Research Brief

The Impact of Race, Culture, and Language on the Leadership Journeys of ECEC Leaders of Color

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BACKGROUND

Given the current context of a pandemic, social and economic upheaval, and the pressing challenge of structural racism, research to advance the profession of early childhood education and care (ECEC) leadership is of critical importance. The current crises have exacerbated long-standing challenges, such as a lack of coordinated policy, disparate regulations, and fragmented funding (Bassok, Magnuson, & Weiland, 2016). With substantial variation in the quality and availability of ECEC, under-resourced communities remain without the structural and economic support to stabilize services and thrive (Hasikawa, Sells, DeJonge, Alkon, Martin, & Shope, 2020; Malik, Hamm, Schochet, Novoa, Workman, & Jessen-Howard, 2018).

As gatekeepers to quality, ECEC program leaders have a direct impact on organizational climate, teaching practices, and family engagement in their programs (Bloom & Abel, 2015; Douglass, 2019). There has been little research, however, on the diversity of ECEC program leaders. School leaders are predominantly white, with only 20% of public school principals representing individuals of color (USDOE, 2016). In the child care sector, about 40% of the early childhood workforce and 52% of those working with infants and toddlers are women of color, with low wages and scarce opportunities functioning as barriers to advancement (McLean, Austin, Whitebook, & Olson, 2021; NAEYC, 2019). These findings call for an imperative to include the voices of leaders of color in exploring pathways to racial equity and conversations related to the direction of the ECEC profession (Robinson, 2020). There is a critical need to examine and dismantle structural racism and to create an equitable system of inclusion for ECEC program leadership.

The *Leading with Equity: Building Leaders* research project addresses a gap in the existing research by explicitly addressing social justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion in the context of ECEC program leadership structures, systems, and practices. It explores how early childhood leaders of color perceive

their input into the formation of professional competencies, professional development policy, and the future direction of the ECEC leadership profession.

This brief is concerned with just one of the research questions guiding the *Leading with Equity* research project: How has race, culture, or language influenced the leadership journeys of ECEC program leaders of color?

METHODS

Data were collected through 13 semi-structured, virtual focus groups (one was conducted in Spanish with translation provided); each group moderated by two early childhood researchers, one Black and one white. A professional speech-to-text service (Rev.com) transcribed the video recordings.

The sample was comprised of 65 program leaders of color from 18 states and the District of Columbia (with 51% from Illinois). Figure 1 illustrates the geographic distribution of the program leaders in the sample. The ECEC programs led by study participants varied by setting, sector, and funding streams. Programs were located in centers (72%), homes (29%), and public schools (8%). About 70% of the programs represented provided Head Start/Early Head Start or state-funded Pre-K. Table 1 provides the complete program characteristics.

By design the participants were racially and culturally diverse: two-thirds (66%) of the participants identified as Black or African American, 23% identified as Hispanic or Latinx, 3% identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, 3% identified as Asian, 3% identified as Multiracial, and 2% identified as White or Caucasian (one participant was an English learner immigrant from Turkey). Table 2 provides the participant characteristics.

Four researchers coded the data with assistance in defining the coding themes from a national expert on early childhood leadership who is also the project's principal investigator. Overall, the coding team has strong background knowledge in early childhood leadership and qualitative analysis, and is racially and culturally diverse. The researchers used an open-coding method to develop themes based on the first three focus groups transcriptions; codes were further refined and expanded as the coding progressed. The meaning of the data was negotiated until consensus amongst all coders was reached.

Data analysis involved the identification, examination, and interpretation of themes that emerged in the transcribed textual data. NVIVO 12, a qualitative analysis software, was utilized to process the data.

FINDINGS

When did you first think of yourself as an early childhood education and care leader?

Three responses were given most frequently:

- **When I first became an administrator or an entrepreneur** (42% of responses). *I realized I was a leader when I decided to open up my own program, and found out that everything starts with me. If I don't initiate and advocate for myself, then nobody else will.*

- **When I first saw myself as an early childhood professional**, e.g., in a position to support others, consult to others, serve on a professional committee, coach others (32% of responses). *I realized that I was a leader when I was a Children's Program Specialist. I had to help center staff…set up their classrooms. That is when I realized I was a leader, because then I started doing trainings, professional development, and people started calling, asking questions and asking for advice….*

- **When I was validated through professional development** (13% of responses). *I began feeling like a leader… once I became accredited. I think that helped me to start to look at myself that way. Then, over the years, it continued to evolve. I've been in several leadership trainings and served on several committees… I think about some of the committees that I served on when I realized that I had something to share, that was of value, and that I was part of a community of professionals, I began to see myself in that light.*

Other pathways to becoming an ECEC leader included being a passionate teacher or having certain innate traits. *I was born a leader.*

How has race, culture, or language influenced your leadership journey?

The responses to this question have three themes: (1) empowering; (2) constraining; and (3) both empowering and constraining. Overall, the race, culture, or language of participants was more likely to have constrained than empowered their leadership journeys. A substantial number of respondents indicated that race, culture, or language was both constraining and empowering. Only one participant thought there was no impact on her leadership journey.

1. **Empowering** (14% of responses). Participants felt that race, culture, or language empowered them as leaders when:

   Working with diverse families
   - *I work with the families who speak different languages. English is their second language. They come from all different backgrounds and races, and cultures… So it has really helped me grow professionally in this position to be able to communicate more effectively and get a better understanding of their backgrounds and be very open-minded to their perspectives, whether they're from the same race or culture as I am or different…*
   - *I was in a mostly Latino, Hispanic community, and I felt empowered to be able to speak to the families that have English as a second language, or they did not speak English at all. I was able to communicate with them to support them. Also, I had teachers that were not fully bilingual. I was able to provide trainings in their home language... Also with the parents, I think they identified with me…We were able to build those stronger relationships.*

   Representing children and families from their own or other under-represented groups
   - *I would just say I never considered at the time that I was specifically working or looking to work only in my community, but I was. At the time, I wasn't necessarily saying, "I know representation matters, and that's why I want to be there." But along the way, I figured that out. I do reflect back and see that I specifically took positions in those communities versus other opportunities offered. I wanted to be there.*

- _There were a lot of single moms and young mothers.in the diverse communities that I worked in... I know that they looked at me as an influential person at the time. Although to me, I was just there doing my job. I enjoyed it. I was there as a resource because I wanted to be, but I know how much they appreciated knowing that I was the one that they were able to come to._

2. **Constraining** (39% of responses). The most frequently cited constraints (accounting for 81% of responses in the Constraining category) were:

Decision makers are predominantly white
- _There are very few women of color represented, and that's when it struck me that the majority of the children that were being cared for were cared for by people of color, women of color, teachers of color. Yet at the leadership levels, whether you looked locally or whether you looked at the state, there were no women of color represented there._
- _It's not often that we are in those positions, people of color, women of color are in those positions where power is held. And so I've experienced early on just the existence of not having power and therefore not having voice as a woman who identifies as black._

Gatekeepers prevent people of color from advancing
- _I remember going for my master's, or finishing my master's, just getting higher qualifications for my position. And I said, "Hey," to my direct supervisor, "Can you put this in my personnel file?" She goes, "I don't need that. The job only requires that you have a BA. If you go above and beyond, that's on you. There's no higher compensation or recognition for that."_
- _I think I've experienced times where the odds are against me just because I'm a woman of color. I have to share an experience with you. When I was in college, I was working on my master's …I went there because they specialize in adult learning, and my goal was to be a college instructor. I asked the chairperson if she could write me a letter of recommendation, because I was actually assisting her, I was serving as a TA already. And so she said to me, "Well Susan (not her actual name), in order for you to get into teaching you have to know someone. You're not just going to get the job."_

Distrust of leaders of color even when in the position of authority
- _I have had to provide an excessive amount of evidence to support my decisions._
- _I felt distrusted, isolated, and lost my sense of self when I had to fit in and adapt to the dominant culture._

Stereotypes in workplaces based on race, gender, language, and role
- _There is a general discrimination towards early childhood professionals, including leaders. We are in a field that is oftentimes looked down upon, because they don't typically see us as educators… With Early Head Start being birth to preschool age, they see us as child care and not as professionals, or teachers, or educators._
- _Just saying the racial disparity in pay inequality that exists is primarily centered around the fact that it is an industry full of women, African-American women._

Language barriers for leaders who are English learners
- *As an early childhood educator, I noticed that my Latino community still are struggling receiving services, especially when we talk about children with the special needs. And there are not too many documents that are translated to a language that many families can understand what they need to in order to get supports for their children.*
- *About teachers, when we need to get people who do not have college or university or a professional education, and when they need to be trained, how well will they be trained or learn a little bit more if they do not understand English? That is mainly the language that all of these trainings…. As immigrants in this country and not having English as our first language, it's a huge barrier.*

3. **Both Empowering and Constraining** (47% of responses**).** The participants in this category stated that they were able to shift the limiting experiences due to their race, culture, or language into something positive and empowering.

   Self-reflection. A frequently coded response was that self-awareness built confidence and self-efficacy.
   - *Whenever I experience discrimination, I kind of find it humorous. I use that energy to generate things, to build things out. I wrote these storybooks based on resilience, because guess what? That's what the community needs right now.*
   - *Because I am Black, there's a level of empathy and understanding I think that I have because of my experience as a Black individual in America that a white counterpart probably wouldn't grasp right away or without being told or taught.*

   Advocacy. The most frequently coded response (40% of responses in the Both Empowering and Constraining category) was that their own negative experiences empowered them to advocate for staff, self, children, families, and the early childhood education profession.
   - *So in my division, the majority of the African-Americans that work in the county are in my division. And so I just have to advocate on their behalf, and continue to assure that we're meeting the needs of our families, because of course, it's Head Start.*
   - *Because of my experiences, I am more passionate about sharing power with teachers and families and speaking up for them.*

   Proactive Approach. Some leaders adopted proactive approaches to overcoming constraints experienced due to their racial, cultural, or linguistic background, including advancing their education beyond what was required, seeking mentorship from others, opening communication to address potential biases, and extending themselves beyond the norm to build partnerships with others.
   - *It was important to me to break that stereotype and get my education and always be the best. I had really good mentors, in that they said, network and bring people along with you…. So just being here, in this capacity, I think it's going to allow for a lot of opportunities to bring more people in of color and be reflective of the community...*
   - *It was just many days that I felt, "Well, I'm just going to give up, because trying to get them to accept me is going to be just overwhelmingly hard." So when I would have parent meetings, I would always talk with the parents to let them know, "I'm here to do a job and I'm going to take great care of your children. I would love for you to trust me. I've had experience in this field for the last 12 years, and I'm bringing my*

experience and knowledge over to you all." I just became really, really friendly with the parents and the teachers. And, as I began to win them over, the year just was so smooth.

DISCUSSION

While not surprising that people of color report that race, culture, or language had a constraining impact on their leadership journeys, it is notable that approximately half of the responses from program leaders indicate that race, culture, or language had both a constraining and an empowering impact on their professional journeys. These program leaders reported being able to shift their perspectives from constrained to empowered primarily through demonstrating self-awareness or advocacy, both of which are core early childhood leadership competencies. These findings suggest the need for more research on the strengths and assets, as well as challenges, facing diverse ECEC program leaders. Additionally, professional development and degree programs that prepare ECEC program administrators should offer content to build competencies in personal and professional self-awareness as well as leadership and advocacy.

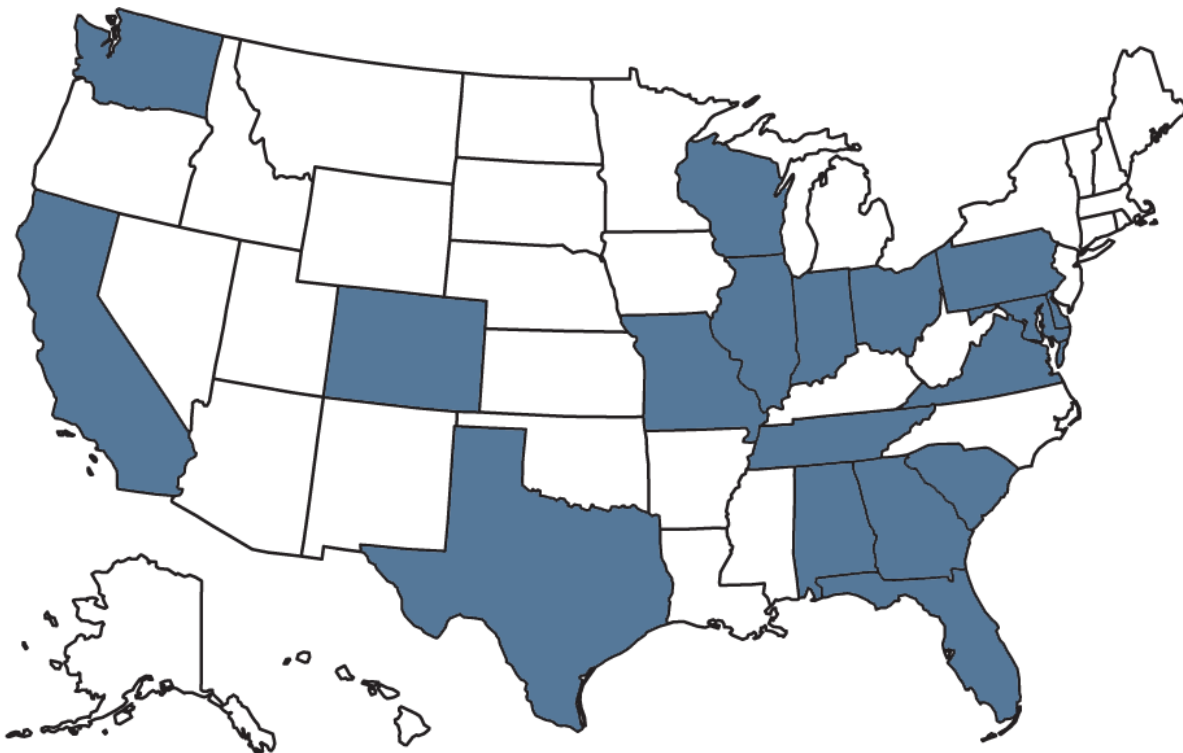**Figure 1. States Represented in Sample**

Table 1. Program Characteristics

	n	%
Auspice (n = 64)		
Public	19	30%
Private For-Profit	20	31%
Private Nonprofit	25	39%
Geographic Location (n = 65)		
Rural	4	6%
Urban	47	72%
Suburban	14	22%
Setting*		
Multi-Site ECEC Organization	30	46%
Center-based	47	72%
Home-based	19	29%
Public School-based	5	8%
Sources of Funding*		
Head Start/Early Head Start	25	39%
State Pre-K/Universal Preschool	20	31%
Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)	31	48%
Private Tuition and Fees	35	54%
Other	17	26%

*More than one response could be selected

Table 2. Participant Characteristics

	n	%
Level of Education (*n* = 65)		
High School	6	9%
Associate degree	6	9%
Baccalaureate degree	12	18%
Graduate degree	36	55%
Advanced or doctoral degree	5	8%
Major in Child Development or ECE (*n* = 64)	43	66%
Child Development Associate Credential (*n* = 64)	13	20%
Principal Endorsement (*n* = 65)	10	15%
State or National Administrator Credential (*n* = 65)	20	31%
Gender (*n* = 65)		
Female	63	97%
Male	2	3%
Age (*n* = 65)		
25-29	1	2%
30-39	11	17%
40-49	24	37%
50-59	24	37%
60-69	3	5%

70+	2	3%
Race and Ethnicity (*n* = 65)		
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	3%
Asian	2	3%
Black or African American	43	66%
Hispanic/Latinx	15	23%
Multiracial	2	3%
White or Caucasian	1	2%
Current Position (*n* = 65)		
Executive Director	6	9%
Director	22	34%
Assistant Director	3	5%
Family Child Care Provider	13	20%
Principal	1	2%
Manager	1	2%
Coordinator (e.g., Education, Family Support, Health)	5	8%
Years worked in ECEC (*n* = 65)		
0 - 11 months	1	2%
1 - 3 years	1	2%
4 - 10 years	10	15%
10 - 19 years	25	38%
20+ years	28	43%

Years Worked in an Administrative Position (*n* = 60)		
0 - 11 months	1	2%
1 - 3 years	10	17%
4 - 10 years	17	28%
10 - 19 years	18	30%
20+ years	14	23%

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