HOW PARENT CHOICE AND LEADERSHIP PRACTICES SHAPE SOCIOECONOMIC DIVERSITY WITHIN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS IN BALTIMORE CITY

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Abstract:
To better understand how parent choice and program leadership foster socioeconomic diversity within community early learning programs, this in-depth case study examines two high-quality, socioeconomically diverse community early education program sites operating in Baltimore City. Key findings of this study include: (1) Despite their shared belief in its value and benefit, parents across the income continuum did not explicitly seek out enrollment in socioeconomically diverse early care and learning programs; (2) Within the two selected program sites, program recruitment and engagement approaches were neither explicit nor refined enough to appeal universally to parents across varying economic backgrounds; and (3) Both parents and leaders may struggle against their own class-based social identities and internalized value systems in enacting either the choice of program or leadership practices that drive the development of socioeconomically diverse settings.

In the last two decades, research has increasingly demonstrated that public investment in high-quality early care and education, particularly when focused on low-income children, pays off in terms of improved outcomes for young learners in academic achievement and overall well-being (Heckman, 2011). These findings, informed by developmental neuroscience (Phillips & Shonkoff, 2000), as well as rigorous program evaluation and policy research (Barnett, 1995), have driven the steady growth of public funding for early care and education programs. Now, a growing evidence base within the early childhood (EC) field also demonstrates that socioeconomic status (SES) diversity in early learning settings improves kindergarten readiness and social-emotional development for all children (Potter, 2019).

Yet, despite the growing public investment in EC, the majority of low-SES young children remain less likely to experience early care and learning in a high-quality environment, and far less likely to be served in an SES-diverse setting (Greenberg & Monarrez, 2019). In many communities, longstanding patterns of income-based residential segregation remain a formidable obstacle to achieving SES integrated early learning settings. In an analysis of 384 urban areas, Reid & Kagan (2015) found that "many children who are three to five years old reside in neighborhoods with levels of racial and economic segregation that are very high, and higher than for older children" (p. 6). Additionally, EC programs that are designed to target services toward low-income populations, including subsidized child care, Head Start, and some state and local Pre-K initiatives, may in fact be further hampering the availability of more SES integrated early learning settings, and run the risk of perpetuating K–12 disparities in educational opportunity (Potter, 2019).

With the promise of EC education's return on investment so strongly demonstrated, it is alarming to consider how lessons gleaned from K–12 research on SES-based disparities are not readily transferring to intentional policies and practices that would increase SES diversity within early learning classrooms (Kahlenberg, 2013). New research about the benefits of SES diversity and a burgeoning universal Pre-K movement—which invites program access to children of all socioeconomic backgrounds—are reframing early education's traditional policy rationales and targeted funding mechanisms (Potter, 2019). As the EC field continues to learn more about the benefits of designing opportunities for income-diverse early care and learning experiences and address the policy hurdles in doing so, this study examines gaps in our understanding about how parent decision-making and program leadership shape the operationalization of urban, community-based, SES-diverse early learning settings.

This study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What are parents' perspectives on their experience of choosing and participating in a SES-diverse program?; and (2) What are organizational executive and site-level program leaders' perspectives on how their leadership practices allow their early care and learning programs to serve a SES-diverse population of children and families? The setting of Baltimore City offers a rich opportunity to explore the development and sustainability of SES-diverse early learning environments prior to the potential implementation of a statewide, universal Pre-K program. Like most American

urban areas, Baltimore's neighborhoods are starkly segregated along lines of both income and race. Currently, it is estimated that fewer than a dozen schools within the district's 85 schools demonstrate racial and SES diversity, which are defined by, respectively, having a make-up of less than 90% of a single race and less than 75% low-income students (Bowie, 2017).

Study Background and Framing

The need for the EC field to identify potential strategies for increasing SES diversity within early care and learning programs stems from both an educational equity stance (Reid & Kagan, 2015), and empirical evidence showing improved student outcomes in school readiness and academic achievement (Potter, 2019). For the purposes of this study, it is helpful to understand the EC policy context, the research base driving income integration efforts, as well as background knowledge on the implications of parent choice patterns and leadership practices for EC program design and operationalization. It is also necessary to examine the intersectionality between race and class within the scope of this study.

The Early Childhood Education Policy Landscape

EC care and education constitutes a complex policy landscape. Overall, the estimated percentage of all children ages three to six (including those not yet enrolled in kindergarten) enrolled in any type of early care and education program has steadily grown throughout the last decade, reaching a rate of 60% in 2019 (Corcoran & Steinley, 2019). The recognition of the interplay between SES and school readiness (García & Weiss, 2017) has resulted in a complex system of publicly funded programs designed to target supports towards low-income families, including federally and state subsidized child care, Early Head Start/Head Start, and some state and local Pre-K initiatives. School districts now increasingly provide Pre-K, and may partner with community-based providers to increase program capacity, as well as provide before- and after-care services.

Most families, regardless of their income level, struggle to afford high-quality early care and education. The annual cost of an early care and learning program for a four-year-old may run as high as 13 percent of a two-parent family's income. In many states, a family with two children in center-based child care pay more for this service than they do to cover their housing costs (Child Care Aware of America, 2019). Despite the availability of publicly subsidized services, there is limited capacity to serve all eligible families (Child Care Aware of America, 2019). Families of all income levels who may select private pay often face high enrollment costs. In addition, the cost of care for infants is significantly higher.

The Benefits of Strengthening Socioeconomic Diversity within Early Childhood Learning Environments

Despite the patchwork of policies that have contributed to and perpetuate income-segregated EC programs, emerging research continues to show the benefits of strengthening socioeconomic diversity within early care and education settings. There are now a number of Pre-K studies specifically focused on the effects of SES diversity on children's levels of school readiness, including social-emotional development (Bagby et al., 2004; Cascio, 2019; Reid, 2012; Schechter & Bye, 2007). These studies focus on comparative outcomes in classrooms within universal Pre-K programs, where students from varying income backgrounds are able to attend together.

One such study is Reid's (2012) research on classroom data drawn from 11 state Pre-K programs serving four-year-olds. Overall, Reid found that the SES composition of Pre-K classrooms was a significant and positive predictor of children's receptive language, expressive language, and math learning while controlling for children's own SES, other background factors, and the racial and ethnic composition of the class. The study concludes that SES composition was not significantly related to children's social skills development after controlling for children's SES, other background factors, and the classroom racial and ethnic composition. Reid also found that key aspects of program quality, including higher levels of instructional quality and smaller class sizes, were not the explanation for the strong relationship between classroom SES composition and learning outcomes. Finally, Reid's analysis determined that the effect of classroom SES composition supersedes that of individual students' backgrounds, and that these effects are more influenced more by peer-to-peer interactions, not directly by instructional quality.

The Impact of Affordability, Access, and Quality on Parent Choice

The SES composition of EC programs is in large part rooted in parent decision-making about their program setting selection. EC policies characterize parents as free market consumers who are able to exercise personal choice—within individually determined parameters of affordability and access—to select the most appropriate early care and learning option for their child (Henry & Gordon, 2006). Research shows that parents across the income continuum who choose a community program option may base their decision on a number of factors, including perceptions of program quality, the ease of transportation, and proximity to their place of employment (Gormley & Gayer, 2005; Meyers & Jordan, 2006).

However, degrees of parent choice are a de facto function of SES and availability of options based on parental income. Lower income families often confront the challenge of accessing high-quality early care and learning programs based on their availability and affordability (Riley & Glass, 2002). Furthermore, parents of all income levels may also face challenges in accessing programs that align with their work schedules, or proximity to home or work. Many families may instead make do with compromises to their ideal preference for early care and learning arrangements (Fuller et al., 1996). As Reid (2012) notes, "This makes [parents] the ultimate arbiters of quality within the constraints of supply" (p. 72). This also means parents' choices will ultimately determine whether and how SES diversity may take shape in early care and learning settings.

While the factors of affordability, accessibility, and availability of quality environments have been shown to be consistent concerns across parents of all income levels, the interaction between decision points and equitably available options has resulted in decisions that "demonstrate stratification based on income and family background borne out by multiple studies" (Meyers & Jordan, 2006, p. 52). Stemming from the interplay between historical and persistent patterns of residential SES segregation, the fact remains that "for low and middle income families, the choices are often meager and low quality" (Fuller et al., 2004). Although the EC marketplace allows for some flexibility in decision-making, families nonetheless remain segregated by income.

Despite these challenges, parent choice within the EC marketplace still offers parents program options that may supersede SES-based limitations, including residential segregation. Further, as cities and states move to expand Pre-K programs beyond serving solely low-income families, universal accessibility of programs may result in parents across the income continuum being more likely to send their children to programs that operate with the support of public Pre-K funds—regardless of the school- or community-based setting in which they operate (Potter, 2019).

How Social Capital, Social Networks, and Class Identity Constructs Shape Parent Choice of Early Childhood Programs

Because this study explores parent decisions about program choice related to the SES makeup of settings, it is also important to consider how parents also construct their preferences and beliefs about early care and education through the context of their own lives and personal networks. Meyers and Jordan's (2006) framework speaks directly to these decision-making processes in regard to child care choices. Decisions may be influenced by parental preferences, beliefs, access to relevant information, and the supply of child care options and other resources, including awareness of available programs. Parent awareness may most often be gained via information shared by and among other parents of young children within existing social networks (Meyers & Jordan, 2006), a finding also supported by Gadsden and Dixon-Román's (2017) study of urban families that develop networks of community awareness and social support. Small's (2009) seminal study on social network development among low-income parents within New York City child care centers also underscores the importance of parent information sharing as the basis for their decision process. Small focuses directly on community-based EC programs as his research setting, a similarity shared by this study.

Finally, Reay's (2008) research on understanding the role of class identity bridges concepts of how perceived levels of social capital based on parents' self-defined SES and access to social networking interact to influence parent choice patterns. Reay's study of 63 urban middle-class parents in the United Kingdom who opted to enroll their children in struggling public schools that served predominantly lower-income students hones in on the self-conflicting and "psychosocial" nature of this choice. He observes that these parents are, in effect, "managing deeply felt and unresolved tensions in relation to their children's schooling…tensions generated through the contradictory interplay of cooperation and competition, consumerism and welfarism" (p. 1074). Reay concludes that, "If we are to develop complex understandings of social reproduction and social privilege we need to give serious consideration to how class and race are lived psychologically and socially" (p. 1085). Parents in this study that are navigating their own social networks in gathering information and making decisions about the choice of an early care and education setting for their child may grapple with these tensions as well.

The Influence of Program Leadership on Socioeconomically Diverse Early Learning Programs

At the program level, EC studies have focused on understanding the mediating influences of high-quality instruction and peer learning effects on student achievement outcomes—and we are learning a great deal in these areas that will continue to better inform policy decisions (Reid & Kagan, 2015). However, current research has not yet examined the critical role leaders of EC programs at both the organizational executive and program levels play in developing and supporting SES-diverse learning environments. This study explores leader perceptions of their role related specifically to the SES diversity of their programs.

Leadership has been shown to be an essential factor in the effectiveness of high-quality EC programs, which tend to embody characteristics such as a language-rich environment, sensitive and responsive teachers, child-focused communication with the child's home, higher levels of teacher professional development, smaller child/adult ratios, and lower staff turnover (Rodd, 1996). Sustaining a high-quality learning environment, the linchpin of producing positive child academic and social-emotional outcomes,

means EC leaders must enact a range of roles and possess multi-faceted skills and competencies (Muijs et al., 2004). Bloom (1992) and Rodd's (1996) research identifies several core competencies that encompass organizational leadership skills, including knowledge of child development and teaching strategies, staff support and development, parent engagement, as well as budgeting and management acumen.

Early childhood program leaders may also impact the development and sustainability of SES-diverse programs more broadly. Rodd's (1996) typology of early childhood leadership skills recognizes that early childhood leaders play a vital role as change agents within larger scale policy and program change initiatives. Similarly, Kagan and Hallmark (2001) suggest that early childhood professionals may also straddle various leadership contexts including administrative, community, advocacy, and conceptual, referring to early childhood leadership within the broader frameworks of social movements and change.

Understanding Race and Resistance in Socioeconomic Integration of Early Childhood Programs

Although it was not a core focus of this study, the scope of this inquiry does suggest the need for consideration of the intersectionality of race and class, and the role racial bias plays in parental assumptions and EC program decisions. DiAngelo's (2016) research underscores how intertwined these dual modes of race- and class-based self-identity may become, yet how critical it is that they be unpacked separately to truly discern aspects of perceived "white fragility" (p. 220) and racism that may underpin social identity. While this study focuses on socioeconomic, not racial, diversity within early care and education settings, it is still vitally important to consider how these program characteristics may overlap to influence parent perceptions and choices.

In addition to the study limitations discussed below, this study does not directly address the convergence of SES based segregation with race-based disparities in both educational opportunity and academic achievement (Kahlenberg, 2013). The broader dialogue about SES diversity, and therefore racial integration, encompasses political, racial, social, cultural, and economic dimensions that are outside the scope of this study. Future research should seek to incorporate these lenses, framed more broadly around issues of equity and social justice, in any continued examination of how parent choice and leadership practices shape SES diversity within EC programs.

Methodology

This case study examined parent choice trends and leadership practices within two high-quality, SES-diverse community EC program sites operating in Baltimore City.

Site Selection

According to the United States Census, Baltimore has a total population of approximately 593,490 and has an overall poverty rate of 20.4%. However, within that 23%, 45% of children under the age of six in Baltimore live in poverty (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Two program sites within Baltimore City were selected because their organizational missions articulate a commitment to SES diversity and serve a range of families with varying income levels. The two programs are located in different areas of the city and have different organizational histories. The racial demographics within the enrollment populations of the two programs are roughly equivalent, serving 70% African-American children; 20% white children; with the remaining 10% of children identifying as Asian, Latino, or other racial identities. Both programs serve children from birth to age five, offer full or part-day options, as well as additional aftercare services.

Data Collection

Within each case study site, study participants were the program executive director and the program site director, as well as ten parents of children who attend the program. Participating parents were purposefully sampled based on their representation of the range of family income scales served by each program.

Each type of study participant took part in a separate interview protocol. All interviews were designed to be semi-structured, last 30 minutes and were conducted on site in private with each individual participant. In addition, a parent focus group was held on-site at each study site. Each focus group was designed to last no more than an hour. Parents from the sample voluntarily opted to participate, resulting in a group of six parents at one program site, and eight parents at the other program site. This study also incorporated data collected via an electronic survey of program level leaders in 170 high-quality, community-based EC program sites in Baltimore City that may or may not self-identify as serving families from a diverse range of income backgrounds. Thirty-seven completed surveys were received in response, a response rate of 65%. Approximately 75% of survey participants identified their EC program as SES-diverse.

Researcher Positionality

Because all in-depth interviews with parents and program executive and site-level leaders were conducted in person, the researcher's own external markers of social identity as a white woman may have been a factor in how respondents chose to act and respond within interviews. In addition to the study limitations discussed below, potential response bias based on researcher positionality should be recognized.

Findings

In order to answer this study's two research questions, findings generated by parent participants are considered separately from those generated by program leaders. Implications drawn from the findings across the two groups of study participants—parents and leaders—are then synthesized in the subsequent Discussion section.

Parent Perceptions

The findings summarized here categorize responses as similarities and differences across parents grouped as Tuition Support (TS) and Full Tuition (FT). For purposes of this study, tuition support parents ($N = 6$) are defined as those who rely partially or fully on some form of public funding support to participate in an EC program, while FT parents ($N = 14$) are defined as those who pay full program tuition. Findings on parent perspectives reflect analysis of parent responses based on a synthesis of both interview and focus group data.

Parent Choice Trends across Affordability, Accessibility, and Quality

All parents reported that cost, logistics, and transportation were primary factors in their program choice. Both FT and TS parents reported that their choice of program was primarily influenced by basic factors of cost, logistics, and transportation. All parents also discussed meeting the challenge of affording the high cost of a quality early care and learning program. However, it is important to note that cost clearly posed a more significant challenge for parents with lower incomes. All parents also reported that their perceptions of program quality constitute an important factor in their program selection decision. The majority of parents in both groupings identified similar criteria for making their decisions based on program quality, including the use of a structured curriculum and teacher-child ratios. Within discussions of program quality, parents across the income continuum spoke about how significant teacher qualifications are as an indicator of quality.

A key finding was that all parents also reported relying heavily on word-of-mouth in identifying high-quality program options The use of resources to aid in identifying and locating high-quality program options does not differ dramatically across parents from different income backgrounds. Echoing Meyers and Jordan's (2006) framework, parents across the income spectrum reported that they relied primarily on word-of-mouth among other parents in their neighborhoods and families, as well as public web sites. All parents also spoke to how important an on-site visit was to them in making their program choice.

The Influence of Social Capital, Social Networks, and Class Identity on Perceived Parent Agency

Both FT and TS parents expressed the belief that their children would benefit by participating in a mixed-income environment. For example, one FT parent stated, "I think it's very important for (child) to know that she lives a life of privilege, and that not everybody out there has the same resources that we do. And I think her growing up in this environment will be a real character strength for her" (FT Parent, Interview). TS parents also spoke to this, remarking, "…I'm on, say, a lower end, not necessarily a poverty line income but just lower than what some other people make, so to have my child to connect or be in the same learning space with someone whose parents make three or four times more than what I do…just to be children and enjoy and learn from one another" (TS Parent, Interview). These parental perceptions mirror previous research showing that SES-diverse programs produce strengthened socio-emotional developmental outcomes for young children, including empathy (Reid & Kagan, 2015).

However, despite this shared belief in the value of SES-diverse learning environments, a particularly compelling finding was that FT parents appeared to be more directly motivated by a sense of social justice in selecting an income-diverse program and recognizing the benefits to their children. FT parents also more readily expressed a sense of personal agency in contributing to program SES diversity participation in a SES-diverse program as an enactment of their own agency and ability to serve a greater good within the community, or even more broadly on a societal level. Comments from higher income parents included,

"I grew up going to public school. I was a minority in my public school…and it was a pretty diverse school…I've always valued that part of my education and I think that's the way to fix a lot of our education problems, after reading those articles and listening to some American Life podcasts. Integration is needed to fix a lot of the problems. I want to, as much as I can, help fix that. Not using my child, but having her be a part of that process" (FT Parent, Interview);

as well as, "Baltimore has some great areas, but it has some horrible areas too. So they need to have places like this" (FT Parent, Interview).

In contrast, TS parents also spoke about their ability to access a SES-diverse program as a positive benefit to their children, but did not express their decision to participate with the same sense of agency. They expressed the benefits of program participation as something they pursued, but unlike FT parents, not something they actively helped construct as an environmental dynamic. This finding was consistent with Cucchiara et al.'s (2011) discussion of how parents' perceptions of their own social capital may serve to empower their sense of choice and consumerism.

Another key finding was that FT parents were more aware than TS parents that they may actively strengthen program quality. Although both groups of parents recognize that income diversity is a factor within overall program quality, only FT parents talked about how their participation in the program *directly* impacts other aspects of program quality. Several FT parents indicated that they are actively aware that they can leverage their agency and influence to improve program functionality and quality. For example, one FT parent stated, "…It's not just caring about the school, but it's actually knowing what questions to ask, and what strings to pull, and having the wherewithal to do their own research and to try to inject some change into the school" (FT Parent, Interview). Some FT parents expressed that they are self-aware that they are making this choice at an economic cost, and in fact forfeiting some of the individual benefit they may receive from a program that serves a more SES homogenous population of higher-income families. For example, one FT parent stated, echoing Raey's (2008) study findings, "I'm not proud of myself that I thought it but I have. Sometimes, I get a little indignant about the fact that we pay $19,000 to give [our daughter] this level of care and other people pay nothing…. Ultimately, I know though, that we are privileged. We have the ability to do this, so we will and we can. Not many people can" (FT Parent, Interview). In contrast, TS parents did not speak at all to this aspect of program participation.

In addition to economic costs, some FT parents also experienced a perceived lack of return on their investment of social capital into mixed-income programs. In contrast, TS parents emphasized feeling the individual benefits of their participation. While FT parents tended to recognize that their sense of agency and the social capital they brought into the program yielded positive effects on program operations and quality overall, they also spoke about shortcomings in networking and social engagement opportunities they felt they experienced based on the program's mixed SES make-up. In these instances, FT parents expressed disappointment or frustration that they were missing out on the return in social networking capital within a more bidirectional or reciprocal relationship that a less SES-diverse center might have afforded them. For example,

"…I take note of myself being very envious of some of my friends, who live in the suburbs of D.C., and have their children in centers that are not mixed income models, and the automatic social group that they seem to sort of build, because, everybody, all of the families are exactly the same. You send your child to this center, then it becomes your social network. That doesn't happen here in the same way, because not all families are the same, and we aren't all experiencing the same things in our lives, and it's more challenging for us to come together…. So I just find myself feeling more socially isolated as a parent." (FT Parent, Interview)

Finally, FT parents also expressed a sense of frustration with and disengagement in what they perceived as a programmatic focus skewed towards the interest of lower-income parents. For example, FT parents observed,

"Going to the parents' meetings…this sounds bad. I just sit through some of them. It's almost like a sociological experiment. There are topics on workforce training, and how to expunge your criminal record, and how to deal with child custody cases…. I think the things they care about at the school…are different from the things I care about at the school. That's also very interesting. I think it makes the school better" (FT Parent, Interview);

and,

"When we were doing our initial meeting for enrollment with somebody who was a family support person, also handled the enrollment. So there were a lot of like strange, to us, forms and paperwork that didn't make any sense. And questions that we're not used to.... Like she asked if [my child] had a pediatrician. And to me, I was like, "Of course, she has a pediatrician. (FT Parent, Interview)

However, several TS parents spoke positively of how programs offered a wide range of parent supports and services that they found to be helpful and relevant. Like the parents in Small's (2009) study, TS parents recognized that their choice of EC program afforded them opportunities for connectivity and collaborative partnership. For example, one TS parent noted her appreciation of parent support services and meetings, stating, "…but they have programs if you want to participate, like if you want to volunteer of if you need food, higher education. There's so much that they provide" (TS Parent, Interview).

Leader Perceptions

Analysis of program leader interviews and survey data yielded several findings that inform our understanding of factors that influence leadership practices within SES-diverse EC programs. These findings reflect analysis of leader responses based on a synthesis of both interview and survey data.

The Influence of Programmatic Socioeconomic Diversity on Leadership Practices

Like parent study participants, both executive and site-level leaders overwhelmingly recognized the importance and value of socioeconomic diversity. Leaders consistently expressed their belief in the importance and value of SES-diverse early care and learning programs. Leader reflections on this value articulated in interviews and survey feedback included statements such as, "I don't see our vision of a mixed income, mixed ethnic, racial community as anything but an asset to attract multi-income families. I think it's such a valuable asset. The only challenge is how do you maintain it fiscally?" (Executive Leader); as well as, "Policies should hinder socioeconomic homogenous grouping of children. Research suggests that diverse populations foster greater learning outcomes for all children" (Site Leader).

Leaders most commonly cited meeting the diverse needs of families as the leadership practice most critical for operating a mixed-income EC program. Some leaders stressed that serving children from low-income backgrounds was accompanied by particular challenges in meeting family needs, noting, "[There are a]…lack of resources to support children with trauma/poverty as a part of their family's experience" (Site Leader).

Like parent study participants across the income spectrum, program leaders also acknowledged the teacher qualifications are a significant indicator of program quality. Several leaders expressed concern that program capacity to recruit and retain high-quality staff is particularly important in operating a SES-diverse setting, as well as the need to identify and recruit staff who possess the cultural competence to work with children of varying income backgrounds. Consistent with Bloom's (1992) recognition of the broad range of skills EC leaders must command, leaders also discussed also challenges related to blending and braiding funding resources needed to meeting the challenges of achieving high-quality SES-diverse programming.

Leaders, like parent participants, recognized that cost, location, and quality are the primary drivers behind parent choice. Moreover, although leaders recognize that parents do care deeply about program quality, they also indicated that cost and location may be deciding factors in program identification and selection. Several leaders made statements such as, "Parents attend mainly based on geographic location, so they tend to choose programs in proximity to their home so choice plays a major role as neighborhoods do not tend to be socioeconomically diverse" (Site Leader).

Leaders, like parents, readily acknowledged that word-of-mouth is the most commonly used resource among parents in identifying and selecting an EC program. Further, as Potter's (2015) research suggests, they spoke of the ability to leverage this parental communication network as an effective recruitment strategy for their programs. For example, leaders stated, "I do think in a lot of cases, it is word of mouth. I think that's the best advertising" (Executive Leader), and one Site Leader observed, "If families don't enroll, diversity doesn't happen. They can also be great advocates and marketing teams for programs" (Site Leader).

Perceptions of Parent Social Class Identity and Leadership Practices

Leaders clearly recognized the need to structure SES-diverse programs to feel inviting to parents across the income continuum. Within this perspective, leaders' perceptions of parent engagement aligned with those of FT parents, with several leaders observing that programs tended to be skewed toward lower income parents in designing and executing their family engagement strategies. For example, one site leader remarked,

> …I didn't want the tuition paying parents to feel as if efforts weren't being geared toward them, if that makes sense, where it's this constant conversation of, 'But oh, but this doesn't apply to you. Oh, this doesn't apply to you,' because that doesn't really much match the model either. So it's really about bringing that into more balance. (Site Leader)

However, although several leaders articulated the challenge of engaging SES-diverse families—and particularly those who are higher income—more consistently, they did not elaborate on specific strategies to engage parents across the income spectrum.

Leaders recognized that the social justice driver particularly among higher-income parents suggests a potential recruitment practice. Leaders appeared to echo this study's finding that higher income parents felt driven to enroll their children in a SES-diverse EC program setting based on a sense of social justice. For example, one site leader observed,

> But a lot of our parents, I've found, are very social justice minded, and they love and really advocate the idea of a mixed model. It's something that they frequently talk about and share about the program, share with other parents, and really always come to me, 'What can we do to spread the word?' (Site Leader)

However, although readers indicated that they understood how this sensibility might be leveraged as a recruitment strategy among higher-income parents, it is interesting to note that leaders did not readily reflect on what might motivate lower-income parents to seek out a SES-diverse setting.

Finally, leaders perceive negative assumptions among some FT parents as a possible recruitment disincentive.Although leaders did not identify recruitment as a primary challenge in effectively operating a SES-diverse program, their responses to both survey and interview questions indicated that they recognize that negative assumptions among higher-income parents regarding the quality of mixed-income settings as a barrier to recruitment. One site leader stated,

> It plays a big role. A lot of parents think that the child development center in a low socioeconomically neighborhood would not be good for their children…If some parents would get away from the stereotypical way of thinking and give those centers a chance, the neighborhood would grow. (Site Leader)

Echoing DiAngelo's (2016) discussion of intertwined modes of self-identification, reader perspectives also suggest that they recognize how socio-cultural and racial biases may be an underlying cause of parent assumptions and perceptions of mixed-income programs. For example,

> It is my experience that race plays a role in the decision making process. I have had parents ask about the racial make-up of our children. One parent wanted their child in a diverse group. The others wanted their children with others of the same race. In this area the majority of African Americans are in a low socioeconomic area. (Site Leader)

Although several leaders recognized how these assumptions on the part of parents may challenge the recruitment of SES-diverse families—and particularly those who are higher income—they did not elaborate on specific strategies to counteract or address assumptions and biases within their recruitment strategies.

Discussion

This study's findings reveal a core conceptual gap between the beliefs and values expressed by both parent and leader study participants, and their perceived capacity of their own personal agency to enact those beliefs and values. All study participants—including parents across the income continuum and leaders—expressed their belief in the universal benefits of high-quality, SES-diverse EC programming for all children, regardless of their family income background. Yet, despite the shared belief in the value and positive benefits of SES-diverse programs, all study participants also expressed that they struggled with their own personal agency in realizing this vision. Parents across the income continuum did not express an explicit intentionality about seeking out SES-diverse settings. And, while leaders recognized that targeted recruitment and engagement practices were needed to foster SES diversity within their programs, particularly among higher-income parents, they did not readily identify recruitment strategies.

The underlying motivations for these inconsistencies may be explained by considering these findings within the context of Reay's (2008) research that explored the internal tensions higher income parents may feel in selecting early care and education environments that are socioeconomically integrated. FT parents shared reflections on their choice process and program experience that reveal they are grappling with their own class-based social identities and deeply internalized value systems, including perceived superiority and privilege. Both leaders and parents also spoke to their perceptions of assumptions held among higher income parents regarding the quality of programs that serve a mixed-income population. TS parents may also have been navigating self-conflicting assumptions and widely held perceptions of their role in and the value of SES-diverse programs, reinforced by their own social and community networks (Gadsden & Dixon-Román, 2017). Parents across the income

continuum, as well as among program leaders, may also have been struggling to reconcile tensions driven by the intersectionality of their markers of social identity with race, as recognized by DiAngelo (2016).

Overall, this underlying tension and conceptual dissonance resulted in several operational disconnects that may impede the development and sustainability of SES-diverse programs. First, parent study participants reported that the primary means of gathering information about their program choice was via word of mouth within their own social networks. However, because parents across the income continuum are not explicitly seeking out SES-diverse programs, their shared belief in the value of these programs does not appear to have been collectively absorbed or reflected by their social networking communications (Gadsden & Dixon-Román, 2017). Unless their reported individualized value and belief in SES diversity becomes an articulated value among parents of all income backgrounds, it follows that parents will continue to suggest program choices based on the key aspects of programming they prioritize—namely cost, proximity to home and work, and a perceived sense of the quality of the setting.

Second, a strong sense of personal agency within the choice process was undermined among lower income parents who expressed more concern in meeting the cost demands of securing a high-quality early learning program setting for their children than seeking out SES diversity. This finding is consistent with Cucchiara et al.'s (2011) findings that parent choice within a citywide marketplace model was strongly influenced by their perceived sense of political, social, and cultural capital they bring to the consumer marketplace. And third, this study found that within the two selected SES-diverse program sites, program recruitment and family engagement approaches are neither explicit nor refined enough to appeal universally to parents across varying economic backgrounds. Although leader participants overwhelmingly spoke to the need for programs with the capacity and mission to serve families across the income continuum, they did not consistently speak to their role as leaders or agents of social change in terms of explicitly taking on the role of pursing SES diversity within their programs (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001).

This study found that, despite the participants' struggle to parse and balance internalized tensions between their own class-based norms and expectations regarding SES-diverse EC programs, they nonetheless find the concept of such programs appealing and a goal worth pursuing. This articulated commitment to the principle of SES integration suggests that harnessing policy and practice to address the operational barriers observed by this study will ultimately strengthen the development and sustainability of SES-diverse EC programs available to all families.

Study Limitations and Need for Further Research

Despite this study's compelling findings, it is important to recognize several of its limitations. First, existing studies on the benefits of SES-diverse early learning environments focus on preschool age children, while the study population for this study includes parents of children ages birth to five. The inclusion of children up to age 3 in this study's age range may mitigate parents' perceptions of the benefits of SES-diverse environments regarding their children's school readiness outcomes. Second, this study's small sample size presents limitations on the implications that may be drawn from its findings. Third, although the distribution of parents of varying income levels within the parent sample reflects the distribution of parent income-levels in the selected program sites, overall, this study's parent sample is skewed to those families at the higher end of the income continuum.

The findings discussed here suggest several areas for further research that would extend the design of this research study and deepen our understanding of its findings. First, this study's setting was an urban area with a high concentration of low-income residents. This study might be replicated to examine similar choice trends among SES-diverse programs within a suburban context. By the same token, expanding the scope of this research to consider differential leadership contexts would also be worthwhile. Such a study might focus on how operational characteristics of programs (e.g., non-profit, school-based, family child care, or public-private partnerships) influence both parent and leader perspectives. Finally, in order to better understand how race and class interact to influence these findings, this study might be replicated to include data on the racial distribution among program participants and leaders.

Conclusion

This study's findings suggest that leveraging new understandings about parent choice patterns and leadership practices to inform evidence-based policy and programmatic approaches will contribute to the development and sustainability of SES-diverse early care and learning programs. In addition, EC policies and practices that support SES-diverse EC programs should address the operational barriers observed. At the policy level, this may include policy leaders clearly articulating the value and potential positive impacts of fostering SES-diverse EC programs; expanding universally available public Pre-K, instituting a universal sliding fee scale that encourage more low-income parents to attend tuition-funded programs, subsidizing transportation, and offering full-day, and extended-day program services (Potter, 2019).

Program approaches may include emphasizing the need for articulating the goal of EC diversity in a program mission, targeting program recruitment and family engagement strategies to reach families across income levels, managing the learning environment to meet the needs of diverse learners, and effectively blending and braiding various funding sources and requirements (Potter, 2015). Finally, EC program leaders should be supported to act as advocates and social change agents to give voice to policies that support the development of SES-diverse programs both within and beyond their own communities (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001).

Any consideration of the need to foster SES diversity within the range of early care and learning programs available to parents raises questions that lead us—as researchers and citizens—to deeper questions about the provision of educational opportunity for all children, regardless of their family background and SES status. These are questions of equity and social justice that challenge our most fundamental notions of what high quality EC care and education is and aspires to be. Increasing opportunities for SES-diverse programs directly through our public investments in early care and education represents an important policy pathway to improving overall access to high-quality programs, particularly among the most disadvantaged young children.

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