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## Perceptions of Classroom Quality and Well-Being among Black Women Teachers of Young Children

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**Abstract:** Concerns about preschool effectiveness have increasingly led to early childhood education policy changes focused on teacher quality. While these reforms intend to ensure children's educational well-being, they rarely consider the impact policies have on teachers. Additionally, child care work is a feminized profession with distinct social experiences along lines of race and class. Black women who are early child care teachers live in poverty at rates disproportionate to their white counterparts. Through Black feminist focus group research, this paper documents perceptions of early childhood education quality mandates in Georgia and their impact on the well-being of 44 Black women teachers of infants, toddlers, and

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preschool age children. Findings suggest that the call for quality complicates Black teachers' work, adds undue financial and emotional stress that takes a toll on their well-being, and interrupts personal dynamics with their loved ones. The paper calls for antiracist and antisexist structural support to interrupt both the stressors exacted by the field and the sociohistorical processes devaluing Black women's work with children.

**Keywords:** Early childhood education; Black teachers; Black women; Teacher well-being; Teacher quality; Focus group research

### **Percepciones de la calidad y el bienestar del aula entre las maestras negras de niños pequeños**

**Resumen:** Las preocupaciones sobre la eficacia preescolar han llevado cada vez más a cambios en las políticas de educación de la primera infancia centrados en la calidad de los docentes. Si bien estas reformas pretenden garantizar el bienestar educativo de los niños, rara vez consideran el impacto que las políticas tienen en los maestros. Además, el trabajo de cuidado infantil es una profesión feminizada con distintas experiencias sociales en función de la raza y la clase. Las mujeres negras que son maestras de cuidado infantil temprano viven en la pobreza a tasas desproporcionadas a sus contrapartes blancas. A través de la investigación de grupos focales feministas negros, este documento documenta las percepciones de los mandatos de calidad de la educación de la primera infancia en Georgia y su impacto en el bienestar de 44 maestras negras de bebés, niños pequeños y preescolares. Los hallazgos sugieren que el llamado a la calidad complica el trabajo de los maestros negros, agrega un estrés financiero y emocional indebido que afecta su bienestar e interrumpe la dinámica personal con sus seres queridos. El documento pide un apoyo estructural antirracista y antisexistista para interrumpir tanto los factores estresantes impuestos por el campo como los procesos sociohistóricos que devalúan el trabajo de las mujeres negras con los niños.

**Palabras-clave:** Educación de la primera infancia; Maestras negras; el bienestar de las maestras; calidad de maestra femenina; Investigación de grupos focales

### **Percepções da qualidade da sala de aula e bem-estar entre professoras negras de crianças pequenas**

**Resumo:** A preocupação com a eficácia da pré-escola tem levado cada vez mais a mudanças nas políticas de educação infantil com foco na qualidade do professor. Embora essas reformas pretendam garantir o bem-estar educacional das crianças, raramente consideram o impacto que as políticas têm sobre os professores. Além disso, o trabalho com crianças é uma profissão feminizada, com experiências sociais distintas entre raças e classes. Mulheres negras que são professoras de cuidados infantis vivem na pobreza em taxas desproporcionais às suas contrapartes brancas. Por meio de pesquisas com grupos focais feministas negros, este artigo documenta as percepções dos mandatos de qualidade da educação infantil na Geórgia e seu impacto no bem-estar de 44 professoras negras de bebês, crianças e pré-escolares. As descobertas sugerem que a demanda por complicações de qualidade no trabalho dos professores negros acrescenta estresse financeiro e emocional indebido que prejudica seu bem-estar e interrompe a dinâmica pessoal com seus entes queridos. O artigo pede suporte estrutural anti-racista e anti-existência para interromper tanto os estressores exigidos pelo campo quanto os processos sócio-históricos que desvalorizam o trabalho das mulheres negras com as crianças.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação infantil; Professoras negras; bem-estar da professora; Qualidade da professora; Pesquisa de grupo de foco

## **Perceptions of Classroom Quality and Well-Being among Black Women Teachers of Young Children**

The current focus on early childhood education (ECE) as a promising strategy to support school readiness has resulted in considerable increases in state and federal funding, legislation, and policy recommendations (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019). Concerns about preschool effectiveness, in particular, have increasingly led to ECE policy changes focused on teacher quality. Policymakers have attempted to strengthen ECE professional standards by increasing teacher education requirements, producing standardized instructional and assessment materials, and improving teacher compensation (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014).

Unique challenges exist in early childhood classrooms, however, that reforms for quality such as these do not address neatly (Iruka, 2019; Smith & Lawrence, 2019). For instance, Georgia expects teachers of young children to attend to multiple dimensions of child development, including physical motor, social-emotional, language, cognitive, and early academic developmental needs (see, for example, Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS): <http://gelds.dec.state.ga.us>). Meanwhile, post-secondary preparation among the early childhood workforce varies widely, with many states lacking provisions for advanced training or continuous professional learning to support the implementation of quality reforms (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019).

In the US, child care is also synonymous with women's work and is tied deeply to race and class (Vogtman, 2017). Until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, white men primarily relegated white women to unpaid care for their children. In contrast, women of color, Black women in particular, were enslaved or underemployed to do this same work. With its distinct raced and classed overtones, this gendered history has contributed to the production of an undervalued social institution—the lasting vestiges of which are evidenced in today's racial disparities in pay in the field (Vogtman, 2017). For example, while wages are markedly low for all infant, toddler, and preschool teachers, Black women earn 84 cents to every \$1 their white counterparts earn (Ullrich et al., 2016; Whitebook et al., 2018). A sizable number of Black women ECE teachers (23%) live in poverty, and among those with children, 44% are parenting independently (Vogtman, 2017). For example, in Georgia, the average teacher of young children would have to spend 43% of their salary to place their child in infant care (Economic Policy Institute, 2016). These statistics suggest that ECE teachers' well-being, particularly those who are Black women, are vulnerable in a field mandating increased work demands.

Given these realities, scholars argue that reform efforts focused on teacher outcomes without accounting for teachers' work lives and identities oversimplify how improvements for quality can be made (Day & Smethem, 2009). As Hall-Kenyon (2014) and colleagues stated, "Efforts to improve education for young children should not only emphasize what teachers do when teaching but also who they are and how they are affected by the doing" (p. 153). Remarkably, very limited research exists on early childhood educators' experiences with ECE quality policies and their well-being, with even less focusing on Black women in particular. Three questions guided this study to address these paucity areas: 1) What are Black women preschool teachers' perceptions of Georgia's teacher quality guidelines? 2) What is the perceived impact of Georgia's ECE quality mandates on Black women preschool teachers' well-being? And 3) How do Black women teachers perceive themselves in relationship to the history of Black women's childcare work in the South?

## The Context: ECE in Georgia

As one of the first state agencies in the nation dedicated solely to ECE, the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) is a national leader among states with rigorous ECE mandates. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, Georgia ranks relatively high in delivering quality preschool programs, meeting 8 out of 10 benchmarks (Friedman-Krauss, 2019). In 2013, Georgia DECAL was one of the first state departments to expand high-quality programs through a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant (Colvard, 2014). This funding led to the development of the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)—marking a strategic effort to develop the early childhood workforce by emphasizing teacher quality and classroom outcomes. Since then, DECAL (2017) has developed rigorous professional standards organized to support early childhood teachers in their multifaceted work as specialists in child development, instruction, and family and community engagement.

In 2017, DECAL released *Georgia's Workforce Knowledge and Competencies Guide* (DECAL, 2017). This set of professional standards details the essential skills that early childhood teachers in the state should know and do; giving specific guidance on advancing child development, supporting family and community engagement, assessing and screening children's abilities, delivering developmentally appropriate pedagogies, and demonstrating professionalism. These indicators refer to just one aspect of quality care—teacher quality. But ECE teachers are also held responsible for maintaining certain environmental factors, such as classroom healthfulness, and supplying adequate learning materials. These pedagogical, relational, and environmental competencies are monitored by DECAL, which licenses child care centers, manages the state's QRIS, and administers Georgia's Head Start program and Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF; i.e., the federal funding initiatives making quality early care accessible to underserved communities).

The first author recruited teachers who participated in this study from a single non-profit provider of multiple ECE centers in the state. The centers were diverse in terms of the socioeconomic and racial backgrounds of the children and families served and, as a result, operated through a licensing and funding portfolio that includes all of these regulating bodies (i.e., DECAL licensing, QRIS, Head Start, and CCDF). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), a professional membership organization supporting ECE centers with best practices in the field, also accredited the provider; and it maintained several public-private partnerships. This portfolio made an array of resources, programs, curricula, and services part of the teachers' responsibility in addition to their regular classroom duties.

Importantly, each of these initiatives (state licensing, QRIS, Head Start, CCDF, NAEYC, and public-private partnerships) have differing requirements for teaching and environmental quality and monitor classrooms relatively independently of one another. However, the core of each emphasizes ensuring high pedagogical and environmental standards. To that end, all of the regulating bodies monitor teachers' use of early learning and development standards, teachers' level of education and professional development, teacher-child ratios, and health and safety practices. Though their quality standards are similar, the requirements for meeting them and the measures used to monitor them may differ.

In terms of curricular quality, the ECE teachers who participated in this study used Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS) to guide their instructional practices. They were required to use *Teaching Strategies Gold* (Teaching Strategies, 2013), an observation-based formative assessment system, and its aligned curriculum, *Creative Curriculum* (Dodge et al., 2002), to individualize instruction and ensure that learning experiences supported the whole child. Through

this coordinated instructional system, the state expected teachers to provide developmentally appropriate and individualized care for all of the children in their classrooms.

Thus, there are a significant number of regulating bodies monitoring ECE teacher practice in Georgia. It is plausible that these many demands complicate teachers' ability to provide quality care. These complications compound the challenges presented by racial disparities in pay and Black women's larger social challenges in the US (Ullrich et al., 2016).

## Teacher Well-Being and ECE Classroom Quality

ECE literature defines teacher well-being in many ways. For this study, we conceptualized it in hedonic terms, meaning that "well-being centers primarily on increasing pleasure and decreasing pain, and tends to emphasize external influences on feelings of well-being rather than on internal sources" (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014, p. 160). Studies of hedonic teacher well-being have shown that several external conditions to ECE teachers' work affect their personal and professional well-being. Studies have also shown that compensation, work related stress, job satisfaction, level of education, and quality of the work environment impact ECE teachers' overall quality of life (Hall-Kenyon, 2014; Cumming, 2017).

The confluence of low wages, professional devaluation, and job insecurity have resulted in teachers' low morale, stress, and diminished degree of wellness. Studies of teacher turnover and job satisfaction, both important indicators of well-being, demonstrated that ECE teachers stay in their positions despite low pay when they experience higher job rank (Bridges et al., 2011), can commit to an area of specialization, and have autonomy in their role (Greene, 1999). Relatedly, Holochwost et al. (2009) found that accessible and affordable health, disability, and retirement benefits played a significant role in teachers' decisions to stay in the field. Findings like these suggest that when teachers feel regarded as professionals and protected from life's uncertainties, they commit more deeply to the field out of a sense of wellness in their professional and personal lives.

However, the broader ECE polycscape is committed to improving teacher quality through recruiting and retaining a highly educated workforce. Such is the case in Georgia, where its *Workforce Knowledge and Competencies Guide* calls for ECE teachers to "continuously seek[s] out and participate[s] in opportunities to grow professionally, including, but not limited to earning an early childhood education credential, degree, or teacher certification" (DECAL 2017, 18). The direct connection between higher levels of education and ECE teacher well-being have not been explored. Still, it is plausible that higher education would affect well-being since, theoretically, increasing education should increase competence and access to higher paid positions. The evidence supporting this theory, however, is mixed.

For example, a longitudinal cohort study of ECE teachers who were given scholarships to work toward a Child Development Associate (CDA) degree showed improved teaching quality but low teacher retention (Miller & Bogatova, 2009). Similarly, a study on New Jersey's mandate that all ECE teachers earn a bachelor's degree found that a sizable percentage (33%) indicated that they would leave the field once they achieved certification (Ryan & Ackerman, 2005). These findings suggest that the call for increased postsecondary education fails to consider how trends in the broader field are implicated in teachers' choices. Results from a study on teachers' emotional lives showed that the stress, worry, and frustration they experienced concerning institutional demands were central to their broader life experiences (Madrid & Dunn-Kenney, 2010). When indicators of a decreased sense of well-being were considered in relationship with teacher performance, negative effects were found in teaching practices, teacher-child relationships, and child outcomes (Smith & Lawrence, 2019). In sum, the call for increased postsecondary education and training, coupled with

increasing and varied regulations demanded by the field, seems to have an adverse impact on ECE teachers' work and lives.

### **Black Women ECE Teachers**

Meanwhile, the literature's absent discussion of racialized gender and its intersection with teacher quality and well-being is palpable. All of the studies reviewed above either drew from samples of exclusively white women or failed to discuss the salience of race or racialized gender in their analysis. This omission is critical, given that Black women have long been stereotyped as "natural" caregivers in both personal and professional settings (Harris-Perry, 2011). This stereotype emanates from the gendered division of labor demanded of them during enslavement (Camp, 2004)—a patriarchal arrangement persisting into the present day, rendering them vulnerable to stress and its related diseases (Chadiha et al., 2004; Felix, 2019; Simons et al., 2016). Black women and girls are perceived as needing less nurturance and protection than other women (Epstein et al., 2017). As a result, higher expectations are held of them to endure adverse circumstances (Walker-Barnes, 2014). Quality regulators, then, may frame their evaluations of Black women's classroom work through these problematic and stereotypical sociocultural lenses. Raters may hold them to higher expectations to support young children's health, safety, and development—given society's propensity to overly associate Black women with strength and endurance (Walker-Barnes, 2014).

Moreover, Black women exhibit higher stress and depressive symptoms than their white counterparts (Scarinci et al., 2002; Spence et al., 2011). It is possible, then, that the challenges to well-being Black women experience in society writ-large compound the burdens they experience at work. Knowing that stress affects teacher quality, it is possible to over-associate Black teachers with low classroom quality when structural factors are at the core of practices and interactions that may appear troubling. To date, we are unable to find research examining these factors among ECE teachers. However, there is a rich body of literature on bias in ratings among African American K-12 teachers (Drake et al., 2019; Wilson, 2015). Thus, it is probable that similar findings would emerge in ECE settings.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Given the absence of research documenting Black women's experiences in ECE, especially in the context of quality reforms, the purpose of this study was to investigate these conditions in Georgia's ECE quality system as it played out in infant, toddler, and preschool classrooms. Therefore, this study was conceptualized through the Black feminist theoretical tradition, which articulates the multiple and interlocking oppressions that occur at the intersections of racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of subjugation (Collins, 2000; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Together with the antiracist, antisexist, and antihomophobic theories developed in parallel by women of color and other subaltern groups, this tradition is part of the pantheon of intersectional approaches to address the complexities of social power relations (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Its emphasis, however, is on the lived experiences of Black women. As so, researchers have invoked the frame when a line of inquiry obscures Black women's needs through an emphasis on either race or gender alone. Studies on gender and quality in ECE rarely focus on women's racialized gender (Ackerman, 2006; Osgood, 2006). This single-axis orientation misses the varied experiences women have no matter their social positionalities.

Further, the literature plays into problematic tropes of white ciswomen's normativity and, thus, erases the racial disparities that exist in gender pay, health, and wellness in the field (Chadiha et al., 2004; Ullrich et al., 2016). As previously discussed, Black women's pay disparities in ECE and

their vulnerability to stress in both society and the workplace render them additionally vulnerable to classroom quality policies. Therefore, it was appropriate to use a Black feminist intersectional approach to clarify Black women teachers' experiences with ECE quality reforms.

The frame clarifies how Black women's suppression seems natural, normal, and inevitable; and centers their voices to bring equity and pragmatic change (Collins, 2000). Black women have historically been barred from or tokenized within mainstream institutions. Black feminist theory, therefore, shows how Black women have been on the receiving end of policies that do not understand or take into account their unique circumstances. This reality does not mean that Black women are without agency. Black women have advanced themselves and their communities despite the social systems that have tried to oppress them (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Still, the majority of Black women in the US continue to face disparate rates of access and opportunity across social sectors (DuMonthier et al., n.d.). ECE is one such sector. Further, Black feminist thought considers Black women's work with children a core line of inquiry, given how their child-rearing has been exploited and stereotyped throughout history (Collins, 2000).

## Methods

This study made use of focus group research to address its guiding questions. Doing so informs stakeholders of the impact policies have on the lives of those they affect by obtaining an in-depth understanding of individuals' perceptions (Cyr, 2019). Ten focus groups were carried out with 44 self-identified Black women teachers in infant, toddler, and preschool classrooms at five ECE centers in Georgia. Each group hosted between four and six ECE teachers, lasted for one hour, and was facilitated at the center where the teachers worked. The teachers were also asked to complete a demographic survey.

A Black feminist approach to focus group research takes seriously Black women's epistemologies and imbues the research process with cultural ways of being (Collins, 2000; Evans-Winters, 2019). It offers a methodology that is consistent with traditional Black oral art forms through its use of group conversation (Hurston, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2009). King and Mitchell (1995) asserted that group conversations offer "a way of apprehending or becoming more critically aware of the collective Black Experience through reflexive examination of their own reality" (p. 3). This way of eliciting experiences allows Black women to examine and share their stories in relation to the histories, discourses, and policies shaping their work; and centers Black women's voices for purposes of identifying pragmatic solutions to the problems they face.

In line with a Black feminist approach, this study used kitchen table methods (Phillips, 2006) in tandem with photo-elicitation (Harper, 2002) to facilitate group conversations. Kitchen table methods attempt to coordinate a harmonious and hospitable dialogic setting by situating conversations in participants' vernacular experiences. Toward that end, the focus groups were facilitated at the schools where the teachers worked instead of in the university setting. Knowing that Black women ECE teachers experience limited resources in their professional and personal lives, the focus groups were held during a period that did not conflict with their regularly scheduled work breaks. A healthful lunch was provided, and to the extent possible, the setting was designed to promote relaxation and conversation. The facilitator asked the teachers about their daily responsibilities, experiences with quality oversight, their perceptions of quality, and the effect their work had on their personal lives.

The facilitator also asked the teachers to view five photographs of Black women child care providers during the enslavement, Jim Crow, Civil Rights, Black Power, and contemporary eras. A caption containing a brief first person narrative of an African American woman's experience as a

child care provider during the period accompanied each photo. The photographs were found through a Google image search and the first person accounts were sourced from bondswomen's narratives (Jacobs, 2001), an online archive documenting Black women's work in the South (Rosenberg, 2001), and a *New York Times Magazine* article (Interlandi, 2018). The photos were used to acknowledge the long and vital herstory of Black women's labor exploitation (Vogtman, 2017), to invite the groups to address the political-economic circumstances they face, and to interrupt settler colonial methods inherent to extractive research techniques (Tuck & Yang, 2014). The images were shared after the teachers discussed their experiences with and perceptions of ECE quality regulations.

To address research ethics, the first author probed her subjectivities as a highly educated, Black cisheterosexual postdoctoral researcher with a working class background to ensure that the focus group questions resisted voyeuristic tendencies. She undertook this process to resist relying on pain narratives (Tuck & Yang, 2014) or idealizing the women's experiences. The research team had a four-year history as a community partner providing evaluation support to the ECE provider from which the teachers were recruited. We made use of evidence-based teacher and environmental rating scales to do this work. Knowing the complexities of quality rating, we developed a supportive evaluation process that focused on continuous improvement over formative evaluation. In so doing, our rating process was more dialogic than authoritarian—using the data we collected in ongoing decision-making processes. Unlike other raters, we did not use our findings to penalize teachers. Our efforts allowed us to build strong relationships. On many occasions, staff members referred to us as an integral part of the “family” of schools led by the nonprofit provider—a distinction not extended to quality raters from other regulating bodies. These sustained relationships made us aware of how outsiders misconstrue classroom practices. The first author's expertise as a Black feminist educational researcher also infused these relationships with care for the intersectional ways that teacher experiences occur. These relationships, coupled with an emphasis on providing a healthful setting, attempted to acknowledge the complex history accompanying Black women teachers' roles while simultaneously communicating that their experiences were valuable.

Finally, qualitative data analysis software was used to organize the data and it was analyzed in a three-round analytical process (Saldaña, 2013). In the first round, descriptive coding delineated the teachers' perspectives. The data corpus was broken apart to refer to the teachers' responses to each research question and then coded using words or short phrases to describe their discussions. For example, answers to the question “How do efforts to advance teacher education impact you?” from all ten focus groups were organized together and assigned the descriptive codes: “No Guarantee for Promotion,” “Financial Distress,” and “Contributes to Teacher Shortage” among others. Descriptive codes were used for all 15 of the questions asked during the focus groups—generating 252 descriptive codes. In the second round, pattern coding was used to organize and categorize the descriptive codes. Descriptive codes that were similar in content were grouped to produce 11 categories describing the teachers' experiences. The categories were further refined by grouping them into similar classes in the third round, which produced two themes: *Perceptions of Quality* and *Teacher Well-Being*. All of the data was analyzed at the same time. Responses to the photo-elicitation methods were analyzed with those gained through traditional focus group questioning.

## Participants

Self-identified Black women who teach infants, toddlers, and preschool aged children (3 years old) were included for participation in this study. In the United States, teachers of pre-kindergarten (4 years old) and K-12 (5 years and older) children are compensated at higher rates than teachers of very young children. Many K-12 public school systems also have pre-kindergarten



programs with teachers funded in ways that are inconsistent with the private ECE school system. Because pre-kindergarten and K-12 teachers are part of a more complex funding system and are compensated at rates that are inconsistent with teachers of young children, they were excluded from participation.

As previously stated, participants were recruited from five ECE centers operated by a single provider in a large metropolitan area in Georgia. They were asked, however, to discuss experiences from their tenure in the field. The findings, then, do not merely relay their perspectives of working at the ECE center where they were employed at the time of this study, but their experiences in the field broadly.

Ranging between one and 27 years of experience, the women averaged over 10 years of ECE classroom practice. While their educational levels varied, they all held postsecondary credentials. 46% held an associate's degree, 40.5% held a bachelor's degree, and 13.5% held a graduate degree. Most of the teachers taught toddlers (58%), some taught preschool (32%) and a few were infant teachers (11%). For those who reported their job title, 60% were lead teachers and the remaining were assistant teachers. Their median annual income was between \$25,000 and \$30,000, but all (100%) reported a yearly income under \$45,000. For most (57%), their pay constituted the primary source of household income among all adult wage earners in their homes. 43% reported that they provide the only income in their household. The majority of respondents (68%) had children.

It is important to note that most of the women in this study were relatively privileged in comparison to their peers in ECE. Childcare workers in the state of Georgia average a salary of \$25,510 annually (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). While some teachers in this study earned salaries on par with this rate, the vast majority ( $n=14$ ) earned at least as much or more than their colleagues in the state. Most Black women in the field are not counted among this group—working disproportionately in centers serving low-income communities that, through policy inadequacies, struggle to access the resources necessary to support their health and well-being (Saluja et al., 2002).

## Findings

### Perceptions of Georgia's Call for Improved ECE Quality

Consistent with the purpose of Black feminist theory, the teachers' perceptions of Georgia's uncoordinated quality monitoring system demonstrated how being on the receiving end of policy decision-making reifies the so-called "natural, normal, and inevitable" nature of Black women's suppression. Their experiences showed how they are made to interrupt their classroom practices to perform for quality raters, how they incur debt in their efforts to increase their education and training, and how their efforts to professionalize go without benefit or recognition. Worse, their experiences in the field show an adverse impact on their well-being *and* their relationships with loved ones.

Across focus groups, we found that the competing quality standards create confusion and frustration at even the most basic levels. Take, for example, the following discussion regarding teacher-child ratios:

- Researcher: So how do the initiatives to improve quality make you feel about your work?
- Ms. Brown: It's overwhelming. And it-
- Ms. Smith: It can become confusing.
- Ms. Brown: It's confusing because everybody has their own theory....And that's what they fail to realize. And they clash. All of it clash. It's like eight different people.

- Mrs. Harris: Everybody got their own rules and regulations and they want you to follow every last one of them. How you gonna do that? Everybody can't be on the same page.
- Ms. Phillips: It's confusing to us and it's confusing to our kids. Because one minute we're telling them to do something [and] then next minute you're telling them to do something else.
- Ms. Brown: You can't do it.
- Ms. Lane: We can't. Because they're gonna look at you like you're crazy, them kids. They'll be like, "What? We don't do this."
- Researcher: Because now you're switching it up?
- Ms. Brown: Right, because we have to switch for different people. So when you come out [to observe] we have to switch. When NAEYC comes in you got to meet NAEYC's needs.
- Ms. Dawson: Even down to ratio. Stuff like that.
- Ms. Brown: We switch ratio every day. Every day we switch ratio. [Management will say] "Oh...you can have six to one. By the state licensing you can have six to one."
- Ms. Dawson: With infants and toddlers, you're only supposed to have four kids to one. I don't know where they get this six to one. It's always been four, but now you got six. I already told them. I ain't taking care of no six kids by myself. I'm gonna take two somewhere else if I have to take them to the front desk. I'm not doing no six kids! (Focus Group 2)

In this example and across many others, we heard how teachers regularly changed their classrooms and practices in order to receive high ratings by regulators. From shuffling children to different classrooms to meet differing ratio guidelines, to changing classroom displays and teaching practices, the teachers relayed how demonstrating quality is something they "do" under observation. In other words, the teachers shifted their regular practices to accommodate the needs of whichever accreditor they were accountable to on a given day. As Ms. Phillips and Ms. Lane relayed, these regular shifts in practice were felt by teachers *and* the children—quite plausibly creating the very conditions that quality regulations try to prevent. Further, the system may obfuscate a genuine understanding of teacher and environmental quality because it interrupts the teachers' regular unobserved classroom practices.

This finding is further complicated by the lack of resources ECE schools and teachers are equipped with. Ms. Jennings and Ms. King, for example, discussed the challenge of being short-staffed while trying to meet Head Start and QRIS health and safety standards:

- Ms. Jennings: If the child goes to the bathroom, you have to wash their hands. You have to clean that sink right after that child and you have to clean that toilet right after that child uses it. *Every child*. I have 17 kids. If my group is kind of rambunctious and they're supposed to be over on the carpet, but you have some over here and I'm in the bathroom scrubbing, it makes it really hard.
- Ms. King: Then that goes with having enough teachers in the classroom so each child that's supposed to have coverage is being seen. Really, I think each classroom is supposed to have like three teachers. Right? But here, we're really like, we're very understaffed. (Focus Group 3)

For Black women ECE teachers, being unable to meet regulators' demands becomes problematic when considering the professional consequences they face if they fail to perform. Consider Ms. Aleya's frustration over receiving a demerit under these policies: "I got a write up about my dramatic play area," she shared:

Well, the classroom as a whole, it didn't have enough materials in it for the theme. And the thing is, I had submitted a list to the management team for the materials. So, when the curriculum coordinator came to observe my classroom, there were no materials. But, I never received them from the higher management. But, she wrote up a paper on me, and I had to sign it. And I'm like, "This wasn't even my fault!" I couldn't control it. The materials that I did have, I put them in there, but it still wasn't enough. (Focus Group 9)

Her experience shows that the teachers risked professional discrediting while being asked to "do" quality in under-resourced contexts. While this finding is undoubtedly factual for most ECE teachers, this experience mirrors the historical record of Black women having to do more with less without professional protection to guard their reputations or livelihood in the broader field (Jones, 2009). It echoes the burdens previously explained regarding the historical propensity to overburden Black women and expect them to endure. While all ECE teachers may face this phenomenon, Black women may experience its adverse effects more acutely given the additional distressful circumstances they face both in and out of schools. Take this conversation, for example, discussed after viewing photographs of Black women child givers in previous historical eras:

Ms. Naomi: It [the pictures] goes back to how the American standard was always the men...and then it became, not racist or anything, but white women. At the bottom have been Black women. What did Malcolm X say? That we are the mule? Because what is a mule? A mule stays quiet, but they hold strong. They set the pace and they hold everything on their back and don't fall. The Black women have become the mule of everyone above us, because why? Because we're resilient. We're strong. We know we're going to get it done. They know dang old well we aren't going to quit our jobs for no reason.

Ms. Tyra: They know that no matter what they throw at us, we're going to do the work. Too many people depend on us to quit. (Focus Group 1)

Ms. Naomi and Ms. Tyra discuss, here, how some Black women may be beholden to the system because of the duties and responsibilities they face outside of the workplace. Like Black women before them, they may be more inclined to endure the burdens created by the system to ensure that their personal needs are cared for. This finding suggests that the regulatory bodies monitoring teacher quality in Georgia are complicit in reifying the problematic trope of the so-called "strong Black woman" (Walker-Barnes, 2014). Through its competing criteria, the system created conditions that caused confusion and the need to endure inequitable resources without complaint or professional protection. We assert that this problem makes it difficult to gain a clear understanding of what teachers actually do in their classrooms. Instead, quality mandates invite teachers to change their regular practices to meet competing expectations under threats of professional discrediting. We cannot ignore the adverse outcomes this may reify in Black women's lives given the sociopolitical disparities they already face.

### ***Increased Education***

Additional evidence of the system's burden on Black women was found in the teachers' discussion of the state's call for professionalization through increased education. They shared that in their experience, obtaining an advanced credential or degree did not result in the increased wages or career advancement they assumed would come with higher education. In fact, many of the women shared that they experienced financial distress despite being highly educated.

I make a certain amount, but it's not enough to survive, but it's too much to get government assistance. My son is walking around with no healthcare. I can't afford for them to take it out of my check because I'm living literally from check to check....That hurts me because I worked my behind off to get my degree, and then to have management say they're not going to honor it [in pay] because it wasn't a requirement? I'm good as gone. Good as gone! (Ms. Freddie, Focus Group 9)

I am working on my bachelor's, but I did change my program of study because I don't want to be in a job where I'm going to stay stuck. I'm working from paycheck to paycheck. Every time I get paid, my paycheck already gone! I didn't go to school to do that. I went to school to better my life. So me and my kids would no longer have to [struggle]... and I owe all this government money and I'm still struggling. I didn't go to school for that. (Ms. Maya, Focus Group 1)

These sentiments reflect how the call for increased education in a field that inadequately compensates teachers depletes the workforce (Austin et al., 2011). As Ms. Naomi explains, teachers are compelled to leave the field, and as other conversations expressed, can deter those for whom child care is a viable career option:

It's not that you should *have* to [have more education], it's gonna be that you're gonna *have* to in order to keep up....Because, like [she] said, it's a lot of people who have not had a degree that are in the classroom and have been spectacular with it. But, now with the way they're moving, with technology, the reading and language and all that stuff, you almost *have* to have a degree in order to keep up....because that's the way the system is being created now. It's leaving back those that don't have a degree, that are coming in with just their C.D.A. That's not gonna be enough. (Ms. Abena, Focus Group 7)

In contradistinction to their intentions, obtaining higher education disadvantaged some of the teachers. It did not result in changes that improved their work experiences or quality of life. These findings mirror the literature and demonstrate the frustrations associated with limited mobility in the field (Miller & Bogatova, 2009; Ryan & Ackerman, 2005).

The teachers' engagement with the photographs supported this finding, further demonstrating how the call for increased education is part of a historical process that may disadvantage Black women. As Ms. Valerie expressed:

[The photographs] remind me of how the bar for what we're supposed to do is never fair....it was easy to get into child care at first so it helped me get a job when I was young and needed to work. You could get your credential in high school before you graduated. Then they're like, "Oh, wait, hold up. Let's push it up. Go get a CDA." Then they said, "Oh, now you have got to go to an Associates [degree]!" And now, "Oh, you got to get your bachelor's." And it all takes more time and money!...You can't just be a teacher, even if you go to school for it. You gotta get certified and

during my certification, I don't get paid for my student teaching and I have to pay for my [certification] test! It's like we're set up for failure. Working shouldn't *cost* me money (Ms. Valerie, Focus Group 3).

Ms. Valerie entered the field out of the need to work when she was young. To stay viable in the field, she had to meet the demands for increased education – but each advancement came at her expense. She, and the other women, rightfully point out that this process mirrors the ways that career advancement has been fraught with challenges and discrimination for Black women (Jones, 2009). While it may seem ubiquitous for women in ECE that the educational standards are ever-evolving, considering the issue in Black women's historical context suggests that calling for increased education without equitably increasing wages reifies exploitative patterns in their labor experiences (Vogtman, 2017). Plausibly, the call for increased education may entrench Black women in cycles of poverty as they take on debt to meet system requirements; and may stagnate their careers as those without the ability to obtain higher education get left behind.

### **Teacher Well-Being Among Participants**

When we assessed how well the teachers were able to experience joy in their broader lives, we found several external influences interrupting their well-being. The teachers discussed how their jobs did not alleviate financial hardship, produced barriers to their overall health and wellness, and had an adverse impact on their loved ones.

#### ***Financial Distress***

Inadequate compensation was at the core of the teacher's distress and was surprisingly acute among salaried lead teachers. Salaried lead teachers shared that they often worked over 40 hours per week to fill teacher shortages. Hourly and part-time aids and assistant teachers shared experiences with rigid weekly work schedules because employers' were avoiding overtime pay. Consider the following conversation between an assistant teacher (Ms. Alexis) and two lead teachers (Ms. Barton & Ms. Jakes):

- Ms. Alexis: The other day [management] made a statement where the [assistant] teachers have to go home first....Your [assistant] teachers are getting paid by the hour, so they're getting rid of them so they don't have to spend no more money....But my thing about the salaried people is they're here first thing in the morning. We come in 30 minutes to an hour later than them. Yeah, we know they...already set in stone what their pay is. They can't go over [and] they can't go under that. But you want to get rid of your other teachers. Who is to say that some of your [assistant] teachers don't want to try and get overtime?
- Researcher: So then when those who are hourly get sent home, the burden comes on the salaried people?
- Ms. Alexis: It's a catch 22.
- Researcher: It's unfair. Okay.
- Ms. Barton: Because sometimes we [lead teachers] work from 6:30 to 6:30.
- Mrs. Jakes: And there's no, "okay, you can get a comp time day off." Or "let's get you a little bit more in your pay." No. You're just going to work it. "See you tomorrow morning. Have a great day." (Focus Group 5)

In addition to having to volunteer their time, the teachers discussed their difficulties paying bills and their inability to access assistance programs that could alleviate their financial challenges:

- Ms. Naomi: You can't even get child care assistance. That's something, too, that we need to discuss. People, working mothers or grandmothers that have their grandkids, we work, but they say we make too much to even get child care....
- Ms. Ashley: So you're paying out of pocket expenses to send your kids to daycare....Meanwhile, you're living check to check, but they telling you that-
- Ms. Naomi: Yeah, we make too much money.... (Focus Group 1)

In another focus group, Ms. Pamela said:

God forbid if you have kids, even a younger kid, it's like you're at this high-quality center, but your child is at a mom and pop [daycare facility] because based on the funding you get just for working [here], there is no really great benefits as far as having your child being a part of something so great. (Focus Group 8)

In this study, the average woman made less than \$30,000, was the breadwinner in her family, and had at least two children. In a state where the average cost of infant care is near \$14,000 (Economic Policy Institute, 2016), it is clear that the stress of financial difficulty would be part of these teachers' everyday realities. Still, the state asks them to provide quality care for other people's children while facing an uncertain future for their own – an ongoing fact long recorded through Black herstory (Branch, 2011). The regulatory burdens the women described, along with the disappointing economic realities they experienced even after increasing their education, led them to discuss the adverse impact of Georgia's quality system on their health and well-being. They described inadequate and, in some instances, inaccessible health and wellness benefits. Teacher shortages prevented them from taking their accrued time off—including sick days—and healthcare was not available to everyone. When health care was available, its related costs, such as co-pays and deductibles, were prohibitively high.

- Ms. Ashley: ...If we run out of sick time or whatever and you've already told them [you're sick], and you get [time off], that's taken out of your pay. We've got bills and all of that, so...
- Ms. Teiarra: Not only that, you've got to go to the doctor, it's \$40 every time you go....See, [where we work now], they give you a break. They give you a mental day. Like I have heard people complain, and I was like, "I wish you guys have worked in the amount of places that I have worked. You don't have sick days. You don't have vacation time. You don't have Medicaid or medical benefits, or dental benefits. No! You work here, and whatever hours you got, that's the hours you got. There was no overtime. There was no overpay. That was it. They will clock you out, and you would still be working. (Focus Group 1)

These excerpts demonstrate a vulnerable teacher population's realities in a field asking them to increase their professional education without support. The state charges them with caring for the neediest children while they are at risk of illness and an inability to care for their dependents' needs. Given the significant health disparities Black women face, Georgia's ECE quality system is implicated in adverse outcomes beyond mere classroom practices. It fails to consider the multifaceted nature of teacher livelihood.

### **Wellness**

As can be expected, the challenges they faced with competing quality demands, the education/compensation gap, the struggle to make ends meet, and their experiences with inadequate healthcare exacted a toll on the teachers' emotional health. Their discussions surfaced how their work is isolating, that they are chronically fatigued, and that they experienced emotional distress. Take the following, for example:

It makes me tired when I go home. Before I switched my hours for the summer, I was working like every day, all day, morning 6:30 to 6:30 at night sometimes. I get home and go straight to sleep knowing that I got to do work on the computer for my classes and everything. I'm just straight to sleep. Nobody ever sees me till the next day...until it's time to start working again. (Ms. Valerie, Focus Group 3)

Last summer, it got really, really bad for me working here....I was getting sick. I was having headaches at work...I went to see the doctor about it, and basically, they were like, "Well yeah, you're exhibiting signs of mild depression due to work-related stress." You hear people talk about work-related stress like it's just something that's thrown out there, whatever. But till you actually experience it and go through it, I was like, "Are you serious?"...I had to go through therapy....It was really, really, really bad. (Ms. Caroline, Focus Group 9)

For the women in this study, the state's call for professionalization without the resources to support their wellness created stress, isolation, and depression. When we considered the impact of their work on their loved ones, we found it unsurprising that they would experience these difficult mental health events.

### **Impact on Loved Ones**

Nearly all of the teachers discussed how their work leaves them too exhausted to spend quality time with their children, families, and friends. They discussed the burdens their loved ones experience because of their work – including missing formative moments in their children's lives. Ms. Sonya and Ms. Keionna shared that:

Ms. Sonya: I'm normally drained when I get home. And I have a seven-year-old. So, it's kind of hard for me to balance because when I get home, he's like, "Mommy, I miss you. I wanna play." And, I'm like, "Not right now. I really need a break." ...And sometimes it makes me feel bad as a single mom 'cause I'm like, "I care for other peoples' kids. And I can't even take time to care for my own."...

Ms. Keionna: And I agree with her, 'cause I have a two-year-old, and I just feel like I don't have anything to give him by the time I get home. And that hurts. (Focus Group 7)

Ms. Naomi remarked:

So my son graduated this past weekend. I'm sitting up in the graduation asleep. I'm asleep. I was asleep at the graduation! (Focus Group 1)

These remarks made evident how an inadequately resourced call for quality created economic, physical, and mental health distress; and further, illustrated how their experiences were in line with the history of Black women's marginalization. After the photo elicitation exercise, Ms. Naomi said:

“I feel like I’m the people in the pictures, the Black lady with the white baby. The help (Focus Group 1); and in Focus Group 5 the women characterized their experience as being the same as those faced in generations before:

- Ms. Alexis: Nothing has changed. We still taking care of kids and they don’t care how we are treated.
- Ms. Kimberly: We just more out of the modern time now, but everything is still the same, they still doing the same thing...
- Mrs. Jakes: Black women tried to make a change, though. Especially with that movement that you said happened in 1868. However I feel that in order for it to physically take a serious impact it’s going to have to start with our politicians. Right from the start.
- Mrs. Barton: We’re still being used. Black people still being used. Because most of the time these parents want us to be here all the time—just like what happened to them before us. It’s not right.
- Mrs. Jakes: I love [a child in my class] to death. But her mama works for the public school. But that baby be here every day. I had her during Christmas break honey. She’s the only one I had. All week. Her Mama works in the office at a public school and just be happy and chill when she drops her off. She’s the first one here and the last one out the door every day – even when I know her Mama is on break from work (Focus Group 5).

Similar to the stories shared in the captions accompanying the photographs, the teachers identified themselves as part of an invisible generation of Black women whose work is essential but undervalued. Even though they acknowledged that times have changed and efforts for justice have been attempted, in this example and others, they evidenced circumstances where their work was taken advantage of. Their discussions suggest that Georgia’s ECE quality system asks Black women teachers of young children to give more than they receive at the expense of their professional, educational, financial, physical, and emotional wellness.

Despite these challenging findings, it is critically important to note that the women overwhelmingly loved their jobs. They shared their experiences out of a desire to strengthen their field and advocate for their needs – rather than complain about what they lack. When asked why the teachers do what they do, most of them shared that they considered their work both a responsibility to give back to their communities and an integral part of their identities. “I teach,” said Ms. LaTonya:

to help change the lives of young children and inspire them to be successful, to give back to the community, and encourage my students to set educational goals for higher education. My purpose is to serve the youth and to give them the proper education that is needed to provide for themselves and their families (Focus Group 3).

Ms. Berakiah and Ms. Talia echoed this sentiment, sharing how their work is an extension of a spirit within—or a calling:

By nature, I just have that nurturing feel, that spirit to welcome and support children, and I have a real passion for teaching. I have a true passion for children and young adults, so this [job] was like the big halo. This is it. This is me. So, that’s why I became a teacher (Ms. Berakiah, Focus Group 6).



And I think you've got to have "it," I mean, it has to be instilled in you. You just can't go and say, okay, I want my degree in education. It's got to be something that's coming from within. With everything that you have to go through in the classroom. It's really not easy, so you just have to have it in you to teach (Ms. Talia, Focus Group 4).

The teachers, therefore, considered their role more substantial than the quality mandates they navigate. They defined it in spiritual terms, as something that drives them to nurture, inspire, and serve children and families. This orientation could be indispensable to the field as it signals a population of teachers committed to their schools, classrooms, and communities. Therefore, Georgia's quality system may burden teachers who would otherwise wholeheartedly want to be in the field.

## Discussion

While the state's uncoordinated quality system creates stress for all ECE teachers, Black women's wellness may adversely play out in the space between quality expectations and the resources to provide children with exceptional classroom experiences. Improving classroom quality without paying full attention to the structural supports framing teacher and environmental practices continues the problematic historical record of requiring Black women to make a way out of no way (both in the classroom and in their own lives; Harris-Perry, 2011). Without a clear and coordinated monitoring system, affordable opportunities for educational advancement, adequate and equitable pay, and full health care benefits, the call for professionalization is located in intersectional patterns of suppression that create disproportionately adverse outcomes for Black women.

Britto et al. (2014) posited that organizational systems, not individual practices, produce quality outcomes. Therefore, Georgia's ECE system should be as responsible for coordinating sustainable supports for its workforce as teachers are accountable for developing child outcomes. Unfortunately, minimal research is available to guide policymakers in this direction (Lobman & Ryan, 2008). The findings from this study, however, suggest that the state should conduct a rigorous analysis of regulatory tools used by private and public ECE benefactors to streamline observational practices across sectors. Doing so would clarify the confusion produced by the competing standards the teachers described. Given Georgia's commitment to improving teacher qualifications through advanced education and training (DECAL, 2017) and the teachers' lack of compensation for meeting this expectation, the state should ensure that the educational costs teachers incur are reflected in their rank and pay after they graduate. Such a move is credited with improving teacher retention (Bridges et al., 2011; Greene, 1999).

Considering that decreased well-being is associated with unfavorable teacher practices and child outcomes (Smith & Lawrence, 2019), it is critical to ensure that ECE teachers have full health care benefits, including paid vacation and sick leave. The teachers who participated in this study lacked access to these essential benefits in ways that adversely permeated their personal lives—a finding also consistent with the literature (Madrid & Dunn-Kenney, 2010). It is in the interest of the state, then, to secure these critical structural supports. Studies have shown that most teachers leave the field because of low wages (Austin et al., 2011) and turnover rates are higher for teachers of color than for white teachers (Achinstein et al., 2010). Simultaneously, there are strong correlations between pay and classroom quality; and teachers of color often improve the classroom experiences and achievement outcomes of students of color (Villegas et al., 2012). It is, then, plausible that supporting Black women teachers in ways that account for the broader classroom context may

attract and retain teachers with the financial, physical, and emotional capacities to create the rich classroom experiences regulators of ECE quality advocate for.

In the new educational era presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, this point is critical. Equitably supporting vulnerable teachers has broader public health implications. ECE centers provide a service that is central to the U.S. economy (Haspel, 2020). Some remained open with face-to-face instruction even at the pandemic's height, and others closed under the weight of economic collapse (Vesoulis, 2020). Some that remained open also provided care for school-age children with only hybrid and virtual K-12 options—taking on more children than they normally would. Additionally, ECE settings employ women of color at higher rates than their white counterparts (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2018). Because of this, women from Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) ethnicities risk greater coronavirus exposure in exchange for their livelihood. If Black women's physical, mental, and financial health was at-risk in the pre-pandemic context, it is even more so now. The imperative for racial and gender equity in pay, educational advancement, and health and wellness benefits is clear. Supportive systemic structures for Black women, and by extension all women, may produce quality classroom outcomes and develop protective factors in the communities their work is at the center of.

### **Limitations and Future Directions in Research**

It is important to note that this study's limitation was that it was conducted with a single nonprofit ECE provider in Georgia. The nonprofit was chosen because of its ability to meet the purposeful sampling needs of the research. Given the variation in ECE setting types across the state, however, sampling from one provider limited the study's ability to understand Black women's experiences with quality regulations in, for example, home-based and for-profit childcare centers. We attempted to overcome this limitation by focusing our discussions on the women's tenure in the field (as opposed to their experiences at their current place of employment) and by sampling from multiple centers within the provider's network. However, we acknowledge that this study could not comment on Black women's disparities across different ECE settings. For this reason, an important future direction in research would be to document and compare the quality rating experiences of Black women ECE teachers in nonprofit, for-profit, and home-based settings. Considering that the women's experiences mirror the historical record, we also find it imperative that this kind of research be conducted from a Black feminist/intersectional standpoint. Further, it is clear that more robust surveys of stress and well-being with the ability to disaggregate data according to multiple social identities is needed to truly understand teacher equity in the field (Saluja et al., 2002). A promising opportunity to do so may be to supplement broad surveys of early childhood educators that already exist, such as the National Survey of Early Care and Education (Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation, 2017). Doing so might produce data to promote Black women's counter-stories and better capture how work compensation and working conditions impact ECE socio-economic and teaching experiences across demographic groups.

### **Conclusion**

After viewing and discussing the narratives and photographs of Black women caring for children throughout history, Ms. Tina said:

[Looking at the pictures] can kinda make you feel like okay, am I still a maid?  
Because you're not, but some people don't have benefits in the field. You're not appreciated. It is more than babysitting, but you're not as important as you think you are. There's this stereotype, and you're stuck here—even when you get educated and

decide to be in this field. It's like time has changed. There's a little bit more compassion, but let's take off the apron. I'm not your maid...Times have changed. Don't just give me your baby soiled. I'm not your maid. (Focus Group 8)

We cannot ignore the racialized history of child care, the disparities in pay, health, and wellness it has produced, and the broader societal stressors Black women ECE teachers face outside of their classrooms. Coupled with their low pay rates, inadequate access to important employee benefits, and the burdens their work places on their loved ones, it is clear that Black women teachers of young children carry stressors that likely influence (and are influenced by) their teaching practices. Without sustained structural supports to address these realities, monitoring quality efforts may reify stereotypical perceptions of inadequate Black teachers. We therefore call for the coordination of a quality system that eliminates competing standards across monitoring bodies, provides access to higher education for those already employed in the ECE system, equitably increases teacher pay, and ensures full health care and wellness benefits. We make this call for the state of Georgia and support efforts to see similar initiatives materialized in states across the US. As Black women early childhood teachers feel the effects of gender-racism in the field “most acutely” (Ullrich et al., 2016, p.1), we must value their work by compensating their labor through the healthful lens of antiracism and antisexism wherever they are.

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