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# Parent Perceptions of Quality Early Childhood Education Programs

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PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
PROGRAMS

By
Lichelle Jones-Wilkins

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University School of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University
2021

**Approval Page**

This dissertation was submitted by Lichelle Jones-Wilkins under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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**Acknowledgements**

This work would not have been possible without the support of my village! I like to give special thanks to my dissertation chair, Dr. William Stone, who relentlessly provided direction and assistance to complete my program. I would like to thank my dissertation committee members, Dr. Uchenna Peters and Dr. Laura Hooks, who provided insight and guidance throughout this process. I wish to thank my professors at Gardner-Webb University for presenting such a balanced doctoral program and for encouraging me every step of the way.

Nobody has been more important to me in the pursuit of this milestone than my family. I would like to thank my amazing husband Ryan who supported me over the years and pushed me to the finish line. Thank you to my daughters, Rhyan who was 2 and Raylee who I was 9 months pregnant with when I began this journey. They have sacrificed a lot with me and are my ultimate sources of inspiration for attaining the highest level of education possible. I would like to thank my parents who raised me to be a finisher and whose unconditional love and support are with me in whatever I pursue. I would like to thank my three brothers who inspire me to make my dreams a reality.

I would also like to thank my friends and mentors who have encouraged and supported me over the years. I am indebted to the doctoral students who were on this journey with me. The friendships we formed are forever. I would like to thank the administrators and families who agreed to participate in this study. Finally, I would like to thank God for being my Waymaker and Guiding Light through this long journey. He continues to be faithful to me daily and has proven to me that with Him, all things are possible!

**Abstract**

PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

PROGRAMS. Jones-Wilkins, Lichelle, 2021: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University.

Early childhood education (ECE) programs play an important role in a child's social,

emotional, and cognitive development. ECE programs strive to prepare the students for

kindergarten. The importance and value of ECE programs have increasingly become

more important to state and federal officials. As a result, these officials have made

significant efforts to make ECE programs more accessible. When it comes to selecting

educational programs for their children, parents are frequently the primary decision

makers. Rather than parental choice, studies usually focus on stakeholder perspectives on

quality care. The goal of this 3-phase study was to better understand the factors that

influence parental decision-making when choosing ECE programs for their children in

the inner-city area of the county studied. A program review of publicly available ECE

program information, parent and director surveys, and parent interviews were used to

collect data. Findings revealed a lack of publicly available ECE program information and

that parents perceived their ECE program as high quality overall. Parents placed a high

importance on environment, teachers and instruction, and cultural competence. Findings

also revealed that parents' cultural background, education level, and household income

did not influence the value they placed on the indicators of quality.

 *Keywords:* early childhood education, parent perceptions, parental, quality, high

quality, parent surveys

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) is an essential element in the education of students in general. ECE plays a crucial role in an increasingly global and economically dynamic environment in ensuring that children can develop foundational skills and join a successful school system. Parents often have various options in choosing an ECE program for their children. The idea of quality as it pertains to early learning has been researched in a variety of realms; however, parent perceptions of quality may differ based on a variety of factors.

### Background

Empirical research has consistently shown over the past 2 decades that children enrolled in high-quality ECE services exhibit improved cognitive skills and socio-emotional competencies (Barnett & Ackerman, 2006; Doggett & Wat, 2010). In fact, it has been shown that quality ECE programming decreases grade retention and special education placements and increases graduation rates for high school (Barnett & Ackerman, 2006; Berliner & Glass, 2014). These gains have a greater impact on children from low-income families and those at risk of academic failure who, on average, begin kindergarten behind their peers in pre-literacy and language skills (Jacobson, 2007).

Early childhood is a period of incredible cognitive and physical development. For the first few years of development, children experience rapid brain development, making this phase of development a primary target of support and intervention. In the early stages of development, a solid foundation is critical for strong early brain development (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). While exposure to quality ECE can improve children's language growth, mathematical skills, and physical abilities, those who do not

have a good foundation or early exposure to ECE often start kindergarten behind their

peers (Board on Children, Youth, and Families, 2021). In particular, 60% of low-income

children without ECE quality do not understand their alphabet, and 94% do not

understand the sequencing of numbers before entering kindergarten (Doggett & Wat,

2010). Therefore, to maximize their learning ability, it is important to get kids off to the

right start within the first few years.

Early learning has been proven to have positive outcomes on student success.

Recent studies conclude that ECE provides lasting benefits to students and has a major

impact on them even into adulthood (Piper, 2018). The early years are significant in

relation to the learning and growth of a child. Lots of research has been dedicated to

demonstrating the benefits of quality ECE. A robust body of research suggests that

children who engage in high-quality early learning services have improved health and

social-emotional and cognitive results than those who do not participate (Duncan, 2015).

Although ECE is important, many issues such as funding, resources, enrollment, access,

instruction, and quality continue to be controversial. These issues, along with others, are

mentioned regularly in articles, research, conversations, and board meetings and have an

effect on program success.

Recognizing the advantages of ECE services, notable attempts have been made by

state and federal governments to improve the accessibility of these programs. In 1965, for

example, with the help of three federal initiatives, a national ECE movement was

initiated. Second, Project Development Continuity was initiated by the Federal Office of

Child Development with the aim of facilitating the movement of preschool children to

kindergarten. The initiative was, sadly, brief and did not provide an assessment of its

efficacy. The 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act made available Title I block grants for educational institutions to provide low-income children with educational programs (Cahan, 1989). While ECE has not been explicitly listed, Title I block grants have given communities the flexibility to prioritize ECE programs (Cahan, 1989). The U.S. Head Start/Project Follow Through was initiated on a national level in 1968 by the Office of Education, which sought to serve low-income children from preschool through third grade by linking them to prevention programs (Cahan, 1989). Today, services continue to exist nationally for Head Start/Project Follow Through. In fact, the culmination of these three federal interventions has given rise to the programs of Head Start and State Preschool that we now know.

As kindergarten content has become increasingly more academically taught, teachers say kindergarten students are not prepared for kindergarten (Daily et al., 2011), which is daunting. If students are to successfully complete kindergarten, they are required to have higher and higher levels of awareness upon admission. Without the skills required to fulfill the curriculum's cognitive demands, some children have difficulties in kindergarten (Farran, 2011). Other factors that can determine student academic outcome in kindergarten are parent participation and parent-to-teacher relationships (Chen, 2020). Without these factors kindergarten learners could be at a disadvantage. Kindergarten teachers indicated that with difficulties, almost half of the students did not reach kindergarten readiness. The biggest problem that was indicated was following the instructions. The lack of structured ECE training was also identified by kindergarten teachers as an obstacle (Pianta & Cox, 2002). Many preschool-aged children attend ECE services with both parents working outside the home for most families (Glynn, 2012).

Parents can select from a number of ECE programs, some of which are approved by associations, while others are not. There are many different ECE programs that exist today. Whether public, private, religious-based, or affiliated with a specific programming method, many options are available for parents (Meyer, 2008). Some ECE systems are theory-specific in how they are structured and the activities they use, such as Montessori or Reggio Emilia schools (Morrison, 2018). Other programs are certified for meeting a set of quality standards by accreditation organizations like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC; Kuchment, 2007). A guide for parents to use in their search for an ECE program is also published by NAEYC. A quick web search also can include a large array of other checklists for families to use during the selection process. Some of these checklists are research-based, although others are not. Some of the variables associated with the choice of ECE programs are consistency, expense, geography, and inclusion (Niergarth & Winterman, 2010). This research discusses the previously listed variables as well as other variables affecting the selection of ECE services for children by parents.

It can be difficult to assess the standard of ECE services, as the concept of "quality" varies depending on which meaning is used. A selection of 10 standards are published each by NAEYC and the National Institute for Early Education Research. While some of the same quality criteria are shared by these two organizations, the concept of quality often can concentrate on a particular programming aspect, such as accreditations, curriculum, or teacher-child interactions. Some theorists claim that high quality is associated with an academically rich approach when selecting an ECE program, while others suggest that higher quality is the social/emotional component of learning

(Jacobson, 2007; Lasser & Fite, 2011). A play-based approached also has been trending as a controversial topic in relation to quality. Academics, social-emotional learning, play-based, or any variation of a published set of research-based quality criteria can be included in high quality.

A previously trending topic was the notion of high-quality universal ECE. In 2012-2013, at least partly funded compulsory ECE was provided by 40 states in the United States (Barnett et al., 2012). A lot of controversy about how and when to have compulsory ECE was trending in the nation (Goldsmith & Rees, 2007). The cost associated with program quality was and remains one of the key problems with the provision of universal ECE (Lasser & Fite, 2011). Although it is a costly endeavor to provide universal ECE, much evidence shows that the benefits outweigh the price (Belfield et al., 2006). The constraint of having a comprehensive service for only children from low-income families is another problem (Doggett & Wat, 2010). Some families of preschool-aged children in the early childhood program may not have the choice of a state-funded program due to issues such as income, waiting list, or overperforming on the intake screener. The geographic areas in which families reside can also restrict the number of services available. Geography can also be a factor in high-quality access to programs of ECE (Kern, 2007).

There are many students in the U.S. who are in need of early learning. Some parents have challenges finding early learning programs that meet their specific needs. There are many ECE programs in the studied state and county. These programs operate under a number of umbrellas such as nonprofit groups including religious organizations and profit-making organizations such as single centers and major corporate chains

(Hansen, 2020). In some areas of South Carolina, prekindergarten programs are provided by the public school system, mostly directed at children who are at risk of not being able to excel in school because of poverty, poor English-speaking capacity, disabilities, or other factors (Hansen, 2020). According to the South Carolina Department of Education (2020), 28,222 prekindergarten students were enrolled during the 2019-2020 school year. According to South Carolina Child Care and Early Education (2020), there are 1,688 registered preschools in South Carolina and 106 registered centers in the studied county. There are also home-based centers in South Carolina. South Carolina Child Care and Early Education reported that childcare providers must be licensed, registered, or exempt in order to legally operate in South Carolina. Overall there were 2,491 childcare facilities including religious, public, private, and home-based approved or registered in South Carolina as of January 2019 (South Carolina Child Care and Early Education, 2020).

**Statement of the Problem**

This dissertation is a study of what parents perceive as quality in ECE programs. This investigation took a mixed methods approach where some parents were interviewed and some were surveyed to determine the primary factors that contribute to a quality early learning program. The primary research question was, "What do parents perceive as the indicators of a quality early learning program?" This is a problem, because in the relatively small studied county, there are many ECE programs of quality, yet many are not filled to capacity. The pre-k public school that was established to serve all students in one particular county school district had less than half its capacity of students enrolled. Parents are opting out of sending their children to some "quality" programs. There are gaps in current and past research in this area. Much research presents a set of influential

factors, but some factors appear to be superficial. This study addressed unknown issues, biases, and/or perspectives that influence parents to choose quality ECE programs. The findings will assist ECE directors in having knowledge of what parents want in a quality ECE program.

**Theoretical or Conceptual Framework**

Programming for ECE relies on theory or ideology. Numerous theories exist, including cognitive, behavioral, psychological, and constructivism (Saracho & Spodek, 1999). The conceptual framework for this study is constructivism. The constructivist point of view holds the learner at the center of experience, arguing that once a person deliberately connects past experiences and prior knowledge, new knowledge evolves or constructs (McLeod, 2019). A constructivist believes that knowledge does not exist outside of the mind and is not discovered, but rather is built by individuals and their experiences (Crotty, 1998). Preschoolers, or early learners, are explorers by nature. Through their natural exploring, they experience new things, build new knowledge, and learn. In the social realm, constructivists view learning with a portion of past experience which affects the climate. Contrary to the tabula rasa, or blank slate, what is perceived as reality for one may not be reality for all under constructivism (McLeod, 2019). The notion of the truth as the required representation of the outside world is dismissed by constructivism and upholds the idea that in particular contexts and in ways peculiar to the perceiver, knowledge is constructed and instilled with meaning (von Glaserfeld, 1995).

Lev Vygotsky is the leading contributor to constructivism, but there are more. Through Vygotsky's social theories of learning studies, it was found that a child usually successfully accomplishes new tasks while working in collaboration with an adult instead

of on their own (Lipoff, 2011). The vision of Vygotsky and the constructivist approach

both depend on the proximal development and scaffolding zone (Gindis, 1999). The

proximal development zone is known as the information gap between real development

and progress of development (Pinantoan, 2013). Furthermore, Bodrova and Leong (2005)

described Vygotsky's field of proximal development as knowledge that children were in

the process of building using past experiences as opposed to building knowledge just

based on information. Proximal development zone is the intended region where

scaffolding is used and has achieved its greatest success; as the proximal development

zone is continuously evolving, it is essential to individualize scaffolding (Pinantoan,

2013).

The vision of Vygotsky focused on speech and play using cognitive and

emotional abilities. Ok Seung Yang (2000) proposed the strongest portion of the young

child's development was during free play. The chance to consciously explore and "try

out" to gain skills as teachers facilitate and support is essential to a child's development.

The teacher's support during the operation of scaffolding is critical. Centered on the

vision of Vygotsky, Ok Seung Yang created the Verbal Plan and Evaluation program

involving teachers as children's encouragers and advocates during free play. When

preschoolers are exploring pretend play, scaffolding may be used when these young

children learn how to play to develop social and playing skills that are more authentic.

The PRoPELS (Plan, Role play, Props, Extended time, Language, Scenarios) technique

was used by one early childhood scaffolding education program with kids while

pretending to play (Bodrova & Leong, 2012). PRoPELS is an abbreviation that stands for

the most significant components of imaginary play. It is on the continuum from most

immature to most mature (Bodrova & Leong, 2012). Using this technique, children should be allowed to plan, role play, use props, have extended time, use language, and explore various scenarios.

In education, constructivism focuses less on the teacher and more on the preschool-aged child and the ways in which children develop skills. Parental involvement is one particular avenue that distinguishes constructivism from other learning theories. Parental engagement and parental cooperation are essential elements of this learning theory, and elements that focus on the development of new skills in children are required (Jacobson, 2007). Parental participation is important for their children in the act of choosing an ECE program. The ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1994) is a theory based primarily on parental participation. A five-system approach is used to define human development in this model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The family, according to Bronfenbrenner (1994), is one part of both the microsystem and the mesosystem, two of the ecological model's five systems. The microsystem is by far the most influential level because of the immediate environmental settings such as home and school (Guy-Evans, 2020). Parenting and the connectedness of the home-school relationship are two problems that inhibit the readiness of children for kindergarten (Kelly, 2010). Both of these variables are important components of the human ecology model of development (Wehman, 1998).

**Statement of the Purpose**

The goal of this research was to gain an understanding of the variables influencing the selection of quality ECE programs for preschool children by parents. The data gathered in this study will be used to give directors of ECE programs a snapshot of

what parents expect while looking for a quality ECE program. These data will allow program directors to build ECE programs that are compatible with what parents say they want. The data will also be used to promote improvements to public policy relating to access to quality local and state-level ECE services. The results can also help to make ECE program knowledge and education more available to parents. This was a mixed methods study that used interviews and surveys to collect data from participants.

**Research Questions**

In order to understand what parents want in an ECE program and to identify the factors that contribute to their decision-making when selecting a program best for their child, the following questions were explored:

1. What do parents view as quality in an ECE program?

2. How do parental views of quality in ECE programs differ by socioeconomic status, culture, parental education, and previous ECE program experience?

3. What types of ECE programs and information are available and attainable in the studied county, as perceived by parents?

4. What improvements can be made to make ECE programs high quality as perceived by parents?

**Significance of the Study**

When choosing educational services for their 3- and 4-year-old daughters, parents are often the primary decision makers. Research that examines the perception of quality care by parents is important for the field of ECE to better understand factors influencing a parent's choice of ECE programs. Although the K-12 education systems in South Carolina have a proven framework to help parents promote college readiness and find the

right college for their children, parents looking to find the right ECE program for their children do not have an equivalent support system. High schools, for example, provide parents with guides and toolkits on college criteria, finance and scholarships, application procedures, and the different types of colleges and universities available to help their college-bound children (private, state, and community colleges). Parents of preschoolers, however, are left to fend for themselves; there are clearly no detailed parent manuals on various forms of ECE services, quality reviews of these programs, related costs and subsidies, and operating hours. Knowing the perspective of parents during their ECE quest and the difficulties they faced will help shed light on these problems and a call for action to create strategies to overcome the obstacles for administrators, providers, and policy makers.

**Assumptions**

I assume the participants in this study answered the questions honestly based on their sincere perspectives and authentic experiences. I believe the participants answered the questions based on additional factors such as their values and beliefs. I believe parents indicated that some of the factors that influence their selection of ECE programs have a great deal to do with location. Since the participants came from a variety of ECE programs, I assume they represent a heterogeneous group of parents, but not all parents with children ages 4-5 enrolled in public ECE programs in the studied county.

**Limitations**

Participants in this study came from programs that serve a variety of students, including students with disabilities. In-depth research about the different perspectives of parents with children with disabilities was not conducted for this study. The differences

in perspectives of parents could affect the validity of the research. This research did not require parents to focus on the scope of K-12 education, but rather the early years. Understanding the educational system for Grades K-12 is relevant, but not for this study. Some parents may have been through the early years prior to the study, if they have older children who attended an ECE program. This may limit their authentic perception of a quality ECE program and the factors that influence their selection of a quality ECE program. Another limitation is the differential selection of subjects. A parenting email list was used to solicit some parent participation for this study. Parents who decided to engage in this study may not be a full representation of all demographics, geographic areas, and/or ideologies.

**Delimitations**

The extent of this study included feedback from parents who reside in the studied county and who have children between the ages of 3-5 who attend a public ECE program such as Pre-K, Head-Start, and Early Childhood Special Education. The parents in this study have had experience with an ECE program for at least 6 months. This study was conducted in the various school districts near the school district and ECE program in which I am employed. Since the area chosen for the study is my hometown, I am familiar with the geography of the county.

**Definition of Terms**

*Compulsory Early Childhood*

The early learning years prior to entering 5-year-old kindergarten (Hansen, 2020).

*Constructivism*

The theory that people actively construct or make their own knowledge based on

previous knowledge and that reality is determined by your experiences as a learner (Western Governors University, 2020).

*Culture*

Patterns of beliefs, practices, and traditions associated with a group of people (NAEYC, 2020).

*ECE*

Any part- or full-day group program in a center, school, or home that serves children from birth through age 8, including children with special developmental and learning needs (NAEYC, 2020).

*Early Childhood*

The period from birth to age 8 (The Center for High Impact Philanthropy, 2020).

*High Quality Early Childhood Program*

A program that provides a safe and nurturing environment while promoting the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development of young children (U.S. Department of State, 2017).

*Parental Involvement*

The participation of parents in meaningful communication about their child's academic learning and their engagement in other school activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

*Parent Perceptions*

Parental beliefs about child development in relation to social cultural variables, belief systems, and values (Scher & Tirosh, 1997).

*Preschooler*

A child who is under 5 years old and has not entered kindergarten.

*Socioeconomic Status*

The social standing or class of an individual or group which is often measured as a combination of education, income, and career (American Psychological Association, 2013).

**Summary**

ECE is a critical foundation needed for all students. Research proves that receiving early learning services will have lasting effects for the child. Choosing the appropriate ECE program is an important decision parents have to make. Many factors are to be considered when parents select a program appropriate for their child. Chapter 2 discusses literature related to parental selection of quality ECE programs.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

**Introduction**

Early learning requirements are described as perceptions of what children should be able to know before entering kindergarten (Debruin-Parecki & Slutzky, 2016). Approximately 70% of Americans agree on the need for early education (Edelman, 2013). In the last few years, kindergarten has been highly demanding. Skills previously discussed in the first grade are now required to be learned in the kindergarten year (Daily et al., 2011). Kindergarten teachers estimated that more than half of children entering kindergarten lack the skills required for a good year (Sheridan et al., 2010). Chien et al. (2010) indicated that more quality training time is required in ECE programs in order to get children ready for kindergarten. The next section explores what is interpreted as quality in ECE programs from a variety of sectors.

**Conceptual Framework**

Programming for ECE relies on theory or ideology. Numerous paradigms exist, including cognitive, behavioral, psychological, and constructivism (McLeod, 2019). The conceptual framework for this study is constructivism. The constructivist point of view holds the learner at the center of experience, arguing that once a person deliberately connects past experiences and prior knowledge, new knowledge evolves or constructs (McLeod, 2019). A constructivist believes that knowledge does not exist outside of the mind and is not discovered, but rather is built by individuals and their experiences (Crotty, 1998). Preschoolers, or early learners, are explorers by nature. Through their natural exploring, they experience new things, build new knowledge, and learn. In the social realm, constructivists view learning with a portion of past experience which affects

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Jean Piaget, John Dewey, and Lev Vygotsky are the leading contributors to constructivism. Through Vygotsky's social theories of learning studies, it was found that a child usually successfully accomplishes new tasks while working in collaboration with an adult instead of on their own (Lipoff, 2011). The vision of Vygotsky and the constructivist approach both depend on the proximal development and scaffolding zone (Gindis, 1999). The proximal development zone is known as the information gap between real development and progress of development (Pinantoan, 2013). Furthermore, Bodrova and Leong (2005) described Vygotsky's field of proximal development as knowledge that children were in the process of building using past experiences as opposed to building knowledge just based on information. Proximal development zone is the intended region where scaffolding is used and has achieved its greatest success; as the proximal development zone is continuously evolving, it is essential to individualize scaffolding (Pinantoan, 2013).

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vision of Vygotsky, Ok Seung Yang created the Verbal Plan and Evaluation program involving teachers as children's encouragers and advocates during free play. When preschoolers are exploring pretend play, scaffolding may be used when these young children learn how to play to develop social and playing skills that are more authentic. The PRoPELS technique was used by one early childhood scaffolding education program with kids while pretending to play (Bodrova & Leong, 2012). PRoPELS is an abbreviation that stands for the most significant components of imaginary play. It is on the continuum from most immature to most mature (Bodrova & Leong, 2012). Using these techniques, children should be allowed to plan, role play, use props, have extended time, use language, and explore various scenarios.

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model of development (Wehman, 1998).

**ECE Programs**

Quality ECE has been described differently by various stakeholders (administrators, teachers, and parents). In the concept of quality ECE, these different viewpoints should be taken into account (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Katz, 1994). ECE quality is characterized by significant themes such as developmentally appropriate practices (DAP), secure and stable environments, positive experiences, positive relationships, and positive social-emotional opportunities, according to Cryer (1999). Cryer stated that some researchers put the concept of quality ECE under fire, claiming that DAP supported individual child-centered approaches that may vary from various family-centered groups. Parents have reported protection, health, and relationships as the most essential aspects of ECE efficiency, according to Cryer. Cryer proposed documentation of global processes with evaluations in order to verify the concept of quality. Method and structural metrics will be assessed by these evaluations. Indicators of process efficiency are primarily focused on interactions and perceptions. Guides such as group size and adult-child ratios apply to structural consistency.

Cryer and Burchinal (1997) analyzed the quality scores of parents and practitioners in ECE programs. Seven hundred twenty-seven parents of babies and children and 2,407 parents of preschoolers were included in the study. Data collection was carried out using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS; Harms et al., 1980), the Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS; Harms et al., 1990), and parent questionnaires. The parent questionnaire questioned how relevant the items were and how well the assignment was carried out by their child's program. One of the

study's key results was that parents reported ECE programs with higher quality scores than professionals who rated the programs.

Ceglowski (2004) explored how quality in ECE was described by a statewide focus group. For a total of 333 participants, the study comprised 11 interviews and 38 focus groups. A wide variety of stakeholders, such as parents, employees, supervisors, lawmakers, and licensing staff, were involved in the focus groups. Characteristics such as individual attention, low teacher-child ratios, program structure, contact with parents, teacher preparation, culturally sensitive training, and safety were included in the study's quality ECE program indicators. "What is best for the students" was the main question defining the quality of ECE programs. The study revealed that due to work schedules, parents make childcare decisions based on availability; choices are not based on consistency. Ceglowski proposed that it was essential to extend the scope of quality early childhood services to incorporate the views and opinions of parents. The key quality indicator for parents, for example, was contact between staff and parents, which was not a quality indicator listed by any of the other stakeholders. Ceglowski suggested that future studies should explore the definition of quality and include other relevant and unstudied viewpoints, such as those of parents. When evaluating the quality of early childhood services, all viewpoints should be taken into consideration.

The level of quality in most early childhood centers in the U.S. is mediocre, according to Love et al. (1996). As shown in longitudinal studies, the authors synthesized data from research studies over the past 20 years and started with the positive results associated with quality ECE programs. Next, Love et al. addressed the analysis of literature on quality services for early childhood. Love et al. stated that structural

measures are the dimensions of quality correlated with child well-being. Teacher

recruitment, training, teacher-child ratios, group size, low staff turnover rates, and

salaries are included in these factors. Structural measures are important since they form

the basis of ECE quality programs. In research studies, the authors proposed stronger

designs and analytical methods and the need to monitor family demographics.

Glantz and Layzer (2000) resolved that ECE programs need to enhance

efficiency, review subsidy systems to provide incentives for quality, raise salaries, and

require more strict regulations on licensing. The research was initially performed in four

states with 100 locations, in multiple phases. Four hundred one centers and 749

classrooms were part of the final process. The researchers used the ECERS (Harms et al.,

1980) and the ITERS (Harms et al., 1990) along with the Caregiver Interaction Scale

(Arnett, 1989) and the Teacher Participation Scale (Howes & Stewart, 1987) to analyze

consistency. The key result was that the majority of centers were mediocre. ECE quality

services have been related to cognitive and social growth. Indicators such as staff-child

ratios, teacher recruitment, training, and salaries were correlated with quality ECE

programs. The authors determined that the higher quality levels of the ECE programs

were connected to stringent regulations on licensing, which included structural indicators.

In helping to classify and define quality ECE projects, quality metrics similar to those

used in DAP have been critical.

NAEYC is the largest and oldest organization that serves early childhood

educators in the United States. NAEYC's DAP paradigm is focused on both in research

on child development and learning and expertise on educational effectiveness and

supports the optimal learning and well-being of young children (NAEYC, 2020). For

over 25 years, NAEYC also has set guidelines for degree awarding institutions. A voluntary accreditation process for ECE programs was created by NAEYC in 1985 (NAEYC, 2020). Many programs do not seek to obtain the accreditation due to the strict standards and regulations. A level of professional quality as determined by NAEYC must be met in order for programs to be accredited. Research has identified quality metrics for early childhood services, according to NAEYC (2009). In the early childhood classroom setting, these quality measures include assessing process and structure indicators. Method refers to experiences such as interactions and events in the early childhood program that children encounter. Indicators of structure include staff/child ratio, group size, and education and training for employees.

Three key considerations have been developed by NAEYC, including awareness of child growth, individuality, and social and cultural background. The first core factor, knowledge of child growth, requires knowledge of normal development of children. Educators who are conscious of child development will have opportunities that will provide children with optimal learning. The second core concern, individuality, is linked to understanding what is suitable for each child individually. Educators who consider the strengths and the family background of the child will better address the child's learning needs. The social and cultural context, the third core concern, relates to understanding the social and cultural context in which the child resides. The cultural values, morals, vocabulary, and interactions children have at home must be taken into account by educators so the children can have appropriate and meaningful learning experiences. The importance of cultural awareness is highlighted by the second and third core considerations.

The DAP system (NAEYC, 2020) contains 12 principles for the growth and learning of children. These principles involve children growing sequentially, at different degrees, on the basis of their experience and maturation. Children learn through a series of play that become more complex as they get older. These styles of play, such as symbolic representation, may inspire children to learn and develop areas such as self-regulation, language, and social skills. Children need to have a safe relationship with educators who are knowledgeable about the social and cultural climate of children. The DAP also includes five guidelines for effective teaching, which include the development of a group of learners through the establishment of reciprocal ties with families. Guidelines also provide curriculum preparation and evaluation to promote the growth of children. There are 10 recommended teaching techniques which are acknowledgement, giving specific feedback, giving direction, asking questions, giving assistance, providing information, creating challenges, demonstrating, encouragement, and modeling.

### *Benefits of ECE Programs*

Practical evidence over the past 25 years has shown that involvement by children in high-quality ECE services may have measurable behavioral and educational effects (Barnett, 1995; Barnett & Ackerman, 2006; Doggett & Wat, 2010). Quality treatment will also contribute to gains for K-12 programs and society as a whole (Krueger, 2002). The following sections discuss these lines of study in depth in order to demonstrate the developmental and financial advantages of ECE programming.

### *Developmental Benefits of ECE Programs*

Participation of children in quality ECE services improves their cognitive and socio-emotional abilities. Children learn how to communicate better with other children

and adults. The preschool setting helps children to learn essential skills that allow them to listen to others and communicate their own thoughts, make friends, share, participate, and be responsible for their behavior (Childventures, 2017). Studies have shown, for example, that the score for general intelligence tests increases by.50 standard deviations (about 8 points) and by.25 to.40 standard deviations for social-emotional evaluations after 1 year of enrollment in ECE services (Barnett, 1995; Barnett & Ackerman, 2006). In comparison, ECE participants are more likely to show more commitment and self-regulation to problem-solving activities, participate in dynamic relationships with their teachers and colleagues, play with others, and use complex sentences to express their feelings (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005).

Quality ECE interventions also have been shown to boost school achievement when children reach primary school. Also, children who receive early education are considered to have a decreased potential for special education in primary school and after (Childventures 2017). Quality preschool programs help create a solid framework for the physical, behavioral, emotional, and social development of the child, which prepares them for their future (Childventures, 2017). These benefits appear to be apparent in student success during adolescence. Specifically, quality ECE intervention has been shown to minimize grade attrition and special education placement while increasing the rate of high school graduation (Barnett & Ackerman, 2006; Berliner & Glass, 2014). For example, researchers found that children who entered the Chicago Child-Parent Center and Extension Program, which is known as a high-quality ECE program, were less likely to be sent to remedial courses and had a 7-month reading and math advantage in Grade 2 and higher academic performance in Grade 8 and were more likely to graduate high

school than their peers. In comparison, children who enrolled in the ECE initiative were more likely to attend college (Reynolds et al., 2006).

### *Future Benefits and Gains*

Evidence of potential returns on public investment in high-quality programs is remarkable. For example, the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program cost-benefit study showed that $7.10 was returned to the community for every $1 spent in the program (Krueger, 2002). This study takes into account the costs of the service as well as the benefits of health and well-being. The authors noted that when these children reach maturity, prospective returns are likely to involve highly educated and professional employees with greater earning opportunities (Krueger, 2002). Around the same time, engaging in high-quality childcare programs decreases the expense of higher education and other human care, as schools will then provide less remediation classes and fewer people may have to focus on public assistance/welfare.

Quality ECE services can also result in other future gains, including less out-of-pocket expenses, less teenage births, and less teenagers joining the criminal justice system (Barnett, 1995). In addition, high-quality ECE provides opportunities for parents, particularly mothers, to seek or retain jobs, raising their earning potential by more than 6% (Green & Mostafa, 2011). Following on from these observations, Barnett (1995) concluded that "the national cost of failing to provide at least two years of quality ECE is extremely high, on the order of $100,000 for each child born into poverty or $400 billion for all poor children under five" (p. 45). Moreover, children who receive quality ECE are reported to be more positive and motivated, which leads them to do well as adults. Children learn how to overcome difficulties and develop resilience in challenging

times, relax comfortably at school to enjoy the rewards of education more quickly, and have a long-term interest in learning various things like playing music, dancing, singing, building, and cooking (Childventures, 2017).

**Quality ECE Indicators**

In 2012, an organization that rated quality in ECE programs became the first local Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) of its sort in the studied state and county. They were financed by a grant of $243,000 from a local foundation with a goal to provide every participating ECE program an individualized quality management plan so improvements in quality would directly affect the children enrolled in the program. The framework was based on a 5-star quality rating system that assessed learning environment, ratio and group size, staff qualifications, family engagement, and program administration. After each rating, childcare programs are entitled to receive enhancement grants of up to $5,000 to help improve quality. Since its conception in 2012, the organization now serves over 50 ECE programs in the studied county. Each program is rated on the 5-star scale, which is published as a resource for parents. Of the participating programs, 15 are 5-star programs, nine are 4-star programs, nine are 3-star programs, and four are awaiting a rating. Currently, 14 public school 4k ECE programs participate in the program. Though this program offers an indication of quality, the rating system does not incorporate core metrics of parental decision-making care such as access and continuity of programs, curriculum, teaching, classroom setting, family involvement, safety, and cultural competence. The aforementioned indicators are studied in this research.

*Quality Physical Environment*

Quality care is mostly measured in two dimensions: structure and procedure.

Structural quality has to do with the physical environment and materials, while process quality incorporates children's experiences with their surroundings. The quality of the classroom atmosphere and the relationships between adults and children will have an effect on children's learning. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) is a widely used indicator of ECE environments. The seven subscales concentrate on areas related to spaces and furniture, personal care procedures, language reasoning, activities, interaction, program layout, and parents and teachers (Cassidy et al., 2005). Positive interactions with teachers and a caring classroom environment have shown an effect on children's socio-emotional well-being (Stevens, 2017).

### *Quality Accessibility*

Historically, the meanings of "access" and accompanying assessment methods have centered on topics relating to the utilization, availability, and affordability of ECE services. Although there is no single or standardized description of ECE access in the literature, most studies concentrate on the location or physical setting of ECE programs and/or access to ECE programs for low-income households (Friese et al., 2017). Friese et al. (2017) described access as what is provided when parents, with reasonable effort and affordability, can enroll their child in a program that supports the development of the child and meets the needs of the parents. These do not explicitly consider location and physical environment, hours of service, commuting distance, or travel for parents. Some programs serve students from birth to 4k or beyond, which provides the continuity parents seek.

### *Cultural Sensitivity and Diversity*

The U.S. population is growing increasingly diverse, particularly given the

exponentially rising number of multicultural, multilingual children and families. In view

of this demographic transition, it is important for ECE programs to consider the needs of

the culturally and linguistically diverse communities they are serving. Literature in the

field noted that at a minimum, ECE programs should promote home language growth,

integrate children's home culture into everyday practices, and hire personnel who

represent the children and populations they serve (Lopez et al., 2017). Staff credentials

include fluency in languages other than English, a broad knowledge of cultural traditions,

and experience in second-language acquisition techniques. Lopez et al. proposed that

schools, resources, and experiences represent the importance of children's home

languages and community.

### *Quality Curriculum*

Another approach to defining quality is through the eyes of ECE directors and

scholars. Parental participation is one way for ECE directors to feel that parents prefer

one curriculum over another and that it leads to a high-quality ECE program (Espinosa,

2002). Teacher-child ratios, teacher preparation and instruction, the compassionate role

of teachers, and teacher-child relationships are important factors for parents to remember

when choosing a high-quality ECE curriculum (Espinosa, 2002).

ECE programs provide academic and life skills as part of the curriculum

(Dougherty, 2017). While scholars accept that both academic and social skill instruction

are components of high-quality early childhood programs, the combination of the two

programs varies from program to program. Farran (2011) indicated that there is a gap

between the skills assessed in school preparedness tests (mostly academic) and what

kindergarten teachers consider to be most relevant at the start of school. The majority of

kindergarten teachers reported that social and emotional abilities were more important than academic skills in a good kindergarten year (Hughes, 2010). Bodrova and Leong (2005) went on to say that pretend play should be a priority practice and should not be confined to relying on conventional academics.

ECE curricula, on the other hand, set targets for the information and abilities children can develop in an instructional setting and endorse curriculum plans to include day-to-day learning opportunities to cultivate such skills, such as daily lesson plans, textbooks, and other pedagogical resources (Duncan et al., 2015). In general, there are three types of early childhood curricula: whole-child (play-based) curricula, content-specific (academic-focused) curricula, and locally developed curricula.

Whole-child curricula provide child-centered learning and an emphasis on the school atmosphere (Duncan et al., 2015). Children are motivated to learn through experiences with peers in a classroom setting that provides and incorporates a range of learning materials and facilities. Although the whole-child program is consistent with accreditation requirements for NAEYC (Zan, 2005), it is unclear if it successfully promotes school readiness for children (Duncan et al., 2015). Content-specific curriculum, on the other hand, is a rigidly sequenced teaching approach that focuses on the growth of academic and socio-emotional skills. Some tests have shown that content-specific curricula have beneficial impacts on vocabulary, mathematics, and socio-emotional abilities (Duncan et al., 2015). Finally, locally produced curricula are basically homegrown or grassroots lesson plans that are developed to fulfill the needs and vision of a particular ECE center or curriculum. Due to the piecemeal approach of locally developed curricula, there is no consistent proof of its efficacy (Duncan et al., 2015).

A constant analysis of ECE principles and curricula through programs shows a patchwork of definitions, expertise, skills, and abilities that differ considerably from state to state. As a result, children reach kindergarten with varying stages of readiness based on where they live (DeBruin-Parecki & Slutzky, 2016). In the United States, ECE centers do not implement universal standardized curriculum, meaning children from different areas may not learn the same fundamental skills in various realms. In South Carolina, state-funded ECE programs use the SC Early Learning Standards. Although there are a set of standards to follow, each ECE center has the option to choose which curriculum they want to use to teach the standards.

### Quality Teachers and Instruction

Though discussions on standardization of ECE curricula are continuing, most scholars agree on key teaching skills. For example, NAEYC has developed teaching guidelines for ECE and education. These criteria stipulate that ECE teachers must (a) promote children's growth and learning by developing learning opportunities based on a deep knowledge of children's needs and development; (b) create relationships with families and the community that value and include them in children's education; (c) systematically employ evaluation, reporting, and assessment to positively affect children's development and education; and (d) promote learning and development by integrating relationships with students and families, effective educational practices, knowledge of content in all learning areas, and the ability to build a meaningful curriculum. Educators who are informed about early childhood development and who can have a balanced approach to education can then optimize children's learning environments.

*Quality Family Engagement*

Family interaction has also been identified as a vital dimension of quality in ECE environments. Research has found that ECE programs that promote good relationships and partnerships with families are more likely to improve children's learning and favorable developmental outcomes (Bromer & Weaver, 2014; Sheridan et al., 2010). Primary components of family engagement include communication, the request for family input and feedback, knowledge and resource relations, program events and activities, and a supportive atmosphere for families to attend and spend time with their children in the classroom (Bromer & Weaver, 2014).

**Parent Perceptions of Quality**

Perception is a mechanism by which individuals obtain and process information about their environment. As a consequence, information on the environment and the stimuli that affect behavior is mediated by experience. Canada and Bland (2014) concluded that parent expectations of ECE services are based on their opinions on the competence of teaching personnel and the level of contact between teachers and children. Canada and Bland established six key measures of high-performing ECE services evident to parents: ability of teachers, retention of teachers within the system or program, multicultural environment, expanded curricula, support for parental participation and involvement, and safety and protection within the ECE facility. Bauchmuller et al. (2014) outlined another set of structural productivity indicators: the staff-child ratio, the number of male and female employees, the number of qualified staff, the percentage of ethnic minority staff, and the level of retention of staff. The value of these five efficiency criteria is in their ability to be logically measured and compared across ECE programs.

While parent perceptions of ECE quality programs vary, parents appear to overestimate the quality of ECE programs relative to the assessments of ECE specialists (Forry et al., 2013; Rentzou & Sakellariou, 2013). However, the disparity in the assessment of ECE services by parents and professionals has been due to parent perceptions of the competence of teaching staff and relationships between staff and children, which influence the way parents feel treatment and education should be given to their children (Grammatikopoulos et al., 2014).

In addition, Rentzou and Sakellariou (2013) stated that parents of preschoolers connected quality with visible ECE experiences such as the interaction between the child and the teacher, rather than with structured components such as staff-child ratios, group size, and teacher qualifications. Parent interpretation of high-quality ECE services reflects cultural and socioeconomic disparities (Ansari, 2017; Petitclerc et al., 2017). Parental understanding of ECE is significant because parents are responsible for deciding in which ECE program their child will participate (Scopelliti & Musatti, 2013). The lack of commitment to understand criteria could be a factor in parent preference of programs that are inadequate for their child. In my experience, parents have based their idea of quality on what their family, friends, and community perceive as quality. Most of the perceptions are based on positive or negative experiences in a particular ECE program. They also base their idea of quality on if the child is happy overall and is learning minimally. Many parents have never heard of entities that assess for quality such as NAEYC.

**Quality ECE Programs and African American Parents**

Shlay et al. (2005) examined how quality is measured and defined by low-income African Americans. The research was a factorial survey to analyze how participants assess the quality of ECE features and make tradeoffs. One hundred forty-three parents were interested, 99.3% were female with a mean age of 31.2, and 80.1% were working. With many of the same ideas that professionals used to characterize quality ECE services, the parents also used the same to described quality. The results showed that the quality of parents was defined in terms of environmental characteristics, such as employee skills, experience, training, and individual attention provided to children. Parents correlated race and income levels with quality and culturally and economically diverse classrooms. Shlay et al. proposed that parents may prefer lower quality care because they do not have access to quality care. Future guidelines include assessing the preferences of parents for various characteristics of childcare and contrasting the preferences of childcare by income, race, and ethnicity.

**Quality ECE Programs and Caucasian Parents**

In a unique study, parents agreed with experts on the standards they used to describe high-quality early childhood services, according to Cryer et al. (2002). The study contrasted the U.S. ECE programs with 2,407 participants in 388 centers, and Germany with 392 participants in 103 centers. Only U.S. details are published for the purpose of this literature review. The participants included 85% of female respondents with a majority of participants with some college education from Caucasian upper- and middle-income families. Twenty-eight percent of respondents were single parents and 70% were married, while 20% earned childcare subsidies. The ECERS (Harms et al.,

1980) was administered by qualified practitioners and compared to responses from a parent questionnaire designed to determine the degree to which parents value specific aspects of ECE programs, as specified by ECERS, and whether parents believed these elements existed in the classroom. Cryer et al. (2002) found that parents offered ECE programs higher quality ratings than experts, and more trained parents provided programs with lower quality ratings. To help parents better recognize quality ECE services, Cryer et al. suggested parent training that was required. It was necessary for both professionals and parents to recognize quality ECE programs. The development of the infrastructure needed to sustain high-quality ECE programs was equally critical.

**Parental Selection of Quality ECE Programs**

The provision of safe, effective, affordable, and high-quality ECE programs allows parents to enter the workforce to gain self-sufficiency and to fulfill the family's childcare and early education objectives (Marshall et al., 2013). Any parent hopes they will make the right decision; and as a result, the child should have a full day of learning accompanied by warm and affectionate staff interactions (Workman & Ullrich, 2017). This feeling is considered universal and coveted with respect to parents, as they drop their children in the ECE facility every morning and continue with their everyday routine.

Parental selection, then, should be of the utmost importance. The availability of valuable information plays a major role in the decision-making process of parents when in pursuit of a quality ECE program. While several states run the QRIS, the available information is limited to certain ECE systems. Research has shown that social networks are the primary source of information for the ECE program (Vesley, 2013). In other words, parent decision-making is affected mainly by information gathered from members

of their family or feedback gained from members of the community (Joshi, 2014). The quantity of parental information available and accessible, as well as how important parents deem the information, varies from community to community (Hopkins et al., 2014).

Details on ECE facilities in a variety of locations can be accessed online (Bauer, 2014). Parents in one survey indicated that the most successful way of locating a childcare provider is by word of mouth, although information about childcare vouchers and other financial information can also be accessed through the internet (Altenhofen et al., 2016; Beckett, 2014). In addition, social media is likely to affect parent selection of ECE programs by making users aware of the type of facilities deemed suitable and desirable from the perspective of other parents (Altenhofen et al., 2016). Social networks are popular for obtaining an authentic perception; however, these views can be skewed by negative experiences some parents cause for themselves.

**Parental Decision-Making Process**

The decision and the decision maker actions could be viewed as key elements of the phenomenon of decision-making. The decision-making process includes human reasoning and emotions concerning the real world, taking into account all actual events and possible future events, along with the psychological implications for the decision maker of those events (Leslie, 2014). The nature of decision-making tends to incorporate both the belief in real occurrences and the emotional response to those events. There are two ways parents organize the decision-making process: the highly planned decision-making process and the loosely planned decision-making process (Bauer, 2014). A highly organized decision-making process includes gathering information over a span of time as

well as embarking on center visits, chatting with others, web-based searches, and social media. On the other hand, the decision-making process is said to be loosely organized where a fast choice is made on the basis of a limited search for information. Also, parents make hasty decisions based on the nearest, most accessible and most popular center among the people (Bauer, 2014). In addition, parents who enroll their first child in the ECE program appear to gather a vast amount of information and take a tour of several ECE facilities to ensure they make the most educated choices (Bauer, 2014).

Obtaining information for ECE program selection can be rendered with confidence by collecting firsthand information through the implementation of specific procedures. These steps include (a) making a list of potential ECE programs; (b) arranging a visit and meeting with the program director to get a feel for the culture; (c) asking questions about the curriculum and addressing the child's needs while finding out how they expect to address the needs; (d) determining the safety of the environment will be suitable for the happiness of the child; (e) inquiring about staff qualifications and experiences and observing interactions between employees and children; (f) asking about the frequency of the communication between the center and parents; (g) requesting the daily routine of the program and asking about how staff provides positive and responsive interactions to the children; (h) noting the availability and the quality of resources in the center; and, if satisfied with what you have seen, (j) making a second appointment to visit with your child (Good Start Early Learning, 2015).

**Factors That Influence Parental Decision-Making**

Over time, parents have reported important criteria when choosing an ECE program. Location and operating hours are certainly two top influential factors. Cost,

safety, quality, family elements, developmental process, and curriculum were among the top factors that influence decision-making. Though not explored in detail in this study, other criteria parents found important in the selection of ECE programs were the daily structure, friend recommendations of the program, furnishings and display, and personal care routines (Ispa et al., 1998).

### Cost and Safety

Ransom (2012) indicated that the cost of ECE services was a significant factor in parental selection of ECE programs. The voucher system used in ECE has been adopted in some areas to give parents a wider variety of ECE services for their children (Meyer, 2008). It has been proposed that low-income families must be a priority in order for states to offer funding. In addition, it is recommended that states have a range of ECE services that enable parents the option to participate in the program (Goldsmith & Rees, 2007). On the other end, Doggett and Wat (2010) argued that many middle-class families have a small range of ECE choices because they cannot afford high-quality options or they do not meet the income requirements for publicly supported ECE options. The disparity between students from the middle class and students from the upper class is as large as the gap between students from the lower class to the middle class (Barnett & Frede, 2010).

Safety is paramount in any setting where children are being cared for. The willingness of the ECE program to provide the students with a safe and healthy environment was an important consideration in parental selection (Ispa et al., 1998; Ransom, 2012). Kuchment (2007) proposed safety as one of the top two criteria parents should focus on when choosing an ECE program.

*Quality and Family Element*

Ispa et al. (1998) concluded that the perceived quality of the program is another critical factor in parental choice of an ECE program. According to NAEYC (2021b), there are ten standards that an ECE must follow in order to be maintain NAEYC certification as well as specific elements relating to each standard that parents should look for when choosing an ECE program. According to NAEYC (2021b), one parent reported that she felt confused as she was looking for an ECE program for her first child, but that using the resources offered by NAEYC and securing the NAEYC-approved program for her child made her happy making the right decision.

Parental and family elements also play a part in the parental choosing of ECE services for their children. Lien (2008) identified a considerable difference in the educational level of parents, parent jobs, and household income in regard to factors that affected the selection, satisfaction, and efficiency of ECE services. Ransom (2012) indicated that factors related to teachers of ECE systems were an influential element in parental programming selection. Teacher-child relationships, teacher-child ratios, and teacher preparation and training were three of the recommended factors parents should look for before deciding on ECE enrollment (Kuchment, 2007). The nurturing essence of teachers is a significant criterion for parents (Ispa et al., 1998).

*Developmental Process and Curriculum*

The presence of developmentally appropriate activities and materials was a consideration that led to a high-quality ECE program (Espinosa, 2002). Kuchment (2007) recommended that parents pursue ECE services that incorporate activities to encourage social learning in their programming. Ispa et al. (1998) indicated that parents believed

that emotional, cognitive, and motor learning experiences were appropriate conditions for ECE services to be included in their everyday routines.

The type of curriculum an ECE program used in its planning is a key consideration for parents (Ransom, 2012). When programs intentionally apply a curriculum that fits their mission and vision and is supported by professional development, coaching, and adequate resources, research has found a positive impact on early achievement scores and socio-emotional behavior (Workman & Ullrich, 2017). This will ensure that the curriculum is effectively incorporated the into their practice and will be evident when viewed by parents (Workman & Ullrich, 2017).

**Additions to Current Research**

Current research addresses factors that influence parent selection of ECE programs as well as what parents perceive as quality. My research will add to this literature by determining if what parents perceive as quality affects their ECE program selection. In my experience, I have noticed that although parents feel that one ECE program is high quality, they may choose another if it is more convenient for them. This study will help fill the hole that currently exists relating to this issue. Also, there are holes in current literature that does not link what parents feel is quality to what is deemed as quality by various measures of quality such as NAEYC or Quality Counts. This is in part due to some parents' lack of knowledge of what quality is. Some ECE programs do not inform parents of information that will assist them in learning what quality is understood to be, and many parents will not do the research beyond what is presented to them by the ECE program. This research may help to make connections between the two ideas of quality.

**Research Questions**

This study addressed four research questions. These questions aimed to determine what parents perceive as quality in ECE programs in the studied county. This study will help ECE program directors improve ECE program structures. The research questions addressed were

1. What do parents view as quality in an ECE program?

2. How do parental views of quality in ECE programs differ by socioeconomic status, culture, parental education, and previous ECE program experience?

3. What types of ECE programs and information are available and attainable in the studied county, as perceived by parents?

4. What improvements can be made to make ECE programs high quality as perceived by parents?

**Summary**

A great deal of research on ECE has been published. This literature review addressed ECE as applied to quality ECE programs. Although high-quality universal ECE is expensive, the numerous advantages of providing these services rather than spending money on repeat grades, welfare, and the criminal justice system in the future were discussed. Specific ECE programs for children were discussed with a focus on high-quality programs. Lev Vygotsky's ideas have been found to be used in ECE programs around the nation. The research-based studies included in this literature review concluded that several factors had an influence on parental choice of ECE programs. These factors included cost, parental and teacher elements, quality, developmental progress, curriculum, and safety. The literature review suggested that quality indicators for ECE

programs and what parents perceive as quality in an ECE program are similar; however,

holes still exist. Chapter 3 discusses the methods used to collect data pertaining to parent

perceptions of quality ECE programs.

**Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter addresses the research design and methods for this study on parent perceptions of quality in ECE programs. An overview of the sample population is provided, and the issue and the purpose of the analysis are briefly discussed. A literature review found limited and controversial studies, in particular on ECE as it relates to parent perceptions of quality. The purposes reviewed are to enhance existing literature and to generate new results pertaining to quality ECE programs.

**Study Type and Research Design**

The county used in this study has 38 cities, towns, and communities. As of 2019, the county, the fifth largest in the state, had a population of 319,785. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, there were 284,307 people, 109,246 households, and 75,404 families living in the county. The population mass was 351.9 people per square mile. As reflected in Table 1, the county's current racial makeup was 68.7% White, 21% Black, 2.9% Non-Hispanic Other, and 7.3% Hispanic or Latino. As of 2020, of the 319,785 population, 19,623 consisted of children under five. The average household income in the studied county was $42,680, and the median household income was $53,149.

**Table 1**

*Racial Composition of Children Under 5 in the Studied County*

| Race | Population (%) | | Children under 5 (%) | |
|------|------|------|------|------|
| Non-Hispanic White only | 219,639 | 68.7% | 12,201 | 62.2% |
| Non-Hispanic Black only | 67,481 | 21% | 4,644 | 23.7% |
| Non-Hispanic Other only | 9361 | 2.9% | 477 | 2.4% |
| Hispanic | 23,304 | 7.3% | 2,301 | 11.7% |
| Total | 319,785 | 100% | 19,623 | 100% |

**Research Design**

This research used a mixed method design to better understand parent decision-making when faced with various forms of ECE systems. This research was performed in a 3-phase approach. Phase 1 involved a review of the ECE programs used in this study. Phase 2 involved parents and center directors from each ECE program completing a survey. Phase 3 involved interviewing parents for the ECE programs. This 3-phase approach was planned to resolve research concerns by identifying different ECE programs in the studied county and analyzing the discrepancy in publicly accessible information on these ECE sites. Identifying what parents view as quality in the ECE programs, and identifying variables that affect parent perspectives of quality care and selection.

*Program Review (Phase 1)*

There are currently 89 licensed, registered, or approved childcare centers in the studied county. These include faith-based, private, public, and home/family. All programs are regulated by the state Department of Social Services (DSS). Phase 1 of this plan reviewed six authorized childcare centers that differed by location and funding model (Federal Head Start, state-funded preschool, or local private/for-profit care). I

retrieved the information such as the mission and values of the center, hours of service, age range served, cost, capacity, teacher-child ratio, teacher credentials, and student demographic profile from their websites. I then analyzed the publicly accessible information for each of these locations to find knowledge gaps.

*Parent and Director Surveys and Parent Interviews (Phase 2 & 3)*

In Phase 2, parents and center directors at the four identified centers completed a survey in order to determine how parent expectations of quality vary. In Phase 3, parents from each center were interviewed. The instruments and protocol for human subjects were submitted to the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. In addition, the instruments and a request to conduct the survey were submitted to the local school districts and facilities selected as the research sites.

**Participants**

Four ECE programs that represented three funding models were chosen for this study. The population involved in this study consisted of 42 parent participants and four center directors who were surveyed or interviewed to assess how parent expectations of quality vary. Each parent was expected to have a child between the ages of 3 and 5 enrolled in the approved ECE program in the studied county. Directors had to have been supervising the program for at least 1 year.

**Research Instruments**

The primary questionnaire used in this study is the Parent Perception Survey (Appendix A). I modified the instrument from the Parent Perception Survey created by a former researcher, Thai (2018), so it would be suitable for this study. It assessed the views of parents on quality early childhood care and education. The Parent Perception

survey was made up of 28 questions. The surveys asked participants to indicate the

degree of significance (1 as "not at all important" to 3 as "very important") of six broad

categories of structure and process-based features of ECE programming (i.e.,

accessibility, center and classroom setting, teachers and instruction education, family

engagement, and cultural competence) when selecting ECE programs for their children.

Some questions were added based on criteria from two the Early Childhood Environment

Rating Scale, ECERS-R and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, CLASS.

ECERS-R is a quality evaluation tool used by many NAEYC approved organizations and

intended for preschool use (Harms et al., 2010). For more than 25 years, ECERS-R has

been used in the early childhood sector to assess quality programs. Many of the research-

based best practices often known as DAP are visible in the ECERS-R scales. The CLASS

is an observation tool that assesses interactions between teachers and students that affect

learning and development (Pianta et al., 2008).

The survey data were obtained by questionnaires, which were available in an

online format. Questionnaires were used because they are a means of assessing the

features of certain representatives of the individual population and can be used to make

limited generalizations about the population as a whole. Also, questionnaires can

highlight the need for improvements in social environment policies and legislation.

Questionnaires may be used to classify individual views on policy concerns and practices

(Czaja & Blair, 1996).

The Center Director Survey (Appendix B) was adapted from a previously used

survey (Thai, 2018). I included questions about center employees, including demographic

history, educational level and language ability. Center directors were asked to indicate the

importance of access and continuity of resources, the center and classroom setting, teachers and instruction, the curriculum, family participation, and cultural sensitivity of their center systems. They were asked to answer two open-ended questions relating to promotion and marketing strategies.

The Parent Interview Questionnaire (Appendix C) was comprised five quality-related questions. Parents were asked to volunteer to complete an interview by scheduling a time with me after completing the Parent Survey. The interviews were conducted to get more detailed information regarding their perception of quality. Open-ended questions were used in the parent interviews. This allowed information to be gathered on the types of public resources parents use to access ECE information, parent search processes, and difficulties they may have faced when in search of an ECE program.

**Research Questions**

This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What do parents view as quality in an ECE program?

2. How do parental views of quality in ECE programs differ by socioeconomic status, culture/race, parental education, and previous ECE program experience?

3. What types of ECE programs and information are available and attainable in the studied county, as perceived by parents?

4. What improvements can be made to make ECE programs high quality as perceived by parents?

The Parent Perception Survey addressed Research Questions 1, "What do parents view as quality in an ECE program," and 2, "How do parental views of quality in ECE

programs differ by socioeconomic status, culture/race, parental education, and previous ECE program experience?" This survey asked questions that parents answered as very important to not at all important. For this study, very important indicated their view of quality. This aimed to understand what parent perceptions are about the indicators of quality.

The Center Director Survey was used to assist in gathering useful information to address Research Questions 1, "What do parents view as quality in an ECE program," and 3, "What types of ECE programs and information are available and attainable in the studied county, as perceived by parents?"

The Parent Interview tool was used to address Research Questions 1, "What do parents view as quality in an ECE program," 3, "What types of ECE programs and information are available and attainable in the studied county, as perceived by parents," and 4, "What improvements can be made to make ECE programs high-quality as perceived by parents?" Since all the questions were open-ended, parents were able to give specific answers to the questions.

**Procedures**

All data collection procedures were approved by the university's IRB. The ethical considerations for using human subjects was addressed through the IRB review process. Several steps were implemented to protect participant privacy and confidentiality. Personal identifying information was not collected on parent surveys. Instead, each survey was assigned a code. Participants in the study were given a voluntary consent form for the Parent Perception Survey (Appendix D), a voluntary consent form for the Center Director Survey (Appendix E), and/or a voluntary consent form for the parent

interviews (Appendix F). These forms detailed the purpose of the study, expected duration of their participation, description of the confidentiality procedures, potential risks and benefits, and participation criteria. I informed all parents and directors of my contact information and informed them that their participation was voluntary and refusal to participate would not result in any drawbacks. Surveys were sent out by the center director through email. The parents were instructed to complete the surveys within 2 weeks. The center directors were sent an online survey to be completed at the same time. The parent interviews were conducted during the same 2 weeks. The time was extended by 1 week to collect more data. I met with parents at their convenience via Zoom or phone meetings.

**Data Analysis**

The data for the study were drawn from a variety of sources and a mixed method approach was used to analyze the data. I identified and reviewed the four ECE programs used in this research. The program review contained information from each program which was analyzed to determine information gaps.

Data from parent and center director survey responses were analyzed to examine the relationship between parental views of quality care and reported family income, parental education level, and cultural background. Data from the questionnaires were analyzed and reported using Qualtrics. Data to identify relationships between variables were entered in the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) of the statistical software. Subjects were assigned to one of the four groups. Each group represented one of the four ECE programs. Using SPSS, I calculated statistics for data collection over several variables. The program allowed me to separate the variables in order to evaluate

the discrepancies between groups. Statistical significance was set at 0.05. Descriptive

predictive methods, such as frequency, were used to define patterns and trends and to

summarize the data obtained. Responses to the questionnaire assessed parent perceptions

about the ECE programs. Qualitative data from open-ended questions and interviews

were color coded for common themes and ideas and then organized to identify parent

perceptions.

The sample size of this study was determined by analyzing the sample size

literature. Most quantitative studies require less than 200 participants; more than 200

subjects slightly boost power (Ross, 2005). The original sample size of 100 was found

sufficient due to the size of the area to demonstrate a substantial variation in the

dependent variables. Four ECE programs were surveyed to represent the overall

population.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

*Limitations*

This study on parent understanding of quality care and their selection of ECE

services can hopefully guide best practices in ECE. This study reviewed only state-

licensed, approved, or registered ECE programs in the studied county. I used convenience

sampling, which may not be representative of the general population. Convenience

sampling can be susceptible to bias in selection due to convenience and proximity to me.

Another limitation of the design was that data were gathered at one point in time, but

perceptions change over time. When data are obtained in this way, the causality of the

interaction between variables cannot be calculated. In addition, the bias of the

participants may have caused parents and center directors to provide what they saw as

favorable responses to the surveys. To resolve this issue, I explained that answering survey questions was entirely voluntary and confidential. An additional limitation may be that because the sample was voluntary and self-directed, participants may have chosen not to participate because of a misunderstanding of the questions in the questionnaire. The last limitation is that my experience and close work with parents, teachers, and students in an ECE program capacity may have presented biases in the development of the instruments and in the analysis of the data. To address these potential biases, I consulted parents, center directors, early childhood experts, and education faculty throughout the survey development.

### *Delimitations*

It is important to investigate the perceptions of all parents of early childhood students. However, due to the nature of the research, only 3- to 5-year-old students were included. The design was acceptable because most facilities serve this age range of students, while possibly not serving younger or older students. Due to the structure of this study, this research can provide more resources for educating parents about what to expect when choosing high-quality ECE programs and assisting center directors in program operations. In addition, results from this study can impact potential improvements to public policies and practices that affect parent abilities to enroll their children in ECE programs and promote efforts to make ECE program knowledge more available to parents. Only limited generalizations can be made on the basis of a convenience sample which may not be representative of the population.

### Summary

Chapter 3 addressed how the data were gathered, the instrument that was used to

collect the data, and how the data were analyzed. The lack of knowledge found in the

literature on the selection of ECE services for children has been discussed. Elements of

quality in environment, curriculum, teachers and instruction, availability and access,

family engagement, and cultural sensitivity are key components of the research questions

and hypotheses. Information on the survey and data collection was analyzed and included

parents as participants who completed a survey as well as parents who were interviewed.

The research instruments were discussed with mention of modifications made from an

instrument used previously. Overall, this chapter discussed the research questions,

participants, setting, instruments, design and method, treatment of data, and delimitations

and limitations. Chapter 4 addresses the analyses and findings.

## Chapter 4: Results

**Introduction**

This study discusses what parents view as quality in an ECE program, along with the factors that influence their selection of a specific program. Chapter 4 represents the findings for this research. Findings from this research helped me understand what parents perceive as quality in ECE programs and what information is available when searching for a program. It also helped me understand the parental decision-making process and whether parent education level, household income, and cultural background influence their ECE program selection. Last, the findings helped suggest what improvements can be made to impact ECE program quality.

Four research questions guided this study of parent perceptions of quality ECE programs. Parent and/or guardian perceptions of quality ECE programs were measured using the Parent Perceptions Survey (Appendix A) and the parent interviews (Appendix C). The survey and interviews examined parent perceptions of quality of the ECE program in which their child was enrolled. The Center Director Survey (Appendix B) measured director perceptions of quality in their program and was used as a baseline to compare parent responses.

**Research Questions and Tools**

The research tools used in this study were reliable because they gave specific insight into what parents perceive as quality. Four research questions were used in this study. The research questions were addressed by tools that would answer the question appropriately.

### *Research Question 1*

Research Question1, "What do parents view as quality in an ECE program," was asked to determine what parents view as quality in an ECE program. The Parent Perceptions Survey and the Parent Interviews were used to address this question. Figure 1 shows the Likert scale used in the surveys. The parent and director surveys asked questions that were rated as *very important*, *moderately important*, or *not at all important.* For this study, very important indicated their perception of high quality and not at all important indicated low quality. This was intended to help understand what parent perceptions of quality are.

**Figure 1**

*Likert Scale Used in the Parent Perception Survey and the Center Director Survey*

**Parent Perceptions of Quality**

**ECE Programs Likert Scale**

| | Not at all important | Moderately important | Very important |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |

### *Research Question 2*

Research Question 2, "How do parental views of quality in ECE programs differ by socioeconomic status, culture, parental education, and previous ECE experience," was asked to determine if parent perceptions of quality ECE programs differed by socioeconomic, culture, education, or experience in the ECE program. The Parent Perception Survey was used to address this question by asking the parents to answer demographic questions and using the responses to perform a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for each variable to determine if differences in perceptions of quality existed in ECE programs.

*Research Question 3*

Research Question 3, "What types of ECE programs and information are available and attainable in the studied county, as perceived by parents," determined what types of information are available and attainable in the studied county. The program website analysis, parent interviews, and the director survey were used to address this question. A scale was not used to address this question; however, the responses were coded to determine frequency of common themes. Parent and director responses were compared using a table to show responses.

*Research Question 4*

Research Question 4, "What improvements can be made to make ECE programs high quality as perceived by parents," determined what changes parents thought could be made to make ECE programs higher quality. The parent interviews were used to address this question. Parent responses were coded and displayed on a graph to show response values in percentages.

**Participant Demographics**

As a part of the survey, parent participants were asked several demographic questions relating to household income, race, education level, and years of experience in the ECE program. Table 2 gives an overview of the participant demographic profile. The survey was sent to all parents at each ECE program. Most of the participants (65%) were Black. Twenty-two percent were White, and 2% were Hispanic. This is an accurate representation of the programs that were used in this study. Most of the participants (94%) had less than 1 year of experience in the ECE program. Household income varied. Interestingly, household incomes below $25,000 and $100,000 or more had the same

percentage of participants (20.9%). Participants with household incomes of $25,000-

$39,999 and $50,000-$74,999 were both 18.6%. The education level of the participants

varied. Approximately 10% of the participants had a high school diploma/GED or less.

The percentage of participants with "some college" was 32.5%. Approximately 35% of

the participants had a bachelor's or master's degree, and approximately 7% of participants

had a doctorate degree or professional degree. The participant demographics were used to

determine diversity of the population and to determine if the individual variables

influenced participant perceptions of quality in an ECE program.

**Table 2**

*Parent Demographic Profile*

| | All sites | Program A | Program B | Program C | Program D |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Race** | | | | | |
| Black | 65% n=26 | 61% n=11 | 100% n=4 | 50% n=4 | 100%n= 3 |
| White | 22% n=9 | 22% n=4 | 0% n=0 | 37% n=3 | 0% n=0 |
| Hispanic | 2 n=2 | 11% n=2 | 0% n=0 | 0% n=0 | 0% n=0 |
| Asian | 0 | | 0% n=0 | 0% n=0 | 0% n=0 |
| Other | n=3 | 6% n=1 | 0% n=0 | 12% n=1 | 0% n=0 |
| N/R | n=3 | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| **Years in ECE** | | | | | |
| <1 year | 74% n=32 | 57% n=15 | 15% n=4 | 23% n=6 | 4%n=1 |
| 1 year | 9.3% n=4 | 66% n=2 | 33% n= 1 | 0% n=0 | 0% n=0 |
| 2 years | 11.6% n=5 | 25%n=1 | 0% n=0 | 50% n=2 | 25% n=1 |
| 3+ | 4.6% n=2 | 50% n=1 | 0% n=0 | 0% n=0 | 50%n=1 |
| | | | | | |
| **Income** | | | | | |
| <25,000 | 20.9% n=9 | 10.5% n=2 | 0% n=0 | 37.5% n=3 | 66.7% n=2 |
| 25-34, 999 | 18.6% n=8 | 15.7% n=3 | 20% n=1 | 12.5% n=1 | 33.3% n=1 |
| 35-49,000 | 16.2%n=7 | 26.3% n=5 | 20% n=1 | 0% n=0 | 0%n=0 |
| 50-74,999 | 18.6% n=8 | 31.5% n=6 | 0% n=1 | 0% n=0 | 0% n=0 |
| 75-99,999 | 4.6% n=2 | 5.2% n=1 | 0% n=1 | 0%n=0 | 0% n=0 |
| 100,000+ | 20.9% n=9 | 10.5 n=2 | 60% n=3 | 50% n=4 | 0%n=0 |
| | | | | | |
| **Education** | | | | | |
| <Diploma | 4.6% n=2 | 0% n=0 | 0% n=0 | 12.5% n=1 | 0% n=0 |
| HS or GED | 4.54% n=2 | 10.5%n=2 | 0% n=0 | 0% n=0 | 0% n=0 |
| College | 32.5% n=14 | 42.1% n=8 | 20%n=1 | 37.5% n=3 | 0% n=0 |
| Associates | 16.2% n=7 | 5.2% n=1 | 20% n=1 | 0% n=0 | 100% n=3 |
| Bachelors | 13.9% n=6 | 21% n=4 | 20% n=1 | 0% n=0 | 0% n=0 |
| Master's | 20.9% n=9 | 10.5% n=2 | 20% n=1 | 50% n=4 | 0% n=0 |
| Doctorate or Professional | 6.9% n=3 | 10.5% n=2 | 20% n=1 | 0% n=0 | 0% n=0 |

**Research Study Results**

*Publicly Available Information Results*

      Phase 1 of the study included an overview of publicly available information for

the ECE programs used in this study. I conducted an inventory of the ECE programs and

the information that was available and attainable by public records. Four ECE programs

were studied and given the titles Programs A, B, C, and D. The programs differed in

various ways, such as enrollment capacity, teacher qualifications, funding (state-funded,

federally funded, public/private), and operating hours. I reviewed each program's website

in search of the mission, philosophy, hours, location, student age requirement,

cost/tuition, and student-to-teacher ratio. Each of the programs had a website except for

one. Table 3 shows the results of the publicly available information.

**Table 3**

*Publicly Available Program Website Information Analysis*

|  | Mission | Vision/ philosophy | Hours of operation | Age range | Cost/ tuition | Ratio | Capacity |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Program A | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | N | N |
| Program B | Y | Y | N | Y | N | N | N |
| Program C | N | N | N | Y | Y | Y | N |
| Program D | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |

*Note*. N/A indicates no website available.

      Programs A and B (50%) had a mission and philosophy listed on their website.

Program A (25%) had the hours listed on the website. Programs A, B, and C (75%) had

the age listed on their website. Program C (25%) listed the cost of tuition on their

website. Program C (25%) listed the teacher-to-child ratio on their website. Student

capacity was not listed on any of the program websites. Although not all information

could be found on the individual program's website, some of it could be found distributed across multiple websites. Information such as capacity, hours, location, reviews, and ratings could be found on other public childcare websites. It was challenging to find information on Program D, because it did not have a website. I could only find details, including capacity, hours, location, reviews, and ratings on this program from other websites.

### *Parent and Director Survey Results*

Phase 2 of the study included parents and directors from four ECE programs completing a Parent Perception Survey and Center Director's Survey to understand what parents perceived as quality in an ECE program. There were six categories in the parent survey and a total of 26 indicators of quality in an ECE program. Parents and directors were asked to select the level of importance they place on each criterion when considering an ECE program for their child. The parents rated the level of importance for each criterion as very important, moderately important, or not at all important.

As seen in Figure 2, most of the participants rated criteria across all six categories (access and operations, center and classroom environment, teachers and instruction, curriculum, family engagement, and diversity and cultural competency) as very important. Of the criteria, the three with the highest average level of perceived importance were related to environment (cleanliness of the center) and curriculum (literacy and math). Similar to these trends in parent responses, 93% (n=40) of parents deemed criteria related to access and operations (mission and vision), environment (welcoming environment), teachers and instruction (appreciation of individuality), and curriculum (problem-solving) as very important. The criteria rated by parents as least

important were related to access and operations (location and driving distance) and

family engagement (share family values, develop relationships).

**Figure 2**

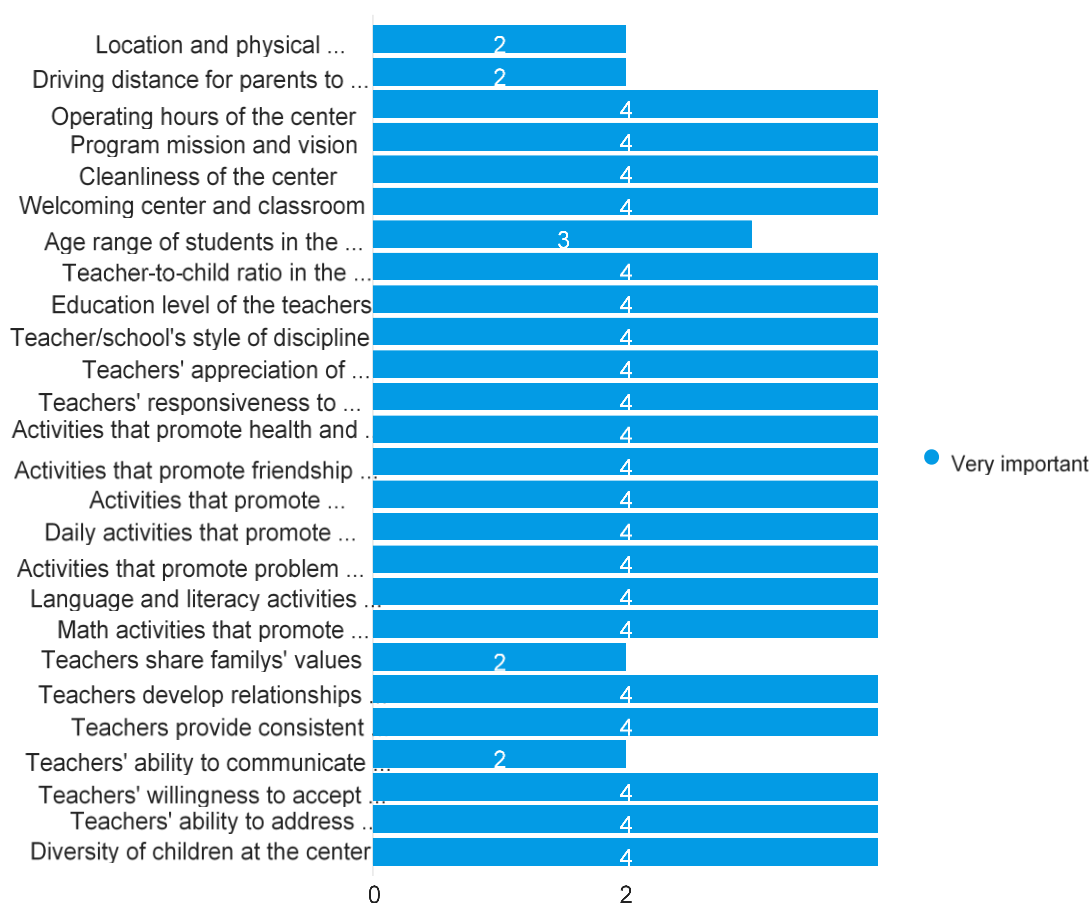*Quality ECE Indicators as Perceived by Parents*
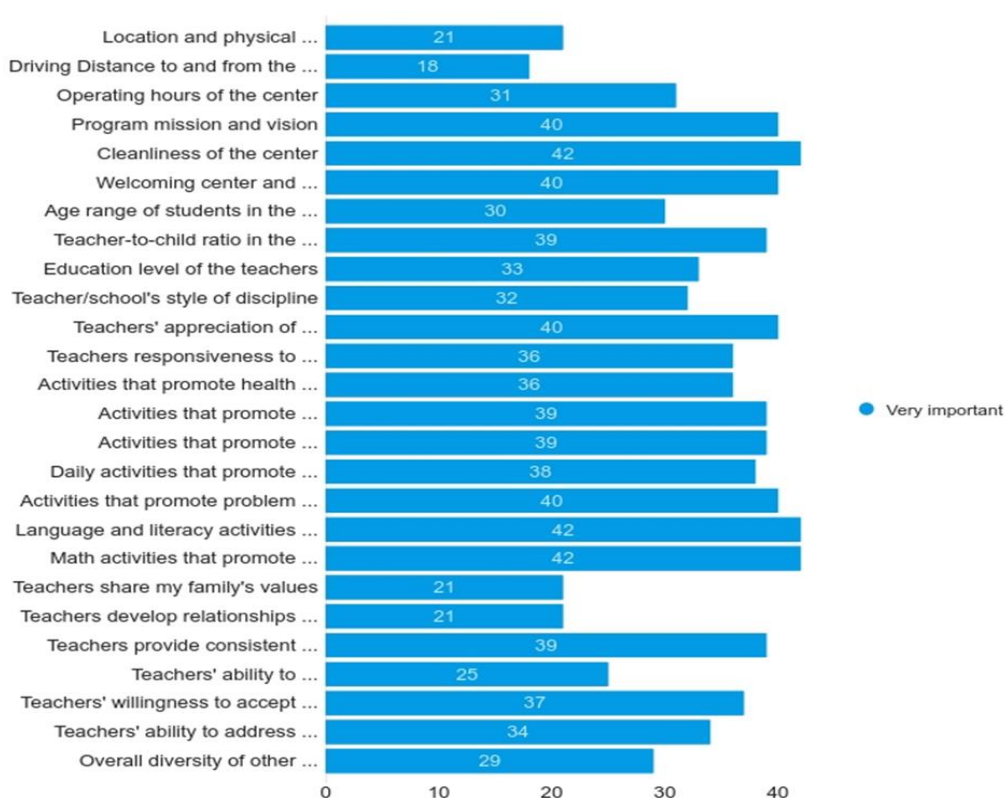


Parent responses to the survey are displayed by individual questions. The

questions are abbreviated; however, they are in the order in which they appeared in the

survey. The questions can be viewed in Appendix A. Only the very important responses

are reflected in Figure 2.

Center directors were asked to rate the same indicators. As seen in Figure 3, all

directors rated most of the indicators as very important. There were two categories in

which directors rated all of the indicators as very important. These were teachers and

instruction and curriculum. Center director responses to criteria that was less important were similar to those of the parents. There were four indicators that were rated as moderately important. They were related to access and operations (location and driving distance), family engagement (sharing family values), and diversity and culture (the ability to communicate in family native language), and environment (age of students in the classroom).

**Figure 3**

*Quality ECE Indicators as Perceived by Directors*



Director responses to the survey are listed by individual questions. The questions are abbreviated; however, they are in the order in which they appeared in the survey. The questions can be viewed in Appendix B. Only the very important responses are reflected
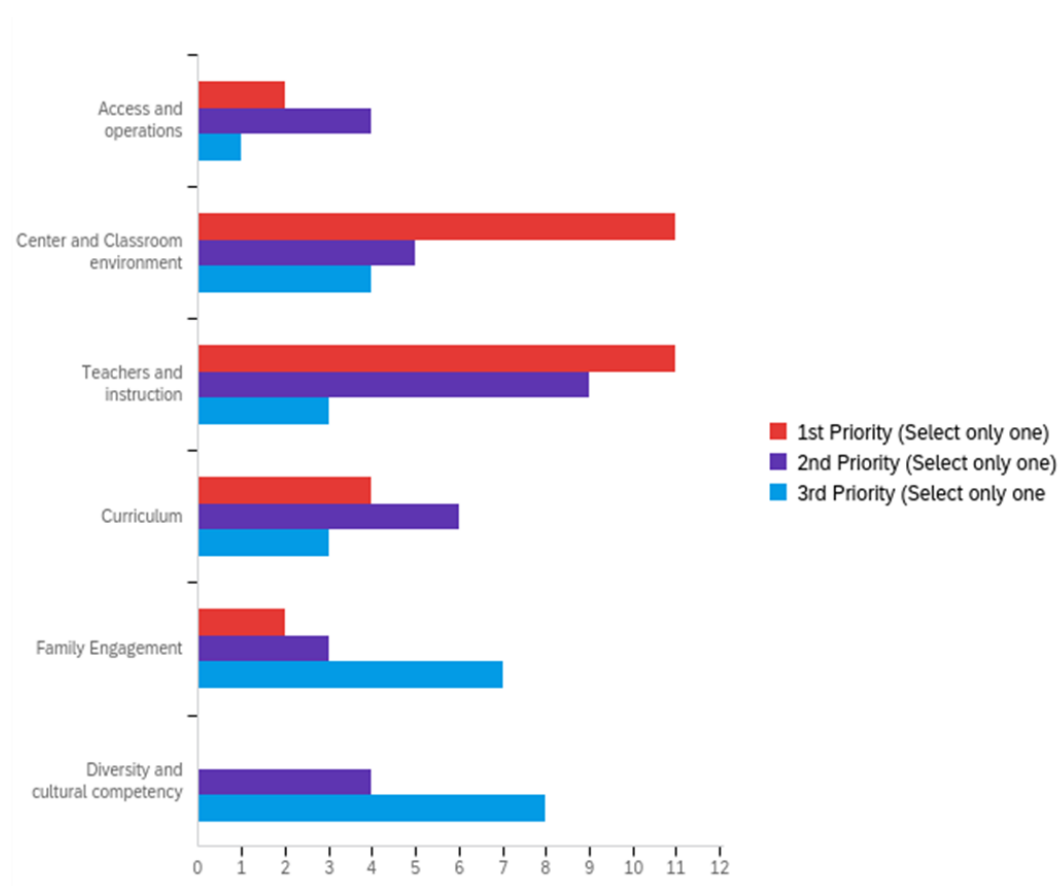
in Figure 3.

### *Parent and Director Force Ranked Priority Categories*

Parent participants were asked to rank their top three priority categories (access and operations, center and classroom environment, teachers and instruction, curriculum, family engagement, and diversity and cultural competency) when searching for an ECE program. As seen in Figure 4, center and classroom environment was first priority, teachers and instruction was second priority, and diversity and culture was third.

**Figure 4**

*Top Three Priority Categories Parents Consider When Choosing an ECE Program*
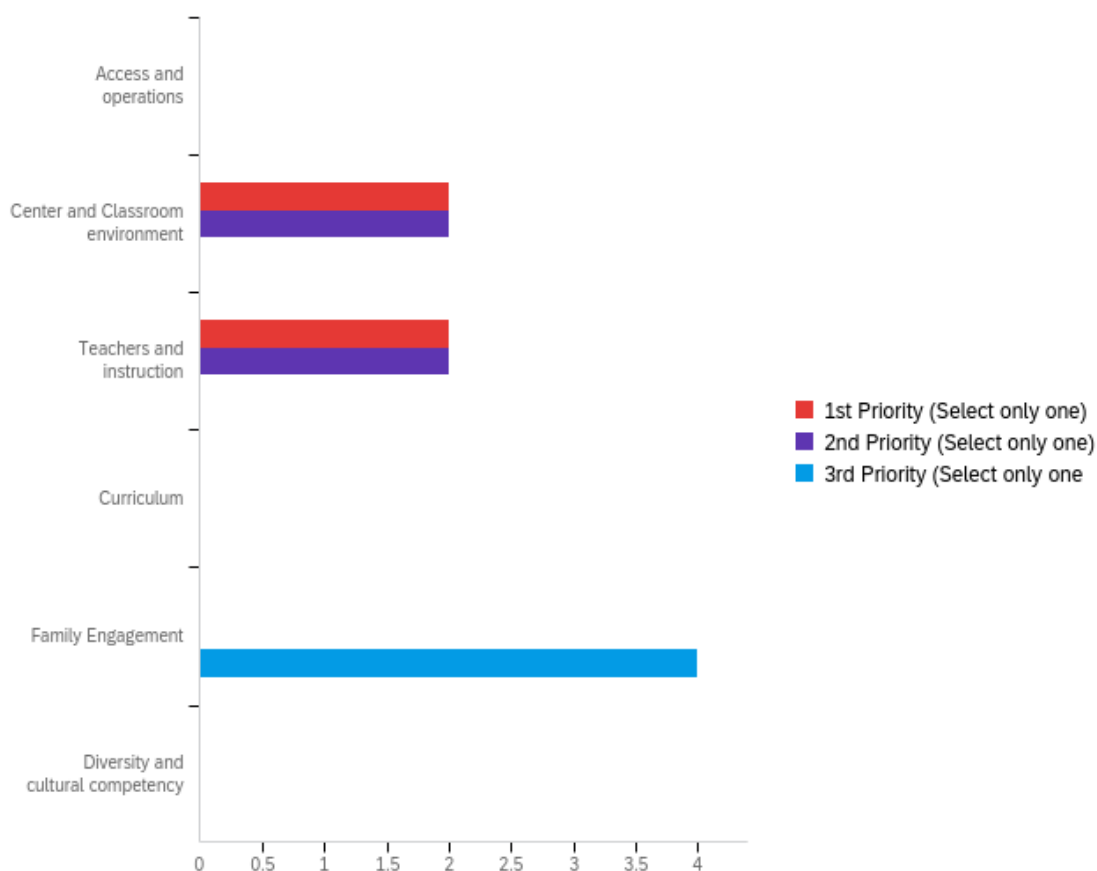


Parent participants ranked the categories as first, second, or third priority. The X axis shows the number of participants who ranked each category as priority.

Center directors were asked to rank the top three priority categories (access and operations, center and classroom environment, teachers and instruction, curriculum, family engagement, and diversity and cultural competency) they consider when developing programming at their facility. Center directors ranked the categories in a similar way as parents. As seen in Figure 5, center and classroom environment and teachers and instruction were equal for first and second priorities. Family engagement was ranked as third priority.

**Figure 5**

*Top Three Priority Categories Directors Consider When Planning for an ECE Program*



Director participants ranked the categories as first, second, or third priority. The X axis shows the number of participants who ranked each category as priority.

*Analyses by Variables*

Four analyses by variables were conducted to answer Research Question 2 by determining if parent perceptions of the indicators of quality in ECE programs differed by socioeconomic status, culture, parental education, and previous ECE experience. Four ANOVA tests were used to compare the differences between groups. These analyses were performed to determine if differences in perceptions of quality in ECE programs existed between groups.

*Analysis by Education*

A one-way ANOVA with participant education as the independent variable (associate's degree or less, bachelor's degree, and graduate degree or higher) and the mean of the responses to all questions in the six categories (access and operations, center and classroom environment, teachers and instruction, curriculum, family engagement, and diversity and cultural competency) was conducted to compare the level of parental views for three education levels (associate's degree or less, bachelor's degree, and graduate degree or higher). Figure 6 shows the comparisons between the three groups. There was no significant difference in parental views among the three educational levels at the $p<.05$ level of significance [$F(2, 35) = 2.96$, $p = 0.07$]. Since there was no significant difference among associate's degree ($M = 30.35$, $SD = 4.03$), bachelor's degree ($M = 31.33$, $SD = 3.61$) and graduate degree or higher ($M = 33.92$, $SD = 4.21$), post hoc comparisons were not necessary. Since the $p$ value is greater than .05 ($p = .07$), the null hypothesis is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis, indicating that educational levels do not influence the importance participants place on the indicators of quality in an ECE program.

**Figure 6**

*Average Participant Responses Based on Education*
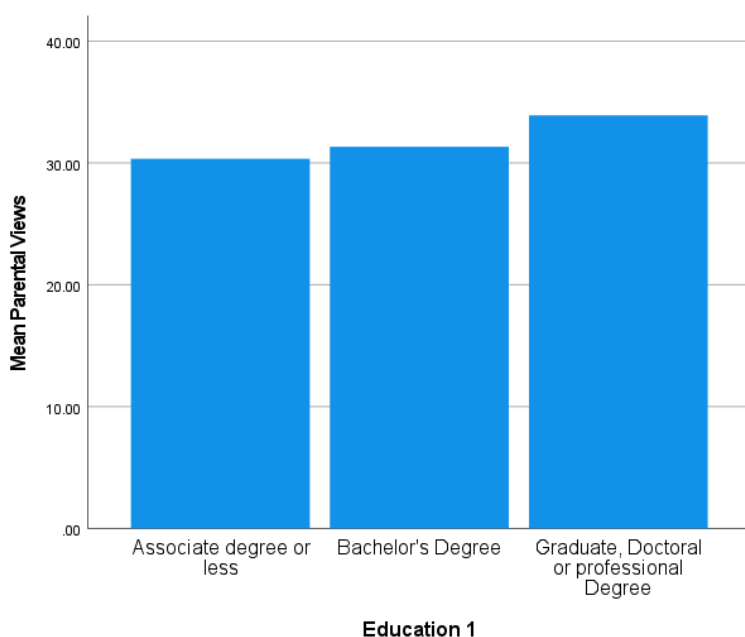


*Analysis by Race*

A one-way ANOVA with participant race/culture as the independent variable (Black, White, and Hispanic and Others) and the mean of the responses to all questions in the six categories (access and operations, center and classroom environment, teachers and instruction, curriculum, family engagement, and diversity and cultural competency) was conducted to compare the level of parental views for three race/culture groups (Black, White, and Hispanic and Others). Figure 7 shows the comparisons between the three groups. There was no significant difference in parental views among the three groups at the $p<.05$ level of significance [$F(2, 35) = 3.23$, $p = 0.052$]. Since there was no significant difference among Black ($M = 30.58$, $SD = 4.50$), White ($M = 34.62$, $SD = 2.67$) and Hispanic and Others ($M = 32.50$, $SD = 1.29$), post hoc comparisons were not necessary. Since the $p$ value is greater than .05 ($p = .052$), the null hypothesis is rejected in favor of

the alternative hypothesis, indicating that race/culture does not influence the importance

participants place on the indicators of quality in an ECE program.

**Figure 7**

*Average Participant Responses Based on Race/Culture*
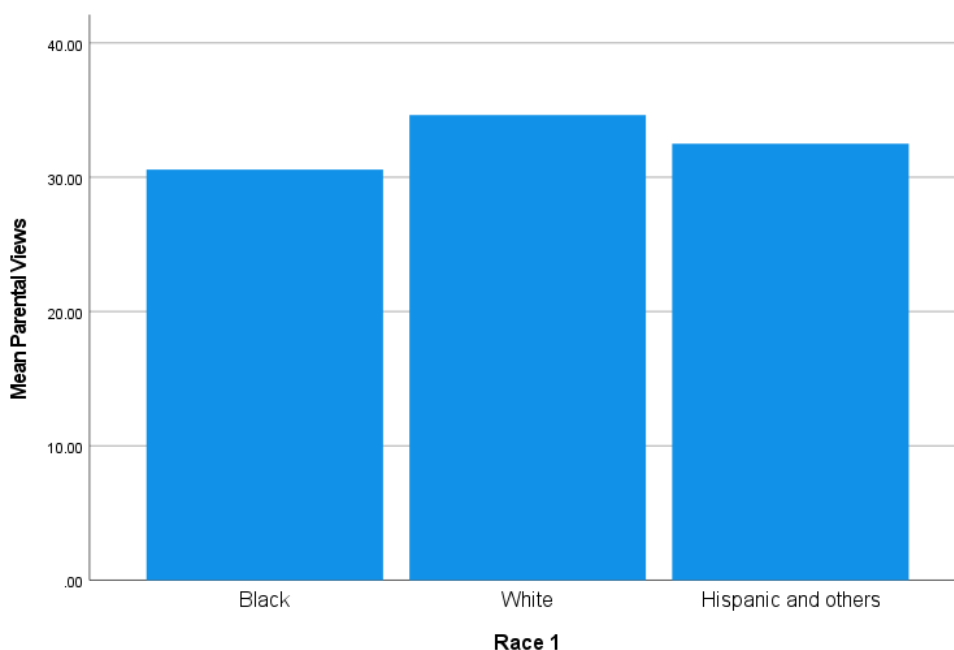


*Analysis by Socioeconomic Status or Household Income*

A one-way ANOVA with participant socioeconomic status as determined by

household income as the independent variable (less than $35,000, $35,000-$74,999, and

$75,000 or more) and the mean of the responses to all questions in the six categories

(access and operations, center and classroom environment, teachers and instruction,

curriculum, family engagement, and diversity and cultural competency) was conducted to

compare the level of parental views for three socioeconomic groups. Figure 8 shows the

comparisons between the three groups. There was no significant difference in parental

views among the three groups at the $p<.05$ level of significance [$F(2, 35) = 2.301$, $p =$

0.115]. Since there was no significant difference among less than $35,000 ($M = 29.85$,

*SD* = 4.38), \$35,000-\$74,999 (*M* = 32.15, *SD* = 4.05), and \$75,000 or more (*M* = 33.27,

*SD* = 3.74), post hoc comparisons were not necessary. Since the *p* value is greater than

.05 (*p* = .115), the null hypothesis is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis,

indicating that socioeconomic status does not influence the importance participants place

on the indicators of quality in an ECE program.

**Figure 8**

*Average Participant Responses Based on Socioeconomic Status as Defined by Household*

*Income*
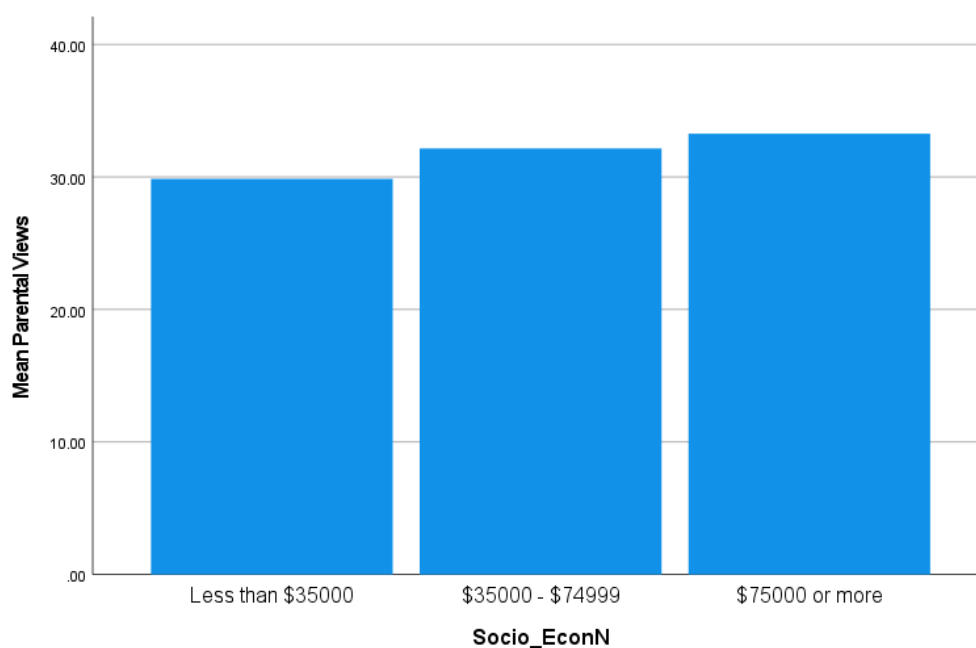


### *Analysis by Years of Experience in ECE Programs*

A one-way ANOVA with participant years of experience in ECE programs as the

independent variable (less than 1 year and 1 year or more) and the mean of the responses

to all questions in the six categories (access and operations, center and classroom

environment, teachers and instruction, curriculum, family engagement, and diversity and

cultural competency) was conducted to compare the level of parental views for two

groups (less than 1 year and 1 year or more). Figure 9 shows the comparisons between the two groups. There was no significant difference in parental views among the two groups at the $p<.05$ level of significance [$F(1, 36) = 1.200$, $p = 0.281$]. Since there was no significant difference among less than 1 year ($M = 32.11$, $SD = 4.38$) and 1 year or more ($M = 30.45$, $SD = 3.80$), further comparisons were not necessary. Since the $p$ value is greater than .05 ($p = .281$), the null hypothesis is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis, indicating that years of experience in ECE programs does not influence the importance participants place on the indicators of quality in an ECE program.

**Figure 9**

*Average of Participant Responses Based on Experience in ECE Programs*
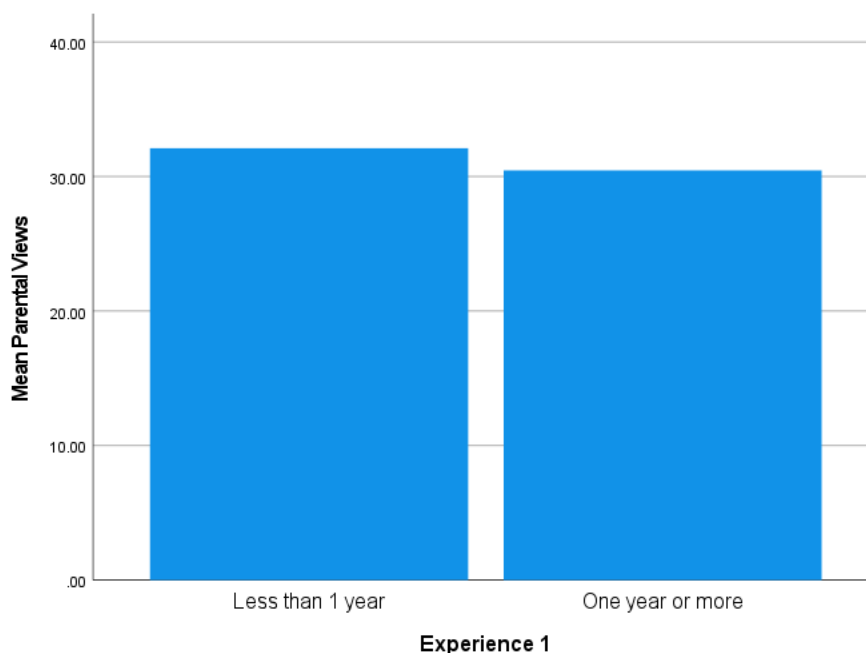


### Parent Interview Results

During Phase 3 of the study, I directed interviews to help understand three of the research questions. The responses of the parent interviews were shared according to the research question they addressed. The responses were coded for common themes.

**Research Question 1: What Do Parents View As Quality in an ECE**

**Program?**

*Interview Question: Tell Me Your Idea of High Quality in an ECE Program.*

Most of the participants answered the question similarly. The common themes that were

perceived as quality were related to the categories of teachers and instruction, curriculum,

and center and classroom environment. Some of the participants went into more details

about their idea of quality than others. Table 4 shows an overview of parent responses.

**Table 4**

*Parent Perceptions of Quality in ECE Programs*

| | Access and operations | Center and class environment | Teachers and instruction | Curriculum | Family engagement | Diversity and cultural competency |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Par. 1 | | Clean and colorful environment | Energetic caring experienced and knowledgeable | Focus on academics<br><br>Kindness and social emotional skills | | Diverse students |
| Par. 2 | | Warm climate<br><br>Engaging environment | Patient | Curriculum on students level | | |
| Par. 3 | | | Good teachers and staff | Good curriculum | | |
| Par. 4 | | Clean and pleasant environment | | Good curriculum | | |
| Par. 5 | | | Knowledgeable teachers | Classroom resources | | |
| Par. 6 | | | Teachers meet the child where they are | Focus on early literacy<br><br>Social emotional skills | | |
| Par. 7 | | Clean environment<br><br>Language rich classroom | Knowledgeable, caring &energetic teachers & staff | exposure to arts | | Diverse students and staff |

*Note.* "Par." is abbreviated for Participant.

In regard to teachers and instruction, Participant 2 said, "My idea of quality is

having teachers who are patient and reach the students on their level." Participant 1

expressed, "My idea of quality is having knowledgeable teachers not just in education,

but in experience with children." Similarly, Participant 7 said, "My idea of quality is having caring, energetic, and knowledgeable teachers."

In relation to curriculum, Participant 1 said, "I think quality is having a curriculum that teaches kindness and social emotional skills, as well as academics." Participant 6 said, "I think quality is having a curriculum that focuses on early literacy and meeting the child where they are." Participant 7 said they perceive quality as having a curriculum that exposes children to the arts. Of the seven participants, six perceived curriculum as an indicator of quality in an ECE program.

Center and classroom environment was commonly mentioned as a response to this question. Participant 1 said their idea of quality was a clean and colorful environment. Participant 7 said, "I think quality is having a language-rich environment that is clean." Participant 4 said their idea of quality was a clean and pleasant environment. Likewise, Participant 2 said, "My idea of quality is a warm climate and an engaging learning environment where every child wants to learn."

**Research Question 3: What Types of ECE Programs Are Available and Attainable in the Studied County, as Perceived by Parents?**

***Interview Question: Tell Me About the Resources or Information You Relied on When Searching for an ECE Program.*** The common themes that were consistently mentioned as resources or information they relied on when searching for an ECE program were word of mouth, program website, DSS online rating site, and phone call to the facility. Although many participants relied on different resources and information, all participants said word of mouth was their primary resource and way of receiving information about the program. Table 5 shows an overview of parent responses.

**Table 5**

*Resources That Assisted Parents in Choosing an ECE Program*

|  | Word of mouth | Program website | Spoke to director/designee | DSS or online rating site |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | 100% most helpful | 57% somewhat helpful | 29% helpful | 43% somewhat helpful |
| Participant 1 | Most helpful | Somewhat helpful | Helpful | Somewhat helpful |
| Participant 2 | Most helpful | Somewhat helpful | Helpful |  |
| Participant 3 | Most helpful | Not helpful |  |  |
| Participant 4 | Most helpful |  |  |  |
| Participant 5 | Most helpful |  |  |  |
| Participant 6 | Most helpful | Somewhat helpful |  | Somewhat helpful |
| Participant 7 | Most helpful | Somewhat helpful |  | Somewhat helpful |

*Note.* Parent responses were coded based on the information they shared as most helpful,

helpful, somewhat helpful, or not helpful. If parents did not use the resource, no response

was coded.

Participant 1 said she heard of the program through various coworkers. She

expressed that she was new to the area and did not know much about ECE programs

offered. She then went online to get more information about the program and to find

others so she could have options. She mentioned that she intentionally searched for

reviews and ratings through the DSS rating website. After searching online, she said she

was put on the waiting list for five programs, due to availability. Participant 2 said she

knew about the program because she was a district employee but that she relied on a few ECE experts who were knowledgeable about the program to get more information. Participant 3 said, "When I was searching for a program, the online research did not help, so I relied on word of mouth from the community." She also said she called one facility and did not meet the requirements, but they recommended another facility in which she may qualify. Participant 4 said, "When searching for a program to enroll my child, I only knew about one program, which was full. I relied on word of mouth by asking family and friends." Interestingly, Participant 5 said she relied on word of mouth from her child's early interventionist and speech therapist. She said she did not know the program existed. Participant 6 said, "I did online research, and after learning about the program, I talked to people and prayed that my child would get into this program." Participant 7 said they relied on word of mouth from friends, family, and social media. They also said they went to the school district's website and to the DSS rating website.

Center directors were asked how they share and advertise information for their program. Table 6 shows a comparison of available and attainable resources as perceived by parents and sources of sharing and distributing information by center directors. The ways of sharing and attaining information were aligned in most areas. Parents did not mention flyers or newsletters as a resource for attaining information. Directors did not mention relying on the DSS quality rating website to share information.

**Table 6**

*Parent and Center Director Sources for Available Information*

| Parent sources for attaining information | Director sources for sharing information |
|---|---|
| Word of mouth from family/friends | Parents share, word of mouth |
| Website/social media | Social media, district website, school website |
| DSS quality rating website | |
| Community (therapist, church, school) | Partnerships (churches, schools) flyers, newsletters |

***Interview Question*: *How Did You Decide on Which ECE Program to Enroll Your Child in?*** Many of the participants expressed the main factor that helped them to decide in which program to enroll was referrals from others and affordability. Other themes that were noticed were availability, diversity, and academic focus. All participants expressed they were not able to tour the facility initially due to guidelines relating to the pandemic; but after enrollment, they were able to see more areas of the facility. Table 7 shows an overview of participant responses.

**Table 7**

*Factors That Helped Parents Decide on an ECE Program*

| | Referrals from others 57% | Affordability 57% | Diversity 29% | Availability 29% | Academic focus 29% |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | ✓ | | ✓ | | |
| Participant 2 | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Participant 3 | | ✓ | | | |
| Participant 4 | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Participant 5 | ✓ | | | | |
| Participant 6 | | | | | ✓ |
| Participant 7 | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |

Participant 1 said they wanted a place that was diverse in socioeconomic status and culture/race and had caring staff who loved the students. She said that after talking with friends whose kids attend the program and talking to the director over the phone, she decided this was her first choice. Unfortunately, she was placed on a waiting list. Participant 2 mentioned that her main reasons for choosing the ECE program were that it was free, full-day, and they had availability. She noted that she knew about the program from working in the district, but she thought they only accepted based on financial need and academic need. She did not think she qualified initially. Participant 3 said the affordable tuition drove her decision to attend the ECE program. She mentioned that she applied to several programs, but she went with the first one that had affordable tuition. Participant 4 said she decided on the program after church members spoke highly about the program and it was free. Participant 5 said she decided on the ECE program because they offered speech services for her child. Participant 6 said she decided on the program because the ECE program had a high focus on early literacy. Participant 7 said she decided on the program because it was free and had certified teachers.

***Interview Question: What Challenges Did You Face When Searching?*** Many of the participants faced several challenges while searching for an ECE program. Table 8 displays the challenges parents faced when searching for an ECE program. The main themes that were present were no availability and being placed on a waiting list. About 70% of the parents said they were placed on a waiting list at one or more ECE programs before finding one with availability. Other themes that were noticed were denied due to requirements, hours of operation, expensive tuition, and no special services offered.

**Table 8**

*Challenges in Finding an ECE Program*

| Participants | Challenges |
|---|---|
| Participant 1 | No experience in choosing a program, no openings, waiting list, one program with an opening, but the location was not favorable |
| Participant 2 | Denied at first choice due to zone requirements, waiting list on several, some only offered half day program |
| Participant 3 | No availability, waiting list for several, unaffordable tuition, denied due to age requirement |
| Participant 4 | Denied due to availability, waiting list was full, did not know about other programs |
| Participant 5 | Programs could not meet the speech needs for my child |
| Participant 6 | Waiting list for 2 years, out of priority zone, most programs focus on play and not literacy |
| Participant 7 | No virtual options for 4k students |

**Research Question 4: What Improvements Can Be Made to Make ECE Programs High Quality as Perceived by Parents?**

*Interview Question: What Changes Would You Make to Your ECE Program to Make it a Higher Quality Program?* The main theme that was noticed was the hours of operation. Figure 10 shows the themes that were mentioned as improvements to make their ECE program a higher quality program. In general, the parents were happy with the quality of the program and most prefaced their suggestion by saying they were pleased. Twenty-five percent of the parents said they would not change anything, and 25% said

they would change the hours by extending them to align with the work schedules of the parents and to avoid afterschool care.

**Figure 10**

*Parent Participant Suggestions of Changes That Would Make Their ECE Program Higher Quality*

## Changes to ECE Programs
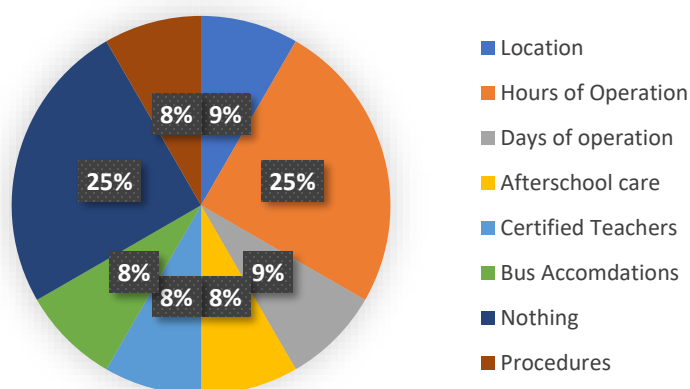


**Summary and Connections to Conceptual Framework**

Chapter 4 discussed the results from each phase of this study. The overall results were that parents seemed to understand indicators of quality in ECE programs, which is important when determining a child's ECE program setting. Studies on quality care in ECE programs sometimes concentrate on a variety of issues such as play-based curriculum, academically based curriculum, teachers and instruction, or the benefits for children, rather than on parent perspectives about ECE programs. Parents are the child's first teacher and an advocate for their child. Parents understand their child's experiences and knowledge much sooner than anyone. This understanding connects parents with the theory of constructivism in preschool education.

In preschool education, constructivism focuses more on the child and the ways in

which children develop skills. The results of this study add to the theory of

constructivism because when parents understand what is meant by quality, they can place

their child in the most suitable program in which they can develop necessary skills.

Parent perspectives and parent understanding of quality in ECE are essential elements of

constructivism, and elements that focus on the development of new skills in children are

required (Jacobson, 2007). Through studying social theories of the leading contributor to

constructivism, Lev Vygotsky, it was found that a child usually successfully

accomplishes new tasks while working in collaboration with an adult instead of on their

own (Lipoff, 2011). These new tasks will be presented by adults in ECE programs, and

parents must understand quality in order to make informed decisions when searching for

an ECE program. The results of this study indicate that parent perspectives and

understanding of quality are important. Parents are in the position to choose the most

appropriate program for their child. Chapter 5 discusses recommendations.

**Chapter 5: Discussion**

This study used a 3-phase approach to determine what parents perceive as quality, what publicly available information exists about the ECE programs, and if specific factors influenced parent views on quality in an ECE program. The results helped to understand what parents perceive as quality in ECE programs and what information is available and attainable for ECE programs. The information was used to make recommendations to help center directors understand what parents expect to experience in a quality ECE program and what improvements can be made. Additionally, this information was used to link the findings to previous research. This final chapter begins with a summary and discussion of the findings from Chapter 4, followed by a discussion of the study's limitations and recommendations for future research and concluding remarks.

The goal of this research was to gain an understanding of the indicators influencing the selection of quality ECE programs for children by parents. The data gathered in this study could be used to give program directors a snapshot of what parents expect while looking for a quality ECE program. The results should allow program directors to build ECE programs that are compatible with what parents say they want. The results could also be used to influence public policy relating to access to quality local and state-level ECE services. The results can also help to make ECE program knowledge and education more available to parents.

**Findings Linked to Relevant Research**

*Research Question 1: What Do Parents View as Quality in an ECE Program?*

**Findings 1.** Overall, most of the parents had a positive view about the indicators

of quality in ECE programs. Most of the responses in the survey were marked as very important on the Likert scale. When given a chance to respond openly through interviews, most parents spoke highly about the quality of their ECE program. This result supports existing research that parents view ECE programs positively (Cryer et al., 2002). In this study, most of the two groups of parents and caregivers rated the ECE programs high on the Likert scale (Cryer et al., 2002).

The indicators of quality that parents felt were very important were related to curriculum, teachers and instruction, and environment. Parents viewed having a strong curriculum that focused on reading and math as well as social-emotional skills an indicator of quality. This aligns with previous research that concluded parents felt DAPs relating to academics and social-emotional skills were very important and indicated quality in an ECE program (Cleveland et al., 2013).

Parents felt that teachers and instruction was an important indicator of quality. The responses from the parent surveys and interviews in this study indicated a high level of importance on teachers and instruction. This aligns to Canada and Bland (2014), who concluded that parent expectations of ECE services are based on their opinions on the competence of teaching personnel and the level of contact between teachers and children. Rentzou and Sakellariou (2013) stated that parents of preschoolers connected quality with visible ECE experiences such as the interaction between the child and the teacher, rather than with structured components such as staff-child ratios, group size, and teacher qualifications.

Parents also felt that center and classroom environment in terms of cleanliness, welcoming classroom, and teacher-to-child ratio was important. This result is similar to a

previous study where the results showed that parents viewed environmental characteristics as important. This previous study defined environmental characteristics as employee skills, experience, training, and individual attention provided to children (Shlay et al., 2005). This aligns with research by Workman and Ullrich (2017), which found that environment, teachers and interactions, and structure are the three key components of a quality ECE program.

Parents also perceived access and availability in terms of hours and calendar days as an indicator of quality. Most of the parents in the parent interviews expressed the importance of hours and availability being conducive to their work schedule. This aligns with previous research that showed that parents felt strongly about attending an ECE program that was flexible and willing to work with parent schedules (Cleveland et al., 2013).

Understanding what parents perceive as quality is important because it allows ECE directors and managers to align aspects of the program to what parents say they want. This indirectly positively effects student development and education because the parents know their child best. I recommend program directors seek feedback from parents upon enrollment and be willing to make reasonable modifications or adjustments to offer a higher quality program for their community.

*Research Question 2: How Do Parental Views of Quality in ECE Programs Differ by Socioeconomic Status, Culture, Parental Education, and Previous ECE Program Experience?*

**Findings 2**. The findings of this study showed there was no significant difference in how parental views differed by socioeconomic status, culture/race, education, or

previous years of experience in an ECE program. Although there was no significant difference, trivial differences were noted. Parents whose household income was $75,000 or more placed a slightly lower level of importance on the indicators of quality than the other groups (less than $75,000). In terms of race/culture, White parents placed a slightly lower level of importance on the indicators of quality than the other groups (Black Hispanic and Others). Parents with a graduate degree or higher slightly placed a lower level of importance on the indicators of quality than the other groups (Bachelor's degree or less). Parents who had less than 1 year of experience in the ECE program placed a slightly higher level of importance on the indicators of quality.

Since these differences were not noted as significant by running four one-way ANOVAs, it is difficult to determine if they completely align with some previous research. However, Thai (2018) noticed several differences in parent perceptions among the different variables. Particularly, she found that parents with household incomes of $100,000 or more per year seemed to value instruction, family, and cultural competency less than families with lower incomes (Thai, 2018). She also found that Hispanic parents placed greater value on the ECE centers' environment, their family engagement, and cultural competency compared to Asian/Pacific Islander and White parents (Thai, 2018). Shlay et al. (2005) examined how quality is measured and defined by low-income African Americans. They found the parents placed the same level of importance on the indicators of quality as experts (Shlay et al., 2005). These findings show that higher education, higher socioeconomic status, race, or years of experience in the ECE program does not mean a higher level of importance is placed on quality of indicators. This further shows that parents of all groups generally view quality as important for their child.

This is important because all children deserve an appropriate and effective educational experience no matter their socioeconomic background, race/culture, or educational level of their parents. I recommend all ECE programs consider all perspectives of quality despite the category in which they may be placed based on different stigmatisms.

*Research Question 3***: *What Types of ECE Programs and Information Are Available and Attainable in the Studied County, as Perceived by Parents?*

**Findings 3**. Friends and family were the primary sources of information for parents. When asked about the information sources they used when looking for ECE programs for their children, parents said their primary sources of information were friends, family, and the community. Center directors also reported that word of mouth was a source they relied on for sharing information. Previous research has shown that social networks are the primary source of information for the ECE program (Vesley, 2013). These results are in line with Pungello and Kurtz-Costes's (1999) findings, which concluded most parents base their decisions on knowledge obtained from informal sources such as family, colleagues, or neighbors. Similarly, Iruka and Carver (2006) found in their study that most parents heard about their child's provider from a friend. These findings show that parents depend on their trusted social network whether in person on a social network platform for knowledge. In other words, parent decision-making when choosing an ECE program is mainly affected by information gathered from members of their family, friends, or feedback gained from members of the community (Joshi, 2014).

This is important because if parents cannot access information to quality

programs, the child is hindered developmentally and academically. The National

Education Association (2021) agreed that access to effective, diverse programs breaks

down structural barriers that have prevented all children from reaching their full

potential, particularly children of color and children from low-income families. I

recommend ECE program directors regularly update and disseminate accurate

information using social network platforms and traditional platforms.

### Research Question 4: What Improvements Can Be Made To Make ECE Programs High Quality as Perceived by Parents?

**Results 4.** The findings of this study showed that parents overall are satisfied with

the quality of the ECE program their child attends. The most common improvement

parents mentioned was to change the hours so they are more conducive to parent work

schedules. Although several of the parents mentioned changes such as location, arrival

and dismissal procedures, and teacher certifications, several of them expressed they

would not change anything to improve the program.

This is important because some parents may choose not to enroll their child in

quality programs because of the hours along with other program services. I recommend

programs offer extended day services to meet parent needs. This program can be at a cost

to the parents or through vouchers funded by outside partners or state/federally allocated

funds.

### Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have several implications. This study was important for

researchers' understanding of parent perceptions in high-quality ECE programs. The

perceptions of parents and caregivers of quality ECE programs are important because

perceptions drive participation (Workman & Ullrich, 2017). According to research, ECE programs with comprehensive parent involvement components have positive outcomes that are critical to closing the achievement gap (Reynolds et al., 2002; Workman & Ullrich, 2017).

Parents are the decision makers and the advocates for their children; therefore, they have a unique opportunity to influence the level of quality provided by the programs. Additionally, they have the opportunity to impact policy and design for the programs due to their vital role in their child's life. Due to the benefits quality ECE programs provide and the influence parents can have on stakeholders, it is critical that parents have knowledge and understanding of these programs. This study demonstrated that parents have knowledge and understanding of quality ECE programs. This supports my hypothesis as well as previous research that parents value quality in the ECE programs their children attend. Perceptions of parents can be used as a formative assessment tool to improve programs. Overall, parent perceptions of quality are somewhat aligned with center director responses. This supports the findings that parents understand quality and should have a voice in program design.

Although parents have an understanding of quality in ECE programs, they may choose lower quality care because they do not have access to quality care. Several parents expressed that many of the ECE programs were full or they did not qualify. One parent even expressed that she was on a waiting list for 2 years before enrolling her child in the program she perceived as high quality. While waiting, she enrolled her son in a less favorable and from her perspective a lower quality program. This was due to access and availability. I think this parent represents many families. According to Workman and

Ullrich (2017), ECE programs are increasingly becoming more out of reach for a majority of Americans due to cost, requirements, location, and availability. Another parent mentioned that the programs that had availability were not in favorable locations. The findings did not fully support my hypothesis that parents do not choose some ECE programs due to unfavorable locations, because only one parent eluded to the issue. I think that if the study included a larger, more diverse sample population, this hypothesis would have been supported.

Previous and current research shows that parents rely heavily on social networks for information about ECE programs. Many of the parents in this study relied on social networks as a resource for acquiring information about ECE programs. They also mentioned that the websites were not very helpful. This supports my hypothesis that formal information is not very assessable for families searching for ECE programs. This also aligns with research that concluded that parents rely on informal sources of information more than formal information such as websites, because they are not as helpful (Sandstrom et al., 2012). Since social networking seems to be parents' primary source for obtaining information about ECE programs, program directors must consider how to use parent social networks as a catalyst for information sharing (Thai, 2018).

**Limitations of Findings**

Results of the study also revealed limitations including voluntary response bias that may have occurred since parents volunteered to participate. Parents who did not choose to participate may have had different views. This may have created an inaccurate representation of the population used for the study. Another limitation is the lack of statistical significance due to a small sample size. If more participants would have

completed the survey, differences may have been detected between the different groups. An additional limitation was that the study took place during a pandemic. Many ECE programs decreased their capacity due to regulations relating to the pandemic. Many ECE programs changed many policies and procedures to align with federal, state, and local guidelines to ensure the safest environment for students and teachers. This may have affected parent perspectives of quality in the ECE programs. Also, many parents and people in general were dealing with a variety of hardships that may have taken their focus off the quality of an ECE program. The pandemic also modified some of the quality rating reporting protocols, which may have caused inaccurate information available for public viewing. Another limitation was the diversity of the sample population. Only ECE programs in an urban area were used in this study, because permission was not granted to conduct the study in two ECE programs that were located in rural areas. Hopkins et al. (2014) concluded that the quantity of parental information available and accessible, as well as how important parents deem the information, varies from community to community. The findings may have been different if a variety of communities were included in the sample population.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study's findings may be limited to ECE programs in urban areas of the studied county that are in some way partly or fully funded federally or by the state. An area for future research is to look more closely at the differences in the perspectives of quality in urban areas and rural areas and in a variety of ECE program types. Since this study only included a small number of participants from ECE programs that were similar in demographics, the findings may not be generalizable. Furthermore, since this study did

not include information about parent perspectives of quality from rural areas and alternative ECE care (home school, faith based), additional research is required to identify and better understand the factors that make this option appealing to families. In speaking to a parent who home schools their children, she said,

> I believe the quality of ECE at home is supreme, where we are able to tailor our children's education to their intellectual, physical, mental, and spiritual needs and growth in a safer environment until they have a solid foundation to make decisions on their own in the world.

This parent believed the best quality program for her children was one that could only be provided at home. In speaking to a parent whose child attended a faith-based program, they believed the quality indicators mentioned in this study were important, but in order to have a high-quality ECE program, faith-based curriculum was a priority. The aforementioned perspectives from these parents are evidence that future studies with a more diverse sample population is necessary.

Another area for future research is cultural competency and family engagement in relation to parental education level, household income, and parents' cultural background. Communities are becoming more diverse than ever, and cultural sensitivity and awareness is at a height in the nation. Understanding how these factors influence parent perceptions of quality care will assist program directors in developing multilingual information and materials to include and engage parents, developing curriculum that is inclusive of all children, and providing professional development training to staff working with multi-cultural families.

**Recommendations for Programs and Policy**

*ECE Programs Should Intentionally Collaborate With Various Organizations in the Community*

ECE program directors should encourage collaboration among ECE centers, school districts, pediatrician offices, and universities. Early childhood programs are often the first educational experience for some students. A study conducted by Flottman et al. (2011) suggested that transitions between settings and within settings can be difficult for young children and their families. Early childhood professionals recognize the importance of continuity in children's education and collaborate to build on children's prior knowledge and experience (Flottman et al., 2011). Collaborating with professionals and stakeholders could assist parents in finding the most appropriate and effective ECE program for their child. ECE program directors in collaboration with local organizations should use this strategy to help parents access program information and understand the options and process of enrollment in ECE programs.

*Extended Day Options Should Be Offered by ECE Programs*

Many programs receive some type of funding. Policy makers should allocate funds to ECE programs to offer extended day options in the form of full day and evening hours for parents with notable needs. Many parents expressed hours of operation as a suggestion for improvement. The Unifying Framework for ECE calls for significant increases in federal and state investments in the early care and education system to ensure that young children, families, and communities are well-served by a profession that is effective, equitable, diverse, well-prepared, and well-compensated (National Education Association, 2021). One of the recommendations the National Education Association has

pushed for is for federal funds to be used to make prekindergarten programs available to all 3- and 4-year-old children from low-income families. State and local governments should contribute the additional funds required to make prekindergarten available to all 3- and 3-year-old children (National Education Association, 2021). This availability should align with parents' need of extended day options.

### *An Updated Centralized ECE Website Should Be Used by All ECE Program Administrators*

Many portals currently exist containing information about ECE programs in a given area; however, they are not updated regularly, and the information is not very helpful. There should be a requirement for ECE programs to update the ECE centralized portal regularly to display current information such as availability, capacity, mission, vision, curriculum, ratio, operating hours, procedures, and schedules. On a national level, NAEYC maintains an online list of programs that are available to help parents find NAEYC-accredited programs in a given area (NAEYC, 2021a). Parents in this study stated they had difficulty finding information about ECE programs via internet searches. They had to search multiple websites for helpful information, and some websites contained contradictory information. Having a local ECE portal would allow parents to effectively search for information about ECE programs. It could serve as a parent guide which could be translated into various languages with a simple click.

### *Highly-Qualified Teachers Should Be Employed in All ECE Programs of Quality*

Programs should hire certified teachers who can effectively implement the curriculum. Many programs have a requirement for teachers to have at least an associate's degree or certificate equivalence; however, some have very minimum

requirements. "A highly-qualified early childhood educator--one who knows how to create a dynamic, accountable learning environment-- is at the center of a high-quality early learning experience" (NAEYC, 2004, p. 1). There should be a requirement for all teachers in ECE programs to have a degree or to have high-quality, ongoing trainings. According to NAEYC (2004), despite the important role early childhood educators play, as well as increased public demand and incremental funding for high-quality early learning, earning a living wage as an early childhood educator in many programs is difficult. Funding on a state and federal level should be available to assist in offering higher wages as well as educational opportunities to ECE staff.

***Revise Current QRIS Tools To Include Cultural Competency and Revised Environmental Guidelines***

QRIS assesses, observes, recognizes, rewards, and supports early childhood program quality improvement, with a focus on continuous quality improvement (NAEYC, 2009). Cultural competency and diversity is a component in ECE programs that is necessary in order to effectively serve the students and families. Considering the demographics of children under the age of 6 in this country, as well as the opportunity that QRIS provides to improve program quality, it is clear that this is an opportune time to ensure that concepts of cultural competence are meaningfully woven into these quality standards and their criteria (NAEYC, 2009). Environmental guidelines currently exist in QRIS; however, they should be revised to intentionally promote a clean, safe, and child friendly environment at all times.

**Conclusion**

Quality early childhood programs are vital because they provide short- and long-term positive benefits. Philosopher and educator John Dewey (1907) said, "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon it destroys our democracy" (p. 19). In order to make this vision a reality, parents must be provided with the information they need to make informed decisions when selecting ECE programs for their children. Previous and current research has clearly demonstrated the impact and benefits high-quality early education has on children's social-emotional and cognitive development. The results of this study demonstrated that parents desire high-quality ECE programs overall. They particularly felt that teachers and instruction, environment, and culture and diversity were very import indicators of quality rather than family engagement and practical factors relating to access and operations such as driving distance, location, and cost. Additionally, this study showed there is a need for parents to have available resources to access information and influence their decision-making in selecting a suitable ECE program for their child.

Parents are the first teachers their children will have. Parents also have the important role as the primary decision makers when it comes to determining their child's educational needs. As ECE administrators and stakeholders, it should be a goal to equip parents with the tools and resources they need to select the best ECE program for their child and give their child a chance at a fair, appropriate beginning of their educational future.

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Appendix A

Parent Perception Survey

**PARENT PERCEPTION SURVEY**

Please rate the importance of the following factors.

**Q1 Access and Operations**

| | Not at all important | Moderately important | Very important |
|---|---|---|---|
| Location and physical surroundings of the center | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Driving Distance to and from the center | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Operating hours of the center | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Program mission and vision | ○ | ○ | ○ |

**Q2 Center and Classroom Environment**

| | Not at all important | Moderately important | Very important |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cleanliness of the center | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Welcoming center and classroom environment | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Age range of students in the classroom | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Teacher-to-child ratio in the classroom | ○ | ○ | ○ |

**Q3 Teachers and Instruction**

| | Not at all important | Moderately important | Very important |
|---|---|---|---|
| Education level of the teachers | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Teacher/school's style of discipline | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Teachers' appreciation of children's individuality, interest, and abilities | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Teachers' responsiveness to parents'/guardians' suggestions and concerns | ○ | ○ | ○ |

**Q4 Curriculum**

| | Not at all important | Moderately important | Very important |
|---|---|---|---|
| Activities that promote health and movement | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| Activities that promote friendship and interacting with others | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| Activities that promote expressing feelings and understanding emotions | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| Daily activities that promote curiosity and exploration | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| Activities that promote problem solving | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| Language and literacy activities to promote reading and writing | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| Math activities that promote counting and number concepts | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

**Q5 Family Engagement**

| | Not at all important | Moderately important | Very important |
|---|---|---|---|
| Teachers share my family's values | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| Teachers develop relationships with my family | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| Teachers provide consistent communication to parents about children's progress and experiences | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

**Q6 Diversity and Cultural Competency**

| | Not at all important | Moderately important | Very important |
|---|---|---|---|
| Teachers' ability to communicate in our family's language | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| Teachers' willingness to accept and respect cultural diversity | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| Teachers' ability to address stereotypes among children | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| Overall diversity of other children at the center | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

**Q7 When choosing an early childhood education program, what are the top 3 factors that you considered in your decision? Select your choice by marking in space. Choose 1st, 2nd, and 3rd priorities)**

| 1st Priority (Select only one) | 2nd Priority (Select only one) | 3rd Priority (Select only one |
|---|---|---|
| _____ Access and operations | _____ Access and operations | _____ Access and operations |
| _____ Center and Classroom environment | _____ Center and Classroom environment | _____ Center and Classroom environment |
| _____ Teachers and instruction | _____ Teachers and instruction | _____ Teachers and instruction |
| _____ Curriculum | _____ Curriculum | _____ Curriculum |
| _____ Family Engagement | _____ Family Engagement | _____ Family Engagement |
| _____ Diversity and cultural competency | _____ Diversity and cultural competency | _____ Diversity and cultural competency |

**Q8 Gender of the student**

○ Male

○ Female

○ Prefer not to say

**Q9 Student Race**

○ Black/African-American

○ White

○ Hispanic

○ Asian

○ Other

○ Prefer not to say

**Q10 How long has the child been enrolled in this early learning program?**

○ Less than a year

○ 1 year

○ 2 years

○ 3 years or more

**Q11 Relationship to the child**

○ Mother

○ Father

○ Guardian

○ Grandparent

○ Aunt or Uncle

○ Other

**Q12 Parent/Adult Race**

○ Black or African-American

○ White

○ Hispanic

○ Asian

○ Other

**Q13 Language spoken in the home**

○ English

○ Spanish

○ Other

**Q14 Highest level of education**

○ Less than high school diploma

○ High school diploma or GED

○ Some college

○ Associates Degree

○ Bachelor's Degree

○ Master's Degree

○ Doctorate or Professional Degree

**Q15 Total household income**

○ Less than 25,000

○ 25,000-34,999

○ 35,000-49,999

○ 50,000-74,999

○ 75,000-99,999

○ 100,000 or more

**Q16 Which early learning program is your child enrolled in? This information should have been on the email that you received.**

○ Program A

○ Program B

○ Program C

○ Program D

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**Q17 If you are willing to participate in a brief interview please list you email address below and you will be emailed a sign-up document.**

Email address:_____

End of Parent Survey

Appendix B

Center Director Survey

**Center Director Survey**

**As you develop your program, to what extent do you consider the following:**

**Q1 Access and Operations**

| | Not at all important | Moderately important | Very important |
|---|---|---|---|
| Location and physical surroundings of the center | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Driving distance for parents to and from the center | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Operating hours of the center | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Program mission and vision | ○ | ○ | ○ |

**Q2 Center and Classroom Environment**

| | Not at all important | Moderately important | Very important |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cleanliness of the center | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Welcoming center and classroom environment | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Age range of students in the classroom | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Teacher-to-child ratio in the classroom | ○ | ○ | ○ |

**Q3 Teachers and Instruction**

|  | Not at all important | Moderately important | Very important |
|---|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Education level of the teachers | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Teacher/school's style of discipline | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Teachers' appreciation of children's individuality, interest, and abilities | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Teachers' responsiveness to parents/guardians' suggestions and concerns | ○ | ○ | ○ |

**Q4 Curriculum**

| | Not at all important | Moderately important | Very important |
|---|---|---|---|
| Activities that promote health and movement | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Activities that promote friendship and interacting with others | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Activities that promote expressing feelings and understanding emotions | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Daily activities that promote curiosity and exploration | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Activities that promote problem solving | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Language and literacy activities to promote reading and writing | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Math activities that promote counting and number concepts | ○ | ○ | ○ |

**Q5 Family Engagement**

| | Not at all important | Moderately important | Very important |
|---|---|---|---|
| Teachers share familys' values | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Teachers develop relationships with families | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Teachers provide consistent communication to parents about children's progress and experiences | ○ | ○ | ○ |

**Q6 Diversity and Cultural Competency**

| | Not at all important | Moderately important | Very important |
|---|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Teachers' ability to communicate in families' language | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Teachers' willingness to accept and respect cultural diversity | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Teachers' ability to address stereotypes among children | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Diversity of children at the center | ○ | ○ | ○ |

**Q7 What are the top 3 factors that you consider when developing programming at your center? (Mark your choice in the space. Choose 1st, 2nd, and 3rd priorities)**

| 1st Priority (Select only one) | 2nd Priority (Select only one) | 3rd Priority (Select only one |
|---|---|---|
| _____ Access and operations | _____ Access and operations | _____ Access and operations |
| _____ Center and Classroom environment | _____ Center and Classroom environment | _____ Center and Classroom environment |
| _____ Teachers and instruction | _____ Teachers and instruction | _____ Teachers and instruction |
| _____ Curriculum | _____ Curriculum | _____ Curriculum |
| _____ Family Engagement | _____ Family Engagement | _____ Family Engagement |
| _____ Diversity and cultural competency | _____ Diversity and cultural competency | _____ Diversity and cultural competency |

**Q8 Approximately how many 3-4-year-old children does your center serve?**

_____

**Q9 Approximately how many full-time ECE teachers are employed at the center?**

_____

**Q10 Approximately how many full-time ECE teacher's assistants are employed at the center?**

_____

**Q11 Approximately what percentage of your ECE staff hold a bachelor's degree or higher in early childhood education or related field?**

**Q12 Approximately what percentage of your teachers belong in the following racial/ethnic groups?**

○ Black/African-American _____

○ White _____

○ Hispanic _____

○ Asian _____

○ Other _____

○ Decline to disclose _____

**Q13 Approximately what percentage of the teachers speak the following language?**

○ English _____

○ Spanish _____

○ Other _____

---

**Q14 How do you share and advertise information about your center with prospective families?**
_____

_____

_____

_____

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Q15 Which early learning program are affiliated with? This information should have been on the email sent by the researcher.

○ Program A

○ Program B

○ Program C

○ Program D

Appendix C

Parent Perception Interview Questionnaire

**Parent Perception Interview Questionnaire**
**Parent interviews (Zoom and Phone) will be recorded using a password protected personal device.**

1. Tell me your idea of high-quality in an Early Childhood Education (ECE) program?

2. How did you decide which ECE program to enroll your child in?
   *Follow-up Question:*
   a. What were the main reasons for choosing your ECE program?

3. Tell me a little about the resources or information you relied on when searching for an ECE program?
   *Follow-up Questions:*
   a. How did you find out about the program you chose?
   b. Did you tour the facility as a part of your search?
   c. What did you think while you were there?
   d. What were the things you liked?

4. What challenges did you face when searching for an ECE program?

5. What changes would you make to your ECE program to make it a higher quality program?

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form for Parent Survey

Gardner-Webb University IRB
Informed Consent Form for Parent Online Survey
***Parent Perceptions of Quality Early Childhood Education Programs***

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in an online survey focusing on parent perceptions of quality early learning programs. Lichelle Jones-Wilkins will be the researcher conducting the study.

The purpose of this research is to understand what parents perceive as quality in Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs. The data gathered in this study could be used to provide ECE program directors information of what parents expect in a quality ECE program. This data could allow program directors to construct ECE programs that are compatible to what parents say they want in a quality ECE program.

As a participant in the study, you will be asked to complete a short survey. It is anticipated that the survey will require about 5 minutes of your time. Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. Please answer the questions as honestly as possible. The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your data will be kept confidential and your name will not be collected or linked to the data.

You will receive no payment for participating in the study. However, your valuable feedback and participation will be appreciated. There are no anticipated risks in this study.

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by not submitting the survey.

Data from this study will be used for future research studies.

**If you have questions about the study, contact:**

Telephone: XXXXX

**Email:XXXXX**

Telephone: XXXXX

**Email: XXXXX**

Telephone: XXXXX

**Email: XXXXX**

Your completion of the survey will serve as consent to participate in the study.

*If you are not 18 years of age or older please do not complete the survey.*

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form for Center Director Survey

Gardner-Webb University IRB
Informed Consent Form for Center Director Online Survey
*Parent Perceptions of Quality Early Childhood Education Programs*

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in an online survey focusing on parent perceptions of quality early learning programs.  Lichelle Jones-Wilkins will be the researcher conducting the study.

The purpose of this research is to understand what parents perceive as quality in Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs. The data gathered in this study could be used to provide ECE program directors information of what parents expect in a quality ECE program. This data could allow program directors to construct ECE programs that are compatible to what parents say they want in a quality ECE program.

As a participant in the study, you will be asked to complete a short online survey. It is anticipated that the survey will require less than 10 minutes of your time. Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason. The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your data will be kept confidential your name will not be collected or linked to the data.

You will receive no payment for participating in the study. However, your valuable feedback and participation will be appreciated. There are no anticipated risks in this study.

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time by exiting the survey. Data from this study will be used for future research studies.

**If you have questions about the study, contact:**

Telephone: XXXXX
Email: XXXXX


Telephone: XXXXX
Email: XXXXX

Telephone: XXXXX
Email: XXXXX


Clicking the link below to access the survey, indicates your consent to participate in the study.



If you are not 18 years of age or older or you do not consent to participate, please close this window.

Appendix F

Informed Consent Form for Parent Interview

Gardner-Webb University IRB
Informed Consent Form for Parent Interviews
*Parent Perceptions of Quality Early Childhood Education Programs*

Dear Participant,

       You are invited to participate in a parent interview focusing on parent perceptions of quality early learning programs. Lichelle Jones-Wilkins will be the researcher conducting the study. At least 10 parent interviews are needed for this study.

       The purpose of this research is to understand what parents perceive as quality in Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs. The data gathered in this study could be used to provide ECE program directors information of what parents expect in a quality ECE program. This data could also allow program directors to construct ECE programs that are compatible to what parents say they want in a quality ECE program.

       As a participant in the study, you will be asked to schedule a 5 question interview via phone or Zoom. It is anticipated that the study will require less than 20 minutes of your time. Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your data will be kept *confidential and* your name will not be collected or linked to the data.

       You will receive no payment for participating in the study. However, your valuable feedback and participation will be appreciated. There are no anticipated risks in this study.

 You have the right to withdraw from the study by discontinuing the interview.
**<u>If you have questions about the study, contact:</u>**

Telephone: XXXXX
Email: XXXXX

Telephone: XXXXX
Email: XXXXX

Telephone: XXXXX
Email: XXXXX

Please check the statement that applies to you.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the parent interview.
\_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to participate in the parent interview.
\_\_\_\_\_ I am not 18 years of age or older.

Signature: _____ Date: _____