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Early Childhood Leadership: A Photovoice Exploration

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Abstract

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Early Childhood Leadership: A Photovoice Exploration

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The first five years of a child's life represent critical windows in physiological, social-emotional, and cognitive development. Administrators of early childhood (EC) programs play a pivotal role in determining the quality of experiences that unfold for young children in center-based care. Using photovoice, semi-structured administrator interviews, and participant-observation, we aimed to identify the factors contributing to one center's atypically excellent outcomes with diverse children and families. Our textual and photographic analyses revealed three findings. First, administrators saw themselves as embedded within a larger system of barriers characterized by low positionality within an educational caste system that is marked by pervasive resource scarcity. Second, with external supports marginal at best, they leveraged multiple internal supports and resources, including agency, interdependence, and advocacy. Third, administrators operationalized literacy leadership by building and sustaining a climate of professional support for teachers within a "25 Books a Day" guiding philosophy. Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Leadership, Photovoice, Equitable Access, Poverty, Literacy, ECE Leadership

Introduction

The first five years of a child's life represent critical windows in physiological, social-emotional, and cognitive development (Shonkoff, 2007). The environments in which young children spend their days prior to Kindergarten play major roles in how this development unfolds. Yet children living in poverty are less likely to have access to high-quality early care and educational experiences during these critical windows (e.g., Reynolds, Rolnick, England, & Temple, 2010). Disparities in access disproportionately affect children from cultural and/or linguistic minority groups and those with disabilities, whose specialized needs require additional teacher training, professional development, mentoring, specialized materials, and access to external family health and support services (Mezey, Schumacher, Greenberg, Lombardo, & Hutchens, 2002).

In addition to inequities in access, preschool programs in the United States are also plagued by inconsistencies in funding, oversight, accountability, and program support (Mezey et al., 2002; National Association for Childcare Resource and Referral Agencies [NACCRRA], 2013; National Women's Law Center [NWLC], 2015; Schmit, Matthews, Smith, & Robbins, 2013). Centers for early learning are funded by a patchwork of different sources that include parents' tuition payments, state and federal need-based childcare subsidies, and federal Head Start and/or Early Head Start grants (a comprehensive, federally-funded program for children and families living in poverty). Military, colleges/universities, and business dollars may also fund EC in the cases of onsite programs at military bases, institutions of higher education, and corporate work sites. These widely varying programs are monitored by a myriad of agencies with highly variable accountability requirements (NACCRRA, 2013).

Most young children in the United States are enrolled in private childcare programs, which are run as private businesses with varying degrees of regulation by state agencies (NACCRRA, 2013). Some of these private businesses also receive childcare subsidies through a voucher system, whereby federal dollars are distributed to states as per-child funds (United States Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families [USDHHS-ACF], 2014). These programs, referred to here as "subsidized childcare programs," are generally poorly funded; in 2015, only one US state reimbursed at federally recommended levels (NWLC, 2015). The county in Florida (where this study was conducted) reimbursed at 76% of the local market rate (Florida Office of Early Learning [FL-OEL], 2015). Because reimbursement rates are generally significantly lower than market value, the more subsidized children a program accepts, the lower their overall operating budget. As a result, even though the need is greater, the funds allocated to sustain high-quality programs serving children placed at risk are severely limited. According to the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER; Barnett, Friedman-Krauss, Weisenfeld, Horowitz, Kasmin, & Squires, 2017), Florida is ranked second highest in the nation for the number of children served in preschool programs but is ranked among the lowest in funding per child (40 out of 44 states providing programs) and in the number of NIEER quality standards met (three out of 10). The quality of services that these under-resourced programs can provide for young children are often simply not adequate to meet the vast needs of the communities they serve (Barnett et al., 2017). Though research overwhelmingly supports the idea that the public's best interest is served when all children—and particularly those who are most vulnerable—have access to high-quality, early education experiences (Barnett & Masse, 2007), many EC programs are so underfunded that creating a system in which these quality indicators are consistently in place across diverse communities and centers is a current impossibility (Schmit et al., 2013).

Within this inequitable system, administrators of EC programs are often considered to be the "gatekeepers" to quality (Bella & Bloom, 2003). Their approaches to leadership determine the climate in which the structural, process, and outcome indicators of quality are supported or undermined, sustained, or destabilized. Understanding the strategies successful administrators use to create and maintain high-quality services for diverse children despite systems-level limitations, is thus of critical importance. In this paper, we describe findings from a study designed to examine the leadership strategies of one center with a demonstrated record of providing high-quality programming for diverse children and families. Using an innovative photovoice methodology (e.g., Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Wang & Burris, 1997), in-depth, semi-structured interviews and participant-observation, the purpose of this project was to identify the leadership factors that contribute to the target center's successes despite significant systems-level obstacles. Specifically, we aimed to answer the following research questions: (a) What barriers do administrators face in implementing a high-quality program for a diverse population of children and families? (b) What supports are administrators able to leverage to help counter challenges? (c) How do administrators operationalize effective leadership within this setting?

Study Background: Quality and Access Problems across an Inequitable Early Childhood Landscape

Eligibility for free or reduced cost EC programs does not guarantee a family *access* to these programs; for example, there may be long waiting lists, or the locations of programs with openings may be prohibitive for families with limited transportation options. Moreover, gaining access to a program does not guarantee that it will be of high-quality (Marshall, Robeson, Tracy, Frye, & Roberts, 2013). For the purposes of this study, we framed the construct of "quality" in terms of structures, processes, and outcomes following research from

the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) that has shown that higher levels of caregiver training and lower child-to-adult ratios (structures) are associated with higher levels of interaction quality (processes), which in turn are associated with higher cognitive and social competence measures (outcomes) (NICHD, 2002). Though federally funded Head Start programs have been linked to these types of positive outcomes (e.g., Love et al., 2005; USDHHS-ACF, 2010), the majority of eligible children in the US are unable to enroll. Inadequate funding has limited access to 42% of eligible three- to five-year-olds (Mohan & Walker, 2016b) and less than four percent of eligible children birth to two (Mohan & Walker, 2016a). Thus, low-income families who are unable to acquire placements in Head Start are often forced to choose between low-quality childcare centers and informal arrangements with extended family, friends, or acquaintances (Henly & Lyons, 2000; NACCRRA, 2013). In 2014, federal attention on early childhood issues resulted in policy changes designed to increase access to Early Head Start (EHS) programs through funding for private childcare center and EHS partnerships (USDHHS-ACF, 2015). Additionally, the most recent reauthorization of the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) in November 2014 provided an unprecedented focus on quality in the form of increased regulations for background checks for staff, lower child-to-adult ratios, and a requirement for state-adopted early learning and developmental standards (NWLC, 2014). These are promising Obama-era trends designed to improve both quality and access; however, questions about the internal capacity of current programs to meet the higher requirements of these initiatives remain, and their overall impact on the quality-access problem is as yet, unknown.

To complicate matters, research suggests that the disparities seen in program quality are based largely on differences in quality of teaching (Barnett, 2004; Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002). Wide variability in state policies for teacher qualifications across service delivery settings have complicated the long-term sustainability of solutions (Wright, 2011), and teachers employed in private childcare centers (relative to publically-funded Head Start programs) have the lowest requirements of all (Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). Moreover, while teachers have the most proximal effect on children's experiences in EC programs, the work environments in which teachers learn and grow professionally are not uniformly high nationally (Whitebook & Ryan, 2013). As a result, there is often a critical mismatch between the preparation and support most practitioners receive and what is actually required for consistent, high-impact, high-quality classroom practices (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014).

While teachers have relatively little control over decisions that affect these workplace characteristics (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014), administrators of EC programs have been shown to play pivotal roles in the daily experiences of children, teachers, and in overall organizational development (e.g., Bella & Bloom, 2003; Harris et al., 2013). Though research specific to EC leadership is sparse (Muijs, Aubrey, Harris, & Briggs, 2004), a few key exceptions informed this project. First, studies suggest that the educational attainment, experience, and specialized training of EC administrators are salient predictors of overall program quality (e.g., Bloom, 1992; Bloom & Sheerer, 1992). Higher-level degrees for administrators have been linked to higher classroom quality (Helburn, 1995; Whitebook & Sakai, 2004), and higher-quality childcare programs tend to employ administrators with more formal EC training and more years of in-field work experience (Whitebook & Sakai, 2004). Second, characteristics of organizational climate have been closely linked to program quality (Bella & Bloom, 2003; Kagan, Kauerz, & Tarrant, 2007; Lower & Cassidy, 2007), as well as teacher/child interactions (Mill & Romano-White, 1999). For example, Mill and Romano-White (1999) found that organizational climate factors like job rewards, job concerns, and supervisor support were correlated to angry versus affectionate teaching behaviors. Collectively, this work suggests that administrators play an important role in teacher learning

and practice (Bella & Bloom, 2003), and teachers in turn play an important role in "gap-closing interactions" for children placed at risk (Pianta, 2011). In an attempt to build on this literature, this project was designed to use photovoice methods (Castleden & Garvin, 2008; Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Wang, 2006; Wang & Burris, 1997) to more closely examine EC administrators' leadership approaches in one target school that has created and sustained a high-quality program, despite suboptimal supports and resources.

Theoretical Framework and Researcher Positionalities

Research in an EC setting presented some specific challenges that informed our study design. Women working in subsidized childcare are often heavily monitored, but also under-supported and marginalized in the broader socio-political landscape in which they work (Ackerman, 2006). These challenges exacerbate power differentials already inherent in social science research (Clark, 2012). For women working in childcare settings, Wright (2011) notes that "the structure of the early childhood economy has also served to perpetuate gender, class, economic, and racial inequity upon women, specifically those who are non-White and belonging to low-income groups" (p. 250). Acknowledging these challenges, we attempted to work into our design, methods that would allow multiple voices to be heard and privileged. Koro-Ljungberg (2008) argued that qualitative research designs require consistency across epistemology, theoretical perspective, and method. For the purposes of this project, we utilized a constructionist epistemology (Crotty, 1998), a critical feminist theoretical perspective (Kortge, 2012), and integrated, qualitative visual and oral narrative methods of data collection and analysis (e.g., Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001) with peer debriefing and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to reduce power differentials between researchers and participants. We reject the notion of researcher as "The Great Liberator" (Foucault, 1980), and as a result, see the knowledge produced by this project as co-constructed through the interactions that occurred and the relationships that developed over the course of our work together as described below. Our findings thus, are products of the research relationship, of the researchers' critical feminist standpoints, and of Maria and Sophia's lived experiences.

Methods

Site Selection, Consent, and Establishing Rapport

In order to identify a subsidized childcare center that provided uniquely high-quality services to children placed at risk, we relied on purposive sampling (Flick, 2009). Our goal was to identify a center or centers that were exceptional in overall program quality and child outcomes, and yet were known to serve economically-, culturally-, linguistically-, and ability-diverse populations. After Institutional Review Board approval for the study was received from the University of Florida, Cheyney-Collante developed an initial selection protocol that was then vetted by three experts: two professors from a university familiar with the regional educational landscape and one official from a local agency that serves young children. Following expert feedback, Cheyney-Collante finalized the protocol and then approached a regional, early learning agency that oversees childcare subsidy disbursement, and elicited nominations. The protocol was sent to one staff member who oversees quality initiatives and one who oversees inclusion efforts. These agency representatives were advised to use the following selection criteria as described in the vetted protocol: (a) a passing "Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Readiness Rate" for the previous three years, which was based on acceptable child outcome data; (b) accreditation from a state Department of Education approved, national

accrediting agency; (c) a minimum of 25% of children on subsidy; (d) a local reputation for accepting children with special needs and for whom English is a second language. The agency representatives returned with only one nomination.

The executive director of the nominated site, referred to here by the pseudonym "Downtown Early Learning Center" (DELC), was approached with the opportunity to participate in the study. The offer was met with enthusiasm, and project planning and research design commenced, with the two program administrators (here referred to by pseudonyms of their choosing, Sophia and Maria) functioning as key informants. Cheyney-Collante began establishing rapport at DELC by first attending a faculty meeting in order to explain the project to teachers and to allow for questions. She also introduced an IRB-approved, tiered protocol of consent and photographic release forms, individualized to reflect multiple levels of participation. These included Informed Consent and Photographic Release forms for Sophia and Maria (who were the only staff participating in interviews), and Photographic Release forms for faculty and parents of children who might appear in images taken by Cheyney-Collante, Maria, or Sophia. The Photographic Release forms included a list of many possible uses of the images and allowed parents and faculty to check which uses would be permissible. All faculty members returned the photographic release forms, and all voluntarily chose to allow the use of their images at all levels.

After teachers were made aware of the study and had signed Photographic Release forms, Maria and Sophia spent a full week standing in the school hallways during arrival and dismissal times to distribute written information and to speak directly with families about the project. Cheyney-Collante also attended arrival and dismissal times on the Friday of that week to answer questions that arose. All families returned signed Photographic Release forms. No one declined the use of images for interviews, though two families declined to have images of their children published. None of their images are included in this manuscript or any other publications or presentations that have resulted from this work. Cheyney-Collante provided all of the images to Sophia digitally, and families were able to request copies of the images following the first public photographic and textual installation of findings.

Once the consent process was complete, Cheyney-Collante spent two weeks volunteering in classrooms and shadowing Maria and Sofia, establishing rapport with the DELC community. Because the focus of this time was to build relationships with stakeholders, no photographs were taken, and field notes were recorded only during breaks or after the day ended, allowing Cheyney-Collante to be fully engaged in school activities. This allowed the children, parents, and teachers to get to know her, to ask questions when needed, and to acclimate to a long-term visitor before the photovoice (Castleden & Garvin, 2008) portion of the study commenced.

Study Setting and Participants

At the time of the study, DELC was located in the Southeastern United States and had two physical sites which ran simultaneously—one serving children six weeks to three-year-olds, and the other children three to five years old. DELC was accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and served approximately 75 children.

Sophia, the executive director, had lived in DELC's town from the time she was a young girl, attended her community's public schools, and lived in the same house with her parents and siblings until adulthood. As a result, she sees herself as a member of the community she serves. Sophia holds a bachelor's degree in Family, Youth, and Consumer Science, with minors in Special Education and Business Administration, as well as a Director's Credential in her state; she has completed hundreds of hours of in-service training in EC content. Additionally,

she is a certified trainer for her state's preschool initiative and for a popular early childhood curriculum. Sophia's leadership style is premised on the beliefs that "every child deserves a high-quality early childhood program, that every child can learn, and that every child needs to be nurtured and loved."

Maria, the Assistant Director at DELC, was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico; a single mother raised Maria and her three siblings. Maria moved to the US in 2003 as a single mother herself. Despite a bachelor's degree, teacher certification, and many years of experience teaching elementary school in Puerto Rico, Maria had trouble navigating her new state's teacher certification system as an English language learner, and initially accepted a position working in childcare. She has remained in the field ever since. This history, she feels, enables her to connect with families at the center who also often struggle financially or with language barriers. Like Sophia, Maria has completed hundreds of hours of EC in-service training and holds a Director's Credential in her state. Not all of the programs for which she has worked in the past were as high-quality as DELC. She credits her transition into leadership to Sophia's expert guidance and support. In Maria's words, "I always knew I wanted to teach, but I did not know I had the ability to be an administrator until Sophia pushed me to believe in myself."

All of the staff that Maria and Sophia oversee identified as women and most had children of their own. They came from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and held a wide variety of credentials. Of DELC's 19 staff members (including Maria and Sophia), all had completed the state mandated 45 hours of EC in-service training. Two teachers held a high school diploma or GED, four a National Child Development Associate credential, one a two-year degree, five a four-year degree, and two a master's degree. Of the eight women with college degrees, seven were in EC or contained a related specialization in EC.

Teachers at DELC were paid an average hourly rate of $10.75, thus slightly exceeding the Actual Mean Hourly Wage of childcare staff reported by the U.S. Department of Labor of $10.33 (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014). However, unlike national trends, teachers were generally fulltime, permanent employees, with two weeks paid vacation time, one week of personal time off, and 13 paid holidays. Teachers were also paid for staff meetings and planning time. Teachers were provided with 30 hours of free, on-site, school-wide, in-service training annually in curriculum/content, pedagogy, and classroom management and behavioral supports. Completion of these in-service hours was often incentivized with a $0.30/hour raise. Teachers were also required to complete or stay current with state regulations for training and to participate in pilot intervention and training programs through their local early learning agency. DELC fundraised to pay for staff to attend state and national conferences. Moreover, as a NAEYC accredited program, they consistently maintained small group size and child:adult ratios that exceeded minimal state licensing requirements (3:1 for infants; 4:1 for toddlers; 6:1 for 2-year-olds; and 8:1 for 3- and 4-year-olds). Two of the 19 staff members at DELC were "floaters": permanent, credentialed staff members who provided direct support in classrooms or functioned as a substitute when needed.

Data Collection

After the initial weeks of rapport building, Cheyney-Collante began the first round of photographic and narrative data collection. Participant observation (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999), in which Cheyney-Collante spent over 100 hours at the school (December 2012 through April 2013) keeping a detailed field journal to record daily observations while participating in school activities and interacting with the teachers and children, informed photovoice and interview procedures (Rose, 2007; Wang, 2006). Photovoice and interview cycles unfolded as follows: (a) Maria and Sophia met with Cheyney-Collante to discuss the focus of the photo-taking assignments; (b) photo-taking commenced; (c) individual interviews

were conducted with selected photos used as prompts; (d) participants and researcher met again to discuss emerging themes and formative analysis, the next photographic assignment was agreed upon and the cycle began again.

At the first participant/researcher meeting, which was scheduled after the rapport building phase ended, Cheyney-Collante, discussed with Maria and Sophia their perceptions of their leadership at the school. Both administrators identified their leadership in supporting teachers' language and literacy interactions with children as *the* core strength of the school; as a result, language and literacy interactions became the focus of the first round of photo collection. We kept the assignment purposefully open-ended without an operational definition of "language and literacy interactions" so that Maria and Sophia's ideas about what constituted this topic could emerge organically. Using language and literacy interactions as an initial prompt, Cheyney-Collante also began taking photographs. At the outset, children were enamored with the cameras, and the older children often asked to look at the view-finder to see themselves. However, most of the children lost interest in the camera after the first two weeks.

Cheyney-Collante archived all digital images and created files for each photographer (Pink, 2001). When Maria and Sophia agreed the process was complete and the first prompt had been saturated (meaning they did not feel additional images were necessary to convey the topic), each photographer then identified several exemplar photographs (generally five to10) to bring to individual interviews. An exemplar photograph was defined as one that "exemplified, contradicted, or further illuminated the photographic prompt," (language and literacy interactions in the first prompt).

Collections of images (Cheyney-Collante's, Maria's, and Sophia's) then played a critical role in semi-structured, open-ended, individual, administrator interviews. Specifically, images were used for photo-elicitation (Rose, 2007; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2011), or as entry points for beginning interview conversations. Here we use the term "photo-elicitation" in a manner consistent with Harper's (1998) idea that images serve a collaborative means and not strictly as tools to draw out or evoke information. Cheyney-Collante encouraged participants to talk about exemplars in an open-ended way using their own terms. This process allowed Maria and Sophia to identify subjects that were meaningful to them rather than beginning interviews with a list of questions that had been defined *a-priori*. In some instances, they chose to talk about their own photographs and in others they chose to talk about images taken by Cheyney-Collante (Pink, 2001). The goal was to allow participants to determine the course of the interviews and align our protocols with the inherent participant focus of photovoice methodology (Castleden & Garvin, 2008; Gubrium & Harper, 2013).

After individual interviews were complete, Cheyney-Collante transcribed the interview audio recordings and created transcripts that included embedded images used during the interviews. This made it possible to analyze particular photographs as organic complements to the transcript texts, rather than as separate pieces of data. Cheyney-Collante conducted individual readings of these first transcripts in order to identify emerging themes that could be addressed in subsequent data collection rounds. During these first readings, Cheyney-Collante also reviewed her field notes, and referenced pertinent passages from the field notes in the margins of the transcripts. Cheyney-Collante then convened a group meeting with Maria and Sophia to member-check her formative analysis. Through these consensus conversations, we collectively decided how to focus the next round of photograph collection. In the second round, we followed the same procedures, but chose to focus on "vulnerable children." Again, we left this open-ended to allow for individual interpretation.

The team did a total of two data collection rounds following these procedures. The final data set from both rounds (with the two prompts "language and literacy interactions" and "vulnerable children") consisted of over five hours of interviews, 4,338 photographs (479 taken by Maria and Sophia), and researcher field notes from participant-observation and meetings.

In addition, the photographs later formed a pool of artifacts from which we co-created a photographic and textual installation communicating the research findings. A montage of the photographic installation is available as an online supplement.

Data Analysis and Co-Creation of the Photographic Installation

In order to operationalize the relational nature of the administrators' transcripts and the researcher's critical feminist lens, we used Gilligan et al.'s "Listening Guide" (2003) as the foundation for our analyses of the photograph-embedded and field note-annotated interview transcripts. According to Gillian and colleagues (2003), the Listening Guide joins "feminist researchers, cultural psychologists, and psychological anthropologists in their concerns about the ways in which a person's voice can be overridden by the researcher and their cautions about voicing over the truth of another" (p. 158). Moreover, member checking and peer debriefing strategies (described throughout the following section) are embedded in the Listening Guide protocols, as methods for increasing the trustworthiness of findings, but also for democratizing voice (i.e., Lather, 2004).

Cheyney-Collante invited a second researcher and anthropologist (Cheyney[1]) with expertise in feminist critical theory, qualitative and ethnographic methods, photovoice methodology, and an outsider's perspective, to participate in the coding of de-identified transcripts (Lather, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Cheyney never engaged at the school and had no vested interest in the program, and the hope was that her readings would provide an additional lens. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) peer debriefing "is a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). This aspect of the methodology aligned well with our intention for open theory building and a skeptical approach to common sense and appearances critical to feminist and poststructural research (Lather, 2004, p. 209).

Gilligan et al.'s (2003) Listening Guide requires four stages of "listenings" (i.e., readings) of interview transcripts. Researchers typically color code transcripts, adding layers of understanding with each listening. "The need for a series of listenings arises from the assumption that the psyche, like the voice, is contrapuntal (not monotone) so that simultaneous voices are co-occurring" (Gilligan et al., 2003, p. 159). Each listening is intended to mine a new layer of understanding.

Step one, called Listening for Plot, involves reading the entire transcript, listening for the participant's (in this case Maria or Sophia's) "plot" or story, and memo-ing the researcher's own subjectivities (Cheyney-Collante and Cheyney) (Gilligan et al., 2003). This step allows researchers to identify what is happening, when, where, with whom, and why. Simultaneously, the researchers explicitly include their own responses to the narrative through memos recorded in the margins so that these subjectivities can be identified and explored purposefully throughout the analysis.

Cheyney-Collante completed each "listening" as a complete reading, from the beginning of the transcript to the end. She completed the Listening for Plot step for each transcript immediately after she conducted and transcribed each interview. The second researcher, Cheyney, completed Step One (and all other steps) at the end of data collection, after all interviews had been conducted, transcribed, and de-identified. Cheyney used a clean set of transcribed interviews in order to facilitate the outsider's perspective.

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[1] Cheyney and Cheyney-Collante are sisters. Dr. Cheyney had been providing informal advising throughout the project, and was thus, sufficiently familiar with the project to join as co-researcher during the data analysis phase.

We recorded initial memos in the left margins of the transcripts and included direct observations ("S. was smiling throughout this part of the interview."); subjective memories about the interviews ("M. seemed excited to talk about this photo; voice more animated."); reflections ("It surprised me that M. brought up this topic so early in the interview. Hadn't expected her to be comfortable enough to talk about this so soon."); questions for the next interview ("Where did the books come from?"); observations about the images we were discussing ("Books all over the place."); and notes that could later direct the coding ("Good example of S.'s style of leadership.").

During step two, listening for "I Poems," the researchers read the transcripts again, listening for first person passages that are key to understanding the participant's perceptions (Gilligan et al., 2003). The researcher underlines any first-person "I" along with verbs and select modifiers needed for meaning. Maintaining the sequence, the researcher then creates an "I Poem." The purpose of this step is to encourage the researchers to pay close attention to the interviewee's first-person voice and the ways they view themselves in relation to the stories they are telling, for example, as a supporter of teachers or champion of children, in our case. This step is critical to relational methods of inquiry, in that it presses the researchers to listen to the participant before talking about or interpreting them, strategies common to critical feminist researchers who intend reciprocity and a more egalitarian approach to representing participants' voices (Lather, 2004, p. 209).

Cheyney-Collante completed the listenings for step two immediately after completing step one, blocking out passages in yellow that might be useful for I Poems, then experimented with the prose in the back of her field journal. For example, the following passage later became the I Poem included below:

> I'm the handles all. All standards have to be met. NAEYC, DCF, ECERS. I have to make sure all is right. A lot falls to me in the classroom, especially if S. is doing payroll or at a [subsidy agency] meeting or something. I just can let you know that I love my job. But sometimes honestly, I want to run away (laughing). But I come back. I love what I do. And I try to do it the best. I try every day to give the best of me, um, with the kids, with the parents and my teachers. So.

To Give the Best of Me
Maria on being a director at DELC…

> I'm the one that handles all
> I love
> But… sometimes
> I want to run away
>
> But I come back
> I love
> I try
> I try everyday
> To give the best of me

The process of listening for I Poems enabled us to "see" the participants' positionalities. We found it difficult to identify passages for I Poems in Sophia's transcripts because she very rarely used the first person. She spoke more often using "you" and "we" collective terminology. When we talked with her about this during the analysis phase she commented, "Yes, I guess I

have to think about everyone else instead of myself. The buck stops with me." More examples of I Poems are included in the Results section below.

In step three, Listening for Contrapuntal Voices, the researchers specify distinct "voices" that emerge in the transcripts (Gilligan et al., 2003). The term "voice" can be thought of as the participant's inner language, but also includes the participant's unique standpoint or expressed experience as it relates to the research question/s. The term "contrapuntal," borrowed from the discipline of music, connotes the idea that more than one voice (or in music, more than one melodic line) can be sounded simultaneously. In the Listening Guide, voices are identified through the first three readings, and then operationally defined. With these definitions as a guide, the researcher re-reads the full transcript once per voice. For example, one of the voices we identified was operationally defined as *agency* or the internal sense of personal responsibility for a particular action; the ability to affect change or influence an outcome; a disposition of "I am going to …" or "I did …."

Operational definitions were initially created by Cheyney-Collante and were then returned to Cheyney for peer debriefing and then to Maria and Sophia for member checking and further revision (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition to the voice of *agency*, we also identified and operationally defined the voice of *interdependency* and *advocacy*. Again, each voice was given its own reading, start to finish of the entire collection of interviews.

Step four, Composing a Synthesis, occurs when the researcher uses all of the analyses from steps one through three to synthesize or bring together multiple readings and voices with the goal of identifying key emergent themes that help to answer the research questions within the larger socio-political structures that affect the participants' experiences (Gilligan et al., 2003). Again, this step furthered our critical feminist intent to create meaning that is connected to broader social structures and powers (Lather, 2004, p. 209). We used this step in the analysis to return to the original research questions and to the larger EC landscape from which they emerged. As we synthesized our findings from each of the first three steps, we discussed points of overlap and difference explicitly. This enabled us to see the ways our positionalities contributed to what we saw and what we missed in our readings.

A key aspect to this stage in analysis was the triangulation of data (Flick, 2009). We undertook most of this stage sitting together (Cheyney-Collante, Maria, and Sophia) and using large sheets of chart paper and removable tape to organize: (a) photos; (b) field notes; (c) transcript excerpts with Cheyney-Collante proposing draft organizations that were then modified through member checking and peer debriefing. The image in Figure 1, illustrates this process. Each montage reflects one of our initial research questions; these process artifacts were often used in presentations of our results at community events.

Figure 1.
Step four of data analysis

Photo courtesy of K. Cheyney-Collante

Step five, which we termed Collaborative Visual Voice, was added because this research project was conducted using photovoice procedures (Castleden & Garvin, 2008; Gubrium & Harper, 2013), and included visual data that we wanted to share with communities (Pink, 2001). During this phase, we reviewed the extant photo archive for images that either exemplified, contradicted, or further illuminated our findings, and relying on larger school community input, created a photographic installation to convey the key study findings. Maria and Sophia worked with Cheyney-Collante and Cheyney very closely during this phase. We held both planned and impromptu meetings over the course of five weeks, moving back and forth among photographs, transcripts, and field notes. During this final step, the analysis charts pictured above (see Figure 1) functioned as blue prints for our collaborative installation planning (Figure 2).

Figure 2.
Process from collaborative blue prints to the photographic installation

Photos courtesy of C. Cummings

Results

This project was designed to examine barriers and supports to effective EC leadership within a program serving an economically-, culturally-, linguistically-, and ability- diverse population of young children. We aimed to identify, from the perspective of school administrators: (a) the barriers administrators face in implementing a high-quality program for diverse children and families; (b) the supports they leverage to help compensate for challenges; (c) the approaches they employ in order to effectively operationalize early literacy leadership. From our analyses we created three corresponding sets of themes: (a) work plagued by systemic

barriers, an "educational caste system," and resource scarcity; (b) overcoming challenges by leveraging the internal supports of agency, interdependence, and advocacy; (c) operationalizing leadership through a "25 Books a Day" guiding philosophy and a climate of professional support. Together, these themes explain how teachers in one successful, subsidized childcare program sustain a high-quality program against a backdrop of chronic resource scarcity.

Theme One: Systemic Barriers—Negotiating Educational Caste and Resource Scarcity

Through our analysis we identified several systems-level barriers encountered at DELC that threaten school administrators' abilities to ensure that all children enrolled have access to the types of early experiences they need. We examine these here through two, key subthemes: an educational caste system and chronic resource scarcity. These emerged as administrators reflected on the challenges of leadership within their context, as well as in their own, more personal, professional trajectory narratives. Maria and Sophia's low position in the educational hierarchy—what we came to refer to as an "educational caste system" (described below) during our interviews—was exacerbated because it was embedded within a system, where limited resource availability and heavy time and emotional demands prevailed.

Educational caste. In one interview, Maria explained how her inability to navigate the K-12 teacher certification system put her on a very different vocational path, one that required a significant demotion in pay, as well as status. Despite a bachelor's degree in-field and 16 years of teaching in Puerto Rico, Maria experienced the US teacher certification system as "insurmountable," particularly given that she was not yet secure in her grasp of English when she first arrived. Because of the challenges involved in the certification process, Maria took work in childcare, a position she described as "the lowest rung" on the educational ladder—in lieu of more lucrative and socially valued work in the public schools. She taught in a few other centers before coming to DELC, acquiring some additional training for credentialing in her state during that time. Maria described feeling secure learning English while on the job because these childcare centers employed other Latina women.

Maria's career shift not only forced her to take a lower-wage job than her credentials should have afforded her, but also forced a re-evaluation of her own value and role in teaching younger children in a childcare setting. "The second week I was working, I resigned." She explained: "I'm a teacher, I'm not a 'caregiver.' I'm not a babysitter … I said, I can work with the 4s and 3s, but I don't think I can do the 2 ½ [year olds]." Maria's struggles mirror the larger hierarchical landscape of her world, in which caregiving is seen as "babysitting" and an inferior skill to "teaching."

Maria's navigation of this situation is layered. Early in her career change, as the above response reflects, she had internalized components of an educational hierarchy in which childcare workers are the lowest in rank (Ackerman, 2006). Her narratives also reflect a deep sense of inferiority—an embodiment of a "less than" status relative to the work she was qualified to do in Puerto Rico. Looking at how each administrator described, in separate interviews, an event in which Maria attempted to resign, further elucidates this dynamic. Sophia did not accept this "less than" caste: "I believed in [Maria's] ability, and I believed in her strengths, so I wanted her to believe in herself. That took a lot of encouragement." Sophia positioned herself as Maria's advocate, encouraged her strengths, mentored her into new skills where needed, and critically, gave her opportunities for advancement by rethinking and re-languaging the value of their work. According to Sophia,

> Many people do not think of teaching in the early childhood field as a profession. It devalues the incredible work, dedication, and commitment teachers need in order to ensure a high-quality educational experience for young

children. Typically, society values people who earn the most money. This profession's earnings are inadequate for the responsibility. Teachers make a long-term commitment to this field because they value it. I want my teachers to be treated with respect and understand how valuable they are to the community. Any high-quality early childhood program is only as good as their teachers, and the directors who must lead and support them.

Conversely, Maria's early I Poem, "I Don't' Regret," reveals a struggle against her own socialization into this caste system and the support she needed in order to stay at DELC— a choice that would lead her to eventually see herself differently.

I Don't Regret:
Maria on coming to work at DELC

> I told Sophia. *I'm leaving.*
> I cannot
> I'm not okay
> I can't
> I just know
> I
> I
> I remember
> We started… training
> I was like okay
> I can
> I can do this
> I
> I
> I decided to stay
>
> It made me think…
> *Something that she sees in me.*
> Sometimes you don't
>
> You don't
> Sometimes you don't… See yourself.
> You don't see the good things that you do
> You don't see it
> But others see it in you
> I think about it
> I pray
> I said I'm going to stay
> I
> I
> I've grown
> I don't regret it

Practitioners' (Maria and Sophia, as well as their teachers) acknowledgement and ongoing navigation of this hierarchal system was also evident during participant-observation at the school and in their choices of photographs used in the installation (see Figure 3). For example,

when the DELC teachers were given the opportunity to participate in this project, they were quick to express support. One indicated that she wanted the public to know what she and her colleagues "really do," that they "are teachers and not babysitters."

Figure 3.
Photographic Installation, April 2013

Photo courtesy of Maria

Further, Maria and Sophia's rejection of this caste system was evidenced in the primary goal they defined for the project and the installation—to situate their work as a profession and to deconstruct the popular notion of childcare practitioners as babysitters. Throughout the process of planning the installation of results, Maria and Sophia often marveled at how the photographs would be received by fellow early childhood practitioners, but also parents, scholars, and a general public that does not often acknowledge the skill required in their work. The image in Figure 2 depicts Sofia talking with an early childhood scholar at the first installation.

Figure 4.
Sofia and an early childhood scholar at the Installation

Photo courtesy of K. Cheyney-Collante

Resource scarcity. Even while Maria, Sophia, and their teachers, navigate a world that does not hold their professional efforts in high esteem, they must continue the daily work for children within a system characterized by constant resource scarcity. A clear example of this emerged in relationship to leveraging services for children with special needs.

The process for accessing external assistance in DELC's county begins when the school that has enrolled a child exhibiting possible signs of developmental delays contacts the local early learning agency. The agency sends a representative to the school to observe the child in the classroom. That representative then offers advice on how the teacher can best address the child's needs. If the representative determines further testing is needed, s/he contacts the appropriate outside agency, such as a local health and human services agency. Parents must give consent for each step. From Maria and Sophia's vantage, this time frame is prohibitive. Maria stated: "It takes such a long time, and it is just so difficult for us and the child during the waiting. By the time you get the services, the child is already in another stage." As a result, they see these "services" as barriers, not supports.

In DELC's county, there is one agency representative on inclusion serving over 800 teachers. Compounding these constraints, teachers employed by childcare centers are usually non-degreed, and often have no formal training in special education (e.g., Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2009). Though Maria indicated that her teachers could benefit from additional training in how to work with children with special needs, she also noted that these types of trainings were rarely offered. Moreover, these same teachers are expected to simultaneously provide purposeful, research-based language and literacy experiences for the class, with little formal training or outside support in effective literacy practices. Early literacy was a specific concern for Maria and Sophia because of state accountability assessments that are heavily weighted in this domain of development. From Maria and Sophia's perspectives, supports are simply not adequate to overcome the barriers. In the face of these challenges, how do they proceed?

Theme Two: Internal Supports and Mechanisms of Resilience–Agency, Interdependence, and Advocacy

During interviews, Maria and Sophia identified some external supports, including services from outside agencies like the state diagnostic and learning resource system, local early learning coalitions, and outreach programs offered by nearby, post-secondary institutions. However, both described these supports as minimal and time prohibitive. Because all subsidized centers in DELC's county have access to these supports yet are unable to sustain the types of positive outcomes documented at DELC, we attempted to identify additional forms of support that could be helping to set them apart. Analyses revealed that where external supports are lacking, Maria and Sophia have adapted by leveraging internal supports. That is, they have marshaled their own "internal protective factors" (Gilligan, 1977) or personal characteristics that promote resilience.

These internal protective factors were clarified during the third step of analysis using Gilligan's listening guide; three "voices" (i.e., internal discourses) emerged, those of the voices of agency, interdependence, and advocacy. We have operationalized these voices as three sub-themes: (a) *Agency*: The internal sense of personal responsibility for a particular action; the ability to affect change or influence an outcome; a disposition of "I am going to …" or "I did …"; (b) *Interdependency*: The pervasive sense that, "we are all in this together. What I do for myself, I also do for you"; (c) *Advocacy*: A participant's desire to use her own personal power to support others (administrators, teachers, parents, and children). These three voices/sub-themes help to illuminate the ways administrators marshal their personal attributes to bolster staff resiliency in the face of systemic barriers.

Voices of agency. One of the most compelling examples of agency is revealed in the way Maria describes her dual roles as single mother and administrator: "Since 2003 when I moved here, I've been a single mom with two kids without any child support, without any help." As a result, at the outset she was forced to juggle learning a new job while also learning a new culture and a new language. "I was very afraid … I was overwhelmed." Rather than allowing this to stop her, Maria threw herself into developing new skills. "I just wanted to learn and learn and learn and be responsible. And so every training that would come up, I was there."

Similarly, it was Sophia's agency that produced early success at DELC. "The first year was really hard. There were months that I didn't get paid. There was just no money." Like Maria, the challenges did not stop her. "So I just kept pushing along … I wrote a lot of grants." The results were increased enrollment, the opening of a new site, and NAEYC accreditation within three years. Sophia said: "I was here all the time. And there was no way out." Both women pushed forward to create an excellent program despite what it cost them. One of Maria's I Poems offers further insight.

To Give the Best of Me
Maria on being a director at DELC…

> I'm the one that handles all
> I love
> But… sometimes
>   I want to run away
>
> But I come back
> I love
> I try
> I try everyday
> To give the best of me

Maria's experience as an administrator provides a clear example of agency in action; though the work is so hard that she sometimes wants to run away, she recognizes that the success or failure of the program hinges on her willingness to show up, to stay, and to bring her best self every day.

Voices of interdependence. Throughout the transcripts, voices of interdependence were expressed in terms of connections between various stakeholders (administrators, teachers, parents, children). The connection between Maria and Sophia is compelling. From both women's perspectives, there was an instant bond between them. In Sophia's words,

> We made a connection because of the way we each taught. You just sometimes find someone that you feel is part of your soul, and she's a big huge part of mine. I always say that we have to surround ourselves with people that we really connect to, so I like to surround myself with strong women because I aspire to be a strong woman. So I needed her. I needed her not only to teach, but to be an administrator because I saw strengths in her that I wanted to achieve for myself. It was important for me that she stay with our program because there were huge benefits for the children and the families, but there was also a huge benefit for me personally because I could see that I could grow with her.

While this level of interdependence may seem antithetical to the agency described in the first subtheme, the contrapuntal nature (Gilligan et al., 2003) of these discourses is critical to

understanding their approach. Their interdependence interacts with their sense of personal agency in significant ways. Maria and Sophia push forward in their individual spheres, moment by moment, only to return to each other for support, encouragement, guidance, and renewal. Far from the "Loan Ranger" sentiment often undergirding heroic, stand-out, and stand-alone teachers in high-poverty contexts (e.g., Weiner, 2000), Maria and Sophia learn from each other and encourage one another—creating a form of sisterhood in which they can rely on each other's strengths.

Voices of advocacy. Maria and Sophia have created a school climate for which the discourses of agency and interdependency fuel a collective and cyclical advocacy for stakeholders. For example, Maria began her experience with DELC as a teacher, but was quickly advanced into an administrative position because Sophia saw promise in her. Maria's interviews revealed that she, in turn, viewed her teachers in a similar way—as women she needed to support if they too were to be successful. Here, interdependency is part of a larger tapestry of advocacy for teachers. During our conversations about retaining her best staff members, Maria frequently returned to this theme. After viewing photographs of one of her teachers effectively consoling an upset child (see Figure 5, Maria said: "That's one of her things. She [the teacher] is very good when kids, not only like for example, this little girl was hurt, but also when they are having a fit or something … Some teachers cannot deal with it, but because she can, [the teacher] comes to the rescue. We feel like we are a family, so we don't even have to ask. We just go and help."

Figure 5.
Teacher effectively consoling a child

Photo courtesy of K. Cheyney-Collante

This description is very similar to the way Maria and Sophia portrayed their own orientations towards their teachers and their willingness to "jump in." Maria described a conversation with a new teacher this way: "I say, … I'm just here to help. Any time you need my help, you just call me. If you have to scream in the hallway because I'm in the office, just call me, I'll be here to help." This pattern of advocacy is cyclical and mutually reinforcing. Administrators send the explicit message: I've got your back. Teachers, in turn, support one another by "coming to each other's rescue" during stressful encounters. As in the case of the photograph of a teacher consoling a child (see Figure 5), teachers in turn, come to the rescue of children. Children thrive. Maria and Sophia's efforts are reinforced, and the cycle continues.

An additional example emerged from interview narratives (the verbal accounts of connected events or stories that emerged in interviews as Maria and Sophia talked about their photographs) where agency and interdependence were discussed as fueling advocacy for

children with special needs. Sophia's transcripts reflect an orientation towards inclusiveness that is not typical in childcare systems, where families of children with special needs experience particular difficulty in gaining access to high-quality programs. Although it is illegal for childcare programs, which are private businesses, to discriminate against children with disabilities, they are legally free to expel children whose needs exceed what they feel their staff and facilities can provide. Here the voices of agency and advocacy are intertwined. Sophia describes her philosophy this way: "My program takes every child. We take every child if we have space. We have special needs kids, we have ESL [for whom English is a Second Language] kids. We have children who come from very, very difficult foster care situations and Partnership for Strong Families, protective services kids." More than just access, Maria and Sophia advocate for high-quality experiences. Maria explains that teachers meet about struggling students to devise action plans. "In the staff meeting, we talk about the kids … if we have some problem with one of them, because we are a team, we talk about a kid all together." If one teacher has found an effective strategy, she shares it with the others.

Moreover, advocacy is not limited to special populations at DELC. Rather, the focus is on inclusiveness and fostering the interdependency of *all* through connected relationships. In Sophia's words, "If you have a kid who comes in and he's tired all the time, or there's hunger or whatever, that's where you start, because no matter how much I teach you about the letter 'T' if I can't get you to trust me, there's no learning going on. So you have to get that nurturing across, that I care about you, I love you, I'm going to help you, we're going to get through this together." Furthermore, her narratives showed an uncommon grace towards families whose work schedules require long hours of care, a particular challenge for the working-poor (NWLC, 2015). Sophia explained: "Parents can go,'Whew, I don't have to worry about them thinking 'I'm not a good mother' … It doesn't matter. When you're with us, we take care of you."

Rather than using their leadership position to control or manage others, Maria and Sophia "come alongside others and guide." Together, findings from participant-observation, photographs, and interview narratives, illustrate how the DELC school climate of agency and interdependence fuel a collective advocacy, contributing to atypically good outcomes.

Theme Three: Operationalizing Early Literacy Leadership—"25 Books a Day and Professional Support

Maria and Sophia have created and sustained a high-quality program by marshaling internal protective factors to help mitigate the challenges of working at the lowest rung of an educational caste system. For every push against them, they push back with equal or greater force. This "push back" is precise, strategic, and all-encompassing in the sense that it influences everything else occurring in the classroom. What does this "push back" look like specifically? They argue that ongoing effective literacy teaching and learning involves a resolute commitment to research-based language and literacy "interactions" within the context of "whole child development." During our interviews we chose to use the term "literacy events" (Street & Martin-Jones, 2000) to refer to these activities. "Literacy events" are a form of *social practice* or layered interpersonal interaction that occurs between teacher and child as opposed to a pedagogical strategy that may simply be employed by a teacher and experienced autonomously by a child. According to administrators, DELC is effective in addressing literacy development because of ubiquitous teacher-child interactions around books and stories (a "25 Books a Day" goal), and a pervasive, institutional culture of professional support for teachers to meet these high expectations.

"25 Books a Day." In our first interview, Sophia explained that her goal for her teachers was that they read 25 books a day. **"**The goal isn't to say okay, you're going to sit here and I'm going to read my 25 books and then (*laughing*) we're going to go do something else.

The goal is that you can engage. Children can be involved in different activities and you can have children, two or three, you can have a whole group, you can take some books on the playground, you can take some books on the stroller ride, anywhere you go, you can do books." Sophia's "25 Books a Day" guiding philosophy does not mean that all student-teacher interactions include an actual book in hand; informal verbal storytelling, storytelling with finger puppets, storied songs and rhymes are all common as well. However, this strategy is explicit; teachers are expected to make literacy events ubiquitous. When teachers think they have done "enough" for the day, Sophia encourages them: "Do more. There's always time for another story." Critically, Maria and Sophia support this high expectation with ongoing, in-class mentoring and an environment filled with books.

Observations at both campuses affirmed not only that this goal is explicit, but that it is regularly achieved. Literacy events were among the most common activities photographed, and thus these activities formed the bulk of the photographic and textual installation created at the end of the project. During the installation, visiting researchers and teachers commonly asked: "Is this hyperbole? Does it just mean "read as many books as possible"? This strategy is not hyperbolic; it is precise, expected, and achievable because it is supported from the top down. This combination of literacy saturation through high expectations and simultaneous support is also the primary explanation Maria and Sophia use to account for their atypically high outcomes on kindergarten readiness assessments. Sophia explained: "I grew up with books everywhere. I loved books and still do. I purchased most of these books at the center myself, from garage sales, from library sales, online. I got parents and the community to donate books. I figured if we had books all over, children would come to love them too." Sophia's I Poem further elucidates her approach to literacy leadership:

Tell Me That Story Again:
Sophia on her "25 Books a Day" Goal

> I love books.
> I read
> I watch
> I play
> I
> I saturate
> I inundate
> I say: My books are my friends.
> I read
> I cuddle
> I laugh
> I read
> I
> I say: Tell me that story again, sweet boy.
> I play
> I watch
> I listen
> I say: Stories are life.
> I listen
> I sing
> My teachers read
> My teachers play
> My teachers watch

I listen
I say: You think it's enough? Read more.

Ongoing participant-observation and photovoice procedures allowed us to see how "25 Books a Day" translates into strategic practice. For example, "Mrs. Wishy Washy Day" (the day where Maria dresses up as this children's literature character), proved to be a microcosm of the larger strategies and dispositions at play in the literacy environments Maria and Sophia have created. A review of the photographs taken during this event further refined our initial observations of the day (see Figure 6).

Figure 6.
Mrs. Wishy Washy Day at DELC

Photos courtesy of K. Cheyney-Collante

First, Maria and Sophia work as a team. Sophia, though the executive director, was not only there for the activity, but she held the book for Maria and acted as a helper despite their ranks. They had clearly done this together many times; in the photographic series above, Sophia can be seen mouthing the words Maria is saying. Though teachers could have performed the read aloud alone, this was Miss Maria and Miss Sophia's chance to "jump in" to the literacy event directly, allowing teachers to enjoy the experience alongside the children. Second, children appeared to be thoroughly engaged. The photographs captured our sense that there were no passive observers amongst the children and teachers. This literacy event, enacted using research-based shared storybook reading strategies (Justice & Kaderavek, 2002), stands in stark contrast to the "worksheet oriented practices" Maria describes pushing back against her previous employment at other centers. Third, this literacy event provided a model for teachers. Later in the day, we observed a teacher conducting a shared storybook reading with her own class. The teacher represented in Figure 6 performed a similarly interactive reading, mirroring the same research-based literacy strategies.

Culture of professional support. We have argued that the "25 Books a Day" goal is funneled through a pervasive culture of professional support. But what does this support look like precisely? Sophia is often the leader of onsite workshops for Maria and her teachers. Both of the women describe multiple ways that they mentor teachers directly. For example, Maria explains that a teacher had begun teaching the literacy component of the curriculum alongside Maria, as her assistant: "I see her doing things that I used to do … that come from the times we

were teaching together. Not only was I helping, I feel like I was a mentor for her too, because she is doing a lot. And she's doing so great. I see amazing things going on in that classroom."

According to Sophia, teachers are regarded with esteem and therefore given autonomy; however, they are also supported moment-to-moment, and provided assistance without judgment when they need it. This approach towards teachers is mirrored in teachers' approaches towards children. Again, these attitudes are cyclical and mutually reinforcing. Maria and Sophia support their staff in the same way they expect teachers to support children. Participant-observation and visual data reinforce this. Every photograph taken during the project was captured candidly. Photo archives contain 4,338 photographs, the preponderance of which are images of teachers engaged with children in literacy events: back-and-forth discussion, stories with and without books, finger plays, singing. Sophia described it this way: "The truth is, if you can make … a connection with them [children], an emotional connection, then they're going to be more interested in taking risks for learning. Sometimes, there are kids that I feel like, 'Oh, my goodness, I don't know if we'll ever do it' … And then they turn the corner and the very next day you've got some kind of connection." How does this translate into literacy practices? Sophia continues: "Literacy is important. It's very important … And it's all over the place. It's on the playground, it's everywhere." Sophia means this literally, as the photos capture. In Figure 7, a teacher shares a story in the hallway as children take turns in the restroom. In Figure 8 another teacher reads a picture book by bell hooks to infants after naptime. No moment is wasted.

Figure 7.
A teacher sharing a story while children take turns in the restroom

Photo courtesy of K. Cheyney-Collante

Figure 8.
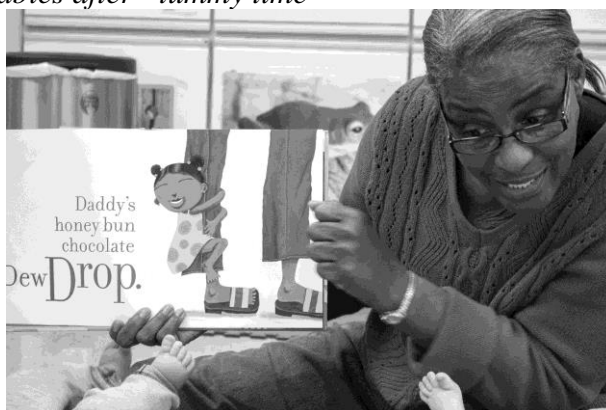*A teacher reading to babies after "tummy time"*

Photo courtesy of Sophia

DELC implements a developmentally appropriate, research-based literacy curriculum embedded within a developmentally appropriate, research-based curriculum framework. The teachers are supported through extensive classroom mentoring, a positive cultural climate, and low teacher: child ratios. All of these components are best practices supported in early childhood educational research. What distinguishes DELC is that they not only have knowledge of these best practices, but they enact them routinely through high expectations *in conjunction with* high levels of teacher support. Maria and Sophia lead with a fierce commitment, making sure each child has the opportunity to be engaged in high-impact literacy events throughout the day—consistently, routinely, every day. Critically, this is not an unsupported mandate. Administrators support literacy by supporting teachers.

Discussion

This project aimed to identify and examine the factors that contribute to one EC program's success in serving an economically-, culturally-, linguistically-, and ability- diverse population of young children. Specifically, we set out to investigate (a) the barriers administrators face in implementing high-quality programs for a diverse population of children and families; (b) the supports administrators' leverage to help compensate for challenges; (c) the approaches Sophia and Maria employ in order to operationalize early literacy leadership within their setting. Textual and photographic analyses revealed three corresponding sets of themes. First, Maria and Sophia see themselves as embedded within a larger system of barriers characterized by low positionality within an educational caste system that is marked by pervasive resource scarcity. Second, with external supports marginal at best, Maria and Sophia leverage multiple internal supports and resources, including agency, interdependence, and advocacy, to help overcome the many barriers they face. This produces a professional climate where DELC's teachers strive to give their best despite the daily struggles and low pay. Thirdly, Maria and Sophia have operationalized literacy leadership by building and sustaining a climate of professional support for teachers within a "25 Books a Day" guiding philosophy. In reflecting on these findings, we are struck by how DELC's treatment of teachers stands in stark contrast to the current tenor of schooling, which emphasizes teacher accountability (e.g., Goertz, 2005) over teacher learning and school-level characteristics that buttress teachers' internal capacity for growth (e.g., Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Hochberg & Desimone, 2010). Working closely in this setting provided the opportunity to observe and experience the ways the cultural politics of school readiness unfold in real time in the understudied setting of a subsidized childcare center. But what, more broadly, are the implications of DELC's case for the systems-wide reform of early childhood education in the United States? What do Maria and Sophia have to teach us about teaching and learning in these contexts?

First, this work illustrates the critical need to overturn the educational caste system as Maria and Sofia's experiences reflect long-standing and highly gendered issues in early care and education. Fifteen years ago, Carlton and Winsler (1999), in a call for a paradigm shift in school readiness discourses, highlighted not only the need for skilled early childhood educators in every classroom, but went on to write, "If preschool and kindergarten teachers are viewed as being only slightly above baby-sitters (Fromberg, 1997), it will remain very difficult to attract quality teachers into the field" (p. 349). As Wright (2011) asserts, nowhere is this more apparent than with the women of childcare and in particular, women of color. From the point of view of the administrators of DELC, it feels as though they are invisible contributors to an impersonal and often ineffective system, their work underpaid and undervalued. Although Maria and Sophia have found ways within the school setting to overcome their perceived low standing in the larger educational community, serious questions remain about the sustainability

of their efforts in the absence of greater recognition of teachers' efforts and needs. Even though our nation's childcare system came into being as a result of women flooding the workforce as part of the 1940s war efforts (MacKenzie, 2011), labeling the care and education of young children as "women's work" has also served to systematically disenfranchise female practitioners employed in this critical profession (Wright, 2011). In fact, according to Wright (2011), "present educational funding structures are perhaps the greatest threat to greater educational equity and achievement" (p. 254). In other words, gender itself has contributed to the undervaluing of early education as a profession. Ryan and Whitebook's (2012) recent call to action is particularly relevant: "Informed by scientific evidence and promising practices, it is time to craft a 2020 ECE Workforce vision that dismantles more than a century of assumptions about the value and skill of working with and on behalf of young children." We would add to this, a call to dismantle assumptions specifically about the value and skill of women working on behalf of young children.

In order for Ryan and Whitebook's (2012) call to be realized, we also see a need for more democratic research designs reinforced by a commitment to methodologies that allow multiple voices to be heard, as well as explicit power sharing with practitioners so that we, as researchers, do not unwittingly reinforce the educational caste system described by Maria and Sophia.

In this case, investing considerable time involving participants in the research process not only increased the validity of our findings, but also set the stage for Maria and Sophia to have a voice in the dissemination of results. The photographic installation served as a platform for the empowerment of school administrators, teachers, and families. We fashioned the last wall of the installation as a grid of 42 large-scale prints of DELC teachers engaged in language interactions with children, aiming to confound the viewer by the visual magnitude of a wall of images depicting, not "babysitters," but highly skilled professionals. Teachers were also able to see themselves in a different light, while we, the research team, came to view the installation as a form of behavior-specific praise of teachers' best practices. The installation provided a compelling medium through which Maria and Sophia were able to reinforce the types of literacy events they wanted to reward and nurture in teachers.

Maria and Sophia described the research experience as both powerful and empowering, and as such photovoice (e.g., Castleden & Garvin, 2008; Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004), as a democratizing methodological innovation that holds promise within the larger arena of educational research. Our experience suggests that this and other participant-oriented, visual methods can provide a critical avenue for future research that is simultaneously rigorous, democratic in its treatment of participants, and effective in bridging the research/policy divide. Moreover, interventions that plan for participants' involvement and the leveling of power relationships may lead to increased social validity and maintenance of new teacher behaviors. Where teachers see an effective practice as unfeasible, we need to work together to find ways to make it feasible. This can only be done if we are willing to see our research subjects as authorities, and in the case of childcare, for the professional teachers they are or can become.

Second, our findings suggest a critical need to create and sustain work environments for teachers that support their own learning, effectiveness, resiliency, and longevity in the work. Given the broad range of challenges faced by teachers and administrators like those at DELC, professional development (PD) will likely be more effective when focused not only on best practices, but also on building individual protective factors that include agency, interdependence, and advocacy. Indeed, Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, and Knoche (2009) suggest that PD for early childhood educators should address pertinent knowledge, skills, and dispositions, and also the maintenance of "high-quality professional practices by enhancing *systems* and *individuals* to engage in activities that are *self-sustaining and growth producing*"

(emphasis added, p. 380). Among the process variables reviewed, Sheridan and colleagues (2009) include within-person variables, between-person variables, and contextual and systemic variables. Stand-alone PD is not enough.

As a field, we understand that children need certain types of environments in order to learn. We have developed and researched ways to structure environments for children, as well as how to measure the quality of these environments. However, this study reminds us that teachers are learners too, and that in settings like subsidized childcare centers, where no larger infrastructure is in place to buttress reform, additional teacher supports and mentoring are needed. Just as Sophia mentored Maria, encouraging her to stay and supporting her to grow into an effective administrator, so Maria and Sophia strive to mentor their teachers, who then mentor children and parents (Cheyney-Collante & Jones, 2016). Maria and Sophia marshaled their own agency, created a sense of interdependency by relying on each other, and furthermore channeled these sources of resiliency into advocacy for children, families, and teachers. The personal attributes that contributed to their success with children were not created or sustained in a vacuum, but rather within the context of a work environment that supported teachers and leaders in their learning.

Third, this work suggests a need to reprioritize subsidized childcare centers, providing both the material resources and teacher supports needed to immerse children in early language and literacy. Maria and Sophia's "25 Books a Day" approach should be replicable in other centers given a few critical caveats. DELC was saturated with books—literally, hundreds of books—books that are currently unlikely to be available in low-income centers or in surrounding low-income communities (e.g., Neuman & Celano, 2001). This problem can be traced back to the funding and oversight inequities detailed in our introductory section. In the absence of public funding for adequate libraries at subsidized preschools, some communities have found ways to mitigate the problem of limited access to high-quality reading materials. Maria and Sofia worked with local libraries to check out large quantities of books at predictable times each month. They also wrote grants to local businesses and frequented rummage sales and thrift shops searching for high-quality books. In a previous study comparing book access for low-, middle-, and high- income school communities in DELC's county, researchers found that the poorest neighborhoods actually had the highest-level access to public library recourses due to a purposeful and extensive outreach program (Lane et al., 2013).

However, Maria and Sophia did more than simply supply the books. They mentored teachers in how to use books along with other language interactions throughout the day. In the 1990s, Susan Neuman (1999) flooded preschool classrooms situated in low-income childcare centers with books at the rate of five books per child. They also provided classroom furniture and materials for teachers to create reading areas, along with 10 hours of free, in-service training. This intervention produced statistically significant gains in literacy skills within the treatment group of 400 children. Our study both adds to and reinforces these findings; PD alongside targeted classroom mentoring (even if that mentoring comes directly from school administrators), may produce sustainable improvements in teacher-child language and literacy interactions. Providing more and better books to subsidized child centers is an important step. Providing high-quality PD along with these books is even better. This aspect of Maria and Sophia's leadership—their commitment to find a way to provide books to teachers, as well as their thoughtful, expert implementation of evidence-based practices—stands in stark contrast to the low esteem afforded them and other women working in this segment of the educational workforce.

While the methodology for this study allowed for "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of an understudied context, it is not without limitations. The main limitation, as we see it, is actually one of the Achilles heels of participant-oriented qualitative work—that is, the tendency, as relationships develop throughout the research process, for participants'

shortcomings to become less visible. Childhood and early education are necessarily messy, and those who persist in this work have good days and bad. We acknowledge our tendency to idealize the women of DELC. In practice, the approaches espoused in interviews were not always held to and participants were less likely to photograph those times. Yet, even leaving space for human failing and the gap that may exist between the real and the ideal in specific moments, we would argue that the strategies for overcoming barriers and inequities described above and which plague many underfunded childcare centers, do not actually have to function perfectly to be effective. Second, we acknowledge that what we see, often determines what we miss in qualitative work. We dealt with this limitation by including the school administrators in the study as co-researchers, by employing extensive memo writing of researcher's subjectivities during data analysis, and by relying on embedding, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking throughout the research process. An extensive listening guide was also utilized to help maximize our abilities to see beyond our own assumptions and individual lenses. Our reading of DELC and its staff's successes are one possible interpretation well-supported by the evidence.

The utility of research with small numbers of participants is not in studying the universality of experience, nor in simply viewing the universe "in a teacup" (Geertz, 1973, p. 22), but rather to understand the local particulars (Emerson, 2009) and the experiences of key players *in situ* (Purcell-Gates, 2004). Our findings are critical, not for purposes of vast generalization, but to "…document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place, hoping that the audience will see themselves reflected in it" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 14). The presumed audience for this exploration of DELC are those interested in the lives of young children, who through no fault of their own, find themselves vulnerable and in need of our attention and action. Therefore, in our interpretation of these data, we attempted to bring together our results into a meaningful whole, to "tell a story" (Purcell-Gates, 2004)—Sophia and Maria's story.

Though Maria and Sophia see their work as embedded within a system marked by pervasive resource scarcity, heavy time and emotional demands, and low respect from the larger educational community, they have managed to create and maintain a vibrant school community where the children who most need early intervention have a place. Their common commitment to a "when you're with us, you're family" motto, shapes Maria and Sofia daily as they endeavor to support each other and their teachers in high-quality, ubiquitous literacy events and a "25 Books a Day" guiding philosophy. Findings from this study, when examined through the lens of the larger body of work on school readiness, indicate a critical need to (a) overturn the educational caste system in both research and practice, and redress the resource scarcity that plagues its lowest rungs; (b) create and sustain work environments for teachers premised on agency, interdependency, and advocacy that support learning, effectiveness, resiliency, and longevity in the work; (c) reprioritize subsidized childcare centers, providing both the material resources and teacher supports needed to immerse children in rich early language and literacy experiences. By re-focusing the lens on every day people—the women behind the numbers of early childhood research—the need to re-enfranchise teachers and include them in all levels of discourse becomes clear. Findings from the DELC study may help us to map a course around and through the limitations of our current system.

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