an early childhood associate degree from a post-secondary accredited institution, or (b) were not enrolled in any program, or (c) were planning to return to school to pursue an early childhood associate degree. I chose only infants/toddlers-PK4 teachers because the educational requirement mandated by OSSE (2016) applies only to infants/toddlers-PK4 teachers from the EC workforce. To establish confirmability for this study I used the following techniques as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985): audit trail, and reflexivity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that an audit trail is a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of a research project to the development and reporting of findings. I provided a detailed description of the research process, and I also recorded the interviews. I made sure that my interpretation of the findings was drawn strictly from the responses of the participants. I kept a reflexive journal where I wrote detailed notes of my reflections, assumptions, my own feelings, and my experience throughout the process of the study; this way helped me to limit my biases while I kept neutral and objective during the entire analysis process which was pivotal when

analyzing the participants' responses. A two-page summary of the findings was sent to the participants to confirm consistency with their responses.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of the infant/toddlers-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in center-based settings on the challenges of attaining an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the support needed throughout the process. In Chapter 4, I presented the setting, the data collection, data analysis, results, and evidence of trustworthiness. From the data analyses, I created five themes that capture the challenges of all participants in attaining the associate in early childhood education. Chapter 5 provided the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and the conclusion of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of the infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in center-based settings on the challenges of attaining an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the support needed throughout the process. The research study was necessary because infant/toddler-PK4 teachers are mandated to attain at a minimum, an ECE associate degree, as part of the new educational requirements to work with young children in center-based settings in the District of Columbia. According to Kaplan (2018), there is limited data on how educational mandates affect infant/toddler-PK4 teachers. This study has the potential to guide stakeholders in creating effective systems of action and support when implementing policies and mandates related to educational reforms.

Data were collected from 12 participants using semistructured interviews. The participants provided their perspectives on the mandate of attaining an associate degree in ECE and the support that they need during the process. I analyzed the collected data using open coding, resulting in five emergent themes that addressed the research questions:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in center-based settings on the challenges of attaining an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District

of Columbia working in center-based settings on the type of support they need to

attain an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as

mandated by OSSE?

The themes are as follows: (a) challenges with technology, (b) challenges navigating the

college system, (c) challenges with language barriers, (d) challenges with academic

readiness, and (e) challenges with limited college support and guidance. In this chapter, I

present my interpretation of the findings, the limitations of the study, my

recommendations for future research, the implications of the findings, and conclusions.

Interpretation of the Findings

Proponents of quality in ECE have long argued that teachers' preparation can

have a transformative power in supporting the teaching and learning process of young

children (Branscomb & Ethridge, 2010; Coleman, 2020; Han et al., 2019; Schacter et al.,

2019). The interviews in the current study offered insight into the perspectives of

infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in center-based

settings on the challenges of attaining an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary

accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the support needed throughout the

process. The five emergent themes in the current study were in accordance with several

challenges that previous researchers had identified as hindrances for EC teachers to

continue postsecondary education, such as being adult learners, lack of academic

experience, and language and cultural barriers among others (see Ackerman, 2005;

Sosinsky & Gillian, 2011). I provide an interpretation of each theme in the following

subsections. Lewin's (1947) three-step model theory of change was the conceptual framework that supported this study and guided the interpretation of the results.

Theme 1: Challenges with Technology

Results from this study showed that from enrollment to registration, the participants faced challenges with technology. Access to computer devices and the ability to use them were the most predominant barriers that emerged from the participants' responses. All the participants in this study valued the importance of using technology but acknowledged they did not own computer devices and had not taken training in how to use them. The participants cited the cost of the internet as one of the reasons they did not have this service at home. Participants also discussed that device ownership did not fit into their budget, and they lacked the ability to use the devices. These findings resonate with those of previous studies that have examined the challenges families have with technology access and confirmed that computers remain out of the reach for millions of Americans (see Martinez, 2022). While owning a smartphone is common for most families, owning a laptop or a computer device is rare (Feldman, 2019). According to the Office of Policy Development and Research (2016), when compared with higher income groups, low-income households are impacted by having lower rates of in-home internet connectivity. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2015, 35% of families with school-age children did not have access to an internet connection at home, and not much change has occurred since then (Anderson & Perrin, 2018; Vogels, 2021). Zickuhr (2013) stated that access to the internet and digital devices are closely connected to ethnic groups

characterized by inequalities in income, age, education, immigration status, race, and geographic areas.

Findings from the current study show participants have been challenged with their inability to use computers efficiently. The participants discussed learning how to use computers has been a real challenge and frustrating and reported that part of the challenge was due to their lack of knowledge and training. However, they partially overcame the challenge by relying on family members and colleagues to help them. The participants acknowledged that everything in the class is done on computers, and they had to learn how to use them. The participants conveyed that basic training in how to use computers could have been very helpful. These findings align with previous research by Alexander (2004) who stated that mobile technology is transforming the educational world and greatly affecting learning environments, campus life, and especially pedagogy in higher education. In 2020, the Public Broadcast System stated that the continuity of education was possible only if people had a computer and know how to use it; connection to affordable home broadband is also important (Martinez, 2022). College students are expected to have a variety of digital skills and good levels of technology literacy before entering college (Valtonen et al., 2019); however, universities have to stop assuming that all the students are knowledgeable in using computers (Losh, 2021). Colleges serve a large population of nontraditional students, and these students do not always have experience with computers or are they comfortable with their level of digital literacy (Losh, 2021). Previous studies have shown that using digital technology is one of the most common barriers faced by nontraditional students and can be a daunting issue (Kuo

& Belland, 2019; MacDonald, 2018). According to Lewin's (1947) theory of change, the unfreezing step in any change process is characterized by the discomfort of embracing the need to change and the frustration in the process of learning new information to accommodate the change.

Theme 2: Challenges Navigating the College System

The unfamiliar environments and processes of higher education can have a detrimental psychological impact on students and, even at a deeper level, on students from nontraditional backgrounds (Falk et al., 1978) where even completing forms from the application form can be overwhelming (MacDonald, 2022). The participants in the current study identified themselves as the first in their families to attend college and discussed the opportunity to attend college as a positive experience. The participants expressed experiencing challenges and feeling despair in navigating the college system. The participants reported feeling overwhelmed with the many steps involved in the process of entering college and the requirements of the application. When discussing the process, participants stated that the most pressing challenges were writing the application essays, completing forms and applications, collecting letters of recommendation, having individual interviews, and getting the required transcripts. The participants also discussed that writing essays required skills that they either did not have or did not remember because they had not been in school for a long time.

The findings regarding the challenges encountered by the participants aligned with a study by Meuleman et al. (2014) who stated that students who are the first in their families to go to university are part of group of nontraditional students who may struggle

with the transition to university. Witti (2016) said that the experience of applying for college can be intimidating, particularly for older, nontraditional students because they may feel at a disadvantage. Qi and Campbell (2022) stated that navigating the college process is challenging for EC teachers and especially for those who identified as immigrants and linguistically diverse. Lieberman et al. (2020) stated that navigating higher education systems can be challenging and overwhelming, especially if students have been out of school for years or are the first in their families to attend college. Several studies reviewed in Chapter 2 acknowledged that professionals working as EC teachers could be challenged by college systems in their process of attaining postsecondary education (Al-Hassan, 2019; Barnes et al., 2018; Hackmack, 2019; Huss-Keller, 2019; Katz et al., 2021; Keay et al. 2019; Kirk, 2018; McDevitt, 2020; Rogers, 2021; Wong & Chiu, 2018). Lewin (1947) noted that during the unfreezing step of change, individuals could experience a disruption in their human stability, producing complex psychological conditions until equilibrium is achieved. Bandura (1977) stated the equilibrium of change is achieved when individuals acquired a certain level of information. Results from the current study showed that participants felt more confident in navigating the process when they received help and acknowledged that they need to have more support to navigate the college process.

Theme 3: Challenges with Language Barrier

In higher education, language learners are seldom included in college conversations about diversity, inclusion, and equity; therefore, they do not get equitable language accommodations (Brown, 2022). Twenty-seven percent of professionals

working in EC centers as teachers speak a language other than English, and institutions of

higher education do not have the capacity to meet the students' language needs

(Lieberman et al., 2020). The findings of the current study show that a language barrier is

among the multiple challenges faced by the participants. Seven of the participants were

English language learners and expressed experiencing difficulties through each step of

the process of entering college and relying on bilingual people to help them complete the

process. Proficiency in English was needed to communicate, complete forms, and comply

with other college tasks. The seven participants recognized lacking needed English

proficiency skills in writing, speaking, and understanding and stated that the university

has not been linguistically responsive to them. These findings concur with Stechuck et al.

(2019) who recommended that higher education institutions should revise their teacher

programs to assure they are culturally and linguistically responsive to all students,

including the syllabi and the requirements for the program. Brown (2022) stated that

often English language learners are a population that does not have very much presence

on campus.

Three participants shared that they experienced linguistic intolerance because of

their inability to communicate when inquiring about evaluating credentials from another

country. The participants said that not speaking the language fluently hindered them from

asking questions, and they were fearful of making mistakes or not being understood.

Additionally, seven of the 12 participants were delayed in completing the required

paperwork until finding someone who could help or assure them that it was correctly

done. These findings are aligned with those of Meuleman et al. (2015) who stated that the

lack of linguistic capital hinders the language learner from complying with all the college demands or requirements in a timely manner. According to Sandstrom and Schilder (2021), in the United States, the professionals working in ECE are racially and ethnically diverse and often English language learners. Pruneda-Hernandez (2020) stated that the majority of ECE teachers attending a community college are nontraditional students who are immigrants and are non-English speakers.

Stechuck et al. (2019) stated that 1 in 5 EC teachers is Latina, and while they bring a wealth of unique experience, they do not have a higher education degree and often are language learners. According to T.E.A.C.H. (2018), ECE teachers who were language learners attending college faced the following challenges: "finding a college advisor who could speak their native language, and finding in-class translation services, textbooks, readings, and courses taught in their home languages." (Lieberman, et al., 2020, p. 8). Language barriers have been a challenge in the educational systems for a long time and need to be addressed especially when the U.S. postsecondary institutions have reached a new high in Hispanic enrollment, which has increased from 1.5 million in 2000 to 3.8 million in 2019 (Mora, 2022), and 35% of Latina women were attending college at least part time in 2021(Galván & Contreras, 2023). Lewin (1947) noted that in order for social change to effectively take place, it is important to understand the dynamics that characterize the group that is required to comply with the change. Furthermore, Lewin cited the importance of supporting diverse groups to assure that justice and equality were carefully observed to improve their human conditions.

Theme 4: Challenges with College Readiness

Evitts (2022) stated that college students face many barriers in higher education however, nontraditional students seemed to suffer the impact the most. Among the barriers are the lack of college readiness and consequently lack of self-confidence which is hard to overcome and translates into the student's low confidence to perform effectively in their academics (Munro, 2011; O'Neil & Thomson, 2013). Results from this study showed teachers faced challenges with academic readiness varying from writing essays to learning APA guidelines to the inability to synthesize and analyze information. These findings concur with a study by MacDonald (2018) which stated that non-traditional students when entering college could face struggles with taking notes, reading assignments, preparing for exams, and learning academic writing. All participants from this study identified struggling with complying with the teachers' requirements for assignments that demonstrate the academic competence required from post-secondary students. All participants shared they felt not well prepared with college knowledge and skill to undertake the demands of being a college student. When discussing college readiness, participants stated that they completed their general studies or high school a few years prior to entering college and they do not remember learning about APA or writing essays. Seven participants stated they graduated from high school in another country and the focus was not on college preparation.

Academic proficiency and competence for adult learners as required by higher education programs is very difficult (NIER, 2020; O'Neil &Thomson, 2013). Prior studies stated that there is a gap, particularly with older learners with competency in

academic knowledge or college knowledge which is known as the institutional process (Hochlander et al., 2003; Hooker & Brand, 2010). This challenge becomes more acute when students are the first in their families to attend college or are attending college years after they finished high school when students might need to refresh in academic skills (Erisman, & Steele, 2015; Mac Donald, 2022; MacDonald, 2018); for older adults, their academic skills "feel a little rusty" (McWhirter, 2022). Participants acknowledged that the university offered some academic support to all students, but they were unable to access them because of other challenges such as language barriers, time, and availability of suitable schedules.

Colleges have long understood that college success is linked to college readiness (Chen, 2017; Sedlacek, 2011; Summerfield, 2011). College readiness is beyond transcripts and grades; is about reading a variety of types of materials, being able to locate, organize and quantify data, understanding and interpret charts, graphics, and tables, being able to understand scientific knowledge, and having the ability to write fluently in different writing modes (ACT, 2013; Conley, 2012; Ely, 1997; Mishkind, 2014). Studies have shown that the lack of these skills represents a major challenge for both entry and success of adult learners in higher education centers and can eventually hinder college success (Chen, 2017; Conley, 2012; Munro, 2011; Wong, 2018) however, the appropriate training on those skills could yield optimal educational outcomes for adult learners (ACT, 2013; Carpentieri et al. 2018). The participants, especially seven out of 12, expressed not feeling confident in the adequacy of their study skills and that has been a challenge faced throughout the process of attending college; however, they hope to

improve as they continue their education. The lack of college readiness can even be worse for language learners as they can feel confused (MacDonald, 2022). Participants conveyed that they need support with college skills and knowledge that could help them to acquire the

necessary readiness to be more successful in their school assignments. Lewin (1947) stated that all forms of learning and changes at the individual, group, or societal levels start with frustrations and discomforts that cause learning anxiety. Dealing with learning anxiety is key to producing change. People in general fear to been seen as less than good or effective in their communities, therefore, is important for them to build psychological safety in order to feel motivated to change (Lewin, 1947)

Theme 5: Challenges with Limited College Support and Guidance

McWhirter (2022) stated that lack of support is often one of the challenges faced by nontraditional students. The findings of this study show that all participants have experienced limited or noninstitutional support and felt under supported while questioning the college's level of readiness to accommodate them. The participants felt that the lack of support hindered the fluidity of the process of change they have already embraced. Lewin (1947) noted that this level of fluidity is fundamental for the individual pursuing change to feel that they are moving forward to achieve their desired goal. This level of fluidity does help the individual to feel more in control and feel moving forward in the process of change. The findings of this study also concurred with Raaper et al. (2022) who claimed that nontraditional students deserve further attention because it is less likely for them to feel at home on campus and interact with traditional forms of

university life and support. These findings also align with prior studies from Quiggins et

al. (2016) who discussed that colleges and universities have failed to provide their

nontraditional online students with the proper support and services they need to succeed

in their educational experience. Carter (2018) and Osan et al. (2017) have found adult

learners attending post-secondary education in American institutions have consistently

been under-supported. MacDonald (2022) stated that adult learners need all the support

possible, especially because navigating the college process can be overwhelming and

could make them feel lost and confused.

All participants identified themselves as being non-traditional students. According

to Tan and Carney-Crompton (2002) nontraditional students have stated that systems of

support are very important for their success in attending school. The participants of this

study found limited or no help when needed and shared that no advisors have been

assigned to them. This concurs with previous findings that demonstrated that "student

support networks in university settings were rather small in scale (Raaper et al., 2022, p.

416) and "it raises concerns about the university's ability to reach students in need"

(Raaper et al., 2022, p. 413). Ribaeus and Löfdahl Hultman (2022) said that universities

are investing in creating systems to support their non-traditional students as the

unfamiliar environments and process of higher education can have a detrimental impact

on students and even at a deeper level on students from nontraditional backgrounds.

Cotton et al. (2017) stated that "significant risk factors are often present prior to starting

university" (p. 68) and they could eventually impact the students' decision in pursuing a

degree. Most of the participants confirmed their initial higher education experience was challenging and could not find help when they needed it.

Participants stated that for support in answering questions and getting help with college-related issues they relied on people from their cohort. The participants expressed that they felt like giving up during this initial experience due to the lack of institutional support. These findings align with Raaper et al. (2022) who claimed that nontraditional students deserve further attention because it is less likely for them "to feel at "home" on campus and interact with traditional forms of university life and support" (p. 404). The sense of belonging or fitting in could be more difficult for nontraditional students. Schreiner (2010) defined a sense of belonging at university as the process that "involves feelings of fitting into university as a community (p. 512). Studies have shown that nontraditional students are at risk of having more difficulties when entering universities (Corver, 2005; Merrill & Johnston, 2011). While participants did not experience strong institutional support, they described having a strong support system off campus from family members and friends who motivated them to keep going. These findings concurred with Raaper et al. (2022), who stated that nontraditional students often receive little institutional support but have higher resilience in handling university adversities because they have strong family support that helps them move forward.

Limitations of the Study

This study has potential limitations. One limitation of this study was the sample size. Twelve infant/toddler PK4 teachers were interviewed for this study. The small sample may not represent the collective views and perspectives of the local ECE

workforce on the mandated educational change. The scope of the study explored the

perspectives of the infant/toddler PK4-teachers' perspectives on the challenges of

attaining an ECE associate degree. Collecting data through the interview process is

limited because each participant may interpret the questions differently or the participants

may not even be able to utter their responses properly (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The

initial dates for the interview were changed to different dates due to power outages that

caused many participants to have limited internet access; this change did not affect the

trustworthiness of the study.

Additional limitations are the demographics. All the participants were

nontraditional students, they were all women, and some of them were English learners.

The possibility of transferability of this study could be limited to another context outside

the population of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers as nontraditional students, minority

women, and English learners. Other limitations included geographic area and researcher

bias. All the participants were from one specific region and the findings cannot represent

infant/toddler-PK4 teachers from the rest of the country working in center-based settings.

To become aware of and minimize my personal bias, I reflected on my position on the

topic. I used a reflexive journal to record my thoughts and feelings throughout the

process which helped me to analyze the data objectively, reduce bias and to keep records

of my reflections and assumptions. Additionally, a summary of the findings was sent to

the participants to confirm what they were trying to convey, and two EC experts

reviewed the summary of findings for biases. Meyers and Willis (2019) stated that

reflexive practice can reveal to the researcher the ways data were created and the findings were reached.

Recommendations

Based on the limitations and the perspectives of the participants I first recommend the replication of this study in the same geographic area using a larger sample size with more diverse demographic backgrounds including teachers working in home-based settings. My second recommendation is to replicate this study in different geographic regions. Replication in different areas would support a better understanding of infant/toddler-PK4 teachers' perspectives on the mandate and may provide additional data regarding the teachers' perspectives on mandated ECE associate degrees. My third recommendation will be to replicate this study to seek more teachers' insights on the availability of systems of support. One theme that emerged from the findings was the lack of support and especially proper information on how to navigate the college admission process. My last recommendation is for researchers to conduct quantitative and qualitative research that investigates the different stakeholders' readiness to implement an educational mandate. Understanding perspectives from all the stakeholders may be necessary to properly support infant/toddler-PK4 teachers in the process of attaining post-secondary education.

Implications

The results of my study have the capacity for positive social change as they may assist all the stakeholders responsible for implementing educational reforms through mandated educational changes. The findings from the study indicated that the participants

were challenged with technology access, college processes, language barrier, college

readiness, and the lack of proper support during the process of educational attainment

which aligns with the Lewin (1947) three-step theory of change which stated that change

at the individual or group level can be painful and frustrating before reaching a state of

equilibrium or balance. These painful experiences are considered restraining forces to

change and are often group norms embedded in the culture of an institution or a

community (Lewin, 1947). My study may contribute to positive change by informing

policymakers, higher education institutions, and licensing agencies of the challenges

faced by the ECE workforce in attaining education and about creating optimal systems to

support infant/toddler-PK4 teachers during the process. Current support systems for

infant/toddler -PK4 teachers are limited and inefficient. When implementing an

educational change, the lack of creating a "powerful support coalition for change" can

appear as an obstacle that hinders change (Jerald, 2005, p. 3). Ilho (2018) stated that

higher education institutions' equity practices will fall short if they fail to serve the adult

learner known as a nontraditional student who is becoming a growing majority. Other

implications for positive change from the findings of my study include highlighted

awareness regarding the landscaping of the early childhood workforce in the United

States and bringing awareness to new teachers who have decided to attain the associate of

the challenges the process could present. My recommendation is that stakeholders should

explore the diverse demographics of the EC workforce to establish systems of support

that meet the needs of the ones who decide to attain a mandated associate degree in early

childhood education in order to remain in the EC field. In the United States, the ECE

workforce is mostly comprised of immigrant women who are diversely linguistics, have limited education, and are average 36 years old (Huss-Keller 2019; Lash & Pech, 2020; McLean et al. 2021; Sandstrom & Schilder, 2021; Whitebook et al., 2018). Lastly, the findings of my research also have implications for future research. Further study is needed on the impact of mandated associate degrees in the ECE workforce, and how they could be better supported with the complex challenges they encounter through the process.

Conclusion

Arnott (2021) stated that ECE is a field of sophisticated practices far from providing simple care to children therefore, there is an evolving culture of learning and collaboration among teachers, families, and policymakers. In this basic qualitative study, I explored the perspectives of infant/toddlers-PK4 teachers from the District of Columbia working in center-based settings on the challenges of attaining an associate degree in ECE from a postsecondary accredited institution as mandated by OSSE and the support needed throughout the process. When interviewing 12 infant/toddlers-PK4 teachers, I aimed to capture their perceptions of the challenges while documenting their experience through the lens of change. Therefore, it was imperative to listen to their voices on the difficult position of either attaining an associate degree or exiting the profession. The findings of this study revealed that infant/toddlers-PK4 teachers who decided to pursue the mandated educational attainment were faced with many challenges and difficult decisions to make. The challenges included access to technology, navigation of the college systems, language barrier, college readiness, and limited college support and

guidance. The challenges had an impact on the abilities of the infant/toddlers-PK4 teachers to attain the associate degree in early childhood education.

Highlighting the support that the teachers needed throughout the process was also very important especially when studies have shown that nontraditional students who receive proper college support build on a higher resilience system to handling university demands and adversities (Chung et al., 2017). Additionally, nontraditional students build on a strong motivation to succeed in their academic studies (McKavanagh & Purnell, 2007; McKay & Devlin, 2016). The findings of this study have implications for positive change by informing all stakeholders especially those at the government or bureaucratic level who are responsible for mandates implementation (Clement, 2014) of the challenges the ECE workforce face with mandated educational attainment and the support they need. These findings could lead policymakers to adopt policy changes that include teachers' voices, especially infant/toddler-PK4 teachers whose voice is seldom considered when mandates are initiated. In conclusion, as the early childhood field moves into constant reforms it is important to create systems that support the ECE teachers' journey to becoming more sophisticated professionals within their multidimensional roles of supporting the learning and development of young children.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Introduction of self to participant

Hello. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

My name is Isabel Lainez Furutan and I am a doctoral student at Walden University completing my degree in education with a concentration in early childhood education. In my professional career, I also worked as an Infant/Toddler-Pk4 teacher.

The purpose of this study is first, to explore the perspectives of the Infant/Toddler-Pk4 teachers from the District of Columbia who are working in a center-based setting on the challenges of attaining an early childhood associate degree as mandated by OSSE and, second to explore perspectives on the kind of support teachers need throughout the process. The results of this study may provide data to licensing agencies, stakeholders, policymakers, and early childhood organizations on how to better support the early childhood workforce in attaining an associated degree in early childhood education.

As described in the informed consent form that you signed, I have planned this interview to last 45-60 minutes. This interview will be recorded so I can refer to it later for accuracy. Please respond to each question with as much detail as possible so I can gain a better understanding of your perspective. Feel free to interrupt and ask clarifying questions as needed. Remember that you can leave the interview at any time. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

Continue upon consent.

Background Information

1. What is your current position at the center you work at?
2. What age of children do you work with?
3. What type of training or education are you required to have to work at this center and with these children?
4. What is your highest level of formal education?

Interview Questions

Experiences of Information (RQ 1)

1. How did you get the information about the required associate degree by OSSE and what was your initial reaction? Please explain.

Experiences of Policies (RQ1)

2. How do you feel about the required associate degree mandated by OSSE and how do you perceive the policies that raise the educational requirements you have to reach in order to keep your job?
3. In what ways has the implementation of these policies affected you directly? In what ways has it affected the early childhood workforce?
4. What is your opinion about Infant/Toddler-Pk4 teachers attaining post-secondary education? Who else should attain post-secondary education? Any reasons for your answer?

Experiences of Day-to-Day Activities

5. What do you believe are the challenges of the OSSE mandate on Infant/Toddler-Pk4 teachers? (RQ1)
6. What factors play a role in your decision to participate in attaining an associate degree as mandated by OSSE? (RQ1)

Experiences of Challenges (RQ1)

7. Tell me about any struggles or challenges you have with pursuing or completing the associate degree. Please give me an example and/or please explain X.
8. In your opinion, how achievable do you think is to attain an associate degree in early childhood education? Please explain.

Experiences of Coping (CF)

9. What are the challenges you have faced and how have you overcome these challenges when pursuing or completing the associate degree?

Experiences of Support (RQ2)

10. What do you think support concerning pursuing or completing the associate degree should consist of?
11. Who has helped you with the process of pursuing or completing the associate degree? Please explain the kind of help you have received. How did this support you?
12. What kind of suggestions for changes or improvements would you like to see for the OSSE mandate?
13. What advice do you have for policymakers and leaders responsible for these changes and educational reforms?
14. Finally, is there anything that we have not discussed that you think I should know about your experience with the education requirement mandated by OSSE?

Closure:
Thank you so much for your participation. After I analyze the results of this interview, I

will email you a 2–3 page summary of the findings to check for accuracy, and you will have one week to return it back to me via email with any corrections you find necessary to make. Please take a moment to review the summary and my findings and send me any comments you may have that could affect the credibility of my findings. If you have any questions or additional thoughts after the interview, please do not hesitate to contact me at XXXXXXXX