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## Exploring the Perspectives of Educators of Color About Their Leadership Development Opportunities at a Local Early Childhood Education Organization

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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Judith M. Uhron

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2023

Abstract

Exploring the Perspectives of Educators of Color About Their Leadership Development

Opportunities at a Local Early Childhood Education Organization

by

Judith M Uhron

MA, Boston University, Wheelock College, 1991

BS, Villanova University, 1987

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

November 2023

## Abstract

There was an underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles at the local early education organization. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood educators of color employed by the local organization about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development and what recommendations they have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles. The conceptual framework that grounds this study was Rawls's theory of justice that describes a just society as supporting an equal distribution of opportunity relative to creating just and effective practices to reduce racial inequality as well as emphasizes equal rights, equality of opportunity, and raising the prospects of the least advantaged. Research questions focused on the perspectives of educators of color about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development. Interviews were conducted with 12 people of color from the local early education organization's fellowship program. The fellowship program enrolls self-selected employees of color, intending to increase their sense of belonging at the organization, leading to higher engagement and retention rates. Data analysis began with open coding and moved to category development and the identification of themes. The study's findings led to the creation of a professional development project that provided the organization with a PowerPoint presentation that included recommendations for creating fair and just policies and practices that allow for an equal distribution of leadership roles to people of color. Additional leaders of color may allow for a more inclusive culture that positively impacts the local organization's overall environment for employees, families, and children.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the educators on whose shoulders I stand, including my mother, my aunts, and my uncle. Without their trailblazing dedication to a spirit of curiosity and determination to offer the opportunity for an education to anyone who desired it, I would certainly not be here. To my mother, who through her example taught me that it is never too late to pursue what inspires you, to continue learning, and to demonstrate empathy at every turn. To anyone who has ever felt like they did not belong or were not welcome, this dissertation is dedicated to making every place your place.

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **The Local Problem**

At a local early childhood education organization (ECEO; a pseudonym for the study site), there is an underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles. This situation exists despite the ECEO's inclusion statement that identifies a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion and despite the fact that early childhood educators in the organization are predominantly people of color. There is a lack of understanding of how early childhood educators of color employed by the ECEO perceive how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development as well as of what recommendations early childhood educators of color have regarding ways for the ECEO to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles.

In early childhood education organizations in the United States, there is a shortage of people of color in leadership roles; however, the workforce in the industry is predominantly comprised of people of color (Talan et al., 2022). According to Tembo (2020), there is a need for more research on early childhood educators of color to address the most effective ways to support their development. With so few leaders of color in the early childhood sector, it is critical to include feedback from people of color when exploring pathways to racial equity in the early childhood education profession (Talan et al., 2022). Exploring the perspectives of people of color about their underrepresentation in leadership positions at the ECEO may contribute to reducing barriers to their advancement.

## **Rationale**

At the local ECEO, only 17% of leaders at ECEO are people of color, while 51% of the workforce is comprised of people of color. The vice president of talent and change management at the local ECEO communicated that the organization has yet to determine how to support and develop the underrepresented groups of employees to create a more equitable organization and that this lack of understanding of how to support and develop the underrepresented groups contributes to the problem of underrepresentation of people of color at the leadership level at the organization. The underrepresentation in leadership contributes to racial inequality, according to ECEO's director of diversity, equity, and inclusion. According to Robinson (2020), a lack of organizational support is an obstacle that inhibits people of color within an organization from taking on leadership responsibilities. Gaining the perspectives of people of color about their opportunities for leadership development and their recommendations regarding ways to support the progression of people into leadership roles within the ECEO is a way to investigate this phenomenon. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood educators of color employed by the local ECEO about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development as well as gather their recommendations regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles.

## **Definition of Terms**

Definitions are provided for the following terms that supported this research study:

*Racial inequality:* The unfair distribution of risks, costs, services, and benefits across organizational demographic groups (Mayorga-Gallo, 2019). An organization that perpetuates racial inequality has individuals who may be conscious of an imbalance but still reproduce Whiteness as a structure (Mayorga-Gallo, 2019).

*Leadership roles:* A role of vice president and equivalent and/or above that includes executive officers (i.e., chief executive officer, chief operations officer, chief financial officer, chief human resource officer, chief information officer, board members) at the local organization.

*People of color:* Individuals who are American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or two or more races.

*Equity:* The state that would be achieved if all people fared the same way in society regardless of race, gender, class, language, disability, or any other social or cultural characteristic (Byars et al., 2020).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study was significant in that by exploring perspectives of early childhood educators of color employed by the local ECEO about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development, an understanding of how to improve the underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles was gained. This understanding may lead to increased representation of people of color at leadership levels. By exploring the perspectives of early childhood educators of color employed by the local ECEO about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development and their

recommendations regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles, the findings provided insights needed to inform current leaders about how to change policies and practices to improve the representation of people of color in leadership roles.

If implemented, the findings of this study and the project developed based on its results could provide positive social change within the ECEO. The findings provided information that could allow the current leaders at ECEO to consider, develop, and/or refine policies and practices that provide educators of color with support to encourage their development and increase their succession into leadership roles. The educators of color could benefit by receiving leadership development that improves their opportunities to progress into leadership roles. Increasing the number of people of color in leadership roles could help the ECEO achieve its diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.

### **Research Questions**

The problem that was addressed in this study was the underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles at the local ECEO. The purpose of the study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood educators of color employed by the ECEO about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development and what recommendations they have regarding ways for the ECEO to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of early childhood educators of color about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development?



RQ2: What recommendations do early childhood educators of color have regarding ways for the ECEO to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles?

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that grounded this study was Rawls's (1971) theory of justice. According to Rawls, social theories are meant to meet the needs of many; however, they are rooted in individual values, such as human dignity, freedom, justice, and the common good. To create a just society, individuals must have access to equal freedoms and not be subject to political influences or interests (Rawls, 1971). Rawls suggested that equality depends on equal opportunity and self-respect unless unequal distribution favors the most vulnerable. The theory of justice as fairness is rooted in equal basic rights and the equality of opportunity (Rawls, 1971). The leaders of any society must choose the rules or policies that lead to justice (Rawls, 1971). Because Rawls's theory of justice is rooted in equal opportunity, equal rights, and raising the prospects of the least advantaged in society, understanding early childhood educators' of color perspectives of how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development may offer information about why the problem of underrepresentation exists at the local ECEO.

By exploring their perspectives, I learned how educators of color employed by ECEO perceive their opportunities for leadership development. Rawls (1971) stated that the only way to consider how to solve a problem fairly is to understand the beliefs and

interests of the parties involved. Using the interview protocol to question educators of color at ECEO about how their employer provides opportunities for leadership development and their recommendations regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles was a way to understand their beliefs and interests. By analyzing their responses, I was able to develop an understanding of the problem of underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles. According to Rawls, fair societies are rooted in equal opportunity and raising the prospects for the least advantaged. Racial inequities may be diminished once opportunities are equally distributed throughout the ECEO, possibly allowing for people of color to be represented equally in leadership positions.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I accessed the Walden University Library to search several databases for relevant and current literature, including EBSCO, Education Source, ERIC, Child Care & Early Education Research Connections, and ProQuest. Initially, I searched the terms of *people of color* and *leadership*. To narrow this search, I added *advancement*, which offered a significant amount of information on the topic, but there was a need for more details on this phenomenon. I then searched *people of color* and *leadership* and *barriers*. To continue to refine the search to include education organizations, I searched *people of color* and *education organizations* and *leadership* and also searched *African American, leadership, racial inequity, Black/African American women and equity* and *underrepresentation in leadership*, which provided diversity and inclusion lenses to the resources. I added *education organization* and *early childhood education, early*

*childhood education and leadership, early childhood education and equity, early childhood education and career development and African American, and equity in the early childhood education workplace* to focus the search on the education sector. Adding *early childhood education* drastically reduced the results, and I needed to reduce the phrases to yield relevant articles. I searched *leaders of color, early childhood education, and African American advancement and leadership*. In the Child Care and Early Education Research Connections database, I searched *leadership, Black leaders in early childhood education, leadership and early childhood education and social justice, early childhood education and equity, early childhood education and inclusive education and equity, leadership development, and of color or Black or African American or Latino or Hispanic or Asian American Pacific Islander or minority*.

Additionally, I searched Google Scholar to access articles using the phrases *barriers to leadership for people of color and early childhood education leaders of color; developing diverse leaders; and racial equity in the workplace*. I also used the National Workforce Registry Alliance and the Early Childhood Workforce Index to gather relevant statistics.

### **The Role of Race**

Race permeates all aspects of organizations; therefore, the role of race must be central to understanding leadership within organizations (Nkomo, 2021). Ray (2019) agreed that organizations are racial structures. Without ongoing analysis, the current strategies will provide an incomplete understanding, and racial inequities in organizations will persist (Nkomo, 2021). According to Randall (2021), to create fairness within an

organization, eliminate unjust policies, and create an antiracist environment, the concentration must be on valuing people of color.

Yamashiro et al. (2022) recognized that the underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles in educational organizations is an issue of racial inequity that impacts an organization's ability to meet the needs of a diverse student population. They found that the solution to the problem involved an analysis that included intentional, reflective, and equity-driven approaches. Exposure and education are pathways for increasing empathy and potentially initiating change (Livingston, 2020). Ongoing research should view race as integral to the constitution of an organization and, therefore, a structure of racial inequality (Ray, 2019). An organization can identify how it navigates its bias by exploring the perspectives of people of color about their experiences with racial inequities (Sisco, 2020).

Johnson (2021) spoke with educational leaders of color to understand their perspectives on navigating the highest levels of educational leadership, concluding that increasing the number of people of color in leadership roles in educational organizations is critical to raising awareness and inclusivity. An inclusive organization allows employees to participate entirely in reaching shared goals without regard to group status, transforming into established norms, or surrendering their authentic selves (Roberson & Perry, 2022). According to Smith et al. (2019), people of color in organizations are often overlooked or excluded from leadership positions because they are not seen as typical members of the organization. Although people of color are better qualified than ever before to succeed in leadership positions, they experience isolation and tokenization

rather than inclusion (Carter & Sisco, 2022). Rather than being seen for their value, people of color are measured against White Americans as the standard (Williams, 2019). Chen and Yang (2019) agreed that significant obstacles isolate people of color in educational organizations and impede their advancement into leadership roles. After exploring the perspectives of university-level leaders of color, Chen and Yang found that race had a significant role in hiring and employing people of color and that there needs to be more emphasis on social justice when establishing policies. When individuals within an organization make personal progress toward understanding their biases and recognizing the detrimental impact of racism, their learning should be applied to organizational systems (Ham, 2021; Shaffer et al., 2022). This can be accomplished through listening to people of color, reflecting, learning, and taking action (Ham, 2021; West, 2020). Johnson concluded that more research dedicated to listening to the underrepresented is needed to understand the leadership journeys of people of color.

### ***Equity in the Early Childhood Education Workplace***

According to Nimmo et al. (2021), advancing equity in the early childhood education workplace requires a comprehensive assessment of all parts of the early childhood education program, including leadership, teachers, staff, families, and children. Racial equality in the early childhood education workforce can be advanced with a concentrated focus on culture, policies and procedures, and opportunities for professional development (Byars et al., 2020). The lack of equitable compensation for early childhood educators negatively impacts their well-being, indicating a need for improved support (Cassidy et al., 2019). Achieving equity can be approached by examining hiring practices

and how equity and inclusion are implemented during organizational change (Byars et al., 2020).

### ***The Impact of Leadership on Creating an Equitable Early Childhood Education***

#### ***Workplace***

The role of leadership in creating an equitable early childhood education workplace begins with self-awareness of history and identities, an understanding of systemic organizational oppression, and a commitment to social justice (Nimmo et al., 2020). Leaders should have engaging, significant conversations on critical topics as a part of their typical conversations when discussing how to positively impact outcomes for children and families (Byars et al., 2020). In recent research on leadership in early childhood education, a movement toward more inclusive practices that recognize the significance of social justice is evident (Nicholson et al., 2020). A more comprehensive approach to defining a leader in the early childhood education setting is also emerging, recognizing that social justice leadership could inform a recharacterization of leadership in the field (Nicholson et al., 2020).

According to Nicholson et al. (2020), there is a shift from a more hierarchical approach to leadership to a distributed and relational model. Gibbs (2022) found that an organization's architecture (i.e., cultural, material, and socio-political) is foundational for positional leadership roles. These definitions of leadership suggest that leadership is a dynamic activity not limited to the few in formal leadership roles (Gibbs, 2022; Nicholson et al., 2020). Halpern et al. (2020) stated that leadership in early childhood education is a collaborative and inclusive practice. When early childhood organizations

invest in leadership training and practice a democratic leadership model, they can better support social justice (Halpern et al., 2020). Klevering et al. (2019) found that there needs to be more clarity around the role of leadership versus management in early childhood settings due to a lack of research on the topic and a lack of consensus in the field.

However, leaders in the field have agreed that shared decision making and trusting relationships provide the cornerstone for successful leadership in early childhood education (Klevering et al., 2019).

### ***Current Leaders of Color and the Impact of Their Leadership Development***

#### ***Opportunities***

The experiences of educational leaders of color have been explored in previous research to gain an understanding of how their identities impacted their career trajectories relative to educational politics, systemic inequities, and professional opportunities (Carter & Sisco, 2022; Gibbs, 2022; Johnson, 2021; Martinez et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2019). Understanding how current leaders of color experienced their leadership development opportunities could inform successful leadership development opportunities for future leaders of color. Carter and Sisco (2022) concluded that the pathway to leadership for women of color is challenging, supported by the discrepancy between those women entering organizations and those women achieving C-suite level positions, a drop-off of over 75%. One reason for this limited achievement of people of color is that female executives of color are threatening outsiders within their organizations and, therefore, experience unique pressures they must absorb (Smith et al., 2019). This outsider within status identifies the complicated nature of people of color in organizations who pursue

leadership roles relative to their marginalized identities (i.e., gender and racial identity; Smith et al., 2019). Women experience the negative effect of the intersection of race and gender bias that contributes to devaluing their work and limiting their opportunities (Martinez et al., 2020; Weller, 2019).

When exploring the problem of underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles, current educational leaders identified the presence of development opportunities as impacting their professional advancement (Gibbs, 2022; Kohli, 2019; Martinez et al., 2020). According to Underwood et al. (2020), there are few initiatives in K–12 settings where advancing teachers of color is the focus. Specifically, educational leaders of color recount that a professional system that inequitably distributes opportunity and power dramatically shapes their leadership trajectory (Martinez et al., 2020). According to Kohli (2019), teachers of color reported that their ability to sustain and progress in their careers is limited without the necessary opportunities to prepare them for leadership roles, limited by racialized organizational structures. Teachers of color need more support to access opportunities for their advancement (Kohli, 2019).

### **Implications for Possible Project Directions**

The findings of this study led to the development of recommendations directed at the senior leaders and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) leaders at the ECEO. My recommendations provide information to the organization’s policy makers regarding ways to define pathways for the advancement of educators of color into leadership roles. The findings of this study also led to the creation of a professional development project



that provides the organization with information about how to create fair and just policies and practices that allow for an equal distribution of leadership roles to people of color.

### **Summary**

In Section 1, I established the problem addressed in this qualitative study regarding the underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles at the local ECEO. The study was focused on collecting information from educators of color within the organization about their perspectives on how the ECEO provides support and opportunities for leadership development and what recommendations the participants had regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles. According to Rawls (1971), equality depends on equal opportunity, and leaders must choose rules and policies that lead to justice. The only way to determine a fair answer to a problem is to understand the beliefs and interests of the people involved (Rawls, 1971). In Section 2, I will describe the research design and approach and data collection and analysis processes.

## Section 2: The Methodology

### **Qualitative Research Design and Approach**

The problem of the underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles is both a social and human situation (Gause, 2021). Gaining the perspectives of people of color within an organization about how their employer supports their opportunities for leadership development is a way to describe their specific condition and possibly gain the insight needed to offer solutions to the problem (Carter & Sisco, 2022). According to Danford (2023), qualitative research should be used to understand a social or human situation in a natural setting. Qualitative researchers describe specific experiences of those they study in words, using the insight gained to potentially transform policies, guidelines, and directives relative to the experiences of those they study (Danford, 2023). Therefore, the qualitative method was a logical methodology to employ to gather data from interviews of early childhood educators of color at the ECO to understand their perspective of how their employer provides opportunities for leadership development and the recommendations they have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles. I conducted this inquiry to explore the participants' perspectives and develop an understanding of their recommendations to address the problem of the underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles at the local ECEO.

I considered the quantitative research method but did not select for this study. According to Mohajan (2020), the quantitative methodology is used to quantify variables and generalize results from a large sample population by generating numerical data.

Quantitative researchers use numbers (e.g., means and correlations) to describe their findings (Danford, 2023). I collected data from the interviews of 12 educators of color about their experiences at a local organization and did not quantify variables and derive generalized results from a large sample population. I used words to categorize the data and did not generate numerical data; therefore, I rejected the quantitative approach as the appropriate research design for my study.

There are many approaches to qualitative research. In the following subsections, I discuss the five qualitative research designs considered: case study, ethnography, narrative, phenomenology, and basic qualitative research.

### **Case Study**

The definition of case study as a research approach includes using cases to generate a deep understanding of the context of specific circumstances (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). I explored each participant's unique perspective about their personal development opportunities and did not consider any specific case in any one context; therefore, I did not choose the case study approach.

### **Ethnography**

An ethnography is conducted to describe a specific group of people's shared and learned cultural practices (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). According to Tomaszewski et al. (2020), an ethnography is an approach that strives to answer the question: What are the shared practices of the culture? I did not describe the shared experiences of a group of people and their relationship to the practices of a given culture in the current study; consequently, I rejected the ethnography approach.

### **Narrative Analysis**

According to Tomaszewski et al. (2020), the narrative approach is defined as one that utilizes peoples' stories about their lives and experiences to answer the question: What is the story of the lived experience? I collected information from participants to understand their perspectives on a specific issue, but, I did not collect information from participants to create the story of their lived experiences; therefore, I did not employ this approach.

### **Phenomenological**

The goal of the phenomenological design is to describe the meaning of the lived experiences of a phenomenon by the people who lived it (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). My focus was not on capturing the meaning of the common lived experiences of the participants in this study, it was to understand their individual perspectives on a specific topic. Therefore, the phenomenological approach was not the appropriate design for the current study.

### **Basic Qualitative Research**

According to Agazu et al. (2022), basic qualitative research is an interpretive design that allows the researcher to gain deep, detailed understanding of a specific phenomenon. I chose the basic qualitative approach for this study because it allowed me to explore the perspectives of educators of color employed by the local ECEO about how their employer provides opportunities for leadership development and what recommendations they have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles. I collected detailed information on this focused

topic and this approach aligned most closely with the study's purpose and research questions.

### **Participants**

Upon receiving Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I recruited members of the local ECEO's fellowship program as participants. The fellowship program enrolls self-selected employees of color into a year-long program intending to increase their sense of belonging at the ECEO, leading to higher engagement and retention rates. There were 32 enrollees in the program, and I selected 12 participants who responded to the study invitation. The rationale for the sample size was that research has shown that nine to 17 interviews are needed to reach saturation, particularly when studying a homogenous study population (see Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Saturation is reached when an interviewer finds the same information being repeated by the subjects, and when the coding reveals no additional themes or insights from the data (Mwita, 2022; Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). According to Mwita (2022), when saturation is reached, the number of interviews conducted is considered sufficient. Therefore, once the participants' interview answers were repetitive and there were no new themes or insights revealed during the interviews, I considered that saturation had been reached.

Furthermore, the goal for qualitative researchers is for the interviews to provide enough in-depth, valuable information to understand the studied phenomenon (Hennink et al., 2019). A sample size of 12 participants allowed for the appropriate depth of inquiry. I developed a self-designed interview protocol to address the problem and purpose of the study (see Appendix B).

### **Procedure for Gaining Access to Participants**

Access to the fellowship participants was approved by the senior legal counsel at the ECEO and was specified as a term of my severance agreement. As all the fellowship participants met the criteria for participation in the study, I selected members until I reached the requisite number of willing participants. I followed the following steps for gaining access to the participants:

1. I obtained a signed agreement from the organization's lead counsel (i.e., the head ethics representative) to contact employees at the organization for the study.
2. I applied for approval from the Walden University IRB, including completing Form A; submitting a signed partner organization agreement for low-risk, work-related interviews form; and completing the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative coursework.
3. After I received approval from the IRB, I recruited participants by sending introduction/invitation emails to the fellowship program members. The emails contained a description of how participants' privacy and confidentiality would be protected throughout the study.
4. Once participation was confirmed with the willing participants, I sent each person a letter of informed consent via email. I confirmed their consent by asking the question, "Do you agree to be interviewed for this study?" and receiving "Yes" as the response.

5. I contacted each participant via email to schedule a date and time for the interview.

To establish an appropriate researcher-participant working relationship when interviewing people of color, the interviewer must build trust, rapport, and genuine connection to help the participants feel safe (Walton et al., 2022). Because I am a White person interviewing people of color, it was incumbent upon me to practice reflexivity in considering what information is necessary from the participant; how to gain that information without harming the participant; and to be cognizant of the participant's vulnerabilities and any social, political, historical or cultural influences (see Walton et al., 2022). Because I no longer work for the partner organization, I do not have a supervisory relationship with any of the participants and held no authority over them.

### **Protection of Participants' Rights**

In every communication with the fellowship program members, I maintained professionalism and worked to build rapport. I also emphasized that any information from the interviews would be kept with confidence, their names would not be used in the study, and the information gained in the study would not be identifiable because I used record numbers and pseudonyms. Finally, I reassured the participants that they could end the interview and withdraw from the study at any time.

### **Data Collection**

According to Elhami and Khoshnevisan (2022), the qualitative research approach is an effective way to gain the participants' perspectives and understand their experiences. Interviews are useful for gathering participant data (Elhami & Khoshnevisan

(2022). I asked open-ended interview questions and recorded the participants' responses. My interview protocol was developed to collect data for analysis (see Appendix B).

### **Interviews**

I collected data for this study through individual, open-ended, semistructured interviews with members of the fellowship program at the local ECEO. The interviews were conducted to gather the participants' perspectives about how their employer, the ECEO, provides opportunities for their leadership development and what recommendations they have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for the participants to progress into leadership roles. After receiving their initial consent to participate in the interviews, I confirmed the interview date and time with each participant via email. I began the interview process by explaining the interview protocol to the participant, including how the interview would be recorded, how I would protect their confidentiality, and that they have the right to opt out of the interview at any time. I reviewed the informed consent document with each participant and asked the question, "Do you agree to be interviewed for this study?" at the start of the interview to confirm their consent (see Appendix D).

### **Process for Generating, Gathering, and Recording the Data**

The interviews took place according to the participants' availability via remote (i.e., the Zoom platform) access. According to Gray et al. (2020), using Zoom video conferencing as an interview technique in qualitative studies was a positive experience for participants because it is convenient and does not entail travel requirements or have geographic constraints (Saarijavi & Blatt, 2021). Zoom interviews offer a cost-effective



approach for reaching participants in diverse locations (Gray et al., 2020; Saarijavi & Blatt, 2021). The interviews were audio recorded using the Zoom platform. I transcribed the interviews into a document within 48 hours of each interview and organized them into a spreadsheet.

I used a script to reduce overtalking during the interview and limited my personal opinions through verbal or nonverbal communication (see Siedlecki, 2022). To increase my effectiveness as an interviewer, I asked questions that sensitively allowed the participants to discuss their perspectives on how the ECEO provides opportunities for leadership development and what recommendations they have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles. The interviews began with me explaining the study and providing an opportunity for the participants to pose questions. According to Walton et al. (2022), individual interviews are a source of qualitative research's significant conceptual and empirical evidence. I conducted the interviews to build rapport, trust, and authentic connection with the participants to understand their perspectives (see Walton et al., 2022).

I used a self-designed interview protocol to address the problem and purpose of the study (see Appendix B). The interviews were conducted with fellowship members during their personal time and lasted about 30 minutes. In addition to using the Zoom recording and transcribing features, I took notes and recorded critical comments from the interviews. Throughout the interview, I asked probing questions to allow the participants to provide additional examples or comments and, in this way, attempted to establish clarification, deeply understand each answer, and reduce any assumptions.

### **Systems for Keeping Track of the Data**

I used a research diary to keep track of the data generated by the interviews and my conduct throughout the process. I added information continuously throughout the interviews. According to Saeidzadeh et al. (2021), information gained from the data captured in a research diary can be used to understand details associated with self-management that might otherwise be missed during an interview. Therefore, I consistently revisited the diary entries throughout the process to highlight any topics for further exploration.

### **Role of the Researcher**

After working for the ECEO for the past 30 years, I had recently left my position at the time of the study. As a long-term employee, I have personal relationships with current employees; however, my personal relationships did not extend to any member of the fellowship group. I had no professional relationship with any participant because I was no longer an employee of the organization. As the researcher, I conducted semistructured interviews with participants of color from within the ECEO.

I may have had some biases relative to the underrepresentation of leaders of color within the organization due to my previous employment. As a previous employee of the ECEO for over 30 years, I watched the organization's unsuccessful attempts to diversify its leadership team. Although the organization has an articulated diversity, equity, and inclusion mission statement, it has been unable to meet its goals. This has caused me frustration and disappointment with the organization's efforts. I have opinions about how and why the ECEO has been unsuccessful, and these opinions could have biased my

analysis the interview responses. However, I journaled throughout the study to understand, reflect on, and mitigate these possible biases. This reflection helped me understand what I manifested from my frustration and disappointment versus what I recorded and analyzed from the interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

The goal of analyzing the data from the interviews was to address the research questions and identify themes that may become evident (see Cassell & Bishop, 2019). After transcribing the interviews into a document within 48 hours of each interview and organizing them into a spreadsheet, I coded and thematically analyzed the interview transcripts and my notes. Coding in qualitative research provides a system for data to be assembled, categorized, and thematically sorted (Williams & Moser, 2019). The themes revealed through the coding process provide a way to construct meaning from the data (Williams & Moser, 2019). In this study, I used qualitative data analysis (QDA) software to organize the data. According to Deterding and Waters (2021), using QDA allows for rigorous, transparent, and flexible analysis of interview data. From data analysis, I created a narrative that reflected the emergent themes. These themes represent the participants' perspectives and experiences, and I presented them cohesively to construct meaning relative to answering the research questions. These analytical techniques and representational practices were aligned to encourage trustworthiness (see Rose & Johnson, 2020). I used member checking and peer review to assure the accuracy and credibility of the study findings.

## **Organizing and Managing the Data**

After transcribing each interview, I labeled the audio recording with the participant's number and secured it in a file. Each transcribed interview was stored in a folder on my password protected, personal laptop computer. In addition to the participant's number, each file included the date of the interview. I reviewed each audio recording multiple times and referenced transcriptions to ensure that I transcribed everything from the audio recording accurately. I matched the participants' numbers, dates, and times of the interviews to ensure accuracy. I used a reflective journal to organize my thoughts and identify topics for further exploration.

## **Data Coding**

After familiarizing myself with the data through multiple reviews of the transcriptions and audio recordings, I generated the initial codes based on the conceptual framework and the literature review. This step involved coding the critical features of the data systemically (Ningi, 2022). Next, I collected the codes into major themes. Finally, I revised and defined the specific themes by developing clear definitions and applicable names for each theme (Ningi, 2022).

A researcher must describe the evidence of quality and procedures of a qualitative study to assure the accuracy and credibility of the findings (Laureate Education, Inc., 2016). Credibility is established by thoroughly describing the analysis. This evidence establishes trustworthiness and provides confidence in the study's findings. I ensured trustworthiness through the use of member checks and peer debriefing.

### ***Member Checking***

According to Coleman (2022), member checking is an appropriate way to validate interview research. I used member checking to ensure the accuracy and credibility of my findings. Member checking is a way to provide the participants the opportunity to correct any errors, confirm their responses, or provide revised responses (Motulsky, 2021). I provided the participants with a summary of the themes and requested their feedback via email. This interaction allowed the participants to clarify any ambiguity by confirming or correcting my interpretation of their responses (Coleman, 2022).

### ***Peer Debriefing***

I used an open peer debriefing model to contribute to the evidence of quality and procedures to assure the accuracy and credibility of the findings of my study. In an open model, the author and the debriefer are aware of the others' identities, encouraging respectful feedback and constructive criticism (Weaver et al., 2022). After discussing with a Walden University professor following a residency and summer workshop, I incorporated her guidance into the process. I used a member of my Organizational Leadership and Development student group as a peer debriefer. The peer debriefer examined the raw data and reviewed the coding and data analysis. I solicited feedback from the peer debriefer and reviewed it to determine if areas required additional consideration. I reported the peer debriefers' feedback as part of the data analysis.

### ***Discrepant Cases***

According to Coleman (2022), discrepant cases are a critical part of validity testing in qualitative research. I identified, examined, and accounted for any data that

appeared to contradict or challenge the conclusions of the study. There were no discrepant cases; therefore, no cases were noted, presented, or explained within the study (Coleman, 2022).

## **Data Analysis Results**

### **Process for Generating, Gathering, and Recording the Data**

I used a consistent and systematic approach to collect the data for this study. Once I received Walden University's IRB approval (#07-31-23-1091363) and the local setting's approval, I contacted the participants to schedule interviews. I used Zoom video conferencing technology to conduct the interviews. Each interview consisted of the same 12 questions and closing statement, asked in the same order. I obtained consent from each participant and recorded the interviews for transcription purposes. I used the transcription software in the Zoom platform and reviewed each transcription immediately following the interview. I confirmed the interviews' accuracy by comparing the audio recording with the transcriptions.

I organized the interviews into a spreadsheet to keep track of the data generated by the interviews. I was able to record critical details associated with each interview. I revisited the spreadsheet periodically throughout the process and highlighted any topics for further exploration. I labeled each audio recording with the participant's number and secured it in a file. I stored each file in my password-protected personal laptop computer. I began the coding process by using manual coding to understand the data. I listened to the audio recordings and reread the transcriptions multiple times to inform the manual coding.

After the manual coding, I used QDA Miner Lite (QDA; Provalis Research, 2017) to further the coding process. After creating cases for each interview where the transcriptions were loaded, I began the coding process using QDA. After a review of QDA tutorials and Saldana's coding process (Saldana, 2021), I immersed myself in the transcriptions, highlighted specific phrases, and assigned preliminary codes. I grouped the codes according to each research question. I reviewed each transcript multiple times and referred to the audio recordings to ensure I accurately captured the participants' responses. I organized the preliminary codes into themes. These themes represented outcomes from the coding (Saldana, 2021). I grouped the codes in various ways to discover the most cohesive patterns and concepts. I developed the final themes to address each research question.

I sent a summary of the themes to each participant. I requested their feedback and asked them to clarify any ambiguity by confirming or correcting my interpretation of their responses. A peer debriefer from the Organizational Leadership and Development program was selected. I shared the raw data, coding, and analysis for her examination.

I input journal entries into a reflective log throughout the data-gathering and coding processes. These entries reflected my genuine thoughts, concerns, and biases related to the interviews, the coding process, and the themes. I reread the log and continued contributing to it to approach each coding session with an objective and clear outlook. The journal provided me with a safe space to concentrate my feelings and interpretations appropriately without allowing them to influence my data processing. Acknowledging and accepting my genuine thoughts without judgment was instrumental

in allowing me to see the data without influence. Journaling was a new act for me and has proven to be a successful way to contribute to an objective analytical process (Shufutinsky, 2020).

### **Findings From the Problem and Research Questions**

The problem that was addressed in this study was the underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles at the ECEO. The purpose of the study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood educators of color employed by the local ECEO about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development and what recommendations they have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles. I asked the participants a series of demographic questions to start the interview (see Table C1). The participants had varying positions and years of experience within the organization, years in their positions, and levels of education (see Table C2). They ranged in age from 30 to over 50 years old (see Table C2).

Participants' perspectives on their leadership development opportunities ranged from positive and plentiful to negative and slow. Participants referenced personal drive, motivation, and exposure to their managers as principal elements influencing how leadership development opportunities were distributed throughout the ECEO. The existence of standardized policies related to the distribution of leadership development opportunities was seldom referenced. Participants recommended representation in senior management levels and ongoing progress with diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts as ways to provide educators of color with leadership development opportunities. Further,



they suggested that their personal stories should be incorporated into how the organization recognizes each individual when considering distributing leadership development opportunities.

I implemented a systematic data collection and analysis process to reveal themes that answered my research questions. I used the QDA software to review each interview transcript and attributed specific excerpts to categories/codes. I grouped the codes by patterns and relationships until they became themes (see Table D1). I reviewed the codes and themes over 1 week. During this week, I continued to journal my thoughts and biases associated with the transcripts, codes, and themes. As such, I ensured I identified the appropriate connections among the codes.

Three themes emerged from the patterns and relationships among the data that answered RQ1: (a) organizational policies, (b) individual effort, and (c) visibility within the organization. Two themes emerged that answered RQ2: (a) DEI related programs, and (b) recognition of individuality. See Table D2 for an explanation of the themes.

### ***Research Question 1: Leadership Development Opportunities***

RQ1: What are the perspectives of early childhood educators of color about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development? focused on the perspectives of early childhood educators of color about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development. Three themes developed from the analysis of the data (see Table D1). Figure E1 shows the frequency of the themes mentioned in the transcripts by count in response to RQ1.

*Theme 1: Organizational Policies.* The first theme that emerged was that while some organizational policies influenced how leadership development opportunities were distributed, eight of the 12 participants stated that no specific policies dictated how opportunities were distributed company-wide. The education policy, time in position, and performance level (all elements needed for advancement into certain positions) were identified as regularly enforced policies. However, convenience (for example, if the educator was located in a specific geography) was cited as a contributor that could eclipse the established policies. Participant 7 stated, “Sometimes it feels like it’s for convenience, you know, it might be easier to slide other people into roles as opposed to others ... there could be so many biases, internal biases.” Two participants also mentioned yearly check-ins or annual reviews as a way to measure how leadership development opportunities were offered to educators.

*Theme 2: Individual Effort.* Seven participants mentioned personal drive, energy, or attention 11 times as a condition of how the organization distributes leadership development opportunities. Participant 2 said, “It would definitely be up to the participant, the applicant, the employee that is looking to grow and their willingness to maybe step outside of their comfort zone.” Participant 3 said that opportunities are distributed relative to an individual's willingness to participate in activities outside their work role (“Have you raised your hand a lot to volunteer for things?”). Participant 5 said, “When you show the dedication and the commitment to what you're doing every day, I feel like those opportunities just naturally are offered.” Management development programs were cited by seven participants as offered to educators as a pathway to

promotion. There were multiple positive responses related to the management development opportunities offered at the ECEO. Participant 11 said, “We do have some really good leadership opportunities (and) trainings for leadership. It has actually evolved over the years.” Participant 3 also cited that the opportunities to enroll in management programs have “improved greatly” over the last year. A person’s background was mentioned as something that should be considered when determining who should qualify for leadership development opportunities. For example, Participant 11 commented, “I don't fit a certain profile.” She was referring to her background as a person who went to a community college and then a four year college to obtain her degree, which took her longer than some of her colleagues.

*Theme 3: Visibility within the Organization.* This topic was cited 13 times by 10 participants as affecting the distribution of leadership development opportunities across the organization. Participant 10 said the “opportunity to be in front of people, right influential people within the company” affects how you receive opportunities. Participant 7 said, “It's a matter of who's willing to take the time.” Participant 4 said that the distribution of opportunities is “really dependent on the people who are above you.” Participant 3 mentioned, “If your last former supervisor may no longer be with the company or moved on to a different area of the company, then there's no one there to speak on your behalf and put your name forward.” Participant 6 shared, “I think it depends on who you're working with, like as far as their leadership team goes, if they're willing to help you with getting you up into the next leadership opportunity.”

***Research Question 2: Recommendations regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles.***

RQ 2: What recommendations do early childhood educators of color have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles? focused on what recommendations early childhood educators of color have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles. Two themes developed from the analysis of the data (see Table D1). Figure E2 shows the frequency of the themes mentioned in the transcripts by count in response to RQ2.

*Theme 1:* DEI related programs. Various DEI programs were mentioned 20 times throughout the interviews. These programs included the need for representation in specific roles, mentorship programs, and equitable opportunities for people of color. Participants 6 and 7 identified the progress that the organization has made relative to DEI related programs (“they have come a long way” and “it felt like our company took a pivot in the right direction”). Participant 1 said, “I feel like the company already had portions of DEI, but now it’s like I’m able to see it, feel it.” Participant 7 cited representation as a recommendation for the organization to provide opportunities for people of color by saying, “If they can look and say if this young Black woman can do this ... then maybe I have a chance to.” Participant 2 also mentioned representation as a means for demonstrating that opportunity exists by saying, “Where there are people of all kinds in different positions and different opportunities for the masses to be able to see.” Participants mentioned the absence of representation as a significant factor in how they

felt when participating in leadership development programs. Participant 11 recounted an experience of “feeling like an outcast in a group of people who all look the same but don’t look like me. I was the only person of color in a group of White women.”

Participant 4 shared that she is “hesitant to participate in some things because the majority is Caucasian.” Participants 6 and 10 recommended mentor programs for the organization to provide leadership development for educators of color. Because she cited limited opportunities to grow, Participant 3 asked if there may be “ways for people to experience growth at a smaller level but still affecting their income or the title they hold.”

*Theme 2: Recognition of Individuality.* Five participants mentioned the need to recognize individuality nine times when considering recommendations for providing leadership development opportunities for educators of color. The participants mentioned the need for the organization to see the individual, including any barriers they may have encountered. In addition, participants mentioned the need to share stories and perspectives as a recommendation for how to include people of color in leadership development. Participant 11 cited “different barriers that exist” as a focus for understanding educators of color when considering their advancement. She went on to say,

You need to get to know them, get to know their background, get to know what their strengths are, where their areas for development are, I guess with anybody, but it may be a little bit different because of their background.

Participant 9 said, “the company should understand the different stories and the barriers that people of color or educators of color face and really take that into consideration

when they're producing different reforms and policies.” Participant 9 also shared, “I do think it's important to understand their perspectives and provide opportunities for them to share their perspectives and stories and experiences.” Participant 4 referred to the organization needing “a plan to make sure that this individual gets to strengthen those skills, gets to practice those skills, gets the guidance, like clear, transparent communication on where they need to work to continue to grow in positions.” Participant 7 said, “There might be some biases that really impact how we view that person, and ultimately, if that person's in the right position determines whether or not we're going to reach out to that person and give them that chance.”

### **Discrepant Cases**

As I conducted the analysis, I examined the data to account for any discrepant cases. I did not find any data that contradicted or challenged the study. Therefore, I did not record any discrepant cases.

### **Evidence of Quality**

To address the accuracy of the data, I used member checks and peer debriefing. I asked the participants to review the themes and associated codes via email. After discussing with a Walden professor following a residency and summer workshop, I incorporated her guidance into the process. I used a member of my Organizational Leadership and Development student group as a peer debriefer.

I used member checking to allow the participants to correct any errors, confirm their responses, or provide revised responses (Motulsky, 2021). I provided the participants with a summary of the themes and requested their feedback via email. I

asked them to clarify any ambiguity and confirm or correct any of my interpretations of their responses (Coleman, 2022). I received responses from only some participants. However, Participants 9 and 11 responded that the themes and codes reflected their responses accurately. Participant 7 also agreed that the codes and themes were “very consistent with what I said (during the interview) and how I feel.” Participant 10 responded with clarification on Theme 2: Individual effort. She noted,

A POC educator has to work hard to show their worth and value. How knowledgeable are they with ECE, how knowledgeable they are with company practices, including can they implement curriculum philosophy, are they an influential leader. A POC educator has to put themselves out there x100. It's not a well-done project or experience that will elevate them. It's indefinite.

Participant 10 also added to Theme 3 (visibility within the organization) that “if you are not consistent with showing/demonstrating your value/worth, then visibility does not happen for POC educators. And we become high performer educators/wall flowers.”

In addition to member checking, I used peer debriefing to increase trustworthiness. According to Stahl and King (2020), trustworthiness in qualitative research means that readers have a sense of assurance in what the researcher has reported. Peer review can identify bias, subjectivity, and the relevance and comprehensiveness of theme presentation (Earnest, 2020). The peer debriefer was a doctoral student at Walden University. However, she was not involved in my study. She reviewed the preliminary analysis, and we had a call to discuss the findings.

## Summary

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood educators of color employed by the local ECEO about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development and what recommendations they have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles. The study gained perspectives from 12 participants. From their responses, I developed themes to address the research questions.

RQ1: What are the perspectives of early childhood educators of color about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development? Theme 1: organizational policies, Theme 2: Individual effort, and Theme 3: visibility within the organization. RQ2: What recommendations do early childhood educators of color have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles? Theme 1: DEI related programs and Theme 2: recognition of individuality.

The findings suggested a generally positive feeling from employees of color about how DEI initiatives are progressing throughout the ECEO. However, there needs to be more consistency relative to how leadership development opportunities are distributed. Specifically, most participants mentioned that leadership development opportunities were distributed according to an individual's effort or how well-known the person was to their supervisor versus any consistently administered policies. Management development programs were generally perceived to be positive experiences and offered a pathway for progression once a candidate was enrolled.



Participants recommended that continuing a focus on DEI related programs with equitable opportunities for exposure may contribute to more educators of color obtaining leadership development opportunities. The findings suggest that the experiences of people of color present unique barriers and personal stories. The participants shared that this individuality should be recognized and understood such that it is incorporated into decisions around the distribution of leadership development opportunities. Finally, the concept of representation was shared by half of the participants and mentioned nine times as a recommendation for how to encourage and support educators of color in their progression into leadership roles.

This study provided data and information that was used to develop formalized recommendations that can contribute to how to consistently implement policies versus the more informal structure that is in place now at the ECEO. The recommendations included concrete and transparent ways for educators of color to share their abilities, which included formal discussions of personal stories and experiences. The recommendations are intended to reduce the perspective that leadership development opportunities are distributed according to visibility or the influence of supervisors and more from the organization's thorough understanding of individual candidates.

## Section 3: The Project

### **Introduction**

Section 3 includes a synopsis of the project based on the findings from this qualitative study. The project includes recommendations presented to the ECEO's leadership group to address the equitability of the distribution of leadership development opportunities, including concrete and transparent ways for educators of color to share their abilities. Rawls's (1971) theory of justice was used as the conceptual framework for this study. In Section 3, I also discuss the rationale and implications for the project and present a literature review related to the policy recommendations.

The findings from the study revealed that the ECEO's DEI initiatives have progressed and provided a foundation for additional work in this area. In addition, most participants felt optimistic about the leadership development opportunities that are currently being offered; however, there are challenges with the consistency of how leadership development opportunities are distributed. The study results revealed that educators of color possess unique experiences that should be incorporated into decisions around the distribution of leadership development opportunities. Finally, the concept of increasing representation was shared as a recommendation for encouraging and supporting educators of color in their progression into leadership roles. I developed this project to provide the organization's leaders with recommendations that build on the current DEI platform and support the sustained change necessary for a more equal distribution of leadership development opportunities. The recommendations may also offer an initial structure for organizational change that goes beyond current DEI

initiatives and permeates decision making, accountability, and partnerships that support organizational equity (see Powell et al., 2023).

### **Rationale**

A policy paper aims to help others arrive at informed policy decisions through data analysis, and this analytical process informs decisions that solve defined problems (Durrance, 2022). The project I developed was a policy paper presentation based on the study findings. The problem addressed in the current study was the underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles at the ECEO. I interviewed 12 educators of color at the organization to understand their perspectives on how leadership development opportunities are distributed and what recommendations they have for increasing the progression of people of color into leadership roles.

To enact a just organization, in the theory of justice Rawls (1971) dictated that each person has the same claim to a full complement of equal basic opportunities and that all positions are available to all employees via equal opportunity. Rawls suggested that how just or unjust an institution is depends on the effectiveness and fairness of its policies. However, most organizations mistakenly expect that the progress of racial justice and equality will be addressed organically over time rather than through changes to policy, and therefore, their DEI strategies are ineffective (Kraus et al., 2022). According to Liera and Desir (2023), DEI initiatives typically focus on individual-level change; however, to enact organizational change, efforts must transform organizations into being equity minded through structured policy development. This shift allows organizational leaders to consider efforts that extend beyond the traditional DEI

initiatives and leads to more sustainable structural changes (Liera & Desir, 2023).

Transformative change requires well-intentioned diversity statements accompanied by well-articulated expectations for implementation (Byrd, 2022).

Data analysis from the current study generated five themes related to how leadership development opportunities are distributed at the ECEO and what recommendations the participants had about improving the progression of people of color into leadership roles: organizational policies, individual effort, visibility within the organization, DEI-related programs, and recognition of individuality. The themes relate to the equity of opportunity, specifically how leadership development opportunities are currently distributed. Leadership development is a fundamental source of quality improvement in early childhood settings (Lee et al., 2022). The findings of the current study revealed that the organizational policies relative to the distribution of leadership development opportunities need to be more consistently implemented across the organization.

Furthermore, leaders' choices around who is provided with leadership development opportunities are dependent on subjective criteria and exposure. The study revealed that current DEI strategies at the organization are progressing and are more evident. However, there is a lack of recognition of people of color's individuality. According to Beach and Segars (2022), to obtain meaningful representation of people of color, organizations must embrace employees' unique skills, backgrounds, and contributions. In the presentation project developed based on the findings of this study, I

present structural options for quantifying individual effort and recognizing personal stories.

I chose to share the study's findings with the ECEO's senior leadership team via a PowerPoint presentation to offer recommendations supporting equal and fair distribution of leadership opportunities. The findings suggested that the ECEO's current leadership development programs and DEI initiatives are progressing positively. The education and development team and the DEI leaders are responsible for those programs; therefore, I offered the presentation to them as well. In this way, the shared distribution of information and responsibility could lead to a holistic approach to implementation (see Powell et al., 2023). There must be a coordinated effort across multiple organizational functions to achieve the successful implementation of DEI goals (Nora, 2022). A group presentation to strategic leaders provides a forum for leaders to listen and ask questions rather than have answers (Beach & Segars, 2022). This setting allows leaders to engage in straightforward discussion around any issues that may obstruct the full implementation of DEI initiatives. The transformation of the DEI strategy can only happen when organizational leaders acknowledge what has not worked in the past and commit to implementing structural changes (Kraus et al., 2022).

### **Review of Literature**

I developed a policy recommendation presentation to offer options for increasing opportunities for leadership development for people of color at the local ECEO. This policy recommendation presentation could be used to inform the organization's leadership team on methods for making leadership development opportunities more

equitable, available, and accessible for people of color in their organization. Increasing these opportunities could allow more people of color to advance into leadership roles within the organization. The policy recommendation presentation includes a presentation of the existing problem within the organization and a summary of the findings from the current study.

In this literature review, I present evidence from my research and current literature, provide recommendations for the ECEO's leadership team connected to the evidence and supported by the research, describe the goals for the project, and explain the rationale for choosing this project genre. In this literature review, I also consider how current research informs practice for this policy recommendation presentation. The data analysis in Section 2 and the literature to develop the presentation. For this literature review, I searched for peer-reviewed journal articles published within the past 5 years in the following databases and search engines accessible through the Walden University Library: Google Scholar, EBSCO, Education Source, ERIC, Child Care & Early Education Research Connections, and ProQuest. Search terms included *DEI policy and education*, *organizational change*, and *DEI and leadership development*. To further refine the search, I added *policy* to *DEI and leadership development* and then added *teachers or educators*. I searched *policy development or making*, *people of color*, *leadership development*, *position paper*, and *leadership development*. I then entered the terms *early childhood education* and *leadership development*. Finally, I searched *storytelling*, *people of color*, *DEI policies and implementation*, and *leadership development policy implementation and people of color*. This literature review is focused

on three key concepts related to the project study: personal identity as a part of leadership development, implementing DEI policy, and leadership development as a pathway to organizational equity.

### **Personal Identity as a Part of Leadership Development**

As a part of leadership development for early childhood educators, personal identity exists permanently in individuals and develops over time (Henderson et al., 2022). A person's lived experiences must be considered when developing leaders (Henderson et al., 2022). The implementation of identity management strategies allows people of color to proactively manage others' impressions of them (Hebl et al., 2020). According to Sisco (2020), this is most significant for educators of color where lived experiences of racism are social realities that affect their performance. According to Arnett (2023), people of color prefer celebrating their identities; however, they perceive doing so as a professional risk. Organizations can highlight their agency by concentrating on a person of color's specific experiences relative to how their race has affected them instead of considering a broader representative narrative (Lee et al., 2023). Additional benefits include the psychological benefits of authenticity and self-esteem as well as the contribution to more significant social change (Arnett, 2023). The value of having people of color represented in an organization is partly due to having a range of voices and perspectives (Beach & Segars, 2022). To maximize this benefit, an organization must value its visible differences and less obvious personal stories (Beach & Segars, 2022). These stories can include who they are, why they are at the organization, and how they got there.

The findings of this study indicated that educators of color at the organization feel a lack of appreciation for their personal stories relative to how they affect their performance, willingness to progress in their careers, and feelings of belonging. These needs can be addressed practically by understanding their career goals and personal stories (see Highton, 2023). According to Griffith et al. (2019), assessing organizational and individual needs when determining the course of leadership development often contributes to more informed decisions when selecting organizational leaders. This critical inclusion into current DEI practices at the organization must be predicated by organizational leaders recognizing the potential disruption to existing power structures that these initiatives may make (see Highton, 2023). However, Rawls (1971) stated that organizations must prioritize raising the prospects of the least advantaged to support justice as fairness, and to do so requires that leaders within the organization not be shielded from the realities of society and must agree to participate in a place where equal opportunity is a fundamental principle (Rawls, 1971). A leadership approach to DEI initiatives that values representation, participation, application, and appreciation promises to offer a way for all employees to engage in it (Beach & Segars, 2022). This pathway allows the entire organization to transform into one that thrives through its full engagement in diversity (Beach & Segars, 2022). This unified experience within the corporate community enables business processes to change, offering more opportunities for diverse voices and an environment where employees are recognized for their individuality and unique personal experiences and the organization becomes authentic and more profoundly accessible (Beach & Segars, 2022). When this type of experience is



incorporated into policy, the organization can move from an articulated DEI statement to an enacted DEI policy (Byrd, 2022).

### **Implementing DEI Policy**

Policy implementation requires intentionality, well-articulated goals, and explicit expectations for implementation responsibility (Byrd, 2022). The findings indicated that the ECEO has made positive progress toward elevating DEI as a conversant topic of significance, and this progress gives the organization a foundation for building an actionable DEI policy. Increased representation in leadership roles may be the goal; however, organizational policy should focus on the lived experiences and barriers to the progression of employees of color rather than solely changing the leadership's composition (Byrd, 2022). Attention must be given to the root cause of the problem; however, creating a policy around racism (i.e., the root cause) versus offering training solutions (e.g., workplace sensitivity training) is challenging to execute (Diaz et al., 2023). Iyer (2021) suggested that DEI initiatives lack effectiveness because the underlying inequality is not addressed. When positions of power (i.e., leaders) in an organization are represented primarily by the advantaged group (i.e., not people of color), the DEI policies reflect their influence, and this singularity causes the incomplete implementation of DEI policies (Iyer, 2021). Instead, the perception is that increasing the number of people of color in leadership roles represents a gain for one group at the expense of a loss for the other (Iyer, 2021). It may be necessary to consider various strategies to negotiate White normativity (Lee et al., 2023). Power should be considered

throughout the implementation of diversity practices and policies for its influence on equity (Byrd, 2022).

Furthermore, examining how power manifests in practice is critical in organizational change (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). If these power structures are not examined, privileged groups within the organization will continue to make decisions for others (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). By emphasizing a broader focus on the disadvantaged group, the injustices and inequities can be seen as central to the policy's purpose (Liebow & Glazer, 2019). According to Rawls (1971), organizational policies that create justice for all can be created to benefit the least advantaged members of society to offer the fair distribution of opportunity. The use of organizational policy to name and address racial issues within an organization can destabilize organizational norms, shed light on racial inequities, and stimulate change (Byrd, 2022).

Ordinary organizational practices often perpetuate inequality in organizations (Amis et al., 2020). These practices are enacted in ways that continue to prioritize some members of the organization over others; however, the idea that they are fair and just is deeply embedded into the organization's culture (Amis et al., 2020; Onyeador et al., 2021). According to Fulton et al. (2019), the centrality of White leaders' perceptions, emotions, and experiences causes significant frustration for people of color in organizations, and this viewpoint is typically present even when White leaders do not intend to centralize their views. Adding to the number of people of color in leadership addresses some issues; however, it does not solely accomplish racial equality (Fulton et al., 2019). The findings from the current study suggested that leadership development

opportunities at the ECEO depend on an employee's visibility or exposure to a supervisor and the supervisor's perception of the person's effort, and this organizational practice allows the dominant racial viewpoint to determine who is afforded an opportunity, thereby perpetuating structural racism. Racial inequity persists without identifying and transforming organizational processes through policy implementation (Liera & Desir, 2023). Focusing on changing organizational practices that even inadvertently undermine DEI is required to fully address these issues in ways that concentrating on changing individual attitudes do not (Onyeador et al., 2021).

Freeman et al. (2019) suggested setting policy to advance people of color into leadership roles includes a focus on a diverse pipeline by consistently providing educators of color with information about leadership opportunities and opportunities to engage with leaders of color. Performance/program evaluations should include DEI (Diaz et al., 2023). Effort should be evaluated clearly and consistently relative to critical behaviors and accomplishments, with less apparent demonstrations of effort identified according to its significance to career advancement (Domingo et al., 2022). Criteria-based feedback should be used to articulate a promotion pathway (Domingo et al., 2022). Organizations must invest in resources that support coaches and mentors to people of color to help apply knowledge (Diaz et al., 2023). People of color must be actively recruited, developed, supported, and nurtured to become leaders within the organization (Iheduru-Anderson, 2020).

## **Leadership Development as a Pathway to Organizational Equity**

According to Kirby et al. (2021), creating policies to support internal leadership promotions in the early childhood education workforce drives quality improvement, innovation, and positive change. Early childhood's most effective leadership development programs offer opportunities for person-centric relational supports (mentoring, network building, peer learning; Lee et al., 2022). When addressed appropriately, leadership development programs effectively address education, economic, and racial inequities (Dugan & Henderson, 2021). Leadership development must keep equity as its focus to maximize its positive value to an organization or society at large (Dugan & Henderson, 2021). People have multiple social identities that can provide privilege or disadvantage and create inequities in leaders and leadership development (Day et al., 2021). The findings from my study showed that current leadership development programs at the organization are perceived positively by educators of color. Specifically, they mention that recent programs aimed at employees of color (e.g., the fellowship program) have positively affected their feelings about progressing into a leadership role. According to Rawls (1971), just and equitable organizations provide all members with fair equality of opportunity. According to Loumpourdi (2023), organizations must consider and remove any barriers to leadership development. Rawls's theory of justice suggested that this obligation should be explicitly extended to the least advantaged in an organization. The findings of my study indicated that opportunities for leadership development are often ascribed according to the exposure or visibility of a person within the organization. Organizations should address instances of bias in what

may be perceived as merit-based decisions, as these could be influenced in other ways (Loumpourdi, 2023). Day et al. (2021) concurred that understanding biases and inequities in leadership development is essential to effective leadership. This concept becomes most relevant when delivering feedback to participants. Kea-Edwards et al. (2023) stated that providing effective feedback for people of color includes task-specific, behavioral feedback absent bias. When considering a process for delivering feedback from leadership development programs, organizations should explicitly prioritize inclusion by articulating it as a goal or leadership competency (Kea-Edwards et al., 2023). Lavoie (2023) noted that inclusive leadership development involves aligning it with business objectives, customizing it to the organization's needs, allocating budget to mentorships, and measuring program results. Further, leadership development initiatives must include systemic and structural ways to reduce organizational inequities and facilitate the involvement of more people of color (Day et al., 2021).

### **Project Description**

As part of a qualitative research study, 12 fellowship participants from the ECEO were interviewed to gain their perspectives on how leadership development opportunities are distributed and what recommendations they have for increasing the progression of people of color into leadership roles. The study was conducted to address the problem of the underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles at the ECEO. The study included interviews with early childhood educators of color in regional manager, executive director, director, assistant director, and instructional coach positions (see Table E2).

The deliverable for this project includes a presentation of the study's findings to the ECEO's senior managers. A copy of the PowerPoint presentation that includes recommendations for ways to support the leadership development of people of color at the organization is in Appendix A. The results from this study show that the organization has a base of positive DEI initiatives to develop a stronger message to educators of color about their ability to advance within the organization. However, there is a need for a more consistent approach to how leadership development opportunities are distributed. Current policies that include set criteria (length of service, time in position, performance level) are a reasonable foundation for additional policies that assure that individual effort is quantified consistently from employee to employee.

Further, leadership development opportunities must be independent of convenience, how well-known the person is to their supervisor, or how visible they are in the organization. Participants shared that their experiences as people of color offer unique barriers and personal stories. Without considering these unique experiences, an equitable distribution of opportunities is unlikely. By normalizing employees' diverse sociocultural, educational, and economic backgrounds and experiences, the message is that people with different perspectives belong (Beach & Segars, 2022). Therefore, this individuality in how employees of color are understood and known should be incorporated into how leadership development opportunities are distributed.

The organization's Education and Development department serves as the leadership development program administrator. Participants agreed that the ECEO's programs are worthwhile and productive in offering opportunities for leadership

development. With the support of concrete policies with measurable deliverables, these programs will have the opportunity to be more equitably distributed. If the organization ensures that educators of color are informed of leadership opportunities and have equitable opportunities to engage with leaders, they will have increased confidence to aspire to leadership roles, and representation will improve (Freeman et al., 2019). Kraus et al. (2022) stated that leaders must implement evidence-based structural changes relative to the DEI strategy to create a just and equitable organization. Positioning racial equity as a course for prosperity for all creates the most effective conditions for implementing new initiatives (Kraus et al., 2022). If there is a consistent commitment by senior managers to hold supervisors accountable to how leadership development programs are consistently administered across the organization, more leaders of color may emerge (Powell et al., 2023). The implementation of DEI policy must be systematic and integrated into all aspects of administration and practice (Diaz et al., 2023).

A barrier to consistently implementing this recommendation is that the organization is geographically disparate and divided into distinct divisions guided by different leaders. Organizational change, particularly concerning DEI, requires shared foundations in leadership, decision-making, professional development, safety, quality, and well-being (Powell et al., 2023). The recommendations may need to be preceded by DEI initiatives that include leadership accountability, shared governance, and shared decision-making that promotes accountability, ownership, partnership, and equity (Powell et al., 2023). To advance people of color into leadership roles requires intentionality at both the individual and organizational levels (Freeman et al., 2019).

According to Livingston (2020), equitability may involve treating people differently but appropriately. Therefore, any strategy must include a connection between personal attitudes, informal cultural norms, and formal policies (Livingston, 2020). Given the barriers and sensitivities of DEI policies, the recommendations proposed by this project may take up to a year to implement in the ECEO.

### **Project Evaluation**

After completing my research, I created a PowerPoint presentation focused on the findings of a qualitative study exploring the perspectives of early childhood educators of color employed by the local ECEO about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development and what recommendations they have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles. The research project aimed to address the problem of the underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles at the ECEO. I proposed a series of recommendations based on my research findings and the literature. The recommendations focused on three areas related to leadership development: personal identity as a part of leadership development, implementing DEI policy, and leadership development as a pathway to organizational equity. A formative approach is recommended to evaluate the effect of the recommendations. Evaluating DEI policy effectiveness is a complex process that confronts evaluators with the need to consider a shift from focusing on a single policy intervention to considering the systemic effects of multiple policies using an integrative, formative approach (Molas-Gallart et al., 2021). DEI policy assessments should allow feedback throughout the policy implementation cycle (Molas-Gallart et al., 2021). A



formative evaluation approach will involve the participation of the stakeholders to improve the implementation of the interventions being evaluated (Molas-Gallart et al., 2021). In this way, setbacks can be approached as learning opportunities and used to make changes during implementation.

The stakeholders in this project are the ECEO's leaders, leadership and development team members, DEI leaders, and educators of color. The inclusive nature of the evaluation approach provides that its evaluation should involve participation from all policy stakeholders while considering how the policy affects a systemic change in the organization (Molas-Gallart et al., 2021). The goals of the project include an increase in the number of educators of color participating in leadership development programs, the consistent organization-wide implementation of a system for capturing personal stories and their value to an educator of color's achievement history, and the consistent and unbiased distribution of information about leadership development opportunities to all employees, especially employees of color.

### **Project Implications**

There are opportunities for positive social change from this study and project recommendations. The ECEO is a leader in early childhood education and provides care to thousands of children and families around the United States. The organization is a premier employer named to Fortune's 100 Best Companies to Work For. As such, its influence and respect are widespread. Prioritizing the leadership development of educators of color is critical for the organization to increase leadership equality and societal equity (Kea-Edwards et al., 2023). The organization can create a more just and

equitable workplace by implementing structural policy changes that positively affect the representation of people of color in leadership roles (Kraus et al., 2022). Equal opportunity is a fundamental principle of Rawls's theory of justice as fairness for society. By adopting a structural means for employees of color to express their cultural identity while elevating their professional opportunities, the organization can support the development of leaders of color (Arnett, 2023). In so doing, the organization can be an inclusive and positive space for its members to thrive. This study does not intend to offer a simple, one-dimensional solution to a complex organizational and social issue. However, providing meaningful perspectives from employees of color may contribute positively to the more significant social issue of underrepresentation.

## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

### **Project Strengths and Limitations**

While there may be a moral imperative to provide all people with equal opportunities and to strive for organizational equality, there is also a business imperative (Loumpourdi, 2023). Companies with greater diversity in leadership roles outperform (with profitability and value creation) less diverse companies (Loumpourdi, 2023). There is an underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles at the local ECEO. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood educators of color employed by the local ECEO about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development and what recommendations they have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for the educators to progress into leadership roles. The participants were 12 people of color who worked at the local ECEO. Rawls's (1971) theory of justice was used as the conceptual framework because of its focus on the principles that all people should have equal basic rights, all offices and positions should be open to all under conditions of fair and equal opportunity, and that fairness commands raising the prospects of the least advantaged in a society or organization.

The study's most significant limitation was accessing only educators of color working for the ECEO. I did not expand the study to include White leaders and leaders of color within the organization or educators of color who have left the organization to pursue leadership roles outside the organization. Limiting the perspectives in the study created a gap in data involving alternative insights. The project deliverable, a PowerPoint

presentation, was directed at senior executives, leadership and development managers, and DEI managers. The presentation's audience could expand to include other decision makers across the organization.

Concerning application generalization, the study focused solely on the leadership development opportunities of people of color within the ECEO and not on any other factors contributing to the succession of people of color into leadership roles. According to Diaz et al. (2023), many organizational practices can contribute to barriers to DEI, including how resources are directed, how accomplishments and performance reviews are conducted, and how the hiring process attracts diverse candidates. Therefore, focusing on only leadership development opportunities leaves a gap in understanding the full complement of issues related to the underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles.

### **Recommendations for Alternative Approaches**

In this study, I collected data via individual interviews with people of color from the fellowship program at the ECEO. According to Campbell et al. (2021), collecting data from communities of color presents challenges, specifically that participants may feel uncomfortable speaking on topics they perceive as private or personal. In the case of the current study, I asked participants to discuss their personal experiences with leadership development opportunities provided by their current employer. An alternative research strategy could have been to include a scholar of color as a research team member (see Campbell et al., 2021). To aid in encouraging a supportive environment, I prioritized conducting the interviews respectfully and introduced each interview by stating why I

was conducting this research, which provided information to the participants that made them feel more at ease and conveyed my commitment to the work (see Campbell et al., 2021). While the participants contributed a significant amount of information and insight into answering the research questions, following Campbell et al.'s suggested alternative approach to collecting data could have provided them with more comfort while expressing themselves.

In this study, I gathered the perspectives of current employees of color at the ECEO who are in the fellowship program in the operations division of the organization. An alternative way to address the problem of underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles would have been to expand the definition of participants to include people of color in other parts of the organization. I could have increased the sample size by adding people of color from other internal departments, which would have offered an expanded definition of how leadership opportunities are distributed at the organization and could have presented alternative ways to solve the problem of underrepresentation.

### **Scholarship, Project Development, and Evaluation**

As a manager of early childhood programs for many years, I identified a problem and created immediate and effective changes that required the cultivation of meaningful relationships and concentrated attention to all aspects of the operation of childcare centers. As a researcher in the doctoral process and the development of the project study, I was challenged to change my perspective from knowing and solving to questioning and patiently allowing the data to provide recommendations for solutions. This paradigm shift has required me to trust the process of allowing evidence to convey solutions to existing

problems. By objectively interviewing participants and reviewing their responses, I could appropriately separate my thoughts from the evidence without losing my passion and conviction for discovering solutions. Throughout the process, I sincerely appreciated the openness and vulnerability displayed by the participants. I also recognized my emotional commitment to diversity work by listening to their experiences and feeling their struggles. Through reflective journaling, I found an unexpected outlet for my thoughts and feelings, which contributed to acknowledging them without allowing them to influence the findings.

By developing the project for the study, I have learned about an alternative way to present data as a change agent. This opportunity has taught me that data can represent itself, and my role is to objectively present reasonable recommendations without judgment. As such, my role as an advocate for change can be informative and compelling. Before engaging in this qualitative research, I needed to be more organized in how I collected knowledge and information from people of color about their experiences. I also needed to be more deliberate in how I recommended change. Converting data into a presentation taught me the significance of using an analytical approach to convey critical messages. This approach allowed me to maintain my objectivity and cohesively present recommendations to solve a complex issue.

### **Reflection on the Importance of the Work**

The ECEO has prioritized DEI for years and has yet to make significant strides in increasing the representation of people of color in leadership roles. In this study, I present data grounded in research to contribute an alternative way to consider DEI and its

implementation in the ECEO. By providing solutions that reflect direct feedback from people of color within their organization, leaders can learn how to create equitable leadership development opportunities in a new way. My presentation intends to create an environment for leaders to discuss necessary changes without expecting answers; instead, the data shared in the presentation can be reviewed, and solutions can be discussed by stakeholders who share collective ownership of the problem. Scholars must consider how they engage in DEI research for educational institutions (Amis et al., 2020). In this project, I offer recommendations to an educational institution that has embraced diversity yet continues to have structural barriers to its implementation. Successful diversity practice requires stakeholders to understand structural barriers to equity and take effective action to remove them (Byrd, 2022).

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

According to Lee et al. (2022), the early childhood education field must strengthen equity, requiring resilient, diverse, innovative, and collaborative leadership. Leadership development programs can provide the pathway for effective early childhood education leadership (Lee et al., 2022). If pursued and implemented, equitable leadership development opportunities can be essential for advancing the profession and supporting the workforce to drive transformative change (Lee et al., 2022). High-quality, diverse leadership in early childhood education can improve child and family outcomes, center quality, and staff outcomes (Kirby et al., 2021). These organizational improvements represent the potential for positive social change.

This study's results informed a presentation I made to ECEO leaders with recommendations for distributing equitable leadership development opportunities for people of color. The findings have several implications related to how the ECEO recognizes the individuality of the experiences of educators of color and how opportunities are distributed without dependence on the educator's visibility or a supervisor's interpretation of their effort. The findings of this study offer a pathway for leaders to collectively share responsibility for developing a system that reflects the unique needs of people of color within their organization.

The study's findings reflected the perspectives of educators of color within the ECEO who participated in the fellowship program. Future research should investigate the perspectives of people of color who have left the organization to pursue leadership opportunities at other organizations. Perspectives from this group of participants may expand on the knowledge needed to provide leadership opportunities that are significant enough to retain educators of color and ultimately support the representation of people of color in leadership roles. Additional research should also include investigating organizational practices central to reproducing inequality. These practices could include practices related to hiring, role allocation, promotion, compensation, and policy structures (Amis et al., 2020).

Finally, making changes to organizational structures that significantly affect the progression of organizations toward equitability and fully implemented DEI practices involves innovation from leaders (Beach & Segars, 2022). This type of innovation requires leveraging ideas and practices from other leading organizations (Beach &



Segars, 2022). Expanding the conversation to include leaders from other motivated organizations may support ECEO's success in increasing the representation of people of color in leadership roles.

### **Conclusion**

When I began this qualitative study, I had a conceptual understanding that the equitable distribution of leadership development opportunities resulted in positive experiences for people of color within an organization. After gathering the perspectives of people of color at the ECEO, I now understand that this type of equitability involves the sensitive exploration of an organization's structural processes. While leadership development can provide pathways to leadership roles, it can also be a definer of organizational equitability and must be considered carefully (Byrd, 2022). Byrd (2022) suggested that power within an educational organization influences its racial equity when organizations' practices and policies reflect the perspectives of those of the dominant race. In an organization where DEI has been a priority but has yet to result in equal representation in leadership roles, current leaders must engage in the conversation that I recommended in the current study.

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## Appendix A: The Project

### **EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF EDUCATORS OF COLOR ABOUT THEIR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES AT A LOCAL EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION ORGANIZATION**

Judy Uhron  
October, 2023  
Doctor of Education; Organizational  
Leadership and Development  
*Recommendations for the Organization's  
Leadership Team*

## **BACKGROUND**

There is an underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles.

This situation exists despite the organization's inclusion statement that identifies a commitment to DEI and despite the fact that ECE educators in the organization are predominantly teachers of color.

There is a lack of understanding of how ECE educators of color employed by the organization perceive how their employer provides leadership development opportunities.



## BACKGROUND

There is a lack of understanding of what recommendations ECE educators of color have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles.

With so few leaders of color in the early childhood sector, it is critical to include feedback from people of color when exploring pathways to racial equity in the ECE profession (Talan et al., 2022).

Exploring the perspectives of people of color about their underrepresentation in leadership positions at the local organization may contribute to reducing barriers to their advancement.

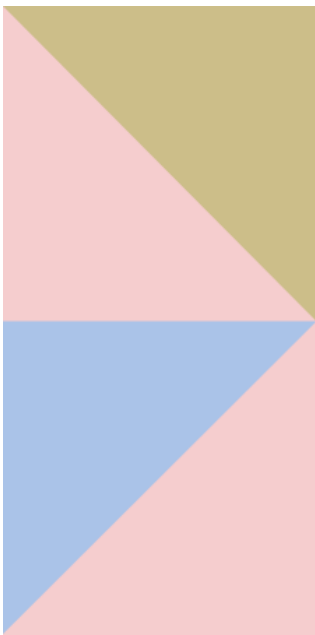


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## PROBLEM STATEMENT

**The problem is that there is an underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles at the local organization.**

- 17% of leaders at the organization are people of color, while 51% of the workforce is comprised of people of color.
- The organization has yet to determine how to support and develop the underrepresented groups of employees to create a more equitable organization.
- The underrepresentation contributes to racial inequality at the organization.
- Lack of organizational support is an obstacle that inhibits people of color within an organization from taking on leadership responsibilities.



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## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood educators of color employed by the local organization about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development and what recommendations they have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles.

**Significance:**

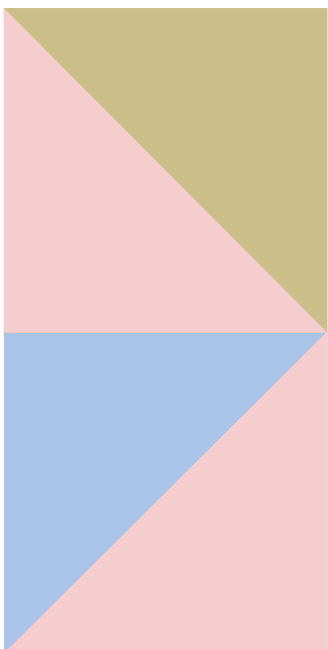
- Provide insights needed to inform current leaders about how to change policies and practices to improve the representation of people of color in leadership roles.
- Educators of color could receive leadership development that improves their opportunities to progress into leadership roles.
- Increasing the number of people of color in leadership roles could help the organization meet its DEI goals.



## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

**RQ1:** What are the perspectives of early childhood educators of color about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development?

**RQ2:** What recommendations do early childhood educators of color have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles?



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## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: RAWLS'S THEORY OF JUSTICE**


The conceptual framework that grounds this study is Rawls's theory of justice.

To create a just society, individuals must have access to equal freedoms and not be subject to political influences or interests

Equality depends on equal opportunity, unless unequal distribution favors the most vulnerable.

The leaders of any society must choose the rules or policies that lead to justice

(Rawls, 1971)



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## **RAWLS'S THEORY OF JUSTICE**

**Key Principles:**

- Equal basic rights
- Equality of opportunity
- Raising the prospects of the least advantaged in society
- Offices and positions are open to everyone under fair equality of opportunity
- Opportunities may be distributed so that they benefit the least advantaged members of society

(Rawls, 1971)

## METHOD/DESIGN

A basic qualitative methodology was used for the study.

- This method allows the researcher to gain a deep, detailed understanding of a specific phenomenon (Agazu et al., 2020).

Research design

- Semi-structured interviews were used to gain the participants' perspectives
- Participants were members of the Fellowship Program
- Interview questions 1-6 gained demographic information
- Interview questions 7-11 addressed RQ1
- Interview question 12 addressed RQ2

## DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FOR PARTICIPANTS

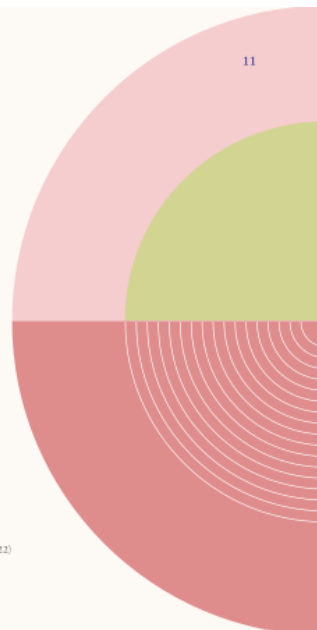
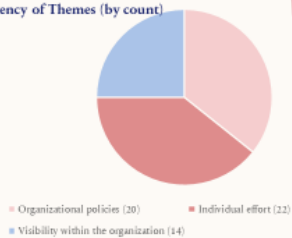
Participant	Years worked at the organization	Role/position at the organization	Length of time in current role	Years of Age	Highest level of education
1	10	Center Director	1 yr	35-40	Master's
2	23	Center Director	7 yrs	> 50	Bachelor's
3	15	Center Director	14 yrs	40-45	Master's
4	5	Center Director	4 yrs	35-40	Master's
5	16	Assistant Director	5 yrs	45-50	Associate's
6	6	Assistant Director	3 yrs	35-40	Bachelor's
7	15	Center Director	12 yrs	40-45	Master's
8	10	Instructional Coach	3 yrs	45-50	Bachelor's
9	12	Director	2 months	30-35	Master's
10	17	Executive Director	6 yrs	40-45	Master's
11	27	Regional Manager	7 yrs	> 50	Bachelor's
12	5	Director	3 yrs	40-45	Associate's

## RESULTS

### RQ 1: WHAT ARE THE PERSPECTIVES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS OF COLOR ABOUT HOW THEIR EMPLOYER PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES FOR THEIR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT?

Theme 1: Organizational policies	Theme 2: Individual effort	Theme 3: Visibility within the organization
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yearly check ins</li> <li>No policies</li> <li>Education</li> <li>Performance</li> <li>Length of time in position</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Personal drive/energy/attention</li> <li>Management development opportunities</li> <li>Individual background/opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Visible to manager</li> <li>Corporate leadership</li> </ul>

Frequency of Themes (by count)

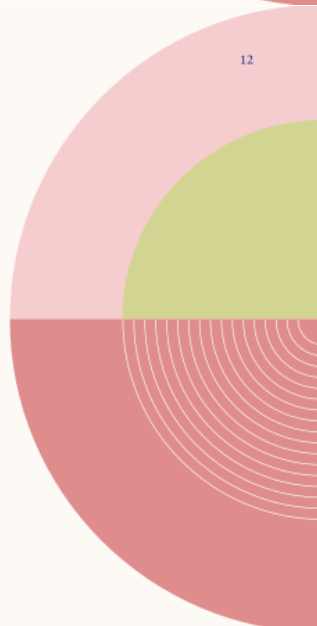


## RESULTS

### RQ2: WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS DO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS OF COLOR HAVE REGARDING WAYS FOR THE ORGANIZATION TO PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE TO PROGRESS INTO LEADERSHIP ROLES?

Theme 1: DEI related programs	Theme 2: Recognition of individuality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Representation</li> <li>Progress with DEI</li> <li>Mentorship program</li> <li>Equitable opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>See the person/individual</li> <li>Consider barriers</li> <li>Share stories/perspectives</li> </ul>

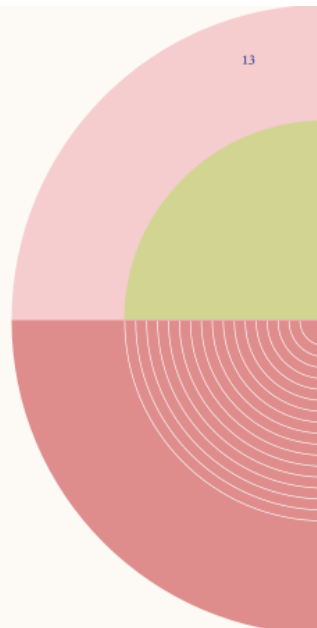
Frequency of themes (by count)



## THEME 1: ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES

- ❑ Lack of specific policies related to how opportunities were distributed
- ❑ Convenience (if the educator was located in a specific geography) was cited as a contributor that could eclipse the established policies (e.g.: education policy, time in position, and performance level).

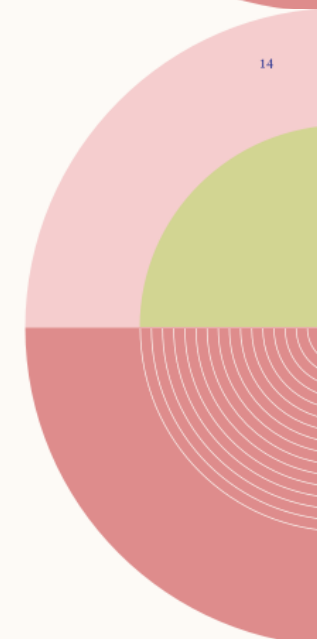
"Sometimes it feels like it's for convenience, you know, it might be easier to slide other people into roles as opposed to others...there could be so many biases, internal biases..."



## THEME 2: INDIVIDUAL EFFORT

- ❑ Seven participants mentioned personal drive, energy, or attention 11 times as a condition of how the organizational distributes leadership development opportunities.
- ❑ Opportunities are distributed relative to an individual's willingness to participate in activities outside their work role. "Have you raised your hand a lot to volunteer for things?"
- ❑ Management development programs were cited by seven participants as offered to educators as a pathway to promotion. Opportunities to enroll in management programs have "improved greatly" over the last year.
- ❑ Consideration of a person's background. "I don't fit a certain profile."

"It would definitely be up to the participant, the applicant, the employee that is looking to grow and their willingness to maybe step outside of their comfort zone."  
 "When you show the dedication and the commitment to what you're doing every day, I feel like those opportunities just naturally are offered."



## THEME 3: VISIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION

- ❑ Visibility was cited 13 times by 10 participants as affecting the distribution of leadership development opportunities across the organization. "The opportunity to be in front of people, right influential people within the company" affects how you receive opportunities.
- ❑ The distribution of opportunities is "really dependent on the people who are above you."

"It's a matter of who is willing to take the time."

"If your last former supervisor may no longer be with the company or moved on to a different area of the company, then there's no one there to speak on your behalf and put your name forward."

"I think it depends on who you work with, like as far as their leadership team goes, if they're willing to help you with getting you up into the next leadership opportunity?"

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## THEME 1: DEI RELATED PROGRAMS

- ❑ Various DEI related programs were mentioned 20 times throughout the interviews.
- ❑ Participants identified progress has been made relative to DEI related programs.
- ❑ Representation was mentioned as a means for demonstrating that opportunities exist.

"I feel like the company already had portions of DEI, but now it's like I'm able to see it, feel it"

"If they can look and say if this young Black woman can do this...then maybe I have a chance to."

"...feeling like an outcast in a group of people who all look the same but don't look like me. I was the only person of color in a group of white women."

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## THEME 2: RECOGNITION OF INDIVIDUALITY

- ❑ Five participants mentioned the need to recognize individuality nine times when considering recommendations for providing leadership development opportunities for educators of color.
- ❑ They mentioned the need for the organization to see the individual, including the barriers they may have encountered.
- ❑ They mentioned the need to share stories and perspectives as a recommendation for how to include people of color in leadership development.

“You need to get to know them, get to know their background, get to know what their strengths are, where there areas for development are. I guess with anybody, but it may be a little different because of their background.”

“The company should understand the different stories and the barriers that people of color or educators of color face and really take that into consideration when they’re producing different reforms and policies.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

### Personal identity as a part of Leadership Development

- ❑ A person’s lived experiences must be considered when developing leaders (Henderson et al., 2022). This is especially true for people of color where lived experiences of racism are social realities that affect their performance (Sisco, 2020).
- ❑ Organizations can highlight a person’s agency by concentrating on their specific experiences relative to how their race has affected them instead of considering a broader representative narrative (Lee et al., 2023).
- ❑ The implementation of identity management strategies allow people of color to proactively manage others’ impressions of them (Hebl et al., 2020).



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

### Personal Identity as a part of Leadership Development (cont.)

- ❑ To address the stated needs of the participants (appreciation for their personal stories relative to how they affect their performance, willingness to progress in their careers and feelings of belonging), the organization can prioritize understanding their career goals and personal stories (Highton, 2023).
- ❑ This inclusion into DEI practices must be predicated by organizational leaders recognizing the potential disruption to existing power structures that these initiatives may make (Highton, 2023).
- ❑ This type of DEI initiative must include a leadership approach that values representation, participation, application, and appreciation for all employees to engage in it (Beach & Segars, 2022).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

### Implementing DEI Policy

- ❑ The organization should use its positive progress toward elevating DEI as a conversant topic of significance as a foundation or building an actionable DEI policy.
- ❑ Focus policy on the lived experiences and barrier to the progression of employees of color rather than solely changing the leadership's composition (Byrd, 2022).
- ❑ Power structures must be considered throughout the implementation of diversity practices and policies for its influence on equity (Byrd, 2022).
- ❑ Performance/program evaluations should include DEI (Diaz et al., 2023).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

### Implementing DEI policy (cont.)

- ❑ Effort should be evaluated clearly and consistently relative to critical behaviors and accomplishments, with less apparent demonstrations of effort identified according to its significance to career advancement (Domingo et al., 2022).
- ❑ Criteria-based feedback should be used to articulate a promotion pathway (Domingo et al., 2022).
- ❑ An investment must be made that supports coaches and mentors to people of color to help apply knowledge (Diaz et al., 2023).
- ❑ People of color must be actively recruited, developed, supported, and nurtured to become leaders within the organization (Iheduru-Anderson, 2020).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

### Leadership Development as a Pathway to Organizational Equity

- ❑ ECE's most effective leadership development programs offer opportunities for person-centric relational supports (mentoring, network building, peer learning) (Lee et al., 2022).
- ❑ Leadership development must keep equity as its focus to maximize its positive value to an organization or society at large (Dugan & Henderson, 2021).
- ❑ Organizations must consider and remove any barriers to leadership development (Loumpourdi, 2023).
- ❑ Organizations must address instances of bias in what may be perceived as merit-based decisions, as these could be influenced in other ways (Loumpourdi, 2023).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

### Leadership Development as a Pathway to Organizational Equity (cont.)

- ❑ Give task-specific, behavioral feedback absent bias to people of color (Kea-Edwards et al., 2023).
- ❑ Organizations should explicitly prioritize inclusion by articulating it as a goal or leadership competency (Kea-Edwards et al., 2023).
- ❑ Leadership development should align with business objectives (Lavoie, 2023).
- ❑ Leadership development initiatives must include systemic and structural ways to reduce organizational inequities and facilitate the involvement of more people of color (Day et al., 2021).

## PROGRAM EVALUATION

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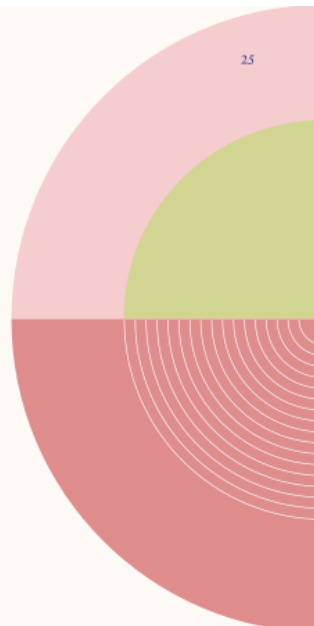
### FORMATIVE APPROACH

- ❑ DEI policy effectiveness is a complex process that requires a shift from focusing on a single policy intervention to considering the systemic effects of multiple policies using an integrative, formative approach.
- ❑ Assessment should occur via feedback throughout the policy implementation cycle.
- ❑ Stakeholders should be participate to improve the implementation of the interventions being evaluated.
- ❑ Setbacks should be approached as learning opportunities and used to inform change.

(Molas-Gallart et al., 2021)

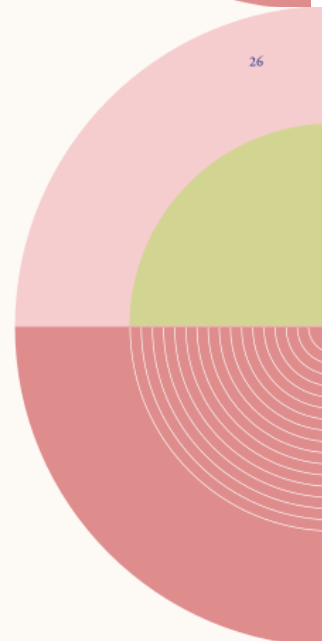
## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- ❑ The study accessed only educators of color working for the organization. Future studies could include white leaders and leaders of color within the organization or educators of color who have left the organization to pursue leadership roles outside the organization.
- ❑ The study focused only on the leadership development opportunities of people of color within the organization, not on any other factors contributing to the succession of people of color into leadership roles. Future studies could include other organizational practices that contribute to barriers to DEI (e.g.: how resources are directed, the hiring process, and how accomplishments and performance reviews are conducted (Diaz et al., 2023).



## POTENTIAL IMPACT FOR POSITIVE SOCIAL CHANGE

- ❑ The ECE field needs to strengthen equity which requires resilient, diverse, innovative, and collaborative leadership (Lee et al., 2022).
- ❑ Leadership development programs can provide the pathway for effective ECE leadership (Lee et al., 2022).
- ❑ If pursued and implemented, equitable leadership development opportunities can be essential for advancing the profession and supporting the workforce to drive transformative change (Lee et al., 2022).
- ❑ High quality, diverse leadership in ECE can improve child and family outcomes, center quality, and staff outcomes (Kirby et al., 2021).



## CONCLUSION

Organizational equity is a complex issue. This study provides a framework to address one element (leadership development) in pursuing diverse leadership. It intends to provide a resource for current leaders at the local organization where DEI has been a priority but has yet to result in equal representation in leadership roles.

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## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Date:

Time:

Interview Code #:

Parts of the Interview	Interview Questions and Notes
Introduction	<p>Hi, my name is Judy Uhron. Thank you for participating in this interview today. As you know, the purpose of the study is to explore the perspectives of early childhood educators of color about how their employer provides opportunities for leadership development and what recommendations they have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles. The interview should last about 45 to 60 minutes. After the interview, I will be reviewing your answers for data analysis purposes. However, I will not identify you or the organization in the documents nor will anyone be able to identify you with your answers. You can choose to stop this interview at any time. I will be recording this interview for transcription purposes.</p> <p>Do you have any questions before we begin? Do you agree to be interviewed for this study?</p>
Question 1-6	<p>The first few questions will provide me with some basic demographic information:</p> <p>How many years have you worked at the organization? What is your role/position at the organization? If a teacher, what age level do you teach? How long have you been in your current role? How old are you? What is the highest level of education that you have completed?</p>
Question 7	<p>How would you describe the leadership development opportunities that you have experienced at the organization?</p> <p>Probing questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you give me additional examples?</li> <li>• Could you explain more about...?</li> <li>• Is there anything else you would like to add?</li> </ul>
Question 8	<p>How do you think opportunities for leadership development are distributed at the organization?</p>

	<p>Probing questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you give me some examples?</li> <li>• Could you explain more about...?</li> <li>• Is there anything else you would like to add?</li> </ul>
Question 9	<p>What policies at the organization impact how you are provided opportunities for leadership development?</p> <p>Probing questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you give me some additional examples?</li> <li>• Could you explain more about ...?</li> <li>• Is there anything else you would like to add?</li> </ul>
Question 10	<p>What policies at the organization impact how you are prevented from accessing opportunities for leadership development?</p> <p>Probing questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you give me some additional examples?</li> <li>• Could you explain more about...?</li> <li>• Is there anything else you would like to add?</li> </ul>
Question 11	<p>What factors at the organization influence how you are provided with leadership development opportunities?</p> <p>Probing questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you give me some examples?</li> <li>• Could you explain more about...?</li> <li>• Is there anything else you would like to add?</li> </ul>
Question 12	<p>What are your recommendations for how the organization could support the progression of people of color into leadership roles at the organization?</p> <p>Probing questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you offer any additional recommendations?</li> <li>• Can you explain more about ...?</li> <li>• Is there anything you would like to add?</li> </ul>
Closing	<p>Thank you for your time today and for sharing your answers with me. Is there anything else you would like to share?</p> <p>Do you have any questions for me?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thank you, again. Goodbye.</li> </ul>



## Appendix C: Demographic Data for Participants

**Table C1***Demographic Interview Questions*

<b>Demographic Interview Questions</b>
How many years have you worked at the organization?
What is your role/position at the organization?
If a teacher, what age level do you teach?
How long have you been at your current role?
Are you between the ages of 20-25, 25-30, 30-35, 35-40, 40-45, >50?
What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

**Table C2***Demographic Data for Participants*

Participant	Yrs worked at the organization	Role/position at the organization	Length of time in current role	Years of Age	Highest level of education
1	10	Center Director	1 yr	35-40	Master's
2	23	Center Director	7 yrs	> 50	Bachelor's
3	15	Center Director	14 yrs	40-45	Master's
4	5	Center Director	4 yrs	35-40	Master's
5	16	Assistant Director	5 yrs	45-50	Associate's
6	6	Assistant Director	3 yrs	35-40	Bachelor's
7	15	Center Director	12 yrs	40-45	Master's
8	10	Instructional Coach	3 yrs	45-50	Bachelor's
9	12	Director	2 months	30-35	Master's
10	17	Executive Director	6 yrs	40-45	Master's
11	27	Regional Manager	7 yrs	> 50	Bachelor's
12	5	Director	3 yrs	40-45	Associate's

## Appendix D: Examples of Codes and Themes

**Table D1***Examples of Codes and Themes*

**RQ1:** What are the perspectives of early childhood educators of color about how their employer provides opportunities for their leadership development?

Theme 1: Organizational policies	Theme 2: Individual effort	Theme 3: Visibility within the organization
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yearly check ins</li> <li>• No policies</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Performance</li> <li>• Length of time in position</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal drive/energy/attention</li> <li>• Management development opportunities</li> <li>• Individual background/opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visible to manager</li> <li>• Corporate leadership</li> </ul>

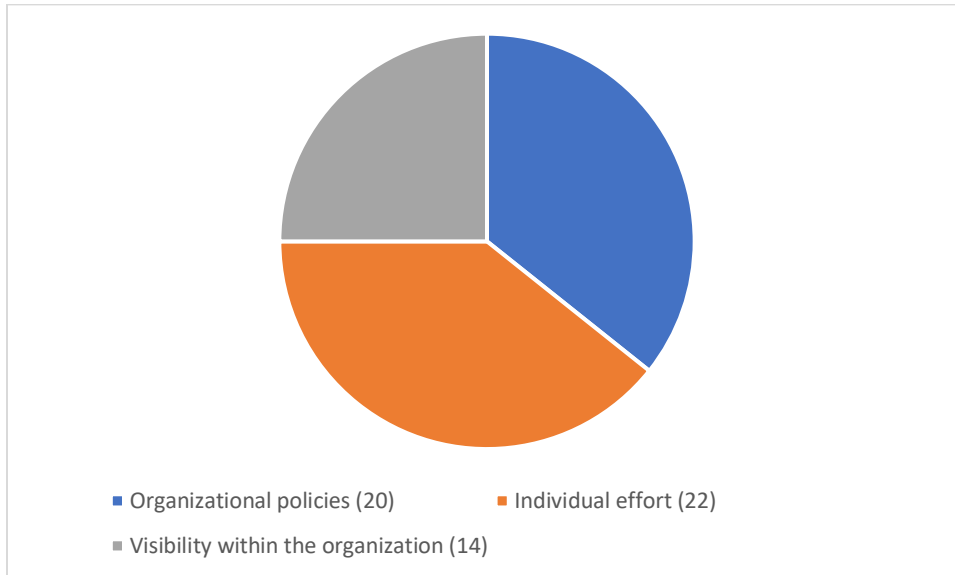
**RQ 2:** What recommendations do early childhood educators of color have regarding ways for the organization to provide opportunities for them to progress into leadership roles?

Theme 1: DEI related programs	Theme 2: Recognition of individuality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Representation</li> <li>• Progress with DEI</li> <li>• Mentorship program</li> <li>• Equitable opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See the person/individual</li> <li>• Consider barriers</li> <li>• Share stories/perspectives</li> </ul>

**Table D2***Explanation of Themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Description</b>
Organizational policies	lack of specific policies that related to how leadership opportunities are distributed
Individual effort	an employee's personal drive, energy, or attention is a condition of how the organization distributes leadership development opportunities
Visibility within the organization	an employee's visibility within the organization affects the distribution of leadership development opportunities
DEI related programs	progress has been made relative to DEI related programs
Recognition of individuality	the need for the organization to see the individual, including the barriers they may have encountered when determining how to distribute leadership development opportunities

## Appendix E: Frequency of Themes

**Figure E1***Frequency of Themes RQ1 (by Count)***Figure E2***Frequency of Themes RQ2 (by Count)*