"Why Can't You Just Honor The Professional I Am?": California Preschool Teachers' Meaning-Making and Resistance Across Policy Contexts

Micah Card

Abstract

This paper contends that qualitative research of early educators' lived experiences is one conceptual and methodological step toward bridging early childhood education and care (ECEC) values, social and political-economic systems of power, and the daily practice of living alongside young children. Early educators are the least compensated and most marginalized teacher workforce in the U.S., tasked with sustaining the ECEC system without being afforded a certain future within it. Theorizing policy as processual and situated in the neoliberal political-economy of ECEC, this paper draws from life history interviews of six California teachers working in differently-funded preschool programs. Across policy contexts, teachers emphasized a sense of fidelity to developmental and social-constructivist principles, making them resistant to standardization and putting them at critical odds with teacher-directed, rote, or deficit-based approaches to education, which they framed as a norm of traditional schooling. This common purpose undergirded teachers' meaning-making and resistance to political and organizational encroachments on their working conditions and professional autonomy. These educators' agentic, values-based, and tenacious experiences across policy contexts have important implications for ECEC research regarding teachers' lives within the field and the futures they seek to create and protect for the children in their care.

Keywords:

early childhood education, education policy, preschool, early childhood workforce

Introduction

As the global community faces increasingly dire, frequent, and interconnected crises, we have much to be inspired by, learn from, and draw hope from early childhood education and care (ECEC) values. The lived experiences of the workforce offer important insights for navigating the future from the heart of the field. What motivates them, how they navigate challenges in practice, and how they make contextual decisions as professionals are critical, yet overlooked facets of what it means to *do* early childhood education and care. This paper contends that qualitative research of early educators' lived experiences is one conceptual and methodological step toward bridging ECEC values, social and political-economic systems, and the daily practice of living alongside young children.

For decades, researchers and policymakers have pointed to ECEC investment as a driver for longer-term "human capital" development in the U.S. (Heckman, 2008; Moss, 2019). These high-profile policy arguments have also increased calls for standardization of ECEC curriculum (Peters et al., 2025) and the "professionalization" of the workforce (Nagasawa & Swadener, 2020). Yet workforce precarity has often been a feature of the ECEC market, rather than a bug of the ECEC system, as low wages and poor working conditions have long subsidized the cost of provision (Boyd,

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2013; Lloyd et al., 2022). Increased requirements for degrees, certifications, and ongoing professional development have failed to yield substantive or equitable increases in the well-being of early educators, economically or otherwise, and early childhood educators remain the lowest-paid teachers in the nation (McLean et al., 2024). Especially in publicly-funded programs, ECEC labor has been intensified by neoliberal economic imperatives and attempts to standardize practices and environments (Bullough et al., 2014; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). From research to policy, it is critical to learn from the lives of the early educators, the workforce that sustains the ECEC system without being afforded a certain future within it.

This paper offers a nuanced point of entry through which to bring early educators' experiences to the fore of a future based not only on what we face but also on what we want for our children, and as an ECEC community of practice, research, and policymaking. The research detailed here employed life history interviews of preschool teachers in differently-funded California preschool programs conducted in 2021 and 2022, representative of the state's fragmented ECEC market and policy context, for 1) gaining insights into early educators' priorities and motivations, and 2) examining their lived experiences in relation to the social and political contexts of California's ECEC system. As such, this study was guided by research questions that addressed teachers' motivations to enter and remain in the field and their conceptualizations of the purpose, focus, and practice of ECEC work.

Situated in their personal experiences and professional contexts, each teacher described their work as rooted in and motivated by philosophical and pedagogical values unique to early childhood education. Across contexts, teachers emphasized a sense of fidelity to developmental and constructivist principles, making them resistant to standardization and putting them at critical odds with organizational constraints on their professional autonomy. As both a motivation and a mission, the ECEC values these teachers describe are important insights for understanding the foundation of the field as they have experienced it, the joyful world they seek to co-create, *and to protect* going forward.

Early Childhood Education Provision, Ideology, & Workforce

ECEC Provision in the U.S. and California

Often conceptualized in general terms as a professional "field," early childhood education and care encompasses a range of policies, research areas, programs, and practices for caring for and educating young children. Overall, U.S. investment in ECEC includes direct-to-program vouchers, parent tax credits, and some wholly public programs such as Head Start and public pre-K programs (McLean et al., 2024). Depending on the funding source, ECEC programs are often subject to different licensing or accreditation requirements, including teacher qualifications, child-teacher ratios, curricular and pedagogical foci, and space and equipment specifications (Doocy et al., 2021).

Provision of early care and education in the state of California operates via a "mixed-delivery system" that includes private child care centers and multiple public programs and services. Public and mixed-funded ECEC services include child care subsidies, the California State Preschool Program, federally funded Head Start, special education, and Transitional Kindergarten (TK) for four-year-

olds in public schools. The demand and cost of child care in the state, however, are unmet by these options. A report by the California Budget and Policy Center reports that “In 2022, only one in nine of California’s children eligible for child care actually received services” (Pryor, 2024). In the 2019-202 fiscal year, 22% of three-year-olds and 46% of four-year-olds were enrolled in public ECE programs, including state preschool, Head Start, and special education services, with the rest of these children enrolled in no or other child care arrangements (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2021).

Improving access is one motivating force behind California’s recent universal pre-kindergarten (UPK) initiative, primarily based on the expansion of transitional kindergarten in public elementary schools. According to the California Master Plan for Early Learning and Care (Alcalá et al., 2020), all four-year-olds should be eligible for public TK by 2026. To staff TK with a goal child-to-adult ratio of 10:1, the state is also developing a PK-3 Early Childhood Education Specialist Credential requiring a BA, additional coursework, and student teaching in public schools.

Neoliberal Political Economy of ECEC Provision

“Program” is a blanket term that encompasses these differently structured early childhood settings, ranging from family child care homes, center-based programs/preschools, and public programs such as Head Start and state pre-kindergarten. The range of varying and disconnected programs in the U.S. reflects the disparate purposes that ECEC serves. Policy and provision are informed by political-economic and ideological goals ranging from parental workforce participation, children's social-emotional and physical development, academic skill building, and "readiness” for public school. Funding for early childhood programming likewise reflects these goals and shapes the concrete realities of the field. Often, policy rhetoric frames investment in early education (either by parents or the state) as an investment in future life outcomes (wages, health). These investments are thought to save public money over time through potential effects including crime reduction, increased GDP, and less reliance on social welfare programs (National Academies of Sciences, 2018; Heckman, 2008).

Critical scholars of ECEC have outlined how neoliberal political-economic conditions shape the character of the field (Arndt et al., 2018; Moss, 2019; Vandenbroeck et al., 2017; Bloch, 1991). Broadly speaking, education has long been viewed as a primary engine for developing “human capital” for the benefit of both individuals and larger economies. However, the human capital function of institutional education, particularly K-12 schooling, has been contested for as long as it has been uplifted and thus constantly negotiated within the context of other social and political aims, particularly democratic equality and the formation of democratic subjects (Labaree, 1997). Moss (2019) describes the primary ideological split in early childhood education between what he calls *democratic experimentalism* (a Dewey-inflected understanding of early childhood as a time for active learning to understand oneself as part of a collective) and increasing policy emphasis on outcomes and human capital development for younger and younger age groups. Importantly, scholars have noted an increase in the regularity and urgency with which international policymakers have applied human capital theory principles and goals to discourses around early childhood since the 1990s and early 2000s (White, 2004; Vandenbroeck et al., 2017) in ways that may tip this precarious balance

between democratic practice and economic rationality in the field (Moss, 2019). Crucially, this trend toward outcome-based policymaking increasingly rationalizes the use of efficiency models in the provision and assessment of ECEC provision, infusing the data-centric neoliberal accountability logics into the field globally (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). The ripple effects of this policy discourse have caused an intensification of early educators' work in the U.S. through the use of standardized assessment tools and requirements, especially in publicly-funded programs (Bullough et al., 2014).

The ECEC Workforce

The early childhood workforce is the most racially diverse, most feminized, and least-paid of all educators in the United States. The workforce is more diverse than the overall population of the U.S., with 92% - 95% being women-identified and 40% of color (Lloyd et al., 2022). In 2022, the median hourly wage for all ECEC professionals in the U.S. was $13.07, $13.74 for preschool teachers, which paled in comparison to the $31.80 median hourly wage paid to elementary teachers (McLean et al., 2024). In 2022, California preschool teachers were paid a median hourly wage of $17.66/hour compared to the $41.03 median hourly wage paid to elementary and middle school teachers (McLean et al., 2024).

Preschool teachers are at the bottom of the overall hierarchy of professional teachers (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008). While early educators see themselves as professionals doing complex, important work requiring the specialized knowledge and skills of child development (Boyd, 2013; Arndt et al., 2021), the prestige of their teaching role has, in fact, declined since the rise of professionalization rhetoric in the 1970s and 80s (Ingersoll & Collins, 2018). Research on ECEC professional identity and conceptions of preschool teachers’ work has demonstrated the complex relationships between ECEC policy, political rhetoric, child development, and pedagogical research on the lived experience of ECECs (Maskit & Firstater, 2016; Kilderry et al., 2017).

Osgood (2009) argues that early educators become objectified through their positioning in national and governmental discourse and that “this process of discursive positioning leaves little space for challenge or critique of the nature of the exigent reforms that appear foisted upon the workforce” (p. 736). At this post-pandemic moment of national attention, the discourse around early childhood education and care is more fraught than ever, with implications for how policymakers and economic stakeholders might steer the fragmented industry and with subsequent effects on its workforce. This paper helps address the lack of socio-political research on the lives, work, and motivations of U.S. early educators.

Conceptual Framework

This qualitative study engages sociocultural theories that understand educational purposes, markets, and policy as socially constructed, processual, and negotiated by social actors (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Castagno & McCarty, 2018; Sutton & Levinson, 2001). Policies are regulations and laws enacted at the national, state, and local levels. These include the operation of early childhood programs and require the action of social actors within them, including at the level of classroom interaction. Preschool teachers are one such group who interpret and implement ECEC policy.

How practice unfolds is contextual, political, and *personal.* U.S. ECEC functions both as an overburdened pillar of the nation's economic structure *and* a relational site of continual, contested meaning-making. Despite insufficient support, early childhood educators are tasked with the reconciliation of these competing realities. However, Castagno & McCarty (2018) argue that education policy, even as it is embedded in the interests of the state, is not merely handed down to practitioners but is negotiated and remade in daily practice.

These processes of agentic engagement, negotiation, and resistance are likewise informed by teachers' life experiences and contextual ways of understanding the world. Goodson & Sikes (2001) argue for the use of life history research to examine social phenomena in and across contexts. Participants' life narratives help explain the influence and nuances of larger social and political contexts. As Goodson & Sikes argue,

A single life story stands alone, and it would be dangerous to generalize on the ground of that one alone...But several life stories *taken from the same set of sociostructural relations* support each other and make up, all together, a strong body of evidence" (2001, p. 24, italics in the original).

Life history-based methods, then, are one methodological entry point into the social processes of ECEC policy as they inform, are interpreted, and are negotiated through the practice of early educators. Further, this nuanced vision of policy and practice can help generate new directions for research and policy based on the lived experiences of practitioners.

Methods

Context and Research Questions

This study employed life history interviews of six teachers working in differently-funded preschool programs, conducted in 2021 and 2022. This time represented a period of transition for ECEC provision following the COVID-19 lockdowns, which had caused significant disruption to the field of ECEC, and at the beginning stages of the state's Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) policy implementation. Although COVID and UPK were not the focus of the study, these events provide important background context regarding the changing policy terrain of ECEC in California.

Centered on the professional motivations of preschool teachers across policy contexts, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What motivates preschool teachers' entrance into the field?
2. What keeps them in the field?
3. How do these teachers conceptualize their work?
4. How do teacher conceptions vary, or not, across the different program models?

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Two participants were selected from each of three common ECEC funding structures: public, mixed-funding, and wholly private tuition-based programs, reflecting the convoluted mixed-delivery childcare system in the U.S. Network and snowball sampling were conducted (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Given my own positionality as a former California Early Childhood Mentor Teacher, I distributed a forwardable call for participants first to my own

early childhood contacts, then to professional networks via social media. Recruitment messages were distributed further by participants. Interested individuals anywhere in the state were invited to fill out a questionnaire asking demographic questions, the type of program where employed, years of experience, and their level of comfort sharing life-history narratives and personal experiences.

In order to compare the life histories and professional experiences of teachers with the same job title across market funding mechanisms, selection criteria included teachers working with children ages 2.5-5 in center or school-based preschool programs, in particular, given the state's dependence on center-based child care and plans for public pre-k expansion.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participant	Gender Identity (as described)	Race/Ethnicity (as described)	Time in ECEC	Time in Current Program	Current Program Funding Structure
Jayla	Female	Black	4 years	6 months	Private
Valerie	Female	White	5 years	1 year	Private
Andrea	Female	White	3 years	3 years	Public
Lane	Female	White	16 years	5 years	Public
Nazanin	Female	Persian	4.5 years	6 months	Mixed
Joanna	Female	White	15	5.5 months	Mixed

Beyond funding structure, the selected teachers' workplaces also differed within these categories, representative of the variability that exists in the U.S. ECEC market. Operating hours, population served, and specifics regarding curriculum and its implementation are summarized in Table 2, below.

Table 2. Participating preschool teachers' current program specifics

Participant	Current Program Funding Model	Hours of Operation	Enrollment Specifics	Philosophy / Curriculum
Jayla	Private: market-rate tuition-based	¾ day	Local affluent community	Montessori
Valerie	Private: Market-rate tuition-based	Full-day	Local affluent community	Reggio Emilia-Inspired
Andrea	Public: district-funded	Half-day	Special education program housed in a general-ed school site	"Creative Curriculum"
Lane	Public: district-funded	¾ day	Transitional kindergarten	Reggio Emilia-Inspired & State TK standards
Nazanin	Mixed: Market-rate and state-subsidized tuition options	Half- and full-day options	A private-operated program operated under a public school district	Play-Based Outdoor classroom
Joanna	Mixed: Market-rate tuition and some scholarships	Full-day	Privately-operated lab school for a two-year college, priority enrollment for city residents	Reggio Emilia-Inspired

Each program also differed in minimum teacher educational requirements (see Table 3). Programs with specialized curricula, like Jayla and Valerie's, voluntarily require them to have special credentials that may or may not be recognized by programs receiving public funds. Although all center-based early childhood educators in the state of California must have at least 12 units of early childhood education, there is currently no single standardized ECEC credential that allows a teacher to work in all of

the programs represented in this study. Public school teachers are required to hold a state teaching credential in addition to a special education authorization and early childhood units, respectively. Private programs with specialized curricula may require them to have special credentials that aren't necessarily recognized by programs receiving public funds. Overall, the educational and experiential backgrounds of each teacher differed as widely as their program context. Even those teachers with degrees related to early childhood differed slightly in the focus of their degree program (See Table 3).

Table 3. Participant education

Participant	Current Program	Education
Jayla	Private Program	BA in Dance + Montessori Credential
Valerie	Private Program	Some College + assortment of ECEC units
Andrea	Public	BA in Liberal Studies + SPED MA + Early Childhood Authorization + National Board Certification
Lane	Public	BA in Early Childhood Education & Child and Family Studies + MA in Reading
Nazanin	Mixed-Funding	BA in Early Childhood Studies
Joanna	Mixed-Funding	BA in Child & Family Studies, concentration in Applied Child Development

Data Collection and Analysis

One 90-100 minute life history interview was conducted with each participant (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Cole & Knowles, 2001). Life history research inquires into the life trajectories of participants in order to situate the personal into the socio-historical and draw connections between and beyond individual experiences (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). The methodological goal is not to collect linear timelines of teachers' lives, but rather nuanced narratives about how formative experiences and personal interests are experienced in context and shape teachers' perceptions within the field.

The same protocol was used for each interview, with questions organized into resonant themes that could allow enough conversational flexibility for participants to tell their stories in a way that felt natural to them. These themes included participants' current work setting, familial and educational backgrounds, their introduction to the field of ECEC, experiences with young children, professional trajectory, experiences of work and working in ECEC settings, and experiences of alignment or misalignment with program goals or outsider perspectives.

Life history themes allowed for nuanced analysis of interwoven personal and professional contexts of the teachers' lives, work, motivations, and perceptions, all of which inform the field of early childhood education overall (Cole & Knowles, 2001). In addition to iterative analytic memos, coding was undertaken in three rounds: 1) Eclectic coding during transcription, followed by analytic memoing to examine emergent themes; 2) top-down thematic coding of interview data using the codes developed in the first round and research questions; and 3) theoretical coding of

participant experiences across and within policy contexts (Saldaña, 2013).

Findings

Contextualized through life history interviews, the data presented here illuminate lived experiences and material conditions that thread together the "patchwork" field of ECEC in California. As one participant, Joanna, reflected, "I don't know if anyone will ever truly understand what it feels like to be a preschool teacher if they haven't been in the field." Although there were, of course, differences in the teachers' personal experiences and professional contexts, they shared remarkably similar perceptions of what it means to be a preschool teacher, the particularities of their work, and the affordances and constraints of their marginalized role within the education system.

Despite wide variation in training and background (see tables 1-3 in section above), these teachers: 1) are critically committed to and motivated by set of ECEC values, shared through practice, that supersedes program or school-specific objectives, 2) see their work as un-standardizable and uniquely complex, and 3) their shared ECEC values likewise create tension with and inspire resistance to organizational and political encroachments on their autonomy as, specifically, early childhood professionals. The following explores these findings through teachers' descriptions of active, agentic meaning-making, resistant decision-making, and policy negotiation through shared pedagogical and relational values.

Committed to and Motivated by Shared ECEC Values

Despite wide variation in training, experiences, and employment history, the teachers in this study shared a common way of conceptualizing and describing their work. They described their thinking and practice as rooted in principles of progressive social-constructivism, through active and relational learning, developmentally appropriate practice, and advocacy for the particular needs and rights of young children. Further, the teachers made career decisions based on where and how they could best apply these principles with fidelity to their training and in the interest of their ongoing professional development.

In describing their work, the teachers often referred to the philosophical influences they'd encountered throughout their careers, synthesizing, contrasting, and integrating these frameworks into their assessments of children's needs and pedagogical responses. They each elected to work in programs with an active-learning framework, some explicit and others de facto. Five of the six teachers specifically referred to the Reggio Emilia approach as a source of inspiration for curating the classroom environment and supporting child-directed playful inquiry.

Although her current program is not officially "Reggio-inspired," Nazanin was introduced to the approach at her university's ECEC lab school. As Nazanin explained, "I learned that sometimes the most simple way to present something is the best way...You can use your environment, and I feel like that's part of the Reggio philosophy, too – to use your environment and your world to create curriculum." Nazanin draws from and leverages her training to bolster her professional identity, seeing herself as a professional who creates rather than implements curriculum.

Joanna, new to the Reggio-Emilia-inspired lab school where she works, explained what she appreciates most about the approach:

> …the curriculum is child-led. So we don't open the book on day one and say, "OK, this week we're learning about the letter A. We are going to eat apples and cut out airplanes, and practice saying the letter A." We take time to get to know the children and get to know what they're interested in. We watch them play and see what grabs their attention… And they grow into these big projects that last an entire year or two. And so it is a really meaningful process, and they're learning so much within that experience that gives them a lot more than the cookie-cutter method can.

Co-constructive and socially-emotionally-focused teaching of foundational concepts resonated across teachers' descriptions of their work. As TK teacher Lane described:

> [My approach is about] modeling the purpose of learning and the way that it's shared. And that learning is a way to connect with people. It's not about, you know, 'learn your ABCs.' The reason we want to learn our ABCs is that it's a tool for connection. And so my responsibility, I believe, is that kids feel independent so they can connect.

This conceptualization of social "responsibility" in teaching was threaded into teachers' descriptions of their complex and intentional daily routines. "Everything is designed for them in the environment," said Jayla. "Everything," as conceptualized by these teachers, is not limited to child-size furniture or the placement of supplies. Rather, the teachers argued that every interaction, child and adult alike, should reflect developmental principles and foster relationships.

Andrea mentors other adults to engage in active reflection and refinement of their practice through recorded video and discussion. "I need you to pause before you help," she repeated, recounting the particulars of how she coaches her aids to take an asset-based approach for children along a wide spectrum of abilities in the SPED classroom. She described working with and pedagogically advocating for a child in her class who is visually impaired and uses a wheelchair.

> He has trays for all of his things. If you pause and say, "Hands up!" and just barely touch his skin with the tray, he will lift his hands. He has that, and everyone always picks up things for him. He can do it! Even at that level. Like, give them the opportunity. Be intentional in those moments.

Here, Andrea illustrates critical thinking about where, when, and how to follow the child. She further described the nuances of following the child while also managing curricular goals:

> There's a difference between the students' interests taking you elsewhere, and so you follow the student, versus you not understanding the objective that you set for yourself. And if maybe you wrote the objective wrong, that's fine. But just be intentional with the students and where they are developmentally.

By integrating the language of "objectives" into what is an essentially relational task, Andrea illustrates how she maintains the reflexive aspect of her work materially and

socially while also negotiating the norms of her public school context. Like Lane, Andrea views the intellectual challenge of pedagogical flexibility as her responsibility to the unique children in her care.

Reflexivity toward children, informed by critical constructivist principles, was both a point of pedagogical resistance and a key motivator for these teachers' career decisions. Across contexts, each teacher reported that they intentionally sought workplaces where they could best align their practice to these principles and grow as educators.

Having spent most of her career working in other states where, in her view, ECEC was primarily perceived as non-educational care, Joanna envisioned her move to California as a chance to learn more about progressive approaches. “I knew that I wanted to kind of flip the script from the very traditional sense of teaching preschool to a more child-led,” Joanna explained, emphasizing, “You hear about California schools and that they are ahead of the curve and things like that, so I kind of wanted to see what the education system was out here. Like, let me just shift my views.”

Changing schools as a means of professional development, “shifting views,” as Joanna put it, and fulfillment was a resonant theme for many of the teachers. Public teacher Andrea cited passion for developmentally appropriate practice as her main motivator for leaving elementary general education for preschool special education. “The early childhood department in our district only focuses on what's developmentally appropriate," Andrea continued, "They're extremely passionate about inclusion – in the positive. It doesn't translate for all teachers, but their core values match my core values.” With this statement of critical distinction, wherein her core values don’t “translate for all teachers,” Andrea exemplifies how the teachers in this study viewed their work — child-centered *and* at critical odds with traditional conceptions of school.

ECEC Work as Complex, Unstandardizable, and Critically Distinct

The teachers largely felt the same intangible qualities that enriched their practice were overlooked or misunderstood by those outside the field. Emphasizing their role as advocates for children and the field, the teachers sought to differentiate and elevate their tenets of ECEC compared to what they experienced or perceived in traditional K-12 schooling. As Valerie put it, “The work that I'm doing is above and beyond most people's imagination.”

Teachers’ descriptions of pedagogical priorities were often described in contrast to what they perceived as overly academic and developmentally inappropriate practices. “I think that the saddest thing you can see in a preschool is a worksheet,” asserted Lane, “We've worked really hard to build these protocols for inquiry, and build these protocols for play, so that the learning can become organic,” said public school teacher Lane, “So the goal is to allow the experiences to happen naturally.” More “natural” learning in this case referred to the progressive ECE tenets the teachers shared, including a more curatorial approach to the learning environment with emphasis on foundational social-emotional skills and play-based inquiry.

Conversely, teachers were critical of what they identified as “adult-centered” teaching practices, approaches based on rote memorization, uniformity of outcomes, and

standardization of learning. Echoing Andreas's sentiments related to children's competence, Montessori teacher Jayla voiced her resistance to simplified curricula in no uncertain terms,

> I think it's ridiculous when teachers are like, "And what color is the snow?" You know who the f**k cares? It's white. We don't care. Why do they need to? It's such a dumb question. You know, "Let's make hearts and tape them to the shapes." Why? "So they know what a heart is." Who cares about making hearts?

Jayla advocated for an alternative approach predicated on the competencies of young children as social agents:

> It's like, what do they want to make? What are they interested in? How can we help them find they have some agency? And we still have our objectives. I understand the goal is to help children read and write, and learn math. Like, I'm not oblivious to that. They do need to learn those three skills… But they're intelligent people, you know, very capable, and very competent when we meet them on that plane.

Jayla's reflections highlight the precarious balance of priorities the teachers described negotiating across their different program contexts – juggling standardized objectives versus facilitating meaningful classroom experiences. However, the teachers also described how carefully they worked to tailor curricula to the needs and interests of each child and how difficult it can be to weave these into the overall structures of a school. "The hard tension," Lane continued, "is how do you monitor that every kid gets everything every day? And the truth is they don't and they shouldn't."

Crucially, the teachers strove to resolve this tension by focusing on what matters most to them, seeing children as full people with knowledge and perspectives of their own. This humanizing orientation toward children allowed the teachers to see their work as reciprocally meaningful. "It's like everything I can give, I can get tenfold," said Lane. "We always talk about how kids need to be seen, but kids also can see us in a way that most adults can't. And so I think that the relationships with kids is what keeps me [in the field]." It is worth noting, however, that being kept in the field is not the same as being sustained.

Acknowledgment of and Resistance to the Lack of Support for ECEC

While the framework the teachers shared for quality early childhood practice guided and motivated the teachers, these same guiding principles put them at odds with the available resources and expectations of their schools. All the teachers felt unsupported in their work – underestimated by outside adults and policymakers, unsupported in their programs, and underpaid for the quality and effort of their work. When asked what she wished others knew about her work, Nazanin replied, "I'm not just sitting there playing with their kids."

Every teacher valued play as a conduit for meaningful learning, if not *the* conduit for it, and they also expressed a desire for their role as facilitators and enablers of that learning context to be taken seriously. While Nazanin expressed her frustration with this underestimation by putting distance between her work and an unserious image of play, Joanna described

feeling at a loss: "How do I verbalize what I believe about young children, what I know about young children, and then how I bring that into a 40-hour workweek career?"

As much as these teachers sought out workplaces where they could support young children according to their ECE values, they also desired places that reflected *their own* worth. As Joanna continued,

Part of what drew me to [my current lab school program] is their mission to elevate the field of early childhood education...because... a lot of people don't believe in it. And I think that does become draining for teachers, too.

Reflecting on the simultaneous demands of their program expectations, policy requirements, parent concerns, and child needs, teachers repeatedly described feeling drained, overwhelmed, and organizationally unsupported in sustaining the quality of their work in each of these areas simultaneously.

Teachers at programs with specialized pedagogies, like Valerie, felt especially pressured to be faithful to those approaches despite constraints of their actual work days, detailing off-hours training, breaks routinely spent preparing materials, and using personal time for additional reading and development of their practice. "It's anxiety-provoking," said Valerie, "because I don't feel confident in what I'm doing. I'm winging it half of the time, and I'm learning from [other] teachers, but it's not like I have the time to learn it because it's my present life."

Across contexts, teachers actively worked to manage, if not bridge, the divides between the ambitious goals of early childhood education and the daily practical and logistical realities of their workplaces. Nazanin described working at the very limit of state licensure guidelines, tasked with teaching twelve children alone each day. Given that no child can ever be left alone, Nazanin and her class were forced to form daily routines where the whole group went to the bathroom together. "That was definitely something they don't prepare you for when you're studying the field... I always joke that I feel like I'm a sheepherder." These conditions are not without strain, and the sense that their labor and expertise were not valued socially or economically was a resonant tension. "We're totally overqualified and underpaid," said Jayla, "I've never gotten paid so little in my life for so much work."

Even union-represented public school teachers Andrea and Lane, who have much higher salaries and benefits, still felt compelled to constantly justify their child-centered teaching methods. Based on their specific training in ECE, advocating for the needs and rights of children within the public system was an intensive condition of their work. Each described laboring to interpret state standards and bureaucratic constraints, which they viewed as watering down the quality of their practice. For Lane, working in transitional kindergarten gave her autonomy to design curriculum and combine strategies that worked for her unique skill set and particular group of learners, "But public school wants data, data, data," she said. "It's very hard to document in a way that makes sense to people who don't understand that learning happens in play." Ultimately, her professional values sit in tension with those measurables valued by the state.

Andrea also felt forced to negotiate resources for her special education class strategically. "There's a whole political game that you have to play to get them the support they need. And I'm not savvy at those things, and I

don't understand." She described being denied additional support for a child who was self-injured in the classroom when a district official visited her classroom, simply confirmed she was doing everything correctly, and left. "They had nothing to offer me because you have to say the right words." Like Lane trading data for play, Andrea sees negotiating the public system as negotiating access to resources against her own developmental expertise:

> There's this bureaucratic system trumping everything that I had learned in my credential program. It just ties your hands behind your back....We had to prove ourselves to these people, and it's like, why can't you just honor the professional I am and trust me when I say he needs more?

Here, the intersecting politics of teaching and learning are not only conceptual considerations, but material conditions of the work. These reflections illuminate how the early educators in this study engage in active, practical negotiation of resources. Key among these is *professional autonomy* to practice according to their specialized training as early educators – a resource they see as worth fighting for.

Discussion and Significance

Despite varied educational experiences and personal pathways into preschool teaching, these teachers each shared a holistic and progressive vision of ECEC. Teachers described these values as the overwhelming motivator to enter and remain in the field and guided their navigation across program and policy contexts. In many ways, "the field" of ECEC itself represented a personal-professional plane through which the teachers in this study grounded their intentions, anchored their practices, and negotiated both resistance and joy within their under-supportive working conditions.

However inadequate, California's "mixed delivery" ECEC system serves diverse populations of children and families across income levels. This diversity supports a wide market of ECEC programs and purposes. In some ways, the patchwork policy landscape of ECEC gave these teachers an array of routes into the field as a means of participating in and spreading the overall critical constructivist values of ECEC. This is not to suggest that program types and funding structures were irrelevant or equitable. These policy structures created different affordances and constraints, primarily in the realms of pedagogy, curriculum, and financial resources, that teachers navigated and negotiated in career moves and daily practice.

ECEC values not only compelled these teachers' entry into this professional realm but also ongoing *resistance* to encroachments on their complex and otherwise overlooked work. Teachers often positioned their work in tension or even at active odds with the academic imperatives and curricular standardization of traditional K-12 schools, including those who work in those very structures. This consistent tension speaks to both the historic siloing of ECEC from the K-12 system in the US (Bloch, 1991) and the deep-rootedness of progressive pedagogies that have persisted in the margins of the larger U.S. education system (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000). Teachers' resistance to or avoidance of academic standardization in early childhood settings is an important indicator of what matters to early educators *and* how they navigate the field in terms of both career path and practice.

These teachers' rationales for working in and often in conflict with their specific program structures and norms are important indicators of how the field is shaped by and *can respond* to political-economic conditions. In particular, these teachers’ perceptions and experiences illuminate the effects of the ideological tension ECEC political discourse Moss (2019) identifies between democratic experimentalism and human capital-focused models that emphasize outcomes, standards, and surveillance. The detailed accounts of these six teachers' lived experiences reveal how these ideologies are not so much split as unsustainably bridged by the extraordinary efforts of early childhood educators. Constant throughout these teachers' stories are descriptions of personal meaning-making, professional choices, and advocacy for children’s rights and families’ well-being, many times at the expense of their own. And, as public TK teacher Lane noted, outcomes of this work are likewise ill-suited to data-centric accountability measures. These teachers’ reflections are indicative not only of the increasing encroachment of the neoliberal measurement imperatives into ECEC (Robert-Holmes, 2015), but of the underestimated commitment of early educators to resist these in practice (Albin-Clark et al., 2024).

The teachers in this study attempted to maintain an uneasy balance between pedagogical autonomy and economic resources, often working against their own interests in the belief that their unsustainable efforts to resist or counteract the conditions of their work were a form of advocacy for young children. It is worth considering further how state and federal negligence of ECEC may not only depend on *economic* exploitation (Boyd, 2013; McLean et al, 2024), but also on the exploitation of the workforce's philosophical and ethical commitments. In addition to fair compensation and working conditions, these teachers' reflections indicate that professional respect and autonomy are essential to the future of the field.

This study’s findings indicate a need for further research into not only the logistics and effects of private and state-sponsored ECEC programs, but, crucially, the insights and experiences of educators negotiating the policy and social contexts of their work. While this study’s sample is small, these teachers’ cohesive, resistant orientation toward their work is a compelling example of what’s at stake just under the surface of ECEC policy. Their stories present a call to embrace the complexity and the possibilities of ECEC as a practical realm for living and acting in the best interest of children, families, and communities, *including* the workforce.

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