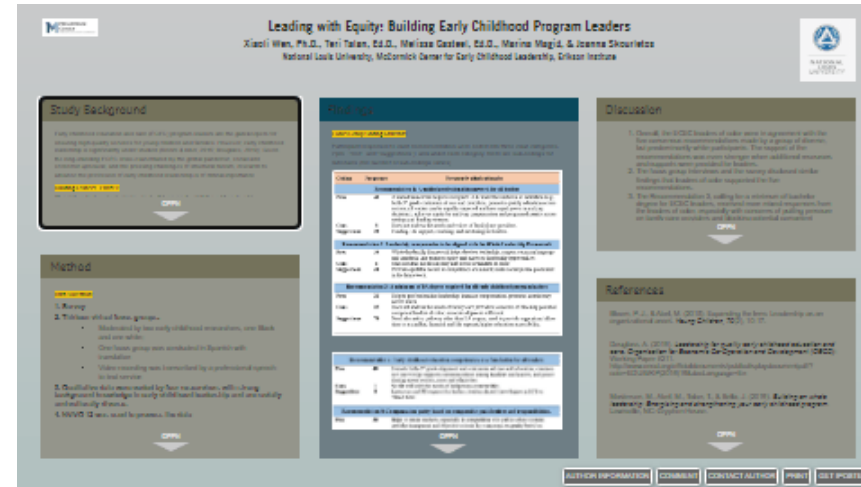# Leading with Equity: Building Early Childhood Program Leaders

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STUDY BACKGROUND

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) program leaders are the gatekeepers for ensuring high-quality services for young children and families. However, early childhood leadership is significantly under studied (Bloom & Abel, 2015; Douglass, 2019). Given the long-standing ECEC crisis exacerbated by the global pandemic, social and economic upheaval, and the pressing challenges of structural racism, research to advance the profession of early childhood leadership is of critical importance.

Building Leaders - Phase I:

Grant-funded project aiming to build an early childhood leadership professional framework based on interviews with over 200 leaders who were predominantly white. Five consensus recommendations were concluded:

Recommendation 1: Calling for a unified professional development framework for program leaders across all sectors (e.g., homes, centers, and schools).

Recommendation 2: Calling for leadership competencies to be aligned with the Whole Leadership Framework -- leadership essentials, pedagogical, and administrative leadership.

Recommendation 3: Calling for a minimum educational level of a BA degree for ECEC program leaders.

Recommendation 4: Calling for early childhood education competencies as a foundation for program leaders.

Recommendation 5: Calling for compensation parity based on comparable qualifications and responsibilities.

Building Leaders - Phase II:

Explores the racial equity impact of implementing the five consensus recommendations, identifying any challenges for leaders of color, and any supports or policy changes needed.

METHOD

Data Collection:

1. Survey

2. Thirteen virtual focus groups:

- Moderated by two early childhood researchers, one Black and one white;

- One focus group was conducted in Spanish with translation

- Video recording was transcribed by a professional speech-to-text service

3. Qualitative data were coded by four researchers with strong background knowledge in early childhood leadership and are racially and culturally diverse.

4. NVIVO 12 was used to process the data

Study Sample:

- **65** program leaders of color from **18 states and District of Columbia**.

- 72% centers, 29% family child cares, 8% public schools; 70% of the programs represeted Head Start or state-funded Pre-K.

- 66% of the leaders identified as Black/African Ameria, 23% Hispanic/Latinx, 3% Asian, 3% American Indian or Alaska native, 3% multiracial, and 2% White or Caucasian.

- 63% had gradaute degrees, 18% bachelor, and 18% with HS or associate degree.

- 23% with more than 20 years of administrative experience, 30% with 10-19 years, 28% with 4-10 years, and 19% with less than 4 years of experience.

Figure 1. States Represented in Sample
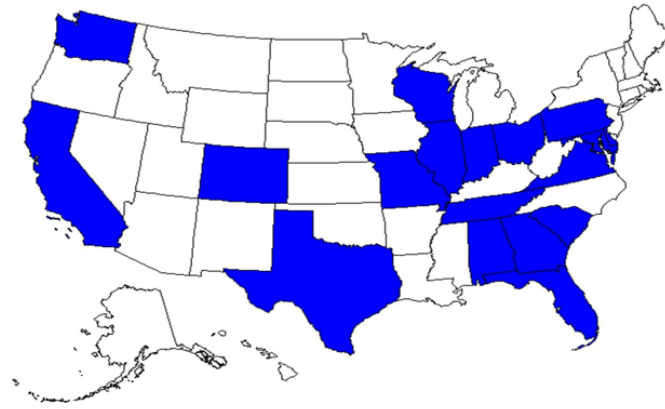
FINDINGS

Focus Group Coding Statistics

Participant responses to each recommendation were coded into three main categories ("pro", "con", and "suggestions"), and under each category, there are sub-codings for rationales (the number of sub-codings varies)

Coding	Frequency	Frequently cited rationales
Recommendation 1: A unified professional framework for all leaders		
Pros	43	A united framework helps to recognize ECE under the umbrella of education (e.g., birth-3rd grade continuum of care and education, promotes quality education across sectors; all leaders can be equally respected and have equal power in making decisions); achieves equity by unifying compensation and program disparity across settings and funding streams.
Cons	8	Does not address the needs and voices of family care providers.
Suggestions	30	Funding, life support, coaching, and mentoring for leaders.
Recommendation 2: Leadership competencies to be aligned with the Whole Leadership Framework		
Pros	33	Whole leadership framework helps develop leadership, support common language and standards that promote equity and access to leadership opportunities.
Cons	3	One size does not fit all; may add stress for leaders of color.
Suggestions	38	Provide equitable access to competency attainment; make social justice prominent in the framework.
Recommendation 3: A minimum of BA degree required for all early childhood program leaders		
Pros	26	Help to professionalize leadership, increase compensation, promotes consistency across states.
Cons	25	Does not address the needs of family care providers; concerns of blocking potential competent leaders of color; associate degree is sufficient.
Suggestions	70	Need alternative pathway other than BA degree; need to provide support and allow time to attain BA; financial and life support; higher education accessibility.

Recommendation 4: Early childhood education competencies as a foundation for all leaders		
Pros	40	Promote birth-3rd grade alignment and continuum of care and education; common core knowledge supports communications among teachers and leaders, and power sharing across sectors, races and ethnicities.
Cons	1	Not fit well with the needs of indigenous communities.
Suggestions	8	Resources and PD support for leaders; leaders should have degree in ECE or related field.

Recommendation 5: Compensation parity based on comparable qualifications and responsibilities.		
Pros	30	Helps to retain teachers, especially in competition with public school system; provides transparent and objective criteria for compensation parity based on education, credential, experience, responsibilities, performance, and budgets.
Cons	0	
Suggestions	35	Dismantle inequality caused by different funding streams; remove barriers and promote access to education and skills; compensation recognize experience and performance in addition to education.

Survey Descriptive Statistics (N = 65)

	Recommendation 1: A unified professional framework for EC leaders across sectors							
	Strongly disagree	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**	**Negative Impact**	**No Impact At All**	**Positive Impact**
Applying a racial equity and social justice lens, do you agree with Recommendation 1	2%		8%	37%	53%			
If the additional supports/resources are in place before Rec. #1 is implemented, what would be the impact on racial equity?						3%	10%	87%
	Recommendation 2: Leadership competencies to be aligned with the Whole Leadership Framework (i.e., pedagogy, administration, leadership essentials)							
Applying a racial equity and social justice lens, do you agree with Recommendation 2	2%		5%	43%	50%			
If the additional supports/resources are in place before Rec. #2 is implemented, what would be the impact on racial equity?						2%	17%	81%
	Recommendation 3: A minimum education level of a BA for early childhood program leaders							
Applying a racial equity and social justice lens, do you agree with Recommendation 3	2%	13%	17%	33%	35%			
If the additional supports/resources are in place before Rec. #3 is implemented, what would be the impact on racial equity?						7%	15%	78%
	Recommendation 4: calling for early childhood education competencies as a foundation for early childhood program leaders							
Applying a racial equity and social justice lens, do you agree with Recommendation 4	2%	3%	3%	32%	60%			
If the additional supports/resources are in place before Rec. #4 is implemented, what would be the impact on racial equity?							8%	92%
	Recommendation 5: calling for compensation parity.							
Applying a racial equity and social justice lens, do you agree with Recommendation 5	1%	2%	2%	25%	70%			
If the additional supports/resources are in place before Rec. #5 is implemented, what would be the impact on racial equity?						3%	3%	94%

DISCUSSION

1. Overall, the ECEC leaders of color were in agreement with the five consensus recommendations made by a group of diverse, but predominantly white participants. The support of the recommendations was even stronger when additional resources and supports were provided for leaders.

2. The focus group interviews and the survey disclosed similar findings that leaders of color supported the five recommendations.

3. The Recommendation 3, calling for a minimum of bachelor degree for ECEC leaders, received more mixed responses from the leaders of color, especially with concerns of putting pressure on family care providers and blocking potential competent leaders who do not meet the degree requirement.

4. The leaders of color consistently called for resources, supports (e.g., financial and life supports, program design, mentoring, coaching, and access to higher education), and policy changes to ensure the equity impact of the five recommendations.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Xiaoli Wen is a professor of early childhood education at National Louis University. Her research focus on the contributions of early childhood programs and families to children's learning. (Xiaoli.wen@nl.edu)

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Dr. Melissa Casteel is a research partner for the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership. She earned a doctorate in adult and continuing education from National Louis University, and holds graduate degrees in early childhood leadership and advocacy, as well as administration and supervision from NLU. With over 25 years of experience in education, Melissa is a researcher and leadership coach focused on cultivating community and building equitable systems.

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Ms. Joanna Skourletos is a doctoral student in Child Development program at Erikson Institute. She has been a Head Start teacher, program manager, professional development facilitator and coach, and worked on several research projects at Erikson and the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research interest focuses on early childhood leadership.